

December 2009

Dear Selection Committee:

We are writing to nominate Dr. Jean Anyon for the Distinguished Contributions to Social Contexts in Education Research—Lifetime Achievement Award. Jean (as she is affectionately known to us) is one of the most influential education and social policy scholars of our time and most deserving of this prestigious honor.

For nearly thirty years, Jean's scholarly research has examined and shed light on the most pressing questions related to the social context of education. At the heart of her superlative body of research are her seminal and groundbreaking studies of social class and schooling, the political economy of urban education, and her powerful illustration of the need to connect urban school reform to social and economic policy and grassroots, community-based movements.

Jean's creative method of historical political economy, along with the use of direct observation and interviewing, has made her work particularly rich and a unique contribution to the field. Her research offers a generation of scholars, teachers, and activists a useful framework for understanding the relationship between micro-level classroom practice, institutional policy, and macro-structural forces. Jean's structural, yet always dynamic and complex, analyses remain on the cutting edge by providing up-to-date detailed descriptions of the shifting social and economic forces that impact education.

As one of the most widely cited scholars in the field, she has influenced countless numbers of scholars, teachers and community-based activists. It is impossible to do research related to the social context of education without engaging the groundwork she has laid. Indeed, as a generous and passionate mentor to doctoral students, Jean's ideas have informed and inspired a new generation of scholarship that moves her work in a multitude of directions.

Early in her career, Jean published numerous important studies that examine a wide range of issues including language, social class, gender, reproduction, the hidden curriculum, and inequality. In 1980, she published her groundbreaking and seminal article, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work." In 1981, she followed up with another foundational contribution: "Social Class and School Knowledge." Based on in-depth qualitative research in five schools representing distinct socioeconomic groups, these articles were among the first to provide empirical evidence of the social reproduction theories of the day; they also served to deepen and complicate our understanding of the reproductive function of schools. The articles provide rigorous comparative analyses of classroom interactions, curriculum content, and textbooks. "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum," which has been reprinted more than thirty times, offers numerous illustrative examples of how the hidden curriculum of work embedded in classroom processes serves to reproduce the social class structure. "Social Class and School

Knowledge" hones in on disparities in curricular content and textbooks across the five schools. To this day, we are indebted to Jean for her significant contribution to our understanding of how schools reproduce social class structures in the United States. Yet even in an era when theories of social reproduction predominated in critical educational studies, Jean did not leave us politically stymied. Indeed, her research provided us with empirical evidence of schools' potential for promoting social change.

In 1997, Jean published her first book, *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*, which has since become a classic and a must-read for anyone interested in the relationship between macro-structural forces and urban schooling. Jean's use of qualitative inquiry combined with detailed policy analysis provides a superb methodological model for situating daily life inside schools in its larger social-historical context. But more importantly, the book's message is essential to our search for social justice and equity. When too much educational research has been divorced from the social context, Jean provided the educational research community, teachers, and activists a brilliant and powerful argument for why school reform must reach beyond the boundaries of school systems. As the eminent sociologist William Julius Williams contends in the book's foreword, Jean makes clear that "to be successful, educational reforms in urban schools have to be a part of a larger effort to address the problems of poverty and racial isolation in our inner cities." He adds that he believes that, "this passionate book will help move us in that direction."

In *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement* (2005), Jean accomplishes two important tasks. First, she specifically details the various public policies that impact education. From housing to public transportation to maldistributive taxation, Jean offers incisive critical analysis of federal, state and local policies that much educational research fails to fully acknowledge, explicate or interrogate. However, Jean does not end here. Lamenting that most studies of social inequality end with a too-easy list of policy prescriptions, she takes on the task of exploring how we might build a new broad-based, multiracial social movement with education at the center. Inspired by early civil rights activism (1900-1950), Jean uses social movement theory to explore how people at that time became involved in political contention, and how we might be guided by their example to foment a new movement, suited for social struggle in our own times. Here, she is, at least in part, responding to scholars who deemed her earlier work overly deterministic or economic. Jean does believe there is hope; it is possible, in her view, to mount a counterinsurgency against socially reproductive forces. But *Radical Possibilities*, perhaps like Jean herself, is not hopeful simply for the sake of being hopeful. It offers a call to action, demanding that we translate critical analysis into critical action. As Peter McLaren notes, "*Radical Possibilities* is a critical pedagogy for activating policy reform at the grassroots—something vitally needed at this time in history." Anyon (1997)

Jean's most recent work has involved a number of meaningful collaborations with her doctoral students in the PhD Program in Urban Education at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York. The principal example of this is the 2009 text, *Theory and Educational Research: Toward Critical Social Explanation*. Here, Jean, at the urging of

her students, reflects on her own personal journey through and with theory, from her early engagement with Marx to more recent encounters with theorists as diverse as Judith Butler, Arjun Appadurai and Chantal Mouffe. She then introduces readers to the work of six emerging scholars, each of whom provides a bridge between critical social theory and their own empirical research. Then, following Jean, these junior scholars reflect on their own, very recent, journeys through and with theory. Early reviews and feedback from professors who have adopted the text suggest that doctoral students and other new researchers have been encouraged by these personal narratives, and by the power of theory to inform scholars' empirical inquiry on a range of issues, from urban school discipline to the experiences of school "push-outs," and from Latina parent activism to the sexual cultural politics of LGBTQ youth. Ultimately, *Theory and Educational Research* reveals, as David Berliner states in his praise for the book, "that even though theoretical labor is challenging, it can also be exhilarating for the researcher, demanding personal creativity while building one's critical intellectual power."

In a recent *Harvard Educational Review* article, titled "What 'Counts' as Educational Policy?" (2005), Jean offers what she calls "notes toward a new paradigm" for educational policy analysis and activism. This is perhaps the clearest articulation and summation of Jean's intellectual contribution, and more, the passionate political commitments of her life, demonstrated in her nearly 30 years speaking to and with the educational research community, parents, teachers and community activists. We need a new paradigm, Jean insists, "one that promotes equity-seeking school change and that includes strategies to create conditions that will allow the educational improvements to take root, grow, and bear fruit in students' lives." Inquiry on educational policy takes us inside of schools, to be sure, but also demands critical investigation of the forces that create the social context within which young people—our children—seek to learn and improve their life chances.

Thank you for your consideration of Dr. Jean Anyon for the Division G Lifetime Achievement Award. We know there are several deserving scholars, many of whom are among Jean's closest friends. Please accept this as our humble but enthusiastic appeal for your recognition of Jean's work and what it has meant to so many of us.

Most sincerely,

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