



TEN NEWSLETTER

Bimonthly Newsletter of the
Transformative Education Network
at Montclair State University

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TEACHER ACTIVISM: PRACTICE WHAT YOU TEACH

As we move through the [6 Elements of Social Justice](#), Element 3, Issues of Social Injustice, gave us pause. TEN decided not to dedicate an entire newsletter to issues of injustice that are well-known in our TEN community. Especially when “what to do about it” is often where teachers get stuck. This February, we decided to focus on Element 4, Social Movements and Social Change. To teach Element 4, teachers “share examples of movements of iconic and everyday people standing together to address the issues of social injustice. [This] helps students understand that working together, ordinary people have united to create change” ([Picower, 2012](#)). “Pedagogically, this focus on potential action is a crucial step toward making [the] classroom emphasize more than learning about inequality and injustice; it is also about doing something and taking action” ([Catone, 2017](#)).

It is widely accepted by social justice educators and critical theorists that schools are sites that reproduce dominant social orders. Teacher activists are teachers who understand that there are broad institutional forces that impact education and the lives of children outside of the classroom. “Teacher activists recognize a simultaneous need to build empowered, democratic spaces in their classrooms and build collective power with others outside of schools” ([Catone, 2017](#)). Teacher activists are set apart from “other social justice educators who confine their roles to issues of curriculum and instruction” ([Picower, 2012](#)).

From the [Chicago Teachers’ strike](#), to the [Opt Out movement](#), to [Black Lives Matter week of action in schools](#), teacher activists have placed themselves on the front lines of opposition to inequities facing their students. Teacher activism, however, is more than attending protests. Teacher activists work in many ways to empower their students to fight for justice. This can be creating liberatory classroom spaces, engaging in letter-writing campaigns, or standing up against unjust decisions by local school boards. Teacher activists know there are many ways to “center on the lived experiences of their culturally and linguistically diverse students and work to dismantle systemic power structures that marginalize” ([Crooms, 2022](#)).

There is no clear model for what a teacher activist must do. What is clear is that teacher activists engage in activism both inside and outside the classroom, they work to empower students to know they can be activists too, and they do not work alone. Teacher activists work with other like-minded teachers collectively to “have a broader impact on injustice than if they remained isolated in their classrooms” ([Picower, 2012](#)). Movements for social change are happening right now in our cities and our communities. The best way to get involved is to find others doing activist work and join them. Focus on issues relevant to your students and the communities they are a part of. That way, you can learn alongside them about ways to get involved and connected and advocate for change.

SPOTLIGHT ON...

Jellie Thomas



UPCOMING EVENTS



March 2 via Zoom

- 5:30 pm - 7:00 pm EST

CUE: Panel discussion with author Renée Watson

March 10

- 9 am -3 pm EST

Mentor Professional Development

March 15

- TEN Honors Nominations due

May 12

- 9 am -3 pm EST

Mentor Professional Development

How and why did you get involved with TEN?

As an activist, seeing the work that Dr. Bree Picower and Dr. Tanya Maloney have been doing as educators, I wanted to amplify and uplift that work and always be supportive of it. Because I have networks in both of those spheres - networks of activists and networks of people who are looking to become educators.

What is your WHY for anti-racist and social justice education?

My WHY is that I was born Black in America. How I came to understand that was my WHY is from my parents, who, at a very early age, made me sure to know that the world was an unjust place, especially towards Black and Brown people. I needed to be mindful of that from a young age and become a person that is going to radically change it. So at an early age, I was learning about Nat Turner, the Black Panther Party, Malcolm X, and other great heroes that we were not learning about in our public education system.

What does being a teacher activist mean to you?

It means a couple of different things. In actuality, the school is a part of the community. When it comes to education it does not only happen within the four walls of the classroom. It is happening within the surrounding community as well. So as a racially conscious teacher activist, I realized that understanding the issues that my students are facing aren't just issues that's happening inside the classroom, but it's happening outside the classroom. So if I really truly care about my students, I need to help to also change the conditions that they're experiencing outside of the classroom as well. Because they are experiencing things, and I have to be mindful of that as a teacher activist.

What are ways that you bring your activism into the classroom?

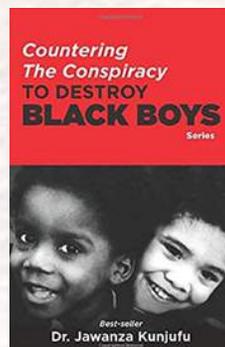
Activism could be something as simple as showing compassion and understanding towards your students because they don't always experience that. I remember vividly a student coming into school with a sweatshirt that said, "Justice for Jamik". I was able to recognize what that shirt meant. I knew the story behind it, and I asked him, "Hey, what does that mean to you?" He was able to tell me, "yeah, that was my godfather". So now I understand that your Godfather was someone who was killed by police officers, and now I'm able to be even more mindful of the student. Just to be aware that in the hallways, I'm gonna show him extra love, extra support because of the things that he's going through. So that is a way that you can bring your activism into the classroom. We have to be able to educate our students fully. It's not just about teaching them how to multiply and divide, but helping them understand the world that they live in.

What is one change that you would like to see in public education?

I would love to see more explicit work on ensuring that teachers are anti-racist across the board. We need anti-racist and social justice education from graduate programs that are emphasizing the importance of this work. Because a lot of teachers are entering this field in urban areas, they have to learn about the situations that the students are experiencing, otherwise, they will be perpetuating harm to the students, even if they think that they are not racist.

What is the book that changed your life?

Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys - Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu



Don't Miss This!

CRITICAL URBAN EDUCATION SPEAKER SERIES PRESENTS: PANEL DISCUSSION WITH AUTHOR RENÉE WATSON



[Click Here to Register](#)

Transformative Education Network's
CRITICAL URBAN EDUCATION SPEAKER SERIES PRESENTS:
Panel Discussion with Author:
Renée Watson

3/2/2023
5:30-7PM EST
Via Zoom

CRITICAL URBAN EDUCATION SPEAKER SERIES

RSVP <https://bit.ly/CUEWatson>

Free and open to the public
ASL interpretation
and live transcription provided

Renée Watson, the acclaimed New York Times #1 bestselling author, educator, and community activist, is coming to share her amazing stories that center the experiences of Black girls and women. She dives into thought-provoking themes such as home, identity, race, class, and gender. TEN residents have developed lesson plans based on her books and their students will be invited to participate in a panel discussion with her where they will ask questions and share their thoughts on her work. Come join us for a thought provoking conversation with Watson and K-12 students from Newark and Orange Public Schools. ***Register now using the link above!

TEACHER ACTIVISM RESOURCES: HOW CAN YOU UNLOCK YOUR POTENTIAL?



Teacher Activist Groups (TAG) is a national coalition of grassroots teacher organizing groups that works to promote educational justice and civil and human rights. They believe that every child should have access to a high quality, equitably funded public education based on participatory democratic principles, community empowerment, a challenging and critical curriculum, respect for cultural diversity, and anti-racism.

TEACHER ACTIVISTS GROUPS
The National Network of Teacher Activists Groups



The **Zinn Education Project** is committed to providing an accurate view of history in classrooms around the US. By teaching people's history, they believe that it can equip students and others with the necessary analytical tools to better understand and positively impact the world today. Their website offers free downloadable lessons and articles related to themes, time periods, and grade levels.

The People's Education Movement is working to create sustainable, liberating learning environments where growth, healing, and transformation can take place. They are recognizing the harms of miseducation which was created to colonize and dehumanize our communities. To rebuild these communities, they are engaging in collective inquiry for knowledge of self and reclaiming indigenous wisdom to restore humanity and envision a new world.



The **Education for Liberation Network** is a national coalition working to create tools for liberatory education and bring people together to learn from each other's experiences. Their mission is to help low-income youth and youth of color understand and challenge injustices in their communities. Hosted by the Education for Liberation Network, **Free Minds, Free People** is a national conference that brings together a range of people to advocate for education as an agent of liberation. In 2024 the conference is going to take place in New Jersey which will host teachers, students, researchers, parents, and community-based activists and educators from all corners of the United States.



DID YOU KNOW?



Being a teacher activist is more than being a social justice educator? There are many ways to be a teacher activist, here are two real life examples:

“Teacher activists view their role as educators as twofold: to promote a more socially just world and to fight against systemic inequality,” pg 135

- Dr. Cyrene Crooms



Teacher Activists:

- Advocate and engage inside and outside the classroom.
- Empower students to feel they can be activist too!
- Work with a community of other activists.

In Lak'ech

In Lak'ech
 Tú eres mi otro yo.
 You are my other me.
 Si te hago daño a ti,
 If I do harm to you,
 Me hago daño a mi mismo.
 I do harm to myself.
 Si te amo y respeto,
 If I love and respect you,
 Me amo y respeto yo.
 I love and respect myself.

- Luis Valdez



This poem, recited in some Tucson classrooms, is part of a longer poem called "Pensamiento Serpentino" and was used to open courses on Mexican-American studies. In 2010, Arizona education officials said it was illegal to recite this poem in schools. A letter was issued stating that Tucson's public schools are illegally promoting "ethnic solidarity and the overthrow of the U.S. government" by teaching Mexican history and hip hop. Teachers, parents, and students filed a legal challenge to the law and lost the case. But, they appealed that ruling, and three years after the ban, in July 2013, a federal court ordered Tuscon United School District to reinstate high school Mexican American Studies and add African American studies. Teacher activism pushed the state of Arizona to successfully advocate for rehumanizing education and thus created a lot more freedom in teaching culturally diverse education for students, who are the present-future of our society.

Amy Donofrio, a 13-year, nationally recognized educator, was banned from her classroom after declining to remove a Black Lives Matter flag above her classroom door. Donofrio's case is part of a pattern of attacks targeting educators' efforts to support Black students and oppose racism. Donofrio's lawsuit highlights how, instead of celebrating their achievements, the school district shut them down. In 2015, Donofrio and her students co-founded the EVAC Movement to address the significant inequities Jacksonville's Black youth face. ("BLM Reprisal: Florida school district terminates teacher who stood up for Black students", [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), 5 August 2021)

To read more about Amy Donofrio's teacher activism, [click here](#). To learn more about Donofrio and her students' continued work with the EVAC Movement, [click here](#).

