



## Introduction: Activist Scholarship as Community-Centered Research for Social Change

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### ABSTRACT

This special issue of Research in Educational Policy and Management (REPAM) highlights, amplifies, and centers Activist Scholarship, bringing together impactful academic research with community advocacy and action that advances social justice. Today's world presents global, national, and local challenges such as climate change, civil unrest, growing economic divides and polarization, and ongoing discrimination that requires more than just observation, critique, or explanation. Now, more than ever, researchers and practitioners need to collaborate and contribute to making a real difference by leading work that is not only informative but also transformative (Gutierrez & Lipman, 2016; Johnson, 2023). Research as activism, also referred to as activist scholarship, is a justice-driven, community-rooted approach and tool that uses critical inquiry to expose inequities, amplify marginalized voices, and mobilize community members from diverse fields and sectors to transform systems toward equity, inclusion, and social change (Abawi et al., 2025; Eizadirad & Trifonas, 2025; Kilinc et al., 2024). Building on conversations which started in the Journal of Culture and Values in Education's 2024 special issue on the theme of "Research as Activism," (Kilinc et al., 2024) this volume further advances and highlights innovative, community-based case studies that tackle systemic inequities to uplift voices of marginalized groups and make educational policies and practices more inclusive,

“Research as Activism” transcends conventional boundaries of academic inquiry by actively participating in the dismantling of oppressive systems. It embodies an ethical and relational orientation that positions research practices, knowledge production, and the dissemination of findings not merely as ends in themselves, but as instruments for advancing justice and empowering individuals and communities who have been historically marginalized, undervalued, or silenced within mainstream academic discourse. This approach acknowledges that education, in its structures and practices, has historically functioned as a vehicle for liberation but in many cases also as a mechanism of sustained control and surveillance. Consequently, the processes of academic research warrant critical examination regarding their impact to either perpetuate or disrupt prevailing power dynamics. The five articles in this special issue, as a collective, exemplify this commitment by interrogating the tensions between state-mandated standardization and the imperative to advance equity and critical consciousness in education through innovative and impactful approaches across different contexts.

In “We Still Have Power in Shaping What and How Students Learn: Activist Teachers Respond to Book Bans,” Erica Marie Neal and Erin T. Miller explore how teachers in urban schools practice epistemic disobedience by intentionally teaching marginalized histories and perspectives. They focus on inclusion by highlighting resistance strategies against gag order legislation on book bans in the United States. This study connects well with the special issue theme by critically examining policy in relation to questioning whose voices and lived experiences matter. It shows how teachers on the front lines challenge inequitable institutional policies. The idea of fugitive pedagogies applied highlights that the classroom is an important space for dialogue in the ongoing effort for democratic and inclusive education.

“Canada is Not an Educational ‘Dreamland’” by Lyndze Harvey and Tahmineh Farnoud examines local to global perspectives within the idealized view of the Canadian education system. Using a post-qualitative autoethnographic method, the authors— one a queer, white settler and the other a recent immigrant from Iran—reveal “hidden layers of oppression” found within what seems like a progressive context. The analogy of “an onion of oppression” acts as a framework for understanding denialism and how exclusion is enacted and justified. The article highlights that activism requires continuous self-reflection and a readiness to let go of comforting stories to be able to work through discomfort. The findings serve as a reminder to constantly examine how established power structures operate, even in countries praised for their democratic and progressive values. It stresses the need for establishing accountability measures through activism within academic contexts.

“Advancing Gender Equality and Educational Access through Community-Driven Research Initiatives in Ethiopia” by Lisa Devall-Martin and Sharlene McHolm emphasizes the importance of community-based research in tackling complex and less studied global situations. Focusing on the Somali region of Ethiopia, this study provides an overview of research that names barriers to girls’ education, paying special attention to gender-specific health education and access to Menstruation Hygiene Management (MHM) kits at safe sanitation facilities. The

study uses descriptive statistical analysis and a matched control/treatment group design across districts such as Jijiga, Shenille, and Godey to produce important baseline data to inform future long-term research. This method highlights the role of data-informed impact evaluation in driving meaningful change.

The important link between technology and social justice is examined in Daniel Lumsden's article "Coding for Equity: Click, Code, Change". This article addresses the theme of technology and activism by looking at how Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be integrated into senior high school classrooms. Using an action-based research approach, the study shows how students, especially in subjects like accounting, use AI tools to co-create learning projects that reflect their values and community identities. Lumsden's case study reveal a significant conflict: while AI can drive digital empowerment, creative expression, and ethical questioning, it also highlights ongoing issues when AI-generated outputs misrepresent or overlook student identities because of cultural bias and systemic inequities. The research supports a justice-focused vision of AI in education that equips students to use technology but also to question and influence its design and societal impact.

Finally, "Resisting Hegemony in Teacher Education: Possibilities for Transformational Teaching and Learning within Neoliberal Systems" by Kara Dymond, Lincoln Smith, and Kathryn Broad explores the ideological tensions within modern educational practice. The authors argue that the spread of neoliberalism, which views education mainly as a tool for economic competition and preparation of students for jobs, limits local and systemic efforts to appreciate human diversity and potential. This, in turn, perpetuates and normalizes systems saturated with racism, classism, and ableism. In discussing intersectionality in activism, the article redefines the terms 'neurodivergent' and 'neurotypical' as 'neurominority' and 'neuromajority.' By presenting a relational and responsive approach that can be used in teacher education, the authors provide alternative pathways for teaching methods that push back against the ongoing deprofessionalization of the teaching field. They emphasize that teacher education must deliberately focus on developing educators who are both justice-oriented and critically aware.

As a collective, the five articles as part of the special issue, demonstrate the range and potential of activist scholarship in driving real social change in educational policy, management, and beyond. They tackle issues that connect local, national, and global contexts. The contributions focus on urgent, polarizing issues. The findings and future implications discussed serve as valuable resource for scholars, practitioners, and activists by providing strong theoretical frameworks and practical case studies to rethink educational landscapes, particularly the agency of people and groups to initiate and enact change. Readers should use these chapters as examples and inspiration for action within their own local contexts. They can reflect on how their own positions and engagement with research can help create better futures to promote equity and justice in education, and how such reforms will be measured over time.

As the co-editors of the special issue, we are committed to further advancing research as activism and activism scholarship through the publication of a 2026 forthcoming book titled

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“*Research as Activism in Education: Community-Oriented Perspectives.*” (Eizadirad et al., forthcoming 2026). The book, with contributions from various authors and practitioners, will highlight other case studies and examples of activist scholarship and their impact across educational contexts. We hope the work inspires others to continue to care about issues that impact their lives and take coordinated, collective, and strategic action to challenge injustice in its various forms and shapes.

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