Article

Intersectional Organizing and Educational Justice: How Lived Experience Influences Community Organizers’ Understanding and Practice of Intersectional Organizing

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Abstract: Recently, education organizers working with youth and parents have taken intersectional approaches. Little research, however, considers how personal experience informs these understandings and the approaches organizers take. The purpose of this study is to understand how social locations like gender identity and race inform organizers’ understanding and practice of intersectional organizing. We interviewed eight community, parent, and youth organizers with a variety of racial and gender identities. The organizers are members of the People’s Think Tank (PTT), an idea and strategy space that includes organizers and activist scholars working together to strengthen and expand the educational justice movement. We found three different practices of intersectional organizing. One subgroup of organizers understands intersectional organizing as a tool for interrogating power and privilege. A second subgroup of organizers understands intersectional organizing as centering the lives of the most marginalized. Finally, the third subgroup of organizers stated that terms like “interconnected” and “intergenerational” are preferred terms when talking about intersectional organizing. Our analysis finds that an individuals’ lived experience impacts how they understand intersectional organizing and that engagement in intersectional organizing helps individuals better understand their social identities. We discuss the relationship between these distinct approaches and how they relate to intersectional organizing.

Keywords: education justice; social movements; community organizing; intersectionality; identity

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, a growing number of studies have highlighted the ways in which community organizers have worked to address racial inequities and educational justice in underserved and oppressed communities (McLaughlin 2009; Warren and Goodman 2018; Warren 2001). This renewed educational justice movement has achieved impressive gains, ending zero tolerance discipline policies in localities and states across the country (Warren 2022), pushing back against mass school closings in Black and Brown communities (Brown 2018), winning the creation of sustainable community schools and culturally responsive education (Capers 2018), increasing funding to public schools in low-income communities (Warren and Mapp 2011) and most recently, removing or defunding police in schools (Warren 2022). Nevertheless, the movement typically remains siloed by issue area and by working with singular constituent groups—with parents, with students, with Black communities or with Latinx communities (Warren et al. 2020). This kind of siloing and division limits the power groups can create to make change in any one policy area. It also limits the programmatic vision of educational justice as it fails to appreciate that systemic change requires addressing inequities in their interrelationship to each other.

More recently, education justice organizers have begun to take intersectional approaches to their organizing, mirroring the growth in intersectional approaches in many social justice movements (Terriquez 2015; Garza 2014). By intersectionality, we mean an
understanding of the way different types or lines of oppression intersect in people’s lives, shaping their experiences and identities in unique ways, and calling forth different kinds of responses; by intersectional organizing, we mean an organizing strategy that centers the experiences and leadership of people who are affected by these multiple systems of oppression (Kunreuther and Thomas-Breitfeld 2015). Initial research conducted by these authors, however, has shown that there is significant variation in the understanding and practice of intersectional organizing by educational justice organizers (Warren et al. 2020). While not mutually exclusive, some organizers emphasize certain aspects of an intersectional approach—centering those most marginalized, addressing power and privilege within organizing, or organizing in ways that connect issues.

In this paper, we extend our earlier research to consider the ways in which organizers’ lived experience informs these understandings and the approaches organizers take. Our exploratory study seeks to address the question: How do the lived experiences of educational justice organizers influence their understanding and practice of intersectional organizing? Little research has been conducted that explores variation in the understanding and practice of intersectional organizing, and even less examines the role of lived experience in shaping these understandings, even though intersectional theory itself suggests that organizing styles and strategies emerge from shared lived experiences, those of Black women for example (Collins 2000a).

2. Intersectionality in Social Theory

The most direct roots of intersectionality, as advanced by Crenshaw (1990) and Collins (2000a), are located in the interaction of Black feminist theory and activism in the seventies and eighties, including, for example, the Combahee River Combahee River Collective (1986) Statement. Thus, intersectionality has long had a strong connection to social movements. Historically, the leadership of many social movements had been dominated by white, male and cisgender participants, leaving Black women and queer people of color excluded and their particular issues ignored (Cohen 1999; Combahee River Collective 1986). Using intersectional approaches, people at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression, such as Black women and queer people of color, have organized and asserted their voice and leadership in social movements and demanded that their issues be heard and addressed. Relatedly, intersectionality has come to mean interrogating power and privilege among movement activists because it recognizes that some people can be simultaneously privileged along some dimensions and oppressed along others, as is the case with Black men and white women (Fine et al. 2012). Few scholars, however, have examined the ways that organizers may emphasize different aspects of intersectional organizing and how lived experiences may influence their approaches.

3. Narrative in Social Movement Organizing

In order to frame our study of the role of lived experience in the understanding and practice of educational justice organizing, we draw from narrative theory. The personal narratives of activists and organizers have long been recognized as powerful and important vehicles to social and political transformation. Scholars of social movements have highlighted the vital role storytelling and narratives play in contemporary social movements (Polletta and Jasper 2001) especially in regard to activist identity formation (Broad 2002; Powell 2011; Ruiz-Junco 2011; Teske 1997; Valocchi 2013). In the 1960s, sit-in narratives became a politically potent form of mobilization and collective action during the Civil Rights movement (Polletta 1998). Hunt and Benford (1994) find that activists in the peace movement draw on a collective narrative framework in their “identity talk”. The focus of these scholars has tended to highlight how stories mobilize participants and help them create a sense of collective identity within movement spaces. For example, Marshall Ganz (2010) shows how social movements help activists craft a “story of me”, which when shared collectively, creates a “story of us” that shows the justice of the cause, and a “story of now” that demands urgent action to address this injustice.
Scholars using a narrative identity framework argue that “all of us come to be who we are . . . by being located or locating ourselves . . . in social narratives” (Somers 1994, p. 606). One of the defining characteristics of narratives is that they integrate the general (i.e., themes) and the particular (i.e., individual occurrences) through their use of events to illustrate a point (i.e., the moral of the story) (Polletta and Lee 2006). Narratives allow individuals to create identities out of their multiple and evolving social statuses, roles, and life experiences (Loseke 2007). In that way, narrative theorists understand identity construction as a creative process, influenced by social location and movement experiences and discourses, but not determined by them.

4. Intersectionality and Personal Narrative

While narrative theory helps us appreciate the creative interplay between individual and collective experiences in the construction of identities, Black feminist thought emphasizes intersectional social locations as important influences shaping political consciousness and strategic action—something which is at the heart of our study. Unveiling intersecting matrices of domination, Black feminist thought centers the struggles and empowerment of Black women, women of color, and those with intersectional, marginalized personalities (Collins 2000a). Intersectional feminists and scholars of color using Critical Race Theory, for example, have long asserted that “the personal is political”, underscoring the connection between personal experience and larger social and political structures (Dixson and Rousseau 2016). In particular, Collins (2000b) shows how Black feminist epistemologies emerge from the distinctive social location of Black women and the forms of political discourse among Black women that occur in the community-based networks they have formed—informally in home and neighborhood spaces, in churches and in other spaces they control. An increasing number of scholars are showing that gender identity, race/ethnicity, immigration status, and sexuality are critical social locations for understanding how people organize and what it means to them (Labelle 2021; Linder et al. 2019; Mizrahi and Greenawalt 2017; De la Torre and Germano 2014; Naples 2012; Crawley and Broad 2004). Feminist scholars, including Black feminist theorists and Chicana feminists, provide models for studying the distinctive experiences of women, highlighting intersecting oppressions due to race, class, gender, and sexuality (Collins 1998, 2000b; Crenshaw 1993; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). For example, in Barbara Ransby’s (2003) work on the radical political activist Ella Baker, she emphasizes how Baker’s personal history as well as her racial, gender, and class identity not only shaped her political views but also her organizing style, which differed from the way most men approached organizing during the Civil Rights Movement. Social movement scholars have also emphasized how women’s experiences have shaped distinctive styles of community organizing (Morgen and Bookman 1988).

5. Forming Solidarity across Different Social Locations

Community organizers do not always come from the community in which they organize, however, so they do not necessarily share the same communal experience. Narrative and intersectional theorists also appreciate that people can break out of the bonds of their social locations and prior experiences to build connections and solidarity across lines of difference within intersectional identities. Patricia Hill Collins (1993, p. 25) has argued that solidarity requires people to develop new ways of understanding race, class, and gender as well as “new categories of connection, new visions of what our relationships with one another can be”, while Warren’s (2010) study uses life history interviews to understand how white people become involved in racial justice activism. Through exploration of the life histories of 50 white activists, Warren finds that all of his interviewees had seminal experiences that drove their “moral impulse” to build solidarity with communities of color in the fight against racism. Warren also shows, however, that the new cross-racial relationships that these activists built profoundly shaped their understanding of racism and their commitment to antiracist practice. These relationships required white activists
to address issues of power and privilege within organizing spaces, but also led to lifetime commitments to racial justice activism.

In other words, the new social relationships and ideologies experienced in activism shapes ongoing processes of personal narrative and identity and can influence approaches to organizing strategy as well. Nevertheless, community organizers who come from a different social location from the communities in which they organize may bring the understandings and organizing styles that have emerged out of their earlier experience into the new community setting even as they build solidarity and are influenced by these new communal experiences.

6. Methods

We began this project as community-engaged research in partnership with the People’s Think Tank (PTT), an idea and strategy space that includes organizers and activist scholars working together to strengthen and expand the educational justice movement. As noted above, education justice organizers are increasingly interested in practicing intersectional organizing and the PTT wanted to start its research in this area by exploring the understandings and practices of its own members. This research is intended to inform organizers in the movement as much as it is concerned with contributing to scholarly theory and understanding. Although beyond the purview of this article, the perspectives and organizing strategies an organizer uses could potentially have important implications with regards to the efficacy of achieving social movement aims and addressing internal and external tensions that face social movement organizing.

We interviewed eight community, parent, and youth organizers with a variety of racial and gender identities, who are members of the PTT. While we do not claim that these organizers represent the full range of educational justice organizing, we do believe they present a rich diversity of organizing efforts across the country (see Appendix A for a list of the organizers). The participants also reflect diversity in social identities and locations, as we discuss below. Nevertheless, there are few organizers under the age of thirty in the study and previous research suggests that younger organizers are more likely to take an intersectional approach to organizing (Milkman 2017; Terriquez and Lin 2020).

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each organizer with each interview lasting about an hour (see Appendix B for a list of interview questions). We used narrative analysis and an intersectional framework to analyze the transcribed interview data and identify themes to reveal the interconnectedness of the personal identities of individual organizers and their work as education justice organizers (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Collins 2019; Crenshaw 1990). We worked iteratively as a team to share analytical approaches, in order to increase the reliability of our analysis.

We understand that the personal standpoints and experiences of researchers shape and limit the research process, no less in a study of intersectionality itself (Collins 2000a). Our team includes one researcher who identifies as Puerto Rican, queer, cisgender female and two researchers who identify as white, male and cisgender. As such, we acknowledge that many intersecting identities are not included. As community-engaged researchers, however, we partnered with the organizers in the PTT around its design and shared our emerging findings, and thereby include perspectives from a wider range of intersectional locations than those from the authors of the study. Nevertheless, we offer this review humbly as part of a larger scholar and activist conversation to develop intersectional understanding and strategies for solidarity in the movement for educational justice and other social justice movements within and beyond the PTT.

7. Findings: Three Emphases in Intersectional Organizing

In our interviews, we found that the educational justice organizers we interviewed emphasize varying perspectives and approaches to intersectional organizing. We identified three perspectives. One subgroup of organizers understands intersectional organizing primarily as a tool for interrogating power and privilege. A second subgroup of organizers
understands intersectional organizing as centering the lives of the most marginalized. The third subgroup of organizers stated that terms like “interconnected” and “intergenerational” are preferred terms when talking about intersectional organizing. By no means do these themes represent each organizer’s sole or definitive understanding of intersectional organizing. In many ways, these understandings are emergent and, in reality, some organizers share combinations of these perspectives in their approaches to organizing. In the following sections, we show how the lived experiences of these organizers came to influence their understanding and practice of intersectional organizing and elaborate these three approaches in some detail.

7.1. Power and Privilege

When asked how they understand and practice intersectional organizing, we found that several of the organizers in our study highlight the interrogation of power and privilege. As parent organizer Maisie Chin states, intersectional organizing is “just a critical consciousness of power and privilege across the board and that’s how I really view intersectionality, is through the lens of power and privilege”. In other words, intersectional analysis recognizes that a person can be oppressed along some dimension of social identity and privileged across another. This creates power dynamics within diverse organizing spaces. If they are to be truly inclusive and democratic, and address the needs and concerns of all, then organizers must be prepared to interrogate power and privilege within the movement as well as in the larger society.

7.1.1. Maisie Chin

Maisie Chin grew up the child of Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles. She attended UCLA in the early 1990s when the police assaulted Rodney King, an African American man they stopped for a traffic violation. Following the acquittal of the police officers by an all-white jury, South LA erupted in several days of uprisings against years of declining jobs and services and increasing police repression. Maisie witnessed “incredible, tragic moments of violence among people of color in South LA”, which launched her on a journey to racial justice organizing.

I’m not Korean, but I saw Korean storeowners shooting at Black and Brown folks with AK47’s to prevent their stores from being looted. So, it feels like all my work has been sparked, or ignited, by outrage over state violence that’s very racialized, and against an economy that values property over people.

Maisie saw vividly how a larger system of oppression worked to pit people of color against each other and vowed that, as an Asian American, she would never be used as a tool of racism to undermine Black and Brown communities. “I didn’t know it then, but I picked a side—to challenge white supremacy”.

After graduation, Maisie began to work in South Los Angeles in a project that linked local schools and higher education. She witnessed profound racism towards Black and Brown students and their parents. Educators routinely criticized parents of color as “bad” parents who did not care about their children’s education. Maisie reflected, however, that her own immigrant Chinese parents worked graveyard shifts that meant that they were not able to attend school meetings and parent-teacher conferences. Unlike Black and Brown parents, no one labeled them as uncaring, and it never impacted her education. Maisie came to understand that these race- and class-based definitions of “good” and “bad” parents were used to pit parents against each other and shut Black and Brown parents out of schools.

I don’t lump myself into some general across-community [people of color category] and therefore, I don’t have to look critically upon privilege. I do and I think to me that’s what intersectionality in a living and breathing term really represents.

Believing that Black and Brown parents held the key to challenging systemic racism in schools, Maisie went on to co-found a parent organizing group called CADRE in South Los Angeles. CADRE led one of the first campaigns in the country to change zero tolerance...
school discipline policy when it played a key role in getting the Los Angeles Unified School District to adopt Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports in 2007. To build a foundation for the campaign, CADRE organizers and parents went door-knocking, speaking to hundreds of other parents about their experiences with schools, conducted a participatory action research project surveying hundreds more parents, held town halls, and testified repeatedly at school board meetings with parents telling their stories of racist school discipline practices, all at a time when few had even heard the term “school-to-prison pipeline”.

Neither Maisie nor CADRE typically use the term intersectional organizing in an explicit way; but she says, “It’s just how we approach everything”. Maisie believes in deep organizing with parents that appreciates the multiple ways that oppression and injustice affects their lives. CADRE does intersectional organizing, as in the door-knocking campaign discussed above, by appreciating the intersections in their lives (all the issues that affect them, including generational trauma) and engaging them through that understanding. She calls this “radical compassion that is nonjudgmental.”

So that intersectionality is not done in an elitist way, where it’s about book knowledge or issue awareness, but really it is connecting it to your story. If you’re able to connect the dots in your own life, then it makes it a lot easier to build solidarity . . . If it’s not about connecting dots, and it’s really just facts and history, then it may land or it may not land.

CADRE approaches parents with an understanding of the impact of multiple issues and systems on families, allowing parents to be more open and honest about their lives, which then creates deeper forms of solidarity among them.

When we decide how to support a parent in their advocacy, we look at all the structural barriers that they may have that aren’t related to education and figure out how to craft or design an approach for that situation. I think our parents feel that . . . so that they can be more honest about what they’re going through and then that ripples into people sharing things about themselves that aren’t related to education that impact their advocacy for their kids.

CADRE’s principle to “do no harm” also reflects this approach of understanding the interconnections of power and privilege.

So if you’re fully aware of the connections between different experiences and oppressions and injustices and power and privilege, to address one and then not cause harm in another, if you’re trying not to do that, then you inherently are being intersectional.

Maisie argues that we need to center anti-Black racism in building solidarity. Therefore, she wants to support Latinx families who face racism but not in a way that would pit them against Black families or privilege them over Black families. In her view, that would be addressing one form of oppression but causing harm in another.

This approach is not about “cataloging all the issues”, and a shout out to every corresponding connected oppression or a whole menu of campaigns where we’re trying to do a little bit of everything. I don’t really view it that way. I often view it in how it allows us to deconstruct our power and privilege in any situation with any group of people.

Maisie believes that CADE needs to dismantle power and privilege within organizing processes if it wants to dismantle the system of power and privilege in the larger society. For example, CADRE understands its campaign to challenge zero tolerance school discipline as an effort to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, which buttresses a system that privileges whiter and more affluent communities and reproduces racialized power structures in society.

Referring to her choosing sides after the Rodney King uprisings, Maisie says this process starts with herself.

So I look at my own story as a pathway to my understanding. People of color can be anti-Black and embrace white supremacy as the way to get ahead, as the way to survive, as the way to be “good”. So when I dismantle that in my own life, it really does give me the lens as the thing that I do.

And then extends it to the staff:
We really try to dismantle power and privilege. Even among our staff, I mean regardless of your personal situation, you have to look at your power and privilege in any situation and that’s how I really view it.

Maisie considers criminalization to be the root cause that connects issues and movements. “It’s an intersectional lens, period”.

So if we view the school-to-prison pipeline as pure and simple the new white supremacy, not just the new Jim Crow but the new white supremacy and the new slavery … it really is how criminalization treats the connection between all these issues, how really it is precarious if you are criminalized. You don’t get your healthcare. You won’t get served. They see you, you know, a certain way. Gentrification continues to increase criminalization. So it’s like that’s really the lens.

Maisie has a critique that many groups in the educational justice movement fail to do deep enough engagement with people; they just work with those who already agree with them. “I feel like it’s still very activist centered. Like it’s about people being woke and naming, rallying off a whole bunch of oppressions that impact education”. Rather, Maisie both wants to take intersectionality “to the streets”, and work with parents in all their complexity, including those who hold different views. She wants to be in spaces where parents are really engaged and understand what’s going on.

If we are gonna be intersectional, are we actually prepared to deal with people who are still transphobic, maybe by virtue of their religious identity … we don’t even know if the people are there. It’s not like they’re not there. We just don’t actually know. And we haven’t found out. And we work primarily with people that are already in agreement with us. So my question is: do we have the capacity to really be intersectional because it isn’t necessarily everybody in agreement and alignment and in solidarity. It’s really about the struggle to get there.

7.1.2. Sally Lee

Sally Lee grew up as a mixed race, Black and white, middle-class girl in New York City. She says that all of these identities shape who she is and how she organizes.

I am mixed race, with a Black and white parent, a woman from New York City, and middle class from a very vibrant and diverse part of New York City. I am very light skinned, with blue eyes. Some people think I’m white, some people think I’m “something”, but they don’t know what. And some people can tell I’m mixed Black right away. It depends on the person’s experience in life.

Moreover, she is the daughter of a Marxist.

I’m also a socialist, a Marxist, and I’m the daughter of a Marxist, and so I have a stronger interest in worker organizing and interracial organizing than I guess what’s emerging as race specific organizing.

That also fits “better with my growing up”, where she attended predominantly white schools, where Black and Latino students were certainly an extreme minority. And so my friendships are predominantly with white people. I would say that I am very comfortable and confident in my growing up.

Sally believes her upbringing gave her a strong sense of herself and an understanding that race does not equal color.

My Black family is light skinned, and northern based, originally Springfield, Massachusetts, and I think that also gave me a pretty nuanced idea about what it can mean to be a Black American. It’s a fairly unique perception as a Black person. My experience as a Black person is a minority within the minority, right? Like there is nothing about my Black experience that is typical for a Black person in America.

Given her diverse background, Sally had to ask herself:

“What is my community? Who am I entitled to organize?” That, plus interests in education and schooling that also comes from the history of my family, really led me to the idea of becoming a teacher.

Sally found organizing teachers to be “a fit with who I was”. 
New York City forms a key part of my identity. I’m a daughter of a New York City public employee, and so I just felt that there was a natural progression or relationship that I have with predominantly white, but diverse educated workers, who work in service of New York City’s young people and communities.

Sally co-founded an organization called Teachers Unite to be an independent organization of NYC teachers committed to democratic unionism and racial justice. Teachers Unite members organize teachers in their schools in deep partnership with parents and students, seeking to transform school discipline and more broadly school culture and relationships towards restorative justice. The group also partners with parent- and youth-led community organizing groups on campaigns to get the school district to change discipline policies citywide and fund and support restorative justice and invest in under-resourced schools. According to Sally, “our theory of social change is about, as much as possible, radical solutions. You know? Abolishing the prison industrial complex”.

When Sally speaks of intersectional organizing, she refers to the group’s view and composition.

Our board has been, at various times, if not predominantly, disproportionately queer. A lot of our members are queer feminists of color. There has been in the conversation just an understanding of how education in New York City and teacher organizing gets at a bunch of oppressions. Whether it’s oppression of Black folks, oppression of undocumented immigrants, oppression of Puerto Ricans, oppression of queer students, queer students of color. There’s just a natural sense of intersectionality.

Sally understands how school serves as a place that reveals intersectional privilege and marginalization and in a very nuanced way. She asks, How has school been a place where you were exalted because of privileges you had? How were schools a place of oppression, because of your gender identity, but privilege you because of your racial identity? I just think it’s such a natural part of the culture of our organization, and the people who tend to be attracted to it, to really be honest and thoughtful about not just race but color. And not just color, but origin. And not just origin, but gender. And not just gender, but their class. And not just their class of origin, but the class that they’re in now, and the education that got them there.

Sally understands intersectional organizing to mean “that if you are a member of different groups, gender, race, whatever, that there might be multiple and overlapping oppression that intersectionality organizing means”.

For us the struggle has been that I think that our analysis is that we see all the oppressions as linked. We see patriarchy, and racism, and capitalism as all fundamental roots of the problem.

Like Maisie, Sally does not explicitly use the term “intersectionality” in organizing. She is critical of the use of the term intersectionality, which she believes sometimes feeds an identity politics that does not appreciate the complexity and nuance in social categories. I don’t use the word intersectionality because of what I was saying before—of associating that with, dare I say, identity politics, which kind of goes against my lived experience and my political understanding of capitalism in the world—with my lived experience and identity being not such a static category, you know? Not such a rigid category. The more you meet people, the more you realize how complex their identities might be, and that we tend to be a society that’s pretty obsessed with color and what we see.

For example, the category “Black” masks differences in the experiences of people from the African diaspora. It “reduces people to a label”. She rejects the term biracial for a similar reason.

I hate the word biracial. I know that it’s a commonly used word to describe folks who have a Black parent and a white parent, or whatever. Two parents of different races. But I hate it because it’s so mathematical. Like this idea that I’m two different things, I’m this white color, and I’m this Black color. To me, it further institutionalizes or crystallizes the idea that Blackness is a thing, right?
Nevertheless, she identifies as Black, despite the problems with the category, out of political solidarity.

I would never want to be part of a society that creates a whole new category, like in Brazil, or South Africa. Like I’m above [being Black], you know? So, I identify as Black. It’s very much political. It’s because I don’t want to contribute to the creation of the otherness, or a new and other, better than, exotic category.

In the end, Lee believes that all voices from the people most impacted in any institution need to be heard and represented in decision-making. That includes not just those who are most oppressed, but all who are impacted. In schools, this means that we believe all teachers, students, and families should have democratic representation in the schools. I have learned from working for many years that it’s a human rights principle. The folks who are most directly impacted by an institution should have the decision-making power on those institutions. I do believe that strongly, and I believe that’s the principle that Teachers Unite is rooted in, and that’s also the principle of transformative justice/restorative justice. We’re talking about transformation through struggle, collective leadership, collaboration, and all voices being heard.

Both Sally and Maisie appreciate the complexities in the lives of people they are organizing. For Sally, it is complex identities that do not fit into neat boxes. For Maisie, it is complex issues facing the lives of Black and Brown parents. It’s telling that neither typically use the term intersectional organizing, even though they can describe what it means to them: primarily challenging power and privilege as it plays out in their organizing. Both Sally and Maisie fear that intersectionality can be used in a way that limits organizing. For Sally, it can become a type of identity politics that puts people into a box and fails to address complex systems of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. For Maisie, it can be done in ways that reflect book-knowledge and only works with people who already agree. Rather, both organizers want to work deeply with people in their complexity. Both reflect the idea that intersectional organizing is about the struggle to get to solidarity.

7.2. Centering the Voices and Experiences of the Most Marginalized in Movement Spaces

Community organizing and social movements play a vital role in dismantling systemic oppression and advancing societal and cultural change. Organizing around collective action creates movement spaces for participation and empowerment for individuals and communities. Moreover, these spaces cultivate places for people to organize, educate, and mobilize around social issues. Yet, as several of the organizers highlight, movement spaces can be exclusionary and marginalize the voices they seek to uplift. Kate McDonough, Geoffrey Winder, and Carlos Rojas offer reflections on their lived experiences and work as organizers within the education justice movement. Their insight provides a second perspective and understanding of intersectional organizing, one that emphasizes it as an important tool that requires organizers and advocates to be aware of the spaces they create and to intentionally center the voices and experiences of the most marginalized by systemic oppression.

7.2.1. Kate McDonough

Kate McDonough is the Director of the New York City chapter of the Dignity in Schools Campaign. In this position, Kate supports the efforts of New York City students, teachers, parents, organizers, and advocates to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and create the schools that young people and families want, deserve, and need. Prior to this position, Kate worked for Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) where they led education justice campaigns through a gender and racial lens. Their work with GGE and experience as a white gender nonconforming person, have influenced their understanding and application of intersectionality as practice in their activism.

Kate McDonough grew up as a low-income, white child in the Bronx. From a young age, they were gender nonconforming and faced discrimination. Nevertheless, they were a
white child in predominantly Black and Latinx schools, and teachers gave them the benefit of the doubt. They saw Kate “as smart and genuinely good”.

I also find that it is helpful for me to uplift, both the ways in which I was almost pushed out of school because of my gender presentation, like in kindergarten. But then the ways that I was pushed back in because I’m white. So owning those two identities.

Kate became seriously involved in organizing in college. During this time, the Massachusetts Supreme Court announced that it was unconstitutional to deny same-sex partners the right to marriage. It was while organizing around this issue that Kate realized the campaign wasn’t inclusive of the entire LGBTQ community; they saw the gay rights movement dominated by white, middle-class activists who prioritized their concerns, like marriage equality. “It was really a single-issue campaign. It was clear the movement wasn’t going to center other issues, like trans rights”. Kate states that LGBTQ organizing spaces and movement spaces, in general, tend to recreate oppressive structures.

Being in predominantly white mainstream LGBT organizing space, and I don’t even know if we could say T with that as well. Maybe light on the L, if you want to be real, it’s like a lot of white gay men. I’d say without an intersectional framework to your organizing, it’s actually more assimilation than it is any kind of liberation. You’re just assimilating into current structures that we have right now and that will always benefit the most privileged of any community that is fighting within that movement.

Kate felt that kind of organizing “went against the core of who I am”. They went on to become an organizer for Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) in New York City, where they support girls and gender nonconforming students of color launch education justice campaigns that address their intersectional needs and concerns. Throughout the interview, Kate refers back to their work with GSE and their own experience as gender nonconforming, as having influenced their understanding and application of intersectionality in their activism.

In Kate’s view, most people familiar with intersectionality understand it as a theory in which to interrogate systemic oppression and personal identity. Kate, by contrast, understands intersectionality as a practice more than a theory, particularly when it comes to community organizing. According to Kate, intersectionality in practice is being inclusive and intentional about uplifting the voices and experiences of individuals and communities most impacted by social injustice. To do this, organizations need to create welcoming and inclusive spaces, by providing translation services, gender nonspecific bathrooms, accessible spaces for the disabled, etc. Kate asks:

How do we build our spaces? How do we make sure that campaign meetings are accessible to young people and parents? How do we make sure that folks who are most impacted by the issue that we’re talking about are the ones that are leading the campaign and really figuring what our demands are? So you’re not forcing demands on people because that will also never work.

Kate makes a point to acknowledge that intersectionality is different from diversity. An intersectional practice is a commitment to understanding how “identity impacts the way one moves through the world”.

Kate connects their view of “centering the most impacted” to their critique of how the founding of the U.S., policies, and government institutions have been designed for white, hetero men to thrive. They are not intersectional and “do not reflect the reality of people’s lives”. In Kate’s view, the current structure isn’t conducive to thinking intersectionally or passing intersectional policies. Kate believes that one of the challenges to intersectional organizing is the way institutions are set up.

They’re not set up to operate from an intersectional framework. I think that’s intentional because, if we think about even the founding of the country and the building of these systems, it’s done through a very white, male lens. So of course, it would not be through this, I think layered, way of looking at policy. It’s like a white, straight, patriarchal lens. I think that’s part of the challenge, too, is that we’re working within systems that actually aren’t set up to reflect the reality of people’s lives.
7.2.2. Geoffrey Winder

Geoffrey Winder is co-Executive Director of the Genders and Sexualities Alliance (GSA) Network. He has over 20 years of LGBTQ youth organizing experience. Geoffrey identifies as queer, African American and Korean, and “an interracial adoptee or transnational adoptee”. Geoffrey first became involved in political organizing in high school through his personal identity and experience as a queer youth searching to build community with other queer youth. He started an LGBTQ support group that eventually became a GSA club (known at the time as a Gay Straight Alliance). “I think, like many LGBTQ youth, I started my club looking for a sense of community or a place where I would fit in, also looking to just meet other LGBTQ people at my school”.

Geoffrey’s experience in the GSA informed his belief that issues of queer and trans oppression are connected to that of racial justice. He views the purpose and mission of the GSA as continuing the organizing work of the civil rights movement.

We view our work as being in the tradition of the Little Rock Nine and other Black students who first integrated public schools. We use GSA clubs to force schools open and integrate education systems that weren’t designed for us and are actively hostile to us.

Similar to Kate’s experience organizing for gay marriage, Geoffrey was propelled into issue organizing during the Prop 21 and 22 campaigns. These were California ballot initiatives attacking both African Americans and gay people.

One was to make three young people on a corner classified as a gang, or three young people gathering. The other one was to ban gay marriage. That was really the first time that I worked on two issues that were related because I was a young person and an LGBTQ person, and also a person of color.

Geoffrey has organized around alternative visions to keep schools safe for all marginalized students, both gay and straight. These include restorative justice approaches which address the root causes of conflicts between students and foster deeper dialogue between the offender and the victim:

In a restorative justice approach, in particular in a bias-based harassment or bullying incident where bias is the motivating factor, one of the main goals is to get at the underlying root bias and to dispel it or to address it somehow. Then generally, through the process, the LGBTQ youth feels safer, feels like they’re heard, feels like their identity might matter, and hopefully are able to, if not win a new ally, at least not have somebody who’s actively hostile to them . . .

The GSA Network had to lobby hard for this position, which was controversial at the time.

The GSA Network pushed other groups in the LGBTQ movement who advocated for anti-bullying policies with the best intentions to instead advocate for restorative justice approaches that protected LGBTQ youth. We worked to shift the national narrative away from punitive, zero-tolerance discipline approaches and toward pro-LGBTQ restorative justice approaches.

Geoffrey conceptualizes LGBTQ students of color at the center of an intersectional organizing approach to educational justice, since this group experiences the most severe forms of marginalization in the education system. He believes that creating a school system that could support, nurture, and meet the needs of Black trans women students would therefore encompass the needs of all students:

From our perspective, solutions that work for a Black trans woman who is a student in school, a school that could support her, could support any student regardless of their identity. How do we build schools or how do we look at our approaches to systems change in a way that supports those that are most marginalized or for whom the most systems intersect? What are solutions that address all of those systems at once or multiple systems at the same time? That’s what in the early days we meant by multi-issue organizing, but now we call intersectional organizing.
7.2.3. Carlos Rojas

At the time of the interview, Carlos Rojas was a Boston-based youth organizer with Youth on Board and the Boston Student Advisory Council. As a gay Latino undocumented immigrant and former Boston Public School student, his identity and lived experience give him deep personal insight into different organizing issues. This has enabled Carlos to play a valuable leadership role within and connecting multiple movements, specifically, the student immigrant rights movement as well as the student and youth movements.

Carlos grew up in Roxbury, the heart of the Black community in Boston, where he witnessed police repression both to his family and to his Black neighbors.

Because other members of my family were also undocumented, I grew up fearful of police enforcement and of anything that looked like the government. And I grew up watching family members both voluntarily leave and be involuntarily deported. All around me I saw people getting in trouble for minor things. The police were always in the apartment building where I grew up. It seemed like every other day they were knocking on someone’s apartment door. That was really scary and frightening to me.

In high school, Carlos first got involved in youth organizing around educational justice issues and then in the immigrant rights movement, where he eventually came out as gay and undocumented. Yet, Carlos addresses how he often felt he had to separate his identities depending on the organizing space he was in.

I don’t think I told my story of being undocumented in the Youth Education Justice space for a long time, and I couldn’t. I also didn’t see the importance of speaking as an urban, public-school student in a highly racist, segregated city like Boston in the DREAMer Movement . . . I did compartmentalize and box myself in, depending on the space that I was in, at least initially for the first few years. Then, as you start to get more involved in the movement, some of the more veteran organizers or some of the staffers or some of the leaders start end up having informal conversations about what I would then realize was intersectionality.

Carlos began to see the DREAMer Movement start to become intersectional, through their work uplifting the fight against both the school to prison pipeline and school to deportation pipeline.

Eventually I reached a space or a level in the DREAMer Movement where I started hearing people have conversations about the private prison industry. And had access to DREAMers who had analysis around the same people that are profiting from migrant detention and who are pushing for stricter immigration laws and stricter border militarization so that they can fill the migrant detention beds are the same people that are driving the forces that keep the school-to-prison pipeline in place. I remember once, I actually heard someone in the DREAM Movement space say, “School-to-prison pipeline”, and it was a little jarring. I was like, “Whoa. That’s the other world. That’s the issue we’re talking about on this side”.

Carlos’ personal experience with having to navigate his identities in different organizing spaces, as well as the growth of solidarity between different activist circles, has influenced how he sees and practices intersectional organizing. Part of his practice of intersectional organizing includes cultivating “healing spaces” for youth organizers where they can share more openly their experiences of oppression and sometimes trauma.

One of the things we focus on significantly is this healing piece, this idea that to be asking people of color to organize and to be effective in doing that and to sustain that in the long term, you have to build spaces for young people to get to process what’s happening to them and get to process what’s been happening to their families and to their people. Since young people are impacted by multiple systems and oppressed along multiple dimensions, the only way to do that is through an in intersectional lens. You can’t invite someone into a healing space and ask them to just focus on what it’s been like to be a student in the Boston Public Schools. You have to be able to talk about what it’s been like to be a Black student in the Boston Public Schools, what it’s been like to be a girl in the Boston Public Schools, what it’s been like to be a raised poor student in the Boston Public Schools, versus a middle-class
student in the Boston Public Schools. In that way, we’re creating space for people to get to recognize sort of their experiences that are tied to all the different identities that they carry.

Each of the organizers in this section presents a particular way in which to understand intersectionality as a tool and deliberate practice in organizing work to create inclusive spaces that center people most impacted by injustice. For Kate McDonough, one way to practice intersectional organizing is through specific actions like providing language access and providing gender nonconforming bathrooms. Geoffrey Winder stresses that solutions to ending the school-to-prison pipeline that center Black trans women create safe and supportive spaces for all. For Carlos Rojas, organizing work starts with inclusive healing spaces that confront the impact of systemic oppression. Collectively, Kate, Geoffrey, and Carlos address the important and dynamic relationship between personal identity and issue organizing, emphasizing the need for organizers and advocates to intentionally create inclusive spaces that foster solidarity and challenge systemic oppression.

7.3. Intergenerational, Interconnectedness, and the Black Radical Tradition

The following subgroup of organizers ground their analyses and understandings of their organizing in the histories of their movements, particularly their racial liberation movements. They emphasize knowledge and understanding of their movement histories—whether it is the Black radical tradition for Zakiya Sankara-Jabar and Jonathan Stith, or the Chicano movement for Ricardo Martinez—and encourage intergenerational unity and struggle. Jonathan Stith points out that, in practice, intersectionality can sometimes narrow participation rather than broaden it. Rather than use the term intersectionality, Ricardo Martinez and Zakiya Sankara-Jabar prefer the terms intergenerational to emphasize the unity required of their movements over time, and interconnectedness to capture the many overlapping issues faced by their families and which their movements must address simultaneously. As we will see, these organizers worry that intersectional practices can be potentially divisive, having the potential to narrow participation rather than expand it or “draw more people into the fight” as Jonathan puts it.

7.3.1. Jonathan Stith

Jonathan Stith is the Director of Alliance for Educational Justice. His life trajectory gave him a strong understanding of the connection between educational justice, racial justice, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Jonathan grew up in an extended Black family in Cleveland. He moved with his mother to a predominantly white, working class, suburb after elementary school and saw how his mother had to fight for him and other Black children experiencing educational racism.

My mom became the first model of being an educational organizer or advocate that I saw. I thought, “Yo, this is what it means for a caring adult to fight and advocate for her son”. She also didn’t just do it for me. She would do it for my friends and other Black kids in the school. And then taught me to look out for each other, all that kind of stuff.

Jonathan moved to Washington, DC, to attend Howard University, an HBCU, for a while, and became involved in organizing through a VISTA community service project in the Black community in Washington, DC. He saw firsthand disparity between the education offered to these Black young people and what was offered to white working class students in the Cleveland suburb. When the young people refused to clean up a park because they said someone would just use it as a dump again the following week, Jonathan turned for support from an environmental justice organizing group.

For myself and the organization it was this real moment where we realized one, just how engaged and transformed the young folk were. This was way more exciting, way more engaging than service. It answered a lot of the contradictions that young people had around service because there were notions around like service was something that you do when you get in trouble versus organizing something that you do to change the world, change your conditions.
Jonathan says that experience started him on the journey to youth organizing. He was given Charles Payne’s, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, on the Black organizing tradition in the civil rights movement and read about Ella Baker. He came to see how his emerging organizing work with young African Americans was part of a long tradition of the more radical leadership role that young Black people played in the civil rights movement and in all racial justice movements. He embraced that tradition as a foundation for his own work.

I feel really honored and blessed to do the work that I do with young folk. I really see myself and the work that I have been doing as carrying the tradition of Ella Baker and that feels really sacred.

Jonathan says he organizes today from a Black nationalist ideology where he sees all African Americans in common struggle as part of one oppressed nation. He appreciates the insights from intersectionality that, for example, Black women are oppressed both as Black and women, in an intersectional way, and the need to create inclusive spaces in the movement. However, he emphasizes the need for a unified “national consciousness” among Black people, and he’s unsure as to “whether an intersectional approach, one focused on specific subsets of Black people within the larger movement, is creating the level of consciousness and connection that will move us all”. As he explains:

In my organizing I come from a Black nationalist tradition. I see Black folk and other Brown folk as captured nations and believe that part of our success in organizing are what we’ve seen or what we admire in the 60s was that level of orientation, that level of national consciousness . . . I’m not sure and always questioning whether an intersectional approach is creating the level of kind of consciousness and connection that will move us all. And I’m not sure that that’s happening . . . . Is it drawing more people into the fight . . . ?

Whereas in theory, intersectional organizing is supposed to make movements more inclusive, Jonathan is concerned that in practice it runs the risk of making them narrower by focusing on a small margin of people. This can come at the expense, according to Jonathan, of building a broader movement or united front among a larger oppressed group.

Some of the challenge that I think that happens is that with intersectionality is that it gets really, really narrow to this section. And we lose kind of what we consider like the mass issue, right? . . . if you add these young people and you add these young people. You add this identity, identity, then you get a thousand young people. When you add the intersections you get two young people... Then you’re like, “What do you do?” That’s not a mass issue. That’s not going to generate the power you need to win on the issue that you want. This is a real pragmatic problem.

Nevertheless, starting with the influence of his mother’s advocacy and his early introduction to Ella Baker, Jonathan applies an intersectional perspective to his appreciation for the leading role that Black women have played and continue to play in racial and social justice movements.

I’m always like, “Forward sisters in the struggle”. I’m there as a continuity from whatever point you want to jump off of, the history of Black women providing leadership, powerful dynamic leadership and leading on people to victories whether you want to jump in like 1409 with Queen Nzinga, you want to jump all the way back to beginning of time, or you want to jump right into a moment in history of the moment right now with Alicia, Opal, and Patrice.

Jonathan now also works as a trainer with Black Organizing and Leadership Development (BOLD), founded by Black women. He says, “I follow the leadership of Black women through BOLD. I just want to be clear about that”.

7.3.2. Ricardo Martinez

Ricardo Martinez, co-founder of Padres and Jóvenes Unidos, grew up in California, the child of Mexican immigrants. His family experienced racism and he saw that the differences within the Latinx community didn’t matter.

My family was Mexicanos. They didn’t identify as Chicano. They were Mexicanos. I was first generation born in this country. But you know, it didn’t matter if you were
Chicano or Mexicano. You were not allowed to go into certain areas. So like my father was not allowed to go work in a factory because they were not hiring Mexicans.

Ricardo joined the Farm Workers movement as a teenager and was influenced by its sense of community unity.

I started with the farm workers’ movement in California and there was always intersection between the rural and the big cities and then people coming in to help in the question around the role of police in dealing with social unrest. So then people from the city would come into our picket lines so there was always this clear understanding that we were all fighting the same fight.

Ricardo moved to Texas where he participated in the immigrant and educational rights movement that eventually led to the *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court case ruling that undocumented children had the right to receive a free public education. With Pam Martinez, he later moved to Denver and co-founded Padres and Jóvenes Unidos when Latinx parents reported that their children were being treated in discriminatory ways in a local elementary school.

Ricardo identifies strongly with the Chicano movement within which he grew up. Ricardo explains that his people’s movement is historically rooted in family units rather than individual identities. He refers to this as “intergenerational organizing”. He emphasizes that families are impacted by multiple issues simultaneously—education, housing, gentrification, immigration, policing—and thus “the movement” must address these interconnected issues:

... We use the concept of intergenerational organizing. That means it’s by family units. Not intersectional ... We know you’re not just a student ... you live in your community. You’re part of a family unit. And the family unit goes to work someplace, even yourself as a student. You’re the one that gets stopped by the police for curfew violations. So as a human being, you’re not isolated from the rest ... You’re not just a parent working someplace. You’re a parent of somebody who’s going to school. You’re a parent who might be affected by immigration. You’re a parent who’s gonna get displaced by gentrification ... for us the movement is ... what affects the families’ lives in its entirety ... and so our organizing goes across many areas ... that’s building a movement.

Due to his understanding that movements encompass many issues that revolve around the collective of the family, Ricardo views the term “intersectional organizing” as an unnecessary repetition of words. Reflecting on his many years of organizing experience, he believes that movements are by definition intersectional since organizers always have to address multiple issues:

We do the work. We just don’t call it that ... we just practice it ... we do it because that’s a natural part of organizing. We don’t have to call it that ... We’ve been doing it in all our work because there’s no one area of organizing ... There has never been a moment in my work history as an organizer that the intersection doesn’t happen.

Indeed, according to Ricardo a movement would not exist in the first place if it was not already intersectional.

Along these lines, Ricardo sees an assumption in the logic of intersectionality that a movement is divided into sections (either identity-based or issue-based) to begin with. Drawing from his experience in the Farm Workers movement through which he learned the importance of maintaining intergenerational unity, Ricardo worries that if today’s movement divides itself into sections it will lose:

What has changed a lot in those years is the idea that somehow organizing is sectional, that you can organize parents and you can organize youth, which is counterproductive in the fight for liberation ... for us to have thought that during the farm workers movement that somehow, we were more advanced than our parents, that somehow our fight was different and that we had to lead the fight was crazy ... because then if we were to divide ourselves into sections, we would have lost our strikes in the fields. And so, it’s always been we organize by unit, by family unit, by community units and not by individual sectors within that place. That only helps the enemy.
While Ricardo does not emphasize intersecting identities in his organizing work, he stresses the need for interconnected campaigns to “come together”, because, according to him, there’s no “. . . single issue movements, whether it’s education, whether it’s immigration, whatever it is, if it stays by itself it’s gonna lose. . . it’s gonna make it harder for there to be society-wide changes . . . we’re all in the same fight”. That is, because the issues that working families face are interconnected, Ricardo argues that there’s is a critical necessity for solidarity between organizers working on different issues and envisions a “bigger movement” for “people’s rights and dignity”.

. . . The education justice movement has to link up with other movements around the country that are fighting gentrification, that are fighting against police brutality, that are fighting for fair wages for people . . . when you’re saying building a movement, there’s no such thing as an educational movement. There’s a movement for people’s rights and dignity and that encompasses everything.

Ricardo notes that some conflicts have arisen between older and younger activists when engaging certain issues, particularly young people’s sexual identities, identities which make some socially conservative Latinx parents uncomfortable. Ricardo affirms that his organization upholds an inclusive, safe space for LGBTQ youth, and that these are non-negotiables for their organizing:

[Two of our lead organizers] . . . they’re both trans and they’re both gender non-conforming. Both are fighting all the fights . . . So in that sense we fully developed plans on how do we recruit, how do we address, how do we manage and talk about things . . . when we’re working on immigration reform, we have to push back on a bunch of folks that were willing to give up that one sector of immigrants. [They] say . . . if they’re homosexuals, no, they cannot be admitted . . . fuck no. Sorry. For us, human rights are human rights. Those are non-negotiable . . . we work together . . .

Ricardo explains that Padres and Jóvenes Unidos actively engages elders in its organizing efforts around these issues and encourages adults to make space for youth and their new approaches and identities. At the same time, Ricardo points out that the family members in the community who harbor certain prejudices, are ultimately all “human” and, at the end of the day, no one is perfect. Ricardo emphasizes the need for a process of healthy conflict resolution within the movement to address these inevitable tensions that arise between youth and elders, one which is respectful of everyone, and which will result in stronger unity and not division. He opposes the alternative which is to “toss out”, these valued members of the community. As he explains,

If we want to create the perfect society, you might as well just drop dead. It ain’t gonna happen. The society is understanding how do we deal with our conflicts . . . well and respecting everybody’s concerns and that we don’t come out of those differences divided. So, the challenge is how do we do it, accept that the conflict is inevitable and then develop things and then make it as productive as possible. So, the resolution to the conflict strengthens us. It doesn’t make us weaker. So that challenge that we all have to learn and some folks will say be absolute . . . we all have crazy parents and we all have crazy uncles and aunts. We all have crazy people in our families that they don’t like something and so if the idea was well just toss them out, shit we’d be living by ourselves.

While he does not use the language of intersectionality nor its focus on identities to understand and guide his organizing work, Ricardo does seem to draw from the theory’s holistic and integrative framework to articulate the interconnected nature of the issues faced by, and the campaigns led by, working families (or family units), and the imperative for intergenerational movement spaces. Like Jonathan, his analysis highlights the need for coalition building and “coming together” across issues and generations in order to generate the power to win transformative change. He argues that movements will lose if they’re focused around single issues or divided into “sections”.
7.3.3. Zakiya Sankara-Jabar

Zakiya Sankara-Jabar co-founded Racial Justice NOW! in Dayton, Ohio to give voice to Black parents like herself whose children were facing racism in schools. Zakiya was born in the South, supported by a strong Black community and extended family but came to Dayton to finish her schooling years. She became a parent herself and saw her African American son face racist school discipline policies in pre-school where he was repeatedly suspended and eventually expelled. A single parent, she had to drop out of college but before she did, researched the experience of Black boys and education. She learned her son’s experience was not unique and was introduced to Black radical analyses of systemic oppression, like those of Jawanza Kunjufu.

Co-founding Racial Justice NOW!, Zakiya grounds her organizing work in the history of the Black radical tradition and expresses a keen awareness of the “historical trauma” she brings to her work as a “descendant of enslaved Africans in this country”. As she explains: “... the main driver in how I do my organizing and some of the standpoint, epistemology of how I do my organizing, is very deeply rooted in the Black radical tradition”. Like Jonathan, Zakiya sees her work organizing working-class Black families around education issues as part of this Black radical tradition, which, akin to Ricardo, she perceives to be “intergenerational” and “interconnected” with both youth and elders participating in the movement together:

Historically, in Black communities ... our movements have been interconnected in many ways, have also been very intergenerational, where there’s been young folks and also elders ... There have always been these de facto mentors, if you will, for me in my work, who support me, who have given me advice. In fact, my co-founder is an elder ... So that whole interconnectedness, that intergenerational piece, has always been very prevalent in my life generally, but also in my work in organizing.

While intersectionality in theory tends to center the experiences and struggles of Black women and other marginalized identities, Zakiya emphasizes that there has always been tremendous and necessary unity—or “interconnectedness”—between Black men and women:

I use interconnected, mostly, because that’s just the way that the work has panned out for us, even around gender. There’s always been Black women and Black men who organize together around issues and really lifting up our children... We have to work together to protect our kids from these harmful institutions, education in particular.

Zakiya also expresses a strong working-class consciousness when discussing her identity, emphasizing the economic dimensions of the African American experience as well as the class divisions within the Black community:

I identify as a working-class Black woman as well. Definitely not middle class, nowhere near it ... My local organizing in Ohio ... most of the Black folks that I organized were Black women, poor, working-class mothers who are being impacted by these harmful, discriminatory school discipline policies that were kicking our kids out left and right ... and the voices of Black parents, especially working-class Black parents, are often drowned out.

While acknowledging that intersectionality centers women and LGBTQ leadership within the Black movement, Zakiya criticizes the theory’s lack of attention to the role that class plays in shaping the Black radical tradition.

A general critique that I have of intersectionality is that I don’t see a whole lot of lifting up of economic justice issues in the conversation around class and caste, even ... That’s been one of the critiques. I also think that for us, as people of color and communities of color, we have not done a good job of even talking about those things ourselves, about how different class interests also can work to undermine racial justice work and improvement and healing and things like that.

Zakiya notes that the interests of middle-class African Americans are often different than those of African Americans who are poor and working-class.
Jonathan and Zakiya organize from the standpoint of the Black radical tradition asserting the need for an interconnected, united front among Black people first and foremost, in order to achieve the power necessary to confront the school-to-prison pipeline. Jonathan is concerned that in practice intersectional ideology risks narrowing the focus of the broader Black movement to a subset of individuals within the community, suggesting the theory lacks pragmatism when it comes to power and strategy. Zakiya critiques intersectionality’s lack of attention to the role of class and underscores the importance of organizing Black working-class families. Ricardo emphasizes the common, interconnected issues faced by working class Latinx families, family units which cannot be theoretically deconstructed into “different sections”, but must be understand as a whole. Here, Ricardo echoes Sally’s concerns that intersectional organizing can devolve into an identity politics which may limit a more holistic understanding of real families and movements. At the same time, he highlights the need to engage and educate elders in the Latinx community on the different identities of young people, and to combat homophobia and transphobia within intergenerational organizing spaces, which is consistent with intersectional organizing’s focus on addressing power and marginalization within movements.

8. Discussion: Lived Experience, Social Identities, and Approaches to Intersectional Organizing

We found that education justice organizers enter this work from a variety of personal backgrounds and intersectional social locations. These locations appear to matter for each person’s understanding and practice of intersectional organizing, even as organizer perspectives are also shaped by larger social processes and political movements. We found that there is a general intersectional approach shared by most organizers, but that it is dynamic and somewhat contested. People we interviewed had different emphases, and some had concerns and critiques, that connect to their lived experience and social identities. The different emphases were not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, some organizers shared views across the categories we identified. Nevertheless, we found some distinctly different approaches and can trace them at least in part to people’s lived experience and social location.

The educational justice organizers that came from relatively privileged backgrounds like Maisie who is Asian-American and Sally, who is mixed racially and from a middle-class background, tended to emphasize the need to interrogate power and privilege as critical to intersectional organizing. They have confronted these issues in their lives and bring that perspective into their understanding and practice. Organizers in this study who are queer or gender nonconforming, like Kate, Geoffrey and Carlos, appear to emphasize the need to create safe spaces that are inclusive for people who are the most marginalized along multiple intersectional lines. Once again, this perspective can be linked to their own experiences as intersectionally marginalized people in mainstream institutions as well as in social movements. Finally, the organizers who came out of Black and Brown working class communities, like Jonathan, Ricardo and Zakiya, emphasize interconnectedness across issues and across identity markers like gender and generation within their own communities. They want to interrogate power and privilege and address particular forms of oppression within their communities, but always by placing unity at the forefront.

These perspectives are not mutually exclusive, however. In fact, there is some overlap between these views. Both Maisie and Sally emphasize addressing power and privilege yet, like Jonathan, Ricardo and Zakiya, also hesitate to use the term intersectionality in organizing. Similar to those three organizers, both Maisie and Sally appreciate the interconnected nature of issues in people’s lives. Ricardo, while stressing unity, insists that PJU has some principles like support of trans and queer participants, that must be agreed to by all. While the queer and gender nonconforming organizers, Geoffrey, Kate and Carlos, emphasize centering the most marginalized and creating inclusive spaces, Zakiya also does so in her own way. She centers Black parents because she sees them as the most
marginalized in the educational justice space and demands inclusive spaces for them in the educational justice movement.

At the same time, there is some important tension between these different approaches. If organizers focus too narrowly on those who are the most marginalized, they may narrow the constituency into too small a group to build the power necessary to win changes in policy and practice. If they fail to engage people deeply in the complexity of their identities and views, unity may be superficial and limited to only those who already agree with every “correct” position. On the other hand, prioritizing unity within community may leave certain lines of power and privilege unaddressed. If organizers fail to center those most marginalized and create inclusive spaces, then their voices may be silenced and excluded.

In the end, these tensions may reflect, in the words of Maisie, that intersectional organizing is really about “the struggle to get there”, in other words, the struggle to get to authentic solidarity. The educational justice movement is dynamic, with organizers and groups that approach intersectional organizing in different ways yet are struggling to work together. Building an intergenerational and intersectional movement is not easy to achieve. There is a push and pull among organizers and groups, attempting to avoid an “oppression Olympics”, while also creating shared consciousness and appreciation for the multiple ways that people and groups who are different from each other are oppressed in the system and inclusive spaces that can address particular needs.

Even though we show that lived experience and social location influence understanding, we do not argue that they determine it. We are not saying that everyone from a particular social location will think and act the same way. People construct their identities through narratives in which they make choices in their lives and also create an evolving story of self that influences how they think and act (Ganz 2010). Movement discourse influences people’s understanding and practice; but people also “make it their own” by selectively choosing and weaving together individual and collective experiences. Nevertheless, it is striking to observe some common patterns that clearly link personal lived experience to understandings and practices of intersectional organizing.

9. Implications

Although social movement scholars have increasingly highlighted intersectional organizing strategies, very rarely have scholars appreciated different emphases within that approach nor have they examined the sources of different approaches. Our analysis finds that an individuals’ lived experience impacts how they understand intersectional organizing and that engagement in intersectional organizing helps individuals better understand their social identities. Our findings suggest that intersectional organizing is a more contested space than is usually understood. Not surprisingly, given the nature of intersectional theory, people who come from different backgrounds and locations understand and practice it in different ways. This variation in understanding provides further insight into how the particular perspectives of movement organizers influences the organizing strategies they pursue.

Our study design did not allow us to trace whether and how differences in understandings and practices of intersectional organizing influence issue-based campaign organizing strategy, nor evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies. While we show that the lived experiences of educational justice organizers influence their understanding and practice of intersectional organizing, this study does not specify how these understandings influence the particular organizing strategies they pursue with regards to participant activation, mobilization, and issue and campaign organizing. Any analysis of these issues would have to appreciate the role of context in the adoption of specific strategies and their effectiveness. As Mediratta et al. (2009) point out, “the challenge of organizing is that campaigns defy replication . . . Organizers must figure out what will work in their setting and amass the political power and organizational expertise to move demands to reform effectively” (p. 80). Future research, however, could build upon our findings and, while paying attention to context, help clarify what the similarities and differences in approaches to organizing
practice mean for education organizing campaigns and their effectiveness in transforming policy towards equity and justice.

Our study included a small number of organizers, so it is even more important to stress the exploratory nature of these findings and the lack of determinism in our analysis. Nevertheless, we believe these findings are provocative and open up important lines of research and action concerning intersectional organizing and educational justice. We intend for the findings from this project to help organizers in the PTT better understand the similarities and differences within the movement concerning intersectional organizing strategies and, as a result, strengthen organizing strategies. We also hope our findings contribute to broader understanding of the role of intersectional theory in social justice movements.


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Appendix A

Organizers Interviewed:
- Maisie Chin, CADRE
- Sally Lee, Teachers Unite
- Kate McDonough, Dignity in Schools Campaign NYC
- Geoffrey Winder, Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network
- Carlos Rojas, Youth on Board
- Jonathan Stith, Alliance for Education Justice
- Ricardo Martinez, Padres and Jóvenes Unidos
- Zakiya Sankara-Jabar, Dignity in Schools Campaign (formerly Racial Justice NOW!)

Appendix B

Interview Questions
1. How do your own personal identities and experiences influence how you organize? 
   a. How about the issues you organize around?
2. Do you use the term intersectional organizing in your work? What do you mean by intersectional organizing?
3. What do you see as the key issues that intersect with your educational work?
4. Does your group pursue intersectional organizing strategies?
   a. If not, why not.
   b. If so, tell us about it.
i. How do you do it? Prompt for specific examples
ii. Under what conditions are you more likely to do it?
c. What do you see as the benefits of taking an intersectional approach?
d. What are the downsides or challenges to taking an intersectional approach?
e. How would the educational justice movement need to change to be more intersectional?

5. Some people say that intersectionality means centering the lived experiences of people who are at the intersection of multiple systems of oppressions.
a. Have you thought about that?
b. If not, what do you think of that approach?
c. If you were to develop strategies that focus on the lived experience of low-income youth of color, and took into consideration intersectional experiences for immigrant youth of color, by gender and for LGBTQ and gender-non-conforming youth, what would that look like?
d. What are the obstacles to taking this approach?

6. We’re interested in whether intersectional strategies help build solidarity across issues and movements.
a. In what ways has the educational justice movement created solidarity with other movements and vice versa?
b. What else needs to be done to build stronger solidarity across movements?
c. To what extent can the struggle for educational justice be the connector between movements?
d. Do intersectional strategies help us think about solidarity in new ways?

7. If not already mentioned, is there anyone special you think we should interview to learn more about intersectional organizing?
a. Is there any particular group or work to investigate that you think stands out as intersectional organizing?

8. Is there anything else you want to add that you haven’t had the chance to share?

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