Forum

Equivocal Equity: The Struggles of a Literacy Scholar, White Middle-Class Urban School Parent, and Grassroots Activist

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In this essay, I propose that literacy scholars who are parents, such as myself, rarely discuss how the choices we make in the education of our children sometimes conflict with our ideals as literacy researchers and problematize our praxis as scholars committed to social justice. I share examples from my own experience as a White, middle-class parent of children in an urban school district to demonstrate how my scholarship, advocacy for educational equity, and decisions about my children’s education are intertwined in complex ways and sometimes conflict. These examples serve to illuminate the multiple, sometimes contradictory, ethical commitments many of us have—ethical commitments that are not always easy to reconcile. I argue that our work as literacy scholars would better serve our goals of educational equity if we balanced our ideals with honest conversations about the difficult decisions we make daily as we struggle to provide the best educational opportunities for all children, including our own.

As a literacy scholar committed to social justice, I don’t believe in “gifted” education. As a parent, I have allowed both my children to be tested for and enrolled in gifted education in Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS), the urban school district in which I live.

As an advocate for equity in education, I have met with PPS leaders to challenge the gifted education program and to share current research demonstrating the inequity, racism, and classism in how PPS (like many school districts) recommends, tests, and serves “gifted” students. I have challenged other parents’ assumption that their children and mine need a special curriculum that is more challenging than what “non-gifted” children receive. In these situations, my expertise as a literacy researcher has not been very useful or convincing.

“They use the Great Books program in the gifted classes,” one friend mentioned. “What is the research on Great Books with gifted students?”

“I don’t know of any research on using Great Books with gifted students,” I explained. “Because first, ‘gifted’ is a policy concept, not a scientific measure of students’ academic potential. It is defined differently in different states and school
districts. Second, the research on using Great Books shows that it’s good for all students. So the question we should be asking the school is why all kids aren’t reading rich texts like Great Books and having literature discussions instead of answering multiple-choice questions from the basal reader."

“Oh.” Uncomfortable silence.

Though I would like to convince PPS to abolish gifted education on the grounds that “gifted” is a fundamentally inequitable concept, in the meantime, my children continue to accrue the privileges of the gifted label, including higher academic self-esteem; creative, self-selected electives; and the promise of being in the highest-level track in high school.

In the murky reality of my struggles as a White, middle-class literacy researcher with children enrolled in an urban public school system, I strive daily to live by my own ideals. In both my scholarly and personal endeavors, I am committed to increasing equity in society. My literacy research has focused on gender and racial inequities in urban high school English classrooms (Godley, 2006; Godley & Minnici, 2008), and in my everyday life, I try to live by the Quaker principles of equality and social justice that shaped my upbringing. But I am increasingly aware of how my position as a White, middle-class parent with a PhD has given my children particular advantages because of structural inequities inherent in the urban public school system they attend.

As literacy scholars, we often write about our work with students and teachers to effect change in underserved or inequitable school systems. We sometimes write about our experiences of inequity or racism in our own schooling. But we rarely write about how we bring our perspectives as literacy researchers to bear on the education of our own children. We rarely acknowledge how the choices we make in the education of our children sometimes conflict with our ideals as literacy researchers and problematize our praxis as scholars committed to social justice.

Years of educational research have documented the myriad ways our public school systems are inequitable. In this essay, rather than rehashing those studies, my goal is to examine how those inequities and my own positionality as a researcher, parent, and advocate for equity intersect. In my conversations with colleagues, I have found that many of us grapple with the educational decisions we make for our own children and compare them to the kind of equitable public schools we advocate for, including African American scholar/parents who choose to send their children to private schools or homeschool their children because of the real emotional and academic damage public schools can inflict upon African American children; White, working-class scholar/parents who send their children to private or university lab schools so their children can receive a more creative, inquiry-based education than they did; and other parent/scholars who move their children from public to private schools because they feel that their children are not engaged by the type of learning currently emphasized in public schools. Though we rarely talk about it publicly, I suspect that for many other literacy researchers who

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are parents, their scholarship, advocacy for educational equity, and own children’s education are intertwined in complex ways as well.

My conversations with colleagues, most of whose children do not attend public schools, led me to question why my children attend PPS when my family could likely afford to pay tuition and when my university offers a well-respected (but tuition-based) laboratory school. In part, my children attend PPS because fundamentally, I think that it is the best educational choice for them. Like many middle-class parents who send their children to urban schools in which they may be the racial and class minority, I also send my children to PPS because I believe in the ideals of equality, democracy, and citizenship that undergird public schools, even though I know such ideals are problematic in practice (Hollingsworth & Williams, 2010). I hope that my children will be more likely to develop antiracist worldviews and the ability to communicate and collaborate with people from diverse linguistic, cultural, and social class backgrounds by attending socioeconomically and racially diverse schools, though I know school diversity alone, particularly if the school is bimodal and tracked, does not ensure these goals (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Hollingsworth & Williams, 2010).

I also send my children to PPS because I know that as an educational researcher and a middle-class parent, I can advocate for changes that bring about greater equity and be “heard.” Recent scholarship suggests that middle-class parents often possess economic, cultural, and social capital that they use to advocate for positive changes and additional resources for the urban schools in which their children are enrolled (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). For instance, three years ago another literacy scholar and I met with our school’s principal and the curriculum coordinator for PPS to share research showing that the upper-elementary literacy curriculum was not aligned with current research and best practices because it focused solely on decontextualized components of reading (phonics, vocabulary, short basal reading passages, and worksheets) rather than comprehension and interpretation of rich texts. We were able to persuade the school district to include more curricular units focused on student-centered discussions of rich trade books.

At the same time, I am aware that middle-class African American and Latino parents—even when they possess a PhD in education—are not always “heard” in the same way I am (see Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010, for excellent descriptions of the struggles that African American literacy researchers face trying to advocate for their own children; see also Wallace, 2013). In addition to advocating for structural equity, literacy researchers of color must also protect their children from potential emotional and academic damage in urban schools that my children will never have to face because they are White (Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010; Ferguson, 2001). I understand why my African American colleagues hesitate to send their children to PPS.

**Advocating for Equity as a Parent/Scholar: The Daily Struggle**

In working for a better education for my own children, I have tried to advocate and volunteer in ways that will improve the education of all children in PPS. I volunteer
hours each month at my children’s school, tutoring struggling fourth graders in math, turning double-dutch jump ropes during recess, and attending the school’s equity committee meetings. I advocate for equity in PPS by making appointments with my children’s principal and district leaders to share and suggest solutions to instances of inequity and racism in the schools that I witness firsthand, such as the poster my child’s former teacher hung in her room to show which students were in the “above”-grade-level reading group (mostly middle-class, White and Asian/Asian American) and the “below”-grade-level reading group (mostly poor and working-class, African American), and the district’s problematic treatment of stigmatized dialects in the elementary ELA curriculum. I serve on the board of the community “watchdog” group for PPS, whose mission is to advocate for equity in the district. And two years ago, I spent countless hours helping organize grassroots efforts to fight the $1 billion cut in state funding for public education initiated by our governor. On good days, I hear my daughter’s ELA teacher talk about how engaging and rich the sixth-grade ELA curriculum is—a curriculum I had a small part in designing—or hear my daughter quote from the curriculum, saying, “I really like discussing the significant moments of the book with my class.” And I remind myself that my husband and I are generally pleased with the education our children are receiving in PPS.

Still I agonize over most decisions I make about my children’s education and often end up feeling like a hypocrite. I question whether I am doing enough to work toward greater equity in PPS, or whether I am deluding myself that I am contributing to the greater good by simply enrolling my children in an urban school system. And issues I used to have strong, clear opinions about, such as gifted education, tracking, and equity, now manifest themselves in so many minutia of my children’s education that I’m no longer sure what they mean or how I should respond. Are the district’s magnet schools a form of tracking? If so, should I refuse to let my children apply? Am I really working toward equity if my children attend the most socioeconomically privileged elementary school in the district (only 33% of students qualify for free/reduced-price lunch, compared with 71% district-wide), even if it is my neighborhood school? What does it mean to be a literacy researcher committed to social justice when you face these questions?

On bad days, I find that trying to align my ideals with my own children’s education feels more exhausting than productive. Like other literacy scholars/parents committed to social justice, I live my work all day, every day—at work, in my conversations with other PPS parents, at my children’s school, and even at the dinner table when my children say things like, “I think my teacher is racist. She only yells at the African American boys and she doesn’t yell at other kids when they tap their pencils,” or when they ask, “Why can’t we join the ski club? Everyone is going. It’s not fair!” How do I talk to other parents, my child’s teacher, and the
principal in productive ways about my daughter’s claim that her teacher is racist? How do I advocate for the African American boys my daughter believes are being discriminated against? And how do I begin to explain the inequity of the school’s decision to start a ski club that requires students to pay $300 to participate, or unpack my children’s use of “everyone” to refer only to their friends from privileged, mostly academic families joining the ski club? I grapple with some version of these questions every day.

On bad days, I also question whether, as a middle-class literacy scholar, I am effecting any improvements in educational equity by enrolling my children in PPS. The alternatives—enrolling my children in private or suburban schools—seem worse, but research suggests that institutionally, many urban public school systems, despite serving mostly low-income families of color, are set up to advantage their minority White, middle-class stakeholders, such as myself. And White, middle-class parents whose children attend urban schools often profess to be committed to social justice yet accumulate public school resources for their own children at the expense of other, more underserved children (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). Such parents often believe that students of color living in poverty benefit from merely being in the same school as their middle-class children. But there is scant research suggesting that this is true. Instead, White, middle-class parents are quite good at structuring an elite education for their children through mechanisms such as gifted education and tracking, while patting themselves on the back for sending their children to urban public schools with poor, Black, and Brown children. The type of reflexivity required of me when I read such research—interrogating my positioning as a White, privileged parent of children in urban schools, and an educational researcher/activist—is much harder than the researcher reflexivity I engage in as part of my scholarship. Reading such research often makes me feel nauseated. Am I one of those White, middle-class parents?

Grappling with “Gifted”
At the same time that I have tried to protest systems of inequity such as gifted education, my personal investment in my children’s education and emotional well-being has caused me to become complicit, to some degree, in the reproduction of such inequities in our urban school district. The story of how my children came to be labeled as “gifted” reveals many of the paradoxical decisions and actions I have taken as a parent. In recent years, PPS has enacted a series of reforms in its gifted program to address systemic inequities, some of which are district-level and others of which are the result of state regulations. Before these reforms, the district estimated that 90% of students tested for the gifted program were tested on the basis of parent requests. Not surprisingly, middle-class parents were most likely to view their children as gifted, understand the benefits of the gifted label, and request testing. Thus, the gifted program in PPS has historically overenrolled White and middle-class students while underenrolling African American and low-income children—a problem seen nationwide (Erwin & Worrell, 2012).

Before my daughter entered PPS as a first grader, friends told me to request
that she be tested for the gifted program immediately. Then, as now, I viewed gifted education as a system of educational inequity, and I did not want to participate. At the same time, however, I recommended that my daughter’s friend, John, be tested for gifted education right away because I knew how African American boys, such as John, are often subjected to low academic expectations and assumed to be “troublemakers” in many urban schools (Ferguson, 2001). It seemed a small step toward equity, within a flawed inequitable system, to convince John’s parents that he should have the protection of a gifted label as he entered PPS, and in the years since, that label seems to have largely shielded him against the negative stereotypes that can destroy African American boys’ success in schools. I believed, and still believe, that my children did not need that protection because of their privileged race and class status. In keeping my daughter out of gifted education, I planned to advocate for implementing the more creative, interpretive aspects of the gifted curriculum in regular classrooms for all children. I imagined classes in which teachers acknowledged that all students were capable of challenging, meaningful learning.

So I did not request that my daughter be tested for the gifted program. And when her first-grade teacher contacted me to suggest that she be tested, I politely declined. But by second grade, more middle-class students had been tested for and enrolled in the gifted program. Many were close friends of my daughter’s, and because PPS had a centralized gifted center to which elementary-aged “gifted” students were bussed once a week, on Wednesdays the school was deeply segregated along racial and class lines, with most middle-class, White, and Asian American students leaving on the bus to the gifted center and most working-class/poor and African American students left behind at school. I was horrified, and I did not think it would serve my daughter or other children to participate.

But as more middle-class students left school each Wednesday, my daughter began to notice. She began to request that she go with her friends. At the same time, her second-grade teacher was putting increasing pressure on my husband and me to have our daughter tested for the gifted program by framing it as the appropriate education for our child. I still refused. On Wednesdays, my daughter often cried after school, asking why I wouldn’t let her go with her friends. I tried to explain that I didn’t think the gifted program was fair because everyone couldn’t go, but my argument was not convincing. Though my own research has focused on the relationship between academic identities and class-based social relationships in high schools (Godley, 2006), I had foolishly not foreseen how socioeconomic class and parental occupations/education levels would influence my daughter’s school-based social networks at such a young age. Nor had I anticipated the role of emotion in such decisions; to me, the decision not to have my children participate in the gifted program was logical and political, not an issue of friendships or feelings.

After one particularly pitiful bout of crying by our daughter, my husband (who had allowed me to be the decision-maker on this issue) finally asked me, “Don’t you think this has gone far enough? Do you really think it’s worth making your point when it’s making our daughter feel sad and left out, and denying her an educational opportunity?”
“The personal is political,” the rallying cry of feminists of the 1960s and ’70s, has always rung true to me. But as I have tried to negotiate the enigmatic space between “social justice-focused literacy scholar” and “middle-class, urban school parent,” the relationship between the political and personal has become much messier. The political is now sometimes at odds with the personal; my political views and attempts at praxis often conflict with my personal relationships, my children’s friendships, and their emotions and desires. After more disagreements with my husband, I gave in. I decided that gifted education would not be that issue in our marriage—the fight you have over and over again—and that palpable tension between my husband, my children, and me was not in the best interest of our family.

My daughter was tested for and enrolled in the gifted program, and later, when my son’s teacher recommended him for the program, I put in my requisite year of protest and then conceded again in response to the argument, “How can you deny him the chance to be in gifted when his sister is?” I still believe that gifted education is not in the best interests of my children or other children who are denied access to this program in PPS. And my daughter, now older and more aware of inequities, has agreed to “opt out” of the gifted program if other families do the same. But I’ve started to appreciate the paradoxical decisions that other parents make when their ethical obligations to their own children and to all children do not easily align.

My struggle with the gifted program and other educational decisions has made me wonder where the balance is between serving my own children’s best interests and advocating for equity in urban public schools. Cucchiar and Horvat’s (2009) study of middle-class parents’ involvement in two urban schools contrasted the effects of parental involvement that was individualized (that is, focused only on one’s own children) versus parental involvement that was community-oriented. In my own experience, this is a rare dichotomy. All of the middle-class parents I know—of all racial and ethnic backgrounds—both advocate for their own children in individualistic ways, such as having their children tested for the gifted program, and also spend time advocating for, raising funds for, or tutoring students who are underserved by the school system. But the tension between these two forms of advocacy—one that reproduces inequity while the other aims to “fix” it—is rarely acknowledged or discussed.

Through my advocacy and grassroots organizing experiences, I’ve also become more sensitive to the tension between trying to advocate for all children in PPS and not speaking for all other parents or making assumptions about what is best for “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1988). At one point, I advocated for more project-based homework rather than the photocopied worksheets my children usually received. Someone had to point out to me that the district’s project-based homework requires intense adult guidance and material resources (computer, Internet access, color printer) that many low-income families in PPS do not have,
and thus can contribute to inequity. I changed my position, but at the same time, the worksheet-based homework still smacks of deficit-oriented pedagogy to me, and I worry that rhetoric about family resources might mask deficit perspectives on low-income children’s academic potential and the academic work that is “appropriate” for them. In discussions such as these, I wish that PPS would gather a diverse group of parents, teachers, and educational researchers to have a far-reaching conversation about redesigning the district’s homework policies so that homework (if given at all) is productive for all students’ academic growth.

I’ve also learned that it is easier to advocate for equity when it is distal and detached from the personal and emotional, such as at the state level, than when it is local and connected to “real” resources and opportunities that are limited, such as in PPS. Educational researchers (including myself) often insist or imply that if we only found the right approach, schools could provide the best education to all children without taking anything away from any of them. But I’ve learned that educational resources are limited, especially in an urban school district, and allocating them is more of a zero-sum game than I had thought. The principle of equity requires that the students with the greatest needs should get greater resources. I believe in this. Yet being a White, middle-class parent committed to equity ultimately means that I have to acknowledge my children’s privilege and accept that they should receive a smaller allocation of dwindling resources in PPS.

Currently, PPS is considering reassigning teachers so that the best teachers are assigned to the neediest students. If I live by my own principles, I must accept that my children will lose some of their excellent, inspiring teachers and be assigned the least experienced and most struggling teachers in the district. Equity thus becomes for me a deeply personal and ethical issue, a choice between my own children’s educational opportunities and those of children who are not as privileged as mine. Ideally, we would not have to make these choices, and all teachers in urban public schools would be excellent teachers who would be given meaningful opportunities to improve their practice. In reality, given my position as a middle-class parent and literacy scholar, I acknowledge that I am more likely to be able to support the most struggling teachers by advocating for mentoring and better professional development.

At the end of the day, my attempts to balance my work as a scholar, a parent, and an activist are messy, morally suspect, emotional, and exhausting. Yet I do believe that being a parent has helped me better understand the nuances of social justice and equity and has made me a better literacy scholar. Conversely, being a parent in PPS has allowed me to voice my concerns about equity far more powerfully and publicly than I could as a researcher. I now see that expressing outrage at educational inequities is a luxury that is well received at academic conferences and in publications (including my own), but not one that helps parents such as...
myself, teachers, or school districts with the complex daily decisions they must make about how to work toward equity and social justice.

I see our work as parents/literacy scholars committed to social justice as threefold. First, we have an obligation, given our educational and class privilege (and for some of us, racial privilege), to advocate for parents and children who are not “heard” by public schools, especially urban and underserved public schools. Such advocacy, however, must be built on true coalition-building and listening to the concerns and priorities of diverse families. Last year, my children’s school constituted an Equity Committee, which draws parents from a range of class and racial backgrounds, holds most of its meetings in the low-income communities where many students live, and focuses on various ways to increase equity in the school through school culture, parent involvement, and student activities. For the first time, I am hearing parents from marginalized racial and class backgrounds talk about their goals, concerns, and dreams for their children’s education. This seems to be a productive first step toward helping parents at the school advocate for changes that serve all children, not some at the expense of others.

Second, literacy scholars who are parents need to teach other parents about the structural inequities that permeate public schooling in the US—inequities that open up educational opportunities to only some students through tracking, bussing, and unfair school discipline policies. Often these structures, such as scheduling or suspension policies, are not visibly inequitable. As researchers, our knowledge of existing scholarship and our ability to ask for important data from schools (such as suspension rates by gender and race) obligate us to reveal inequities in our children’s schools and share such findings with those parents whose children might be most affected.

Finally, we need to generate counter-stories, based on our experiences as parents, that call into question widespread master narratives about our educational system and students, such as the assumptions that academic assessments reveal students’ innate intelligence or that schools treat all students equally. This requires us to be reflexive and open about our own privilege (and that of our children, by extension) within an inequitable system. It requires us to acknowledge when we fall short of our scholarly ideals of equity. It requires us to make the personal political by questioning whether each decision we make for our own children is in the best interest of all children, rather than letting personal advocacy for our own children take power and opportunity away from other people’s children and perpetuate the system as it exists.

Viewing our identities as literacy scholars and advocates for equity as intertwined with our identities as parents illuminates the multiple, sometimes contradictory, ethical commitments many of us have—ethical commitments that are not always easy to reconcile. Our work as literacy scholars would better serve our goals of educational equity if we balanced our ideals with honest conversations about the difficult decisions we make daily as we struggle to provide the best educational opportunities for all children, including our own.
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NOTES
1. PPS is an urban district that enrolls approximately 27,000 students, of whom 71% qualify for free/reduced-price lunch, 55% are African American, 33% are White, 1% are Latino, 2% are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% are ELLs (Harvard School of Public Health, 2013; Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2013).
2. Race and socioeconomic status are correlated in PPS and in Pittsburgh, as they are in many urban areas across the country.
3. A pseudonym
4. A few years later, the district implemented an in-school gifted pilot program that was designed to be more equitable by actively recruiting underrepresented students into “gifted” activities, including “talented” students (many of whom were low-income and African American), and placing gifted program teachers in regular classrooms once a week, where they worked with all students. I publicly supported the pilot program, but it was cut back due to budget cuts.

REFERENCES


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