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Exploring the Myth of School-University Partnerships: Untangling District Resistance and Academic Capitalism

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Exploring the Myth of School-University Partnerships

Untangling District Resistance and Academic Capitalism

Brianne Morettini, Daniel Tulino, & Shelley Zion

Abstract

In this article we engage in reflexive methodology to make sense of our experiences in a particular school-university partnership and the district-level resistance from central office administrators we encountered in our work. We explore the nuanced accounts of resistance to reform and change in the context of a school-university partnership from central office or district-level administrators, even when teachers themselves acted as enthusiastic agents of change; to the general public, the inner-workings of district-level offices remain obscured. The purposes of the study, therefore, are two-fold: one, to shift blame away from teachers and students and center the role of district-level administrators as gatekeepers to social justice-oriented work even when teachers embrace it; and, two, to hold ourselves accountable to the students, teachers, and communities we serve. We situate our experiences within a larger neoliberal ideological framework and how our own social positions as university faculty were largely shaped by academic capitalism. The generative insights gleaned through our analysis are used to lay out a road map of possibilities for others engaged in social-justice projects within school-university partnerships.

Keywords: school-university partnerships, kitchen table reflexivity, academic capitalism

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Introduction

Social injustice in its many forms is deeply rooted in the history of the United States. The authors of this study are university researchers who maintain long-held convictions as advocates of social justice; this work is evidenced in our scholarly, professional, and personal commitments and choices. Given how recent events underscore the systematic, institutionalized, and deliberate marginalization and oppression of people of color right here in the U.S., we feel it necessary to question the ways in which social justice work in P-12 schools is enacted. To that end, this narrative tells the story of three social justice-related projects all happening, unbeknownst to the researchers, in Smithville Public Schools,¹ one of Appleton State University's partner school districts, from the fall of 2015 until the spring of 2018.

Specifically, this article details the nuanced accounts of resistance to reform and change in the context of a school-university partnership from central office or district-level administrators, even when teachers themselves acted as enthusiastic agents of change; to the general public, the inner-workings of district-level offices remain obscured. The purposes of the study, therefore, are two-fold: one, to shift blame away from teachers and students and center the role of district-level administrators as gatekeepers to social justice-oriented work even when teachers embrace it; and, two, to hold ourselves accountable to the students, teachers, and communities we serve. In this paper, we use a reflexive methodology to make sense of our experiences in the school-university partnership and the district-level resistance we encountered in our work.

Through reflexive analysis, we engage in sensemaking around our experiences in schools and our encounters with resistance to our work in this school-university partnership. To that end, we situate our experiences within a larger neoliberal ideological framework and how our own social positions as university faculty were largely shaped by academic capitalism. We begin this work by first acknowledging our shared frustrations and resulting jadedness and then quickly recognizing this was not a good place to be—or to remain—as social justice advocates.

Theoretical & Conceptual Frames

The narratives here illuminate the resistance from central office administration that three researchers from the same institution faced when trying to implement social-justice school-improvement related research projects in Smithville Public Schools. The study, therefore, centers personal experience narratives and is informed by a sociocultural theoretical framework that grounds the ideas of sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and sociolinguistic perspectives (Jaffe, 2009) that center language and dialogue in meaning-making. To that end, the study draws on literature about researcher positionality (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015) and self-reflexivity (Cole & Knowles, 2000) as well as self-study methodology through the use of critical friends (Petroelje et al., 2019).

The data for this study include field notes and detailed accounts of our experiences: individual and collective memories of overlapping experiences of praxis in a particular school district. Using each other as critical friends, we sought to interpret the individual and collective memories of our overlapping experiences to engage in kitchen table reflexivity (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015) as a way to engage in sensemaking of the district-level resistance we encountered from central office administration. Given the sociocultural and sociolinguistic frames of the study, we maintain that “how we write about the social world is of fundamental importance to our own and others’ interpretations of it” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 255).

Embodied Positionalities

Building on that, we believe the ways in which we describe and reflect upon our memories points to our self-perceptions of positionality. We also believe that our embodied positionalities influenced the research process. We critically examined our individual and collective experiences through the reflexive process of sustained inquiry and discourse. Therefore, we were able to question the “broader social and cultural systems” (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015, p. 749) that shaped and influenced our research experiences as university researchers working in a school district, particularly given the resistance we all experienced in the enactment of our social justice-oriented work.

Further, interrogating the influences of our positionalities, which includes self-perceptions and our perceptions of the teachers and school leaders with whom we worked, enabled us to uncover more hidden and pernicious barriers to affecting meaningful change related to social justice in education and how our efforts ran up against larger structures of power and privilege in a school-university partnership. And, like others (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015), we situated our experiences as ways “to demonstrate the importance of meaningful interaction with others to deepen critical engagement with research” (p. 749) and to counterbalance the activist burnout we were experiencing (Chen & Gorski, 2015).

Reflexivity and Critical Friends

This study threads together positionalities, self-reflexivity, and critical friends within the frames of sociocultural learning theory and sociolinguistic perspectives (Jaffe, 2009). Like other researchers (Petroelje Stolle et al., 2019), we looked to each other for deeper and different understandings through the use of critical friends, which enacts and acknowledges Vygotsky’s notion of the more knowledgeable other (1978). With an eye toward stance (Jaffe, 2009), we are able to help one another and ourselves with the sensemaking (Rom & Eyal, 2019) of how our own positionalities reflected our individual and collective experiences. Further, critical friends represents the dialogic engagement that takes place in more infor-

mal spaces, such as the kitchen table. And, in this way, kitchen table reflexivity (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015) as an analytic tool was particularly useful in that it validated the usefulness and meaning-making enabled by informal conversations and memories.

Such reflexivity created a safe space for us to problematize our own positionality and reflect on the district-level resistance we encountered to our different yet overlapping endeavors toward social justice in P-12 schools. Kitchen-table reflexivity (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015) allowed us the temporal and intellectual space to move through different iterations of our narratives, different dimensions of our experiences, and ultimately form deeper understandings of what it means to do the work of social justice with school districts. While there are larger systemic issues at play in urban education and social justice, this piece centers personal experiences and considers the influence of researcher positionality in school-based social justice work in school districts in an effort to recast the narrative about why reform efforts are difficult to enact in P-12 schools.

Activist Burnout

This work also draws on the practical and theoretical considerations of activist burnout, as advanced by Chen and Gorski (2015). More specifically, there is a small yet growing thread of literature that acknowledges the physical and emotional demands of activism for social justice (e.g. Maslach & Gomes, 2006; Klandermans, 2003). The literature identifies stressors related to activism and how activists sustain themselves during and through their efforts. This work complements this thread of literature by extending the ways social justice educators understand the influence of their own researcher positionalities in the conceptualization and enactment of social justice work in P-12 schools. In particular, through the use of reflexive dialogue and introspection, we were able to uncover some ways our positionalities as university researchers actually hindered our social justice efforts and inadvertently contributed to a degree of activist burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015).

Methodological Approach

Since the study centers personal experiences through a sociocultural and sociolinguistic frame, data for the study include individual and collective memories as well as field notes and participant feedback from our various experiences with resistance toward social justice in a local school district. Each researcher worked for a span of three years in the Smithville Public Schools. Our projects were only connected by a shared site and our shared roles as researchers from nearby Appleton State University. Otherwise, we remained isolated actors of our research and professional development experiences.

Only sometime after our individual social justice focused projects ended

did we even realize we had each been working with Smithville Public Schools. Through informal conversations *after* our experiences ended, we realized we experienced similar forms of resistance toward our projects from different central office administrators. We, therefore, became curious about how these shared practical experiences could inform our theoretical perspectives about working as social justice advocates in school districts.

Personal Experience Narratives

We identified the need for a more in-depth analysis of the resistance we perceived we encountered from district-level actors at the school district. We, therefore, decided to write detailed accounts of our projects, including timelines, missed opportunities, hopes for our work, and the anticipated outcomes from our longitudinal work. These individual accounts resemble the perhaps more familiar form of analytic memos, drawing on the steeped tradition of ethnographic methods (e.g. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). We situated ourselves as critical friends in the self-reflexive process, charged with acknowledging and validating the much-needed catharsis of our experiences and also with pushing each other to (re)consider how we make sense of the resistance we encountered to our work at the district level. We developed the following prompts to guide the initial writing of our narratives:

1. Describe your project and its goals.
2. Who were the main stakeholders in the project and how did you interact with them?
3. What was the timeline of the project?
4. What were the missed opportunities of the project?

After writing our initial narratives, we shared them with each other electronically. Then, we met formally 1-2 times per month over the course of 1 academic year to dialogue about our written narratives and the questions and insights they were starting to reveal to us both collectively and individually. The narratives were housed in a shared electronic folder to which we all had access. As the narratives were being written and expounded upon over time, we made comments on each other's narratives. Using immersive engagement (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) as our method of data analysis, we engaged in multiple data readings and dialogic engagement to make sense of the experiences and our memories as documented in our individual narratives.

More specifically, these data were iteratively analyzed using kitchen table reflexivity as an analytical lens; first, as critical friends we commented and responded to each other's individual memories and field notes. Those responses and comments are symbolic of our collective memories and allowed us to engage in

sensemaking, sense-taking, sense-giving and sense-breaking (Rom & Eval, 2019) from our overlapping experiences. Then, we engaged in subsequent readings of our memories with an eye toward the “socially situated and socially consequential” (Jaffe, 2009, p. 3) stances we took in the sensemaking of our experiences as documented in our individual and collective memories.

Kitchen Table Reflexivity

We sought a way to process and make sense (Rom & Eyal, 2019) of our individual and collective accomplishments and frustrations around our social justice projects in Smithville Public Schools. Using kitchen table reflexivity as a frame provided the time, space, and guidance to interrogate our own experiences and the influence that power, privilege, and resistance may have had on those experiences. In particular, we engaged in meaning making around the tensions (Berry, 2008) of working with perceived outsider status as university researchers on gaining traction and buy-in for overlapping professional development and research efforts in a partner school district. We also wrote about and examined our experiences by centering our emotions and felt obligations to the work of social justice in education.

It is important to note that we used kitchen table reflexivity as a way to help us move out of the space of frustration and blame toward others around why our social justice-focused projects failed to unfold and take shape according to our plans and visions. Through sustained reflexive engagement, we called into question the school-university partnership myth, and realized how heavily we relied on the idea of the partnership. We also hold ourselves accountable for our shortcomings by exploring the potential influences of our privileged positioning as university-based researchers, not as community members or school employees. In the spirit of kitchen-table reflexivity, we recognized we could not let ourselves off the hook and succumb to the activist burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015) that thwarts sustained social justice efforts over time.

Context of the Work

The city of Smithville is 35% African American, 44% Hispanic or Latino, and 19% White. Twenty-four percent (24%) of Smithville’s population is foreign born, as Smithville is host to many migrant and seasonal farmworkers, and 44% of the population is non-native English speakers. Approximately one-third (34%) of the entire documented population of Smithville lives in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Smithville Public Schools serve approximately 5,820 students.

Smithville is geographically considered rural but has many indicators of an urban community; the majority of students are Latinx, and over half of the entire student population receives free or reduced meals. In this regard, Smithville could be considered an “urban characteristic” school as Milner (2012) outlines in his evolving typology of urban education. Recently, the state designated Smithville as

an Urban Enterprise Zone, as a way to spur economic development and growth. In order for an area to receive this state designation, it must be “suffering from economic distress” (State Treasury, 2020).

An important element of the context of Smithville is that a state prison and county jail are located there. The state prison houses over 3,000 male inmates and is classified as medium and maximum security. The prison was built in the nineties and began operations in 1997 (State Department of Corrections, 2020). The presence of the state prison means that many correctional officers and inmates’ families also live in Smithville or adjacent communities. Whenever we speak with Smithville residents, they often draw a connection to the prison or deliberately distance themselves from any connection to it. In this way, the state prison has become an integral part of what it means to live and attend school in Smithville.

Professional Development Schools

Over twenty years ago, Smithville Public Schools joined the Appleton State University’s Professional Development Schools (PDS) network; three out of nine schools in the Smithville district are part of the PDS network. PDS networks have been identified by the Council for Educator Preparation (CAEP) as robust models of collaboration aimed at supporting and enhancing P-12 student achievement (CAEP, n.d.). Currently, three PK-8 schools in Smithville are designated as PDS partners with our university. Each PDS partner has a professor-in-residence whose responsibilities are particularly site-based, but typically include providing some level of pedagogical support to teachers and conducting on-site observations of clinical interns. In this way, the university articulates an investment in the success of Smithville teachers and students. Smithville Public Schools, like so many other urban and urban characteristic schools, are overseen by a large central office.

The Smithville Public Schools central office building is a standalone space, not attached to any of the schools. It is several stories high, with a spacious rear parking lot, conference rooms on every floor, working heat and air conditioning, and very clean modernized restrooms. There are several different administrators assigned to: grant funding; different content area curricula; special education; beginning teacher development; mentoring; and more. Office organization in the central office building seems to be random, with no clear logic of arrangement, but that is perhaps because the central office administrators change roles so frequently.

In the next section we provide abridged versions of the final personal experience narratives we developed using reflexive engagement; we describe our positionalities with respect to our work in Smithville Public Schools. Each project focused on implementing fundamental shifts in some core practices in the district: Brie’s project focused on the development of a new mentorship program to support beginning teachers and to build teacher leadership capacity; Shelley’s project focused identifying ways to counteract the disproportionality of boys of color

in segregated special education settings; and, Dan's project focused on targeted professional development for English/Language Arts (ELA) teachers. After we provide more detailed descriptions of our projects, we articulate our perceptions of missed opportunities and felt tensions related to our social justice-related projects within the larger context of the school-university partnership.

Personal Experience Narratives

The following narratives are collectively organized by the following conceptual guide: researcher positionality, project description, getting started, felt tensions, and missed opportunities. Each narrative appears in the author's own voice in order to maintain the person-centered experience with our work. Brie's narrative appears first, followed by Shelley's and then Dan's.

Brie Morettini's Narrative Account

In the fall of 2015, colleagues and I were awarded over half a million dollars in state funds to build teacher leadership and mentoring capacity as a mechanism to support beginning teacher retention and, ultimately, to improve student achievement in a nearby high-needs school district. Being that I was tenure-track faculty at the time, I was elated at having received such a large external grant. I was even more excited, however, at how our collaboration with Smithville Public Schools—the site of this new and exciting grant project—emerged. To situate my excitement, let me explain my positionality as it pertains to *The Novice Teacher Project*.

Researcher Positionality. As a former teacher in a district very similar to Smithville, my scholarly and personal commitments align with helping to improve the experiences and conditions of teachers and students in urban or urban-characteristic schools, like Smithville. I remember as a teacher feeling frustrated with top-down decision making that impacted *how* and *what* I taught my students, who the administrators did not even know or interact with. During my time as a classroom teacher, I grew to become an advocate for families and caregivers and students who felt too intimidated by the symbolic system of public education to understand their rights to engagement and information. I carry these experiences with me in my role as a teacher educator whose research focuses on teacher experiences, particularly teachers' experiences and perceptions of their work. My experiences have situated me as an advocate for teachers and their students. This positionality is what I brought with me to the research study and to the "partnership" I tried to create with Smithville Public Schools in *The Novice Teacher Project*.

The Novice Teacher Project (2015 - 2018). When the call for proposals was released and Smithville Public Schools district administrators reached out to us, faculty in my college, about a partnership for this work, I was excited and hum-

bled at the thought that, together, university researchers and district administrators could work in close concert with teachers and school leaders on (1) identifying their needs and areas for growth; and (2) finding ways to build social and cultural capital among teachers in a context with limited financial resources. What is more, as a tenure-track faculty member at the time of receiving this grant award, I had a stake in ensuring that there were measurable outcomes from the project.

My colleagues and I established the signature features of *The Novice Teacher Project* during year one of the project in consultation with the district administrators and through the analysis of data gathered from a needs assessment of teacher leaders and novice teachers related to school climate and culture, areas of strength, and challenges for professional practice. We also drew upon our knowledge of extant literature on beginning teacher attrition, effective professional development, and signature pedagogies for the teaching profession. Using these research and data as a framework, the project unfolded as a sustainable, tiered model of support for beginning teachers.

Together, Appleton State University and Smithville Public Schools agreed on their shared commitment to the goals as outlined in the notice of grant opportunity:

1. Developing a high-quality program of professional learning to prepare teacher leaders to support beginning teachers;
2. Implementing mentor training for a cadre of teacher leaders;
3. Creating and implementing high quality professional learning opportunities for district and school leaders;
4. Examining and upgrading district mentoring programs and other policies and practices that impact teacher leaders' work.

In the first year of this three-year project, district administrators selected 24 teacher leaders to participate in *The Novice Teacher Project*. In year two, ten new teacher leaders were added as a second cohort. Applicants for the program were evaluated in terms of their overall effectiveness rating based on the Danielson Evaluation Instrument; their attendance; their contributions to the district; and, their years of teaching experience. The teacher leaders represented a variety of grade levels, subject areas, and schools in the district. In year one of the project, work focused exclusively on developing the skills of the teacher leaders. In year two, first-year teachers were also invited to participate in program activities, and teacher leaders had the opportunity to put their mentoring skills into practice. Because of large-scale layoffs in the district, the beginning teacher population was small in year two: eight beginning teachers were hired, and all participated in the project.

Getting Started (2015). In the planning phase of the project, which lasted from the conception of the project, into the submission of the grant application, and through the first of three years of the life of the project, there were four key players from Smithville Public Schools' central office. Most notably was Dr.

James Hunter, the Assistant Superintendent of the district. Dr. Hunter was instrumental in drumming up support and promoting the project among central office staff and teachers.

In fact, Dr. James Hunter was so supportive of the project that he came to the first kick-off meeting with teachers and said directly to teachers, “I hope my presence shows you how important your work as teacher leaders is and how much I am willing to do to ensure that your work on this project becomes part of [Smithville’s] mentoring program.” Hunter’s comment established a positive ethos for the remainder of year one; he made good on his word by attending *all* the grant-related activities and checking in with the teacher participants individually. His actions communicated that this grant would yield results that would become institutionalized in Smithville Public Schools, and as a result, the teachers were excited and engaged in the work of building a contextualized, effective, and supportive mentoring plan for beginning teachers in their district.

The summer after the first year of the project, Dr. Hunter announced his early retirement. In a letter published in the local newspaper, Dr. Hunter expounded on what he described as a toxic environment in the central office of Smithville Public Schools because of the district superintendent. In his letter, Dr. Hunter expounded upon his description of toxicity by describing specific events and actions carried out by the superintendent as being particularly counterproductive to student learning and teacher productivity. Dr. Hunter’s early retirement came as a surprise to us all, and his exit as Assistant Superintendent left the grant project in quite a lurch.

Felt Tensions (2016-2017). As the university research team expected, without the explicit and consistent support and presence of Dr. Hunter, years two and three brought about some missed opportunities for our work, because no one in the district central office was as explicitly supportive of the project as Dr. Hunter had been. In particular, without an internal advocate, we witnessed the rupture of consistent communication between Smithville central office and university researchers. What we established as bi-monthly phone calls between all the key players in year one—phone calls that we would all willingly describe as productive and collegial—no longer occurred. Well, to be specific, the university researchers worked with the administrators to find mutually agreeable dates for phone calls that ultimately went unanswered for months at a time. What’s more, the administrators no longer came to grant-mandated meetings, nor did they attend grant-related activities or check in with their teacher participants.

Upon seeing the frustrations of the teacher participants—and the funder of this grant project—the university researchers set up a meeting with the remaining Smithville administrators to try to re-establish purpose and outline ways we could support the work of the project and the teachers involved. Only two of the three administrators showed up for the meeting (which was held right at the central office) and numerous phone calls and emails to the interim Assistant Superinten-

dent went unanswered. The change in leadership created a gulf that made way for turbulence in years two and three of the project. And, while almost all of the teachers remained engaged in and committed to the work of the grant and to the overall purpose of revising the district mentoring plan, the university researchers did notice a slight dip in the attendance of certain teacher leaders, purportedly since their efforts were going unnoticed by their employers.

Due to the structure of the funding parameters of the grant, the university researchers had to submit quarterly reports to the funders that tracked progress and explained encountered challenges and how they were being addressed. For the sake of transparency, the university researchers documented what was happening with the district administrative partners in the project. And, during one of the required site visits from the funders, no one from Smithville Public Schools administrative team showed up (even though several clerical staff confirmed the meeting was on their respective calendars). So, as we were preparing the project narrative for the third and final year of the grant, we, the university researchers, felt obligated to be transparent with the state about our efforts with Smithville Public Schools administrators. And, based on past practice, we shared this project narrative in its entirety with the Smithville administrators. A few weeks later, we finally heard from them.

After an absence of communication for almost the entire second year of the project, the Smithville Public Schools administrators seemed very eager to speak with us. We, mistakenly, took this as a good sign that perhaps we could course-correct and re-engage them as our partners in the revising of their district mentoring plan. During the conference call, we soon learned that the administrators were enraged that we would write about their lack of attendance and communication to our funders. They each referenced their active participation in year one of the project—when they still reported to Dr. James Hunter—as evidence of their commitment to their teachers and to this project. When we asked them if we could count on similar commitments in this final year of the project, however, each administrator referenced that it was really someone else's job at this point—even though they could not give us specific names of individuals—and that it was really just their responsibility to work with us and their teacher leaders in year one of the project to get us started.

Further, the administrators informed us how angry they were that we should be so transparent with our funders, even when asked directly by our funders to account for the support, or lack thereof, of the Smithville administrative team. In response, I actually asked the administrators how we could have more appropriately responded to the funder's direct questions about year two. The administrators again referenced their attendance at events during year one and made no mention of their whereabouts for the entire second year of the project.

Missed Opportunities (2017-18). I situated these unfortunate happenings in my mind as a personal affront to me—clearly this group of administrators took

offense to an outside actor taking up the cause of teachers in *their* schools. Still, we persisted. The researchers and teacher leaders remained committed to creating a contextualized mentoring plan that included community engagement, specific training on district systems, and an overhaul of the foci for professional learning communities in each school. Because of the commitment of the teacher leaders, we did, in fact, develop a revised district mentoring plan, which included a detailed handbook and a community resource guide. Both documents were developed *by teachers and community members, respectively*, and using grant funds, we hired a graphic designer to work on the documents in order to create professionalized products that were beyond the scope of what the university researchers could create. During all of this, district layoffs resulted in pulling teachers out of RTI positions, back into the classroom, and almost all of them in different schools.

Simply put, the teachers were proud of what their three-year commitment yielded. They were excited to share these resources with beginning teachers in their district, and they were hopeful about what their collective efforts could spark in the district moving forward. These new documents received Board of Education approval, and they were subsequently showcased at the Symposium for the grant project at the end of year three.

Without the support of key players in the central office, however, these documents have not been institutionalized for the district. The district mentoring plan was ultimately just revised by a different administrator working in isolation from teachers, and her plan supplanted what the teachers and community members themselves created. Research (Payne, 2011) suggests “One of the great paradoxes of the inner-city school is that when resources are made available, social and political barriers often inhibit their being brought to bear” (p. 25). The end result of the grant project is that Smithville Public Schools was part of a half million dollar grant that yielded no real institutionalized change despite the hard work and dedication of the teachers who tried to be a part of that change.

Shelley Zion’s Narrative Account

Researcher Positionality. As a researcher who has spent the past eighteen years working with different state departments of education, districts, and individual schools across the country on eliminating disproportionality and opportunity gaps, I bring a wealth of experience and expertise in systems change to the table. I frame my work in Black Feminist theory and visionary pragmatism, and in the necessity of changing people to change systems, by developing critical consciousness. I am an activist scholar. My work with Smithville Public Schools was as an external consultant, hired by Smithville by virtue of my role as the Executive Director of our university’s center for research and professional development.

Eliminating Disproportionality & Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms Project (2016-2018). In July 2016, the Special Education (SPED) Director

at Smithville Public Schools contacted me for assistance with her efforts to eliminate disproportionality in the district—as they were on notice from the state’s Department of Education to reduce disparities in identification, placement, and discipline, specifically for boys of color. From there, we crafted a plan to engage teams of eight participants (to include general and special education teachers and school administrators) from each of the nine schools in five full days of training, spread out over eight months. By virtue of my role as the inaugural director of our university’s new research and professional development center, I had a particular stake in the success of these professional development training sessions and the dissemination of our work to the larger population of teachers in Smithville.

These training sessions were geared toward school-level administrators’ and teachers’ development of a critical consciousness related to issues of race and ability, identifying challenges, and building new practices to support the creation of culturally responsive classrooms. Each training day was preceded by a set of readings and followed by a set of activities that participants would engage during the time between sessions. Our goal was to prepare these building leaders to support implementation and training of staff in their buildings, so a training of trainers model was used. The focus of the trainings was organized as follows:

Day one: Exploring Systems of Power and Privilege

Day two: Understanding Social Identity & Culture

Day three: Building Relationships: Students, Family, and Community

Day four: Culturally Responsive Classroom Environments, Discipline, and Behavior

Day five: Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Instruction

Getting Started. I went to the district and toured all nine schools in Smithville to better understand the context of the schools. I was struck by the high percentage of administrators of color (at the district and school level) and on the School Board (past and present, as evidenced by photos in the Board of Education Conference Room). The schools are all in good condition, and the principals who provided the tours were proud of their work. At the high school, I was greeted with some degree of hostility that seemed to be a result of conflicted communication with the district. At the elementary and pre-schools, I noted multiple self-contained classrooms, with primarily boys of color, labeled as having “behavioral disabilities.”

Following those visits, the SPED Director and I devised a plan to provide intensive professional development to teams from each school. Each of the nine schools was tasked with identifying an administrator and four teachers to participate in five full days of training, spread out over the school year, and to commit to work in between sessions (e.g. readings, data collection, observations). The district SPED and Curriculum leaders also committed to participation, with the shared goal of helping these teams both learn about how culture impacted SPED identification and to develop plans to turnkey the information learned to others in their building. The SPED Director was provided with a pre-reading to disseminate to all participants, and the first training was scheduled for November.

I arrived at the agreed upon location for the first training date. Despite the fact that the number of participants was set at 35, our training had been scheduled for a conference room at the Smithville Central Office. The room could not fit all the participants; some were standing around the perimeter of the room when I arrived, even though we had discussed in advance that the nature of the training was interactive, small groups, and activity-based. Additionally, teacher participants had not received the pre-reading from the SPED Director, were unclear about why they were there, and the school leaders were largely absent from the teams.

By the second training, we had resolved the space issue, and the SPED Director had communicated the expectation for school leaders to attend. I took over responsibility for providing the readings between sessions. Participation was sporadic, as people missed sessions frequently. At the beginning of each session, each team shared what they had done in the intermittent weeks, and at the end of each session time was provided for each team to plan how they would share what they learned with their larger school setting. Teachers were overall very excited, engaged, and wanted to bring the work back to their school settings, but very few managed to deliver any of the content—often because administration had not made time or space for it to happen. Additionally, the district SPED staff did NOT attend any full sessions, but only “dropped in” once or twice for a few minutes.

Felt Tensions (2017-18). At the end of the year, the SPED Director contacted me, frustrated that “nothing had happened” to reduce disproportionality numbers. We discussed the various barriers (e.g. administrative buy-in, district support, time and skill development for teachers) and agreed to do a second series during the 2017/18 school year, with a more explicit focus on “training the trainers.” This assumed that the teams would largely remain the same and that the district-level administrators would do what they could to decrease the aforementioned barriers to implementation.

When I returned for the first session in 2017/18, only a few of the same teachers from the previous year returned. As a result, this required all new learning for those participants, but we did devise a note taking guide that we used after each activity in each session; we paused to allow teams to take notes about the activity, including: one, summarize the lesson, identify needed resources, define key terms; two, determine facilitator needs, including identifying questions they still had, their level of comfort in leading the content; three, the key takeaways; and four, discuss implementation, including identifying the level of resistance they anticipate, the response they anticipate, the when/where/how/for whom they would lead the training, and also an opportunity to identify expected outcomes, including for the classroom, personal growth, and school levels.

Missed Opportunities (2017-18). Similar problems as the first year continued to plague the sessions in the second year—participants not reading, missing sessions, administrators not attending (as they had attended the previous year,

only one thought it was “worth her time” to come again in spite of communication from the district about the expectation that they come, and that they ensure the “turn key” opportunities in their schools). To further exacerbate my frustration, the SPED Director called me repeatedly during the year to ask how I was making sure that the work was turn-keyed in the individual schools among teachers. I explained to her each time that what I could do was provide the resources and planning support, but that SHE needed to develop the accountability system in her school district. Then, the newly appointed chief academic officer reached out to see if “her team” could attend the fourth session, which focused on curriculum. I agreed that they could, but when I arrived for that training day, her team of four were the only ones there: she had “un-invited” the rest of the teams! Overall, I don’t think anything changed as a result of my sustained efforts—a few teachers learned a few things, but mostly they learned that they cannot change anything with individual effort alone.

Dan Tulino’s Narrative Account

Researcher Positionality. As a current Professor-in-Residence (PIR) in Smithville, a doctoral candidate at a nearby university, and former middle-school teacher and sports coach in a district similar to Smithville, I continue to align my personal and professional commitments to building sustainable partnerships with marginalized communities and schools, like Smithville. As a Professor-in-Residence, I play an integral role in the maintenance of the PDS network for my university; still, my role is one of an outsider, whose goal is to gain as much access as possible within the partnering school and community. To this end, a certain level of appeasement, both on the university end and the school side of things, had to be enacted on a weekly basis. I had to meet the needs of the school while also acting as a “good neighbor” to the school. Many times, I had to cast aside enacting any critical approaches to professional development or conversations with university and district staff, as maintaining the “relationship” was paramount in every situation.

Professor-In-Residence Work. In the summer of 2016, I entered the doctoral program at our university and was assigned the role of Professor-in-Residence at a K-8 school within Smithville Public Schools as part of my funding package. Therefore, my stake in this work is directly tied to my tuition funding but also to my prior experience as a teacher in a similar school district. My role as PIR at the Smithville school was designed to provide professional development to faculty and staff, support various clinical interns, teach on-site courses, and conduct research projects at the school site. I received a four-year contract to work in this capacity throughout my doctoral studies.

I was assigned to a newly constructed building with state-of -the-art resources and structures. However, the playground for the nearly 750 students had yet to be completed, and there was no open field for students to play on during recess.

This issue remained throughout the entirety of my first year working with the school. Situated at the Southernmost part of town, and having been built at the end of a road and on an apple orchard, this school literally had no room for students to engage in outdoor play. Prior to the new school's construction, the original school had only housed around 350 students. Student enrollment and staff nearly doubled in size when I began my position. Further, the district planned to add 10 Pre-K classrooms the following school year. This was certainly a time of transition for the staff, students, families, and school leadership.

Getting Started. Of the many positive relationships formed throughout the three years I spent in Smithville as a PIR, the bond formed with the on-site coordinator/master teacher went beyond any hopes of gaining access to the “real” inner-workings of the school and district. This staff member was consistently honest and open with me throughout our time working together. Having been a township resident, student, and teacher throughout their life, this person understood the dynamics of the school district as well as anyone I met throughout my tenure in the district.

Access to classrooms and teachers, scheduling of meetings and programs, construction of the steering committee, and responding to emails and text messages in a timely manner were a few of the many qualities this staff member brought to the relationship. And, throughout the three years, I also had access to their office space as a place to conduct my work. Without this access and candor, my time in Smithville would have looked far different, as I would have had to find open doors in places I'm not positive would ever be opened.

After a month or so of getting settled into this new position during the fall of 2016, I began to understand why so many of the Smithville teachers seemed reticent about working with me and resistant to some of the professional development I planned to offer. Various district initiatives that never yielded any meaningful results compounded with sporadic visits from other educational consultants over the past five years scarred these middle school teachers. They had seen many people similar to me come and go without ever making any significant impact. With an extensive background in teaching English, I chose to work closely with the two secondary ELA teachers in my assigned school. Each of these teachers taught one section each of grades 6 – 8. Therefore, every student at this school had either teacher for their three years of English instruction. The problems trying to engage with the two teachers started from the first request for communication. Emails went ignored for weeks. Only after a set meeting with the master teacher was I formally introduced to the teachers, one of whom came 20 minutes late to the meeting that was scheduled for 40 minutes in duration.

Felt Tensions (2016-17). After our initial meeting, I continued correspondence via email with only a handful of brief responses. There was no excitement on their end to be working with an “expert” in the field. If anything, I sensed that

my presence was more of an annoyance than a welcomed resource. I then decided to create binders of PARCC-released student samples to assist the teachers with better understanding PARCC performance-based assessments. Printing, copying, collating, stapling, and organizing these binders was hours of work that I was sure would win over the teachers' affections and prove to them my intent to support their practice.

At our next scheduled meeting, I brought the completed binders, along with an additional binder for the master teacher. I entered an empty room, and sat alone for 10 minutes. Finally, one of the two ELA teachers entered the room to let me know she had another administrative meeting and could not stay for our scheduled meeting. After another five minutes passed, the master teacher entered the classroom and asked where the two ELA teachers were. She understood my frustrations by the expression on my face and sat beside me. She began to flip through the binder periodically asking me questions about the information I had prepared. Our meeting ended, and I left the binders for the two ELA teachers.

Months passed with intermittent meetings, and little to no collaboration between myself and the two ELA teachers. Without wasting any more time and energy, I began working with other teachers in the building. This new approach paid dividends. A few of the cooperating teachers of Smithville interns welcomed me into their classrooms on a weekly basis to observe and interact with their students. A few of these cooperating teachers eventually formed the foundation for our PDS Steering Committee. This small group of dedicated staff, along with the master teacher, provided me countless opportunities to feel valued and valuable in my role as Professor-in-Residence. However, the reluctance of the two middle school ELA teachers would continue to bother me and serve as a continued reminder of the overall reluctance to engage in meaningful work with me and this partnership.

What made this work even more difficult was the lack of communication between the university, the district central office, and the staff at the PDS site. The years working there would prove time and again that the PDS site was not the genesis of this problem, and looking back now, I have a much better understanding of why I failed to engage with the two middle school ELA teachers. Too often, university requests to the district went unanswered, and just as often, university initiatives were not shared with the partners in a meaningful manner. For example, rather than include myself and the PDS principal on communications, many times, university employees only communicated with representatives at the central district office. Communication breakdowns occurred often, leaving the school principal and myself to clean up more than one mess.

As I began to engage in this work, I was beginning to see and understand what was at play in the inner-workings of a larger school district and within the broader school-university partnership. These initiatives were not welcomed at my PDS site due to scheduling conflicts (e.g. in-services always planned without considering PIR/PDS work), reluctance from district central office, and not prioritized

by university administration—even though it is a core component of our college’s mission and vision.

The role of PIR was one of contradiction from the start, one I still struggle with internally on a daily basis, despite the importance of this role in the maintenance of our school-university partnership and larger PDS network. For example, I found myself asking: am I assisting with the perpetuation of oppressive policies or am I merely biding my time until I can do the “good work” I plan to do once my doctorate is complete? How did I rationalize my own perspective and what influence did that have on my positionality? Therefore, I see myself as much to blame as anyone else in any failings of this partnership. Looking back, I wonder what was assumed about me and about the assumptions I carried with me to the school.

Missed Opportunities (2016-18). From an infrastructure standpoint, I experienced consistent roadblocks in the form of having never been granted a district email address, schools throughout the district not having the ability to utilize Google applications, an outright disregard and reluctance to share standardized test scores with me, constant scheduling conflicts, lack of substitute teachers, no dedicated workspace, and other small issues that stemmed from the district central office. And, there was always a sense of hostility throughout the building aimed at the central office, almost an explicit daily fear of not knowing what might happen next. Rather than utilizing teachers as a resource, district leadership viewed staff as “the other” who would not have important information until the administration deemed it necessary, without ever once asking staff for input and feedback.

From an institutional level, the university never once let any of the three PIRs in Smithville know of any research projects taking place, which reflects failure on both ends. If a partnership is to be cultivated, PIRs are certainly the ones who can develop and maintain such relationships. However, the university and district administrators alike never once consulted any of the PDS sites about the many research and professional development series being offered throughout the district. In fact, it was not until certain members of each research team approached me that I ever knew of these university projects. To this day, no representative from either district nor university administration had mentioned any such project in the larger partnership.

As a final note, I did not meet with any district leadership until the middle of year three of this work in Smithville. The only reason myself and the two other PIRs finally met with district leadership was because we requested the meeting at one of our PDS Network meetings after we were told by university leadership that our job was to meet specific district mandates. At this moment, the two PIRs and myself demanded a meeting before proceeding as to ensure the success of such mandates. This would be the first and only time I have ever met with or communicated with anyone from district administration, other than the ELA supervisor with whom I have met twice in four years, again, upon my explicit request.

The overall feel and understanding is that I am to be either ignored or forgotten about while in district; but, the university can add my name to a list of PIRs and can keep Smithville Public Schools listed as a member of their PDS network. Beyond that, there was no true partnership beyond the walls of the PDS site. Indeed, there was no coordinated effort from either the district or the university to strengthen or even maintain the articulated partnership between the school and university.

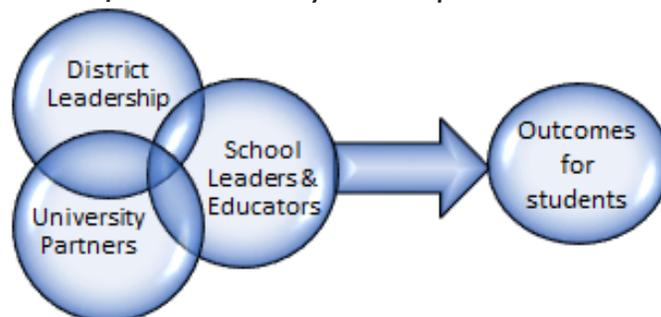
Generative Insights

Reflexive engagement allowed us to put our narrative accounts in dialogue with one another over time as a way to make sense of our individual experiences and memories with district-level resistance in Smithville Public Schools. Through our analysis, generative insights emerged around our experiences in this school-university partnership. Here, we reflect on the methodological engagement with kitchen-table reflexivity to develop generative insights related to our encounters with school district resistance to social justice work with a supposed partnership school district. Through the theoretical framing of this work, two related levels of generative insights emerged: systemic and idiosyncratic insights. We discuss both of these levels of insights in relation to each other and within the larger neoliberal ideological framework of capitalism that has become all too familiar to us. Then, we offer a roadmap of possibilities for other social justice scholars who are invested in launching social justice work in school-university partnerships.

Systemic Insights

The “Partnership” Myth. The term “school-university partnership” has become a commonly called upon theme in education literature and practice, and is used to denote when a school and university work together toward shared goals aimed at a shared commitment to research and professional learning for all stakeholders (Burns et al., 2016). Figure 1 captures the ideal state of such partnerships, as framed by the literature and as hoped for by us.

Figure 1
The Ideal State of a School-University Partnership



The core components of a school-university partnership as outlined in the literature do not provide guidance on who is responsible for maintaining fidelity with the core components, or how to course correct when things go awry. Further, our generative insights revealed that the district level administrators may not have been aware of our perceptions of their resistance to our social justice projects within the partner schools. As it stands for our particular experiences, this was a partnership agreement on paper only, and not in practice.

There are, of course, variations on the partnership myth theme. For example, we have heard the term used to describe when a school district hosts clinical practice interns for a semester or two. We have also heard the term used to describe Professional Development Schools in which the university offers more intensive or myriad supports to a school. As it pertains to this study, some of the Smithville Public Schools were actually PDS sites for our university. However, the reflexive methodological approach adopted here suggests that the frequent use of the term “partnership” may actually be a misleading appropriation for what is really happening between the school and the university.

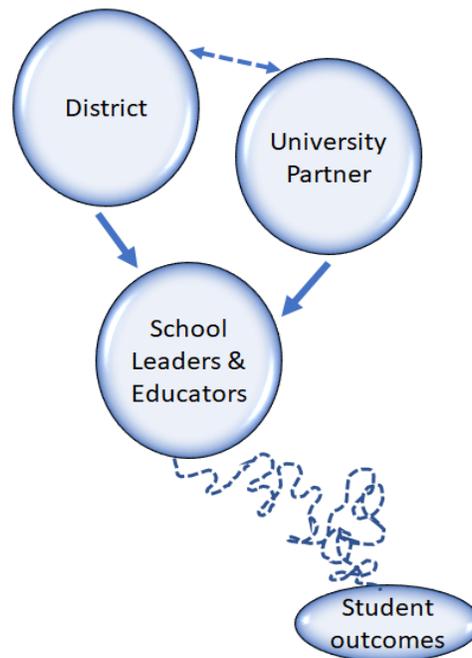
The idea of mutualism (Coburn et al., 2013) is key to any partnership work, as it helps ensure that all perspectives and participants have the opportunity to contribute to the focus of the work. In doing so, all parties work hand-in-hand toward a common goal. In each of our individual projects, we entered into our partnerships with the hopes of cultivating a sense of mutualism. As our teams were each made up of practitioners, researchers, and university partners, our projects all centered on making positive change within the Smithville context.

At several points in our kitchen-table talk, we described this mutualism simply as a lie—a lie told from both the school and the university, both of which seemed more concerned with the optics of our arrangement rather than with how we were working collaboratively toward student improvement, engagement with the community, and professional learning, as articulated in the core components of school-university partnerships (Burns et al., 1988).

One of the most salient implications of our reflexivity is that these are in fact not partnerships but rather transactions, despite how *we* choose to name them. Figure 2 shows the reality of the transaction—three groups, all with their own interests, two pushing down on the third in hopes that the school leaders and teachers can in some way impact student outcomes.

Schools and universities alike are systems, systems comprising individuals who operate within larger ideological and structural frames. And, while the frames that define the academic community may largely overlap with those that define public school districts, they are distinct and different. Universities and schools fulfill different needs in a community and are guided by different discourses, values, evaluations, and social positions in society. And, even when there is synchronicity between the ideologies, schools and universities still operate differently, serve different populations, and employ different systems of rewards.

Figure 2
The Reality of the School-University Partnership



As such, the relationship between a school and a university is complex and rarely begins on equal footing. To simply form a relationship and to name this relationship as a “partnership” without more closely examining the often competing needs that these institutions serve is to gloss over the mutual opportunism that each entity brings to bear in the nature of this complex relationship. And, P-12 students and teachers deserve more from the people who make decisions regarding their lives and livelihoods.

The Priorities of the Academy. Anyone reading this piece is likely a researcher who thoroughly understands the difficulties related to engaging in sustained community-focused work *and* scholarly productivity. The currency in the realm of academia remains peer-reviewed publications, and oftentimes, as long as publications are produced and scholarly output remains high, no one in a position of authority in the academy will question the merits of one’s work in a community, or the investment of time needed to build positive rapport or relationships, or the need to first understand the nuanced environment of a school district before moving forward with an “improvement plan” for teachers and administrators. Without resultant publications or subsequent deliverables, such community-engaged work focused on social justice becomes harder to define

and, thus, harder to defend to anyone outside this work who holds an evaluative position on our career trajectories.

As a result of our reflexive efforts in the development of this piece, we each realized that we fell into the trap of protecting our own time in an effort to maintain scholarly productivity. For example, over time we each felt the tensions of having a limited impact in Smithville Public Schools and then slowly rolled back our own time commitments, which we were able to do quite easily and with virtually no pushback from our institution. In this way, we enacted the privilege of our researcher positionalities and submitted to what we perceived were the more pressing demands of our academic community. We defined this tactic as drawing boundaries, but upon further reflexive interrogation, realized we fell back on the luxury of scholarly privilege and gave ourselves an out—an out that teachers and students do not have. And, this further contributes to mistrust and the failure of partnerships to hold.

Idiosyncratic Insights

The idiosyncratic insights that emerged in this research stem from more personal aspects of who we are as researchers or external agents when working with a partner school district. Through a critical examination of our social positions as *external* or *outsider* we began to realize that, despite good intentions, expertise, experience, and identities as former classroom teachers, we maintain outsider status to the administrators who vetted our work. Further, even a sustained presence in the schools and classrooms did not seem to alter our social positioning as outsiders to the Smithville Public Schools administrators, who ultimately determined the degree to which change might be enacted or not. We explore two related dimensions of idiosyncratic insights: the problem with outsider positionality and individual accountability.

The Problem with Outsider Positionality. Over time, and through sustained reflexive engagement with our narratives of experience, we realized that these are not partnerships between our college and Smithville Public Schools, despite the moniker these arrangements carry. Rather, *we* name them partnerships as a way to feel okay about the work we do as *external* social justice advocates. This positionality allowed us to hold Smithville Public School administrators as equally accountable to our social justice efforts as we were, even though they approached us as the experts in different areas in need of improvement.

Through our engagement with kitchen-table reflexivity, we uncovered that this positionality is problematic; through our positionalities we allowed ourselves off the hook because we perceived our partner school district did not care or was not as committed to our work as we were. Somehow, our privileged social positions as university-based researchers—and outsiders to the school community—enabled us to rationalize our perspectives and made us feel better about the

limits of our influence of our individual projects. But, we also see how the district administrators and ourselves alike enacted the privileges our social positions afforded us in different ways.

For example, we made sense of the resistance we encountered by withdrawing and *protecting our time*, which is a widely-accepted and enacted phrase in research-based universities. At the same time, the district administrators likely engaged in their own sensemaking of our work as outsiders by protecting *their* time and focusing on what they perceived as more immediate and pressing concerns to the daily operations of the school district since we can assume no other operational tasks were being taken off their plates with the onset of our projects.

Individual Accountability. The use of kitchen-table reflexivity methodology uncovered more hidden aspects of our positionality. We each came in with a hopeful commitment to building authentic relationships devoid of power structures and becoming a part of the school community; but we realized we were positioned as outsiders who were expected to simply provide something to the school. Had we not engaged in kitchen-table reflexivity, our privileged social position as university-based researchers would not have been explored—we would still be frustrated without acknowledging the ways *we* contributed to the missed opportunities and felt tensions in our work. For example, without realizing it we enacted our privileged social positioning as university-based researchers to draw boundaries and protect our time and our own sense of productivity.

Further, while we initially aimed to explore the district-level resistance we encountered from central office administrators to our social justice endeavors in the school district, we quickly realized through our engagement with kitchen table reflexivity that the perspective we were taking stripped us of individual accountability of our own work. Collectively, we faced challenges at the district level, but that does not mean we can let ourselves fall short. We feel these idiosyncratic insights are nested within the larger systemic insights that this particular methodological approach yielded. The systemic insights that emerged are related to how the priorities of the academic community do not often value the time commitment needed to engage in social justice work at the district level.

Educational Commodities and Academic Capitalism

Reflexive engagement with our experiences offered an occasion for deeper analysis around what was expected of us, how we were positioned, and why that was the case. Readings on academic capitalism (e.g. Apple, 2013; Au & Hollar, 2016; Jessop, 2018) and the power of neoliberal agendas—especially in this particular political moment—assisted our sensemaking. As we reflect upon our experiences through a capitalistic power critique, we see how our experiences reflect a neoliberal transaction and what Marx (1976) described as commodities in a capitalist system. What actually happened was a negotiated transaction—not

an authentic partnership—to exchange goods and services, with slight variations for each of us depending on our specific project.

For example, Brie offered her knowledge and services on educator preparation to support her tenure application; Shelley offered her expertise on equitable practices in the form of a contract for an academic center she was tasked with starting; and Dan offered his expertise and services as a PIR as a condition of his enrollment in a doctoral program. In sum, the school district provided us with a site to enact our work in exchange for the knowledge we stood to offer them. How we each moved through this particular neoliberal power structure reflects how we internalized degrees of capitalism in our work by conflating the idea of partnership building with an exchange of goods and services.

Through ongoing reflexive engagement with our experiences and memories we see how we engaged in this exchange; we each had something on the line that prompted us to *operate* within this capitalistic arrangement for a number of years. For example, Brie had tenure on the line and knew that a multi-year grant would help support a positive tenure decision for her application; Shelley was brand new to the geographical area and wanted to become familiar with schools and communities; and, Dan was a new doctoral student who hoped to build his Vitae in preparation for a tenure-track faculty position. In this way, the entire school-university partnership reflects academic capitalism in two ways: the transfer of knowledge and capital accumulation.

The transfer of knowledge is a key component of academic capitalism because of its contribution to capital accumulation; our positionality as outsiders or external agents became reified and entrenched as we inadvertently assumed the role of “bearers of intellectual capital” (Jessop, 2018, p. 104). Since we operate as individuals within this larger system, we are reminded of the need to develop relationships first, then perhaps more organic and authentic partnerships between institutions could emerge.

Road Map of Possibilities

Some may read these insights as an indictment of the academy as an ivory tower, detached from the community in which it stands. While this holds true in many ways, our actions as individuals will not provide the collective effort needed to affect change. Our work is intended to give voice to the resistance we encountered in a school-university partnership—resistance that ultimately thwarted our efforts with enthusiastic teachers. There is a pressing and longstanding need for change in our schools in particular and for our society at large.

We write this piece to make sense of our own experiences, to encourage others who may have similar resistance encounters, and to persist in our social justice efforts. Still, as scholars committed to social justice in society and in U.S. schools, we cannot relinquish the responsibility we feel to Smithville students and teachers

despite the district-level resistance we encountered to our work; our kitchen-table reflexivity provided a space for us to make sense of our experiences and the resultant jadedness in an effort to persist in our efforts with a renewed sense of solidarity and purpose.

Given the generative insights that emerged, we grapple with how we as individuals with commitments to social justice work in P-12 schools navigate the power-laden systems of universities and the lure of academic capitalism. We, therefore, take the generative insights yielded from our reflexive methodological approach and use them to lay out a road map of possibilities for other social justice-oriented scholars who are committed to community-engaged scholarship and reform as a way to move forward. Formerly, Brie worked as an early childhood educator, Dan worked as a secondary school teacher, and Shelley worked as a social worker. We draw on these collective experiences in light of the generative insights to offer a roadmap of suggestions to aid others in dealing with the fatigue and frustrations of enacting social-justice work in P-12 schools.

Both the systemic insights and idiosyncratic insights suggest that social justice efforts at the school level may not be enough to render any changes. Given the outsider status afforded to us by virtue of our affiliation with a university, our work was not readily embraced by district level administrators, despite our efforts and despite teachers' enthusiasm toward the work. And, given that we operate with our "partner" school districts in what can best be described as a symbiotic, albeit at times toxic, relationship, we are powerless to do anything about district-level resistance, even when individual teachers are excited about the work.

For this reason, we suggest that alongside school-based social justice work, there needs to be activism and advocacy *at the state level*. For administrators, unless something is measured and documented in a formal way, it becomes too easily ignored, forgotten, or altogether dismissed. We, at the university level, need to leverage our privileged positions to actively advocate for state leaders to begin to find ways to measure the degree to which social justice initiatives are enacted in schools. We feel this is not a heavy lift, since public education is adapting to a capitalist economy through increased accountability and competition (Au & Hollar, 2018).

And, given the idiosyncratic challenges of this work, we need to gather together more collectively as colleagues to advocate for such change at the state-level. Our experiences indicate that teachers and faculty shoulder the burden of weight of the institutions as laborers. What we need are more authentic and grassroots relationships between teachers and faculty to push against these systems *and* we need advocacy at the state level from the top down to push against these systems. Here is an opportunity for different departments, colleges, and universities to demonstrate solidarity with the communities we so often research and voice the need for systemic change, for critical analysis of spending initiatives at the state level, and for more equitable allocation of resources and aid to communities.

Rather than drawing boundaries to protect our time, we need to draw greater attention to the issues that concern us all.

Based on our insights, we also encourage other scholars and activists to empower local stakeholders in the community by developing *Community Advisory Boards*. Community Advisory Boards should comprise individuals living in and working in the community who can take up the cause for social justice endeavors and organize other community members to take an active role in enacting the changes they want in their community. In this way, a Community Advisory Board empowers individuals with *insider positionality* to do the work in a more organic way.

Since we, as university-based researchers, maintain outsider status by virtue of our positionality, and because we operate within partnerships in name only, we cannot carry on this work and hope to make any visible, meaningful, or sustainable change unless we support grass-roots work at the local level. And, finally, we urge the academic community to find ways to recognize and acknowledge the considerable investment of time and effort that enacting social justice work in P-12 schools demands of those who are willing to do it.

Conclusion

Many of us working in educational institutions, whether they are P-12 schools or universities, articulate a social justice stance; and, this stance informs and guides our personal and professional decision-making in both the everyday and in the bigger picture. Our intention in writing this piece was two-fold: first, we wanted to explore the more tacit and pernicious dimensions of our positionalities as social justice researchers working in higher education; and, we wanted to engage in explicit and structured shared analysis of our individual yet overlapping experiences with social justice work in a “partnership” school district.

Conversations regarding failing schools and the dismal state of education in the U.S. abound; public rhetoric and policy situate teachers as the blameworthy actors in the narrative of what policy-makers contend is the sub-standard academic achievement of P-12 students, particularly that of students of color, immigrant students, and students attending schools in urban characteristic contexts. Alongside our explorations of district-level resistance to our work, we hope this paper can help shift the blame away from teachers and discuss reasons why reform efforts are difficult to enact in the bureaucratic organizations of U.S. schools.

Despite any individual teacher’s or researcher’s efforts toward social justice, U.S. educational institutions operate within a larger ideological framework that easily dismisses efforts toward widespread change. We engaged in this work in an effort to hold ourselves accountable for why our particular research efforts may not have been taken up at the district level, even when individual teachers were committed to and engaged with the work of our various projects.

We hope that this piece serves to recast the narrative about the inner-work-

ings of schools for anyone who has not worked as a classroom teacher or who is tempted by the narrative that blames teachers for the myriad ways U.S. schools fall short in meeting the needs of students and communities. Indeed, teachers are easy targets for the failures of schools as systems. In our particular experiences in Smithville Public Schools, district-level resistance from central office administrators—our supposed partners—posed the biggest challenge and barrier to enacting social-justice reform and change. We hope that through this piece, we have helped others find ways to make sense of their own experiences with social justice work in school-university partnerships, and have provided some useful considerations for the larger academic community in support of this important work.

Note

¹ Names of individuals, the school district, and the grant projects are pseudonyms.

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