

The Beautiful Struggle of the New York State Foundations of Education Association: Presidential Notes on the 52nd Conference

Max Jacobs
Rutgers University

Abstract: As one of the few remaining regional Foundations of Education associations in the United States, NYSFEA places experienced scholars, early career researchers, practicing K-12 administrators, teachers, and students in a reciprocal space. The intellectual alchemy sparks a real community of inquiry, opening an authentic avenue to build a local, collective consciousness. A sense of intellectual solidarity sets the annual meeting of NYSFEA apart from others in the field. I discuss the past and present beautiful struggle of NYSFEA, present a short summary of the conference program, and end by offering two ways of seeing the conference.

I write these words with immense gratitude. I want to begin by thanking each member of the Association's Board: Shirley Sommers, Lori-Ann Newman, Leslee Grey, Timothy Glander, Greg Seals, Ana Juliana Borja, Amanda Kingston, and Tim Monreal. In a field of research that prioritizes what works and in a society that promotes surplus enjoyment (Žižek, 2023), the annual meeting of the New York Foundations of Education Association (NYSFEA) serves as an intellectual refuge. Stuffed in a single room, people interested in educational theory and practice — professors, administrators, teachers, parents, friends, graduate students, undergraduate students, and secondary students — dwell on issues that span theoretical disciplines and practical dilemmas. Vibrant conversations on ideas presented continue between sessions, bites of food, sips of drink, and across cyberspace. Since the association's reconvening in 2020, the annual meeting has grown from a regional conversation across the State of New York to an international exchange that blends remote and in-person presentations. Thanks to the reach of American Educational Studies Association's newsletter (shout out, Tim!) and the advent of blended conference rooms, the association has brought together topics that speak to both local and international issues in education. As one of the few remaining regional Foundations of Education associations in the United States, NYSFEA places experienced scholars, early career researchers, practicing K-12 administrators, teachers, and students in a reciprocal space. The intellectual alchemy sparks a real community of inquiry, opening an authentic avenue to build a local, collective consciousness. That feeling of intellectual solidarity is what sets the annual meeting of NYSFEA apart from others in the field. In what follows, I discuss the past and present beautiful struggle of NYSFEA. I present a short summary of the conference program. With help from curriculum theory, I end by offering two ways of seeing the conference.

The Past and Present Struggle of NYSFEA

In the first volume of *Educational Abundance*, Richard Ognibene, a founding member of NYSFEA, presents a history of the association. The founding collective, formalized in 1971 on the campus of SUNY Cortland, arose amid a struggle in teacher education. Namely, business-oriented reformers renewed the clarion call for performance-based teacher education (Cuban, 2023). Fitted within a back-to-basics rhetoric, the business-oriented reformers questioned the practical utility of pre-service teachers learning what social foundations of education courses offered. As Ognibene aptly notes: "One could not dare to build a new social order if one did not know it was needed or know that teachers should have an important role in helping to shape that new and more just society," (Ognibene & Seals, 2020, p. 1). Although formed as a way for

SUNY educational foundations professors to “discuss the place of Foundations” and “share methods for teaching courses,” (Ognibene & Seals, 2020, p. 1) NYSFEA played an active role in preserving educational foundations within the performance-based standards of teacher education, especially in the state of New York.

The early years of the association featured discussions on critical questions in the history and philosophy of education with a clear-eyed commitment to social justice. The dedicated service and published research of Jeff Harold, Richard Ognibene, William Griffen, John Marciano, Ron Butchart, Bill Doll, Jr., and William Pinar reflected activist-inspired, cutting-edge scholarship that not only showcased the value of social foundations but modeled another way to answer the call of teaching. The rhetoric of performance-based teaching, as Dewey wrote in 1904, is enticing: “Teachers, actual and intending, flock to those persons who give them clear-cut and definite instruction as to just how to teach this or that,” (1904, p. 16). Rather than “become submerged in the routine detail of their callings,” the founding collective of NYSFEA were “possessed by the spirit of an abiding student of education...” (Dewey, 1904, p. 16). Their collective spirit broke through and inspires the present struggle.

Fifty years later, the push for performance-based teacher education continues. Scholars in foundations of education, from its inception, occupy a peculiar place in departments of education — not practical enough for practice-based enthusiasts and not truncated enough for ROI-motivated policymakers. People who study the social foundations of education float in the liminal space of educational theory, practice, and policy. This shaky feeling of in-betweenness prompted the theme of this year’s annual meeting: “The Beautiful Struggle: Recommitting to Democracy (or something else) in Education.” The “struggle” signals a recognition that what came before inspires continued action today. The “beautiful” speaks to an aesthetic appreciation for the social movements and organizing pedagogies that have formed in response to the dramatic erosion of civil liberties (Strong, 2024). The potential “recommitment to democracy in education” highlights a duty to maintain access to counter-majoritarian forms of knowledge, which are under direct attack from the fascistic politics of erasure (Grey & Seals, 2024; Stanley, 2024). The “or something else” represents an unruliness that encapsulates the beautiful struggle for an education that leaves open the possibility of reconstruction or refusal.

The 52nd Annual Conference

Christopher M. Span, historian of education and dean of the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, kicked off the conference with heartfelt opening remarks, welcoming NYSFEA to the campus. The first session oriented us to the material reality, with special attention to gendered and racialized forms of social oppression, administrators and teachers face when they engage in leadership and care work. The second session built off the first by offering possible pathways for pre-service and in-service teachers to become democratic and just in their future and current roles. In between the second and third session, the room came together to reflect on the conference theme. After a short interval of silence, those in the room discussed how assumptions of others shape how we see each other and the world around us as well as what it means to enact a dignity-affirming educational practice. The third session featured two presentations that placed artificial intelligence and data-driven decision making in the realms of critical realism and humanizing educational practice. The fourth session featured a wide-ranging meditation on the educational consequences of technological addiction, the biopolitics of student-driven educational activism in Iran, and civic reform, and the pragmatic promise of developing pre-

service teachers as social change agents. The New Jersey State Teacher of the Year, Gillian Ober, delivered a talk on the importance of creating meaningful relationships with students and school community members in the face of ongoing political whirlwinds. The first day of presentations ended with Greg Seals, who delivered an excellent keynote lecture on a theory of educational energy development, using clips from *The Wire* to elucidate a formula to articulate a concrete way to enact a Deweyan-inspired democratic education.

The second day of in-person presentations started with two presentations. The first explained the theory and practice of teaching an anti-racist genetics unit in a high school biology course. The second highlighted best practices for nurturing community for migrant families promises and discussed challenges of sustaining a university partnership with a community school district. The second session connected the carceral logics of the university and the vital, but unrecognized role Black women play in higher education spaces, the audience then conducted a collective map-making activity to build a campuswide counternarrative to the politics of erasure. A deeply personal and wide-ranging talk on educational displacement followed, featuring the awesome work of Project Belonging and the Interfaith Lab. The third session presented gallery walks as a pedagogical tool to promote critical engagement in teacher education courses, audience members were encouraged to partake in the practice and reflect on its pedagogical value for maximal participation in classroom dialogue.

After lunch, the plenary session presented the conference with a rich engagement on the state of social foundations in education and what the beautiful struggle entails. A poignant commentary on the beauty of silos and their reinvention as community spaces in Buffalo, New York served as a wonderful metaphor for the conference's theme. The fourth session, then, featured middle school students — by far, NYSFEA's youngest presenters/participants ever — modeling the power of classroom debate to promote civic dialogue. A holistic education approach, combining experimental, project, and place-based methods, pointed to a different way of seeing the vocational ends of higher education. Using AsianCrit as the organizing principle, a more inclusive version of culturally relevant education was outlined and discussed. The final session began with a philosophical meditation on a morality-motivation paradox in Emerson's "The American Scholar." Moved to the history of community-controlled education at the Highlander Folk School which featured an oral history interview that illuminated how the struggle over childcare at the school spoke to underlying tensions in the movement. The session ended with discussion of how implementation of mindfulness-based instruction in kindergarten classrooms demonstrated serious gains in knowledge acquisition and decreased the amount of negative behavioral reports.

After two days of in-person gathering, the conference moved to cyberspace for two evenings. The feeling of intellectual solidarity carried over as we heard presentations and had discussions on a wide range of issues in educational theory, practice, and policy. The first day included: the politics of gender in elementary classrooms, disability justice on campus, social justice in public health education, philosophical analysis of neuromyths, international educational exchanges on Padlet, the inadequacy of teachers' workforce knowledge, and a critical analysis of higher education politics in Vietnam. The second day featured: meditation upon personal growth as necessary for democratic education, methods for teacher educators to engage their students in analysis of educational privatization, an in-school study of reality pedagogy, a critical engagement on the educational value of LLMs and AI companies, the cultivation of an online space for educators of color as a way to build racial equity, an

argumentative literature review of disaster studies and science education, and a critical appraisal of graduate assistant labor in US-based higher education. The combination of in-person and remote presentations, as one participant noted on our feedback form, is “both generous and helpful...” As the political whirlwinds continue to increase the precarity of academic labor, the combination of both mediums allow for maximal participation across the educational landscape, tenured and adjunct professors, graduate and undergraduate students, and interested members of the public are provided the opportunity to engage on important issues in educational research. The full experience of the fifty-second conference, by the end, felt like an enactment of the theme.

The 52nd Annual Meeting as an Academic Conference and a Third Space

Curriculum theorists have conceptualized multiple forms of curriculum. As Benjmain Justice has detailed, the overt curriculum contains “what is formally offered, officially sanctioned, and/or described in standards, curriculum guides, and lesson plans...” The implicit curriculum is the educational experience of learning the overt, which can include, for example, “sitting in bolted down desks in front of a lecturing teacher...” (Justice, 2017). In application to the fifty-second conference, the overt curriculum is the conference program, which includes the titles of the talks and names of the authors who present. The covert curriculum is the experience of the presentations and the discussions that take place between and after the talks are presented, including but not limited to how the desks were arranged in the Rutgers Graduate School’s lecture hall and the positioning of the speakers as they delivered their presentations, whether in person, remote, or hybrid.

One way of seeing the fifty second conference is, through a reading of the overt curriculum listed on the programs, as an academic conference. Issues that span across many areas of educational research were featured: how intersectional oppression shapes and reshapes teaching and learning, the critical relationship between technology and education, the promises of teaching methods that promote racial equity and justice-oriented action, and much more. As an academic conference, the fifty-second annual meeting includes fresh and diverse perspectives from various stakeholders across the field, driven by concerns for democracy, social justice, and emancipatory education.

Another way of seeing the fifty-second conference is, through the prism of the implicit curriculum, as a third space (Oldenburg, 1999). Academic conferences, whether regional, national, or international, almost always include separate rooms to hear concurrent sessions on the topics presented. This is not the case for a NYSFEA conference. The single room features the conference, where the presenter and audience members sustain an intimate relation, leading to a reciprocity that envelops the space. Upon arrival, for the fifty-second annual conference, attendees only had to sign in free of charge (with an option for a donation to the association) to attend the conference, either in the room or on Zoom. NYSFEA’s fifty-second annual meeting, then, felt more like an agora than a pressure-cooked academic conference. People flow in and out of the room as they please, continuing discussions on what was presented or preparing for the next presentation. While academic conferences function as an extension of work for educational scholars and researchers, the openness of NYSFEA conferences places scholars and researchers in community with persons beyond the research enterprise — practitioners, teachers, administrators, friends, and family are present and welcomed.

As we look toward to the next annual conference, the board intends to build and continue fostering the unique spirit of NYSFEA conferences as third spaces where all are welcome to think and speak on pressing issues in and around education.

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