Research, Justice, and Our Opportunity to Cultivate a Political Future Outside the Workforce

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Abstract—As the RESPECT community turns toward education Justice as an organizing principle, we have an opportunity to re-engage with the liberatory, emancipatory, and revolutionary histories of common literacy and pedagogical frameworks used within the RESPECT community. Drawing on the work of Freire, as well as contemporary critical pedagogy scholars, I situate our research process as an element of critical pedagogy. Bringing in the semi-shared context of RPPs, I argue that researchers engaged in RPPs should understand themselves as a vehicle of collective power aiming to accomplish "ideal-centered change" (Orphan and Hartley, 2020). Bringing together critical and organizational perspectives as a lens through which to understand the research process, and its relationship to achieving education justice, I argue that we need to move beyond strategies of inclusion within the current system to strategies that seek to fundamentally alter the system in which we work.

Keywords—*justice, RPPs, pedagogy, liberation, research to practice, anti-racism*

I. Introduction

Over the past three and a half years I have had a tremendous opportunity to become part of a growing K-12 Computer Science Education community. To my delight, RPPs were also being systematically integrated into the Computing Education Research legacy. I was delighted not because I had a particular attachment to RPPs, but as a staunch Socialist with years of organizing experience and revolutionary study, I was excited to have a common framework from which to begin thinking about issues of collective action, power, and current events in technology. From #metoo demonstrations to union-led pressure campaigns to drop facial recognition contracts, to calling out the white supremacy reflected in algorithms that disproportionately surveil, police, and jail Black communities, the spirit of justice was animating the discourse and the action of broad swaths of the technology and computing workforce. More broadly the United States was still abuzz from Trump Inauguration protests, the continued growth and activity of the Black Lives Matter movement. This was (and still is!) an incredibly exciting time for a politics of liberation.

In naming education justice as the theme of this year's conference, the RESPECT conference committee is implicitly recognizing that Broadening Participation in Computing (BPC), and even efforts around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are not justice, and are insufficient for achieving it. We are being asked to set our goals more ambitiously (or perhaps modestly – we only want the world). We are being challenged to rethink what we do, how we do it, and why.

This dialogue that we are engaging in with one another likely feels familiar to many in the community who are using concepts like Paris' Humanizing Research, or who find their pedagogical lineage in the works of bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Antonia Darden, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and others.

Paris writes [8] "Humanizing research is a methodological stance, which requires that our inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of dignity and care for both researchers and participants." These ideas are expanded in the edited volume curated by Paris and Maisha T. Winn [9]. They write, "thinking about the ways one conducts research with youth and communities in that it positions researchers as evolving and situated, always being mindful of how critically important it is to respect the humanity of the people who invite us into their worlds" (p. 10).

Research Practice Partnerships (RPPs) are similarly concerned with how research is conducted, seeking to build authentic connections with the practitioner communities (broadly defined) [5]. While RPPs can be traced as part of a longer history of radical, critical, and relational approaches to research including but not limited to Action Research (Participatory, Youth, Community), Engaged and Community Engaged Research, to date most literature on RPPs has eschewed those more critical questions.

To be sure, there is a small but growing literature base interrogating power, race, culture, identity, and trust, [4, 6, 10] in RPPs, but until this interrogation also includes the research process, the flow of ideas, the relationships of capital to education and CSEd research in particular, we won't be able to rightly reclaim a critical lineage and define the purpose of RPPs not as vehicles for improving the relevance and uptake of education research, but as vehicles for achieving education justice.

Though not entirely overlapping, the number of people working with both humanizing/liberatory and RPP frameworks is substantial within the RESPECT community. These frameworks provide us entre to issues of authenticity in partnerships; value (Whose value is used up and whose value is replenished by our work?); and the interrelation of education justice to global, societal justice.

The CSEd community is international in scope. Our RPP partnerships are with sovereign nations, and other countries that the left would describe as under colonial subjugation. Yet, we haven't acknowledged these historical and material realities in tangible ways. What does it mean to have the US government,

venture capitalists, multinational corporations, and corporate philanthropy fund work that is supposed to be humanizing, supposed to serve community interests? How might this be ideologically and materially constraining our pursuit of justice?

When we must align our efforts to the shibboleth of workforce development in service of US global competitiveness and private enterprise as a condition of funding, this acts as a political straight jacket, a negation of our ability to not only effectively acknowledge, but begin to repair the harm that the US has caused for those very same purposes. How do we work toward justice if we are every bit a part of that "culture of dominance" as bell hooks terms it?

Personally, I am agnostic to RPP versus other engaged, critical, or liberatory research paradigms because I am more concerned with the ethos of the research team, the intrapersonal growth of researchers, and the community growth that it will take to hold ourselves in loving accountability, not only to our communities, partners, selves, or each other, but to Liberation.

However, since RPPs are now a key point of commonality in language (if not common definition), and RPPs were explicitly designed to change the nature of the research process toward greater democracy in the production and use of research knowledge, we can begin here. We have the ability to say that RPPs only work as a bridge between policy and practice inasmuch as policy and practice work for the liberation of all peoples.

I am suggesting we regularly incorporate into our professional culture self-examination of how interwoven systems of oppression have shaped our lives, our worldviews, and our assumptions. Beyond simplistic approaches such as implicit bias training [3, 7], which say nothing about explicit racism, we also need a framework to understand our own power to change the systems that produce implicit bias. Incorporating our lived experiences with oppression and exploitation (as both oppressed and oppressor, exploited and exploiter) is an essential element of the methodological stance of humanizing research. Honest self-examination is a necessary beginning to "building relationships of dignity and care" with ourselves, and so opens the possibility of building those kinds of relationships with others.

To do the intrapersonal work well, we need to do it in relationship [1, 2]. Outside of family, friends, and other chosen communities, some of the most important relationships we have are with fellow scholars, researchers, intellectuals, and the people and communities in/with which we carry out our inquiry and scholarship. Not only do our jobs require us to work in concert with one another toward a common mandate around Broadening Participation in Computing, but a semi-shared context of RPPs means that many of us are also doing this work using a structure that invites us to question how the very relations of research production in which we engage are part of our larger strategy to achieve Broadened Participation.

RESPECT, as partly a conference at the intersection of these sites of dialogue is also being asked to think of itself differently. For any of us individually to be able to work toward justice, we need a community of loving accountability, of discussion and debate. RESPECT could be that community, but it would require a rejection of the academic conference model, a rethinking of audience and purpose, and a commitment to material justice, not only the idea.

One element that I see will be necessary is to develop a sense of ourselves as a collective force for collective action, i.e. as a force that can exert pressure on those who hold power to relinquish it, and to leverage our own collective power toward anti-racist end.

Justice requires engaging in collective action toward our own humanity and the humanity of those around us. Through developing dignified accountability to that collective, we discern how we perpetuate white supremacy in our actions and worldviews and can be supported in our anti-racist practice. If justice is love in action [15], then we better get moving. Doing this work well will be difficult, uncomfortable, unfamiliar, dangerous, and absolutely necessary. Let this moment radicalize you.

II. REFERENCES

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