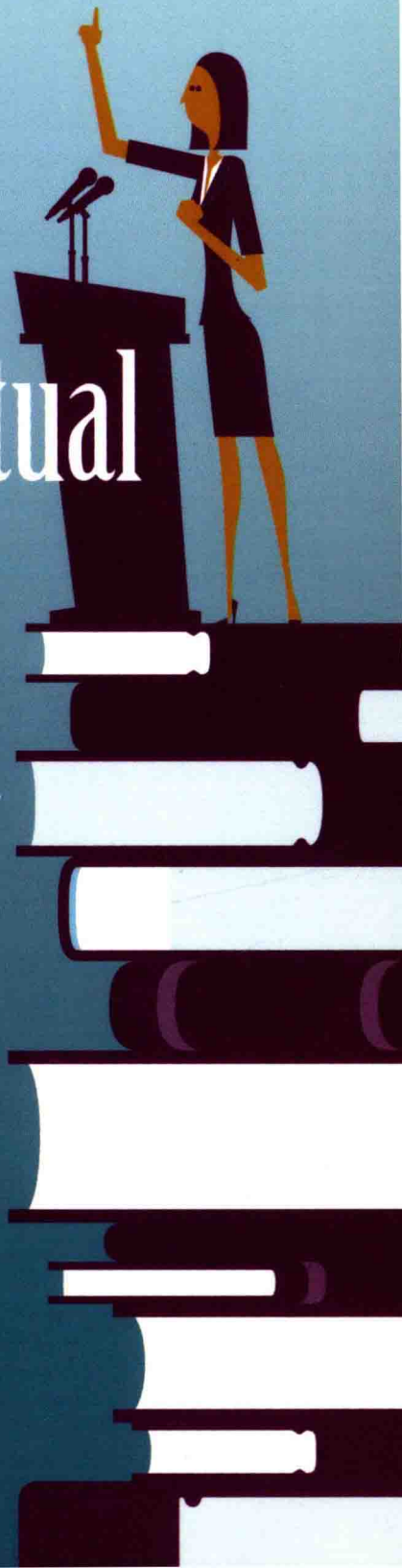
reimagining THE public intellectual IN education

making scholarship matter



edited by

CYNTHIA GERSTL-PEPIN

and CYNTHIA REYES

While the term "public intellectual" has been used to describe scholars who seek to share their research with the public, little work has been done to examine the role of a public intellectual in the field of education. This book builds upon the notion of the public intellectual in a way that makes the term more accessible, using it to refer to education scholars who seek to share their research outside of academia. Media coverage of educational issues is rife with self-appointed experts on education who have claimed space in public discussions to define educational problems and dominate public dialogues on education. But where are the education researchers in these academic dialogues? This book addresses their absence, sharing the stories of scholars who are seeking to enter public dialogues and reclaim space for reasoned dialogue on education. The stories of public scholars highlighted here acknowledge that the policymaking arena is teeming with value conflicts that can lead to dismissing or ignoring research if it does not fit with political agendas.

"In this important new book Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin and Cynthia Reyes make a clear and compelling case for socially and politically engaged scholarship that moves beyond the tidy boundaries of academia to confront critical issues related to equity and justice. At a time when inequality is growing and policymakers are more paralyzed than ever in devising solutions to the pressing problems that plague our society, such scholarship is needed now more than ever. For scholars who are more concerned about making a difference than protecting their jobs, this book will be an inspiration."—PEDRO A. NOGUERA, Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education and Executive Director, Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University

"The lament of the academic is over! Gerstl-Pepin and Reyes have pushed us beyond critique and into new forms of engagement with this book. The chapters inspire me and all intellectuals to be citizens first. Knowledge in this is a tool of participation in civic life."—GEORGE W. NOBLIT, Joseph R. Neikirk Distinguished Professor of Sociology of Education, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

"...Along with the authors in the book, Gerstl-Pepin and Reyes urge academics to step out of their comfort zone, away from their intellectual jargon and contribute to the issues facing society, especially those in the realm of education. Their book not only gives an intellectual rationale for this approach but it contains many examples of how to make research relevant. Given the messy situation that public education in the United States finds itself in, this book is much-needed and vital."—MARYBETH GASMAN, Professor of Higher Education and Director, Penn Center for Minority-Serving Institutions, University of Pennsylvania

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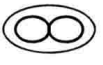

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To the leaders, teachers, communities, families, students, and researchers working to improve schools

and

To Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin's sons, Reid and Ethan, and her husband, Craig

and

To Cynthia Reyes' children, Elliot and Monica, and her husband, Brian.

You inspire us every day to make a difference for children everywhere.

Preface

A Case for Emphasizing the "Public" in Public Intellectual

CYNTHIA GERSTL-PEPIN AND CYNTHIA REYES

INTRODUCTION

Dr. David Parenti (academic): We get the grant, we study the problem, we propose solutions. If they listen, they listen. If they don't, it still makes for great research. What we publish on this is gonna get a lot of attention.

Howard "Bunny" Colvin (former police officer): From who?

Dr. David Parenti: From other researchers, academics.

Howard "Bunny" Colvin: Academics?! What, they gonn' study your study? [chuckles and shakes head] When do this shit change?

—*The Wire*, Season 4, Final Grades Episode (Simon & Johnson, 2006)
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The excerpt above from the television show *The Wire* laments the shutting down of a successful educational program that was helping troubled middle school students. This excerpt is emblematic of the startling lack of connection between academic research and meaningful policy solutions. In academia, academic publication is privileged over community needs. It is this disconnect that the character Bunny Colvin laments and that we seek to explore in this book. While it is the "intellectual" side of the term "public intellectual" that academics have tended to

focus on in debates and scholarship, we believe that it is the public side of the equation that needs more focus and attention from education scholars.

In a world where research must be presented as objective if it is to make an impact on policymaking, there exists a tension between the notions of an academic researcher as a neutral professional and as a policy advocate. Nowhere in the public discussion is it stated that all research is socially constructed, whether it involves naturalistic inquiry or experimental design. Despite the best attempts of the researcher to use objective forms of research such as quantitative methods, including quasi-experimental design, the very research questions we ask are difficult to disentangle from our value systems, training, beliefs, and historical context from which a researcher emerges (Gunzenhauser & Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). While naturalistic inquiry and qualitative forms of inquiry often acknowledge bias, much quantitative research is wrapped in seemingly objective methodologies that claim to control for research bias.

Yet one need only look historically at objective research studies such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment conducted between 1932 and 1972 (Jones, 1993) or the Nazi "scientific" experiments (Baumslag, 2005) to see how objective methodologies can be shaped by culturally biased researchers. Nazi researchers subscribing to the Nazi ideology of the superiority of the Aryan race conducted numerous inhumane experiments on concentration camp victims who were considered racially inferior. White researchers in the Tuskegee experiment discovered a treatment for syphilis in 1940 but neglected to inform the African American sharecroppers in the study that there was an effective treatment, thus allowing them to suffer and in some cases die from the disease. These studies show that researchers are human after all and not beyond reproach even when utilizing objective research designs. So when qualitative forms of research are presented and acknowledge the bias of the researcher, they can be easily dismissed. Yet the irony is that quantitative approaches can often be shaped by bias but presented as objective.

Media coverage of educational issues is rife with self-appointed experts on education (with little or no research training in education) such as Steven Brill (founder of CourtTV and *American Lawyer* magazine) or Joel Klein (former New York City schools chancellor whose professional training is in health and constitutional law) who have claimed space in public discussions to define educational problems and solutions. These public speakers dominate public dialogues on education, going so far as to write magazine articles for *The Atlantic*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *New Yorker* and, in Steven Brill's case, a book targeted to the public, *Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America's Schools* (2012). A variety of self-appointed experts promote solutions to continuing national debates on such polarizing issues as national testing, charter schools and school choice, or higher education costs. In many cases they present data and information as if their opinions are based on objective truths.

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At a local level in our own rural northeast state, we witness ongoing public debates on environmental and educational issues, such as the role of wind and solar energy, the nuclear power plant, and racism in one school district in a predominantly White state. We continue to hear a meager response from academic voices at the local university, even as these local issues have critical relevance to the larger national discussion on the economy and the immigration debate in Arizona. There may be isolated conversations, but there is a noticeable absence of more intentional university voices engaging in these debates in the public arena. Molnar (2006) argues that very few scholars are interested in joining in public debate, and many more are too consumed with the "promotion regime" to become interested in joining discussions (p. 64). There may even be fear of retaliation for speaking out on school issues, especially when their programs depend heavily on local schools for pre-service teacher clinical internships. Such relationships are vital for a strong teacher education program. Academics, particularly in education, walk a fine line of partnering with local schools yet bringing into the classroom current local issues, even if the latter are polarizing and foster controversial debate. But where are the researchers in these academic dialogues at all levels? This book seeks to address this issue by sharing the stories of scholars who are seeking to engage in public dialogue and reclaim space for reasoned dialogue on education.

WHEN "INTELLECTUAL" DEBATES TRUMP PUBLIC CONCERNS

The notion of the public intellectual has many historical connotations and has been written about in broad terms across disciplines (Jacoby, 2000; Posner, 2002; Said, 1994). But what constitutes the "public" in public intellectual? It has been a term that has been used to describe scholars who seek to share their research with the public. Little work has been done, however, to examine the role of a public intellectual in the field of education (Cochran-Smith, 2006a, 2006b). Authors such as Cochran-Smith (2006a) see how the public dialogue on education has evolved over the years and highlight the critical need for public intellectuals (scholars) in the field of education. Given that state and federal policies govern much of education, it is critical that the public and policymakers reclaim the public dialogue on education so that it can be opened up to include scholars who are informed and knowledgeable about educational problems. Cochran-Smith (2006b) defines the role of the public intellectual in education as requiring that "in whatever public realm one has influence and access, one is obliged to offer critique of policies and practices he or she sees as problematic in terms of logic or evidence or that will not serve the best interests of schoolchildren and teachers" (p. 97).

Few university-based scholars have sought to enter public debates, and when they have, it is often challenging to move away from traditional academic discourse. For example, Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) offer a collection of essays from scholars who write compellingly on the intersections of race, poverty, power, and education. The editors use Hurricane Katrina as a backdrop for discussing the politics of neoliberalism, the privatization of education, and accountability and the economic market. The arguments are empirically supported, and the scholarly prowess of each of the authors is reflected and legitimized in the discourse and passion they use to describe their topics. Yet the audience for whom this book is intended is other scholars who are interested in informing public conversations, debates, and policy formation around education. The language and discourse of the book is academic and abstract; however, some authors express anger and frustration with education policy decisions driven by political agendas rather than the best interests of students and schools. The anger and frustration is often the result of inhumane educational reform and policies. Ironically, the very public that is most affected by these dangerous policies—the ones most marginalized and disenfranchised in the school system—do not have access to these types of academic texts and research.

Even if such texts are neither appropriate to nor meant for the general public, how might the very crucial and compelling topics that affect the very individuals who need to make the decisions or who need to choose among the educational policies be made more fluid and translatable? How can those individuals become better informed? Which texts do they read? Furthermore, how might the more academic text by Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) and other academic tomes inspire, encourage, and move education scholars to make research more accessible to the general public? For the purposes of this book, we choose to build upon the notion of a public intellectual but seek to do so in a way that makes the term more accessible. Specifically, we choose to use the term public *scholar* as opposed to public intellectual to refer to scholars who seek to share their research outside of academia.

The general problem with being a public scholar in the university is the lack of an institutional reward system that encourages scholars to make their work more accessible to the public. Assistant professors must secure tenure, and even associate professors, upon receiving tenure, are kept busy with teaching, advising, and service to the university community. The system provides neither incentive nor inspiration for creatively imagining such a goal. According to Molnar (2006),

> a public intellectual in a university setting must inevitably hover uncomfortably between being an outsider with academically sound ideas that challenge the received wisdom of policy and practice and being someone who maintains durable long-term relationships with the policymaking world beyond the boundaries of the academy. (p. 65)

This dual role can present many challenges, since most higher education institutions reinforce reward systems that favor academic work over community engagement.

USING STORIES TO MAKE WRITING MORE ACCESSIBLE

Rather than engage in another academic exercise in which scholars write about the notion of the public intellectual in abstract terms, we have gathered together the stories of academics who are engaged in public debates. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) see narrative experience (personal stories) as an important facet of understanding educational life, and given this book's goal of reclaiming the public dialogue in education, we have chosen narrative storytelling as a means for creating this understanding. By having a diverse set of authors personally tell their stories and share their experiences as public scholars, we seek to show the various ways in which educational researchers can make their work more accessible to the general public (including those most affected by educational policy decisions such as teachers, parents, students, and community members). The diverse (in terms of culture, gender, academic or not, and politics) public scholars highlighted in the book acknowledge that the policymaking arena is rife with value conflicts that can lead to dismissing or ignoring research if it does not fit with political agendas (Dery, 1990). The focus of the chapters is on lessons learned by public scholars engaging in multiple public arenas from the local to the national and international—from classrooms, school board meetings, blogs, newspaper editorials, media outlets, international programs, cyberspace, Web 2.0, and so on.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This preface situates the book within current challenges facing educational researchers as they attempt to inform public debates. To emphasize the "public" in public intellectual, the book is structured around three themes. The first theme examines the potential for making academic language accessible. The second theme examines how scholars can engage in public debates through the news media and Web 2.0 outlets. Finally, the third theme examines the personal dilemmas faced by scholars who engage in this type of work. The book concludes with a final chapter that highlights suggestions emerging from each chapter as to how educational researchers can work to share their research and scholarship in public arenas. The following provides an outline of each of the sections and chapters in the book.

SECTION ONE: MAKING ACADEMIC LANGUAGE ACCESSIBLE

In this section, the authors consider how language can play a role in how a public intellectual shapes her writing for a public audience. Writers in this section aim to highlight their personal struggles with using language to describe the experiences of the individuals who inhabit schools: children, teachers, parents, and staff. They share the difficulties in writing compelling stories about individuals working and learning in schools in order to shed light on the many challenges facing education in light of shifting demographics, inequities, technologies, politics, and economics. Yet personal stories of this kind are generally overshadowed by publicized reporting of standardized reading and writing scores that too often paint a picture of failure within the schools. Without the personal stories of children and teachers at work, the authors fear that the public rarely witnesses the human side of schooling.

The authors in this section explore the ways they use language to write personally about education, particularly children and teachers, in order to lend a personal face to the reported test scores the public receives. Chapter 1, "Crisscrossing from Classrooms to Cartoons: Social Science Satire," by Michael Giangreco, provides an insightful example of how the medium of cartoons can be used as a way to translate academic research and language into a format that is easily understood in public arenas and can have broad appeal via the Internet. In Chapter 2, "'Languaging Their Lives,' Places of Engagement, and Collaborations with Urban Youth," Valerie Kinloch discusses how she simultaneously provides space in her research for the youth she studies who she views as public scholars (intellectuals) and how they inform how she works in their communities as well as how she shares her research in public arenas. In Chapter 3, "Reframing: We Are Not Public Intellectuals; We are Movement Intellectuals," Margarita Machado-Casas, Belinda Flores, and Enrique Murillo, Jr., suggest that the term public intellectual is subtractive and suggest instead that, for their own work, the term Movement Intellectuals is more appropriate, given their call to action and grassroots efforts to redefine research and provide space for the perspectives of cultural groups that have traditionally been marginalized in research as well as public discussions. In Chapter 4, "Scholarly Personal Narrative as a Way to Connect the Academy to the World," Robert Nash explores how narrative writing and storytelling provide one way of making academic language accessible to public debates.

SECTION TWO: ENGAGING THE PUBLIC THROUGH MEDIA AND WEB 2.0

This section acknowledges the rise of the electronic information age, which is constantly shifting and changing. The authors will address the benefits and challenges

of using twenty-first-century media outlets to disseminate their research. In Chapter 5, "When a Public Intellectual Speaks Out But No One Hears Her, Does She Exist?" Susan Ohanian examines her own journey in exposing how media outlets can marginalize academics in favor of more mainstream political players. In Chapter 6, "The Naked Seminar: Blogging as Public Education Outside the Classroom," Sherman Dorn explores how he developed his own blog to inform the public on pressing educational debates. In Chapter 7, "The Public Intellectual: The Changing Context; Implications for Attributes and Practices," William Mathis examines the shifting role of educational researchers over the years and the rise of corporate media outlets, shares his personal experiences of engaging in educational policy debates and news media coverage, and identifies the personal attributes required these days to work in the contentious field of education policy. He also provides strategies and practices that can be utilized by educational researchers to enter public debates.

SECTION THREE: PERSONAL DILEMMAS

What are the particular dilemmas confronting the work of the public scholar? What constitutes the reporting of ethics, quality, or authority in both realms? In this section, authors examine the challenge of writing to the general public and writing for their profession. In Chapter 8, "Reflections of a 'Stunt Intellectual': Caught in the Crosshairs of 'Public' Controversy," William Ayers explores his very public engagement in the public media arena. In Chapter 9, "Traveling Down a Desire Line: Surviving Where Academia and Community Meet," JuliAnna Ávila shares her struggles with her role as a public scholar and the challenges of balancing the requirements of working in academia with the very real needs of the communities in which she has worked, such as post-Katrina New Orleans. In Chapter 10, "Conversations That Matter: Community-Based Practice in Support of the Public Good," Alan and Barri Tinkler share their community-based engagement in their local community and argue that this type of work is critical to community improvement and breaking down boundaries between academic goals and community needs. In Chapter 11, "An Inevitable Dichotomy...*Really*? Harmonizing Public Intellectual Work *with* Academic Work," Steven Jay Gross articulates his struggles in balancing his academic research and writing with his desire to influence unjust and harmful policies and his efforts at engaging other academics in efforts for strategic change.

SECTION FOUR: IMPLICATIONS

In Chapter 12, "Reimagining the Public Intellectual in Education: Making Scholarship Matter," we (Reyes & Gerstl-Pepin) examine the implications of the stories of public scholars captured in the book and suggest multiple ways in which education scholars can play a role in contributing to public debates from the local level to the national and international levels.

The authors' insights in this collective of experiences illuminate how education data is transformed and translated in a meaningful way to the general public. The chapters capture multiple, personal stories of researchers engaged in exploring what it means to be a public scholar.

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