

Introduction

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CICELY’S KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS squirm in front of their Zoom screens. She is teaching students how to write a shopping list, using words and drawings. Later in the day, Cicely joins an online research seminar at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), as part of her PhD program in Urban Schooling. During the check-in, she shares the shopping list and the joy she experienced seeing her students’ faces light up: “You can’t get a clearer perspective on life than through the eyes of a kindergartner.”

Cicely began her teaching career twenty-four years ago, in a school not far from where she grew up. During her first year of student teaching, she was robbed at gunpoint—a terrifying incident that clarified what she calls “a mission to help children see the range of possibilities for their lives so that they don’t see crime or this type of behavior as their only option.” She still lives and works in the same community,

buying her groceries alongside her students' parents. As a fifth-year teacher—when so many lose hope and leave the profession—Cicely said she was “too angry to leave.” After ten years, she reflected on what it means to stay in the same community: “Consistency is important, the kids see that people are committed to them.” Today, Cicely also mentors student teachers, organizes parent activists, conducts research, and leads professional learning. This book is about the community that supports and sustains educators like Cicely as they transform our public schools to create a more just, equitable, and humane society.

Schools are the moral, political, and social centers of our democracy. When we work to change schools, we are working to change society. In times when our nation's core values are being challenged and our social contract grows ever more tenuous, we look to public schools for a brighter future. In response to the global pandemic and racial violence that erupted in 2020, we saw schools step up to feed families, deliver health care, provide technology, and help young people unpack race, racism, and police violence. We witnessed teachers holding space during precious instructional time to take care of confused, frustrated, traumatized, and righteously angry young people. As they have for decades, educators like Cicely inspire the next generation to believe in democracy, the importance of their own voice, and the power of coming together in community to imagine a better future.

This book brings to life the challenging work of preparing and sustaining educators to disrupt educational inequality in urban communities. It is not a how-to guide. Nor is it a celebration of best practices. Rather, through grounded stories and examples from thirty years of collective work in Los Angeles, we illustrate the kind of professional activity you find in communities that view teaching and leading as progressive political acts of love guided by an antiracist, social justice agenda. You will find pedagogical approaches that honor and draw upon the rich racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of families and communities to make learning more accessible, culturally relevant, and sustaining. You will find deliberate activity intended to provoke deeper learning, engaged clinical practice and induction, and sustained professional development from “cradle to grave.” Activity that

ensures educational quality and equity. You will find robust school-university partnerships that work hard to center depth of knowledge, powerful pedagogies, and transformative school cultures. We share these stories knowing that they are part of a much larger narrative about the role of public education in disrupting pernicious inequalities in our society—a story line rooted in particular values, politics, and practices.

A BELOVED COMMUNITY

The UCLA campus is anchored by Royce Hall, named after Josiah Royce, a teacher whose students included W. E. B. Du Bois and T. S. Eliot. Royce was also a philosopher who stated, “My life means nothing, either theoretically or practically, unless I am a member of a community.”¹ Royce developed the concept of “the beloved community” that shaped the civil rights work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who believed “our ultimate end must be the creation of the beloved community.”² Many educators take up this idea, such as bell hooks, who explains, “Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.”³ Center X is one of many beloved communities of educators across the globe. As a movement, we share the values of inclusion, respect, and love. We unite around a common set of beliefs about the importance of culture, identity, and justice.

A POLITICAL COMMUNITY

We also unite in political struggle. We ask for trouble. Center X was created in response to the civil unrest and racial uprisings that followed the 1992 Rodney King verdict, and now, almost thirty years later, we continue the fight for racial justice in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others. We are indebted to Black Lives Matter’s cofounder Patrisse Cullors, who, like Royce, anchors the work of our university. A celebrated alumna, Cullors makes her political stance clear: “While other people are trying to subjugate human beings, there’s a whole other group of people trying

to liberate them, and I'm on that side of history."⁴ So is the Center X community. Teacher leaders, school principals, teacher educators, professional development experts, program directors, and researchers are committed to making schools and classrooms liberatory spaces of belonging, connection, and learning, particularly for young people whose lives have been shaped by poverty, racial violence and injustice, and trauma. A community that exists because we've seen firsthand how the multiple faces of bias, discrimination, and oppression affect the lives of our beloved students.

A LEARNING COMMUNITY

We are also a professional community of educators who understand teaching and learning practice. We know (and at times have unconsciously contributed to) classroom and leadership practices that present barriers to social and academic growth, as well as student agency. Dismantling these barriers is slow and steady work. Teachers and school leaders must prepare students to meet academic content standards, develop important socioemotional skills, and become critical thinkers and creative problem-solvers. Skills they will need to actively and productively contribute to what has become an increasingly fragile democracy. Skills they will need to solve the very complex problems their parents and teachers and principals are grappling with today.

OUR HOPE FOR THIS BOOK

Over the years, we have been criticized for being too value-driven, too political, and too radical in the classroom. To be sure, this work is contested by many and runs counter to policies that support fast-track teacher preparation, scripted curricula, high-stakes standardized testing, and other efforts that deskill teachers and constrain their capacity to educate students. As the authors in this book attest, the work to push against the grain is tough intellectual work that is often hard and exhausting. We share Center X's thirty years of experience in hopes that it ignites your imagination about what is possible in your own spheres of influence. We hope it provides other urban teacher educators with an opportunity to reflect on and perhaps reimagine their

curriculum and instruction. We hope that teacher education deans and directors, as well as school and district leaders, will find this book a valuable tool for creating authentic, community-dedicated, praxis-focused, and justice-oriented school-university partnerships. And, ultimately, we hope that policy makers at all levels of our educational system will use Center X's experience to create programs and put forward legislation that increases public commitment to the education of our most vulnerable students.

A STORY IN THREE PARTS

Twenty-eight Center Xers came together to write this book to ensure we captured multiple perspectives on a rich thirty-year history of work together. Part I of the story contains three chapters that set the stage. Chapter 1, our origin story, was published in 1996 by Jeannie Oakes, whom we affectionately think of as the mother of Center X. Oakes sets forth a bold vision to make the rhetoric of social justice real by fundamentally changing the way the university prepares and supports educators. In this chapter, you'll learn about the center's seven guiding principles and the historic context that brought them to life. Chapter 2 picks up these principles in its portrayal of the current work of UCLA's Teacher Education Program (TEP). Center X Executive Director Annamarie M. Francois and teacher education researcher Jarrod Kawasaki draw on the rich tradition and experiences of *community teachers* to propose a set of abolitionist practices within teacher preparation. These practices bring together the lived experiences of aspiring teachers and K–12 students, as well as an understanding of sociopolitical context, to construct and enact an antiracist pedagogy. Chapter 3 takes up the pressing policy issue of measuring and evaluating teacher quality. Veteran teacher educators Jaime J. Park, Imelda L. Nava, and Melissa S. Arias describe the development and use of a social justice classroom observation rubric designed to extend and deepen teacher learning.

In part II, we transition to the work of sustaining community teachers through ongoing professional learning partnerships. Chapter 4 describes an alternative approach to coaching that reframes the

achievement gap as an equity gap that results from the unexamined explicit and implicit biases educators carry with them into the classroom and perpetuate in their practice. Coaching experts Tonikia Orange and Jo Ann Isken detail how school and classroom culture, structures, and pedagogies are often culturally oppressive and exacerbate inequalities, and they explore the need for educators to engage in critical conversations and self-reflection seldom found in conventional coaching models. Chapter 5 champions equity-guided, content-focused professional learning “cradle-to-grave” opportunities for educators working for social justice. Longtime Center X leaders Jody Z. Priselac and Megan L. Franke explore two research-practice partnerships grounded in a common vision of public schooling and transformative relationships. In chapter 6, a team of researchers, content and professional development experts, and graduate student researchers look inside a research-practice partnership and describe how it deepened and sustained practice that centers students and leads to increased student agency. Chapter 7 turns to the process of preparing educational leaders for justice and the need for continued support and inquiry. John Rogers and Nancy Parachini, co-directors of the UCLA Principal Leadership Institute, amplify the voices and experiences of new and seasoned school leaders within and beyond their ongoing community of practice.

Part III introduces you to three beloved school communities. You’ll hear from the principals of these schools and the partners they work alongside. In chapter 8, Principal Ben Gertner teams up with TEP Director Emma Hipólito to tell the story of Roosevelt High School, a historic neighborhood school in the East Los Angeles community of Boyle Heights. They detail how the university has supported social justice work at the school over the past thirty years. In chapter 9, Principal Leyda Garcia and Assistant Principal Queena Kim partner with UCLA researchers Karen Hunter Quartz and Marisa Saunders to tell the UCLA Community School’s story, focusing on how this decade-old partnership in Los Angeles’s Koreatown community has created a democratic workplace culture where teachers want to work and stay. And in chapter 10, Principal Orlando Johnson and Assistant

Principal Carla Estes join Center Xers Carrie Usui Johnson, Ung-Sang Lee, and Christine Shen in reporting on the Mann UCLA Community School—a new partnership with a South Los Angeles school slated for closure—contributing to the debate about how best to address the epidemic of school closures in neighborhoods of color.

In full circle, the book concludes with a powerful chapter by Jeanie Oakes, who reflects on what it now means to make the rhetoric of social justice real. In this very personal essay, Oakes reflects on the words she wrote in 1996 when Center X was “asking for trouble.” She lifts up the words and legacy of congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis to frame the book’s themes, using reflections from the authors about what it means to make “good trouble, necessary trouble.” As they did more than twenty years ago, Oakes’s thoughtful words and critical analysis will inspire Center X’s journey forward.

Marian Wright Edelman reminds us, “We must always refill and ensure there is a critical mass of leaders and activists committed to nonviolence and racial and economic justice who will keep seeding and building transforming movements.”⁵ Center X remains committed to recruiting, developing, and retaining teachers and school leaders who are transforming public schools. We persist in this work because while we can identify urban schools that support the learning of their most vulnerable students well, high-quality public schooling remains elusive for far too many others. As it was in 1992, the recent racial violence and resulting civil unrest reminds us that the time is always now—and high-quality teaching and leading continues to be our most powerful lever for change and justice. This is a lifetime of work. We invite you to join us—in beloved community—to make some good and necessary trouble.