

**Narrating Activist Education: Teachers' Stories
of Affecting Social and Political Change**

Blair Niblett

Faculty of Education

Lakehead University

Thunder Bay, ON

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ABSTRACT

The project was undertaken in order to gain a deeper understanding of the conceptual and practical relationships between education and activism. Of particular concern is how teachers perceive this landscape from social, cultural, political, and pedagogical perspectives. Underpinning this research is a presupposition that education has the potential to create a less oppressive and more socially just world.

Methodologically informed by narrative inquiry, ten participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format that encouraged story telling. The approach to the interviews was based in an understanding of stories as fluid and organic organisms. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of concepts as rhizomes was helpful in theorizing this approach. Participants were encouraged to share stories of their experiences as activist educators, the transcripts of each were parsed for relevant stories, following McCormack's (2000a, b) multiple lenses approach, and then curated into an experience narrative for each participant.

Three meaningful rhizomes were discerned from the body of experience narratives. Analysis of stories indicated that activist education may be understood as socially, politically, and pedagogically oriented. Social elements have to do with human relations, how people treat each other, and how they learn these ideas through education. Political elements refer to normative dimensions of activism and education: what decisions should be made in order to live well? Who should be included in making these decisions, and who is excluded? Pedagogical elements reflect the importance of experiences as vehicles for learning, and the potential for activism to be a source of rich learning experiences. These three strands are not strictly independent, but rather are

intricately intertwined, and even chameleonic at times; that is to say that activist education may be social at one moment, but transform into something more political or pedagogical at another moment according to the needs of the teachers and students and the contexts in which they find themselves.

The findings of this work are significant both for teachers who identify as activist educators, teachers who do not immediately see themselves as activist educators but who are interested in anti-oppressive and social justice education, and others who are interested in social justice and anti-oppressive education. The stories shared by the ten participants in this research illustrate a broad range of activist education approaches that range from simple and politically safe, to complex and politically contentious. Readers of the participants' stories and accompanying theorizing have an opportunity to better understand ways that education, as a process that changes students and teachers, can play a role in social change both in schools and the societies and cultures in which they are situated.

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CHAPTER I WHAT'S THE STORY WITH ACTIVIST EDUCATION?

Just a moment ago, as I was puzzling over the structure of this introductory chapter, one of my students poked her head into my office to say hello. She leaned on the doorframe as we chatted idly about workloads and frustration with the pace of the daily grind at our institution. “Are you a student as well?” she asked, noticing the unruly pile of books on my desk. I told her I was a PhD student. “What are you researching?” she enquired. I took a slow breath as I contemplated the most efficient tack to navigate her not uncomplicated question—neither wishing to interrupt the train of thought I had been on before her arrival—nor wanting to shrug off an interested student who had asked a question in earnest. “I’m looking into education and activism,” I stated plainly. She prompted further, seemingly aware of and unshaken by my attempted dodge. Another slow breath. I launch into my dissertation “elevator speech”:

education...
...activism
...theorize it this way
but what about?
...and...
betray the aims of...
And if...then
...implications for teaching

As I breathed again at the end of my explanation, she smiled broadly, and began her own story of an article she had been reading recently, about how some inner city citizens had started a program to engage teachers and students in learning advocacy skills about issues that were significant to them. Passion filled her voice as she reached the climax of her story, and exclaimed “that is the type of education I want to be involved with.” Our resonant excitement cooled to a simmer as she conveyed that,

overall, her teacher education experience didn't¹ give much credence to the kind of activist teaching that she was excited about. For a moment, we commiserated on our shared disappointment about the narrow focus of teacher education programs, and their connection to a school system that often fails to educate, but is instead a breeding ground for social and political apathy. As the weight of the daily grind bore down on us again, I asked if she could send me the articles she had mentioned; she agreed, and she pushed off my doorframe with salutations and continued along her way.

In the minute after her departure as I tried to re-board my train of thought, the significance of our brief encounter, which I had nearly truncated in my haste to be working, was apparent to me. It is moments like these—the in between spaces of teaching—that fuel my interest in education, and in activist education. It is in these kinds of moments where relationships can develop between teacher and student in ways that they often are not permitted to in most public education structures. It is the resonant quality of the student-teacher relationship that makes these the moments that I thrive on as a teacher, researcher, and activist. Fleeting as they may be, these moments are the foundation of my teacher-researcher-activist self.

Rationale: A Compelling “Why?”

The story that I have offered as an opening vignette to a dissertation on the relationship between activism and education is not especially radical, contrary to what one might expect of an opening to a dissertation on a seemingly radical topic, nor does

¹ Throughout the dissertation, I use contractions to foster a conversational style congruent with the narrative methodology that I will explain in Chapter 3 – Methodology: Thinking Narratively about Education and Activism.

it illustrate a pivotal example of what activist education *is* or can look like. Still, the story of my doorframe leaning student serves as an exemplar of the frustration that many teachers and students experience with regard to apathy that I suggest, with Sachs (2000, 2003a), results, at least in part, from the managerial ethos that pervades public schooling. In this section, I intend to elucidate why it is that activist education is significant by explaining how it offers the potential to counter the development of public apathy. Before attending to this task, though, I offer some understanding of what counts in my conception of activist education.

Activist Education: What's In, What's Out, and Why?

My definition of activist education is an intentional educational practice where participants engage in guided learning activities that help individuals to understand themselves as capable of effecting change for social and ecological justice. While there are many outlets for activist learning opportunities, my concept of activist education plays out within the context of public education where it is sometimes institutionally sanctioned, but at other times challenges the very power that institutions hold to sanction or condemn activism. As I envision it, the learning derived from activist education occurs through hands-on, minds-on, developmentally appropriate, and at least partially student directed activities. These activities are presented in ways that open a practice-field where students and teachers can enact democracy in the form of facilitated participation in, and sometimes resistance to, the figurative sociocultural machinery that constitutes human society on both a local and global level.

Activist education can be approached through a wide variety of different strategies. For instance, one teacher may engage in classroom discussion about contentious issues with her students and encourage students to take action on issues that are important to them. Another might create space for activism directly within their teaching; this might be through whole-class approaches (fundraisers, food drives, demonstrations, resistance campaigns), or through individual student projects. A different approach might involve integrating service learning into class work in ways that allow for reflecting on the socio-political undercurrents of service as well as the ways that service may or may not contribute to anti-oppressive social change. For instance, a class may donate their time at a food bank and reflect on the degree to which their labour may or may not facilitate individual and systemic change around poverty. Additionally, it *could* play out through co-curricular groups that are common in schools such as environment clubs, gay-straight alliances, multicultural associations, drama clubs, and year-book and prom committees. Of course, many of these groups function without ever having the character of activist education. The heart of doing activist education lies in the particular intention to develop competence in making a less oppressive and more socially just world, and not in the existence of any particular group itself.

When I speak with others about activism in education, the most common question is about the kind of radical left and right wing actions that might be allowed in schools if activist education is condoned. Many fear that, if activism is allowed within the bounds of public schools, then we must be prepared for any and all kinds of activism that might pop up along the political spectrum. They wonder if I would be accepting of

White-supremacy rallies, anti-gay posters in schools, or actions in support of corporate oil pipelines. As Warnock (1975) suggests, this anxiety may arise from a common assumption that teachers should be socio-politically neutral. This is a tricky problem, and some critics have gone so far as to suggest that I abandon the word “activism” to describe the kinds of education that I advocate because of its range of possible manifestations, and the troublesome ethical implications that some of those might bring. I am unwilling, however, to dissociate from activism because of my belief in the potential that activism within education has to further **social justice** and **anti-oppressive** environments, ideas, and actions. Social justice and anti-oppression are the moral anchors to which I attach my conception of activist education (and in the next subsection, I outline more fully what I mean by these terms). In choosing to anchor activist education in these ways, I also make a choice not to associate my vision of activist education with theories, ideologies, or actions that do not further social justice or anti-oppression. That is to say, I am not interested in instances of so-called right-wing, reactionary, conservative, orthodox activism, except insofar as the activist education that I advocate in this research serves to challenge, resist, or undermine such efforts.

In taking the stance that I do, I am not ignorant of Conservative political actions, or the problematic effects that they can have on implementing school programs in an environment that is “safe, inclusive, and accepting of all pupils” (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2013, s. 300.0.1.1), as is required by the Education Act in Ontario. Nor is it lost on me that being accepting of all pupils also means fostering learning environments that are welcoming for those students who would participate in Conservative kinds of

activism. However, fostering a welcoming environment for everyone does not mean creating opportunities for championing “traditional” values that may very well chip away at the ethic of inclusion that incorporates welcoming in the first place. In addressing the problem of ethical relativism, Ruitenberg (2013) calls for pluralism, which she describes as “the view that there is more than one set of values that is legitimate and worth pursuing, but not an infinite number” (p. 110). Pluralism is a tricky balance, but is requisite to an ethic of inclusion—be welcoming of everyone, but not so welcoming so as to dismantle one’s own ethos of welcome. In a diverse society, the idea of pluralism is important for implementing social justice and anti-oppressive education.

Social Justice & Anti-Oppressive Education

When I reference social justice, I mean equity for all people, following Crib and Gewirtz (2003), across a variety of variables all of which connect in one way or another to the realm of the social: distributive justice (how resources are shared), procedural justice (processes of social access), and relational justice (equity in political association) are all examples, but this is not an exhaustive list. Social justice is an important part of how I think about activist education. However, on its own, it is not a strong enough anchor. While equity is critical to activist pursuits, it has become too easy within modern culture to reference social justice or equity in ways that make it seem like something that is easy to achieve, or that simply by saying these words or claiming to be for the concepts they represent, that somehow equitable change will come about. One poignant example is the Delaware-based Christian anti-abortion group called *Prolife*

Social Justice, that claims to be “restoring the dignity of social justice” by “sharing the teachings of the church on social justice” (Prolife Social Justice, n. d.). Notably, the group’s name and website invoke the term social justice, but they provide no explanation of what they, or any church, might mean in using the term. This example shows a hijacking of the discourse of social justice in the service of a status quo that has and continues to marginalize people who do not or cannot adhere to the rigid norms set by social power brokers, otherwise known as those with social capital—traditionally—wealthy, White, heterosexual males (Carr, 2011b; Marginson, 2006).

In an effort to prevent such a hijacking of activist education, I position my thinking about social justice alongside theories of anti-oppressive education. According to Kumashiro (2000), anti-oppressive education seeks to “address the myriad ways in which racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression play out in schools” (p. 25). Naming these sources of oppression directly is important in education because it allows for the uncovering of oppressive histories that need to be more fully understood in order to be reconciled. As Kumashiro (2000) notes: “oppression originates in discourse, and in particular, in the citing of particular discourses, which frame how people think, feel, act, and interact. In other words, oppression is the citing of particular discourses, and the repetition of harmful histories” (p. 40). It is through the naming of specific oppressions and discussion of their histories that social justice educators can begin to enact real processes of social justice that unfold over time through intentional actions.

One example of immediate concern for Canadian society is the colonial legacy that continues to oppress First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. This example is cogent

because many would suggest that the social injustice faced by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis individuals is an historical relic and that achieving social justice is dependent on “moving on” into the future. First Nations activist, comedian, writer, and public intellectual Drew Hayden Taylor (2013, July) responds to such claims:

Truth be told, we’d love to get on with it if the past didn’t have such a strong effect on us in the present. Case in point, we are now into the second, third, and possibly fourth generation of people dealing with the trauma of residential schools. That’s just one example of the post-contact stress disorder (PCSD) that afflicts many communities today. It’s difficult to move on when history won’t let you. (p. 13)²

While Taylor’s comments are specific to the historical trauma experienced by Aboriginal people and communities even today, his sentiment might well be applied to other kinds of oppression, albeit in different ways and without minimizing the traumas of colonialism. For example, while LGBTQ youth in schools do not necessarily experience intergenerational trauma in the way that Aboriginal youth often do, a “Move on! We’re all equal now!” attitude may pervade as a form of resistance among some who view the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada as final victory over heterosexism (Conrad, 2014). This view, however, comes from a place of privilege and fails to account for the historical messaging that many LGBTQ individuals experience on a daily basis that tells them that they are less valuable than their heterosexual peers (Cook, 2007; Goldstein, Russell, & Daley, 2007). As another example of privileged “forward thinking” discourse, people taking up environmental activism may be pressured to believe that modern municipal recycling and composting programs

² I dispense with one particular aspect of APA style, and present bulleted lists and block quotations using single spacing. The intent of this choice is to produce a shorter document with better aesthetics.

represent big wins for environmentalism, while in fact these programs, while worthwhile, may actually increase energy consumption while providing consumers with a feel-good effect that further increases ecologically damaging levels of consumption (Leonard, 2010). The point is that gains for social and environmental justice are often construed as evidence that social injustice and environmental degradation are problems that have been conquered. When such ideas flourish in schools, it becomes easier to continue the business as usual (Ellsworth, 1988) approach to schooling that suggests that activism is something that's not needed in schools, or is outside the scope of what schools do. My purpose in this work is to suggest that education can, and should, be an opportunity for participation in the development of a more socially just, anti-oppressive world through activism.

Why Schools Need Activism, and How Activism Benefits from Being in Schools

Since I began work on this project in late 2010, a deluge of global and local events have transpired that iteratively remind me of the timeliness, nay, *urgency* of integrations between activism and education in the service of social justice and anti-oppressive ends. I offer a short overview of these events to frame my argument that contemporary schools need activism, and that activism can be better from having been introduced in schools:

- On December 17th, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, an underemployed street vendor in rural Tunisia set himself on fire after civil authorities confiscated the produce he was selling in a stall on the street in order to support himself. Bouazizi's suicide by self-immolation led to a relatively small protest of several hundred youth in the town of Sidi Bouzid (Reuters, 2010). These events sparked what came to be known as the **Arab Spring**, an activist uprising on a continental scale that led to mass protests of authoritarian governments across seventeen countries in the Arab world. The myriad protests led to regime changes in Tunisia, Egypt, and

Libya, and protests continue at the time of writing almost 3 years following Bouazizi's death (Blight, Pulham, & Torpin, 2012; Bowan, 2012).

- On July 13, 2011, inspired by the challenge to autocracy presented by the Arab Spring, the anti-consumer media outlet Adbusters (2011) posed a challenge to North Americans: "On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months. Once there, we shall incessantly repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices" (§4). Their call suggested a rough demand: "It's time for **DEMOCRACY NOT CORPORATOCRACY**" (§ 4-6, emphasis in original). The September 17th occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York City gave rise to a worldwide protest of economic subservience of the masses predicated on wealth accumulation of society's super-elite. **The Occupy Movement** spread to over 500 cities in the closing months of 2011, and resulted in raising significant awareness about a range of issues related to corporate imposition on societies (Occupy Together, n. d.).
- On May 5, 2012 climate watchdog 350.org garners worldwide support for their **connect the dots** campaign. Around the world, community sites of protest conduct rallies involving a large black dot; the point being to "connect the dots" to show that heavy weather incidents around the world are climate change related, and to emphasize that climate change is a current reality that needs to be acted on, not a future crisis that should be planned for (350.org, n. d.).
- In November 2012, four women in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan held a teach-in in protest of the federal government's omnibus Bill C-45 that threatened the sovereignty of Aboriginal Nations and weakens or removes legislative protections of the land and water in their traditional territories. The teach-in resulted in the creation of a Facebook page, and the Twitter hashtag #idlenomore. Largely through social media, **Idle No More** spawned dozens of protests across Canada and around the world, from rallies and marches to teach-ins and flash mobs. Two notable campaigns connected with Idle No More garnered significant public attention: a six-week hunger strike in December 2012 of Attawapiskat First Nation Chief Teresa Spence on a small island adjacent to Parliament Hill in Ottawa (Idle No More, n. d.), and a 1600-kilometre walk by a group of youth from their Cree community in northern Quebec to Parliament Hill in Ottawa in March 2013 with the goal of meeting the Prime Minister to discuss youth concerns about oppressive relations between Canadian and Aboriginal Nations (CBC News, 2013).
- On May 28, 2013 roughly 50 protesters camped out in order to prevent the demolition of a public park in **Istanbul, Turkey**. In response, local police forcibly evicted the demonstrators with tear gas and allegedly set fire to their encampment. This action sparked mass protests both in Istanbul and elsewhere

in Turkey against authoritarian policing and in support of free expression and assembly (2013 protests in Turkey, n.d).

- On February 26th, 2012, **Trayvon Martin**, a 17-year old Black male, was killed as he walked home from a convenience store by George Zimmerman, a neighbourhood watch patrol person. On July 13, 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder. While news of the case itself had already resulted in much public discourse around the injustice of racial profiling, the jury's decision sparked outrage in the United States and around the world, resulting in large-scale protests of oppressive race-relations in more than 100 cities on July 20, 2013. (Timeline, 2014; Williams, 2013).

As these campaigns against social and ecological injustice have played out on the global stage, scores of other local incidences have surely played out with minimal public attention through press coverage. Many of these may be of equal or greater social, cultural, and environmental import than the global activist phenomena that I have outlined above. These events illustrate the depth of the crisis that humanity is facing (G. Walton, personal communication, July 2013). It is a multifaceted crisis—one of democracy, of human rights, of liberty, of apathy, ecological survival, and of activism itself—and while neither the root nor the solution to this crisis is evident with full clarity, it is clearly evidenced through the variety of large scale activist campaigns offered above that activism is a critical pivot point on which the contemporary human story on a global scale turns. Still, despite the scale of, and passion behind, the exemplars provided above, these instances are a metaphorical “drop in the bucket” both in terms of the number of participants and immediate effects in curbing the contemporary neoliberal agenda that pervades the western world.

Working from my assertion above, a question arises: Given the ongoing and dire need for activism, what is the responsibility of public schools to include activism in both the content and processes of education? The notion of education often carries

democratic connotations (see, for example, Brighouse, 2006; Dewey, 1918; hooks, 1994, 2004; Noddings, 2005; Simpson, 2011). However, the practice of education within mandatory schooling frequently fails to deliver on promises of education as a democratic enterprise (Carr, 2011a; Giroux, 2007; McLaren, 1989). Indeed, relationships between education (as schooling, especially) and democracy are murky at best because the managerial logistics that tend to characterize modern schools, by accident and/or by design, better facilitate compliance with authority than citizenship, understood as participation in a process of deep democracy (Carr, 2011a).

The title of this section indicates that I will explicate some sort of “why” that justifies an integration of activism into education. Democracy, then, is my answer to the question of why education (and the world) needs activism (Carr, 2011a). I suggest that activist education is one means by which democracy might be infused into schooling to combat the growth of social apathy that largely characterizes typical journeys through modern schools, particularly in North America. I recognize that naming democratic values as an underlying rationale for this study places my work in somewhat of an academic minefield, given the flippant way that the word democracy is frequently used to describe any number of phenomena that a speaker wants others to believe are “good” (Carr, 2011a).

Further, I borrow Carr’s (2011a) conception of *thick democracy* in order to navigate this minefield and demonstrate that activist education, as I conceive of it herein, may not only contribute to the integrity of the concept of democracy, but also its successful praxis in schools and in wider society. Carr (2011a) describes democracy on a continuum from thin to thick; he postulates that references to democracy are thin

when they tend towards formal actions like voting or running for election, and thick when they tend to focus on ongoing lived participation in a fair and just society. Carr's (2011a) conceptualization is not a dichotomy, but it speaks to tendencies. This is critical because it takes the concept of democracy off a pedestal of perfection and acknowledges that whether a particular use of the term democracy is thicker or thinner, it always needs critical appraisal. Importantly for this study, thin democracy is only peripherally connected to education. In thinner democratic systems, education is separate from democracy, often teaching about it at an arm's length in order to elicit "comfort and reassurance rather than questioning complicity, change, and power" (Carr, 2011a, p. 199). Conversely, thicker democracy is characterized by a more intimate connection with education, founded on the idea that "Education is linked to society, and should seek to understand it, and in some cases, to transform it" (p. 198). I suggest that this transformative democratic element can be achieved through participation in, and an understanding of, activism that is developed through activist education, and that making this approach more central to what it means to be educated in a public school can help to turn the tide of apathy that seems to develop out of the managerial, neoliberal ethos of most modern western schools. In Chapter 2, I return to the concept of democracy and democratic education to offer a deeper perspective on its relationship to activist education. In the next section of this chapter, I offer a conceptualization of activist education that follows from the preceding rationale.

Activist Education

The central concept of my dissertation research, *activist education*, is a compound concept made up of *activist* and *education*. The term might also be constructed as educational activism, or educative activism. However, because I approach this research primarily as an educator, and schools (specifically, the educators who teach in schools) are the main vehicle for education that I explore in this project, it makes sense for me to position education as the central concept, and activist as a qualifier. In making this choice, I do not intend to subordinate activism, but rather to highlight that this project is fundamentally about the nature of education, and the possibilities that it can offer as a catalyst for activism.

When I say *activism* in this research, I mean the *ideas* and *actions* that unfold in a particular *environment* where a person or people are responding to the ethical and political circumstances that they experience as they build and live in communities together (supported, for instance through Ayers, 1998; Carr, 2013; Dewey, 1918, 1938; Freire, 1970; hooks, 2004). Thinking about activism this way is somewhat complex, but this complexity is necessary to point out that activism is not *only* about carrying out action in protest, but also importantly includes the thinking that can generate ideas for change, and the environments in which those ideas and actions are situated.

Likewise, when I use the term *education* in this research, I mean, drawing from Peters (1966), a constellation of processes (most notably, teaching and learning) wherein participants willingly develop or redevelop worthwhile knowledge or understandings which they can apply to problems and interests that they encounter as they navigate and engage with others in the world. This process of knowledge

development necessarily manifests as experiences within particular environments (Dewey, 1918); these experiences and environments are both influenced by and can have influence on the prevailing politics and ethics of a community (Freire, 1970). An important qualifier in this explanation of education is the requirement of willing participation, a tricky criterion given that schooling is compulsory for, and often resisted by, so many. As a criterion for education, I understand willingness as a reminder to educators that even while students may be obliged to attend school, that they will only really be open to learning if teachers invite them to engage in education, rather than coerce or manipulate students into learning. This means that education, in its purest form, cannot be an imposition, either in favor of any status quo politics, or towards any particular vision for change. At the same time, it cannot be ethically or politically neutral because it is always situated within particular cultural politics. To navigate this paradox, I suggest that educators can offer students opportunities to understand and evaluate a variety of controversial perspectives on issues of their own choosing, and that participation in activism within educational contexts is one way to achieve this kind of engagement.

Activism, as the qualifier component of “activist education,” is a collection of sub-components. Acknowledging that at least three components—environments, ideas, and actions—are all a part of activism opens a broad range of possibilities for what it can mean to be an activist. For instance, an activist might be someone who takes action with the intention of making change in the world, asserting personal agency, or resisting injustice. But, an activist might also be someone whose focus is on generating ideas for how people can live in better alignment of social justice principles, and sharing those

ideas in ways that lead to implementation. Or, an activist may even be someone who is skilled at creating environments where ideas and actions for anti-oppressive change can take shape. While an individual may choose to focus their activist efforts in one of these areas, I understand environments, ideas, and actions as intimately interconnected domains that are mutually reinforcing, such that work on one domain may travel into another, either intentionally, or unintentionally.

Whether their focus is on fostering activism-friendly environments, developing ideas, or taking specific actions, activists challenge the ethics and politics that define their communities, societies, and cultures. Such a challenge inevitably touches ethical ideals, and the power dynamics that influence civic decision making, along with the cultural assumptions that shape the ethos in which particular groups of people live their day-to-day lives.

While activism and education can be strongly compatible, some design parameters are needed so that activism does not infringe on the kinds of independent thinking that are both a process and a desired outcome of education, and likewise that activist education is not coopted by status quo politics. Although education is not value free, it also does not embrace any and all value-laden activities; for example, manipulation, coercion, and indoctrination are typically not embraced as educational (Hare, 2013). At the same time as activism may require particular constraints to operate within education, education must also be understood as implicitly political if activism is to be genuine when conducted within educational contexts (Carr, 2011a; Kincheloe, 2008). Here, I return to the elements I outlined above: environments, ideas, and actions, which I suggest are important for both activism and education. A central

criterion of activism is that it must be directly relevant to the cultural politics of a community (Harden, 2013). Therefore, to be fertile ground for activism, education must be presented in ways such that its environments, ideas, and actions are directly responsive to social justice and anti-oppressive concerns within a local cultural ethics, and/or politics, and should include students as decision-makers when choices need to be made about what should be learned, and how learning should be approached. This suggestion does not indicate that students should be “thrown the keys,” and thus be given full control of, or responsibility for, curricular decisions without guidance and supervision. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that if students are viewed as agents in their own education rather than as passive objects to be acted upon, then some level of student input into what is to be learned and how it may be delivered is appropriate (Hern, 2014; Ricci, 2007; Wink, 2009).

In order for students to participate as decision-makers around activist issues within education, educators should create opportunities for genuine reflection that allow students and educators alike to take inventory of their own privilege and oppression (Bishop, 1994; McIntosh, 2012; Nnawulezi et al., 2013; Young, 2000). This process of interrogating the ways that each of us experiences privilege and oppression is needed to bring legitimacy to activist education by discouraging activist endeavors based in trivial claims to oppression. Consider, for example, activism based in the idea of “reverse racism” or “heterophobia.” These are cases where dominant groups make claims to oppression that arise largely out of a lack of effort on the part of group members to critically reflect on their own privilege. Worse, they may engage in that reflection, and then claim oppression because of a fear of losing privilege currently

enjoyed. If these design considerations are not attended to, introducing activism could mean that students are forced into activism that is not meaningful or relevant to the context of their lives, or that the activism does not reflect a commitment to social justice and anti-oppression. Both of these prospects represent educationally dubious outcomes.

Conversely, in order for activism to be educationally appropriate, the environments, ideas, and actions that constitute an activist scenario must not be so inflexible or dogmatic that the kinds of critical reflection and questioning that are crucial for education are stifled. As Warnock (1975) points out, a teacher can't and shouldn't be neutral, but neither should a teacher be dogmatic. Hare (2013) suggests open-mindedness as a criterion that strikes a balance on this continuum. That is to say that, while activism, even within education, may be radical, it must also be presented in ways that allow for the honest consideration and analysis of a plurality of perspectives—a hallmark of education (Bigelow, 1998; Hare, 2013; Jensen & Schnack, 1997; Ruitenberg, 2013; Stocker, 2002). Here, a paradox emerges between the overtly political demands of activism and the boundaries that prevent education from becoming indoctrination. Navigating this paradox is a core praxis of activist education that I explore in this research.

Research Questions

Working from the explanations of the main concepts introduced in this chapter, I offer general research questions that function as starting points in an exploratory and

descriptive study. These questions examine the relationships between education and activism:

- What relationships exist between education and activism? What qualities characterize their convergences?
- In what ways, and under what conditions, can activism add richness and depth to education?
- How is the relationship between education and activism conceptualized and practiced by teachers who identify as activist educators?

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the focus of my doctoral research by offering a rationale for the study based in a justification of social justice and anti-oppressive education. I explained that my understanding of social justice meant equality for everyone through equitable access to resources, participation in processes, and recognition of agency (Crib & Gewirtz, 2003), and I connected my ideas about social justice to anti-oppressive education, which brings an analysis of power relations in education and activism to the foreground. Next, using examples from current events, I explained why I think that activism and education should have opportunities for integration, and, finally, offered a thumbnail sketch of what I mean by activist education, working from what I suggest are its three main elements: environments, ideas, and actions. In Chapter 2, I expand on this three-element explanation of activist education as I review the relevant scholarship.

CHAPTER 2 CONCEPTUALIZING ACTIVIST EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Building on the introduction to the study presented in Chapter 1, this chapter provides an analytical survey of literature related to activist education, unfolding in three parts. In Part I, an analysis of the three-element understanding of activist education that I introduced in Chapter 1 (environments, ideas, and actions) outlines a theoretical heuristic within which this research is situated. The heuristic creates a metaphorical umbrella under which the second part of the chapter is sheltered. In the second part, I undertake a thematic review of literature suggested by and relevant to my three-element understanding of activist education; this section expounds details and interconnections between a series of themes, or orienting perspectives, that arise from the heuristic developed in the first part. In the third part, I offer exemplars from the literature that demonstrate specifically what activist education looks like, and offer an argument for the significance of the current study in relation to the literature on activist education. The literature reviewed here was compiled over a period of six years between 2009 and 2014. The base of literature began from pieces I had been assigned to read in coursework, from which I culled reference lists for other relevant books and articles. Searches of databases included ERIC, Professional Development Collection, Education Full Text, and CBCA Complete. Search terms used included combinations of *activism*, *activist*, and *education*, and other related terms. I also made significant use of the Google Scholar search engine, with a particular focus on the *cited by* feature which allows for finding newer material by authors who have been referenced in older articles.

In each part of this chapter, the theories and practices discussed represent traditions of activism: in this way, activist education is not a new approach to progressive education, but rather a reflection of the genealogy that precedes it.

Part 1: Setting the Context of the Literature Review: Environments, Ideas, and Actions

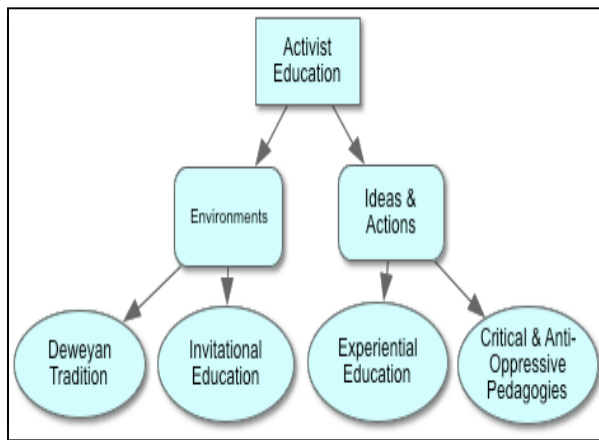


Figure 1 - Outline of Literature Review Part 1

In Chapter 1, I indicated that at least 3 key components make up activist education, these being environments, ideas, and actions. Here, I offer development of these three elements in order to contextualize these ideas within the social justice and anti-oppressive lens from which I undertake this research. In other words,

this section highlights the contours of my conception of activist education in order to draw out the themes by which the later thematic review of literature is organized. Because this section integrates a variety of complex ideas, Figure 1 offers a visual to clarify basic relationships among the concepts.

Environments

My use of the term *environments* refers specifically to educational environments. This term is complex, because it is related to physical environments, and also “the environment” in an ecological sense. These other senses of the word can both have

impacts on an educational environment; for example, the quality, design and upkeep of a built environment, or the attitudes that people hold about the ecological environment, necessarily shape the character of an educational environment (Orr, 2002). While these other senses of the term environment are relevant, my focus is on educational environments, and other senses of the word are considered through an educational lens. My choice to use the term environment rather than another (context, for example) lies in the Deweyan tradition from which it originates. Dewey (1918) assayed that teachers never act directly upon students, but only on the environment that the students and teacher share. For Dewey:

The only way in which adults consciously control the kind of education the immature get is by controlling the environment in which they act, and hence think and feel. We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. (p. 18)

Working from this notion, I position environment as the most critical component of the conception of activist education that I put forward here. By accepting Dewey's premise that an environment is the critical factor in the delivery of education, it follows that other elements of activist education, such as ideas and actions, are dependent on the learning environment for their richness and depth. This does not mean that environment is of greater import than ideas or actions in constituting activist education, but that environments hold some primacy because, as students and teachers come together, they must first interface within a learning environment before the teaching and learning of ideas and actions can begin. In a longer-term sense, I argue there is a reciprocal relationship among environments, ideas, and actions because the activist ideas and actions that unfold within a learning environment cannot help but contribute to the environment itself. However, some kind of environment typically exists prior to

ideas and actions becoming an active part of the educative experience (Frank, 2004; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Orr, 2002).

Deweyan learning environments. Activist education, I argue, is cultivated by a particular kind of learning environment, and these environments are designed and operated on by teachers and students enacting particular kinds of cultural politics that are rooted in social justice and anti-oppressive pedagogies (Kumashiro, 2004; McLaren, 2009). Regrettably for the practice of activist education, the predominant discourse in modern western education has largely departed from the kind of Deweyan thinking about learning environments described above. Whereas Dewey encouraged educators to think about designing learning environments as vehicles for delivering curricular outcomes, the focus that I see playing out in contemporary teacher education is one where environments are to be managed and controlled by teachers, as a necessary precursor to content delivery, but not necessarily as an integral part of teaching and learning (see, for instance: Levin, Nolan, Kerr, & Elliot, 2012). I want to be careful here not to establish a false dualism between Dewey's concept of environment and a more managerial ethos; effective educators need strategies for managing student behaviours and misbehaviours within the environments where their lessons unfold. It is noteworthy that Dewey (1918) himself used the word *controlling* to convey what he expected teachers should do with learning environments. The key difference in understandings of controlling learning environments that I see between a Deweyan perspective and what is common in contemporary schooling is that of experience.

For Dewey, experience is at the heart of education, and it is conveyed through environments. Dewey argues that all kinds of learning environments convey experience—that a human interacting in a particular environment necessarily collects experience in a neurological sense because they cannot help but do otherwise. For Dewey (1938), though, while experience is the basis of education, not just any experience can be called educational—even and especially those that happen within the institution of schooling. He writes:

The belief that all education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative.... Traditional education offers a plethora of examples of experiences of the kind just mentioned. It is a great mistake to suppose, even tacitly, that the traditional schoolroom was not a place in which pupils had experiences.... The experiences which were had, by pupils and teachers alike, were largely of a wrong kind. How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them? (pp. 25-26)

An important take away from this passage is that, from Dewey's (1938) perspective, while there may be learning as a result of a particular schooling environment, it cannot be assumed that that all learning is educational. For example, if because of poor design, an experience “has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (p. 25) then it is mis-educative because “possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted” (p. 26). For instance, a teacher who takes a group of students to a climate change protest may be mis-educating because early cognitive development, weak understanding of the issue at hand, or lack of preparedness for the events likely to transpire at a climate change protest may result in students being unable to process the experience in educative ways. In this scenario, students may be alienated from the intended learning outcomes. This caution does not preclude attending protests as a

kind of activist education, but suggests that careful planning is needed to ensure that specific activist experiences are beneficial experiences for the particular students who will participate. Dewey argues that educators, as designers of learning environments, should make every effort to ensure that their curriculum design, including planning and implementation, and subsequent reflection, delivers a quality of experience that, while they may or may not be of immediate enjoyment to the student, serve over time to invite further experiences that are richer and of greater depth (Dewey, 1938). In his own words: “The central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (p. 28).

For activist educators, then, *just doing anything* for the sake of having experiences is not intentional pedagogy (Breunig, 2005; Jickling, 2009; Simpson, 2011; Smith, Knapp, Seaman, & Pace, 2011), which is the interaction of teaching and learning (Wink, 2011). Wink’s definition has the benefit of being clear and succinct, but the often uncritical use of the term pedagogy within the discipline of education requires some explanation. Literally denoting the leadership of children (Smith, 2012), the term has nebulous uses referring variously to the art, science, or wisdom of teaching (Murphy, 2008). While it is outside the scope of this work to dwell on a definition of pedagogy (a dissertation in and of itself), for my purposes in outlining and understanding activist education, pedagogy goes beyond the practical and logistical concerns of program delivery from teacher to student, and importantly includes difficult to articulate “wisdom of practice” (Murphy, 2008) that might include things like attitudes, beliefs,

and professional identities that underlie the more practical aspects of teaching usually referred to as pedagogy.

Returning to Dewey's (1938) explanation of educative experiences, *just doing anything* isn't good pedagogy without an understanding of how that *doing* connects to the specific outcome desired within the pedagogical positioning of the teacher. Specific and contextual design before, during, and after a learning experience is needed in order to facilitate the kind of meaningful involvement (Haras, Bunting, & Witt, 2006) that would qualify an experience as educative in the Deweyan sense. Haras (2003) defines meaningful involvement as voluntary participation in a purposeful and challenging activity from which personal satisfaction is derived. While the clause of voluntary participation is tricky in the context of school programs, which almost always have mandatory attendance and assessment requirements, the notion of meaningful involvement can still be useful in education insofar as educators are capable of designing learning experiences that transcend obligatory attendance and tap into students' potential to learn. To return to a point alluded to in Chapter 1, meaningful involvement is of critical importance for activist education because students must not be forced into activism. Rather, they must come to it by invitation. In this way, it behooves activist educators to design activist experiences that invite students' participation, and are not coercive in nature. This, I suggest, is a contingent feature of an activist educational learning environment, and it is well described in the literature (e.g.: Giroux, 2007; Hare, 2013; Peters, 1966), although not with specific reference to activist education. In the next section, I make such connections as I review conceptions of invitational education.

Invitational educational environments. In summarizing the scholarship known as invitational education, Frank (2004) asserts that, “there is a ubiquitous mood in our education system that is uninviting” (p. 14). While she refers specifically to American public schooling, I argue that a similar mood pervades Canadian and other systems as well. Looking back to the story of my doorframe leaning student introduced in Chapter 1, I believe that the mood Frank (2004) discusses, at least in part, underlies the frustration which she and I expressed about the focus of the *daily grind* of educational institutions (or, *business-as-usual*, as Ellsworth, 1988, expressed it), and how their over-focus on bureaucratic concerns and privileging of traditional learning theories to the exclusion of sociocultural perspectives on education (Oakes & Lipton, 1999) can choke out, or marginalize, possibilities for activist education (Marshall & Anderson, 2009). I argue that activist education, as I envision it, can work against the uninviting ethos of schooling, and, reciprocally, that activist education is dependent on inviting environments for its successful functioning. Purkey and Novak’s (1984) use of “inviting” transcends the common “welcoming” connotation attached to the word. For the founders of invitational education, the term connects with its Latin root *invitare*, meaning “to offer something beneficial for consideration” (p. 2). Accordingly, these authors name invitational education as “the process by which people are cordially summoned to realize their relatively boundless potential” (p. 3).

Purkey and Novak’s (1984; 1998; 2008) approach, then, encourages educators to create learning environments that lead to transformational education experiences. An important caveat of this transformational reach is that the nature of the

transformation cannot be *a priori* decided, but must be continuously re/negotiated *in situ* between the learner and educator in consultation with stakeholder parties. They further describe invitational education as: “an evolving theory of communicative practice” (1998, p. 38). They go on to say that, “Building on the idea that people live in and through the communicative process, it [invitational education] stresses that people’s identities are informed by the messages they perceive, and formed by the messages they extend” (p. 38). Invitational education, then, offers much to think about when it comes to educational actors, and the environments they inhabit. The nature of messaging perceived and extended by any individual is naturally informed by the environment in which the person is situated, and is continually reshaped by the quality of the continuous messaging among students, teachers, other actors, and institutions that constitute the process of education (Purkey & Novak, 1984). Underlying Purkey and Novak’s (1998) development of invitational education theory is the assumption that “a market-driven emphasis on consumerism and competition has become the dominant educational ethic” (p. 37). They further argue that:

Under these economic and bureaucratic pressures, an ethic of caring and democratic educational practice has been overshadowed by bell-shaped curves, labeling and sorting of students, teaching to the test, business approaches to schooling, and a continual mandate to do more with less and do it better. (p. 37)

In the face of such an uninviting culture of schooling, Purkey and Novak’s (1998) theorizing at once offers a critique of the kind of bureaucratic environments that dominate schooling and suggests an alternative vision for change that I argue can be achieved in part through the acceptance and implementation of activist education opportunities. I suggest that a role of invitational theory within activist education is to mitigate potential for coercion or indoctrination, and champion the learning potential

that can come from activist experiences. Through its commitment to the empowerment and humanization of all parties in an educational experience, invitational education theory serves as a reminder to activist educators that the educational environments they aspire to must allow students to make guided choices as self-directive participants in their own education. This alternative vision is rooted in an ethical stance comprised of five principles: respect, trust, optimism, care, and intentionality (Purkey & Novak, 1997, 2008).

To explain further, *respect* positions people at the centre of education, and presumes that all people are valuable, and should be treated thusly. Respectful educators acknowledge that as valuable, capable, responsible members of a community, people who are affected by important decisions should have opportunities for some level of input on those decisions. In this way, respectful education demonstrates a democratic ethos by leaning toward *acting with* students, and not *acting on* them (Purkey & Novak, 2008). *Trust* means that the process in which teachers and students interact can only be invitational if it is characterized by trustworthy attributes such as reliability, genuineness, truthfulness, good intent, competence, and knowledge (Arceneaux, 1994); the greater or lesser degree that these characteristics are present within an educational environment will impact the degree to which theories of invitational education become actionable. Like trust, *care* reminds educators of the kinds of environments that are necessary to maximize educational ends. In invitational education, and in activist education by extension, care is not an abstract concept but rather a conduit by which the teachers' and students' dispositions of "warmth, empathy, and positive regard" (Purkey & Novak, 2008, p. 16) are transformed into actions that

further aims of social justice in the communities in which the actors are situated.

Optimism concerns a realistic and hopeful approach to education, whereby all people are believed to have untapped potential of some kind, and that educative environments must be designed to help identify and tap into that hidden richness. Lastly, *intentionality* gives invitational education a design mentality whereby every choice made is made with invitational messaging in mind.

As educators internalize an invitational ethical stance, it becomes more likely that the unconscious choices and spur-of-the-moment decisions that need to be made as a practicing teacher will reflect invitational principles; for instance, faced with the need to make a quick decision, educators versed in invitational practices may take momentary pause to assess what is being asked of them in relation to the invitational principles before acting (Stavros & Torres, 2006). This is the *how* of invitational education. It allows for the other four assumptions to become actionable.

Operating from this intentional design, educators can work to increase the human potential of all participants to greater degrees than might otherwise be possible (Purkey & Novak, 1998, 2008). Each of the principles of invitational education, in one way or another, challenge orthodoxies held about the ways that public education should operate. For instance, extending degrees of choice or input to students under the principle of respect can have many logistical barriers. For those unable or unwilling to find ways that public education can change, even in small ways, it is easy to reject invitational education, and other principles that underlie activist education as simply unrealistic within public education systems. For activist educators, though, principles such as Purkey and Novak's (2008) are not all or nothing propositions (Niblett, 2008).

In my experiences, doing activist education within conservative institutions may require small gestures that seem like tokenism, and may well be. However, these token changes, while only of small significance in the moment, may coalesce toward more noteworthy change through the continued efforts of teachers and students (Weston, 2008).

Crosscutting Purkey and Novak's (2008) invitational education principles is a focus on developing human potential. This is a point of resonance between invitational theory and activist education. In earlier work (Niblett, 2008), I drew on appreciative inquiry (see Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005), to suggest that activism could be joined with education in ways that do not have to be seen as confrontational or adversarial, and where students could choose their participation in activist endeavors in order to suit their personal interests and level of comfort. Appreciative approaches to activist education facilitates an environment where teachers and students collaborate and negotiate avenues for activism that are relevant to students, respectful of all parties, pedagogically dynamic, and integrated within the curricular frameworks in which the learning environment is situated (Cunningham, Riverstone, & Roberts, 2005; Stavros & Torres, 2006).

In addition to the element of environments, the two other elements of ideas and actions make up my understanding of what constitutes activist education. To reiterate, these three elements are not mutually exclusive; they are distinct in some ways but integrated in many others. I chose to explicate the characteristics of educational environments that foster activist education first because I think that a carefully designed and implemented learning environment is a precursor, or incubating factor,

for the kinds of actions and ideas that can be called activist education. I have chosen to review literature that informs my thinking about ideas and actions jointly, because where both education and activism as concepts are concerned, I do not think, following Breunig (2005), that it is appropriate to separate cognitive and affective elements that make up ideas from the embodied and lived elements that make up actions.

Ideas and Actions

Central to the relationship between ideas and actions is the notion of praxis. Breunig (2005) asserts that praxis “starts with an abstract idea (theory) or an experience, and incorporates reflection upon that idea or experience and then translates it into purposeful action. Praxis is reflective, active, creative, contextual, purposeful, and socially constructed” (p. 111). This conception of praxis is useful for my three-element heuristic of activist education (environments, ideas, actions) because while Breunig calls upon reflection, action, creativity, and purpose, her definition also references context and social construction, which link to the element of environments reviewed in the previous section. Thus, her conception of praxis supports my assertion of the interconnected nature of the three elements by which I constitute activist education.

Breunig’s (2005) theorizing of praxis draws mutually on the discourses of critical pedagogies and experiential education; she identifies that both discourses share a core assumption, and indeed goal, that education should aim to “develop a more socially just world” (p. 107). Her assertion of this goal is supported by both Itin’s (1999) and Kincheloe’s (2004) suggestion that the enterprise of education pivots on its ability

to catalyze or squelch critical questioning. Her philosophy of critical experiential education through praxis purports to tip the scales toward critical questioning through reflective learning experiences. Working from this same core assumption, I position praxis as a driving process in the enactment of activist education. Through a core praxis of iterative actions (small and large) infused with reflection on learning, activist education is able to maintain a hybrid identity of being both activist and educational. In being activist, it is political, community oriented, and focused toward a future framed by social justice principles. Being educational, it is framed around dynamic learning about issues that are important within the groups of people who assemble to engage together (Peters, 1966) at the same time as promoting an understanding of the limits of knowing, particularly those limits that might be imposed by the contextuality and situatedness of the specific activist experiences with whom a group or individuals might engage.

Breunig's (2005) model of praxis is founded on her engagement with the Freireian tradition of critical pedagogy. Freire's (1970) conceptualization of praxis has had significant influence on the academic discipline of education; he writes:

It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action: nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis. (p. 65)

Freire's words have had a significant scholarly impact³, but as Breunig points out, scholarly influence may not directly shift teaching practices for many educators or its

³ A Google Scholar inquiry indicates that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is cited in more than 40,000 other documents.

influence on practice may be stifled by other forces that protect status quo arrangements in education systems. For example, Sachs (2000, 2003a, b) notes a trend toward increased central control of education systems through the development of managerial frameworks of teacher professionalism. These kinds of frameworks typically conjure professional dispositions such as trust in a bureaucratic fiduciary sense rather than the more relational sense that I portray as constituting activist education (see also Bauman, 1993; Monchinski, 2010; Noddings, 2005; Purkey & Novak, 2008). The bureaucratic vision of trust in educators puts teachers on a high and narrow pedestal, and being placed in such a position frightens many teachers away from activist praxis because of the disciplinary risks of a “fall from grace” from the very public pedestal on which the teaching profession has been placed (Marshall & Anderson, 2009). Despite these anxieties, activist education persists, perhaps because of many teachers’ deep values related to equity, student agency, and justice as shown through dispositions of democracy, hope, and care. While these constructs are central to my thinking about activist education, they also need to be problematized for their potential to cultivate apathy and complacency rather than activist praxis (in Part II of this chapter, I undertake just such a problematizing analysis).

In the next two sections, I offer relevant genealogies of the discourses of critical pedagogy and experiential education on which Breunig (2005) bases her concept of praxis. Through review of these literatures, I position praxis as an interplay of idea and action within educational environments, and argue that this conception is the hinge on which activist education functions.

Critical pedagogical praxis. The contemporary global discourse of critical pedagogy finds its roots in Brazil, specifically in the work and pedagogy of Paulo Freire, typically considered the grandparent of critical pedagogical discourse (Kincheloe, 2008). He was an adult educator and social activist who was exiled by the Brazilian government of the mid-1960s for conducting a literacy campaign for impoverished rural people of Brazil (Apple, Gandin, & Hypolito, 2001). While Freire's work reflects the 1960s Brazilian context and should not be uncritically transplanted as a whole to contemporary North American contexts, the broad concepts of love, hope, and freedom that underpin Freire's pedagogy are useful for thinking about many contemporary educational problems. Central to Freire's project was the development of not only literacy skills, but the capacity to understand one's situation within the power dynamics that constitute societies and the world, and to use such a critical consciousness (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Kincheloe, 2007) to work for the emancipation of both the oppressed and the oppressors (Apple, Gandin, & Hypolito, 2001). Freire (2001) called this "reading the world and... reading the word" (p.149), and noted:

The act of reading cannot be explained as merely reading words, since every act of reading words implies a previous reading of the world and a subsequent reading of the world. There is a permanent movement back and forth between "reading" reality and reading words—the spoken word too is our reading of the world. We can go further, however, and say that reading the word is not only preceded by reading the world, but also by a certain form of writing or rewriting it. In other words, of transforming it by means of conscious practical action. For me, this dynamic movement is central to literacy. (p. 149)

Here, the dynamic reciprocity of idea and action that constitutes the praxis of Freire's pedagogy are highlighted, and further, that the "rewriting" of the world—a gesture to activism, is implicit in the doing of education. In my estimation, this premise is the overarching offering of a Freireian vision of education to the ongoing project of critical

pedagogical praxis, which supports the kinds of transformative teaching that I call activist education.

The primary critical pedagogical principle drawn from Freire's "reading the world, reading the word" conception of education is that of *conscientization*, or critical consciousness-raising. (Freire, 1970; 2001) Perhaps the easiest way to understand Freire's notion of conscientization is to position it in opposition to the outcome of social reproduction that dominates contemporary schooling. McLaren (2009) explains this as:

A process of understanding how subjectivities are produced. [Schooling] should be a process of examining how we have been constructed out of the prevailing ideas, values, and worldviews of the dominant culture.... Teaching and learning should be a process of *inquiry*, of critique; it should be a process of *constructing*, of building a social imagination that works within a language of hope. If teaching is cast in the form of what Henry Giroux refers to as a 'language of possibility,' then a greater potential exists for making learning relevant, critical, and transformative. (p. 80, emphasis in original)

McLaren's vision positions schools in a dynamic relationship with the communities in which they are situated, and stands as a clarion call for a different understanding of how education functions as a social and cultural engine. Such understandings are at times invoked in the discourses of contemporary public schooling (Macedo, 2007), mostly in the form of sloganized promotional language. In my estimation, though, these policy campaigns (for example, the Ontario Ministry of Education's *Growing Success*, 2010, and *Learning for All*, 2011, policy documents) are rarely implemented in ways that fully live up to their names because of oppressive internal and external conditions that are placed on public schooling.

Through both formal and informal processes that intentionally or unintentionally protect traditional practices, the social and cultural status quo are maintained by what Freire calls banking models of education (1970). Banking

education is characterized by ritual one-way transfer of knowledge where, according to Freire (1970), students are: “receptacles to be filled by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles allow themselves to be filled the better students they are⁴” (p. 72). In describing banking education, I want to be careful not to make it synonymous with direct, or didactic, teaching. At times, it may be necessary to use didactic teaching strategies, and these approaches to instruction may be totally appropriate. Along with Strike (2000), I acknowledge that teachers may need to direct student learning at times, especially when students aren’t in a position to know where to begin learning in ways that will help them become educated. The pedagogical caveat that Strike (2000) places on this endorsement of teacher direction is that it must be used as a vehicle for moving students’ thinking to places where they have greater capability for independent critical thought and action. Banking education, on the other hand, is the proliferation of didactic methods to the exclusion of other student-centred approaches, with the intent or outcome of alienating students from the process of education. By inviting students to engage in community-based activist projects, activist education seeks to overcome the limitations of the banking model as students and teachers collaborate to understand and make change around community problems that are, as McLaren (2009) puts it, “fundamentally tied to a struggle for a qualitatively better life for all through the construction of a society based on non-exploitative relations and social justice” (p. 62).

⁴ Freire’s words here gender teaching inappropriately. More generally, his work is characterized by sexist use of language. hooks (1994) notes that while sexism in Freire’s critical pedagogy needs critical analysis, this deficit need not spoil the valuable tools for emancipatory pedagogy that Freire’s work offers. Freire was welcoming of hooks’ critical feedback, and adjusted his later work accordingly.

Fish (2008), however, problematizes such social justice pedagogies. He suggests that such community engaged approaches to education violate educational aims because they digress from traditional understandings of the purposes and goals of academia, which Fish (2008) explains as: “to (1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that they didn’t know much about before; and (2) equip those same students with the analytical skills that will allow them to move confidently within those traditions, and to engage in independent research should they choose to do so” (p. 18).

A problem that I identify with Fish’s (2008) critique of pedagogies of praxis is that it presumes that it is possible and preferable for pedagogy to remain neutral to, and objective about, the specific content being taught. In refuting this suggestion, I adopt Kumashiro’s (2004) perspective that there is no dualism between oppressive-education and non-oppressive education, but rather a complex continuum between them where there is no neutral ground. That is to say, education can inscribe status-quo situations of oppression by ignoring them or disguising them through a supposed neutral stance, or it can actively work toward the elimination of oppressive conditions through a commitment to ways of knowing that acknowledge a basic moral impulse that tends to orient human behaviour toward anti-oppressive actions (Bauman, 1993). Much of the time, it does both of these things simultaneously, as teachers’ and students’ efforts at enacting socially just education are, of course, imperfect (Kumashiro, 2004). The important work of doing anti-oppressive education, then, lies not in *arriving* at a mythical anti-oppressive place, but in continually journeying and reassessing the journey’s often non-linear trajectory (Kumashiro, 2000). These reassessments are

necessarily ethical reflections—check-ins to negotiate what a commitment to anti-oppressive ethics looks like within a particular group of people, and to assess the congruence between ethical visions, actions played out in reality, and intentions for future action that move us to new places. The new places are not pre-ordained as part of the ethical visions, but rather negotiated among the players within the praxis of anti-oppressive education. For Kumashiro: “we are not trying to *move to a better place*; rather, we are just trying to move. The aspect of oppression that we need to work against is the repetition of sameness” (p. 46). He elaborates that setting too firm a direction on the journey toward anti-oppression would only result in “a different and foretold way *to be*, and thus, a different way to be stuck in a reified sameness” (p. 46, emphasis in original). In eschewing a pre-set destination for the work of anti-oppressive education, Kumashiro’s (2000) perspective aligns with my call for a reflective approach to activist education. In earlier work, I argued that:

Dialogue initiated as an integral part of activist processes in education can provide a space for students and teachers to engage in intentional reflection on their own ethical positions. Just as advocacy in education allows for the enactment of knowledge, ethics are also enacted through the process of doing and reflecting on advocacy.” (Niblett, 2012, p. 10)

Working from Bauman’s (1993) notion of a human moral impulse, I suggest further that anti-oppressive education as it is taken up in activist education has a strong ethical dimension, and that this dimension is one of praxis—that is to say it should not be just ideas, or actions, but ideas in a continual and dynamic state of enactment.

Central to this conception is the notion of experience that I discussed previously in relation to learning environments. The concept of experience and experiential education is not only relevant to learning environments, but also important for the

relationship between ideas and actions that manifests in activist education. Building on the ideas of critical praxis discussed here, I turn now to experiential education theory to round out a theoretical heuristic of activist education that is necessarily shaped by ideas of what it means to have experiences in the world, and to think about such ideas in order to make meaning.

Experiential education theories. Experiential education has a long history. The theory and practice of experiential education in contemporary education circles is commonly attributed to the theory and research of John Dewey, and the practical leadership of Kurt Hahn. As has been discussed already, one of Dewey's many contributions to theories of education is a conception of the central role of experience in the process of education. While not inspired directly by Dewey's thinking, Kurt Hahn's pioneering programs, including Outward Bound, The United World Colleges, and the Duke of Edinburgh Award, have been models of experiential education in the English speaking world and beyond for almost the past century. Roughly speaking, Hahn's programs were all founded on two concepts: the notion of compassion expressed through the biblical parable of the good Samaritan, and the idea that people are capable of much more than they typically understand of themselves (*'there's more in you than you know'*) (Holland, 2012).

Principles both directly and indirectly influenced by Hahn's ideas are well established in modern experiential education programs (Smith, Knapp, Seaman, & Pace, 2011). While Dewey and Hahn's major contributions are broadly representative of the development of modern experiential education, they are part of a more complex

genealogy. Smith and Knapp's (2011) edited volume highlights a broad historical and contemporary cadre of philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, outdoor/environmental champions, and school or program leaders whose work brings rich texture to the field of experiential education. Distilling their approach, I offer a brief outline of the most salient trends in experiential education theorizing that support my conception of the ideas and actions elements of activist education.

Brookfield (1993) argues for the inclusion of visceral experiences in the development of knowledge. I interpret his use of *visceral* to mean inwardly felt, and deeply connected to the body. He further suggests that teaching and learning are often "considered at a cognitive, intellectual level, without having the influence on practice that the emotionality of direct experience provides" (p. 23). Likewise, Jickling (2009) laments an over-focus on reductionist approaches to teaching and learning, where the most valuable knowledge to be developed through schooling is considered to be the kinds that can be cataloged, stated succinctly in learning objectives, and can be empirically evaluated. He rejects the alienation of feeling from education. Reminding readers that "feelings are at the heart of the most important knowing; they are at the heart of our capacity to be ethical beings" (p. 172), he suggests that the kinds of educative experience that help learners to connect with feelings that motivate the shaping of knowledge may not always be accessible through traditional pedagogical approaches that are, in theory, easily measured and evaluated.

Brookfield (1993) and Jickling (2009) each call attention to the predominance of the kind of teaching approaches that critical pedagogues would likely label as banking education. As alternatives, they each advocate for approaches that are more visceral

and emotional, respectively. In calling for a change in pedagogical direction, Jickling (2009) notes “the aim here is to shift emphasis away from evaluation and back to considering what good learning opportunities would look like—first and foremost” (p. 172). Jickling does not indicate here what exactly good learning opportunities might be, but I find his line of thinking useful because it challenges the orthodoxy of evaluation and the broader accountability discourse that dominates contemporary education and often serves to limit the kind of experiences that can count as educational.

In advocating for activist education, I think that, by engaging students in co-developed classroom and community based experiences around issues that are socioculturally relevant, Brookfield’s (1993) and Jickling’s (2009) aims may become more of a reality because activist experiences offer the potential for leveraging reflection on visceral/emotional experiences in order to produce meaningful learning, which may or may not be a companion to more traditional didactic pedagogies. Both Jickling’s (2009) and Brookfield’s (1993) work is demonstrative of a theme of deeply felt learning that runs throughout experiential education (e.g., Houge Mackenzie, Son, & Hollenhorst, 2014; Raiola, 2011; Woodhouse & Wells, 2011), and asks readers to consider the ways that learning and education may be different.

Experiential Learning vs. Experiential Education. Scholarship on experiential education stresses the importance of a distinction between experiential learning and experiential education (see, for instance, Chapman, McPhee, & Proudman, 2008; Itin, 1999; Joplin, 1981). In the broadest sense, the difference between them is that experiential education refers to pedagogy of educators who serve as guides in the

process of education (DeLay, 2008; Dewey, 1938; Itin, 1994, 1999; Joplin, 1981), while experiential learning is an individualistic process that may or may not involve purposeful direction (Kolb, 1984). In this section, I differentiate experiential learning and experiential education, and their significance for activist education.

Distinguishing experiential learning and experiential education is of critical importance for my thinking about activist education. For instance, Cooley (2011) describes a grade four classroom letter-writing campaign sparked by one student's indignation over obvious gender stereotyping in a Pottery Barn catalogue. This student's frustration was in part developed because Cooley had introduced students to gender stereotyping as part of the school board's anti-bias initiative. Similarly, Friedman (2011) discusses the teaching of values in a Judaic studies class, and the tensions and successes involved with inviting students and their families to participate in a public demonstration outside a Disney store to protest sweatshop manufacturing commonly linked to Disney themed merchandise. (A student suggested this action after Friedman had showed a film on the topic.) The teachers' leading and supporting each of these examples highlight the learning focus of these actions. For instance, Cooley (2011) muses: "One thing I know for sure is that my students now look at advertisements with a critical eye, and I hope that they have learned that they do have the power to make a difference in this world" (p. 252). While these examples highlight differing strategies of activist engagement (letter writing and direct-action), both involve students engaged in a sociopolitical issue under the guidance and support of an educator. Both teachers describe how students came to suggest taking action about the respective issues, but in the educational context, the presence of the teacher creates opportunities for guided

reflection that gives activist activities a learning purpose that is unlikely to be as intentional if students were to take up these kinds of causes independently of their school experiences. Educators whose teaching philosophy includes understandings of the role of experience in learning are well positioned to facilitate activist education.

Itin (1999) makes a strong argument for thinking about experiential education as an educational philosophy that operates as a springboard for educational praxis. Citing Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, he argues that experiential education goes beyond the cyclical process of experience, reflection, abstraction, and application that constitutes experiential learning, because of the added transactive element between a teacher and a learner. Itin (1994; 1999) explains that the role of the teacher is to present opportunity for experiences, and then to shepherd students who are navigating unfamiliar territory by offering their expertise to help students develop tools for problem solving, and capacities for understanding their experiences. Itin's (1999) facilitated vision for experiential education reiterates Deweyan and Freirian perspectives on progressive education by establishing the teacher as a knowledge holder, but not the only or absolute knowledge holder as in Freire's (1970) banking model. Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman (2008) offer a similar perspective; for them, teachers are cast as coaches and are largely removed from their roles as interpreters of reality, purveyors of truth, mediators between students and the world. They are asked to believe that students can draw valid and meaningful conclusions from their own experiences. (p. 7)

In activist education, this facilitative role of the teacher is a critical presence that differentiates activist education from activism as a broader concept, which would almost always be a learning experience, but may not be educative.

Given the previously identified tensions around integrating activism as an educational process in public schools as discussed by Marshall and Anderson (2009) and Sachs (2003a, b), it is critical for teachers doing activist work in their teaching to ensure that their efforts strive toward education, and not simply activist learning (Yang, 2009). My assertion here is grounded in two main ideas. First, because K-12 students are likely (but not certainly) to be novice activists, and given the emotional, mental, and even physical risks that can be associated with activist experiences, there is a moral interest in engaging public school students in activism in structured and scaffolded ways so as to increase the likelihood that these experiences are, in fact, educative; that is, they compel further similar experience, and do not put students unduly in harm's way. Second, given the intense scrutiny that activist oriented experiential education can endure in the context of conservative public schools (see Warmington, 2012), it is a practical concern to demonstrate maximal educative benefit from these kinds of experiences in order to gain some traction within the public education establishment, and eventually to have an impact that can change the culture of education in ways that draw social justice and anti-oppressive aims closer to the centre of popular understandings of what it means to "do" education. One way that this shift might be achieved is through a focus on the intentional reflective component that is an increasingly common feature of experiential education programming.

Reflection, manipulation, and invitation. Reflection is an inevitable result of having experiences (Dewey, 1938; Hildebrand, 2008; Kolb, 1984) and so it is redundant to ask if it is needed to satisfy the criteria of education. However, much debate in

experiential education centres on reflection as learning, especially around the role of reflection as an aid to generalization; the transfer of learning from the specific learning experience to the broader context of students' lives (Kolb, 1984). For Kolb, though, reflection on an experience is a natural cognitive reaction to any kind of sensory input. In this way, Kolb uses the term "reflection" in a slightly different way than it is commonly used by experiential education practitioners, whose understanding of the term often manifests as a *debrief* during or after an activity, or some other kind of educator directed action that brings intentionality to what may otherwise be a passive process of reflection on the part of learners (see, for instance, Cain, Cummings, & Stanchfield, 2005; Luckner & Nadler, 1997). Priest and Gass (1997) model a history of the facilitation of adventure experiences in their *generations of facilitation model*; their approach suggests that early experiential educators were primarily concerned with offering engaging experiences to students, and allowing the power of these experiences to drive student meaning making without intentional direction on the part of the educator ("let the experience speak for itself"). As more complex understandings of experiential education began to develop, some experiential education practitioners began to use more intentional means of processing to focus student reflection during or after an experience. These processing sessions are intended to direct reflection to help achieve particular learning objectives relevant to the specific program or curriculum being delivered (Estes, 2004; Priest & Gass, 1997).

As I suggested in agreement with Itin (1999) in the previous section, the transactive nature of the relationship between student and teacher is a critical feature of experiential education as it manifests in activist education. This is in no small part

because of the role that teachers can play in making reflection an intentional part of the learning process, and thus potentially more educational, through focused processing of experiences. In my work as an experiential educator, I have witnessed the power of intentional processing to bring about insightful “ah ha!” moments that students might not otherwise have. Through these kinds of moments, I have witnessed students make connections between actions taken as part of an experiential education program and ideas that were either programming outcomes, or that were beyond expected outcomes, generated by students and teachers as a result of processing. However, as pointed out by Estes (2004), care must be taken in planning and implementing processing strategies so as to not inadvertently trample the student-centred environment that is thought to be necessary in doing experiential education (Chapman, McPhee, & Proudman, 2008; Estes, 2004). Estes (2004) demonstrates the tendency for educators to design experiences that are genuinely student directed and then revert to teacher directed pedagogy in the processing phase. In these instances, the teacher as facilitator interprets the experience for the student, or uses an otherwise manipulative strategy to draw their thinking towards an outcome predetermined by the teacher (Estes, 2004).

In the context of activist education, teacher-directed processing that begets *a priori* outcomes without fair opportunity for students to consider alternative ideas is problematic, particularly in cases where it is veiled as student-directed; such instances may rightly be called indoctrinatory. My objection to processing experiences in such manipulative ways is twofold. First, such exercises undermine the powerful potential of activism as experiential education. In this regard, Estes (2004) notes: “to the extent that

experiential educators assume power over students by over-controlling their reflection on experience, they devalue both the experience and the students' role in their own learning" (p. 151). Second, such instances of manipulative processing of experience undermine the entire enterprise of activist education that I endorse in my doctoral research, as it becomes vulnerable to the attacks of (usually right-wing) critics who generate popular media headlines such as "Why are schools brainwashing our children?" (Macleans, 2012), and "What are they teaching *our* kids?"⁵ (Warmington, 2012, emphasis added). These hastily offered rhetorics often result in a resurgence of *back to basics* discourse that reinforce the *business as usual* approach (Ellsworth, 1988; Kumashiro, 2004) to education that dominates contemporary schooling, and which activist education seeks to change (Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Sachs, 2000, 2003a, b).

While activist educators must take care not to indoctrinate by unduly manipulating student ideas under the guise of education, it is not the case that they must therefore function as morally or politically neutral deliverers of information. Indeed, within the social justice context of activist education that I advocate, any attempt at neutrality would be both impossible and undesirable. Warnock (1975) effectively describes why attempts at conceptualizing teaching as neutral are ineffective:

A man [sic] ought to have and to express moral beliefs, and this entails that as a teacher he cannot remain neutral. For holding a moral belief is in some respects like having a vision.... Expressing a moral belief is thus attempting to share a vision or way of looking, and this cannot be done without in some sense

⁵ These headlines are designed to be provocative, and while they may have some merit in instances where activist education does in fact use manipulative pedagogy, they are also problematic because they assume that a more conservative *back to basics* approach to education is ideologically superior.

attempting to get your interlocutor to see things as you do, if only for the time.
(p. 170)

This line of thinking establishes a place for moral beliefs within teaching, not in a way that permits these beliefs to be transmitted uncritically—Warnock’s qualifier *if only for a time* shows that student beliefs should be allowed and encouraged to shift from what the teacher presents—but in a way that justifies the kind of moral anchors like social justice and anti-oppressive education theories that I discussed in the previous chapter as underlying activist education. Hare (2013) extends Warnock’s thinking with his ideas about open-mindedness. For him, “open-mindedness does not require neutrality.... Teaching is not preaching, but this point is consistent with teachers employing argument in the attempt to convince” (p. 364). Open-mindedness, then, functions as a hallmark of inquiry. Inquiry, as a method of education, can serve as an invitation for students and teachers to consider and reconsider their beliefs as they work through activist education to create a more socially just world (Breunig, 2005; Itin, 1999).

Champions of activist education position their practices as *an invitation* for students to take actions that positively impact their communities, and allow them to develop understandings of themselves as agents capable of changing their own worlds (Breunig, 2005; Estes, 2004; Freire, 1970; Itin, 1999; Jensen & Schnack, 2006; McLaren, 2009). In formal education systems characterized by mandatory participation, the idea of genuine invitation is somewhat troublesome. In using the concept here, I posit that invitations to activist education are not an empty gesture, but rather an ongoing negotiation between teachers and students so that each can have their needs met and fulfill their role obligations within the educational relationship. For teachers, these needs may mean introducing content that seems irrelevant to students, but that

provides background knowledge that will prepare students to achieve educational goals that are deeply relevant; likewise, student needs may be centred on the desire to experience trust in a teacher, knowing that the teacher is interested in their personal learning goals, and the personal histories that influence such goals.

Still, critics may posit that such invitations may be declined by students—and then what? McLaren (2009) acknowledges this potential by offering the qualifier that, “teachers can do no better than to create agendas of possibility in their classrooms. Not every student will want to participate, but many will” (p. 80). Knowing that some students will decline or actively resist invitations to activist education, effective teachers plan for differentiation, so that learning opportunities have multiple entry points (Haras, Bunting, & Witt, 2006) and that resisters are offered parameters in which alternatives can be negotiated. For instance, students working on activism around deforestation may choose amongst tasks such as writing a letter to a public official, planting trees as a carbon offset, or planning a rally to raise awareness about their cause. Designing activist education this way alleviates indoctrinatory concerns, and creates conditions where some resisters may later, if they choose, become more active participants in educative struggles for social justice. Such a change-of-heart situation would certainly provide lots of fodder for the kind of reflection that is integral to experiential education.

Part II: Review of Crosscutting Themes

In Part I, I explained a 3-element heuristic of activist education comprised of environments, ideas, and actions that is supported through Deweyan theories,

invitational education, critical pedagogies, and experiential education theories. Now in Part II, I review literature relevant to activist education arranged by two orienting perspectives that I suggest emerge from the heuristic of environments, ideas, and actions. These perspectives are democracy and hope. While both constructs are germane to activist education, they also need to be critically dissected so that their utility for doing activist education may be carefully understood. Being cognizant of the nuances and pitfalls of democracy and hope offers the possibility that each construct may tangibly serve the interests of activist students and teachers, and decrease the likelihood that abstract ideological slogans are at work.

Democracy

Democracy is a significant and contested concept; it may be viewed simultaneously as a goal and an underlying principle of activist education, but like all ideological concepts, it must be approached with critical caution. As I alluded in Chapter 1, the idea of democracy can be challenging to take up within a social justice and anti-oppressive framework because the term has a wide range of meanings; it is often spoken and written flippantly or ambiguously, and is often implemented in sociocultural systems in ways that do not reflect or achieve social justice or anti-oppressive goals, but instead reify the dominance of some individuals and groups at the expense of others' marginalization (Carr, 2011b; Giroux, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2013; Schugurensky, 2013; Tupper, 2007). Still, I remain convinced that democracy is not a lost cause, that a thicker understanding of democracy (Carr, 2011b) that has tangible meaning for the everyday lives of people is possible. Ayers (1998), a prominent figure

in the scholarship of social justice education, eloquently summarizes a conviction of deep democracy even in the face of the overpoweringly shallow manifestations of democratic living that pervade contemporary life:

When the drumbeat of our daily lives [as teachers] is all about controlling the crowd, managing and moving the mob, conveying disembodied bits of information to inert things propped at desks before us, the need to fight for ourselves and our students becomes an imperative. Central to that fight is the understanding that there is no basis for education in a democracy except for a belief in the enduring capacity for growth in ordinary people. For me it is a faith that requires no proof and no corroboration—it is an activist’s conviction: the people with the problems are also the people with the solutions. (p. xxiii)

Ayers’ strong faith in the potential for democracy necessitates an equally strong guardianship of democratic discourse to prevent it from being perverted in ways that undercut virtues commonly understood to characterize democracy (Abdi, 2013; Crick, 2002; Dewey, 1918; Guttman, 1990; Miller, 2003); these theorists call for critical analysis of what democracy means, and can mean, in order to support educational processes that promote more egalitarian social relationships.

Dissing democracy? Political philosophers point out that historic thinkers such as Plato and Hobbes dismissed democracy as an effective social arrangement on the grounds that average individuals lack sufficient knowledge to make decisions that are critical to society and politics (Christiano, 2006; Crick, 2002; Guttman, 1990; Miller, 2003). On this grounding, aristocracy—“the rule of the best”—became a dominant way of justifying governance by the elite until the mid-nineteenth century (Miller, 2003, p. 38), and, indeed, continues tacitly in representative democracies where citizens’ ability to run for office and otherwise participate in democratic processes is significantly impeded by social class and other barriers (Carr, 2011b). So, a dubious ethical sticking

point arises that in both aristocratic government and the so-called representative democracies which replaced them, the elite, while *perhaps* better prepared through education to make technical decisions, tend to use the political authority assigned to them to make decisions that advantage themselves and members of their class group more than the citizenry as a whole (Crick, 2002; Miller, 2003). Faced with this contradiction, can democracy effectively serve education broadly and activist education more specifically?

Democracy, and thus democratic education, is imperfect; Abdi (2013) reminds us that:

The story of democracy is replete with false claims that have been more exclusive in their educational and social development contexts than inclusive, but that should not chase us away from the primordial intentions of the democratic ideal, which in its pragmatic notations, should aim for something less than perfect, but minimally for some discernible ontological, epistemological, and sociocultural enfranchisements that render the social connected, the political manageable, and the economic livable. (p. 14)

Abdi's sentiment, then, is to not throw the democratic baby out with the proverbial bathwater. Turning to education, Abdi's position is supported by others (Carr, 2011a; Marginson, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2013) who suggest that if there are opportunities to critically analyze and correct democracy's imperfections, democratic education may still help prepare citizens to participate in societies in ways that challenge forces such as neoliberalism.⁶ Such forces benefit from democratic ideologies that normalize minimized social participation of the average citizen, and thus breed apathy, and political subservience (Carr, 2011b; O'Sullivan, 2013).

⁶ I define neoliberalism following Carr (2011a, b) and O'Sullivan (2013) as a brand of capitalism characterized by an economic focus on the market, private interests, and weak social welfare systems. In neoliberal ideologies, private and corporate interests outweigh community interests.

Dismantling the neoliberal façade that has masqueraded as democracy for more than a half century (Abdi, 2013) depends in part on differentiating between democracy as a formalized institutional arrangement (for decision making and constituting government), and democracy as characteristic behaviours of people in relation with one another (Crick, 2002), driven by an ethical impulse to *be for* one another (Bauman, 1993). This distinction is, of course, complex, as political democracy and democracy as an underlying relational value are necessarily intertwined. While Crick (2002) gives relatively equal footing to these strands of democracy, I suggest that, particularly where education is concerned, relational democracy is foundational to other strands of democratic existence. For people to organize democratically, and for that organization to maintain integrity, a commitment to relational democracy—basic assumptions about how we want to *be for* other people (Bauman, 1993; Guimaraes-Iosif, 2013; Tupper, 2007)—is called for. I further suggest that a key failure in societies that claim to be democratic, but in many ways operate undemocratically, is a failure to cultivate an underlying democratic relationality among individuals that would better support the functioning of democratic political arrangements. Schooling, as a key social and cultural institution within most democracies, offers the potential for cultivating such an ethic (Guimaraes-Iosif, 2013), and activist education in particular offers a pedagogical approach that would challenge the banking model (Freire, 1970) through which education about democracy is typically taught. Chomsky (2000) makes an eloquent argument in this regard, suggesting that:

Any school that has to impose the teaching of democracy is already suspect. The less democratic schools are, the more they need to teach about democratic ideals. If schools were really democratic, in the sense of providing opportunities

for children to experience democracy through practice, they wouldn't feel the need to indoctrinate them with platitudes. (Loc. 328)

Banking approaches to democratic education are inherently problematic because the pedagogical disconnection between medium and message undermines valuable understanding. Furthermore, the content that is taught in banking style teaching is typically only about democracy in the sense of government arrangement, and not about the relational values that are germane in supporting such arrangements. What critical democratic education can do is cultivate what Carr (2011a, b) calls *thick* democracy, whereby technical understandings of democratic processes that are typically taught in schools are integrated with, and interrogated by, relational principles of critical democracy that aim to develop social justice. I argue that such critical democratic education may be achieved through activist education.

Toward thicker democracy. Carr (2011b) is quick to establish that his notion of democracy, thick or thin, should not be assumed to be *good* and undemocratic things as necessarily *bad*; he elaborates that such dichotomous thinking is, in itself, unhelpful in advancing a deliberative democratic understanding—one that is *thicker* in part because of its ability to withstand routine critical appraisal. I argue that the thicker democracy that Carr (2011b) describes is central to doing activist education, as it serves as a means of enacting Chomsky's (2000) idea noted above that democratic education is best practiced, rather than preached.

Carr (2011b) draws on a history of democratic thinking in supporting his claims. In particular, Dewey (1918) offers a starting point for thinking about a thicker conception of democracy. By thicker, I mean that Dewey's (1918) understanding of

democracy as “a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 87), which speaks more to the role of democracy in guiding the development of community on an everyday basis than it does an understanding that centres on the technical processes of voting to elect government, and for the operation of that government (Carr, 2013).

While Dewey’s above description is an abstraction that does not give us a blueprint for what a conjoint communicated experience might look like, it does make clear that democracy is more than a form of elected government. Working from Dewey, though, Chomsky (2000) offers a clearer definition of democracy, noting that, “in a democracy all individuals can participate in decisions that have to do with their lives” (Loc. 336). This clarifies Dewey’s way of thinking about democracy, and speaks to Crick’s (2002) strand of democracy as a set of behaviours between individuals, or what I call *relational democracy*. Dewey (1918) himself offers two characteristics by which the democratic ideal of a community can be measured: “the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups” (p. 99). I do not interpret Dewey to mean a quest for absolute consensus, but rather an interest that leans more in the direction of inclusion of diverse needs and interests than it does toward exclusion and marginalization (Abdi, 2013). Dewey’s first criterion about shared interests is of particular importance for a democratic conception of education; a call towards equitable sharing of group interests requires thinking about power and privilege as elements of democratic association, and this has implications for the kind of education needed to sustain democracy (Tupper, 2007). Dewey (1918) further notes that:

a society which makes provision for participation in its good of all members on equal terms... is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder. (p. 99)

Through his use of the words “in so far,” Dewey’s conception represents an ideal along a continuum, and not an absolute democratic state of being.

In a critique of earlier Platonic conceptions of education, Dewey (1918) conceptualizes the relationship between democracy and education as dialectic; that is to say that education is a means by which to develop society, and that development would in turn work to improve education. Dewey’s thinking paves a road for more contemporary critical conceptions of democracy and democratic education.

Carr (2013) suggests a dichotomy between the dominant understanding of democracy as a system of voting for elected representatives, which he persuasively characterizes as hegemonic, and “what could be.... a more inclusive, robust, and meaningful form of democracy” (p. 31). Carr advocates for his conception of thicker democracy through education by furnishing a list of proposals for educational reform. While summarizing each would be impossible here, two strike me as especially related to the concept of activist education that I advocate:

17. All schools should emphasize deliberative democracy, and young people should learn how to listen, articulate, debate, and diagnose difference. Significantly, students should learn how to respectfully seek to construct further knowledge in a peaceful way. Condemning those with critical opinions needs to be stopped, as group-think can lead to societal paralysis and a nefarious form of patriotism.
18. Rather than protecting students from controversial subject matter, they should be encouraged to critically understand not only the what but also the how and why behind significant events, issues, and concerns.... Students need to learn that critical reflection can lead to more appropriate and

effective resolutions of systemic problems and conflicts than the use of force.
(p. 43-44)

These two proposals highlight the yin-yang synergy between democracy and education, where democracy is implicit within education, and education is inherently a part of democracy. The critical reflection that Carr (2013) advocates through democratic education must be equally applied to the concept of democracy. Purposefully engaging in community activist experiences with the guidance and support of a teacher offers the potential for students to engage in the kinds of questioning of deliberative democracy that Carr (2013) expounds, and concurrently provides a venue for developing hands-on, critical understandings of both the context and content of controversial topics that are closest to students' communities and thus meaningful to their lives.

Similarly to Carr (2013), Hoover (2013) describes a vision for richer societies and richer forms of education through *animating* the concept of democracy within schools. The notion of animation means giving tangibility to school-based learning so that students, in his words, "can think with, apply, and use the fundamental knowledge base of all subject-matter areas in real-world venues subsequent to their classroom and school experiences" (p. 125). One key means of making school learning meaningful, I argue, is through the kinds of experiential approaches that I discussed earlier in this chapter, which engage students in relevant experiences, encourage intentional reflection on those experiences, and seek connections between such reflection and students' everyday lives.

For the concept of democracy to be enabled as praxis, further theorizing is needed to give democracy more tangible meaning. The idea of hope, which I describe

next, serves to bring flesh to the skeletal notion of democracy that I have sketched thus far.

Hope

Much like democracy, the notion of hope is a troublesome paradox because it can serve as a kind of mirage—a metaphorical beacon of possibility in the landscape of social change. Just as parched activist teachers and students reach for a quenching drink, the perceived goal or achievement may evaporate leaving everyone with mouthfuls of sand; dashed hopes are a demoralizing return on hard invested time and energy. Indeed, the same forces that constrain genuine democratic flourishing discussed above also benefit when activist hope dries up, and people succumb to the hegemonic notion that things simply are the way they are (Freire, 1994; McLaren, 2009). On the other hand, hope is the ability to believe that just futures are possible. O’Sullivan (2013) notes that “if you cannot imagine a better future, it is impossible to work for it” (p. 175). What, then, is the use of hope in activist education?

Is hope enough? As reported in the literature, the short answer to this rhetorical question is “no.” Scholarship on hope in critical education strongly indicates that hope is necessary, but is not sufficient in supporting activist education. To be useful in sustaining activist education, very specific conceptions of hope are needed. Scholars describe such hopeful dispositions variously, but their core conceptions are similar. Kincheloe (2008), for instance, writes of “practical hope” (p. x), while Giroux (2004) uses the phrase “educated hope” (¶ 4), Freire (1994) describes “critical hope” (p. 8),

and Fisher (2001) coins the term “cautionary hope” (p. 192). While each scholar here might offer different emphases in explaining their conceptions, Weiler (2003) supplies effective commentary of Fisher’s (2001) work that is broadly descriptive: hope “does not assume a just and peaceful future is either inevitable or impossible, but asserts the importance of maintaining our values and goals and fighting for them in whatever setting we find ourselves” (p. 34). I describe this range of hopeful approaches as *anchored hope*, because the idea of hope is anchored to another related, and often more concrete, concept with the aim of preventing it from becoming promissory (Fisher, 2001; Weiler, 2003) or utopian (Freire, 1994).

Toward anchored hope. A common thread in anchored conceptions of hope is that the anchoring concept is transitive—that is to say it is a *doing* (like education) or, at least, it is connected to doing as a reflective component of praxis (as in critical, or cautionary hope). Freire (1994) asserts that, “hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice” (p. 9). For Freire, and for many other critical scholars of hope, a praxis of hope manifests as struggles toward social justice. hooks (2004) describes the importance of hope as a part of education for social justice:

Hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice, even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time.... My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. (p. xiv)

hooks alludes to struggle for positive transformation, both for the self and the wider world. In the context of activist education, and working from hooks’ statement, I suggest that anchored hope drives the process of doing activism, and works against the *pie-in-*

the-sky mirage of false hope that is all too common in modern media-driven societies (Hedges, 2010). In demonstrating a will for change by doing something together, the efforts of teachers and students produce anchored hope as they work in tandem to concurrently learn about an issue in their community and use that learning to struggle towards a more socially just world. At the same time, the hope that is produced through these kinds of activist education projects drives the enterprise of activist education, inspires new ways of thinking about and engaging in community, and reaffirms commitment to ongoing projects that might otherwise feel stale. Without hope anchored to praxis, activism lacks both purpose and direction; in the context of education, it then becomes aimless activity (Dewey, 1938) and could even be mis-educative.

Giroux's (2004, p. 38) conception of "educated hope" describes a kind of hope that "acknowledges those social, economic, spiritual, and cultural conditions in the present that make certain kinds of agency and democratic politics possible" (pp. 38-39). For Giroux, hope in the context of critical education can become a vehicle for conversations and actions that can lead to social transformation. Activist educational environments, as I described above, serve as a milieu for these kinds of conversations and actions to transpire. Importantly, Giroux (2004) acknowledges that:

Hope becomes meaningful to the degree that it identifies agencies and processes, offers alternatives to an age of profound pessimism, reclaims an ethic of compassion and justice, and struggles for those institutions in which equality, freedom, and justice flourish as part of the ongoing struggle for a global democracy. (¶ 10)

For Giroux (2004; 2010), hope can be a catalyst for transformation toward a more socially just world, but it is only effective insofar as it helps people understand their

potential as social change makers. As they become aware of this power, students and teachers transform hope from an abstract concept or trite slogan into something tangible that can fuel further action. Conceptualizing hope this way positions agency within people, and not as something external that can be sprinkled upon them like fairy dust, after which they would then naturally take up a change mandate for social justice. Hope is a product of the praxis that individuals engage in, and activist education can be a venue for this work.

Social theorist Zygmunt Bauman (2004) argues that, as human beings, students and teachers are hard wired for hope; for him, “if we ever stopped hoping, we would no longer be human” (para. 1). This proposition is central to the functioning of activist education as a mode of liberatory education, as it carves out a goal for activist education praxis relative to the democratic goals of social justice and anti-oppression. However, hope as a human imperative cannot function as a passive waiting game for a better future, lest it become an ideological promise that can never be realized. The goal of anchored hope is not to work for the biggest or most radical changes which are always just out of reach, but instead to fuel democratic spirit through the celebration of small and medium benchmarks that spur the ongoing journey of *becoming* a society that reflects social justice and anti-oppressive ethics (Kumashiro, 2004).

Part III: What activist education looks like, and what this research contributes

In Chapter 1, I defined activist education as an intentional educational practice where participants engage in guided learning activities that help individuals to understand themselves as capable of effecting change for social and ecological justice.

Throughout this chapter, I have supported this definition by pointing to activist education as an alternative to traditional educational approaches. I have furnished examples of the kind of approaches to schooling that I think are problematic in that they lead to the development of social apathy that reifies the kinds of thin democracy (Carr, 2011b) that enables oppressive and unjust social arrangements to be normalized. Largely, though, the literature reviewed so far describes activist education by highlighting what it is *not*. While a useful way of painting a picture, this approach somewhat sidesteps the important question of what activist education *is* and how teachers and students go about doing it. Building from the operationalization that I provided in the introductory chapter, in this section, I offer examples from the literature to show explicitly what my understanding of activist education looks like in practice and how it differs from other educational approaches.

Reviewing literature that uncovers activist education is a somewhat tricky undertaking. While it would seem that there is a reasonable amount of literature documenting activist education currently in practice, there is not an organized genre of literature called activist education. Instead, the work is fragmented across a range of search terms typically related to the particular causes that drive each initiative (for instance: environmental justice, queer activism, anti-racism, classism and poverty reduction, and gender oppression).

For example, within the area of environmental education, Stone (2007) tells about the *Rethinking School Lunch* project based in Berkley, California, where students and local farmers work in tandem to source all of the food served in school cafeterias in the city, thus making positive socio-ecological change as local communities begin to

maintain greater control of their food systems. In the discipline of Queer studies, Callaghan (2007) offers an approach to challenging the orthodoxy of homophobia in Catholic schools through Boal's theatre of the oppressed method. She provides readers with four separate dramatic improvisation scenarios that can be performed in a classroom, and offers specific examples of classroom outcomes that have arisen in her own implementation of each scenario. In the realm of gender anti-oppression, Stocker (2012) gives a detailed narration of an integrated learning unit on domestic violence against women. Stocker puts particular emphasis on how this content drove the delivery of mathematics curriculum in his classroom for a period of two months, and included community-based activist application of students' learning through the development of leaflets that were distributed on the streets on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Lastly, Bigelow (1998) outlines a comprehensive unit on the human costs of sweatshop labour in his high school global studies class. He draws his students' attention to the oppression that is quite literally woven and sewn into everyday items that are taken-for-granted in North America. The culminating task in Bigelow's sweatshop labour unit asks the students to write "work poems" where they "captured some aspect of the human lives connected to the products we use everyday" (p. 30). From the samples included in his article, I suggest that these poems represent an example of the kind of richness and depth that may be added to education, which I inquire about in my second research question.

These four examples offer a sense of the kind of splintered geography evident in searches for activist education literature. While not necessarily a deficit, this

fragmentation means that it is difficult to quickly amass the best of what literature is available through a single set of search terms.

One significant exception to the fragmentation I have identified above is the publishing and advocacy collective *Rethinking Schools*. Founded in 1986, Rethinking Schools publishes books and a magazine with a dual purpose. As stated on their website, “Rethinking Schools has tried to balance classroom practice and educational theory. It is an activist publication, with articles written by and for teachers, parents, and students. Yet it also addresses key policy issues” (Rethinking Schools, 2014, ¶ 5). It may be unusual in a literature review to comment specifically on a particular journal or publisher. However, *Rethinking Schools*’ dual focus is somewhat unique within the literature and is worthy of mention because of its positioning as a critical outlet detailing the praxis of activist education; the following authors have all been featured in its publications. Cooley (2011) and Friedman (2011) document a curricular activist letter-writing campaign and student participation in a protest rally, respectively. Likewise, Marshall, and Rosati (2014) describe a classroom exploration of power and privilege in social class and collective action through analysis of the popular novel series *The Hunger Games* (Collins, as cited in Marshall & Rosati, 2014). They facilitate activities where students draw connections between the fictional happenings of the novels and real-life class oppression; their goal is to “challenge students’ stereotypes about social class by helping them recognize how class structures their everyday lives,” and to “encourage students to see class struggle as part of their own histories, and to connect Collins’ story of collective resistance to the real world by providing them with a historical example of class solidarity” (Marshall & Rosati, 2014, ¶ 3). In further

examples, Hansen (2012) illustrates the power of writing to help students practice self-reflection on their own values and how they would like to take action for justice, and Ciwko (2013) narrates her experience teaching sexuality and gender concepts from the health curriculum integrated into normalized weekly classroom moments, as opposed to awkwardly integrated stand-alone units often delivered by guest speakers. This sample of literature offers a glimpse of the venue for bearing witness to activist education praxis that is created by *Rethinking Schools*.

Two significant threads loosely connect all of the literature introduced in this section, which show a general trend in the larger collection of literature that this sample represents. First, each exemplifies an aspect of the conceptual inputs of environments, ideas, and actions that I have introduced in this chapter as an overarching structure for thinking about activist education. For instance, when Stocker (2012) writes about his mathematics of gender-violence project that “the topic is beginning to get very personal. I am aware, however, that it was I who introduced the topic of gender and domestic violence in the first place” (p. 108), he recognizes the effects that content can have on a learning environment, and the power that teachers hold in shaping how students experience that environment. In addition, the brief synopses for each citation above show the inputs of ideas and actions are evident in the activist education literature, from students planning protests, to writing about their values and aspirations for social justice change. These exemplars give me confidence that the conceptual inputs by which I describe activist education are not purely theoretical, but are demonstrated in the practices of actual teachers and students.

Second, there is a shared methodological flavour to the literature, in the sense that each piece offers an explanation of one specific initiative, classroom practice, or campaign. More frequently than not, these artefacts are authored at least in part by a practicing teacher conducting some variation of self-study (Kubler-LaBoskey, 2004) for the purpose of improving their own practice, and also for sharing that practice as a way of inspiring others to adopt similar pedagogies into their own work. This hybrid genre of academic-professional literature is of crucial importance; it showcases activist education practice in ways that can lead to improved quality and greater quantity of activist education. However, the important focus in the majority of the activist education literature on the experiences of teacher(s) in self-study leaves minimal room for a broader metacognitive analysis of activist education, particularly that the venue for publication is frequently practitioner focused. In other words, while most literature does an effective job of thinking about activist education practice, there isn't a lot of work about how we think about thinking about activist education in a broad way.

In describing this kind of meta-analytical literature, North (2007) notes that there is a "thin empirical base" (p. 7) of literature exploring the doing of activist education in classrooms by teachers. In her study, she works to thicken the base by documenting the views and classroom practices of four social justice teachers working in high schools and middle schools. The composites of focus group discussions that she polished and included in the dissertation (similar to my use of experience narratives in Chapter 4) illustrate the valuable contributions made by social justice educators, alongside the often painstaking frustrations these teachers can experience in attempting to make social justice a central concept in students' experience of schooling.

For her participants, these focus groups were not only research meetings, but rather became a professional support community that contributed to their capacity for functioning as social justice advocates in schools. Following this finding, North (2007) concludes that, “more institutionalized, formal professional development programs as well as the development of evaluative tools for these programs are necessary for the substantial realization of teacher education for democracy and social justice” (p. 382).

Two additional examples of research from the “thin empirical base” (p. 7) that North (2007) identifies are Marshall and Anderson’s (2009) book *Activist Educators: Breaking Past Limits* and Picower’s (2012) *Practice What you Teach*. Marshall and Anderson (2009) worked with a small group of researchers to produce an edited volume that might be described as a multiple case study. Using a common interview guide, each associate researcher studied a different instance of activist education from African American teachers doing anti-racist activism to female educational administrators reflecting on the women’s movement and teachers working for LGBTQ equity. Marshall and Anderson coordinated analysis across each associate’s inquiry, and they found that activism, both within and outside of the classroom, is constrained for many educators because of the fear of backlash and limitations on upward career mobility. These constraints were found to be most prevalent in contexts where conservative (“Bible Belt”) community values were strong and less evident for those already holding leadership positions, or who were close to retirement. Despite these constraints, Marshall and Anderson report that teachers who identify as activist educators are doing activist work, but that, particularly in classroom based curricular

activism, activist undertakings are designed to resist oppression and inequity in ways that fly under the radar of the conservative institutions within which they operate.

Marshall and Anderson's (2009) book is an important landmark in literature that looks broadly at activist education. However, classroom based examples (e.g.: creating safer space against peer-to-peer sexual harassment, gay-straight alliances) of activism form only a portion of what is discussed in the case studies that make up their research. More commonly, those activist educators talk about participation in activism outside of their teaching. Despite this partial limitation, Marshall and Anderson's work is useful in my own thinking about activist education because of the open ended way that they conceptualize what it means to be an activist educator—they neither denote nor connote a particular threshold of *activist enough* that is required to count someone as an activist educator.

By contrast, Picower (2012) studied a continuum of teachers from those who actively resist activist education as a justifiable teaching identity, to those who, for lack of a better descriptor, are “on the fence” about activist education, to those who publicly identify as activist educators, and work both within and outside their classrooms to take action for social justice and anti-oppressive change. The continuum that Picower (2012) sets up is a useful thinking tool for envisioning a path from privileged ignorance to activist action, a path that Picower herself admits to having travelled. I also relate to the path from privileged and uninformed, to informed but hesitant social justice educator, to activist teacher; I suspect that many White, middle class teachers may also find this to be resonant with their experience. I find Picower's (2012) research to be fascinating—particularly her interviews with teachers in a graduate course on

multiculturalism who show sometimes hostile resistance toward ideas of privilege and oppression, and those fence-sitters who are amenable to the values of activist education but for a variety of reasons do not move much beyond sharing social justice ideas in their classrooms (e.g., fear, lack of strategies for implementation). However, I identify one significant limitation to her tiered pathway from ignorance to activism, which is that it positions public membership in teacher activist groups as the ultimate manifestation of an activist educator identity. This has the result, I suggest, of limiting the field of what it can mean to be an activist educator, and undervalues the potential contribution that so-called fence-sitters can make to enriching the social justice education that is enacted in schools (O'Sullivan, 2013).

These studies (Marshall & Anderson, 2009; North, 2007; Picower, 2012) are of central importance to my research because they represent the specific genre of literature on activist education to which my study contributes. The narrative methodological orientation of my work brings a new flavour to a body of empirical research on teachers who identify as activist educators. A study of Canadian teachers' perspectives also adds to the literature (see also, Lund, 2001). Herein lies a significant contribution that this research offers to the field. Beyond the conceptual inputs of environments, ideas, and actions, the results I present, collected through interviews with ten self-identified activist educators, expand the small body of literature that broadly documents the work of activist educators.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed literature relevant to developing a conception of activist education. Working from a foundational understanding that activist education is comprised of three main elements—environments, ideas, and actions—I worked from a series of discourse traditions within education to deepen an explanation of how I understand these elements as constituting factors in activist education. Working through *Deweyan philosophy* and *invitational education theory*, I explicated a vision for learning environments in which students are invited to participate, and even initiate, activist activities that reflect everyday concerns that impact their selves, families, and communities. The conception of such activities depends on ideas and actions. Using *critical pedagogy theories* and *experiential education theories*, I explained how ideas and actions can become praxis—or reflective action. It is through praxis that activist education is enacted.

In Part II, I outlined two orienting perspectives that support the theoretical heuristic of activist education offered in Part I: democracy and hope. I promoted an understanding of democracy that goes beyond the all too common understanding of voting as democratic participation. Instead, I outlined how Deweyan and critical pedagogical understandings of relational democracy underlie activist education. In this sense, democracy is more about how individuals in a society can relate with one another everyday than it is about operations of government. Finally, I explained the important ways that hope informs my thinking about activist education. Without a concept of hope anchored in praxis, activist education could be overwhelmed by the vast interconnected web of local and global problems. The helplessness that can result

from such feelings may breed apathy and cast doubts about each individual's ability to effect social change.

In Part III, I explored literature that illustrates what activist education *is* in practice. Primarily, activist education literature comes in the form of first person accounts of pedagogy that is intended to foster social justice and anti-oppressive change. This important body of work is paralleled by a smaller constellation of literature that theorizes activist education by looking at activist education practices on a broader scale than single practitioner accounts (e.g.: Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Picower, 2012; Sachs, 2000). The current research contributes to the body of literature that broadly describes and offers critical perspectives on activist education.

The concepts explored in this chapter share a common ethos of relationality, which is to say that they highlight the way that people relate with one another as members of a community. One way that this relationality is expressed is through teachers' stories of their experiences with and around activist education. In the next chapter, I explicate a methodological approach to making meaning from teachers' stories of experience based in narrative theory.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY: THINKING NARRATIVELY ABOUT EDUCATION AND ACTIVISM

In this chapter, I accomplish two main tasks. First, I outline a theoretical methodology within which the research is situated. Second, I explain the methods that I employed to conduct the research. The first part is extensive, as it offers an in-depth explanation of my reading and thinking about theories of narrative research, and introduces the key methodological idea of conceptual rhizomes that I adopt from Deleuze and Guattari (1987). While I think that the first part makes a useful contribution to narrative methodological literature, those readers who are primarily interested in the practical and logistical details of the research methods may consider moving directly into the second part. The focus of the second part is outlining the parameters of the study, including research participants, data collection through story-sharing interviews, analysis and interpretation, representation of the results through experience narratives, as well as delimitations and limitations inherent in the research.

* * *

In his 2009 Kurt Hahn Address from the Association for Experiential Education Conference in Montreal, Clifford Knapp discussed the power of stories as vehicles for education and, more generally, as windows for deeper understanding of life experiences. His (2010) work draws on folk writer Barry Lopez's (2001) book *Crow and Weasel*, where the character Badger tells crow and weasel, "The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive" (p. 48). Put another way by Thomas King (2003), "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 2). While Lopez and King are writers rather than social science

researchers, their assertions regarding the primacy of story in shaping human existence are mirrored in the social sciences arena by a growing body of researchers, many of whom have taken up the term *narrative inquiry* to describe their methodological leanings.

In this chapter, I describe narrative inquiry as an overarching research design principle that informs, coordinates, and links all elements of my dissertation. A key feature of narrative methodology is a tendency towards theory development through storytelling, rather than pure rational argumentation as is traditional in social science research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is my hope that, by including story as a central feature of my academic writing, readers will understand story as a vehicle for theorizing; through their telling and re-telling, stories give us the opportunity to reshape our understanding of key concepts that we use to make sense of the world. A primary goal of this research, then, is to create a space where the telling and re-telling of stories about activist education may help to reshape the concepts of activism and education in ways that better facilitate thoughtful activist practice within education.

In the upcoming section, I offer an overview of narrative inquiry as it is described in social science literature, particularly in the field of education. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I apply the ideas developed in this section to conceptual and qualitative research methodologies respectively, with a particular view to highlighting why such an approach is an appropriate choice for this doctoral research. Then, I outline the methods of data collection and analysis and representation that I applied in the research that I conducted with K-12 teachers who self-identify as activist educators.

Understanding Narrative Inquiry

Bruner (1987) describes a role for story in the field of social sciences, which is historically characterized by a positivist ethos of detachment and objectivity:

Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives. (p. 15, emphasis in original)

It is Bruner's (1987) contention that, while stories overlay reality like flesh over bones, eventually, the two become merged in a reciprocal way such that narrative mimics life, and life mimics narrative. Such a dynamic synergy between life events and the stories used to tell about them is an important consideration in conceptualizing education, as well as educational research.

Witherell and Noddings (1991) note that, "the power of narrative and dialogue as contributors to reflective awareness in teachers and students is that they provide opportunities for deepened relations with others and serve as springboards for ethical action" (p. 8). This notion of stories as a starting point for ethical action resonates strongly with me. Learning from activism with inevitable ethical actions is a central aim of activist education as I have conceived it, and thus I suggest a connection between activist education and narrative inquiry as an organizing heuristic for educational research concerning activism. By "organizing heuristic," I mean that stories provide a backdrop to both education and to activism, and that using stories as a guide can help educators to see and engage with the ethical issues and questions that affect both activism and education. Central to enabling ethical action is the notion of experience, a key concept in both narrative inquiry and in activist education. In conceptualizing the

nature of storied experience, I draw on Cassidy (2001) who argues that narrative perspectives in experiential education can help learners construct meaning from their experiences and connect it to their own life stories. In this way, narrating experiential education is about more than generalizing “generic concepts to future life situations,” but is also about helping learners see connections between formal learning experiences and “relevant concepts that are formed from their personal history, context, and feelings” (Cassidy, 2001, p. 25). To put it another way, having activist experiences as part of one’s education offers opportunities for identifying resonances (or dissonances) between one’s own developing values and the dominant (or marginalized) stories being enacted both globally and in their local communities (see Zwicky, 2003).

Evoking narratives to recreate and reflect on learning experiences is not only an effective educational strategy, but also an important means of doing educational research. Where research on activist education is concerned, stories can help clarify understandings about complex ideas and how each concept is cast in relation to another (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). Likewise, stories illuminate ways that people engage with these concepts and highlight ways that conceptual understandings of activism and education manifest in the day-to-day lives of teachers, students, and other educational community members.

According to Connolly and Clandinin (1990), “the main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the way humans experience the world” (p. 2). Building on Connolly and Clandinin, I suggest that narrative inquiry includes not only the *study* of narratives, but

also the ongoing *creation and recreation* (telling and re-telling) of stories that give meaning to our existence, as well as the socially developed conceptual understandings that underlie stories and which are also in a dynamic state of creation and recreation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). This social construction of meaning through storytelling operates both individually and collectively, to the degree that communities of people have shared interpretations of stories. These shared understandings develop through shared experiences. As a perspective on how the social world operates, narrative inquiry draws heavily on John Dewey's ontology of experience as a foundation for interpreting and making meaning from happenings in the lives of individuals and communities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). As such, some exposition of Dewey's theory of experience is necessary to understand my methodological disposition.

John Dewey, Narrative, and Activist Education

A Deweyan philosophy of experience resonates strongly as a foundational ontology for my understanding of narrative inquiry into activist education. This resonance arises from the undervalued status of experiential education that I have experienced as both a student and teacher within the realm of compulsory schooling as education. As I alluded to in the personal rationale for this doctoral research in Chapter 1, experiential education is a key lens for my understandings of both education and activism. Outside of compulsory schooling (and in marginal ways, within it), I have borne witness to the power of intentionally designed experiences and reflection as a powerful means of education, but the pedagogies that I experienced as a student within

compulsory schooling were, for the most part, sorely lacking in experiential education, whereby students are engaged in “direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities” (Association for Experiential Education, n.d.). As an educator, I endeavour to inject carefully planned experiences into my teaching to the greatest degree that the constraints of the schooling context I work within allow. As noted in Chapter 2, Dewey’s (1938) theorizing forms a critical piece of the philosophy of experiential education in which I find value (see Breunig, 2005; Itin, 1999) and, as the dissertation progresses, I reflect on the role his thinking has taken as a central component of my conception of activist education. Here, however, I note that Dewey’s work is also significant to this study on a methodological level. His thinking about experience as the keystone of all inquiry (Fleener, 2002) gives rise to narrative as a way of both understanding and reimagining the corporeal and social worlds.

For Dewey (1938), experience can be divided into two interrelated parts: primary experience, made up of minute-to-minute happenings delivered through sensory inputs, and secondary or reflective experience comprised of arrangements and processing of primary experiences from which systematic interpretations can begin to be made. It is the unification of primary and secondary experience that allows for individuals to perceive a continuity of experiences (Hunt, 2008) that form the basis of a storied understanding of the world, and allow people to construct individual and collective stories of how they experience and understand the world.

Hildebrand (2008) comments that Dewey’s construct of experience “provides an innovative way of understanding (and changing) how we learn. If experience is an

ongoing-and-cumulative coordination, then learning, too, proceeds as a living rhythm—not by a series of truncated arcs, fits and starts” (p. 18). The living rhythm that Hildebrand (2008) describes is what Dewey (1938) named a continuity of experience, whereby education proceeds successively, and the new understandings from one experience compel further experiences with continued development of understandings. Dewey notes that this continuity of learning may be either educative, or mis-educative, if the learning leads to an end that isn’t ethically justifiable; for instance, Dewey (1938) uses the example of a burglar honing his or her skills to illustrate a mis-educative development of knowledge. Through Hildebrand’s assessment of Dewey’s views on the nature of experience, we can begin to see narrative inquiry as a helpful perspective in studying phenomena that are particularly experiential, such as education and activism. For those members of educational communities (teachers, students, and other individuals) who are passionate and engaged with activism within education, these feelings of passion and engagement are, from a Deweyan perspective, necessarily derived from continuity of experience where initial experiences invite further engagement (Dewey, 1938). Moreover, it is a continuity of educative experiences that open possibilities for new epistemological and ontological positioning that I began to outline in Chapter 1. For Dewey, it is this compulsion for continuity that defines educative experiences, and I suggest these experiences can be designed in the service of activist education. Moreover, these continuities engender stories by which individuals identify and define themselves; through narrative inquiry, stories can be understood as data from which trends may be observed, and concepts re-casted (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994).

Dewey's construct of experience as both embodied and reflective (Hunt, 2008) suggests that understandings of activist education that rely primarily on one or the other of these components will always be incomplete. Working from the understanding that stories can represent the work of rational arguments, narrative research approaches allow for the analysis of stories and production of new stories in ways that foreground normative questions about activism and education. Thinking through conceptual questions allows one to think and rethink what it means to do activism and education, and to understand how these enactments contribute to living well. In the following sections, I offer further details of my understanding of the potential for recasting narrative inquiry, and how they will function in this dissertation.

Recasting Concepts Through Stories of Experience

A Deweyan theory of experience, through a focus on continuity, lays groundwork for my narrative approach to research. A narrative approach to research resonates strongly with the experiential character of activism and education (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Dewey, 1938). While narratives of activist education may not reveal truth *per se*, positioning stories as arguments may enable ethical work that is an important part of both activism and education. My interest in this research is to use stories as a vehicle for thinking deeply about concepts like activism and education, and to do so in ways that position stories as clues for understanding complex concepts, and not as all-revealing truths elicited from some research crystal ball.

This outlook aligns my project with postmodern research discourses. While not the focus of my doctoral research, I draw from Burbules (1996) to offer ideas on what

postmodernism is (no small task) and how it contributes to my work. Burbules points out that postmodernism rejects modernism's quest for stable meanings and fixed truths. He further argues that what crosscuts the somewhat disparate collection of stances that are generally dubbed postmodern is a common flavour that he names *postmodern doubt*. Postmodern doubt refers to doubt not in the Cartesian sense describing the absence of truth, but rather as a generalized discomfort with the certainty of cultural metanarratives. It is this postmodern essence that I seek to channel through narrative inquiry in this research.

The primary way that I take up postmodern thought is through Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of *rhizomes*. A rhizome is a biological organism that does not have a central root system and which grows in many directions⁷. Deleuze and Guattari use the rhizome as a metaphor for abstract concepts such as activism and education, and it strikes me that stories function in similar ways. With each telling, a story shifts and changes, making it difficult to trace meaning back to an ultimate "root;" still, the story may have compelling elements that offer clues for thinking.

Thinking Conceptually, Thinking Narratively, Thinking Rhizomatically

One possible on-ramp for thinking narratively and conceptually using a rhizomatic approach lies in the somewhat enigmatic work of Deleuze and Guattari (1994), whose book *What is Philosophy* outlines a postmodern approach to understanding the nature of concepts; I suggest that this understanding offers an

⁷ This is an oversimplified description of a rhizome, but it suffices for my introductory purpose here.

explanation for why stories shape the ways that humans understand the world in which they live. For Deleuze and Guattari, a concept is:

a heterogenesis—that is to say an ordering of its components by zones of neighbourhood. It is ordinal, an intention present in all the features that make it up. The concept is in a state of *survey* [*survol*] in relation to its components, endlessly traversing them according to an order without distance. (p. 20, emphasis in original)

While their description seems obtuse on the surface, deeper reflection has helped me to construct plausible meaning from their words. For Deleuze and Guattari, concepts are complex, ordered constructions of like and related ideas (heterogenesis, ordinal), but they are not static constructions; on the contrary, they are always in a state of change through analysis (survey, traversing). This change can be slow or fast, deep or shallow, and is driven by the needs of a concept's creators and users (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). From a Deleuze-Guattarian perspective, then, concepts resemble living and breathing organisms. I assay that stories function in a very similar way to Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) notion of concepts, and that the organic understanding of concepts that they

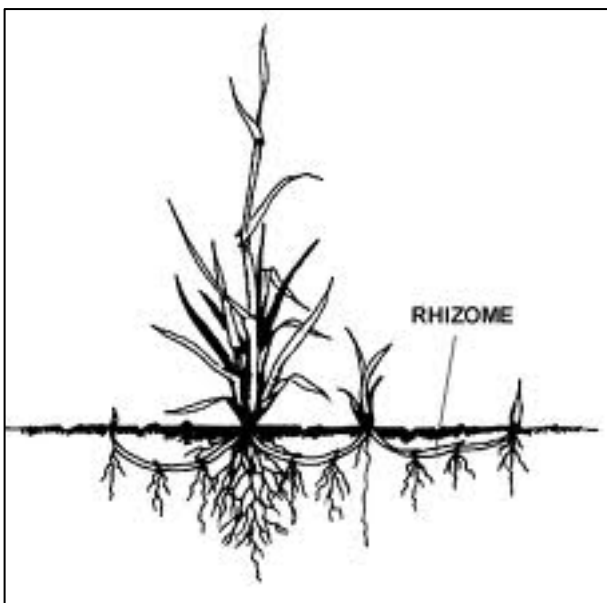


Figure 2 - A rhizomatic organism. (from www.rhizomesystems.com)

offer gives some explanation as to why stories are so important for human relations and understandings of the world.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the analogy of a rhizome to explain their understanding of the concept. From

biology, a rhizome is “a continuously

growing horizontal underground stem that puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals” (Rhizome, n.d.). Figure 2 above shows an image of a rhizome in the biological sense, and may help to illustrate Deleuze and Guattari’s (1994) analogy in the realm of concepts because it gives a reasonably clear visual of the “lateral shoots and adventitious roots” that make a rhizomatic organism a multiplicity, or a “one” that is also “many.” Unlike other plant systems that grow in a systematically branching way, a rhizome is able to relate with its environment in more fluid or flexible ways because of the multiplicity of shoots that form a single organism, much in the same way that I suggest that stories help people understand and communicate about the environments in which they live.

Analogous to biological rhizomes, stories are dynamic and multifaceted; actors may play various characters and events may be viewed from a variety of perspectives in different stories, with different storytellers. Where education and activism are concerned, understanding activist events as unfolding stories with multiple perspectives is compelling. Such an approach could allow teachers to avoid polarizing “us/them” or “included/excluded” dualisms that may hinder students from understanding the depth and complexities of a given activist issue both inside the activist education context, or outside of education. In this way, a rhizomatic approach may help teachers to understand and convey that “knowing” activism means understanding the context specific complexities, and interconnectivities of lived activist experiences.

Thinking about stories as concepts in a fluid, relational, or rhizomatic way (Grossberg, 2003) may allow narrative researchers to theorize in ways that respond to

the postmodern mood typical of contemporary educational research (Burbules, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Noddings, 2007). The significance of this moment in educational theorizing is that it may result in opportunities for reimagining what educational research can look like when modernist tendencies for certainty are suspended (Burbules, 1996). This reimagining may create new spaces within educational research for engaging with normative questions that can help people better understand contemporary educational landscapes in which the day-to-day practices of education unfold.

Developing such an on-ramp for rethinking conceptual analysis requires some explanation of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987; 1994) philosophical project. In the following subsections, I outline Grossberg's (2003) analysis of Deleuze-Guattarian thinking, specifically around the rhizome metaphor, an empiricist mode of analysis, and a pragmatics of concepts. From this outline, I conduct a short thought experiment that applies this line of thought to activist education.

Conceptual rhizomes. Returning to the rhizome analogy and Figure 2, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizomatic thinking is centred on a notion of multiplicity—a conception of thinking that allows for many divergent ideas to exist simultaneously without necessarily nullifying one another. The plant in Figure 2 has multiple stems and multiple root systems that function as a single organism, but could survive and continue to grow as a new organism if any one part were to be severed from the whole. Likewise, concepts, and also, stories, can be understood to develop rhizomatically, such that dynamic reinterpretations may take root and sprout shoots either near or far from the

concept or story's beginning. In this way, concepts as stories truly are internally multiple. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write:

multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities for what they are. There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object or "return" in the subject... a multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature. (p. 8)

I interpret from this passage that Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizomatic epistemology departs from traditional ways of knowing the world because forced choice dualisms such as subject and object are forsworn in favour of a plurality of possible ways of being and knowing. For Fawcett (2009), a "rhizomatic model is about interconnection and interpenetration between beings and environments; it is about multiple 'ands' that can be linked to critical education" (p. 229). Such a shift from either/or propositions towards a multiplicity of truths (without embracing relativism) creates possibilities for facilitating change through the recasting of old conceptual understandings into new constellations of ideas that respond to the changing needs of those who engage with a particular concept, often through the telling of stories. From this explanation, I interpret a narrative quality to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome metaphor. That is to say that the plurality of meanings that characterize concepts as rhizomes offers a richness that makes for compelling stories.

Here, though, emerges a quandary: How can we think towards postmodernity with stories and avoid an inevitable slide toward relativism? This is a bigger problem than I can solve here without becoming distracted from the task of introducing my methodology, but some discussion is worthwhile because of the centrality of postmodern views to my understanding of the plurality of interpretations that I see as a

virtuous feature of narrative theory. I approach postmodernism cautiously because of the problematic ethical relativity that can emerge when modernist claims to truth are disavowed. My caution is not a total rejection of postmodernism; I think efforts at transcending modernism (characterized by a quest for foundational truths and universal moral codes, among other things) can offer opportunities for living a shared existence as human beings that is more in line with the human rights principles that I introduced in Chapter 1.

In adopting a postmodern stance toward narrative research, but at the same time being unwilling to accept ethical relativism, I follow Bauman (1993) who offers a malleable, but still somewhat tangible source for postmodern ethics based on a notion that humans, by their constitution, are predisposed to a moral impulse. Bauman's (1993) moral impulse is not a guarantee of ethical behaviour, but simply a human *tendency of "being for"* (p. 13, italics in original) others. For Bauman (1993):

The moral self is also a self with no foundation. To be sure, it has its moral impulse as the ground on which to stand—but this is the only ground it has. And moral impulse would be hardly considered by philosophers to be worthy of the name of the foundation.... Moral impulse is not a sort of ground on which anything of importance and stability can be erected: like a slushy marshland, it must be thoroughly drained to be turned into a building site. (p. 62)

Bauman (1993) posits here that the moral impulse that gives way to ethical human relations is too viscous a foundation for building any kind of universal ethical code, but it is *something*, and this something can serve as a restraint to mark the precipice of the slippery slope to ethical relativism.

Bauman (1993) suggests that a moral impulse exists as a critical part of human reality—that our being is steeped in moral potential⁸. He constructs a concept of self that includes the other-as-neighbour who becomes part of the self because our very existence is constituted on an interest in reaching out and *being for* the other. For Bauman (1993), the universalized ethics of modernist social reality undermines the simple beauty of being for another by tarnishing the innate moral impulse with imposed, authoritarian ethical codes and duties. He asserts that it is these falsely-universal codes, and not postmodern discourses in themselves, that enable relativism:

The postmodern perspective on moral phenomena *does not reveal the relativism* of morality. Neither must it call for, or obliquely recommend, a ‘nothing we can do about it’ disarmament in the face of... ethical codes. The contrary is the case. Modern societies practice moral parochialism under the mask of promoting universal ethics. By exposing the essential incongruity between any power-assisted ethical code on one hand, and the infinitely complex condition of the moral self on the other, and by exposing the falsity of society’s pretense to be the ultimate author and the sole trustworthy guardian of morality, the postmodern perspective shows the relativity of ethical codes and of moral practices... to be the outcome of the *politically* promoted parochiality of *ethical codes* that pretend to be universal, and not of the ‘uncodified’ moral condition and moral conduct which they decried as parochial. It is the ethical codes which are plagued with relativism, that plague being but a reflection or a sediment of tribal parochialism of institutional powers that usurp ethical authority. (p. 14, italics in original)

Bauman’s (1993) contention is that because ethical codes are imposed on people through systems of power based in social privilege and oppression, they enable relativity because they are legislated by false moral authority. He further suggests that the enactment of ethical codes as universal guides to moral conduct in fact *erodes* the moral impulse, which he argues is the only fleeting connection that humanity has to a moral compass. In order to understand the significance of Bauman’s (1993)

⁸ I draw this metaphor from Battiste’s (2005) notion of “colonial marinade,” and shift the context of the metaphor from colonialism to ethics.

postmodern ethics to research on activist education, I expound on the nature of the human moral impulse that he describes.

Bauman (1993) describes the *moral party of two* (the self and the other) as a primal state of morality that pre-exists human ontology; that is to say, that ethics precedes existence. Bauman admits that his configuration begs the question, “How can anything precede existence?” However, given various explanations of the authority of moral codes (from “‘some people’ or ‘some god(s)’ said so” to the nihilism of anything-goes relativism), Bauman’s notion that perhaps there is a moral beacon preceding human existence that subtly calls us to care for one another is, in my view, compelling. He characterizes this primal state as one of proximity to the other. Proximity refers to a moral closeness between self and other that Levinas describes as a “suppression of distance” (as cited in Bauman, 1993, p. 87). That is to say, the other is morally separated from the self by only the self’s peripheral edge; the two are morally adjacent. The implication of such a positioning of self and other is that any exploration around the periphery of the self can result in a close encounter with the other. The self/other positioning that Bauman describes is significant for education and for activism because both endeavors require, at least in part, an interaction with others.

Bauman’s (1993) conception of postmodern ethics is important for understanding and conducting research on activist education because it offers an alternative to the false-authority of de-ontological ethical codes that typify modernist systems of ethics, and the moral relativism that emerges from many examples of postmodern ethical theorizing. The description of the moral impulse as a “slushy marshland” (p. 62) that is not suitable for constructing structured ethical codes is apt

given the rhizomatic orientation that I take in this project. Metaphoric rhizomes, as ethical guideposts, need little solid soil in which to root, preferring to creep just under the soil's surface, and set small roots at intervals; an ethical rhizome has minimal need for foundation. Bauman's moral impulse may have just the soft consistency that does well to support an ethic that, by design, shifts and changes direction to suit its current context. Still, as the rhizome spreads and changes direction, it remains rooted in the metaphoric soil of moral impulse that is characterized by a concern for other beings.

An empiricist mode of analysis. Closely related to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic mode of expression is their understanding of an empiricist mode of philosophical analysis (Grossberg, 2003). As I understand Deleuze and Guattari's metaphilosophy, rhizomatic knowing is fueled by sensuous experience—the kinds of experiences that people often describe as “magical,” or consciousness altering, as described by Abram (1996). Jickling (2009) notes that such “embodied, know-it-in-your-bones kind of knowledge” (p. 166) forms a kind of evidence that allows for empiricist analysis leading to dynamic understandings. Working from Bauman's (1993) notion of a moral impulse, I conclude that a know-it-in-your-bones knowledge arises from an innate desire to show concern for the needs of others. In constructing a narrative understanding of conceptual analysis, an empiricist positioning makes sense. Returning to King (2003), I am reminded that, “the truth about stories is that that's all we are” (p. 2). Conceptually, one's understanding of various elements of the world, from the tangible, such as houses and rivers, to the abstract, such as relationality and despair,

are deeply informed by experiences in the world which one remembers and retells as stories (King, 2003; Knapp, 2010).

Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) recasting of the notion of concepts with greater attention to multiplicity and sensory experience may serve to reinvigorate otherwise undervalued epistemologies and ontologies. Recognizing individuals' everyday experiences as fodder for recasting "concepts for problems that necessarily change" (p. 28) may create more seats at the philosophers' table, as it were. Moreover, approaching knowledge rhizomatically may also increase the relevance of conceptual analysis to educational research, as perspectives that might have been unwelcome in bifurcated (either/or) systems of conceptualizing may find a home in a conceptual analysis that allows for concepts to be described, bridged, and interrelated in a variety of new and exciting ways.

Zones, bridges, and conceptual neighbourhoods. The concepts of activism and education are sometimes viewed as distinct or even oppositional. From such positions, education, when taken up as western compulsory schooling, is often seen as formalized, objective, and safe, while activism can be thought to be messy, radical, and involving risk (Marshall & Anderson, 2009). While neither of these descriptions is thorough or complete, they offer quick thumbnail sketches of common understandings of activism and education. Viewed through a rhizomatic lens, there is possibility for seeing "zones and bridges" that "are the joints of concepts" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 20). Rhizomatic thinking, then, may help to blur the sharp edges of a concept to allow for it to interface with adjacent concepts, and also to extend bridges towards

nonadjacent, but still related concepts. I would suggest that, where education and activism are concerned, the two concepts can be adjacent and overlapping at some edges, but also quite distinct at their opposite boundaries. At conceptual “places” where the two ideas are not clearly copasetic, bridges may emerge that facilitate less obvious linkages between neighbourhoods contained in each concept.

In my interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari (1994), while connected zones represent areas of strong intersubjective overlap between two concepts, bridges emerge to connect conceptual spaces that may have less obvious resonance, but where there remains some viable connection between two ideas, however tenuous. Conceptual bridges, then, may be rickety, or more fleeting than established zones of conceptual overlap. But just as concepts are ever changing (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994), so are their joints. Bridges may crumble, or be built stronger as the relationship between two concepts develops or dissipates; likewise, long established “zones of neighborhood” (p. 19) may dissolve as their adjoining concepts shift in time. For participants in activist education, activist experiences offer an opportunity to learn about how concepts are used, and thus what they mean, and they are able to participate as meaning makers by using concepts in new ways arising from their activist engagements. To illustrate the dynamic joints of concepts, I offer an example from the two concepts most close at hand in this research.

A rhizomatic thought experiment. I suggest that one of the prominent components at the “zone of neighbourhood” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 19) between activism and education is engagement. Imagining a panel of average people, many

would likely agree that engagement on the part of students and teachers is a hallmark of “good” education. Similarly, many of those same people would suggest that an activist is someone who demonstrates a high degree of engagement with whatever events, campaigns, or movements in which she or he is involved. In this way, the component of engagement can be seen as one particular zone of neighbourhood that conceptually joins education and activism.

In addition to more widely agreed upon areas of convergence, activism and education also have connections that are contested, or less clearly understood. One example is the notion of transformation. Returning to the imagined panel of people from the previous example, many would likely agree that someone who is counted as an activist would demonstrate a strong commitment to transformative politics. On the other hand, if a question were posed to the panel about the nature of education, there would likely be a greater diversity of opinion. For some, transformation (i.e., production of new social outcomes) would be a central aim of education, while for others, transformative politics would have no place in the educational landscape; for others still, there would be a middle ground of some shade where politics for transformation could form a component of education, but with certain limits—checks and balances to prevent manipulative or indoctrinatory tendencies from infiltrating educational practice. In this way, there may be a joiner between the components of politics for social change within the concepts of education and activism, but it would seem to be less comprehensive and more up for debate than the previous example of engagement. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) might call this connection a bridge.

A pragmatics of concept. This short conceptual analysis of activism and education is revealing of Grossberg's (2003) third strand of Deleuze and Guattari's discourse, which is a pragmatics of concepts. In his reading, their concept of concepts involves:

a certain refusal of the necessary and determining power of formal systematicity over life. Concepts may be abstractions, but they are not cut off from the materiality of life itself. Rather, as Benjamin put it, they cut into and construct the very reality from which they are derived. Like the American pragmatists, Deleuze and Guattari view concepts—including their own—as solutions to problems of thinking and living. (p. 2)

In clear language, Grossberg (2003) cuts to the heart of what concepts and stories can be, namely, thinking machines (Higgins, 2006) for processing thoughts about how to live better. He goes on to suggest ways that philosophers can put Deleuze-Guattarian style conceptual analysis to work in their research:

Their thinking, then, is to be treated as a toolbox, a collection, or perhaps an assemblage, of various tools that may be, under specific conditions, more or less useful in solving the problems we face as we continue to make our lives as part of the larger contexts of reality making itself. (p. 2)

Working from this passage, a Deleuze-Guattarian influence offers educational research one prospective avenue for reinvigorating the way that researchers understand how concepts function as the heart of stories.

In the remainder of this chapter, I shift focus from methodological theorizing to explain my narrative approach to qualitative inquiry, and to outline the methods I will use to enact such theorizing.

Narrative Inquiry as Empirical Qualitative Research

Over the past several decades, narrative researchers have worked to build a strong methodological foundation in qualitative research (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; Clandinin & Connelley, 2000; Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Within this discourse, Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou (2008) distinguish between three main theoretical streams of narrative research: *event-focused*, *experience-focused*, and *social-dialogical perspectives*. They suggest that while *event-focused* approaches primarily examine “the spoken recounting of particular past events that happened to the narrator, the person telling the story,” that *experience-focused* approaches work on:

exploring stories that range in length from segments of interviews, to many hours of life histories, and that may be about general or imagined phenomena, things that happened to the narrator, or distant matters they’ve only heard about. (p. 5)

The third stream described by Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou (2008) characterizes narrative as a *social dialog* that emerges between two or more agents; the key interest in this approach is in the patterns that are revealed through socially-constructed narratives.

I situate the current study within Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou’s (2008) *experience-focused* approach to narrative research, and connect it to the notion of rhizomatic stories as concepts that I developed earlier in this chapter, and which I also suggest is importantly affected by the lived experience of the analyst. Squire (2008) describes experience-centred approaches as ones where narratives are viewed as sequential and meaningful enactments of human sense-making. She further states that storytelling serves to reconstitute the initial experiences being represented, and offers

transformational possibilities for the narrator, the listener, or both. While both the event-centred and dialogical approaches described by Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou (2008) offer some compelling features, an experience-centred approach offers a fitting alignment with my construct of activist education as necessarily experiential.

Conceptualizing narrative in this way positions stories as not only biographical histories offered by research participants, but more importantly as socio-cultural landscapes where events, emotions, and personal reflections form contours, landmarks, and guideposts that can be interpreted alongside and in light of the conceptual bridges and zones of neighbourhood discussed earlier in this chapter. Said differently, stories recounted and collected, and analyzed through a lens of social experience, can fuel rhizomatic concept development. Likewise, understanding concepts in new ways through narrative analysis (Kohler-Reissman, 2002) may allow for new reflection on experiences, and thus new stories to be shared. This is not to suggest that concepts impose themselves on experiences, or vice versa, but to say that stories of concept and stories of experience can co-evolve, informing and intermingling rhizomatically (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) with one another along the way. In what follows, I offer details of my particular perspective on an experience-centred approach to narrative research.

Situating my experience-centred approach. In my conversations with activist educators, an experience-centred approach allowed for research participants to draw on events, emotions, and personal reflections to describe their experiences of activist

education. Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou (2008) observe that experience-centred approaches are the most popular conceptualizations of narrative inquiry in the contemporary research landscape. While they report that there is no single vision among narrative researchers concerning what an experience-centred approach must look like or how it is operationalized, the approach is constituted by some basic assumptions. Squire (2008) encapsulates these assumptions: that narratives: “are sequential and meaningful; are definitively human; ‘re-present’ experience, reconstituting it as well as expressing it; [and] display transformation or change” (p. 21, punctuation adjusted from bullet list in original). Through these foci, an experience-centred approach differs from event-centred approaches, which tend to focus on the structure of events as they are retold in narratives (Squire, 2008).

Following Squire (2008), I propose that an experience-centred approach to narrative research “rests on a phenomenological assumption that experience can, through stories, become part of consciousness” (p. 41). Interpreting the ways that consciousness is influenced by storied experiences requires attention not only to the content of a narrative, but also to its structure and context (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008). In this study, I am interested in the content of teachers’ stories of activist education, but I am more significantly interested in the ways that narrative content related to activist education is structured, and the social context in which it is situated. I understand narrative as a mediated sharing of participants’ experiences, situated within the context of the researcher-participant dialog in which it is elicited. This is to say that the power and interpersonal dynamics of the interview situation meld with the stories shared by the researcher and participant in order to make up a

narrative. My interest in analyzing narratives of activist educators is to move towards renewed conceptual understandings of education, activism, and their zones of convergence.

The ability to make meaning from the narratives of activist-educators in this study comes from interpretation of narrative interviews (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000; Squire, 2008). With this in mind, I offer an outline of the kinds of methods that characterized data collection, prefaced by a brief explanation of the journey that led me to adopt a particular method of developing experience narratives from each of the interviews I conducted.

From portraits to experience narratives. Knowing that I wanted to portray participants' stories as holistically as possible in the final presentation of my dissertation, I became interested in Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman-Davis's (1997) *portraiture* method. After seeing one of my colleagues adapt their methodology for his dissertation (Lowan, 2011), I was intrigued with their idea of a *portrait* as a holistic representation of the data collected through interviews. Having seen my colleague's approach, and also having always been engaged by reading polished interview conversations (such as Naess & Jickling, 2000), I knew I wanted to present larger chunks of polished interview text than is typical in qualitative research reporting, and I initially labeled this vision as portraiture. Later, as I was in the thick of transcribing and early analysis, questions began to arise (both for me personally, and directed at me by those evaluating my work) about what it actually meant to do and write about portraiture. I needed to enquire into the literature describing portraiture

methodology, and to question its fit with the rhizomatic ontological and epistemological assumptions that I had used to frame my research from the outset. Specifically, I felt somewhat uneasy with Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman-Davis's focus on capturing a subject's *essence* through the development of portraits, given the rhizomatic research outlook that I had been developing. In this regard, English's (2000) postmodern critique of Lawrence-Lightfoot's methods helped me to articulate my dis-ease.

English (2000) questions whether portraiture's focus on portraying a subject's *essence* is:

implicitly a quest for a foundational and stable truth, which in turn requires the portraitist to become omniscient or else the resulting verbal canvas is only a half or three-quarters truth. Portraiture represents an example of a grand theory in the social sciences when such theories are on the decline. (p. 21)

If English's assessment is accurate, and I believe it may be, then portraiture is discordant with the spirit of postmodern doubt (Burbules, 1996) that I discussed earlier in this chapter. Upon digesting this critical perspective, it seemed that portraiture was an uncomfortable fit for the underlying assumptions of my research; I needed to return to the literature for a methods approach that was better aligned with my rhizomatic research outlook.

Continued reading on narrative research proved fruitful, as I encountered work that justified my approach of representing narratives through polished and interpreted dialogical transcriptions of my interview texts. McCormack (2000a, b) calls this process creating *interpretive stories*, which she derives through a multiple lenses approach to data analysis. McCormack's (2000a, b) approach calls for multiple readings (active listening) of interview text in order to pay attention to the narrative processes, language, context, and moments that constitute the stories within the each transcript.

The findings of examining each interview through these lenses become the foundational elements for developing interpretive stories from each interview. Later, these interpretive stories are woven together to become a *personal experience narrative* that is presented as a representation of the data collected from each participant (McCormack, 2000a, b).

Methods

In the remainder of this chapter, I explain the methods used to enact the theoretical methodology discussed already. To begin, I outline a cautionary approach to thinking about the trustworthiness of qualitative research data. This primer is intended to frame the way that readers understand the methods that I employed in this study, and helps them to ask critical questions about qualitative research methods and the results derived from those methods.

Trust in Narrative Data

There is much discussion in the discourse of qualitative research around the trustworthiness of results that emerge from studies where the researcher functions as an instrument of data collection, interpretation, and reporting (Simco & Warin, 1997; Mishler, 1990). Following Berger (2008), I am concerned with the issue of trustworthiness because I want readers to feel a sense of honesty and caring when they read the experience narratives that I have curated from participants' stories, despite the presence of some researcher bias that is inevitable when one person retells the story of another. To this end, I identify some factors that may help to increase reader confidence

in the experience narratives presented in Chapter 4, and my interpretive discussion of those narratives in Chapter 5.

Trustworthiness through sampling. Agar (1980) suggests a concept of theoretical sampling, which means that the researcher seeks a sample of participants that allows for new data to be compared with data already collected, toward an end that Agar named *theoretical saturation*—the point where no more significant new data emerges. My use of a purposeful (Creswell, 2003), maximum variation (Patton, 2002) sampling approach approximates Agar’s notion of theoretical sampling in that I invited participants to be interviewed sequentially as I was transcribing the previous interview. This meant I was able to identify congruencies and discrepancies between the narratives as I was continuing to invite participation, and to target participants who were more likely to challenge the narratives already provided. The evidence of success in theoretical sampling towards saturation is found within the experience narratives themselves, which are dependent on participants’ descriptions of experience, which may also serve as a test of trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness through description. Iannacci (2007) notes that one way of fostering trust in critical narrative research is through description. He writes that:

thick, rich description as a way of fostering a sense of research ‘completeness’ has also been deemed integral to fostering the validity of a research endeavour. The level of creativity and evocative nature of description reflects artistic criteria used in judging qualitative inquiry. (p. 70)

In this study, then, the representation of participants’ stories in large chunks of polished narration, rather than broken down into smaller segments by theme is a way of offering

thick description directly from the voice of the participant. This choice was made with the intent of fostering trust in the data. While description may be a way of showcasing participants' voices in a way that adds to trustworthiness, the approach is not without problems. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) trouble the simplicity of voice, noting that the task of the narrative researcher is to present a triadic voice in research texts that fairly represents the speaker, but also acknowledges the researcher's presence in the text, and is designed to speak to the voice of the reader. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further point out that while the researcher necessarily makes judgments in the process of representing voice through description, readers must also exercise judgments of the trustworthiness of a research text. I explore the exercise of such judgment further in relation to the idea of reflexivity.

Trustworthiness through reflexivity. Chase (2005) notes that, "narrative researchers... view *themselves* as narrators as they develop interpretations and find ways in which to present and publish their ideas about the narratives they studied." (p. 657, emphasis in original). This notion connects nicely with my own conception of being a curator of the narratives that participants shared. Both Chase's notion of narrating the narratives and my thinking about curating data point to the importance of researcher reflexivity. For me, this meant rigorously considering and re-considering my own influence on the experience narratives as I interviewed, transcribed, analyzed, and shaped raw text into the experience narratives presented in the next chapter. Iannacci (2007) points out that, "researcher reflexivity demands that researchers bracket or suspend their biases as the study proceeds" (p. 68). I concur with Iannacci, and I

endeavoured to enact his advice whenever I made a decision that might shape how participants' stories might be interpreted by readers. However, Iannacci (2007) also offers a level of caution that I appreciate:

Throughout my research I became increasingly aware of my own personal biases and how they were formed... acknowledging these beliefs and biases did not ensure that they were not reinscribed in my inquiry.... I believe that it is possible for researchers to ignore narratives and theoretical proclivities that disrupt their beliefs and biases even though they have named them.... It is important to continually locate, name, examine, and reflect upon biases and beliefs *throughout* the research to remind the reader that the researcher is very much present within the narratives they are constructing and theory choices they are making. (p. 68, emphasis in original).

Iannacci's caution around the insidious nature of researcher bias is resonant with my own discomforts in curating other people's stories of activist education into experience narratives. While I practiced researcher reflexivity, I also interrogated whether I was reflexive enough to present a trustworthy experience narrative. There is anxiety on this issue that I don't have an absolute ability to resolve. In searching for some peace of mind, though, I return to Zwicky's (2003) concept of resonance. She notes that, "resonance involves the carrying-over of an impulse from one component to another" (p. 47). In this way, I imagine that if readers experience such an impulsive resonance between my research findings and their own experiences, then perhaps there is a degree of trustworthiness in the research. This idea corresponds with Mishler's (1990) position that, "if our overall assessment of a study's trustworthiness is high enough for us to *act on it*, we are granting the findings a sufficient degree of validity" (p. 419, emphasis added). I see a parallel between Zwicky's idea of an impulse, and Mishler's notion of acting on the ideas that we encounter, and I hope that readers are able to experience such examples of trustworthiness as they engage with my research.

Still, faced with the anxiety that I may not have done enough to manage my own bias, I ask readers to not let down their critical sensibilities as they read through my study results. Additionally, I invite readers who want to express dissonant views to open dialog with me. I think that this invitation is another strategy for intensifying my researcher reflexivity even after the study is finished.

Research Participants

The participants in this research are educators who are working or have worked for at least five years (or equivalent) in a formal or non-formal educational context where the primary population served is K-12 aged students, *and* who self-identify as activist educators interested in social justice and anti-oppressive education. That is to say, that they consider social justice and anti-oppressive activism a part of their pedagogical practice. Using a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2003), I interviewed 11 educators; one participant was eliminated (because their stories were not social justice focused as sampling delimitations required), for a final sample of 10. It is difficult to judge if this number is sufficient; as Sandelowski (1995) notes:

A sample size of 10 may be judged adequate for certain kinds of homogeneous or critical case sampling, too small to achieve maximum variation of a complex phenomenon or to develop theory, or too large for certain kinds of narrative analysis. (p. 179)

She concludes that researcher judgment is the ultimate factor in deciding when to stop sampling. Within narrative methods literature, there is scarce guidance on the ideal number of participants or volume of data. However, 10 participant interviews (ranging 45 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes) are roughly commensurate with some other examples of narrative research I reviewed (e.g.: Coulter, Michael, & Poyner, 2007;

Mwebi, 2012; Tourangeau, 2008). The sample was designed to represent a cross-section of experiences and perspectives on education and activism, with the aim of uncovering both unique perspectives as well as shared ideas among participants (Patton, 2002). There were six female participants and four male. Their ages range from late 20s to retirement age; eight participants were early to mid-career teachers at the time of the interview, while one was nearing retirement and one was semi-retired. All the participants were White, or at least appeared to be. Six participants were recruited from within my personal and professional network, 2 were recommended by others who knew of my research but did not participate, and 2 were recruited through “snowball” recruitment from other study participants (Berg, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Initially, it was my intention to recruit a smaller primary cohort of participants (3-4 people) from my own personal and professional networks in order to “snowball” to a larger sample by inviting participants to recruit new participants. In practice, this proved difficult because initial participants did not refer others, or because those who they referred did not meet my recruitment criteria, did not respond to recruitment, or chose not to participate. As a result, I recruited additional prospective participants from my network, and accepted referrals from people in my network who could not participate. Perspective participants received a recruitment package including an advertisement, explanatory letter, consent form, and a list of preparatory story prompts (attached in Appendix B).

Data Collection

The primary source of data was interviews. 10 Participants were recruited and

interviewed between February and July 2012, and one additional participant was interviewed in January 2013 (because she was unknown to me until that time). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 45 minutes, and took place at a variety of locations that were convenient and comfortable for the interview participant. While practical advice on conducting interviews (Creswell, 2003) usually recommends a quiet space without distraction or noise that could interfere with focus or recording quality, I disregarded these directions in favour of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) suggestion that "the conditions under which the interview takes place also shape the interview; for example, the place, time of day, and degree of formality established" (p. 110). With this in mind, I let participants take the lead in establishing an interview context that was good for them, with the hope that greater participant comfort would yield richer stories. This meant meeting at a variety of day and evening times, and in a variety of venues including coffee shops, restaurants, a park, participants' homes, and occasionally a quiet office or meeting room. One interview was conducted via Skype video chat software, while the rest were conducted in person. Each interview was audio recorded with the permission of the participant. The participants recruited were all teachers in Ontario, Canada.

In order to aid participants in effectively narrating their experiences with education and activism, a series of story prompts were emailed to participants a few days ahead of the interview session. I viewed these as a means of "priming the pump," as it were, and helping participants to tell their stories in more thoughtful and coherent ways. In the end, I am uncertain if this was effective, as some participants reported paying close attention to what I had sent, while others didn't get time to review the

documents thoroughly, and there is no clear difference in the richness of their narratives based on this distinction.

Patton (2002) points out that, in the field of naturalistic inquiry, it is rarely possible to plot a detailed course of action before a study begins, because it is “in the moment” when many of the most important details to be studied become evident. As such, I embraced an emergent approach to my data collection. Emergent design operates through dispositions of flexibility, openness, and trust in the process of naturalistic inquiry (Patton, 2002). In the spirit of emergent design, I began with a loose heuristic of how I would conduct this research informed by broad sources on qualitative approaches (Berg, 2009; Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002) and narrative research (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; Clandinin & Connelley, 2000; Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). As I progressed with interviewing, transcription, and the early stages of analyzing the resultant narratives, I returned to methodological literature on narrative research in order to give greater definition to my approach to analysis (Kohler-Reissman, 2002; McCormack, 2000a; 2000b) based on what I knew about the data I had collected and how best to treat it fairly.

At the outset, my plan was to collect narrative data through two avenues: one-on-one interviews with each participant and one or more group interviews. After I completed one-on-one interviews, I decided not to arrange for group interviews for three reasons. First, because the 10 one-on-one interviews I had conducted yielded more data than anticipated. Second, because participants who I asked about participating in another interview showed reluctant interest, and explained that they

felt guarded with their time given the demands of teaching, plus their activist interests, while also maintaining personal and family lives. Finally, a particular sub-group of participants who would have made for an interesting group interview that would complement the existing data rather than simply duplicate it did not present itself. Data collection procedures were reviewed and approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board.

Story-sharing interviews. I set out using the term “interview” loosely in my approach to research as an acknowledgment of the long history interviews hold in qualitative approaches to research, discussed by Fontana and Frey (2005). In my approach to interviewing, I wanted to avoid an overly formal, transactional, question and answer session, and attempt to create an environment where participants were invited to tell stories about their experiences as educators engaging with activism as part of their teaching practice. In retrospect, I had the idea that I would ask a few opening questions, after which participants would tell one or more stories about their work as activist educators, and I would close by asking probing and clarifying questions about the stories that they shared.

As I began interviewing, I quickly learned that the process of conducting interviews is not nearly as neat and tidy as I had expected. In practice, my experience was that stories would not wait until their allotted time to be shared; the introductory questions that I asked frequently elicited stories from my participants, and likewise my clarifying and probing questions about their narratives prompted more stories to emerge. Moreover, my initial idea that I would simply provide participants with a

prompt to tell stories and they would tell them did not pan out. In this regard, I am glad that I was encouraged by my committee to spend time crafting quality interview questions. I thought that the interview questions would be secondary to the telling of stories; in many of the interviews they were key to helping participants find their stories. Perhaps my most important methodological learning from this process is that in the context of a formal interview situation, rich stories are rarely shared on cue, but are elicited through well-crafted questions designed in advance, as well as thoughtful probes that may develop in the moment. For further detail on interview format, my interview guide is included as Appendix A, and an analysis of each interview question in relation to the dissertation research questions makes up Appendix B. In the end, my interview process followed the spirit of Fontana and Frey's (2005) creative and polyphonic interviews where "interviewers...forget 'how to' rules, and must adapt to the ever-changing situations they face" (p. 709). In depth, one-on-one conversations with research participants allowed time and space for specific individuals to share their own stories of experience with activist education.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Patton (2002) astutely points out that the "challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data... and constructing a framework for communicating... what the data reveal" (p. 432). He goes on to argue that there are no strict regulations on how data analysis should be undertaken, except maybe for a precept that advises: "Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study" (p. 433).

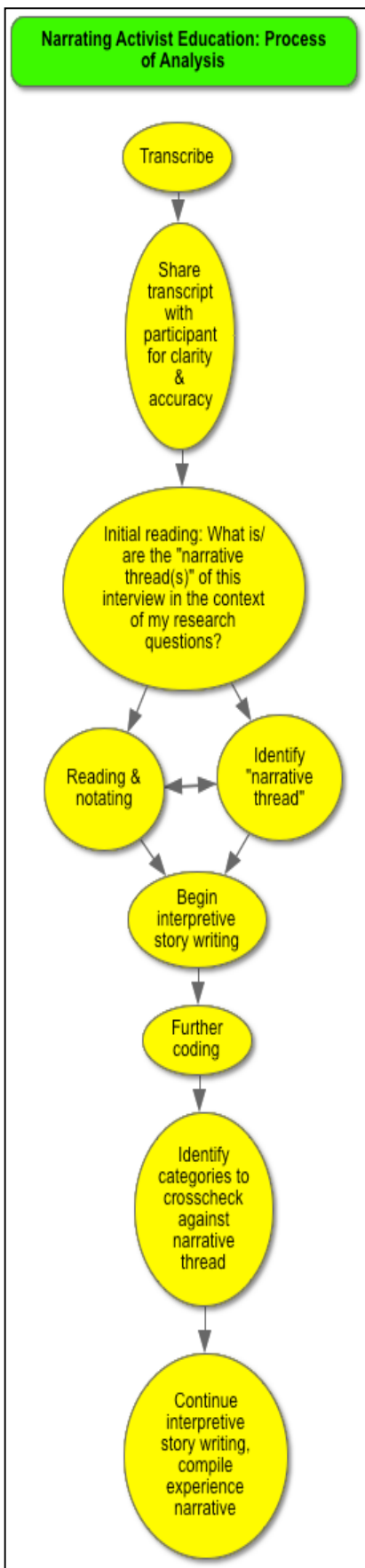


Figure 3 - Process of Analysis

With this advice in mind, I crafted a method of analysis that respects the needs of participants' stories, and is also supported by data analysis principles described in narrative research literature. In paying attention to the needs of participants' stories, I was attempting to recognize a kind of reciprocity between myself as researcher and the participants who volunteered for my study—understanding that participants might have specific ideas to convey to me outside of what I was asking them to share about. This reciprocity meant being open to and aware of all of the stories they shared, even if some of those fell outside of my framework of relevancy for the study.

Figure 3 depicts a flow chart that I developed to show my analysis process from interview transcription to representation of results. This flow of analysis loosely mimics Kohler-Riessman's (2002) stages of narrative analysis, and also integrates concepts of analysis from McCormack's (2000a, 2000b) approach to interpretive story development, and Richardson's (2001) notion of writing as a method of inquiry. Following transcription of the recorded interviews (I transcribed the first eight interviews myself, and paid

for transcription of the last two due to time constraints), I provided each participant with a copy of the transcript for them to verify the accuracy of what had been transcribed, as well as to indicate if there was anything they would like to have omitted. None of the participants indicated that there were any significant errors in transcription. So, with the transcript process completed, I began an initial reading while listening along with the audio recording. I reviewed the interview with a view to answering the question: *what is/are the narrative thread(s) of this interview in the context of my research?* I envision the term *narrative thread* to mean an overarching theme or themes that is or are revealed through the story or stories that each participant shared during our conversation. In some instances, a narrative thread was strikingly evident through an initial reading and listening, while in other cases multiple passes and detailed notation of the transcript (guided by McCormack's, 2000a, multiple lenses approach to analyzing narratives) to organize ideas were required before a narrative thread emerged.

My effort at identifying a narrative thread for each conversation positions the whole interview as the primary unit of analysis (Chenail, 2012) for this study. Chenail's (2012) interest in focusing analysis on larger units of text than single lines or even words is congruent with McCormack's (2000a) position that "the traditional method of coding for themes in transcripts and studying those themes separated people's words from their spoken and heard context." She notes that this vivisection results in "the loss of the individual's experience and the context of that experience" (p. 283). I focus on a larger unit of analysis, then, with the intent of preserving the context of participants' narratives to the greatest extent possible. I provide more on this in the discussion of

narrative representation, below.

Once I identified a narrative thread, I began to craft the interpretive stories (McCormack, 2000a; 2000b) and the experience narrative (McCormack, 2004) that would become the representation of the stories that each participant shared. I treated the writing of interpretive stories as a process of research, guided by Richardson's (2001) idea of "writing as a method of discovery" (p. 35) as I curated participants' stories and my own commentary into an experience narrative. At some point midway in the writing process, I usually felt stuck, sometimes because of my proclivity for distraction, or sometimes because the transcripts were somehow puzzling. As this feeling of *stuckness* became uncomfortable and unproductive, I took breaks from constructing the interpretive stories, and returned to the transcript to continue notating and organizing my notations into groups by theme. The purpose of this process was not to engage in a primary mode of analysis that I expressed caution about, above, but rather to operate as a secondary process that served as a means of cross-checking that the narrative thread identified in my early readings of a transcript was, in fact, the best descriptor of the rich complexity of the stories as evidenced by my interpretive notations on each interview transcript. My approach to this phase of analysis draws on Richards's (2009) notion of "seeing a whole" (p. 171), where strategies like coding and memoing are practiced with a view to synthesis, rather than in isolating data in chunks of disconnected meaning. Underlying Richards's suggestion is an interest in "discovering the core themes or the overriding pattern" (p. 171), a view that synchs nicely with the rhizomatic orientation from which I derived the idea of narrative threads that would help to tie together the interpretive story that I prepared from each

interview. The particular approach that I applied to conducting analysis was to read and re-read interview transcripts and to notate using McCormack's (2000a) multiple lenses of *active listening, narrative processes, language, context, moments*. For example, one reading and notation of a transcript would relate specifically to McCormack's (2000a) lens of narrative processes. In that round of reading, I attended to the text specifically to identify various narrative processes that each participant used as they conveyed their stories. This was repeated for each lens, and the resultant notations became helpful guides in shaping how interpretive stories and larger experience narratives would be developed by highlighting the portions of text that best conveyed the meanings relevant to the research questions I was exploring. In Table 1 below, I provide a summary of my understanding of each of McCormack's (2000a) lenses.

<i>Lens</i>	<i>Summary</i>	<i>Questions Arising</i>
Active Listening	-Recursive listening and reading of each interview text with delayed notation for meaning making so as to privilege listening in earlier rounds.	Characters? Events? Timing? Interviewer positioning? Interviewer/participant in relation to each other?
Narrative Processes	-Identifying strategies used to give shape to the story. Specifically: Stories, description, argumentation, augmentation, & theorizing.	
Language	-Identifying the ways that particular uses of language affect the way that stories are interpreted.	What did the participant say? How did s/he say it? What didn't get said?
Context	-Identifying how the cultural context and situational context of the interview impact the stories told, and how they might best be interpreted given those contexts.	CULTURE: What cultural assumptions are at play for each speaker? How do these affect what each person says? SITUATION: Is there anything telling about responses to the first and last questions asked? Does the text reveal situational factors

		that aid interpretation (short vs. long answers, tone of researcher/participant interaction, what was/wasn't probed further?)
Moments	-Identifying special points of interest within the text that demand explanation within the interpretive story.	

Table 1 - Summary of McCormack's (2000a) multiple lenses.

Narrative Representation

In contemplating how to represent the stories that participants shared within the completed dissertation, I wanted to take an approach that would give readers a broader sense of the interaction I shared with each participant than is common in qualitative research reporting (McCormack, 2000b). In this way, McCormack's (2000a, 2000b) method of developing interpretive stories resonated strongly with me, specifically in the sense that:

ethical and accountable research demands that when we write these stories we do not write research participants out of their lives... we need to write in a way that does not inscribe our writing with a narrative authority that rewrites a participant's story in such a way that it becomes our story only. (2000b, p. 312)

Further, McCormack's method also emphasizes that, "we do not write ourselves out of the story by including only our voice as a disembodied reporter of another's experience" (p. 312). These points offer justification for my choice to represent participant's stories as polished and curated dialogs between the participants and me. While I have seen other examples of this kind of representation (see Lowen, 2011; Naess & Jickling, 2000), it is helpful to have discovered a method of analysis and representation that is strongly aligned with the fundamental methodological

assumptions about a rhizomatic approach to conceptual analysis that I espoused earlier in this chapter.

Delimitations and Limitations

The main delimiting factor of this research was the choice to eliminate educators working from activist frameworks who do not work from a social justice or anti-oppressive ideological framework. This choice helped to give clarity to what I mean by activism, and to illustrate the kinds of values that underlie my conception of activism.

Sampling and sample size was a limitation in the study. Deciding who were the right people to talk to and how many was an ongoing challenge for me. The decision to recruit a small sample beginning with contacts known to the researcher was a metaphorical double-edged sword. On one hand, it is a limitation because the data produced from the sample may not reach theoretical saturation (Agar, 1980), and any existing relationship outside of the research may impact (positively or negatively) what the participant shares. Conversely, it may have added richness to the data because word-of-mouth recruitment had the consequence of a sample group that was more familiar with the researcher, and thus perhaps more likely to speak candidly about their activist education practices given the professional risks (Marshall & Anderson, 2009; “Andrea” & “Roger,” participants in this project) that may arise from such admissions. How this limitation played out in practice is perhaps best left for the reader to judge. From my perspective, while the interviews with participants of whom I had existing knowledge tended to be longer than other interviews, I cannot say that they are more or less rich; as I have spent so much time working with the interview text, I am able to find

richness in each of them. As researcher, my closeness to the data may represent a limitation in and of itself, as there may be idiosyncrasies that I don't see because of how connected I am to the stories.

Interviews as a data gathering mechanism also present limitations. The stories shared in the interviews may fall prey to “recall error, reactivity of the interviewee to the interviewer, and self-serving responses” (Patton, 2002, p. 306). While I have no reason to believe that the stories shared with me were fabricated, I had no way of corroborating the accounts that each participant articulated. Mitchell (2014) acknowledges this reality of narrative research, but takes solace in the idea that while the factual accuracy of a story may be imperfect, that the story holds a particular truth for its teller, and that truth may have some meaningful use for others operating in similar contexts. I encourage readers to enjoy the stories for what they have to offer, but also to remain critical in appraising each participant's narration of their experiences of being an activist educator.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, my privileged social position as a White, male, educated, professionally employed individual also creates a limitation. Because the sampling began with people from within my network of contacts, people like me may be over represented, despite efforts that I made to work towards maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002). The concern may be somewhat alleviated by the fact that most teachers would be considered educated and professionally employed, and that female participants are well represented. However, the prevalence of Whiteness in the sample is a limitation of which readers should take heed. All of the participants and the researcher in this study appear to be White, and thus benefit from a White privilege

(Wise, 2011) that, among other benefits, may allow them to conduct activism in their work with a degree of ease not experienced by activist educators who are not White. Likewise, as a researcher, I also benefit from White privilege. This is not a position that I can escape, but it is one that I acknowledge, in the hope that naming my privilege may help me to identify moments when, and in what capacities, White privilege may be at work.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has explained the methodology of this research both theoretically and logistically. In the beginning of the chapter I explained a theoretical approach that underpins the way that I chose to conduct the research. Both Deweyan and postmodern ways of thinking about education and education research inform this theoretical grounding. Specifically, I draw on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) metaphor of a conceptual rhizome, whereby the image of a crawling vine is used to explain the complex interaction of concepts like activism and education. Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome metaphor shows the narrative character of concepts, twisting and turning in new directions as they struggle to grow, develop, and change.

In the second part of the chapter, I turned to more logistical matters and explained my use of narrative research methods to collect, analyze, and represent the stories shared by participants in the research. The purpose of this section was to explain the methods so as to bring transparency to the research, and to help foster a critical trustworthiness in the experience narratives that are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS: STORYING THE FINDINGS

Working from the methodology presented in the preceding chapter, this chapter presents the results of analysis from the story-sharing interview conducted with each participant. The results take the form of 10 experience narratives (McCormack, 2000b). Following McCormack (2000a), each interview was parsed for its stories, as well as other text that supported the stories shared by each participant. This parsing was guided by the three dissertation research questions:

- What relationships exist between education and activism? What qualities characterize their convergences?
- In what ways, and under what conditions can activism add richness and depth to education?
- How is the relationship between education and activism conceptualized and practiced by teachers who identify as activist educators?

As I worked to curate the text from a transcript into an experience narrative, I attempted to include text that showed the participants grappling with their own understandings: relationships between education and activism, working through ideas that they are still trying to fully understand, asking questions of themselves about activist/education relationships, situating themselves in relation to both activism and education, and the intersecting areas of these concepts. Likewise, text that didn't reflect these concerns in significant ways was excluded from the experience narratives. To introduce the chapter, I offer a primer with suggestions for reading and making meaning from the experience narratives of each participant. The driving force in my decisions about what would be included or excluded in the final experience narratives arose from the *narrative thread* that I identified early in the analysis of each interview transcript. As I was faced with curating the field texts into research texts (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000), I asked myself, *is this essential for representing the narrative thread that I have identified as being at the heart of this field text?* Elements of the field text that were essential were retained, and those that were deemed non-essential were set aside.

A Primer: Notes for Reading the Experience Narratives.

At a glance, it would be natural for a critical reader of this chapter to wonder in what way the 10 experience narratives presented here constitute an analysis of qualitative data, and not simply a transcription of the text collected from each interview. Indeed, each experience narrative is heavy with participants' verbatim words, but the process of transforming an interview transcript into an experience narrative is far more in-depth than a simple copy and paste function. Creation of the experience narratives was guided by methodologies including McCormack's (2000a, b) multiple lenses approach, which inspired iterative reading of the text from different perspectives; Kohler-Riessman's narrative analysis and Richardson's (2001) writing as research, which both emphasized that analysis is not a discrete undertaking, but ongoing from the time of the interview until beyond the time the results are "fixed" in text. Finally, I frequently relied on Patton's (2002) advice beyond specific methods: treat data as fairly as possible to the best of the researcher's ability. This maxim was immeasurably helpful at times when decisions needed to be made, and no concrete advice was available about the best course of action. So, for instance, in the transition from field texts to research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I often felt attached to particular elements of text, and the wisdom of scholars working in the area of narrative methodology often helped me to feel more confident in excising text that I was fond of

but which was distracting from the narrative thread that I wanted to illustrate in each experience narrative.

It is Patton's advice that led me to think of myself as a curator of the artifacts that were gifted to me as a researcher. Like the curator of a museum or art gallery, my role was to showcase the ideas shared by each participant—not in a way that claims to encapsulate *the essence* (see Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997) of the individual as an activist educator, but simply to highlight key ideas that arose from my interpretations of the stories. Undoubtedly, the process of curating stories necessarily imbues my own biases and assumptions into the final product to a certain degree. Rather than hide or explain away this situatedness, I embrace it along with Patton's (2002) data-fairness maxim, and a healthy dose of personal reflexivity. By including my own voice in the experience narratives, both within the context of the interview text, and in brief moments of commentary, I hope that my own reflection holds a place within each experience narrative. The social justice, anti-oppressive framework that I constructed throughout the preceding chapters offers readers an understanding of who I am as a researcher, a teacher, and an activist. Readers should expect to find elements of my social justice and anti-oppressive commitments in each experience narrative alongside the voice of the participant-storytellers. As Iannacci (2007) notes, even after naming biases and situating one's self within the research, these factors cannot be eliminated from the research. He suggests, though, that through reflexivity and rich description, higher degrees of trustworthiness in research texts may be achieved. Throughout the experience narratives, I have attempted to imbue my own reflexivity

and provide rich description—in many cases in the speakers' verbatim words—in order to achieve a greater degree of trust with readers.

Practical Reading Tips

In order to facilitate reading, I have formatted the text of the experience narratives differently than the rest of the dissertation. Participant voices and mine are represented in single-spaced and indented text. Where there are two voices speaking in turn, each is identified with the speaker's initial in bold and italics followed by a colon (e.g., ***B:*** for Blair). In places where only the participant is speaking, no initial is provided but the text is still indented and single-spaced. In all but one instance (Tim, who chose to use his real first name), participants created or were assigned pseudonyms for the study. All names of people, places, and schools are also disguised to protect anonymity.

Each experience narrative is comprised of a series of interpretive stories developed from transcriptions of the stories shared by participants. Each interpretive story is identified by a title heading in bold text at the beginning, and a marker (//) for the stories' *coda* (McCormack, 2000a) at its end. Participant speech outside of the interpretive stories are examples of editorial narrative processes that support the speakers' stories. Double spaced text represents my scholarly commentary, including a brief introduction to each participant, and short commentaries on the most significant ideas shared throughout each experience narrative. In the interest of giving the storyteller's voice primacy within the experience narrative, I endeavored to limit my commentary to only items that help provide context for the reader, or where an idea shared is so significant to the central questions of the research or the existing literature

relevant to activist education that not to call attention to it in the moment would represent a lost opportunity for discussion. In Chapter 5, I offer a more in-depth discussion of the trends and patterns that I found evident across the 10 experience narratives.

In curating spoken expression into meaningful written text, I had to make choices about punctuating text in ways that cadence of speech and thoughtful pauses could be understood as I believe the speaker intended them. Commas, periods, and Em-Dashes (—) are used to represent pauses and verbal cadence. Driven by the methodological spirit of transparency, I desired to present verbatim participant speech so readers could get as close as possible to the “raw” data. However, filler words like “um,” and “ah,” repetition of words or phrases, and other abnormalities that are a normal part of verbal conversation can cause lengthy distractions when transcribed into writing. In curating the experience narratives, I retained such utterances where they help to offer context or nuance to the speakers’ words, and removed it in places where filler words or repetitions serve more as detractors from understanding. Also, because it was impractical to present each interview in its entirety, ellipses were used to show breaks in text. A three point ellipsis (...) shows an omission within a sentence, and a four point ellipsis (....) shows a break that crosses over one or more sentences.

What is a Self-Identified Activist Educator?

I have defined activist education as an intentional educational practice where participants engage in guided learning activities that help individuals to understand themselves as capable of affecting change for social and ecological justice within

personally relevant environments. In alignment with this definition, I created a list of a list of sensitizing ideas (Bell, 2003) intended to attract teachers through environments, ideas, and actions that further social justice and anti-oppressive ends. Prospective participants self-selected an identification with the term “activist educator.” The sensitizing prompts suggested that activist educators might:

- Talk about contentious current issues with their students, and encourage students to take actions about issues that are important for them.
- Make space for activism within their teaching. This could be through whole class activities (food drives, fundraising, etc.) or projects initiated by individual students.
- Integrate service learning or community service learning opportunities into their teaching.
- Supervise extra-curricular initiatives that invite activist opportunities, such as:
 - Environmental clubs
 - Gay/Straight Alliance Groups
 - Amnesty International clubs
 - Multicultural associations
 - Some spiritual or faith based organizations.

The recruitment advertisement further articulated that this was not an exhaustive list, and that other parallel characteristics might also be associated with activist education. Further qualifications asked for individuals with progressive political outlooks (e.g., social or environmental justice) and with a minimum of five years of experience.

The Experience Narratives at a Glance

Because of the length of the 10 experience narratives as a whole, I offer this section as a table of contents to help readers navigate. The experience narratives are presented chronologically in the order that I met with the participants. Some readers will be interested in reading all of the experience narratives, while others may prefer to

pick and choose based on their own specific interests. The following table offers a guide to the experience narratives. Another table at the end of the chapter offers a short summary of each:

Name	Personal Context	Narrative Thread
Andrea	White, female, straight, high-school teacher, Northwestern Ontario, early career.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring: Dialog and conversation • “Being the change?”
Mindy	White, female, high school teacher, Greater Toronto Area, late career.	How should we treat each other?
Dave	White; male; high school teacher, VP, and principal; Greater Toronto Area; retired from public school system, working part-time in post secondary.	Human rights as central educational narrative
Colleen	White, female, high school teacher, outdoor educator, integrated program, Central and Northwestern Ontario, mid-career.	Curiosity and self-directedness
Jennifer	White, female, bisexual, elementary school teacher, Greater Toronto Area (G.T.A.), early/mid-career.	Safety and Inclusion
Grace	White, female, high school teacher, Greater Toronto Area, early/mid career.	Love!
Tim	White, male, former high school teacher, now editor of <i>Green Teacher</i> magazine, political candidate for Ontario Green Party, G.T.A.	Community citizenship
Estevan	White, male, gay, high school teacher, mid-career, G.T.A.	Integrating equity
Nate	White, male, gay, high-school teacher, mid-career, alternative school, G.T.A.	Caring Community
Zoe	White, female, high school teacher, mid-career, Central Ontario.	Teaching Subversion

NOTE: All names are pseudonyms, except for Tim who requested to be identified by his own name. Sexual orientation is only indicated where a participant self-disclosed. Narrative thread was identified by analysis as described in Chapter 3. The experience narratives are presented in the order that the interviews were conducted.

Table 2 - Participant Details

Andrea - “An Interrupter of the Highest Order”
(Narrative Threads: Dialog and Critical Questioning AND “Being the Change”)

Andrea is a teacher in her early 30s, and has taught for 5 years at several secondary schools in Northwestern Ontario. She has taught a variety of subjects, including civics, history, family studies, and social science courses. In addition to her classroom teaching, Andrea has supervised many extra-curricular programs including a peer-counseling group, and a gay-straight alliance, which she talks extensively about in our discussion.

Of the 10 interviews I conducted, Andrea’s was by far the longest at 1 hour 48 minutes. For this reason, her stories are split into two experience narratives that each represent one of the main threads that characterize her thinking about activist education: dialog and critical questioning, and “being the change?”

Part 1 - Dialog and Critical Questioning

I began by asking Andrea how important activist teaching was to her as an educator. She responded with a story that partially illustrates her entry point into an activist educator identity:

Radical Nannying: Activist Educator Entry Point

A: So, at the same time, I was helping my friend with her nannying job, so I was spending time after school with this little, very intelligent little girl, and we had lots of very interesting conversations about important things like social justice issues, like gay marriage, from a 5 year old, and that kind of turned my mind on to, that kids could be open to these kinds of conversations, and so there could be some kind of activism done from within the system, within the context of education.

B: When you say these kinds of conversations, you mean?

A: Like, critical conversations about society and the world, and how not everything in our society is just. My friend, who was the main nanny, the “chief” nanny of this little girl, was in a same-sex relationship. And this little girl was learning that her nanny had a girlfriend, not a boyfriend. And that was what started the conversation about, and she, just said to me one day “do you know there are some places where girls can marry girls, and boys can marry boys, and there are some places that they can’t?” And I was like, you’re 5... how do you know that?

And, the conversation that we had about, like, acceptance, and the fact that it’s not ok for some people to not be accepted in some places. And that conversation was really rewarding for me as an individual. As my educational career went on, those feelings are much more complicated than I realized when I started. So, feelings of “oh, I had a meaningful conversation with a student, and that makes me feel good, or a child and that makes me feel good” ... that there are some complications there in terms of activism and education, but that was my sort of my initial response.... spending time with this little girl feels so incredibly, it’s so enjoyable and there’s so much potential for growth there, because I kinda’ felt like kids weren’t, kids or teens weren’t as rigid yet. They’re still in a place where they can be influenced.... Which is also problematic, but we’ll get to that. {laughs}

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Having broken the ice and elicited a sense of how Andrea came to identify as an activist educator, I wanted to make sure that using the word *activism* to describe Andrea’s practice was right for her; I wanted to make sure that she was not using the word activism just because it was the word that I was using:

B: Umm, So in my research I’m using the term activism.... but I’m wondering how the term activism fits with what you see yourself to be doing as an educator?

A: I think that it fits really well, for me. Um, like, in my own mind, I think that that’s exactly what I’m doing. I have had conversations with people... . like, with teachers. Or students... and they’re like “well, you’re not like wearing black, and like a Dead Kennedy’s T-shirt and trying to blow up banks, so how can you be an activist?” I think we have very rigid... . a very rigid view of what activism is, like it involves a placard, and screaming, and like standing on a street corner. And to me that’s not what it is at all.

I prompted further by asking what exactly activism looks like in the context of her teaching. Her answer highlights the importance of dialog and critical conversations:

I think that in teaching, you have the opportunity to have meaningful conversations, and I think that for me, activism in my teaching is taking the opportunities to sort of poke at preconceived notions and assumptions that we may have about gender, or race, or class, or, you know, the norm, as it were... what the norms of society are. And, the classroom is the perfect place to start those conversations, you know? And, it comes out in lessons, but it comes out organically... and I hate when people overuse that term, but it really does. Like, it emerges in conversation. Like, you listen to the students... kids will be talking about an issue in a school, so like, the football team... talk about the resources that the football team gets, versus the junior girls' basketball team. And, why is that fair? Well, it's not fair. Right? And so, just because it's not part of the lesson plan and part of the curriculum per se, it's a very important conversation to have. Why does it make people angry? Why are some people defensive? Why are some people on the offensive? You know, why do we put so much stock in football, which is a predominantly, almost exclusively male enterprise in schools? But, the curriculum documents open up the door for critical conversations, you can grab hold of those strands, use them, talk about, have those conversations in your classroom, and nobody can come to you and say that it isn't based in the curriculum.

Here, Andrea's commitment to feminism becomes clear, and remains a constant foundation for her stories throughout our conversation. Likewise, she references the centrality of curriculum, which will become an important theme across several of the experience narratives. Before we continued, Andrea made sure to clarify for me that her thinking about activist education had changed significantly over the five years she had been teaching:

So, you know, I think that for me, and I think that that perspective has evolved. I think that when I started teaching, it was like... I'm an activist and I can like, make my students activists too, right? And I can sort of... share my views with them, and they're obviously going to see that those views are the right ones {sarcasm}... and then I'll like have this army of teens who go out into the world, and like, think like me. And then the world will be a better place. And, but that's really problematic. You can't do that. You can't do that to somebody. And so, that's why I'm now at the point where I see it as the start of the conversation.

I prompted further to find out about how she came to have these perspectives:

Oh, my goodness. Um... Well, kids are smart. And they don't... they're whole life...as teenagers is being imposed upon by adults. And... kids called me on it. That I was sort of... in their own way... That I was imposing my values on them, and it doesn't come out that way... they don't say "you're imposing your values on me" they say like... "screw you, I don't want to do this" or you know, they tease you... or... there's power struggles, right? And, those were important power struggles for me to... define my own position, but also to understand that... I'm an educator... I have to provide... that I can provide a certain environment, and I can be very clear about what my standards are in that environment, and what my values are... like transparency is really important, um, but you're never going to have an authentic conversation unless other voices are allowed to be heard.

Here, Andrea's thinking points to the problem of activist education as an imposition on students by teachers:

I had many difficult, frustrating, upsetting conversations with kids because I opened up this Pandora's box when it came to social justice issues like race or gender or whatever, and but, when I think back on it was very upsetting for me at the time to hear people say racist or sexist things, but then I realized that it was a testament to the environment that I created that those dissenting voices could be heard.... I consider my politics to be on the left; people are often targeted as being indoctrinators by the status quo, right?... "you're an indoctrinator of the, of kids! And you want to create some kind of red army!" You know? But, that wasn't...

I interrupted her at that point:

B: Did you encounter that directly?

A: No... but I guess that was something that I *felt* in the institutional environment. I felt like it was there, from colleagues, and there was sort of this like... I would do things in my teaching, and take risks in my teaching that scared other teachers, because that's not what learning looked like to them... .So they were kind of, there was always a non-acceptance.

The italic text that I have added to emphasize the word *felt* here does not do justice to Andrea's exclamation of the feeling of being, at least in some ways, shunned by other teachers for her teaching methods that breach the seemingly apolitical status quo of public schooling. Her feeling of being alone, or not accepted by her colleagues as a result

of her identity as an activist educator is telling of why many educators, according to Marshall and Anderson (2009) may avoid activism or controversy in their teaching.

Both Tim and Zoë offer remarks that resonate with Andrea's feeling of being alone.

Before continuing, I asked Andrea to clarify something that she had said earlier about imposing her activist values on students. She responded:

A: I certainly experienced a lot more students who were leaping at the opportunity to have their voice heard in the classroom.

Andrea reported that honouring students' voices in her classroom is a central tenet of her activist education. She further noted that cultivating such a classroom environment made her popular among students, which can create challenges in maintaining the kind of detached professionalism that is expected of public school teachers:

A: That's a really tricky role for a teacher. Because you can't... just be motivated because you want your students to like you

This line of conversation reminded Andrea of an experience she had with a former student in the weeks before our meeting, resulting in a story about Facebook.

Activist Facebook Policing

A: I had that experience just on Facebook last week with a former student, who's... just about to graduate from the BEd program. Anyways, so she was talking, we were having some kind of conversation on Facebook, and I had mentioned that I had seen one of my students on the street dealing drugs, and that was a really sort of disturbing moment, to see this drug deal happen and realize the dealer was my former student. And she made some kind of comment like, "I can't speak for all of us, but there are some of us that you inspired to do greater things" and I thought, in that moment, I knew she was trying to pay me a compliment, but I had to respond in a way, because she is going to be an educator, and I don't want her going into a classroom thinking that because she decided to be a teacher, and some other kid's a drug dealer that she's better, right? Like, she just has different life circumstances. And so, I had to make a comment that kind of checked her a little, and I didn't like feel comfortable with that, because {Facebook} it's a social space, and she was just trying to pay me a

compliment, but sometimes you have to sort of remind people that it's not clear cut. And that's something that they... that I don't think anyone can prepare you for when you go into teaching, is the complexity of human relations.

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Andrea's commitment to facilitating critical conversation is demonstrated through her desire to "check" her former student's views. This story gives the sense that Andrea's work as an educator extends beyond the obligatory classroom duties required of her as a teacher. She offers a final thought about how her activist teaching style facilitates these kinds of connections:

I don't see everyone having that opportunity with students. Because, I think it's, I think to be an activist educator, to be an honest educator and to be someone who's willing to admit that you have faults, and you have perspectives, and you're a human being and you make mistakes, and you don't know everything. It's really risky, but it's really powerful. And that resonates with kids, I think.

Part 2 - "Being the Change?"

Having developed a sense of Andrea's comfort with the term activism, and a basic sense of what that activism might look like in her practice, I wanted to know about the philosophical underpinnings of her work as an educator. Little did I know at the time that this shift in the line of questioning would be a clear window into the second major narrative theme of our conversation, "being the change?"

A: I think this is where, um, I see an evolution in my thinking, right? Like, I think I was very "be the change" when I started. And, as I say that, um... I still think that's a very powerful notion. And I think that I said that, I actually had that printed on a piece of paper and put it on the front of my desk for my very first class ever. My very first classes, that Gandhi quote was on the front of my desk. But, I think that what that looked like, what "being the change" looked like to me when I started teaching was very different from what it is now. And, similar to what we talked about a few minutes ago, I was very gung-ho, and felt like I can really create all kinds of change, and influence kids, you know? And, the kids needed saving, and I was going to be the one to save them...

And so, but, again, by the time it came to... the last incarnation of my career as a secondary teacher.... I couldn't expect... that they would start the semester with me, being one way, and then by the end they were like, you know, activists... as I understood that... . So, I guess, so that's one part, but that's not really answering your question, is it? So, what is my philosophy? What are the values that guide...? See, for me, this question is really bogged down in academic terms, too. Which, I don't want to overuse, but they're meaningful.

Here, I assured Andrea that she shouldn't be afraid to use academic terms, if they are terms of reference for her educational philosophy.

So, one of the key theories that influence me was anti-oppressive education. The notion of anti-oppressive education. Kevin Kumashiro and Ellsworth, and all the rest. Um, because, it looked at, to me it's a way of looking at the classroom as a holistic experience, and um, and looking at the way you deliver the curriculum, the way you act. Like, it's kind of like a self-reflective assault on everything going on in a classroom... In a good way... . I think that that is the only way that I could do activist education, as I became more comfortable in that role and could see the potential power that I had to influence students. But... it also ran against the grain for me if that wasn't authentic. I didn't just want a bunch of people running around telling me what I wanted to hear, right? So, anti-oppressive is really important to me because it is rigorous self-reflection about all of the power dynamics in the classroom. Which includes the power invested in the role of the teacher.

At this point, we shifted gears. Andrea's narrative turns toward her more evolved idea of being the change. While the theme of dialog and critical conversation remains, she begins to speak more directly about action:

The GSA Story

I can't remember if it was my second year teaching, or my third year. I think it was my second year teaching. I had a student in my, not in my class, she was part of an extra-curricular group that I was supervising... So, I'm teaching this girl... But it turns out, and I know this just through being part of this community, that her eldest brother is gay. And, so she comes to me and she says, you know, I've heard about these GSA things, and I'd really like to start one, and would you be interested in, you know, being the supervisor—absolutely! So, that to me felt really good... To look back and know that it came from a student....

So, I'm helping and guiding the students that want this GSA, and like there's 4 of them, or 3 of them, like, there's not a lot of them, but they're dedicated... . They're working hard, to do the first pink shirt day⁹. And, it was the first pink shirt day that I'm pretty sure had been done in the city. And... the school that I was working in had had a human rights complaint against it by a former student, for homophobic bullying and harassment... . So, I was like, knew I could be up against something here. I remember a very important conversation happening with my vice-principal at the time, and that was a crossroads for me. Like, I made a decision from then on that this was the path that I was taking in term of activism, and if the school board wasn't ready for it, or if there were repercussions for me because of it, then, there would be repercussions and I would take them... like, negative repercussions, right? So, I said to her {the vice-principal}, you know, I want to do, *we* want to do this pink shirt day... So... she said, well, you just need to be aware of what you're biting off here, and there might be repercussions. And, like, the tone of the conversation was like--back off, don't do this. And, I was like, well, we're gonna do it, and see what happens. And, I was given permission to do it, but it was sort of, like, with this cautionary tone. And, thank god there's a strong teacher's union, because that gives you the security that as long as you're dotting your i's and crossing your t's, they've got your back.

And, I was astonished at the level of participation... The number of students and teachers wearing pink, and participating in pink day enthusiastically... . It was great, I was excited, and I was, to see the football coach wearing pink, and like... this was great, this was a real statement. And... for Shannonville, at the time in high schools, this was the first time it had been done... .And what resulted from that was an ongoing dialog in the local newspaper for about two and a half months... in the form of letters to the editor, between self-identified conservative members of the religious community, and other people in the community who were allies of the LGBT community. There ended up being a dialog about, um, the acceptance, and school spaces, and what's acceptable in school spaces, and whether or not we should even be talking about this {Queer rights} in schools, and like, and human rights and all kinds of things. And this discussion happened in the community at large, you know, everyone reads the paper, or most people do... for two and a half months.... *well, THAT'S INCREDIBLE! Right?* Like, two and a half months! Now, of course, my principal is thrilled, because... we're seen as, like, a leader in the community, and that looks good for him, you know.... I'm also taking these professional risks, and end up having this issue that's really important to me... being talked about, you know, in the community at large. And I think... it was just, like, the momentum of the GSAs just built. And... I don't know what's happening now at that school, but the GSA was so strong, and the students were so vibrant and... enthusiastic, and

⁹ Pink Shirt day, or Day of Pink is a campaign against homophobic bullying in schools. For background on the event, visit <http://www.dayofpink.org>

supportive, and hard working. Like, they would come to me with a list of tasks, like “here, we need you to do this for us,” whereas most student groups is like herding cats all the time.

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While excited about the growth and flourishing of a GSA at her school through the success of pink shirt day, Andrea was also reflective of the strengths and limitations of a t-shirt day as an example of effective activism:

But, I spent a lot of time, of course, reflecting on how authentic that participation {in pink shirt day} was.... The fact that we, and by we I mean myself and the students in the GSA were encouraging people to wear pink to take a stand against homophobic harassment in schools... was a physical action that people could do to show solidarity. And, it would be something that is contrary to the norm in the school, which would be that, you know, that boys don't wear pink, for example.... And so, I think some of the other ideas, within that, that connect to activism for me... is that... it was students, and teachers, acknowledging that our schools aren't accepting of everyone, which is a very radical thing for people in education to do, right? Because we all want to think of what we're doing as accepting... And then, the idea of TAKING ACTION ON THAT, and not just being cantankerous and complaining about it. So, to think about... who belongs and who doesn't belong, and what can we do about it... . Now, of course, I think that having one-off shirt days isn't the be all and end all of activism in schools.

Delving more into the limitations of an event like pink shirt day, Andrea augments her story:

I know... with the GSAs that I was working to... deepen the conversation.... Especially because... . I think it was Greg... one of my students who I had... power struggles with, and he, um, was wearing pink on pink day, and then in my classroom was making super homophobic comments... They were envisioning an island... it was a civics class, and they were envisioning what the rules of the island would be, a la Lord of the Flies... .and one of his rules would be that no gay people would be allowed... . And, the kids in the class were like, “Dude, it's pink day, and you're wearing pink, and you're saying homophobic stuff... like, what are you doing?” And, he was like “Well, I'm just wearing this because everyone else is wearing pink.”

And that for me was a moment as an activist educator where I was like, “oh my god, like, I've failed.... I'VE FAILED!” I failed because this kid, like, I'm feeling all happy, everyone's wearing pink, and like, the boys get super flamboyant... .They've got streamers tied to them, and like boas, and like every boy with some

kind of closeted issues decides that he's going to dress in drag for the day, you know... but, this kid was like... wearing the pink, and saying homophobic things. So, I think that for me was a moment in time where I was like, this has to be deepened.

Elsewhere in our conversation, Andrea talked about the yearly challenge of focusing *Day of Pink* campaign specifically on homophobia rather than generic forms of bullying. In this augmentation to her story, we can see more clearly the challenges that activist educators face; the relationship between activist teaching and student demonstration of activist attitudes and behaviours is very messy. For Andrea, a big part of deepening her activist education in the years following this first pink shirt day lay in going beyond the implementation of campaigns with students, through the development of teachers' capacity for disrupting homophobia:

That last year at the school... . Before my last year... myself and the other teacher running the GSA did a workshop for the staff. Umm, about homophobia in schools... .But, teachers were like, "Well, I don't know how to deal with this.... I don't want to talk about sex with my students" ... It isn't about sex! So anyways, we had a wonderful, meaningful, workshop with staff, and people that you would not expect were coming up... after and saying, "you know what, like, I heard a kid saying 'that's so gay' in the hallway, and... I knew what to say because of your workshop" So... holy shit, that's awesome!... So, you go from kid wearing pink being homophobic, 3-years later doing a staff room, with, this is the same staff that... I was told was like, not going to respond well to pink shirt day, and they're like, "just give us the tools... just give us the tools." And I think that maybe that's a big, a huge piece of activism for me too, is like, you provide the tools. So many people... have dissenting voices, or a voice of dissent about something, but then they don't know how to make that voice heard. What are the productive ways to dissent? Or, what are the... maybe productive is the wrong word, but.... How can you be a dissenting voice in a high school environment, whether you're a student or a teacher?

In this passage, I notice a connection between the narrative threads of dialog and critical conversation, and "being the change." Andrea's work with her colleagues represents the kind of "be the change" action that she is capable of as an activist educator, and also creates opportunities for dialog and critical conversation as she

facilitates an openness to that kind of pedagogy among her colleagues who may not currently be as open to hearing dissenting voices in their classrooms.

Andrea adds to the idea of disruption with an academic reference, and also makes a connection to her own teaching:

So... this particular author... Jennifer Tupper (2005)... she's influenced by Michael Apple quite heavily... the notion of being disruptive, or "interrupting" the moment. And, I am an interrupter of the highest order. But, her concept is that when you are teaching social sciences, in particular history, it's very important that we interrupt the dominant narrative, for those critical questions. And, kids are great at interrupting the dominant narrative, and asking those questions. And, we're really quick as educators, to try to stick to our lesson plans, and to our timelines, and like, "oh, we'll talk about that later," or "oh, that doesn't matter", but there's a lot of richness in those interruptions, and for me that became, in my sort of quest to find a way to do activism ethically, in the classroom. Or... for my own satisfaction, to not feel like I was imposing my values on students was to encourage the questioning and encourage the interruptions. And, I felt like that... was a way that I could sort of reconcile those, the relationship between activism and education.

I interrupted to probe Andrea's reference to an ethical impulse:

B: So, there's an ethical element to that then?

A: Sure, ya, and that's that not wanting to impose thing. Like, I don't want to impose my... I don't want to create the army... Out of my students, right? I don't want to indoctrinate them. Like... that's not education, that's not learning.

Andrea's deep commitment to education as an activist undertaking is constituted in a good part by an ethic against exerting undue influence over her students. Having clarified this with her, I asked one last question in our interview. Her response tied together many of the themes that crosscut our conversation:

B: Can education plant seeds for activism?

A: Yes. I think that's what education should do... I think a huge part of activism for me is about being true to one's self... I think that the highest, the most realistic and most just goal of activism as education is to plant the seeds, because once you get into mapping it out for somebody else, then you're imposing, right?... So, there's no power and control, or, there's little power and

control in encouraging people to ask questions. Including of the person in power.

Mindy - "It all Comes Down to Manners"

(Narrative Thread: How should we treat one another?)

Mindy teaches in the Greater Toronto Area, and at the time of our interview was within a few years of retirement. During our story sharing, Mindy conveyed an idea that she presents to each new class that she teaches: "People will forget what you say, people will forget what you did, people will never forget how you made them feel."¹⁰ This reference begins to illustrate one aspect of Mindy's teaching style, and contrasts with another aspect of her teacher identity that emerged when I contacted Mindy to see if she would be interested in meeting with me:

B: Hi Mindy, I hope you're doing well. I'm just in the process of starting to collect data for my PhD, and I was hoping you might be interested in helping me out... I'm interviewing self-identified "activist educators."¹¹

M: Well, I'd love a chance to sit down and chat with you, and if it's combined with a good purpose - even better. I really don't think of myself as an activist educator - more like the old broad who won't shut up about what's wrong with the world. I like your choice of language better...

Mindy's self-identification as "the old broad who won't shut up about what's wrong with the world" formed a significant theme in her later stories.

Puppy Training

M: Do you have a dog? Have you ever been around puppies?

¹⁰ This quotation is commonly attributed to Maya Angelou, but I have been unable to find a published source to cite.

¹¹ My invitation here is truncated for brevity. Mindy gave her permission for this pre-consent conversation to be included.

B: Uhhh, I like other people's pets.

M: Because, I frequently refer to education as puppy training. As that, they need a whole lot of reminders, not to pee on the carpet, and an awful lot of what to do, and not to chew, and... You don't beat a puppy, and you reward a puppy. So, if I were to use a metaphor for what I do, it's puppy trainer.... And so, my philosophy includes a fairly tight leash, and lots of second chances, and, that nothing, nothing is so horrible that a student does that you can't sit down with them and chit chat about it for a while. Overly longwinded response to your question.

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Mindy's classic conditioning metaphor in explaining her philosophy caught me by surprise! It sits in somewhat stark contrast to the story she told next, explaining her struggles and successes in producing a contentious play, *The Laramie Project*:

Blake and the Laramie Project

M: You know what... If we're going to talk about Laramie Project¹², it's long, and it's probably more tape than you need, so I'm just going to warn you... because you need to hear the whole story. Because it is a combination of teacher, and theatre, and politics.

The story starts in 2001, and I had this charming, delightful, drug addicted, failing, young boy in my class [named Blake], and he was absolutely a delight, and I couldn't understand why he was abusing himself so much. He seemed to have everything going for him, looks and talent. So, I got him involved with theatre. Little by little all the problems didn't stop, at all. But, we developed a fairly strong rapport... and we started talking about the drugs, quite honestly... . He wanted to TA for my class. Well, I said, I can't have you TA... the drugs are a problem if the kids know about it, so he did his best, and he would keep me up to date on the drugs... . A new school year started, and he did TA, and... we did a lot of theatre together; one day... at the beginning of class he was looking soooo—depressed and sad, and I said are you ok, and he said “No, not really.” And, he said “Can I talk to you after school?” And I said sure, so we agreed, he went out, he had his smoke, and, we agreed to meet in the portable.

¹² *The Laramie Project* is play by Moises Kaufman. Kaufman and his theatre troupe developed the play from interviews with community members in Laramie, Wyoming following the hate crime that led to the death of Matthew Sheppard, a young gay man.

So I sat and waited for him, and he «burst through the door, and he said, “You know I’m gay, right?” and I said, well... I swear, I haven’t really thought about it, but I guess it doesn’t surprise me.... So, we sat for the longest time, because he had just been outed, and he ran with... He ran with a very tough, really tough druggy group, and he’s like—“I’m dead”— this is how he felt. And... it got late; I took him home. His mom knew, his father didn’t—and, he contacted me via email again, wanted to continue the discussion. And, email is always a grey area... with a young male student and a teacher, but it seemed to be really important. So, we went for coffee.... for 5 hours. And we just sat and talked, and talked and talked, and talked. And... I had to keep a really good eye on him, I kept peeping in his classroom to see if he was there, because I really thought he was going to hurt himself. As it turns out, he hadn’t been outed.... But, it struck me that this kid was living in fear... because he was so closeted, and... you didn’t have to be a brain surgeon to all of a sudden realize that there was a connection with the drugs, and there was the a connection with the school, and all sorts of things...

Umm, that story goes on for quite some time, but at the end of that year, we had been given some money to do some workshops. I was able to take a group of kids to Niagara-on-the-Lake, and workshop with these American playwrights who came up, and we did some great work. During that time... one by one, he took the girls out on the porch, and came out, sort of individually. And, I had picked up a copy of *The Laramie Project*, and I said to him on the trip, read this, and let me know what you think. And he was so—so touched by it. And I said, I think that I’ve gotta do this. It’s a tough play, but I think I really really feel that we need to do this.

So, it was a new principal, and... he had heard me speak at the last staff meeting about the language in the halls, and my speech was pretty rough, I mean I stood up and said we don’t use nigger, chick, spick in the hall, and you don’t allow it... so, why are you allowing the following language {Here, I assume Mindy to be referring to homophobic slurs}. He was really impressed; I didn’t know he came from a really socially activist background. So, at the beginning of the year, I went to him, and I handed him the Laramie Project, and I said, how much do you like your job? {laughs} And if you meet with him, he will talk about that¹³. And I said, read this. And, he came back from the weekend, and he just sort of, and his eyes were really wide and he went “OK.”

We had been told {by powers beyond the school} that we could not do the Laramie Project. It was too mature, or it was too risqué. And... A problem arose in that a local theatre was doing a professional production of it, so we weren’t allowed the rights. But, we continued to rehearse anyways. We did it at my house, we did it on site after school hours, six to ten... not knowing if we’d ever be able to get the show up on the road. One of the great stories from Laramie is how great these kids were, I had 15 of them, doing 120 parts, and, my young

¹³ Mindy connected me with her former principal, Dave. A portrait of his stories follows hers. As Mindy suggests, he does tell part of this story from his own perspective.

boy, Brock who really wanted to complete his coming out process but was having a hard time with it, but he was in this play... and so he made a comment backstage one night, that another one of the actors took as being homophobic, and started an altercation with him {Brock}, and said “has this play taught you nothing?” And, so, so here was this young gay male who was just accused of being a homophobe, you know, being an actor in the Laramie Project. And, he came to me and he said, “He think’s I’m a homophobe,” and I’m like this is the perfect opportunity for you to do something. He didn’t, at that time.

A week later on Valentine’s day, his father found out he was gay and threw him out of the house. He showed up at my doorstep... . On Valentine’s day. So, we chatted. We chatted until like 7 o’clock in the morning, when he decided he was brave enough to go home. That was really an unpleasant thing. It gave him enough courage, though, to, when we were having a cast meeting, very casually to say “Ya, I understand all these issues. Ya, my dad just found out I’m gay, and he threw me out of the house, so...” And, and then that was it.

So... two weeks before we were to open we got the rights to the actual play, so we were able to stage it at Riverside. We had been building and everything all along... . The principal felt for our personal safety... so, he asked that we not extensively advertise outside the school, which was his moment of caution. And, the guy had been so brave already, that, alright... so, I ended up with his cell phone number to call in emergency, I mean, over a play, and a bunch of high school kids. But he was... I mean, he was right, ‘cuz Jack Layton CVI did it a few years ago, and there was a huge threat of you know, Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church showing up to protest outside of it. We ran six shows, we were tremendously successful, we were sold out... Blake’s father came to the show, and I think that the actual performance really had an impact on dad.

So, that was our *Laramie Project*, and it had a tremendous effect on the kids that were in the production, and a lot of the people who came to see it. Mostly you are preaching to the converted anyway, when you do a piece like *The Laramie Project*... But, you also get family members and stuff like that who really don’t know what’s going on, who sit there, and listen to those words, and listen to, you know... one of the characters, um, one of the actors, Jedidiah, his mother doesn’t want to come see him in a “gay play,” and he’s like “Mom, I played Macbeth last night... I killed people on stage”... Umm, it just made so much sense... . And, Moises Kaufman, at the introduction of *The Laramie Project* talks about Bertolt Brecht, and the concept of... Brechtian theatre—where you are actually meant to think, not to feel... . The feeling sort of comes later. And, that was certainly the impact of our play.

And, so after doing *The Laramie Project*, and using that structure, I think I’m better at... social pieces like that.... Anyway... I mean, Matthew Shepard died in 1998, and I can remember taking it in to a 4G1 drama class, at the time, and... Just, being so devastated... about the protest... in front of his parents. I think that piece of history... I think that moment... would probably be the moment that I became the cranky old woman who talked about what’s wrong with the world.

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Mindy makes an important revelation at the end of her story—the genesis of one element of her identity as a teacher, her persona of “the cranky old woman who complains about what is wrong with the world.” Adopting the persona of the “cranky old woman” may allow Mindy to avoid explicitly identifying herself as an activist. This distancing strategy is significant given the number of participants in this research, as well as literature (such as Marshall & Anderson, 2009), who report the dim view that public schooling takes of political activism within its bounds. Given the often hostile disposition of schooling towards activism, it is unsurprising that teachers whose social consciences manifest within their teaching might dissociate from activism entirely, or use distancing strategies such as Mindy’s “cranky old woman” persona to mask their activism.

Earlier, in commenting on Mindy’s puppy trainer story, I wrote that her idea of training a puppy contrasted somewhat with the compassion she demonstrated toward Blake in the *Laramie* story. The mentoring relationship that she describes with Blake as he struggled to be open with the world about his sexual orientation is certainly demonstrative of her preferred style, and underscores the importance of the question “how should we treat one another” as a central element of Mindy’s teaching. The last story Mindy shared with me continues this narrative thread:

Kony 2012: Proud of my Son

M: But, certainly, you know, our famous viral video of the week?

B: Right, which, I haven’t seen yet.

M: Neither have I, actually, but, that’s another story. I’m downstairs, and I’m doing

school work, and a Facebook message comes in from my son upstairs who says “can you please order me this, I’ll pay you back.” I look at it; it’s this Kony 2012 bracelet, and I thought, what the??? I have no idea what this is.

In March 2012, an organization called *Invisible Children* released an internet video that aimed to bring global infamy to warlord Joseph Kony of the Lord’s Resistance Army.

The campaign’s objectives were to raise awareness of LRA atrocities, create pressure on world governments to take action to immobilize the LRA, increase protection for people living in terror of the LRA, and ultimately, to see Kony’s capture and criminal prosecution. The video became the fastest growing viral video in history (*Invisible Children*, 2014). Controversy quickly arose as *Invisible Children* were challenged on oversimplifying a complex issue, their use of funds questioned, and they were accused of encouraging “slackivism” (Kony 2012, 2014). Mindy Continued:

So, I Googled... and I just do a quick search and then I read about who he was, and I send this *scathing* note back to my son: *Is this some of your gansta’ crap? You know? What’s going on? Get your priorities straight! So, he tosses me a line back... “Mom, watch the video. It’s not about this.”* So, I did not watch the video at that time; however, I started to read all the other feeds, and stuff that was happening on Twitter, and went Ohhhh.... My son is supporting this. And I was very proud of him. ‘Cuz, he just turned 21, I thought, WOW! I was so delighted, that I said, sure. Postage and handling was like \$30 for this \$10 bracelet.

And, of course, and then the counter {argument} came the next day, right... and to me, I thought, well, I don’t really care. You know what, my kid felt strongly enough... So, I think that comes from his education at Riverside [Mindy’s son Christian attended high school at Riverside, where Mindy teaches], he took, you know, he was an anthropology student... and sort of got introduced to world issues, and what was going on. So, he doesn’t need to throw something burning... He feels that financial support is good—and awareness. My favorite quotation from this whole Kony 2012 thing was from a celebrity who, didn’t retweet it, but said “I’m as skeptical as anyone, because the politics in that country is very difficult, however, getting people to care is the first step towards great change.”

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Mindy’s pride in her son’s conviction is reminiscent of the implicit pride that she expressed about Blake’s coming out. Her pride in Blake and Christian’s respective

actions demonstrates that values education is central to her broader conception of education. I argue that this kind of values education can be delivered through activist channels within the context of public schools, as shown through stories like Mindy's.

As we closed, I explored how Mindy understood the political implications of her teaching, given her relative caution in identifying as an activist educator. Her response gestured to an understanding of activist education that suggests that, as Bauman (1993) and Noddings (2005) argue, ethical action is more closely concerned with how people respond to their ontological proximity to others in any given moment than the ideological concerns that are usually more associated with politics:

B: I wonder if you think your work is political?

M: No. It's social. But not political.

Her answer was immediate and unequivocal. Like her puppy training metaphor, Mindy surprised me here. I was shocked that having heard her speak as she did about having a student show up on her doorstep on Valentine's Day because he'd been kicked out of home for being gay, or the worry of having her play protested by the Westboro Baptist Church, that she would then deny the political nature of her work. What I take from this response, though, is not that Mindy's work is actually apolitical, but that she chooses to respond to those political elements in ways that are more social. We finished up clarifying her understanding of the social nature of her work:

B: No? Ok. And, what's the difference, for you?

M: Oh, hmm... social is being more about how human beings treat each other.... You know, if you're going to write anything about this, here's the thing, I have a mantra. The kids know—it goes on my board. 'People will forget what you say, people will forget what you did, people will never forget how you made them feel.' And, I start every drama class every year with that... . It doesn't matter

how great you are and how popular you are, because they're going to forget all that... so, who's going to come to your funeral in 50 years? That's important. And, to me that's social, not political. There, that's the difference I see.

Dave - "Taking Them to the Threshold of Their Imaginations"

(Narrative Thread: Human Rights are the Central Narrative)

Dave is a recently retired high school teacher and principal. Dave and Mindy worked together for six years at Riverside CVI, where he became principal after serving as teacher and vice-principal at other schools. Dave has received several prestigious awards for his work as an educator, particularly for his school leadership strategies that harness students' interest in pro-social change in order to positively (re)shape what he calls "the central narrative" of a school. Noting this, it is unsurprising that Dave's stories concern the struggles and successes of developing a school culture centrally characterized by student-driven, teacher-facilitated human rights initiatives. This overarching approach was facilitated through something called *the culture of peace initiative*. I asked Dave what this meant to him as an educator:

To me it's the most important piece of education... Learning, or the curriculum that we have to teach is only a vehicle. And, what we're really looking at is nurturing and developing the soul of the individual, the character of the individual. Those are... the important elements that will lead them through the rest of their lives.... So, what we want, really, is individuals who will walk away recognizing that the world is much bigger than the four walls of that school, and the curriculum that we teach. And, that they have a ways and means of interacting with that, and making an impact on that, even as high school students. So that, to me, is part of what I call the central narrative of the school.

There are no curriculum police. People do not come around here and check off, have you done A, B, C, D, E, and F in this curriculum document. So, therefore, what I'd rather have you do is teach 70% of the curriculum, and have 100% of the kids successful.... Education isn't teaching; teaching is just imparting knowledge. Education is inspiring kids to think. I call it taking them to the threshold of their imagination. If you can take them to the threshold of their imagination, then they will learn themselves through that.

Dave continued with the story of his background, including his path into teaching:

Activist Educator Entry Point

I immigrated to this country when I was 4 years old. From England... . So, I remember clearly going to kindergarten... speaking with a British accent, much like Coronation Street... And, I remember being teased. And, I remember what it felt like... And, having a British accent still, and all that, it became a very difficult place to be. And, I learned to fight, and in fact in grade 4 when I moved to another school part way through the school year, I went out at recess, and what's the first thing I did, pick a fight. I ended up in the office and had no idea why. So, that was part of probably the development of my core around rights of individuals, and how people feel.

When I came back to education... I got a job right out of the faculty... only 6 of us got a job that year, it was very tough. But, at the end of that year I knew I'd be redundant, or bounced around. So, I left education for a period of 10 years, worked in the fire department, and supply taught... . Came back in at Lake Street Vocational School, as a teacher, and saw a lot of kids who had been dumped there, in many cases, for all the wrong reasons. You know, they had a variety of issues, either socioeconomic, or learning disabilities, or whatever. What I did see was kids thrive in that environment who... wouldn't have thrived in other schools—regular stream schools, we'll call them. So, I really saw the value in individuals that I might not have seen in other places, and recognize a little bit of myself in those kids.... So, advocacy on behalf of students was really engrained in me in those years, and there are many teachers that I've kept in touch with, and they all say that same thing. Those years at Lake Street branded us, and burned into us a desire, a need, and skill set, a belief in the abilities of all kids.

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Here, Dave has identified advocacy on behalf of students as a foundational entry point in the development of his identity as an educator. From this, student empowerment becomes a central theme in his stories of the culture of peace:

Developing the Culture of Peace

My second vice-principalship, I was placed in... Dunnvale High School, I was sent there in February, so halfway through a school year. Now, Dunnvale, when I arrived there, they had been understaffed in administration... . I went into a situation where there was fights almost every day, smell of drugs all over the

school.... And, I really wanted to start building student capacity... because it's through students that we can change this.

And, it was the same time when Mike Harris was in—there were no sports¹⁴. And, as a non-teacher now, out of the unions, I could offer things after school for kids, whereas teachers couldn't. So, I took 6 kids to a meeting... it was a police forum, a community forum... Well, the police were being soundly attacked that night, by the press, and by others. And it wasn't the experience that we had had, and the kids were getting upset. We spoke up on behalf of the police. That began the advocacy. And, I asked the kids afterwards, do you want to get together once a month, we'll talk about how we can change things in our school, you guys can change things in our school, and we'll set a course. And, you'll get my support. That began the culture of peace.... So, that's how it started at Dunnvale. So, had change happened, yes, because we empowered kids... .

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At this juncture, I shifted the conversation to finding out about Dave's comfort with the word activism to describe his work:

Depends on how you define activism. But, it could be a correct term. Umm, if an activist is someone that challenges the status quo and is looking for a better solution, than yes, it's a useful term. You could call me a maverick. You could simply call me someone who's committed to democracy, and doesn't believe that we have to maintain the status quo, and that the status quo should not be maintained, in fact.... You have to think differently.... If an activist thinks outside of those parameters, then yes, I'm an activist.... You cannot teach kids unless you have them in their seats, so we have to roll back the situation here and say what really is the issue, and it's student disengagement. So, if student disengagement is the real issue here, how do we engage students?... . So, what I'm saying it's not necessarily activism, but break down those barriers, become more youthful in our thinking. Become more open minded in our thinking, and that's how we'll change education.

Like many of the other educators that I interviewed, Dave was cautious in adopting an activist identity. His use of the self-descriptor *maverick*, and a commitment to democracy offers a sense his understanding of an activist educator identity, even though the term 'activist' wasn't his immediate preference. Having clarified Dave's

¹⁴ Mike Harris was Premier of Ontario from 1995-2002. Harris's "common sense revolution" agenda meant severe cuts to education spending which caused Ontario's Teachers' Federations to implement a work-to-rule campaign.

comfort with the term activism, I asked about the underpinning philosophies that guided his work:

Oh, boy. This could go for a while. First of all, I think we have to teach democracy in our classroom every day. Teach «and demonstrate democracy in our classroom every day. There’s a wonderful line that goes you know, if we demonstrate democracy each and every day in our classroom, then the soul of one generation will pass seamlessly to the next, and to me that’s what education is about. It’s the passing of the soul of one generation to the next, and providing them with the opportunity to think critically and democratically about how they would choose to improve on the soul of that generation.

As Dave shared, I felt anxious about his idea of the seamless passing of democracy from one generation to the next, worrying that this conception was too much like a transmission of the status quo, akin to Freire’s (1970) banking model of education. I relaxed as he continued to explain that critical and democratic thinking about social change is implicit in his conception of education—a conception of democracy that is synergistic with literature around *deep democracy* that I reviewed in Chapter 2 (Abdi, 2013; Carr, 2011a, b, 2013; O’Sullivan, 2013). It is interesting that Dave’s idea of education includes critical and democratic thinking implicitly, because it may explain in one way his ambivalence toward activism as a label for his work, even though he felt drawn to the overall character activist education. For Dave, activism is not something that we need to draw into education from outside—it is an ongoing part of what social justice and anti-oppressive educators do. Dave’s commitment to democratic education is evidenced through his stories of the culture of peace, which he shared next.

Growing a Culture of Peace

It was one of those things that evolved from that initial meeting I told you about. There were two conferences being offered for kids, and one was being put on by

the police, and I can't recall the name of it, and there was another one being put on, and it was called *a culture of peace*. And, it was held at police headquarters. So, I took these seven kids down just to see what it was like. And, it was run by a couple from Pottsville who were educators, and it was the international year for a culture of peace as designated by the United Nations. Well, it was such a hit with our kids, the speakers that they heard, that this international conference at the UN came up, and... we found them money to take them down there. From there, the discussion started. What is it that are issues at our school? And, I still remember coming back on the bus from New York, these kids had done phenomenal things. Like, it was long days at the UN with kids from all over the world. And, at the end the kids had to come up with a mandate and declaration that they would present to the United Nations. I found out after it had been presented that the process had been waylaid by UN staffers, and that it wasn't what the working group had wanted to present. Our kids gathered up everyone at the hotel that had been there, and they pulled an all-nighter and re-wrote it and presented it at the United Nations the next day, and said, basically, "You guys screwed up, you tried to railroad us." And, I was so damn proud of them because they had taken that stand. And that stand was so important, because they knew they had gotten the support, they had gotten the backing, and that is what started the culture of peace for our school. Then, it was student driven.

So, they developed a whole variety of projects.... The very first one that these kids put together is a white bandana anti-violence campaign at Dunnville High School, because of the gang violence. The kid that brought it forward, his cousin had been murdered by gangs. You know, we made bandanas, which you're not allowed to wear in schools. Our home economics class actually dipped them in UN Blue, and kids could wear them around their arm, or their sleeve. And, they came out with posters, and the kids in tech developed the posters, and we had speakers, and announcements every day. So, you know, there's many layers, and each campaign became multi-layered, so it would go on for two-weeks, and these bandanas were only given out in the last couple of days, and it was like this big, it caused discussion, and what you want to do is cause discussion. Let kids talk about it. A similar thing happened at Riverside, a group of the drama kids said, you know, there's a lot said about victims, uh, what about the silent victims? So, rather than a moment of silence, a moment of noise.... And this happened during the White Ribbon Campaign [against men's violence against women], so at lunch time, and you know, we discussed this well in advance, and I primed staff on it, and we put a couple of extra staff in the cafeteria. The kids from Drama started at the end of the hall--Drums, bugles, noise-makers, placards... down the hall the entire length, right into the cafeteria. Bang, bang, bang, noise, noise, noise. And then all of a sudden, Stop! And as they stopped, different females stood up on top of the tables with tape across their mouths slings on their arms, with some sort of damage to themselves, and nothing was said. And they stepped down and they walked out. That caused discussion; that is what you want. They went in, distributed information around, so there was something there to support it, and teachers were ready to discuss it afterwards. That's what culture of peace is

about—It's advocacy, it's giving kids the power to do things that are important for them, to bring about change.

That changes kids. They're going to remember that more than what you taught them in the classroom. And this was what culture of peace was about: empowering kids to create and generate ideas, and activism, if you will, around issues that were important to them. Because, remember, a lot of these kids were minority groups, or were made to feel different, or were different. And gave them a safe place to be, and a safe place for advocacy, and a place to open discussion. And, what a... and talk about impacting literacy and numeracy... . Attendance went way up, because kids wanted to be there.... You know, a school that was typically middle of the pack for literacy and numeracy scores, in those six years that we had this going, we stood first in the board on two occasions, and we never dropped out of the top five. And, yeah, we still focus on literacy and numeracy, but what we did was we addressed it through student advocacy.

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Dave's narratives of the UN trip, and White Ribbon Campaign street theatre highlight the importance of a student driven emphasis in activist education, where students feel supported by educators to learn through activist initiatives that they have developed themselves. For Dave, when these conditions are established, rich opportunities develop that create further opportunities for discussions that drive learning. In this vein, Dave offered a final story that illustrates the critical impact—both social and educational, that the culture of peace had on one student:

Steve and Romeo

D: Another story if I might?

B: Yeah.

D: Students that go to the return ticket, which was for fully expelled students, when they are deemed ready to re-enter regular school, they are rarely put back where they were put before. And, there was a student that was coming to my first school with a culture of peace that was a gangster. He had been a gangster, he had pulled a knife on someone at another school. But, he'd done well in this program, and they thought, good guy to come back. I won't use his real name, but he was a big heavy guy, and he talked the gangster, he walked the gangster, but he wanted to make a change. I'll call him Steve. And, the first

time I met him was in my office with his parents, and he said “Yo, I wanna meakka change,” you know, talking like this to me. And, I said sure, the only thing I ask is you come to the first culture of peace meeting. And, that was my standard, you come to the first one, try to get connected with some good kids, different kids, get involved with some human rights stuff.

Soon after that, we went down... to the Ontario Legislature, for the UN conference that we ran there. I happened to be there early, and this fellow by the name of General Romeo Dallaire happened to be... speaking, he had just come back from Rwanda, and you know the story with Dallaire¹⁵. So, I was asked to sit with him for a half hour, because he was early. So, he and I talked... When he spoke... and there was about 150 kids from all over the province there, you could’ve heard a pin drop. Unbelievable. And, afterwards... And, I said to him... I want to get you to my school, if you’re willing, to talk to high school students. And, he thought, you know, they’re not quite ready. I said, watch them over the course of the day, and if you think they’re ready, you have an invitation. So, at break time, he’s standing by himself, and Steve’s with me, and I said, Steve, go on over and talk to Dallaire. Just go talk to him, ‘cause [Steve] was floored by this guy. And he said, you know, “I can’t do that, Saunders, you know, he’s a big guy, he’s a General”. And, I said, no—he’s a guy... And I said just go over and just say, “Hi General, good talk.” So, he walks over, and I hear him say “Yo, General Dallaire... good talk, man”. Well, 15 minutes later they were still talking, and it was just like two regular people talking. And, Steve came back to me after, he said, “I couldn’t believe that, he’s like, he’s a human being, he’s a normal guy.” And I said, ya, they are. He’s just, he’s a normal guy.

One month later, we’ve got Dallaire coming to our school, as all the kids are filing in, and I reminded Dallaire that he met this guy, and I said you really had an impact on him, and he remembered [Steve]. As we’re walking down, remember, Steve’s new, not many of the kids know him, except he’s a big gangster. Dallaire sees him in the middle of this crowd of hundreds coming down, and Dallaire says, “YO, STEVE, MON AMI!” And barges through the crowd, and they’re talking, talking, talking. Well, after Dallaire did his speech to all the grade 11 and 12s, the kids remembered this. So, suddenly Steve’s status in the school just goes through the roof. A year and a half later, the same kid who was arrested by the police was receiving an award from the police for contributions to safety in the community. And, he’d gotten involved in all sorts of projects through the culture of peace. That was one of about a dozen stories I can tell you like that, of opportunities that wouldn’t come up on a normal day in a normal school, under normal circumstances. You’ve got to reach out and make

¹⁵ Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire (Retired) is a Canadian Senator, noted humanitarian, and public intellectual. He is best known for his work as force commander of the UN assistance mission in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide. <http://romeodallaire.sencanada.ca/en/p102763>

these differences. That's what culture of peace is about, it's about changing lives. And, Steve is one example of how it can happen.

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Colleen - Curiosity & Self Directedness
(Narrative Thread: Doing Education Differently)

The school where Colleen worked for four years was a private alternative school called Quest that delivered a five credit integrated program for senior high school students. Integration was accomplished through a program of outdoor activities, expeditions, community service learning, and some traditional classroom instruction. In addition to working at Quest, Colleen has also taught kindergarten at a private alternative school, worked as an occasional teacher in Ontario public schools, and taught at the post-secondary level.

Colleen's perspectives on activist education differ from other participants. While she acknowledges the importance of social and political elements of activist education that others have narrated, Colleen's perspective lies in *doing education differently* as a kind of activism:

B: So, would you say... if I said the word activism, would you say that's a good fit for what you're doing as an educator?

C: I think that I would be comfortable with that word, but I probably wouldn't have pulled it out... you know, and said "I am so and so, activist educator".... I think there's doing education in a way that engages you and your students in other social issues, other activist projects... so, taking education into activism... But, I think education itself can be looked at as activism, if as a teacher you are trying to... in the way schooling is done... an approach to learning and to schooling that moves towards something more democratic, something where students have some self-determination.... I would say that I would probably identify a lot more with the side of... doing activism in education.

Colleen begins to explain her approach to activist education:

I think fostering an ethic of care amongst students is... one central part of education, and fostering curiosity and self-directedness would be sort of a second major component of education, and that... if you can do those two things with students, then I think they're, of their own accord, more likely to become engaged citizens in the world, who want to create some sort of positive change in a realm that interests them. And, I think that's what's important to me, it's not about getting them to take on my causes, it's about... getting them really excited about learning, and about making the world... well, that sounds very trite, making the world a better place, but you know? And then, I think, so, I think that's the broader implication is that the way you educate, it's creating an environment; it's in a way being a mentor, it's being a role model. And, the ripple effect is... students end up growing in a certain way, or becoming... themselves, becoming more of who they are, and making choices about how they're going to engage in the world

B: I like the way that you... talked about doing activism as education, or doing education as activism, like within... uhh...the internal activism?

As I struggle to paraphrase, Colleen clarifies, and begins a story about the entry point to her teacher identity:

Activist Educator Entry Point

C: The act of educating is an act of activism.

B: How important is that conception to you as an educator?

C: I think that's probably... quite central to who I am as an educator, and how I engage with students.... I think I've always had an identity as an educator, and maybe that sounds weird, so I'm not sure that I can separate them. How do I explain? I think the transition into being an educator is pretty fuzzy. I mean, I've always been very curious and always very interested in learning, always imagined myself becoming a teacher ever since I was very little... I would sit in grade 2 class and watch what the teacher was doing, and think about how I was going to do it when I was a teacher. So, I don't think there was a moment where I became an educator; similarly I don't think there was a moment when I could have said, "now I'm an activist." I think I always wanted to educate, for similar reasons, about making, I guess making—well—why—I guess? Why is it? That's a good question. Why is it that I wanted to be an educator?

Colleen asks herself a question, and then begins to formulate an answer. I take this as an example of her deep curiosity and self-directedness, which in some ways explains her early entry point into identifying as an educator:

I do think that there was always a sense of wanting other people to be as excited as I was about the world, and as excited as I was about learning. I used to say sometimes... to the people I taught with, or to my students... I ultimately didn't care so much what the students were learning, I mean, within reason, I just wanted them to be excited about learning *something*. And, um, and so, tried to support and foster and encourage students in whatever... that was. I mean, of course there was the curriculum... But, I think teaching in that environment where we were living together, and traveling together made, made it more possible to have a role, or have some sort of connection to their interests outside of the curriculum.

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Colleen's stories highlight her belief in the educative power of the immersive environment that she taught in. In the same vein, she expanded her thinking on how education connects with the local community:

B: Could you talk a little bit about some of the key ideas that you have about education?

C: I think is quite important to make it possible for students to... feel connected to a larger community, to people of different generations, to people doing different sorts of jobs, to people who are making different sorts of contributions to the community. Learning from experience is quite important, and... people say "well... everything's an experience..." Sure, sitting... in rows in math class is experiential learning, but it's not an experience in the math concept that you're trying to learn, it's an experience in sitting in rows in a boxed in classroom. So... that's important... keeping a... broader natural world connected to education and learning and schooling is important to me.

B: You've mentioned the idea of care... I wondered if you could talk about... is there is a relationship between care and... curiosity?

C: Ya, I think there is a relationship. I think if you're curious about something, and it's, and it compels you to get to know that "other," whether that other is... a plant or a tree, or a person... Whatever it is, then, when you get to know that other entity... then I think that leads to more of a sense of care. You know, the opposite would be sort of an apathy and disinterest in the world, and...

remaining fairly ignorant about things and people that are different from you and therefore not really caring.

At this juncture, I offered an opportunity for Colleen to tell stories of her experience without direct prompting.

Cross Canada Curiosity

So, Ok, so we've loaded up a 15 passenger white van, with 12 students, and... one of the 5 courses that students were taking was... Canadian history, culture and identity, and we thought that if we spent 3 weeks driving across the country and back that that would be a good experiential way to think about Canadian identity.... And, the funny thing is, that to me... my most significant teaching has been in these alternative sorts of situations, so it's kind of become the norm, so although they're all incredible and amazing, it sort of seems normal. There were so many moments... we visited the mint, we stopped in a farmer's field in Saskatchewan, we... paddled outside of Vancouver Island, we... stopped in a park and met with a Canadian artist who was on tour across Canada. We... spent so many hours a day listening to CBC radio and having discussions about it. We had... two vehicle breakdowns.

But, I think, you know, each of those little moments were not that different, they were just fairly regular moments you'd have, that anyone who was going traveling would have... . But, I think what happened overall is that... the students saw that... this wasn't just the next history project. That learning about Canada's history, learning about... you know, what multiplicities of identities there are in Canada, and having these conversations doesn't have to end; because, it's actually really interesting, and they can continue to live their life, and to interact with the world in that way if that inspires them.

B: Do you feel like that particular experience that they had would be educationally different than just taking a road trip across the country with your friends?

C: Well, I mean I don't know that they learned more about Canada... but, I think that they learned more about themselves as learners... . So, fostering that self-directedness, fostering that sense of curiosity in the larger community... . learning how to ask questions... it was never really about the content. So, I think that's maybe how the experience is different. But, at the same time, it's not different. I mean, when people take a year off from school and go traveling, they do often change as people, and they do often become engaged in the world.

So, what was our role as educators, or as facilitators? How did it make it educational?

Here again, Colleen asks questions of herself, and then begins to furnish answers. This think-aloud technique is demonstrative of the curiosity and self-directed learning that Colleen describes as central to her educational style:

It was, um, well, I've been told... I've had students, and other people that I've worked with tell me that a big role of mine on those trips was... to foster that curiosity, that they would just be astounded at how excited I would get at things, and they would laugh, at the beginning they would laugh at me that I would go up to the guy on the park bench and ask him a question, or that I would roll down my window at a stop sign and knock on the truck next door, because the students had asked, you know, for example, we were driving in Montreal, and I don't have a clue what the question was, but the students had asked a question in the van, and we became curious about something, and we happened to stopped at a stoplight, and I thought, well, I'll just ask the guy. And, they were in total disbelief, that you could just do that. You know, that you could have a conversation with him. But then, you would notice that they would start to do it as well. And, I, you know, some of the students in that class, I've been able to continue to know, and they've continued to live their lives that way. They've continued to take advantage of, um, of learning from the people around them... . for example, they won't be satisfied with just the discussion in class, or the reading... . But, they'll, they'll take the time to stop somewhere on their way home because they think that person might contribute something to the discussion. So that's, to me, really amazing.

Another project that we used to get involved with, was... hiking on the Big Bay Hiking Trail, ... Leading up to it we would study... two... environmental controversies that were taking place there. One was they wanted to build a liquefied natural gas terminal... in this small town of Baysdale, and the entire community of Baysdale was talking about you know stereotypical activism, there were posters everywhere, there were protests, there were rallies in the gyms, there were speeches by politicians, [Right.], and, we would kind of start learning about this issue, and then when we got there, we would, we had preplanned meetings with different people. So... the other environmental issue we were looking at was aquaculture, so we had meetings with a local biologist, with the local whale watching tourism operator, with the local high school students, with, uh, the local chief of {a First Nation}... . And then, we went and sat in Tim Horton's, and had our discussions. And the people around us noticed that we were this class visiting, that we were having these discussions, and... the retired man at that table... joined into our discussion... . The students were fascinated that they could see that this issue that had originally just been something that we were studying by reading articles, and we were trying to give them some

background before we went out east. And, it was usually a little bit like pulling teeth... . It was when we got there and the students could see that this was a really central issue in these people's lives, then they became curious, and they cared about the people in that community.

B: It sounds like the content becomes a vehicle for the inquiry?

C: Ya... To me it's the process... what I'm most excited about as the educator is the process of inquiry, you know, helping the students experience that... They're overwhelmed by being given the responsibility...

Colleen segues, noting that the Big Bay hiking experience in which her classes participated in was not in and of itself very self-directed, but that it set the stage for a later experience where students spent a week engaged in learning experiences that they designed, planned, and executed independently within a small group, under the supervision of a "hands-off" teacher:

Ok, there was the Giant Bay thing, that wasn't really that self-directed, but that would lead... into... the E.L.W.s, the experiential learning weeks, where we wanted the students to be out in the community learning about whatever it was that they had chosen, that they were interested in; by meeting people, by, you know, it was totally open ended. They had about six weeks to work on making this plan, and then they were given a gas card, and a van, and a driver, and they had to have all their accommodations and food planned, and... although they had the gas card, they didn't have any other budget, so they had to sometimes offer service in exchange for experiences that they wanted to have, or people that they wanted to meet with. So... watching them go through the stages of... being incredibly excited that they got all of this freedom, but then getting very very overwhelmed, almost to the point of being paralyzed because ... it just seemed like too big of a responsibility; to finally tumbling and fumbling, and figuring it out, to actually having the experience. And, again, at the end it wasn't that they were extremely excited about the content that they had learned, but they had really come to understand themselves as learners... that was what was most exciting to me.

I think what happens through a self-directed learning experience like that is that the care the students feel becomes their own. I didn't indoctrinate them into caring about a particular issue. They, they became... they came to care about whatever it was that they were learning about and whoever they were interacting with because of their own interest. And so, it's kind of authentic, and they can, you know, it's, I mean, maybe they'll end up caring about some similar

things to me, but it wasn't because I planted... it ultimately wasn't because I planted that.
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B: Coming back to the idea of care... how do you think that you care for students when they're in the midst of that overwhelmed state?

C: I think the care, the care is also the letting go, like, I think that... wanting to control the students all the time, and really wanting to direct their learning, it's, I mean, I think it's really really really hard, because... as teachers... often that is our main role, is to direct the learning. To design the curriculum, to decide what the students are going to do, and to really really authentically make it their choice and to get out of the way, and let that happen, I think is very hard. But, I think that's part of caring, if the outcome that you want is for them to become engaged of their own volition.

Colleen's reference to engagement here pushed my thinking back to teaching as an act of activism:

B: I want to come back to something that you said a little while ago about... not indoctrinating the students into particular issues—

C: Education as an activist act?

B: Ya!

C: I think if education can... compel students to become active citizens, and they make a choice about how they want to spend their energy and their time, then that's... exciting too. I mean, it's... hard—It would be very difficult as a teacher to... teach a curriculum that you disbelieved... and, I don't think it's necessarily wrong that your opinion gets in there... but, helping students understand that there is a situatedness to things, and that people have an identity, and people have biases is important. You can't remove your personal commitments and your personal beliefs from what you're doing, and I think it's not authentic if you try. I don't think it's even possible to try. So, I think being transparent about it, and talking about how your positionality influences what's going on in the classroom. And, I think talking about that with students, and helping the students figure out what some of their beliefs are, and how their beliefs, you know, influence the way they're interacting in the classroom.

Jennifer – “How not to be a Jerk”
(Narrative Thread: Safety and Inclusion)

Jennifer has taught middle school in Southern Ontario for nine years. Andrea connected us; the two of them met during their teacher-training program. In addition to her work as a teacher, Jennifer is a musician and host of a popular podcast. Andrea insisted that Jennifer was just the kind of person I needed to talk to, although I didn't really know her story when we met. So, I began to elicit her narrative by trying to get a sense of how activism fit within her teaching identity, and her entry point into that identity:

B: What about your teaching practice drew you to what I'm studying?

J: Well, I think there's sort of two parallel things going on. I do a lot of activist work in the board that's kind of outside of my classroom reality, because it's in secondary [schools]... and then, at school, I run a social justice league. And, in my teaching practice, obviously I'm always sort of teaching from... that... perspective of equity... it's kind of woven into everything that I do.

Specifically, my main... direction or thing I'm most involved with is... a couple of committees called *Prescott Pride*, a secondary one and an elementary one. And, I chair the elementary one... it's new this year. But, I've been on the secondary one for 4 years, and we run an annual conference for kids from gay-straight alliances in the high schools in Prescott. And, this year was the first year that we really did... a board-wide... day-of-pink, and really tried to make the focus about homophobia and transphobia. As opposed to the “BULLYING, balloons!!!”.... I mean, the pink t-shirt day was there, but I think there's been kind of a, I don't know, like a suppression movement going on to make it about all forms of bullying, instead of about homophobia.

Here, Jennifer expresses a kind of whitewashing she has experienced around anti-bullying campaigns typically focused on celebrations of “being nice,” which largely ignore specific markers of difference such as race and perceived sexual orientation that are known to increase the likelihood of experiencing bullying (Swearer, Espelage,

Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010; Walton & Niblett, 2013). We continued to explore her entry point into an activist educator identity:

Activist Educator Entry Point

B: I'm wondering... how you came to activism in education?

J: Well, I guess I've always sort of been politically active, and I was involved in student politics.... I don't think that's what led me to education, I think that was that I had been a sailing instructor, I finished my degree, and I was like "I dunnooo, I guess I'll go to teacher's college" I think probably a lot of my activism began as a... pet project... because... I had sort of personal beliefs about it. But... I feel like I'm kind of a fringe member of society. So, I think I've always sort of brought... not contrasting, but different views to my classroom than maybe my students might have normally heard.

Her self-description as a "fringe member of society" offers us a window of understanding into how Jennifer understands her activist educator identity. A teacher working in a mainstream environment but with fringe sensibilities offers the potential to introduce students to ideas that challenge status quo ideas that reify social injustice and oppression:

J: They're kind of sheltered in Prescott, in some ways. In other ways, they're not, right? Like... for them, is, well for most of them multiculturalism is kind of like a non-issue

B: Right, cuz it's such a—

J: It's such a multicultural place. But, there are some schools, and my school is a little bit like this, where you'll get like, like, groups of people will sort of segregate themselves. But, not always. I don't know, it's weird.

Jennifer teaches in a large suburban community that has experienced an influx of new Canadians in the past several decades. This demographic means that, in her experience, anti-oppressive pedagogies around multiculturalism are often taken for

granted, while other inclusive teachings about social difference may encounter resistance. Jennifer continued:

J: We recently did... an identity day, and you had to sort of identify three elements of your identity, and one of the ones that I chose was activist. I mean, I decorated my door of activism. So, I think I certainly define myself as an activist, and I think I'm always sort of finding new things to be an activist about.... I would say that sort of, my main focus has been and continues to be LGBTQ stuff... but I'm sort of you know, working on like classist things, and um, Aboriginal issues, and they're all intertwined, ultimately. But... ya, I think it defines me. I don't know, I guess I could see how there are probably a lot of people who I would define as an activist who wouldn't see themselves as one, because they aren't chaining themselves to trees, or going to protests. But, I don't think you need to do that. Especially in education, right... It's just about planting the seeds.

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Planting Seeds

B: It's funny that you would... use that phrase, because... that's sort of one of the key questions that I have in the dissertation is, can education plant seeds for activism?

J: This is the time of the year that I really start to notice that it's working. I have a student teacher right now who's just doing drama. And, she was doing an activity with my students about, I dunno, this kid that was getting bullied. And so, she asked the kids to come up with reasons why the kids were bullying him. And, ah, one kid puts her hand up, and she was like "Because of his class?" ... I could see the student teacher stop and think, "Why would they bully him because of what class he's in?" And, then she realized what the kid meant, and she was like, "Oh! you mean social class!" And I'm sitting there like "YES!" ... It's neat, it's neat. Because, they get it. Grade 8 especially, they're kind of hungry to form their own opinions about things.

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B: Maybe you could talk a bit about some of the key ideas... or principles that influence your daily choices about how you conduct your classroom?

J: Um, I think that curriculum content is important, but it's meaningless without... that character education piece, without that critical thinking piece... Cuz really, what kid remembers when confederation is? You know, as long as they know how to... find a source that they think is reliable, to find it out. That ability to learn and to find knowledge is more valuable than any facts. And, how to not be a jerk. So, I think that's fundamental.

Jennifer's comment about the role of curriculum dovetails with ideas shared in other experience narratives. Her quip about "how not to be a jerk" offers a sense of how she takes up the required curriculum in support of activist education:

I guess when it comes to like a teachable moment or something, I'm not, I'm not the teacher that's gonna be like "But we have to learn this thing about biology!" You know, if a kid has a question or there's something going on, you know... Those are the moments that people remember from school anyways, like when you have a real conversation about something other than, I dunno... Pythagorean theorem.

B: Do you think that there is a fairly natural fit between activism and education in your practice? Or is there more tension there in terms of the context that you're working in?

J: I think there is a natural fit, I think when there's tension is when there are concerns about... about certain topics. I know, a colleague of mine, they did a survey at their school of, like the "isms" to say, you know, which ones are you most comfortable addressing, which ones are you least comfortable addressing, and the ones that people had the most concern with were heterosexism and faith as an ism. So, which makes sense in so many ways, but it's funny, because those are the two isms that kind of come into conflict with each other. So, I've certainly run into difficulty at times with parents... being concerned with their kids learning about, you know, anti-homophobia messages, and, less so with concerns of parents about their kids hearing messages about different faiths, though... . But, I think that teachers are afraid to address issues around faith, or talk about faith because they don't want to seem like they're endorsing a faith, or perhaps it's something they're ignorant about, and they don't want to reveal their ignorance. I think the same is true for homophobia. Lots of teachers don't have the language to talk about it.

But, I think as far as activism in the classroom goes, I think it's a really natural fit, because it encourages kids to, um think critically, or to take on action themselves. And, I dunno, how is that not exactly what school is supposed to be doing?

Here, Jennifer reveals her understanding of what it means to educate within the context of public schools: To develop critical thinking, and to take initiative to improve their communities. In the context of the narrative thread of safety and inclusion that

links Jennifer's stories, thinking critically and taking action are part and parcel of building and maintaining safe and inclusive schools, and communities:

B: You had mentioned lots of teachers being afraid of taking on... activist issues... do you think that that fear is legitimate in terms of cues that they are getting from either the administration? Or the parents?

J: I think it is legitimate. I would say that my administrator is fearful around, around those sorts of issues... . I mean a couple years ago a colleague and I, um, we have a thing called arts week at our school, where the kids who are in the arts program, they get, it's kind of like electives, they get split up into all these different groups, and they get to choose what they do. And we... do you know the book *King and King*?

B: No.

J: It's a picture book. It's about this prince, and his Mom wants him to get married, so she parades all these princesses in front of him, and none of them are the right one, until this one princess shows up with her brother, and the two princes fall in love and get married... . It's a cute book. So, we did a musical version of it. Just you know, we did it in a week. We got the kids, figured out what songs to put in... . Anyways, so we had parents pull their kids out of that, and then our principal wanted us to write up a whole rationale for why we are doing this. Which, is silly. Like, he should know how to address those concerns without having us write that up... . I mean it's not like what we were doing is something outside the box. Not really. You know, if you read all the stuff from the Prescott board, we have all kinds of great strategies where we talk about the "isms", and being inclusive, and creating safe and inclusive environments, and I don't know... So, I mean when he doesn't know how to do, how to answer those questions... .And, probably he's better than a lot of the other principals.

Jennifer's experience with her principal is resonant with the kinds of experiences that Andrea and Mindy described as activist educator teachers, and that John also reported experiencing as a principal taking on activist work. These narrative accounts are also corroborative of a general discomfort of activism within public education (Marshall & Anderson, 2009). Jennifer continues:

Around the day-of-pink, there was a principal who said that the staff were allowed to have discussions about homophobia, but for the students it would just be about bullying. Like, can you imagine? Like, "It's Black history month, but we can't tell the children... just the staff" It's unreasonable... . And, I think it's

because when people hear... the word homosexual, all they hear is sex. And they're like "Oh my god! We can't tell the children about sex!" But, kids get it. A friend of mine... the girl I did the *King and King* play with, she teaches kindergarten now. And... she was reading a book to her class that had... two dads in it. And... it was mostly boys in her class, they were all drawing pictures of their families with two dads. And they were like, "Two dads? that would be awesome!... Who doesn't want two dads?" So, then, she was like, that's hilarious. 'Cuz they have no sense of prejudice. She didn't send those pictures home, though, 'cuz she didn't want to hurt the Mommy's feelings.

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Jennifer jests that her colleague opted not to send drawings home when children drew two dads (even if the children didn't actually have two dads), but the anecdote shows a similar kind of caution that Jennifer indicated her administrator exercised around issues that are socially controversial.

Jennifer continues to offer reflection on her *King and King* story:

J: This year, in my homeroom class I had a boy who was, like, stereotypical gay boy. Like, he was hitting every stereotype; people would ask him all the time if he was gay. People would make fun of him for being gay. So, I wanted to present [the issue] at a staff meeting.... But, my principal kept saying "nooooo!". I'd been asking for years, but I finally put my foot down. And, I said something like, "Well, if we don't do this, how are you going to feel if that kid kills himself?" ... I wanted 15 minutes, or half-an-hour... I got 5 minutes. Um, but, it was, I didn't feel like I had to make an excuse at that point, it was like, "Well, it's for this kid." And, I, I think it made me feel... I don't know... righteous? That you couldn't argue with it being for... a particular student.... Anyways, he's no longer in my class, he's no longer at our school, because halfway through the year his parents transferred him to a Christian school. And I hope he knows, like, you know, he knows how much work I did and his classmates did to make him, to help make him feel safe. So, I think at the very least he'll know that, you know, somewhere there were people who said it's ok.

The cornerstone of Jennifer's activist teacher identity lies in working to create a safe and inclusive environment for her students to learn in. Her actions encourage students to help co-create the sense of safety and inclusion in their classroom. Shifting gears, I ask Jennifer to tell a story:

“Make it Better Now!”

J: This year at the conference, the workshop I ran... I called it “Make it Better Now”. And, the idea was that the high school kids would come, and we would video tape them sharing messages for elementary kids, of what they wish they’d heard. So, tell whoever you think needs to hear the message, so, do you think that elementary teachers need to hear something, elementary students who are gay, elementary students who are bullies. You know, whatever you feel, like the elementary world needs to hear--record this. And... a few students that had been my students... were a part of that workshop, and... one... was talking about, when she was in grade 8, how people used to call her names and try to pick fights with her, and how she had this really miserable time, and how she was really internalizing it, and starting to call herself these names that other kids were calling her. And, started to cut herself. Now, I kind of knew all of that... But... I didn’t realize how much of a crisis it was for her... She talked about, in the video, how I personally had changed things for her, because she was... crying one day, and I was like, what’s going on? But it’s so weird because I don’t really feel like I did anything out of the ordinary for her... I think sometimes we don’t know the impact that we can have. I think people always remember teachers that made a difference, or were real to them. It’s funny, because, like, they were human beings.

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B: Do you get to see kids who you’ve taught when they were in grade 8 come to the conference?

J: Yep. It’s amazing... It’s nice to see them, though, because otherwise I think I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t have that opportunity to... It keeps you going, right? To sort of see these kids who have sort of taken that positive message forward. And, I think for kids to figure out who they are, or at least question who they are, and how they relate in the world, in high school, or earlier, is amazing.

Jennifer’s remark about seeing students taking “the positive message forward” runs throughout her narrative. The importance of this theme for Jennifer’s teaching is her teaching may plant seeds for future action. Seeing her students take action through their participation in conference workshops when they are in high school is an example of that future action. Furthermore, the dialog that Jennifer facilitates in her classroom is a vehicle for her commitment to the development of critical thinking abilities. I asked a final question:

B: In what way do you think your role as an educator and your personal commitment to activism are connected?

J: Um, well... I don't think you can separate them at all really.... Do you know people, how they have teacher voice? I don't have teacher voice. And, so, I think it's just that being present, and being sort of truthful. Like, I don't feel like it's ever far from anything I'm doing. I think it's just how I navigate the world. You know, anywhere. Like, if you see injustice, you're not going to just be, like "oh, hey, injustice". Well, I think most people don't notice injustice.... How do we expect to have a better world, if the kids don't get it? And, I think they're so ready to get it when they are little kids. And, I think that as soon as they get to high school, if that seed hasn't been planted, there's not much hope. But, as adults, I think that we become very cynical, and we think, well that will never change, that's just the way it is, you just have to get over it.... And so, I think it's important to sort of start early, because little kids get it. They get fair.

Grace: "Small Changes that Make Big Differences"

(Narrative Thread: Love!)

Grace is an early career teacher who has taught for seven years at many urban high schools in occasional and contract positions before earning a permanent job teaching geography. I met Grace when we were both in our teacher certification program and master's degree. I knew Grace was a committed environmentalist, and I thought her environmental ethics might bring an activist element to her teaching.

The narrative thread that I see connecting Grace's stories is love. Grace's sense of love as an educational imperative is directly evident when she tells about loving her job and her students, but also indirectly through ideas that she shares about how she conducts herself and constructs her identity as a teacher. Her many ideas about activist education are narrated through the lens of love. As usual, I began by trying to understand Grace's comfort with the term activism to describe her teaching:

B: In my research, I'm using the term activism... and I wonder how the term fits with what you see yourself to be doing as an educator?

G: I think the first thing that comes to mind is that for me, I see activist education as like... thinking about small changes that make big differences. And, not necessarily how am I going to reduce poverty in the world, or how am I going to make sure that we make sure that we treat the earth better, which are definitely bigger goals in my teaching, but, like on the day that they walk into my room, how do they enter the room, and how do they treat each other? And, just thinking that how we treat each other will make that bigger difference in making that change, and how we go about that change, is one of the most important things to me. So, I spend a lot of time establishing a community in a classroom, and you know, exploring respect, and friendship, and other values like responsibility, and things that like make, I think, social action powerful. I deal with those like character values on a daily basis, and then they can relate to so many things, you know, like justice. Like, is it, is it fair, if we're teaching about water issues in geography and we're trying to talk about you know, how we live in this really rich country, and so many First Nations communities have boil water advisories. It makes... the transitions easy, once we talk about what's fair to us. And, those conversations are much richer when there's some sort of community there, so I feel like... my biggest contribution to a school or to a group of students is maybe not in the big project that we get the governments... attention about, but, just in how people go about their daily, you know, events.

Grace identifies justice and fairness as an important theme that underlies her thinking about activism within her teaching; she spends significant time developing a loving environment in which students can learn. This environment facilitates learning through and about fairness and justice:

Activist Educator Entry Point

B: Did your interest in doing activist education... drive your decision to become an educator, or... did activism grow out of your interest in education?

G: I think activism led me into education, no doubt.... An activism to want to make a better world definitely drove me into teaching, and just having experience of working with people, by being a camp counsellor, and growing up in leadership roles, it seemed like the natural way to make that positive change towards a sustainable world.

So, activism led me into education, but I work in a school board, and I'm always looking for creative ways to use activism, that may not always be—I've never been a, you know, protest, gung-ho, rise up and cause a lot of people to be angry about things, but I have always been someone who believes in certain values, and feels that... we need to strive for important goals. To live the values that you

have. And, knowing that our world is moving in a direction that is only harming the earth... . Not doing anything about that feels wrong, so, yes, that's why I'm a teacher.

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Grace offers a glimpse of her teacher identity as an activist educator, especially around environmental issues. She understands her own contribution to activism as being outside of antagonistic acts, and suggests a broad range of possibilities for ways that activist education can be carried out. She continues to develop these ideas as we discuss her philosophy of education:

B: I wonder if you could talk a bit about some of the key ideas that you have about education... . or about choices that you make day to day that influence your practice as a teacher?

G: The first thing that comes to mind is: students first! Although I came into this with a passion to share, an inspiration to do good in the world... it's always, for me, it's all about doing my best for the students, and making sure that they leave feeling like they can do, and they are successful. So, I guess the first thing that drives me is the real belief that all students can be successful and all students can learn. And it's about the type of environment that we enable that will allow students, or hold them back. I think there are so many barriers in a school that can hold students back, rather than help them to be successful. So, every year that goes by I'm finding myself a little more successful at helping them. That's where I see my biggest goal. So, before it is about... changing their views of the world... it's about making sure they have the skills to do what they want, you know, to be successful in their way. So, in that way, maybe activism has taken a back seat, my own beliefs about things so that there's, they have more power to be activists in their own way, right? That's a natural... progression for a teacher to want to do that... . Because in the first few years, you're just trying to learn the curriculum, and cover the things, and do a good job... . Now, you're like, okay, so this person is struggling with this. Why? How do we change that? So, that's number one for me.

Grace's story of experience here resonates strongly with advice offered by Kohl (1998), who writes that teachers need strong foundations in the basic practices of quality teaching before they can be successful activist educators:

B: You talked about coming to education as an activist, can you pinpoint a shift... recognizing that maybe... those ideas that you came to education with sort of

took a back seat to... waiting for what the students needed?

G: Probably... like, building those relationships. You know, because, you continue to ask yourself why you're there, and what your purpose is... . And, as you build relationships with students you want the best for them, and it's a two way thing, I think. It allows you to be more helpful to them. And, they learn more, from you. I work at a school where there are a lot of high risk students who have little supports in the school, as well as out of the school. And, those students... I want to be that one difference, and... I want to inspire that of other teachers, too.

B: So, students first! You were going to talk about another idea?

G: Ya... people are really nervous about the word "love" in schools. So, I think that's probably the way I'm an activist. I use that word really comfortably, and, um, passionately. I love my students. I love my job, and I love the earth.... And, I think that that makes for an important element of my teaching, because when you love something, and you explain that to kids also, like, when you love something, it's unconditional. And, what... more beautiful thing is there than that? Because, you can work through anything and it makes you feel good, and you know... you don't give up on things when you love them.

And I say it, you know, "I love you guys," "I love this!"... . Ya, I use that word a lot, and... I think that's probably important too because it keeps you remembering what's important.

B: And, are you intentional about talking to students about what that means?

G: Yes! Very. And, like, the first time you say it, they'll all be like "whewwwww!" and... I might be frustrated one day about the way things are going, and people might not be doing their homework, and, um, maybe there's been some racist comment in class... . And, using that word might get everyone off guard the first time, so you have to explain yourself. But, then all of a sudden you've got a little closer with your class by... acknowledging that, yes, I do *love* you, and *love* this job, and it makes it hard when you act like, you know, none of this matters. 'Cuz it matters a whole lot. To you guys, you know for your goals, and to me to feel like, you know, we're here doing something special and important. So, yes, I definitely use it intentionally.

Grace makes it clear that love isn't only an element of her activist environmental education, but that championing love within the realm of public education is a kind of activism itself (similar to Colleen's assertion that "the act of educating is an act of activism"). Working from popular perceptions of the attributes of good teaching, it

would seem natural for love to be central to the practice of teaching. However, by Grace's report, and as documented in literature, love is alien to many educational environments, particularly public schools (Darder, 2002; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 1989; Monchinski, 2010; Noddings, 2005).

From this discussion around love, I asked Grace to talk about the way that love played into her teaching, particularly around environmental issues, which is the area around which she most identifies as an activist educator:

B: You've touched on throughout the conversation, about yourself as an environmental educator.... Maybe you could talk about the environment as an issue that you're interested in helping students come to care about?

G: Well, I feel like it's easier these days, because... it's becoming more popular to talk about climate change, or... kids know what factory farming is when they come into grade 9... You know, a few years ago they didn't. So, it's becoming a little bit more mainstream. That we need to treat the Earth better. Not necessarily changing how we behave... but, there's more to work from. And, I teach geography, so I'm really lucky because the current curriculum, because every aspect of the curriculum has environmental issues.... We've designed our grade 9 course, around justice... environmental justice and social justice being themes. And, the reason we've done that is because we feel like kids naturally have a sense of... what is fair, and not fair. And, so, you can talk so much about the environment from that perspective. And, you can grab their interest.

And, everything that we explore, whether it be forestry industry, or... First Nations issues, we look at a particular situation, and we get them to consider a bunch of questions, that in the end they have to evaluate: is this good for the community... the economy? Is it good for global economy, and bad for a local economy? Or, is it balanced in that way? So, grade 9s are confident by the end of the course asking questions that help them to become sustainable problem solvers.

So, I try, like right at the beginning of the year we give out permission forms to leave the property, so that we can do that during class and not have to get permission every time. So, it makes it a lot easier to go out to the park down the street, and to the stream across the road, and to the hydro lines outside the school property, and whatever urban issue we're talking about to actually get out there... And, when you do that more, that becomes more normal, and so you can have discussions, and you can take them back to the classroom.

Grace transitions into a story about “the Green Team,” which she mentioned earlier:

The Green Team

B: Can you tell me more about the Green Team?

G: The green team... is our school’s environmental club... Everyone that’s in that group has a passion to make change, and... I think, like, what the group does, there’s some annual events, they do the twenty-minute makeover, they do gardening around the school... they have campaigns after doing a waste audit, depending on what is like most problematic that year, to try and raise awareness in the school. And, then they try and work on the eco-schools goals to make sure that the school retains its silver certification. So, that involves a lot of awareness about energy conservation, and waste minimization, and I’d say the biggest challenge is to try to meet the goals of eco-schools while meeting the interests of the kids. Because sometimes what you can do to make the school the most sustainable that it can be a bunch of checklists that you’ve made sure you’ve accomplished. And that doesn’t necessarily lead to the most creative, inspiring actions. So, the other thing that we try and do is like, have events throughout the year that are special to the Green Team. Like, going on a big hike, or going to an outdoor ed centre.

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Grace’s commentary here about finding the right balance between the administrative hoop jumping required by the sustainability audit system the school uses and the “creative, inspiring, actions” that might facilitate student engagement in the Green Team is demonstrative of the theme of student-directed teaching that runs strongly through her stories.

I was curious about the balance between student-directedness and teacher leadership of the educative activism within the Green Team program:

B: Would you say that the action is primarily driven by the students, or driven by staff?

G: So, right now, this year, sooo by me. And that’s the part where I feel like I’m not being a successful leader of the group. Cuz, you know, I’m working on the binder tonight for our audit, and I’m figuring out what we can do for this meeting tomorrow, but it’s not them. And, there’s been a few events where they’ve got the chance to shine, but, um, no... I’m carrying the group right now.

B: And, what is it that affects that shift between when you're sort of carrying it, and when students are doing for themselves?

G: These kids being torn between... so being allowed to be in multiple activities... because sometimes kids are in a bunch of groups because they want to be involved in the school, but sometimes they just want to have a ticket... you know, it's good for your resume... . So there are those things... and I work at a school where the students aren't as natural leaders as much, and the reason I can say that is because when I was at Downtown Collegiate, students ran the eco-team... . They had an executive... and they involve outside parties, and they fundraised, and it was amazing to be in the background of that. I was only an observer in that place, and it was amazing and inspiring. Because that's what you want in the end. So, there's that; but then, at Frankwood Collegiate you have to start everything. And there's a lot more energy that goes into that... . The culture is younger. And, I would say that that's the biggest factor... .it's a younger school.

As the interview progressed, I noticed that Grace's narrative process tended toward theorizing and reflection. While her reflections were rich, I wanted to hear more stories of her activist work:

B: I'd like to hear another story... is there a story on the top of your mind that you would say, this is a really good example of... activist education?

Speaker's Corner: Activist Throwback

I always just try to have a moment where they can have a voice in the lesson, and one way that I have found that successful, and often it works with the First Nation's issues that we look at, is having a "Speaker's Corner." And so, speaker's corner, is totally... not within their time frame, but... Some of them will know that speaker's corner is some place that you can go and speak your mind, that got televised. And, sometimes a kid will know that it was on Queen St. and John. Otherwise, you have to let them know, but they all know where Queen St is, because I teach in Toronto, and where Much Music is... and so, I tell them what we used to be able to do before other forms of communication took over, and Facebook came around, and we didn't need speaker's corner anymore.

And so, I say, we're going to have a speaker's corner today. And, I usually do the lesson and then maybe reflect on one idea that was in the lesson and give a rant... and, then find out if they have any messages for Canadians, or the government, after they've had some time to put themselves in the shoes of the students. And, I always try and look at issues from a youth point of view first. Again, because if we want empathy, we have to be able to relate. Um, and so, I

have found that sometimes that can lead to further actions that kids want to take. When they get a moment to say like, if you had 30 seconds, what would you say to Canadians now? Or, what would you want the government to hear.... And so, that can be, I sometimes try and provide avenues for that. And, whether it becomes a class thing, or whether it becomes an individual interest, having students to have an opportunity to say, like a message, that may not be more informed than what they have just learned that day, but gives them an opportunity to say it, and sometimes others to hear it.

And so, ya. We put... on the overhead projector—old school! We put down a piece of paper with a hole in it, and it creates a spotlight. And, everyone comes up who wants to, and rants in front of the big spotlight. And, some good things have been said from that. It's just to the class, and it's just in the moment, and sometimes 5 seconds. But, sometimes it's a minute. That's... small scale, it can lead to things, though.

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Grace's remark about small-scale actions took me back to her opening remarks about the power of small-scale change to inspire bigger things, and the return to this idea served as a signal that our time was wrapping up:

B: One last question. In what ways, if any, does your activist education shape or reshape the culture, or politics, or ethics of the school?

G: I think, subtly, again, amongst relationships. When you're doing things that other people see are genuinely inspiring, or they want to help because they think they're good too. Um, subtly over time. You build allies that way. I think the worst thing an environmentalist, or a social activist... can do... is just say "this is the way it needs to be," without being sensitive to the dynamic that you're in. It's not effective. And, that's the way you make enemies. And, it's not the purpose. So, just like I would expect to know my students, you need to know the school you're coming into. And, um, want the best for that, and make that known, but also be willing to like be aware of things that, traditions that are there, or roles that other people play that are important. So, valuing everyone's place. And what they do, and noticing those things, um, can help for others to notice yours too. So, really understanding what it means to be a team. And, caring about each other. So, bringing back that element of care. Your approach in everything matters, but especially in activism.

Tim

(Narrative Thread: Community Citizenship)

Tim Grant¹⁶ was a teacher for 13 years in the 1980s and early 90s, after which he left teaching in order to start *Green Teacher*, a magazine for teachers who are interested in environmental issues, and integrating the environment into their teaching. Additionally, Tim is a critic for the Ontario Green Party and, in 2011 and 2014, ran for election as an MPP. Tim's temporal distance from the classroom, and his close connection to environmental education in terms of both discourse and practice, position him well to offer commentary on the opportunities and challenges of the praxis of activist education. As usual, I opened the interview by trying to understand how strongly Tim identified himself as being an activist educator:

B: So I wonder for you if the term activism fits for what you see yourself doing as an educator?

T: I'm not a teacher anymore. I used to be a teacher, so really I'm not a good example in that sense, because... my role is to help teachers and non-formal educators who work in... a wide variety of settings, um, to take on more innovative... learning strategies, engage their... kids... in community oriented projects that inevitably involve activism.

I argue that Tim is an excellent participant for this study because his role as editor of *Green Teacher* positions him as an educational consultant of sorts who, in addition to having years of classroom experience, also has a very broad view of environmental education as activist education, and the variety of ways that it can and is being taken up across North America. I prompted him further by asking if he would have identified as an activist educator at the time that he was a classroom teacher, and his answer came as a story about how he became an activist educator:

¹⁶ With his permission and by his request, Tim's identity is not concealed.

Activist Educator Entry Point

I was a teacher for 13 years, 20 years ago... I taught shop subjects, what was then called design and technology, I taught world politics and other things. But... I taught opposite 8 nuclear reactors outside of Laketown, ON. So... I... got very heavily involved in the anti-nuclear power movement... and some of the kids in my classes got involved but it wasn't really directly, it was more indirectly associated with my teaching than directly, because I wasn't teaching about nuclear power in my classes....

So, what was missing was twofold, one was that... I wasn't the person teaching about nuclear power per se, and thus helping kids be exposed to different perspectives. But equally importantly, more importantly perhaps, kids weren't getting a foundation in energy education that would allow them to put nuclear in some context and then make up their own minds so they could be involved in lots of activist opportunities if they so choose. But, they could be waving pro-nuclear banners if they wanted to. You know, that's ultimately the filter of whether as a teacher, as an activist-teacher, you're you know, propagandizing or you're educating. So, that was... when my wife and I left teaching to start this unprofitable non-profit magazine called Green Teacher... we were reminded... many times by some of the better educators out there who are saying that, you know... education remains too conservative, but there's some sound... educational ways of... of ensuring, engaging kids in community activities, and getting outside the walls of a school and all that stuff.

I was curious if Tim's activism influenced his decision to leave the classroom:

In a way, but it's really common that activist teachers don't stay in teaching a long time. A lot of them leave early; because they also see that there are, you know, other ways that they can... do fulfilling work without having to deal with the administrivia, and the routines... and the real pressures to not be an activist in a classroom if you're a formal educator.

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As our discussion continued, Tim offered some augmentation and reflection on the story of how he became an activist educator as he explained his philosophy of education:

What we have learned in education, ah, is that... it's only through action that you can learn about a problem. You can't learn about any social issue unless you try to do something about it. Because, only then do you start discovering what are the barriers.

It's only when kids get involved in trying to solve a problem that they've identified as a problem... that, they then become aware that it's not a black and white issue. Kids look at the world in black and white terms, especially younger kids. And... that there are complications, there are two sides, ah, and that as they navigate and learn, that they begin to discover what's going to be required to overcome the barriers to solve the problem as they see it. And, that's where the kids develop the critical thinking skills... they develop the strategies for successful activism. And that's the failing of a 21st century education, is that it assumes that kids are repositories of knowledge and somehow they're going to leave the building at the end of 12 years and they're going to be citizens. Well, hello—clearly citizenship education is the missing link in conventional education, for the most part. And so, kids need opportunities to do something with the knowledge about the world that they gain in the classroom... That's... the central leverage point that needs to be used to change public education.

This line of thinking prompted Tim to tell a story about a project that had been reported on in *Green Teacher* (Grant & Littlejohn, 2005):

Activist Trigonometry

There are some really exciting strategies. Activist education can be... really challenging for educators who have no background, but it need not be. And, some of the exciting things that I see, to give you an example of less obvious roots... there is a movement in North America... mainly in the states... where school districts or schools where individual teachers are checking with public authorities to see what studies need to be done that the public authorities don't have money for. And... now there are towns in New England and the Pacific Northwest states where the town manager doesn't award a contract to an engineering firm to do a project until they've thought about which part of the project can the kids in the neighbouring schools do?

A grade 11 math teacher in a little place called Seaside, Oregon, a community that at the time was a bit preoccupied by the potentially destructive forces of a tsunami wave that once in 50 years would... be magnified as it funneled up their inlet to their town at the top of that inlet. And... and they had decided they couldn't afford a \$700,000 study that would look at the impact of a magnified tsunami wave on the buildings along the sea wall in their town. And, this teacher got wind of this and said, well this is a perfect project for my grade 11 trigonometry class. And, got the permission of her school district to be absolved of state curriculum for the following year so that they could work on this project. And, they took it up, and of course as the kids took up the project, ah, and started doing the, using their trigonometry skills learned in during the course, they then started realizing that, you know, they needed to do some public education about

all of this... And so they... developed public display boards to be mounted on this along the boardwalk on the sea wall, but also making presentations to the town council... So, they were doing art for these displays, and then they were doing language arts, as well as the, you know developing... persuasive arguments... about what they thought should happen, what the town should do as a result of their findings. And, of course, here are grade 11 kids who were incredibly motivated the whole year, learned far more effectively because they were, you know, if... one was to do objective tests, they probably did better on their standardized tests, and all that other bullshit that matters to traditional educators. But, it also meant that they were far more engaged, and they probably learned a lot about subjects that they previously didn't care about... because they needed those skills to be effective change agents in their communities.

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In the last lines of his story, Tim makes an important distinction between “*bullshit* that matters to traditional educators,” and engagement—something he sees happen more in activist education than in traditional education. However, the marginalization of activist education within public education means that engagement is not as high as it could be in schools because activist education is not well systematized in public schools. He says more in relation to this in the theorizing after his story:

You know, the traditional side of activist education is the lone teacher who... either is personally inspired and motivated on a particular issue, and shares that with their kids... or the kids themselves come up with an idea that they want to do something on an issue after talking... about current events, and stuff like that. And, it's really challenging for individual teachers; sometimes they only do it if they can get enough support from their administrator. But often they don't, and they're frustrated, and they have to kind of, it's just a difficult thing to navigate through in a system that's... designed to keep kids within the four walls of the building. And, studying you know, their Ps and Qs. And, so, I look for things that can institutionalize, how do you transform education in ways that are going to enable kids... and enable teachers more easily to do this?

The image that Tim introduces of the “lone teacher” is consistent with the sentiment that Andrea shared about not being accepted by many colleagues as a result of her activist orientation; Zoë will also share a similar idea in her experience narrative. These statements are consistent with Marshall and Anderson's (2009) findings that

activist educators often operate in stealth, making it difficult to develop strong support networks among colleagues. Tim's question about reshaping education to allow for the more community focused citizenship highlights the political nature of activist education, where activism is generally marginalized in public schools (Marshall & Anderson, 2009), and is taken up in incidental ways by concerned individuals, but is not typically systematized across whole schools or school systems. In another personal story, Tim accounts for more of his own history of activism and provides an example of the "lone-teacher" as activist educator:

The Spadina Expressway

My own activist upbringing... was really spurred by a grade 13 class way back when, in my Toronto high school where we had a fairly young geography teacher who taught a course that had never been taught in our school, on urban geography. And, the Spadina Expressway was threatening the city at the time, and he introduced us to the issues, and I got interested, and I went out and bought this book... or maybe he lent it to us... and I was really outraged by what I read about the Machiavellian origins and vested interests that were behind the launch of this expressway.... And, I was just outraged by that, and got heavily involved in the stop the Spadina Expressway movement. And, that kind of catapulted me onto many things. But, it... wasn't that the teacher was doing the traditional thing, he was just being a bit more innovative, and trying to engage kids in local issues, but not, we didn't do anything as a group about it. I went off with another student and got involved, and probably other people got involved in a few things, but you know, that's the minimum way that an education should be fostering activism, but it doesn't do much to ensure that the majority of kids really develop the citizenship skills that we need them to develop, you know, in the process of formal education.

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Following this story, I asked Tim how systematizing activist education could change the culture of a school. His response provides a nice end point:

Well, it can transform it. Completely transform it. Instead of schools just being... accidentally located in the middle of each neighbourhood... They would become much more valued by the whole community, because it's the whole community

that is impacted by students that are taking up projects that are of value... or taking stands on issues, and educating their communities.... Kids have to be involved with their communities—to develop citizenship skills, but also because of what we know about brain-based learning. Kids sitting in rows regurgitating stuff does not take advantage of their brains.... Attention drives emotion, and emotion drives learning, and... unless, it's hands on community projects that engage you. And, so that alone is a compelling argument that propels us towards a more engaged kind of educational process. A more activist process.

Estevan

(Narrative Thread: Integrating Equity)

Estevan is a White, male, Queer identified teacher who has been teaching French and International Languages in high schools for eight years. We met coincidentally through an online social network while I was in the process of interviewing for my dissertation; Estevan expressed an interest and we met up a few weeks later for an interview.

Estevan's narrative processes show his preference for argumentation and theorizing rather than more storied aspects of narration (McCormack, 2000a). This is evidenced by relatively short stories that are expanded and explained through augmentation, argumentation, and theorizing outside of the story texts themselves:

B: Tell me a little bit about why you consider yourself an activist educator?

E: Okay, um... reflective dialog... I've done a lot of work in integrating... curriculum information, and... contextualization of real life for the LGBTQ community into my... programs.... I've taught in a couple of different learning environments where homophobia, transphobia, were quite prevalent. Where it was quite toxic for LGBTQ identified or perceived people. So, that sort of work that I did in terms of embedding this work into my curriculum has been pretty important to me, as an educator.

B: And, is there a particular action, or a particular part of your practice that you would say is activist?

E: Through the work that I do, in terms of vetting LGBTQ positive films, language and literature examples, when you are teaching grammar, syntax, by infusing these things into the curriculum, it forces kids to confront their prejudices. It celebrates, and acknowledges students who are straight allies, and have different sexuality or gender identity—it makes them feel valued in the class. And, I think that part of activism is not just about forcing people—I see it as two parts: forcing people to reflect on their values, standards, images, that they possess of stereotypical groups, cultural groups, whatever the case may be. And, also valuing and validating the students who self-identify as LGBTQ, who might be thinking they are LGBTQ, that have family members, acquaintances that are LGBTQ. So, that is how I see a small shape of activism being present. That’s how I see myself as an activist educator.

As I analyze these early passages, the context of the interview situation permeates the text. Estevan appears nervous, crafting his words just so (e.g., his hesitation and reformulation around “forcing people”—trying to get it just right), in what could be an attempt to elevate the language he is using so as to “please” the researcher. I note this not to diminish Estevan’s stories, but to account for my own power as a researcher.

Activist Educator Entry Point

B: And, would you say that your interest in activism drove your decision to work in education, or that through working in education that you sort of arrived at this activist approach?

E: I was a community volunteer in the LGBTQ community for many years, prior to becoming a teacher, but while I was doing other volunteer work that would lend itself to becoming an educator. Being accepted to the faculty. So, that interest and involvement in the LGBTQ community has been present in my life for a long time, and ultimately, I knew it was going to be present in some way shape or form in my teaching career as well.

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In his first micro-story, Estevan describes his entry point into activist education as a sort of merging of identities through his experiences of working as a volunteer in LGBTQ contexts, and also in more traditional education contexts, leading to some

understanding of a link between the two that begins to constitute an activist identity. I shifted questions to try and understand how strongly that identity was constituted for

Estevan:

B: So in my project, I'm using the term activism. And, so, I'm wondering if the term activism works for you. Like, does that resonate for you? Do you... generally think of yourself as an activist educator, or is that term just ok because I happen to be using it?

E: It was—when you mentioned the term activist educator, my initial reaction was, no, I'm not an activist educator. Looking through the definition that you have provided, I think I would fit into that label, despite the fact that I might consider myself more of an equitable educator, or an educator that is dedicated to equity and inclusive education across my curricula... . But, I guess part of it too is that I am involved in activist causes outside of education, and in very specific causes that are not really geared towards students in education. You know, union work, for example. That is activism in one facet, but that's not related to my programming or curricula. But, I do consider the work that I do as an important part of equity, as opposed to say activism.

Estevan is cautious here, embracing the identity of activist educator in one utterance (“I would fit into that label”), but introducing the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009) sanctioned language of “equity and inclusive education” as an alternative in his next. Again, the context of the interview situation may play into the language in this instance if Estevan wanted to demonstrate his fluency with ministry-speak. But, given the cold relationship between activism and formal schooling, it is unsurprising that Estevan would exercise care in adopting an activist identity, even though he is quite comfortable with the idea that elements of his teaching have activist implications. Self-descriptors like “equitable educator” offer a view to how Estevan navigates his activist educator identity within an environment that can be inhospitable to activists. Further, Estevan identifies union work as a facet of his activist self, but delineates that work clearly from his teaching. This approach is different from Andrea, for instance, who talks about the

union as a protective factor for teachers doing activist education. This sort of “identity crisis” of activist educator is further shown in Estevan’s last two stories.

Purple Shirt Day

E: I had just started at my new school... I had been there barely a month, secondary school...most people didn’t know me. And, within the space of a month, even though I was quite nervous, I already had a couple new friends on staff and I found out that there were at least a half a dozen openly queer staff members at the school. To come from a school of equivalent staff size where there were zero... talk about an amazing shift!... So, with that in mind and hearing that my school was such a social justice-ish school, a lot of things had been in the news at that point about the recent spate of teen-suicide particularly in the US by students—young men, primarily who were Queer. So, purple shirt day had been created, and I was like, let’s do purple shirt day¹⁷, and I felt comfortable, and in a school of about 1000 kids where I knew hardly anyone, there were 550 or 600 kids wearing purple on the day that it happened. And, like any good teaching activity, it was scaffolded back... teachers bought into the concept, the relevance was there. I remember I made my very first announcement and I didn’t mention anything about queer youth, it was just: Teen suicide, wear purple! And then, a friend reminded me... “you didn’t say anything about it being with a queer bent...” and I was like, NOOO... ahhh! And, I realized that maybe I hadn’t unintentionally forgot... maybe my brain was saying: don’t say it, don’t come out, you’ve been here a month... what kind of impression might that leave?... Long story short, it was a big success. I was very happy.

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At this juncture, Estevan launched directly into another story that provides some possible background to explain his actions around purple shirt day:

¹⁷ Following in the vein of Day of Pink, and inspired by Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better Project,” Purple Shirt Day is a loosely organized movement asking people to wear purple in remembrance of queer teens who have died by suicide. The day is not formally endorsed by the It Gets Better Project, although the t-shirts they sell are purple.

Fag and Run!

Probably the other big contrast that I had in my career...um, my first year of teaching... I was very young. I was out to everyone in my life, except, you know, the students. I was working in an environment that I perceived to be very homophobic... a school and body of students who were first generation immigrants primarily from countries where Queer people were maligned, abused.... So, my perceptions, for me, I felt very unsafe, a very homophobic environment. I had no idea I could talk to a union rep or an administrator about that. So, this was towards the end of the year, and my classroom door was open, and I was teaching a lesson, and a kid walks by, and I swore he said "fag." Five minutes later the same kid walks by and yells "FAG!" into my classroom. And, I'm you know...I ran out of the classroom, I chased him up the stairs, I tried to figure out who it was. The school had video surveillance. The kid was "caught", so to speak, suspended, showed absolutely zero remorse for his actions. Neither was the situation handled in a way that could have been a learning situation for him.

B: On the part of administration?

E: The administration did not handle it in a way that... ya, exactly. So, I felt Unsafe? Unhappy? Vilified? And what was the learning result for the kid? Zero. You can get suspended for 5 days towards the end of the year because you call a teacher a fag and get out of your exams. So, that was very challenging... And I think one of the major issues, too, was that I had just started to feel comfortable enough to talk about issues relating to diversity and equity within my classes.... So, it was... one step forward, five steps back.

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Estevan's story does not describe an instance of activism, but it sets a context for his motivation to do activist education work. The homophobic harassment that Estevan describes offers a sense of the things that he works against in his teaching. For example, the earlier connection he made between his teacher identity and equity and inclusive education. While this incident may provide activist motivation on one hand, experiencing this kind of oppression may contribute to the activist caution that many teachers exercise. For instance, Estevan described perhaps unconsciously neglecting to advertise the purple shirt day event as an anti-homophobia event rather than a general anti-bullying initiative. These contrasting stories (Purple Shirt/Fag and Run) illustrate a

tension between teachers' interest in activist education and systemic protection of status quo politics both in schools and the wider communities that schools serve. In a reflection following his story, Estevan comments on living with this tension as a teacher:

In my last school where I felt very unsafe, and... I knew homophobia was quite rampant, I saw my actions almost as clandestine. The fact that I could be teaching the kids about positive LGBTQ characters, though film, media, whatever, in my French, Spanish, or German classes, allowed me to feel like I was making a difference, and the fact that it was a secret, or was perceived to be a secret, I certainly thought so, it's kinda cool. And the result of feeling like it was a secret was that I felt no support from my administration... the climate was not there.... And... I was surrounded by people who were... very ambivalent; didn't get the connections between anti-homophobia work and education. Or, even where they might have a connection between anti-racist work, or work against... breaking down stereotypes around people with disabilities, or Aboriginal-Canadians, but not that part of equity work. So, it was kind of cool having something that felt my own, and I do think that my students felt... I don't know if I ever expressly ever articulated that, but I think that my students felt a certain amount of pride, and being in my classes in general, and I think that some of that had to do with the fact that we were talking about things you just didn't talk about in other classes. So, there's a positive out of a negative. I only wish that, you know, in a school of 750 kids, that all 750 could have been exposed to that.

Nate: "I'm Just a Teacher"

(Narrative Thread: Caring Community on the Margins)

Nate is a Queer identified male teacher who has been teaching high school for several years in both Australia and Canada. Currently, he teaches at an alternative school for "at-risk" youth that uses innovative programming (arts, media, pop culture, and business) to invite students to experience schooling in alternative ways. We were connected by our mutual friend Collin, who suggested that I meet with Nate after hearing me give an "elevator pitch" on my research; we met a few days later on a Saturday morning in a coffee lounge nearby to where we each live. I began by asking

him to talk about his understanding of the relationship between activism and education:

B: So, just a second ago you said that everyone should be an activist educator... Can you tell me a little bit about what, for you, activist education looks like, in terms of the relationship between social action and education?

N: I think, activism... in teachers' college you're always told that you have to, for example, politically sit on the fence. That you shouldn't... teach your biases to the kids. Which I agree with; however, a lot of teachers take that learning perspective and say, "ok, we have to sit on the fence then, we can't argue for a cause." Or, they are politically afraid to do so.

Nate makes an interesting distinction here between teachers who believe they should not present any particular viewpoints on controversial issues, and those who would, but who are afraid to take the political risks that often face teachers who champion activist education:

In class, this year I taught philosophy, which is fantastic for anything social activism, or whatever words the academic world uses... um, and it's a great way of addressing stuff. Again, I will talk about my cause, I will talk about what I believe in, and then, there's a balance, you need a balance... A lot of their influences are from parents, who might be completely different, completely opposite from what social activism is.... For example, I might say, and I've had this in the past before, I might say, "Ok, Pride is coming up, I'm working with the Pride Prom committee, this is going to be awesome for the kids." A kid might say, "Ya, but, the Bible says that it's wrong, my parents think it's wrong." I said, fair enough, that's your religious beliefs and backgrounds— I'm telling you that the society that we live in today, and the laws, it's not wrong. And, if you have an issue with that, there's things you have to talk about it, and think about it, why is that?

Playful scrappiness is evident in Nate's tone when he says "or whatever words the academic world uses". Before the interview started, he had challenged me to explain why I was working in academia, rather than applying my talents directly with youth. His remarks here led into his first story about a student with whom he had a bond.

Trinny's Moment

And, a classic example where it's worked for me; last year I worked in Quinton, so I worked with at-risk youth; I love tough kids that no one really wants to work with, they're fantastic. I had this kid, can't remember his name—little Trinny. I can't remember his name, but we called him Trinny. And, he's very homophobic and stuff, little gangsta. So, in class one day he was talking with his teacher, I remember, but he came out as homophobic. And, his teacher was sort of stuck, didn't know what to do, so she was like, "Oh, ya... what if Nate was gay?" Cuz, this kid really liked me; he'd say how much I helped him, and how much, you know, we were there for each other. Like, it was a community. I believe in community, and social activism can't happen without community. And, then, he went quiet. Of course, the teacher felt really bad because she felt she outted me, and I felt, well, I'm not in or out. It just, if it happens, it happens, if it comes up in conversation, fantastic. She was really apologetic; she thought she was going to get in trouble. No problem, no problem at all, this is perfect.

Next day, kid walks in, knocks on my office door, he's like "Nate, can I talk to you?" I'm like, ya, of course you can, Trinny, come on in. He's like "Sir, I just want you to know that I really appreciate everything that you do. That you're a good person, and you really care." And, I'm like, mate, you're welcome, that's what we're here for. And, that was it. That was his way of saying, you may be gay, and I'm cool with that.

And, that's where social activism starts. Something small that way. He's come from a culture, whether it's a family culture, or a... culture. However, now he knows one gay person who's out, and he knows that they're cool. So, that's a start. It starts with a small pebble, or a small step. Something tiny, as small as a discussion, which can turn into something bigger. And, that's where I come from, the grassroots. So, I introduce it in my class, I talk about it in class; I'm not aggressive, it's just who I am. I've got right-wing friends, I've got left-wing friends... I try to find a balance, and talk about what's right, and that's where it comes from.

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Nate's message is tricky to interpret here; he speaks of finding balance, but also talks about "what's right"—highlighting the normative tensions that are implicit in any activist education project. Nate does not clarify what he means by "what's right," but from his story, it seems that he supports the kind of social justice and anti-oppressive values that also underlie this research. While Nate's values are well supported in the theoretical framework on which this research draws, whether they are "right" is

contested within education, and, indeed, in wider society. At this point, I asked about how Nate came into activist education. His response offers commentary on the politics of alternative schools:

Activist Educator Entry Point

B: Would you say that your interest in activism influenced your decision to work in education, or was it through education that you came to activism, or some mix of the two?

N: I don't think it was a thought when I got into education. When I was younger I was always very interested in politics and culture. Because of my own background. Umm, Mum's from Cyprus... Greek. Lots of political history there. Dad's from Lebanon. Tons of political history there. Tons of cultural history. So, it's part of our culture. I grew up with politics, I grew up with, say, cultural criticism. I studied political science. I wanted to go on to work in foreign affairs, and stuff like that. I just found that it suited my personality. So, I took a couple of years off, and I worked for the government, and what have you, this was back in Australia. And then, I've always loved kids. I've loved, I've loved sort of doing my own thing, being independent. Working my presence into a field. And when I was a kid I had always thought about teaching, so that's how I've got into it. And, I've found a happy medium. I do my beliefs and my personality comes out. I dunno, I enjoy it. I love the job. I do the teaching, I do some admin stuff, I do the discipline stuff. I do fun stuff. I was at a graduation last night. Fucking awesome!

B: And, right now you're working at... an alternative school... some people would say that's an activist choice in and of itself...

N: True.

B: Can you talk about how you found yourself there, and was that intentional for you?

N: Yes, it was. I don't know if you know much about schools, and how they operate, but alternative schools, for a long time have, um, it's been sort of a dumping ground for students... or it's perceived as that way, and teachers. In the past. So, if you didn't like the teacher, mainstream school wants to get rid of them, you moved them into alternative schools. This was, say 15 years ago when alternative schools were starting; now, a lot of teachers choose to work, because they choose to work with...these tough... kids. Honestly, I don't find them that tough. I grew up in the south west suburbs of Sydney... that's tough.... I love the one-on-one, I love the challenges. It's heartbreaking sometimes, like, you know

some of the kids, but they are the ones that need us the most. And, I'd done so much, you know I've got promotions... that I never would have probably done if I'd stayed in the mainstream. So from a, from a personal satisfaction career satisfying, and I guess the relationship satisfying.

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Nate's story offers useful insights into the logistics of alternatives schools, which are often sites for activist education, but as Nate has alluded to, are often marginalized spaces within an education system (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Later, he says more in this vein as he reflects on his story. Based on his earlier statements, I had a sense that activism might not be a label he was completely comfortable with, even though he was copasetic with most of what activist education might mean. I asked him to clarify:

B: I wonder if the term activism resonates for you as an educator, is that what you see yourself doing?

N: No, honestly I think of it as a negative term. Because, it's like, if you're an activist and you're political, and you think yourself higher than everyone else. I'm just a teacher. I'm a teacher who does what every teacher should do, and hopefully are doing in their classrooms. Would I say I'm an activist, no. If someone said, you know, must be an activist, you've chosen to work in alternative schools, you've chosen to work where you are—Sure, if you need a label to make me fit into your philosophical mould, or whatever, go for it.

B: So, your discomfort, or your rejection of that term is less to do with underlying meaning of it, and more to do with the connotation that comes with it?

N: It's not necessarily a discomfort or a rejection, it's anything that's labelled. It's like people need to label anything, whether it's in the gay community, or schools, or activism. Who fuckin' cares? Who cares what the label is? I don't care. Um, do what you have to do. Firstly, be in the right profession for yourself, um, do the things that are right for kids, if you're working with kids, and make sure it's an unselfish agenda. Like, it's not about me. I can go in there, and, it doesn't matter, whatever I do is there for the kids. It's not for me, so if you want to label it, go for it, but it should be student-centered focus, not a teacher-centered focus or not an adult-centered focus. It's not an adult-centered pedagogy. It's kids.

B: So, what struck me is that you said "I'm a teacher, first" and I think that's important. And, I wonder if you could talk about some key ideas that you have about education?

N: My educational philosophy, 101?

B: Yes, but I've chosen not to use that term because I think it alienates lots of people, probably in the same way that activism does.

N: I'm a real role model. Kids see a human me, they see flaws, they see where I've come from. I share stories sometimes, so they can relate. I help them set goals that aren't just academic, and I have different criteria for success... The criticisms that I get at work, I have kids that show up who need a lot of support, and who might not get all their credits... might get one out of four, might get zero out of four. At the end of the day, I don't care. As long as they're there, they're trying their best, they are improving as human beings, and they are safe.

This is the problem with society, and with education, people in education now... We're credit factories. That's what the end game is. We're playing a game. However, we have to realize, and a lot of people forget this, that not everyone is going to graduate school. Or, not everyone is going to be academically successful, or go to university or college; not everyone *should* be there. Society doesn't work that way.... They might not have a degree, they might not even have finished grade 12, that doesn't make them less of a human being. Everyone has limitations on what they can and can't do. See, is my job to keep people down? No. Just to make sure that they try their best, and if this is their best, that they're happy with it. If this is their best, and they're not working to that potential, I'm going to kick them up the ass. So, my educational philosophy: Be a role model, be real, help kids, make them feel like important human beings. And then, they can be successful members of society.... And, of course, if they attend, and they get their credits, great. But, that's secondary for me. I'm a bad educator, don't say my name to the board.

Nate offered rich commentary on the cultural politics of alternative education within a public school system. His closing remark about *tattling* on him to the board was offered in jest, I think, but parallels similar remarks from other participants and the literature (Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Picower, 2012) about the covert conduct of activist education within formal schooling.

I wanted to try to elicit more stories of activist education from within Nate's own teaching. The story he tells reaffirms his early commentary about activist education not necessarily being about doing overtly political work within the context of curriculum,

but rather in conducting education in ways that demonstrate a respect for all students no matter their circumstances. In his final story, Nate introduces the self-descriptor of *care*, which seems to encapsulate many of the other ideas about teaching that he shared, and offers some understanding of what being an activist educator means to him. Along with a story, I also got Nate's characteristic sass. I attempted to sass back, without much success:

B: If there was one story that you were going to tell someone about working as an activist educator, what comes to mind?

N: Oh, they'd only be bad stories. Activist educator? Are you using that word again?

B: I don't have to if you don't want me to.

N: I told Collin I'd give you a hard time, plus you're making me work on a fuckin' Saturday!

B: You suggested Saturday.

Brandon's Hand, and Other Stories

N: Ya, well... as reality dictates, you only really remember the shit. One of my favorite stories is, I guess last year, I had a big boy, 6'4" ... kid, gangster, drug dealer, tough, massive, I absolutely loved him. Loved the kid. And, there was an issue where, um, again, it extends from their family and stuff, so, he was angry with something happening at home, and I was you know, in his face at the time trying to help him, and he got angry and he left, and you know the old school doors, where there's the glass, and—

B: With the wire mesh inside? Ya—

N: He punched that. And it went straight through. Beautiful circle. So, punched the window. And, he was walking out of the school, and I followed him, and I'm like, Brandon, *commheer*. And, he comes back. Like, anyone else would have been scared that he's gonna, you know, beat them. He's huge. And, um, he comes and he's like, "Um, sorry, sir." I'm like, it's ok, show me your hand. Ok, come with me. So, I took him to the sink and washed his hand, and he was apologizing. I'm like, alright, mate. And then I said, you know bandaged it up, and I said you have to go to the medical centre, you might need stitches. You wanna go? Because he was

over 18 at the time. I said, he's like "Ya, I'll go." Then I said, by the way, that was a fuckin' good punch. I'm glad it wasn't my face. You would have done some major damage. And he just smiled and left...

It was, to me, it's the kids, and part of the social activism is that you care. And they know Nate's there not to bust their balls. Sometimes I will, and I've got nicknames at school, but umm, it's because I care.... So, it doesn't matter if I'm black or white or gay, or whatever, it's this is a human being, who takes interest, who really gives a shit, and maybe we can learn something from him. And, you know what, if the kid wanted to punch me in the face, but they learned something from me....

I had a kid a couple of weeks ago... and he's not very bright. I love the kid to death, but, he's an idiot. So, he got angry a couple of weeks ago, and told me to fuck off. Whatever... we dealt with it. He was suspended, there was other stuff. It wasn't about that that he was suspended. He came back in the other day, and he wasn't supposed to come in, he's been shipped out. And, I'm like, he walked in, he's "Hi" and I'm like, "you gonna tell me to fuck off again?" and he's like "hi", and I'm like, sit down. We'll talk. You try to help him out. So, this kid has been suspended 25 times, he's on serious charges, he's a drug dealer, he's a gangbanger, he's an idiot. Like, if the best thing that happens to him is that he knows there was a couple of people at [this school] that really cared for him, maybe that's going to resonate in the future. Maybe when he has kids. That's activism, I think. It's simply, it's not about burning a building or driving a car into something to get attention, that's not what it is for me. I'll work more in the background.... I think that if a community feels valued, then a community can contribute to society, and members of the community can be great human beings and great citizens.

Zoë—"If I'm not subversive... then I am not teaching"

(Narrative Thread: Subversion)

Zoë is a veteran high school teacher of more than 15 years. Currently, she teaches drama and English courses in the context of an integrated four-credit arts based program. My first meeting with Zoë was at a faculty orientation meeting where we were both new instructors in a teacher-training program (Zoë taught a drama curriculum course part-time in addition to her work as a high school teacher). Later, I had the opportunity to visit her high school classroom as two of the teacher candidates that I was supervising completed practicum under her mentorship. It was during those visits

that I got a glimpse of Zoë's practice of activist education. During my first visit to her classroom, the grade 10 English students were reading Cory Doctorow's (2008) *Little Brother*, a novel chronicling the (mis)adventures of a small band of youth activists who challenge the tyrannical authority of the US Department of Homeland Security in a futuristic, dystopian San Francisco. After seeing Zoë and the teacher candidate I was observing give a lesson on the book, I began reading it myself. It occurred to me that to include this book in a high school curriculum was likely a distinctly activist choice; at the beginning of my interview with Zoë months later, I used *Little Brother* as a starting point, and that discussion facilitated her first story:

Subversive Literature

B: So, uh... I want to start with... *Little Brother*. Because that was the thing when I came to observe your class in the fall and you were reading that book, which I am reading now...

Z: Isn't it great?

B: I love it. Uh, but that was the thing that made me think.... Choosing to put that book into your course is, I think, probably in some ways an activist choice, as opposed to, you know, reading something else... So, I wondered how important that kind of teaching is to you as an educator?

Z: Absolutely.... I think, if I'm not subversive in my teaching, then I am not teaching. And part of that comes from my heart, that if I don't feel it, I'm doing something that isn't gonna make a student go "Wow, hey, woo!", then that is not inspiring learning. And... I also believe that I can be subversive teaching *Macbeth*. So, sometimes it's about what I teach. Often it's about how it's taught, but certainly with *Little Brother* and... with most of the texts... I like new texts, because if I'm inspired by it then I want them to be inspired by it as well.

So, with *Little Brother*... a friend of mine... said "You need to read this..." And... I fell in love with the subversive nature of it, the activist nature of it. The fact that students could be activists was really meaningful to me... I just kinda lucked into it. And then, I contacted Doctorow and told him I was teaching it, and so, ya, so he tweeted with me, and I was able to show my students that, and then I sent him a bunch of the resources I created and he's uploaded them onto his site.... So, he was

writing my students. So that makes it a gift on its own.
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While many of the participants that I had interviewed at this point had identified with the kind of ideas that I had presented as activist education, I had yet to encounter someone who was so confident in their use of the word *subversive* as a descriptor for their practice of teaching, particularly at such an early juncture in the conversation. I knew I needed to ask further about it.

B: You use the word subversive... I wonder if you could say a bit more of what you mean about subversive?

Z: I mean pissing somebody off.

B: Ok?

Z: I also mean challenging what the expectation of normal is. I also mean, uh, re/presenting—and not «representing —but, re/presenting the notion of knowledge. I always want my students to explore their own assumptions. And, maybe this is my cultural studies background, but... that if they aren't second guessing and triple guessing themselves—and by subversion I mean subverting even their own thought processes... then I don't think, I don't want them to regurgitate facts. I want them to become critical thinkers, so that they can change things around them.

Zoë's argumentation in support of her story about *Little Brother* as a teaching tool showed a close fit with my framework of activist education, and I wanted to get a sense of how it was that her teaching practice had developed so strongly in this vein:

Activist Educator Entry Point

B: How would, would you say that... this subversive perspective, or what I am calling... an 'activist perspective', do you think... that influenced your decision to work in education or was it something about working in education that took you to this subversive or activist's place?

Z: Ok, I always knew I wanted to... well, from the day I was fourteen and taught swimming for the first time, I knew I wanted to teach. But, even that was in a

subversive way, 'cuz I was in a school that did things against the grain of what normal swim schools did. But then, I did a whole bunch of theatre... at a place called the Station Theatre, which was a collective, and we did everything, five years... like between who cleans the toilets, to who buys the beer, to what shows went on. It was all done collectively. And that, I think, informed my education choices as much as me deciding to be an educator. So they, and being at Cardinal University, and again—Cultural Studies—right, it was all about questioning! So those things informed who I was. I don't know if I was always that person, but I was able to find that voice being here. So, yes, but no.

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After we finished talking about Zoë's understanding of the roots of her practice of activist education, I wanted to clarify with her if her use of the term subversive was the same as being activist, and my prompt allowed her to share more about the specifics of her practice:

B: I wonder if the term activism fits with... what you see yourself doing as an educator?

Z: Yes, because I think as soon as you get, you're an activist, you also end up with, um, a slant or an agenda, and without question most people know that mine's equity with an LGBT slant.

I was curious about Zoë's introduction of LGBT issues into the conversation. I have been thinking about my own influence on the study, and that my interest in Queer activist education may have been significant in the recruitment of participants with like interests, but in this instance, Zoë's alliance and solidarity with the LGBT community was news to me. She continued:

For sure. And, it has always been that way from the day I started teaching and so I will embed equity work in everything I do. I can't help but do it. And I also know when I'm showing up to school I want to inspire students to be those activists—themselves and I'm not just showing up for the paycheck. If it was, just, I would go through the motions, that's not activist education—education that has a goal. And that's maybe a bad thing... because you know, you get accused of “being an activist,” and having your agenda in your classroom.

Here, Zoë touches on a theme shared by many of the participants who identify a strong

political element to their teaching of activist education (Andrea, Jennifer, Tim, Nate): that to be an activist, or have an agenda is a characteristic that negates “good” teaching—something that one would be accused of. She continues to offer that this negative view toward activism is not generalized, and that some specific issues are targeted as unwelcome in schools:

But, nobody's ever said “You have a racism agenda,” or “You are politically active in race relations.” Nobody accuses anybody in a negative light about that. But if you bring in poverty, or gender politics, or Queer politics, suddenly that's a bad thing? And, I wanna get us to the point where we, just like with race, we just say “Of course I would.”

Zoë's point here about bias against left wing ideas in activist education is well taken, although her notion that anti-racism activism has a warm welcome in schools needs to be problematized to some degree; while many schools readily welcome discourses of multiculturalism, parallel political efforts to challenge White privilege within schooling are frequently shut out (Lund, 2001; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Knowing that Zoë had spent as many years teaching as she had, and that she still worked from a strongly politicized notion of activist education, I was keen to hear more stories of her work. She had a story immediately in mind:

B: If you were going to tell a story that you thought described your, sort of, quintessential activist educator moment—

Z: That's the easiest thing I've ever told!

Why Wouldn't We?

Four, five years ago? Six years ago? A friend of mine, a queer teacher, was in the board with me here. Moved to the Lakeside Board and he knew I was doing this work. He was never ever “out,” here, “out” in Durham... but knew all of the work I was doing. It was supportive of my work and was there, with that, but was never identified.

Called me up and said “Any chance your students wanna, or any of your queer students wanna do a show, a performance at a thing we're doing in Durham for equity, LGBT stuff?” And, I said “Ya, man, I'm in. Why the hell not?” And then, I was like—wait a second, I can't say my students are gonna do this. So, I went to them and I said are you interested in doing this? We have this opportunity. And one of them put their hands up, her hand up and said, “Well why wouldn't we?” I'm like—Holy Fuck, ya! Why wouldn't you, indeed? So, we spent four weeks: researched, interviewed, wrote from their own perspectives and created a show called *Coming Out Proud* that we took for this one day event in Durham and presented to about 200 people. Uh, education workers, ed activists, social activists, board of directors, like, like it was just a mish mash. It was an equity thing focused on LGBT rights.

And at the end of the show, we always have people stand up and say, you know, “What questions do you have of the cast?” and we had two people stand up and one who said, “I was gonna go home tonight and, I have, I have everything ready and I was gonna kill myself tonight and I'm not, because of you.” And, my grade *nines* are sitting there just—you know. All but one was identifying straight at that point. And another one stood up and said, “I've been desperately unable to do what I am about to do, but I am gay,” and came out in front of us and said, “I am going home to tell my family tonight that I'm gay.”

Those were the moments. All coming from that one student asking the right question, “why wouldn't we?” Indeed, why wouldn't we? What do we have to lose from engaging in equity work and activist work?

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At the end of her story, Zoë questions what losses might accrue from a failure to include activism within education, but her story illustrates the kind of gains that are possible in terms of furthering social justice and anti-oppressive values through education that are demonstrated through the rich experiences that her students gained in the process of planning, rehearsing, and performing an anti-homophobia theatre piece, and then having an opportunity for shared-reflection on the process through an audience talk-back session.

After hearing this story, I wanted to get a sense of whether Zoë felt her activist approach to education was supported within her teaching context, or if there was tension. Given the somewhat rural context she was working in, her answer surprised

me:

Administrators have been great. *Really* great! And, I know that people tell me, 'cuz... I present provincially with OSSTF.... I hear people say, "My administrator would never let us do that." Like, what makes Tradburg special? 'Cuz it sure as shit is happening here! And, I don't know if the principals just end up using me as their token to say look at the equity work my school's doing, 'Cuz that's part of it. You have to sell, you have to bring praises upon your school.... So, and I've had parents—"Why are you doing this?" And, I just always go back to the line from Laramie Project, are you ok with your child being in *Macbeth*? and it doesn't get any clearer "Yes, I am, I'd love my child to be in *Macbeth*." So great, when she plays Lady Macbeth and is a murderer you're ok with that? But I have just as many arguments... with people about rubrics. So, I'd much rather have the equity argument.

Zoë's experience here is hopeful for activist education as a mainstream educational approach, and her reference to *The Laramie Project* resonates with Mindy's earlier reference to the same question from the play. Both references point to the often invisible force of values in teaching about controversial issues. While much concern might be paid to a production of *Laramie* or another production featuring queer characters, or with anti-homophobia messaging, we would think little of producing a classic canonized text like *Macbeth* and many others that feature violence, sex, and other controversial elements. However, because these elements are culturally normative in many parts of western societies, they remain unscrutinized (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012), while works that portray anti-homophobia, anti-racism, and other social justice values are given pejorative labels like *activist*, *fringe*, and *special-interest* (Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Picower, 2012).

As our conversation felt like it was drawing to a close, I asked Zoë if there was anything else she felt like she wanted or needed to share. Her response provided a lovely and thoughtful *coda* (McCormack, 2000) to our conversation:

I think an interesting side is how difficult it is to be an activist. 'Cuz sometimes it's

exhausting when I feel I'm alone. And, sometimes that's equally invigorating... I think it... ebbs and flows, but the moment that you, that a student comes back, and just like any other teacher... they say thank you for the thing that you said, that you never knew you said. That was a moment of activism. Even if it was "You can hand write that essay." And challenge and change the rules... question the rule. Those are the moments that make it worth it and it's often the smallest moments. Although, you know, I talk about the defining moment when the person said they were gonna kill themselves. Like, it doesn't get any bigger than that, you know. I cried... the whole class cried, like, the whole way home on the bus and then for days when they told the story—but those are no more important than the other activist moments that you don't even realize that you've made a change.

Zoë's admission of sometimes feeling lonely as an activist educator demonstrates a trend expressed in multiple other experience narratives (See also Andrea, and Tim). Her explanation of internalizing the thanks of former students who point out the small things that she didn't notice doing may be understood as a kind of fuel for recharging her identity as an activist educator. I can think of no better note on which to draw the experience narratives to a close.

Chapter Summary

This chapter portrays the stories of 10 self-identified activist educators who were participants in the research project. An interview with each participant was analyzed for its stories in order to produce the 10 experience narratives presented here. Each experience narrative is encapsulated by a narrative thread. These are shown in the following table with a brief summary of how the narrative thread contributes to the evolving conception of activist education presented next.

Andrea	Dialog and Critical Questioning, and "Being the Change"	Andrea is a committed activist, but also questions deeply the ethics of doing activism within education in ways that are not indoctrinatory. She posits that through dialog and critical questioning, students can choose to become change agents around issues
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		that are significant for them. Her story of starting a gay/straight alliance with some of her students shows her ideas merge with practice in her teaching.
Mindy	How should we treat each other?	Mindy's primary story revolves around her interaction with a young student, Blake, who is struggling in school as he deals with coming out about his sexual orientation to his friends and family. Underlying her story is a feeling of compassion that clearly dominates Mindy's views on, and practice of, teaching. Compassion operates as a response to the key question of her teaching philosophy: how should we treat each other?
Dave	Human rights are the central narrative	Dave spoke about activist education through the lens of developing a "culture of peace" initiative in his schools. He compares culture of peace schools with "normal schools" and suggests that it's possible for schools to achieve much more with students when they adopt a vision that places human rights as a central piece of the school's <i>raison d'être</i> . His story about Steve, a reformed gang member who becomes a leader in the school, shows how activist education programs like the culture of peace can have lasting positive influence on students' lives.
Colleen	Curiosity and self-direction	Colleen coined the mantra "the act of educating is an act of activism" to describe her idea that doing education in ways that focus on leveraging students' curiosity and ability for self-directed learning is, in-and-of-itself, an activist task, notwithstanding any particular sociopolitical issue. Her story of taking a cross-country road trip with a group of students as part of an integrated high school credit program shows how her philosophy may work in practice, "where the rubber meets the road".
Jennifer	Safety and inclusion	Jennifer described how creating a safe and inclusive environment in her classroom is an important foundation for the activism that emerges from her class discussions about issues of equity including queer issues, and classism. Her stories reveal that some of her students choose to follow activist paths once they are in high school.
Grace	Love!	Grace explained two principles of her philosophy of education: Love!, and Students first. It is through the educational and emotional imperative of love that Grace reminds herself that she wants to put

		students first in every part of her teaching. She understands activism as working for small changes that can make big differences and shares love as a vehicle for inviting her students to share in her activist vision for a better world.
Tim	Community citizenship	Tim suggests that integrating community activist experiences into schooling would be a significant innovation toward helping students think about themselves as active citizens. He thinks that many teachers would be willing to get on board if there was more professional development and systemic support for activist education.
Estevan	Integrating Equity	Estevan storied his efforts to integrate queer content into his teaching. While cautious about identifying as an activist educator, he demonstrates thinking about his identity as a teacher, and how it can and cannot integrate with his activism outside of teaching.
Nate	Caring community on the margins	Nate told of his experience working in alternative schools. He describes doing community development on the margins of schooling, and sees this teaching as a kind of activism in that he shows care for those who otherwise would go uncared for by the education system in which he works.
Zoë	Subversion	Zoë notes that activism is something that teachers are often “accused of,” a characteristic that negates good teaching. However, she contends that the activism that arises within her teaching is not forced upon students, but arises from her central task of encouraging students to question assumptions.

Table 3 - Summary of Experience Narratives

Looking across these summaries and the experience narratives as a whole, three main elements of activist education are apparent: social elements, political elements, and pedagogical elements. In the next chapter, I begin a discussion that explores these three elements that characterize the landscape of activist education as it is described by these 10 educators.

CHAPTER 5 TRACING RHIZOMES: A DISCUSSION OF TRENDS AND TRAGECTORIES

The questions guiding this research that concern relationships between education and activism are:

- What relationships exist between education and activism? What qualities characterize their convergences?
- In what ways, and under what conditions, can activism add richness and depth to education?
- How is the relationship between education and activism conceptualized and practiced by teachers who identify as activist educators?

In this chapter, I discuss the significance of the results presented through the 10 experience narratives in Chapter 4, in light of the research questions re-presented above. Working from the conceptual inputs of *environments*, *ideas*, and *actions* used to describe my understandings of activist education in Chapters 1 and 2, I further employ the rhizomatic narrative analysis (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; 1994) described in Chapter 3 to illustrate intertwined themes that emerged from participants' stories. While the data reveal myriad trends and connections, three main themes regarding the relationship between education and activism became clear early in the analysis and remained consistent throughout. These themes are: social elements, political elements, and pedagogical elements of activist education. Working from Deleuze and Guattari (1987; 1994), I develop these strands as conceptual rhizomes. Social elements refer to humanitarian interpersonal concerns that emerge from activist education; political elements involve normative dimensions that are necessarily a part of all education, which crystallize as teachers and students take action on controversial issues in their communities; and pedagogical elements refer to more inward-reaching rhizomes that focus on the ways that the kinds of hands-on, student directed methods that typically

characterize activist education constitute “good education.” Recall from Chapter 3 that I use the metaphor of rhizomes to think about the organic nature of concepts—rooted in particular places, but always stretching line vines in new directions. Throughout this chapter, I return to this metaphor to explain trends around social, political, and pedagogical elements of activist education. Each element operates as a rhizome offered by the research participants as a way of responding to the research questions—not with finite answers, but as possibilities that are highlighted through this research.

Rhizomes Redux

In Chapter 3: Thinking Narratively about Education and Activism, I introduced Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) idea of concepts as rhizomes. I assayed that a rhizomatic metaphor was particularly appropriate for thinking about activist education because of its ability to reflect the degree of complexity that is present in educative and activist phenomena. For Zwicky (2003) “metaphor is one way of showing how patterns of meaning in the world intersect and echo one another. The ability to think analogically is a reflection of sensitivity to ontological form” (p. 6). Zwicky’s message is that, while underutilized academically, metaphor is an effective way of theorizing. Here, I offer an extension of the thinking about rhizomes presented earlier; I reintroduce these ideas here so that readers may keep the notion of rhizomatic concepts in mind as they read my discussion of the significance of the body of stories shared in Chapter 4.

On the centrality of connection to the enterprise of education, Stanley (2011) quotes Václav Havel, who suggests: “education is the ability to perceive hidden connections between phenomena” (p. 275). In interpreting this definition, Stanley

observes that the significance of these hidden connections is that they illustrate the relational, interconnected nature of our world. The rhizome metaphor may be a helpful way to understand Havel's claim; the connections of a rhizome are often not immediately visible because they run underground, making the many extensions of an organism seem independent. The work of an educator, then is to help students trace the underground roots that connect what seem like separate entities. Such inquiries make the invisible more easily seen, and reveal the complex, dynamic, organic nature of the relationships between concepts such as education and activism. In following a rhizomatic approach to conceptualizing activist education, I recognize that the connections that Havel and Stanley discuss are not random in nature, but arranged, at least in part as a result of affinities between the two conceptual nodes of education and activism. Of course, an affinity between education and activism is not universal, but has strong meaning for the individuals who shared their stories in this research. For them, the relationships between education and activism have systemic characteristics.

Capra (2007) argues that systems are best understood not by the parts that make them up, but by the patterns of relationship that hold the parts together. A key aspect identified by Capra (1983) of non-linear systems that guides their relational operation is that of self-organization. Unlike machines whose structure and function are externally imposed, organisms and their systems "exhibit a certain degree of autonomy" (p. 269)—indeed, the activist educators who participated in this research demonstrate this quality, even as they operate within education systems that are designed and operated on a mechanistic template.

This contradiction gives way to another metaphor for understanding activist education operating within the confines of public schooling: a rhizomatic organism that has taken root within the cogs of the precisely ordered gears of the schooling machine. At times, the activist education organism confounds the workings of the machine—focusing on those structures that are particularly oppressive. At other times, the machine’s gears continue to turn, sometimes severing parts of the activist education rhizome. In some instances, these severed rhizomes will wither and die, but at other times they find ways of surviving independently, creating multiplicity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) as the new organism continues to interact with the machine, as well as with the existing organisms; vines stretching towards each other, intertwining in a caress that is not possessive, but demonstrative of ethical affinity—a selfless relationship of support and encouragement, of *being for* (Bauman, 1993). Similarly, Zwicky describes a resonance: “Resonance is indeed a function of attunement of the various distinct components of a whole. But their distinctness is crucial: resonance involves the carrying-over of an impulse from one component to another” (p. 47). Zwicky’s *carrying over* may refer not only to the attunement between the multiplicities of the activist organism, but may also reflect the tension in relationship between the organism and the machine. As described in many of the experience narratives, an *uncomfortably comfortable* relationship exists between activist education and formal schooling.

Returning to the multiplicities of the activist education organism, I suggest that three main rhizomes constitute the organic invasion of the machine that I sketched above: social elements, political elements, and pedagogical elements. These rhizomes

interact collaboratively in attempts to confound schooling machines in ways that resist oppressive elements of schooling, and accelerate those elements that facilitate equity and social justice.

Understanding Social, Political, and Pedagogical Elements of Activist Education.

Before I begin to describe each of these broad rhizomes of meaning, I briefly explain their interrelationships and how they came to emerge from my analysis. To suggest that these three ideas about the nature of activist education are interrelated is perhaps an understatement. Working from the rhizome metaphor, it is best to understand these threads as commonly rooted ideas that continue to weave together and intertwine as they stretch away from their points of origin. Indeed, in many cases, the same utterances from a participant may offer support for one or more of these explanatory ideas. Likewise, similar ideas shared by different participants may cast light on social or political elements in one sense, but be interpreted as pedagogically related as explained by another participant. In this sense, these rhizomes are strong illustrations of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of *multiplicity*—a conceptual condition where divergent ideas can coexist without being in full opposition to one another. In short, there are no clean lines delineating each rhizome, but the existence of each is evident throughout participants' stories.

As a result of the multiplicity of the three rhizomes, it would be disingenuous to assign each participant to only one of these categories. For example, Mindy's stories are strongly focused on social elements of activist education as evidenced by her narrative thread "how should we treat each other?" But to categorize her experience narrative as

only socially focused would dismiss the subtle political undercurrents of her work; she specifically characterizes her work as social in order to protect her professional image within a conservative school system that is suspicious of political thinking, in particular left leaning political thinking. Likewise, while Andrea, Jennifer, and Zoë are overtly political teachers, to categorize them as exclusively so would negate their deep commitments to rich social and pedagogical practices through their activist education activities. In varying degrees of intensity, each participant demonstrates all three rhizomes through their stories. While it is useful for discussion to identify three distinct rhizomes, some caution needs to be maintained about the certainty with which these three rhizomes are defined; Deleuze and Guattari (1987) might suggest that too careful a delineation of each rhizome interferes with the potential for multiplicity. I make a distinction for the purpose of discussion, but acknowledge that the realities of activist education described here are more fluid than three defined categories can communicate. It may be useful to think of each of the three rhizomes as having chameleonic properties—the ability to shift its appearance to blend with the environment in which it exists.

The three rhizomes were identified through the two processes of analysis explained in the methods section of Chapter 3: first, recursive readings of interview transcripts by which the interpretive stories were developed, and second, a process of coding and thematic organization that was used to double-check that each narrative thread was supported by the interview text. Through the process of recursive readings, following the multiple lenses approach (McCormack, 2000a, b), I began to see social, political, and pedagogical elements. By identifying grassroots themes within each

narrative and compiling them to support the narrative thread of each interview, the integrity of the three key elements is supported.

As these three rhizomes began to present themselves through my analysis of participants' stories, I worried because I felt that the analysis was not revealing any particularly significant findings. That activist education has social, political, and pedagogical elements is not an especially Earth-shattering notion; similar propositions could be located in both theoretical (Breunig, 2005; hooks, 2004; Monchinski, 2009; Wink, 2011) and empirical (Lund, 2001; Marshall & Anderson, 2009) literature. What prompted me to continue developing the analysis in this direction, though, was not that these rhizomes of interpreted meaning simply existed within the stories, but that the stories that participants shared offer potential to add depth and texture to existing literatures of critical, anti-oppressive, and liberatory education. In this way, my aim in this project has been to showcase the research findings in ways that harmonize and extend existing literature, rather than to identify a knowledge gap of some kind and attempt to fill it.

Furthermore, an interesting gain in understanding activist education offered by this study is not just that these three patterns emerged, but that each of the three (social, political, and pedagogical elements) seems to function in two differing ways: both as an entry point to activist education, and also as an ongoing process of praxis.

Entry points. One of the questions that I asked consistently in all of the interviews (even if it is not reflected in each experience narrative) was relevant to how participants came to identify with the term "activist education" as something that they

were doing in their teaching. Specifically, I wanted to know if involvement with activism influenced the participant's choice to become a teacher, or if it was something about being a teacher that compelled her/him to activist education. Looking through the experience narratives, it is clear that the answers to this question are not simple. However, what is equally clear is that one or more of the social, political, or pedagogical elements served as entryways into the activist educator identity held by each of the participants, according to their reports. Andrea, for example, describes her disenchantment with the more political world of student activism through a public interest research group (PIRG), and the joy she experienced in nannying a little girl—a more social enterprise. Likewise, Dave credited his experience working in a vocational school as shaping his human rights-based approach to education. Multiple participants described pedagogical entry points to their teaching careers—Jennifer and Zoë respectively were drawn to teaching through their experiences instructing sailing and swimming lessons; for them, perhaps there was something inherently worthwhile in the interaction between teacher and student, or the resultant learning that made teaching inviting for them, and upon entering teaching as a formal career, they discovered it to be a venue for their more political concerns. Here again, Mindy does not articulate exactly what drew her into teaching: she emphasizes that it was not any kind of activist inclination, but rather, her activism developed out of the relationships that she developed with students. She also commented that, although her entry point into teaching was not specifically an activist interest, she always knew that being subversive would be part of her teaching—and so her entry point is somewhat more political.

The notion of social, political, and pedagogical entry points into activist education is a significant contribution. While my focus in this research isn't on filling gaps in the literature, this would seem to be a place where this project specifically contributes to an underdeveloped area of knowledge. Clarifying understandings of factors that contribute to, or hinder the development of activist educator identities stands to facilitate the emergence of more educators who work for social justice and anti-oppressive ends through their teaching praxis. For instance, awareness of social, political, and pedagogical entry points may help those who work in teacher education to intentionally design pedagogies that help new teachers to identify with one or more of these entry points as motivating factors for becoming an educator, and leveraging these entry points towards processes of activist education praxis. For instance, conscious intention on the part of teacher educators to honour activist educator identities in teacher-candidates could serve as a challenge to Nate's suggestion that "in teachers' college, you're always told that you have to, for example, politically sit on the fence." Likewise, Andrea and Zoë expressed similar concerns about the common perceptions among many educators and the general public that activist education is *de facto* indoctrination. Such pedagogies within teacher education may serve to create cracks in the neoliberal *business-as-usual* (Ellsworth, 1988) façade that limits the ways that teachers and students experience schooling, and inject those cracks with the kind of invitational messaging that Purkey and Novak (2008) suggest can lead people to understand their boundless potential, and apply that potential in the service of creating a more socially just world (Breunig, 2005; Carr, 2011b, 2013; Itin, 1999; McLaren, 2009).

Processes of praxis. Beyond entry points, the social, political, and pedagogical elements of activist education also appear to explain the ongoing praxis that makes up the work of the activist educators who were participants in this study. Returning to the notion of three rhizomes of activist education, it is significant to note that many participants show a shift in perspective between their entry point to activist education, and how they continue their praxis. This trend works nicely with the rhizome metaphor, because it is natural for rhizomes to change paths over time, responding to the particular conditions they encounter.

Throughout the experience narratives in Chapter 4, participants describe their own foundations of activist education that can be understood through social, political, and pedagogical lenses. For instance, Andrea spoke of meaningful conversations, Colleen feels that “the act of educating is an act of activism,” Dave identified human rights as a “central narrative of the school,” and Estevan espoused “equity and inclusive education across... curricula.” Each of these reported understandings of what activist education looks like in practice lean towards ongoing processes of doing education, rather than singular practices of enactment. In this way, activist education may have an alternate focus than activism outside the context of education. The distinction that I am making here is between process and product. Both processes and products are important in both activist education, and in all activism; however, within activist education, research participants described particular attention to the *process* of activism rather than only the change, or product, that activism is designed to achieve.

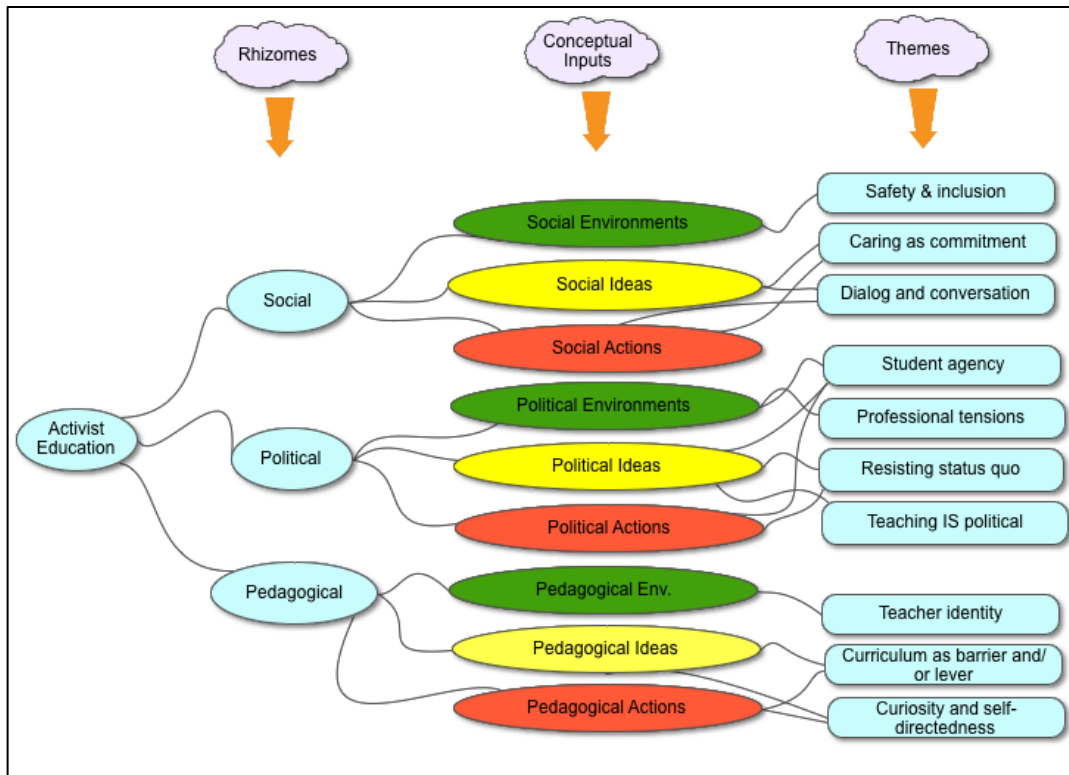


Figure 4 - Rhizomes, conceptual inputs, and themes

This trend is perhaps best encapsulated by Jennifer’s phrase “planting the seeds.” This turn of phrase can be viewed as a manifestation of educational design in the Deweyan sense (Dewey, 1918; 1938); that teachers act upon an environment to allow students to have certain experiences, and to wait and see what meanings students will assign to those experiences through reflection. A focus on process is important because it facilitates the emergence of educative moments within activist experiences. That is to say that, through reflective practice, the doing of activism can become the study of activism. Through study, understanding can become deeper, and deeper understandings can lead to better enactment of activism in the future. While this process can be, and often is, achieved in activism outside of education, a formal educative component makes the focus on process more intentional. In what follows, I

individually discuss social, political, and pedagogical elements and describe them in terms of the conceptual inputs (environments, ideas, and actions) that inform activist education, as I detailed in Chapter 2. Figure 4 shows a visual representation of the rhizomes, conceptual inputs, and themes that were found in the experience narratives.

Social Elements of Activist Education

The social rhizome of activist education as described by participants includes a variety of ideas that surround humanization. Ethics, values, socialization, dialog, engagement, inclusion, and relationships are all concepts related to the social elements of participants' stories. Both directly and indirectly, participants explained the ways in which the sociality of activist education offered unique opportunities for teachers and students to work together around social issues that are important to them. They described having opportunities to use activism and reshape education in ways that have a positive humanizing influence on their participants. For instance, Grace's story about her students coming to understand their values in relation to Canada's colonial legacy through a "Speakers' Corner" activity, Mindy's drama students gaining understanding of how homophobia impacts one of their cast-mates as they rehearse *The Laramie Project*, and students at Dave's school having school-wide class discussions about violence against women after the culture of peace group's "moment of noise" lunchtime demonstration all highlight possibilities for increasing social awareness through activist education. In what follows, I unpack these and other narratives of humanizing activist education through the lenses of ideas, actions, and environment that were developed in Chapter 2: Conceptualizing Activist Education: A Review of the Literature. Key ideas in

the next two sections that fuel the trajectory of the social rhizome are safety and inclusion, care as commitment, dialog, and human connection.

Social environments. The most salient patterns emerging from the stories shared in this research relate to the social character of educational environments, in particular, feelings of safety and inclusion. Some participants felt that creating safe environments for students was, in and of itself, an activist task. For example, Jennifer commented that her efforts to make her classroom inclusive is something that at least one student reported as making a difference in their experience of school. Similarly, Nate discussed the importance of being part of a community; for the marginalized students he works with in an alternative school program, a sense of physical and emotional safety is a critical entryway into learning. Additionally, Mindy espoused that, within schooling, curriculum is a vehicle by which students can develop into better human beings, and that the effectiveness of this vehicle hinges on feelings of belonging that emerge from carefully designed educational environments. Mindy's sentiment is congruent with the invitational ethical stance articulated by Purkey and Novak (1998, 2008), typified by the elements of respect, trust, optimism, care, and intentionality (these elements of invitational education are expanded on in Chapter 2—*Conceptualizing Activist Education: A Review of Literature*).

These perspectives are significant, not because they are all ultimately correct, but because they show that these activist educators spend time thinking about and acting to positively shape the character of their classrooms and schools. They do this amid the many competing priorities that schools demand of teachers. Several scholars

(e.g.: Fox, 2007; Goldstein, Russell, and Daley, 2007; Prichard, 2013) have rightly critiqued the idea of “safe environments” as a blanket concept, questioning the idea that there can be a singular kind of safe environment for everyone, and that a dynamic place like a classroom could always fulfill the criteria of such an environment for everyone. While the notion of safe and inclusive classrooms is in need of continual theorizing and interrogation, teachers may not need to “get it perfect” in order to be influential with the students whom they serve. That six of the 10 participants in this study prioritize safety and inclusion in designing educational environments is an acknowledgement that at least some activist educators are concerned with making students feel physically and emotionally safe in school. Acting on this concern is of primary pedagogical importance for these teachers—equal or more so than delivering on particular curriculum deliverables, or achieving particular activist ends (Picower, 2012). Given pressures for teachers to prioritize things like curriculum coverage (Kohn, 2001) and assessment and evaluation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), it would be unsurprising if classroom environmental concerns took a backseat to these systemic priorities that are often portrayed in the popular media as being of more central purpose to schooling than making students feel secure and included.

Some participants discussed the way that their own personal convictions about the importance of safe and inclusive educational environments motivates their efforts in constructing positive environments with their students (for example, the importance of being an ally to marginalized people, or infusing equity ideas into curriculum deliverables). While somewhat unsurprising, the significance of this attribution should not be overlooked. In educational systems dominated by instrumental and neoliberal

policies and practices, some teachers, perhaps even many, set aside ideas of a neutral or objective professional identity and infuse their own beliefs into their professional practice (Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Picower, 2012). Based in social justice and anti-oppressive frameworks of teaching, these practices lead to the creation of environments where students may feel empowered to be more active participants than in more traditional classrooms (Bialystok, 2014; Kumashiro, 2004; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Within such activist education environments, participants in this study expressed the kinds of ideas and actions that could emerge in relation to more positive human social relations, which gives support to the kinds of Deweyan (Dewey, 1918; 1938) and contemporary experiential education theories (Breunig, 2005; Chapman, McPhee, & Proudman, 2008; Delay, 2008; Itin, 1999; Joplin, 1981) that champion student engagement and empowerment as central pedagogical principles.

Social ideas and actions. The narratives shared by participants demonstrate a close interrelation between ideas and actions that, to discuss them separately would mean both duplication and also distortion of the meanings significant to each rhizome. As such, I discuss idea and actions in tandem. Critical to the concept of social ideas and actions described by the participants is the idea of caring. The quality of the caring education that was generally explained through participants' stories and reflections can be described as a hybrid of caring as nurturing, in the vein of Monchinski (2010), and caring as commitment—to the role of teacher, to student achievement and wellbeing, and to issues of social justice and anti-oppression. Neither explicitly an idea nor an action, this broad disposition of caring can be attributed many of the participants, most

notably Andrea, Mindy, Colleen, Jennifer, and Nate. Caring as an overriding approach to teaching clears a path for more specific activist educational ideas and actions to emerge. For instance, Dave and Mindy shared similar ideas about integrations between school learning and the wider world in which schools are situated and where students live. Dave discussed the ways that teachers and students, *qua* educators, have the capacity to shape culture, both within and outside the school. Mindy espoused a curriculum of life that includes but goes beyond the official school curriculum. These parallel ideas suggest that activist educators perceive only a permeable (if any) barrier between the school and the community and cultures in which the school is situated. While most educators would probably agree that students necessarily bring the community into the school, simply by virtue of being there, the activist educators who participated in this study leverage that community in order to try and achieve socially educative ends, resonant with the literature (Picower, 2012; Sobel, 2004; Solomon, Singer, Campbell, Allen & Portelli, 2011). Looking across the ten experience narratives, it is evident that, in some instances, the leverage of community issues, ideas, and concerns for educational ends is quite intentional and formally planned, as in Dave's culture of peace initiative. In other situations, the opportunity for leverage arises more spontaneously out of the interaction between teachers and students as a result of their environment, as in Andrea's description of the "perfect storm" that brought her together with a group of students to form a gay/straight alliance. While these examples differ in the ways that they came about—one formally developed by an educator as a way to challenge student disengagement in the school community, and the other emerging from a grassroots collaboration between students and teachers concerned about creating safety for

LGBTQ youth in schools—both create important opportunities for dialog about social issues resulting from embodied educational experiences (Brookfield, 1993; Dewey, 1938; Jickling, 2009).

Before continuing to discuss the theme of dialog, it is worthwhile to note that the notion of leverage I have been discussing is useful in continuing the metaphor of the activist organism inhabiting the schooling machine. Recall that I described some rhizomes as having success at confounding the workings of the machine, while others would wither after becoming caught in the gears. Activist educators who are successful at achieving activist ends without succumbing to the machine's crushing parts achieve leverage by exploiting gaps in the workings of the machine in order to achieve social justice and anti-oppressive outcomes. These acts of leverage may be thought to create invitational openings (Purkey & Novak, 2008) into which students can enter and find educational opportunities that reflect the grassroots needs of their community, as opposed to the typically mechanistic ethos of the machine. Dave's explanation of the culture of peace initiative at his school, or Grace's *Speaker's Corner* lesson, stand out as examples of the kind of invitational levers I'm thinking of. Working from the definition of rhizomes furnished in Chapter 3, this kind of opportunism may be viewed as a figurative manifestation of the *advantageous roots* that are characteristic of rhizomatic organisms. For the activist education organism, finding space within the machine to flourish out of the way of the crunch of the gears is an example of the uncomfortably comfortable relationship between activist education and schooling.

The idea of dialog, or meaningful conversation (Adams, Jones, & Tatum, 2007), was pervasive across the experience narratives, particularly that dialog is an essential

starting point for activist education, in that it serves as a way of planting seeds for further action. Interestingly, the theme of dialog was usually related as much or more to social elements (how people treat each other and human rights) as it was to political elements (power dynamics associated with ideas of how things should be). Andrea and Jennifer were both explicit about the importance of dialog as a vehicle for their practice of education as an activist process. For Andrea, positioning dialog and critical questioning as a central means of doing activist education allows for a rethinking of what activism can mean, both within education and more broadly. She contends that one need not be a radical protester in the stereotypical sense in order to be an activist educator, that asking critical questions and opening conversations about social issues could be an equally radical pedagogy given the flavor of apathy and disengagement that constitutes school experiences for many students. Jennifer shares a similar sentiment when she talks about “planting the seeds” for activism—a lovely image given the rhizomatic orientation of this work. Again, eschewing the traditional image of a radical activist (“chaining themselves to trees”), she posits that, by normalizing ideas about fairness in relations to social issues like classism—recall her story about a grade 8-student who identified the connection between social class and bullying—later activism may be facilitated because students are more fluent with social justice and anti-oppressive language and its meanings.

The significance of the cluster of concepts that form the environments, ideas, and actions conceptual inputs within the social element is in the ways that the central educational task of facilitating human connection is highlighted. The stories shared by participants of this project resonate with much of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2

(e. g., Dewey, 1918, 1938; Levin, Nolan, Kerr, & Elliot, 2012; Purkey & Novak, 2008; Smith & Knapp, 2011; Wink, 2011) which champions the idea that helping people connect in constructive ways is not a side dish to the main course of education, but rather a precursor to, and intrinsic component of, developing deep understanding. Further, the prominence of the social dimension of activist education as described in participants' stories is a testament to the ethical position that I shared in Chapter 1, that people have an affinity to relate positively with one another (Bauman, 1993; Rifkin, 2009), which mirrors the affinity I described in the rhizome metaphor earlier. Evidence of the importance to participants of such an ethic of empathy can be seen in their shared messages of caring, safety and inclusion, relationality, and the humanizing potential of education. The breadth and depth of these ideas indicates that, for these activist educators, the social character of activist education is of equal or more importance than the dimensions of power that are associated with politics and often assumed to be at the heart of activism.

Political Elements of Activist Education

While political elements form a significant part of the stories shared by participants, connections between these elements are not as obviously evident as is the case for social elements. In noting this difference, it is not my intention to downplay the importance of political elements to activist education, but to highlight that these 10 activist educators expressed more strongly congruent understandings of the social character of activist education than they did its political character. Here, the chameleonic nature of the rhizomes is evident—sometimes the social looks very

political, and vice versa. This attribute is a rich asset to the activist education organism, but needs to be carefully monitored; activist educators should (and do, as evidenced in the experience narratives) practice self-reflective exercises that help them to be aware of the genuine intentions of their practice. Good self-reflection may help activist educators from losing sight of the intentions in their work. While caution is needed in identifying the fluid shifts between social and political aspects of activist education (pedagogical as well, more on this soon), several important political ideas arise from the experience narratives.

Political environments. The predominant idea that was shared about the politics of environments was around the notion of professional tensions. In this way, the environment being discussed is different from the social and pedagogical elements of activist education because it refers less to the teaching and learning environment, and more to the professional environment that these teachers occupy with their coworkers, an environment that exists under the gaze of supervisors and the public-at-large—many of whom are students’ parents. Surveying the experience narratives, words such as “backlash,” “risk,” “fear,” “isolated,” “rigid,” “repercussions,” and “barriers” characterize participants’ feelings about identifying as an activist educator. These sentiments about the struggles of doing activist education are congruent with what is reported in existing literature on activist education (see Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Picower, 2012). In terms of supervisory relationships, most participants reported that administrators have a sense of fear or discomfort about activist education because of the possibility that it will be viewed unfavorably by their superiors, and/or the wider

community that schools serve. A key example is Jennifer's *King and King* story about her principal's demand for justification of a social justice initiative. Tim and Grace both suggested that, in the face of this discomfort, schools implement structures and requirements such as rigid timetables and copious curriculum expectations in order to suppress activist education by making it arduous or uninviting. This is interesting in light of Purkey and Novak's (2008) ladder framework for invitational education because it serves as an example of the lowest position, intentional dis-invitation, for the purpose of maintaining status quo politics.

Participants explained that the tension around activist education was maintained through supervisory relationships and that some other teachers who do not identify as activist educators also contribute to activist education tensions. As an example, Zoë shared that she felt that being an activist teacher is something that one might be accused of, and that when she felt alone in her activist approaches, she also felt exhausted. Also, recall Andrea's emphatic feeling that her approach to education was something alien to her coworkers, and that she sometimes felt professionally isolated as a result. These two ideas resonate with O'Sullivan's (2013) notion that neo-liberal anti-intellectualism has taken hold in schools, and that teachers who work against such assumptions may incite many raised eyebrows, or even outright scorn from their coworkers. O'Sullivan goes on to suggest that, in order to be more successful, activist educators should develop alliances with teachers who are not activist educators, but are supportive of the ends that may result from activist education. Rallying these "neutral" but potentially supportive teachers may shift the professional ethos of a school such that identifying as an activist educator feels less like professional suicide for teachers

who are committed to social justice and anti-oppressive values. Andrea and Zoë's stories affirm O'Sullivan's (2013) idea about creating alliances, and further suggest that these alliances may provide non-activist educators with exposure and experience that may help them to begin to internalize the identity of activist educator. In my conversation with Tim, I learned that most teacher training does not touch on activism at all, and that there are many teachers who, given the right invitation and some relevant training, would be on board with supporting social justice and anti-oppressive values through activist education.

Similar to participants in Marshall and Anderson's (2009) research, feelings of tension around activist education were pervasive among participants in this study, but these feelings were not all-consuming. All of the teachers with whom I spoke reported feeling a tension in their work environment. They were also able to put the tension in the perspective of the larger objectives of being an activist teacher, typically in relation to an imperative of delivering social justice and anti-oppressive values as part of their pedagogies. Most were also able to cite protective factors: Estevan and Andrea, for instance, mention the strength and values of their professional union as a factor that helps them to navigate the tensions inherent in activist education. Dave, on the other hand, who was most recently a principal and did not have the protection of a union, used the metaphor of boundary lines on a football field to explain how he would monitor risk and reward in his initiatives: "playing down the middle" is slow and incremental, but relatively low risk, whereas taking a play towards the edge of the field could be a faster, more impactful route, but also comes with the risk of taking a much bigger hit from opposing players. Dave's ideas here serve as a useful segue because,

while they are related to the rhizome of environments, his metaphor of playing down the middle vs. playing the outside edge is also germane to the ideas and actions rhizomes, as it speaks to educators' values and ideas about education, their alignment with those of the school system, and how an individual chooses to act on their values.

Political ideas and actions. Dave's football field analogy illustrates the interplay of ideas and actions in activist education. In football, the goal is to move the ball down the field towards the end zone in order to score points. Analogously, the goal of activism is to motivate a particular set of values so as to effect social and political change. If the football represents social justice and anti-oppressive educational values, then the goal of an activist team is to realize those values by moving them into the scoring zone; the opposing players attempt to defend the status quo by slowing or preventing activists in their pursuits. Understood this way, activism is very literally the interaction between ideas and the actions needed to allow those ideas to be practiced within a society. Of course, the analogy is flawed: it is too simple to meaningfully explain the complex interactions that are at play in achieving social justice through activism. Moreover, I believe the analogy of an invasion game is too adversarial to account for the many subtle and creative acts of resistance that activists may invent and employ. However, Dave's football analogy is aptly descriptive of the kinds of experiences that participants in this research described—particularly in regards to making choices about how to navigate the ball down the field. Many of the experience narratives highlight a tension or decision: play safely down the centre where values are less politically charged and may even be shared between activists and power-holders to

some degree, or play further afield and make bigger value gains. With big activist gains, though, come bigger risks in terms of the professional consequences resulting from a stronger allegiance to social justice and anti-oppressive values, or even the threat of those consequences.

Central to the tension between playing it safe and taking activist risks is an acknowledgment that, contrary to popular understanding, teaching by its very nature is political. This assertion is well supported in critical education literatures (Freire, 1970; Hare, 2013; McLaren, 2009; Warnock, 1975), but is not always central to the classroom experience in schools (Breunig, 2005; Picower, 2012). For Zoë, this equation is rooted in the negotiation of relationships between players within the educational landscape, specifically students, teachers, parents, and administrators. On to that, I layer dynamics of power, following Peters and Burubles (2004), and Leistyna (2007), whose work respectively explores Foucault's power/knowledge constellation, and the power imbalances implicit in the neoliberal corporatization of culture. As is the case for all relationships, educational relationships are imbued with particular power dynamics based on the position an individual holds within a school. How power is wielded within these relationships determines in part how social justice and anti-oppressive values can be realized through schools. One significant way that this power dynamic manifests in schools is in the degree to which students are considered agents in their own learning.

A keystone that holds together the constellation of ideas making up the category of student agency in Andrea's experience narrative is that of student voice. The notion of student voice transcends any of the conceptual input rhizomes of environment, ideas, or actions; indeed, voice is a central component of educational environments, and the

ideas and actions that emerge within them. My choice to position the category of student agency within the political element of activist education lays in the power dynamics of traditional education systems that often unduly restrict many or all student voices in the classroom (Gatto, 2005). I view a teacher's choice to resist such restrictions as a subtle political maneuver aimed at redistributing power within the classroom in more socially just, and more educational ways. Andrea noted that her own rigorous self-reflection on the quality of her classroom environment was part of what made students feel comfortable in asserting their voices. While Andrea was the only participant who referenced the idea of student voice explicitly to talk about agency, there are connections with ideas shared by others. For instance, Zoë identified that having difficult conversations with students was an important action towards subverting the status quo of education. Likewise, Grace shared the idea that she tries to find opportunities for students to give voice to their values because it is these values that make social action powerful. Looking across these three examples, we can see instances of environments, ideas, and actions intertwining as students come to understand that their ideas matter and that their voices can express those ideas in order to help bring about change for anti-oppressive social justice. This development of voice may be a germinating strategy for hope as discussed in the literature review. In connecting hope with participants' remarks about student voice, I reiterate O'Sullivan's (2013) suggestion that "if you cannot imagine a better future, it is impossible to work for it" (p. 175), and posit that the development of student voice through activist education allows for hopeful imaginings of the future because the development of voice can be thought of as the acquisition of political language, along with a sense of "agency,

ethics, and meaning for a substantive democracy” (Giroux, 2004, p. 38) that allows a person to use their language effectively to build a better world.

At the intersection of student agency and power is a pedagogy of resistance that was described by several participants. In the vein of Freire (1970) and other critical and anti-oppressive theorists who disrupt the notion that students are passive recipients of knowledge, these teachers recognize students as subjects participating in an educative process, and not objects to be taught. In practice, such a stance necessitates a sharing of power between teacher and student. Pedagogical power sharing is fraught with complexities that both explicitly and tacitly assume that teachers wield power and students are obliged to respect unquestioningly. Through power sharing, many teachers in this study invite students to empower themselves and take actions that move toward the dynamic realization of social justice and anti-oppressive values. For instance, Andrea, Mindy, and Zoë each shared ideas related to the theme of resistance. Andrea spoke of resisting hegemony through interrupting dominant narratives, while Mindy talked about resisting bureaucracy, and Zoë described subverting the status quo in her school. Andrea’s remarks align more with the rhizome of ideas, as she makes specific reference to challenging hegemony through her teaching practice. Meanwhile, Mindy and Zoë speak more to actions that generate resistance through their teaching.

Andrea’s ideas about resisting hegemony through her teaching hinge on her conviction that schools as institutions perpetuate dominant narratives about people and the world—particularly traditional ideas about gender and sexuality that often go unquestioned in schools. Working from Tupper (2005), Andrea adopts a politicized theoretical lens that suggests activist educators can interrupt hegemonic narratives by

asking critical questions with their students—she calls this “deepening activist education.” In describing this deepening process, Andrea offers evidence of the interaction between her ideas and action when she talks about “unsanitizing” the pink day activities, which were often presented in ways that make bullying generic in order to avoid the uncomfortable reality of homophobia in schools.

While Andrea’s mode of resistance begins with theory and moves toward practice, Mindy’s story about *The Laramie Project* works in a somewhat opposite direction. Faced with a directive from the school board *not* to produce the play, Mindy and her student cast are forced to reconcile the board’s decision with their social justice values, and decided to continue rehearsing the play in relative secrecy, and to perform it quietly with the support of the school principal, but against the board’s express wishes. In the beginning, Mindy’s choice to produce the play was driven more by a social goal of helping a student feel more secure in his coming out process than in an anti-homophobia political agenda; this is a demonstration of the kind of compassion that Holland (2012) describes as a central principle of education. Faced with the board’s decision, though, she decided that the values of inclusion that tacitly underpinned her original motivation were more important than the consequences that might arise from the choice to carry on. Thus, the action of performing a play based on social values became politicized, given that they were challenged by authority designed to maintain, as Ellsworth (1988) puts it, a *business-as-usual* politics in schools.

The primary significance that I attribute to the discourse of political elements of activist education that emerges from this research is in the affirmation of the political character of teaching—both professionally and pedagogically. While most teachers

would admit that their professional role is political in terms of the funding and control of education, there is often a sense that those politics are, or at least *should* be, left at the classroom door in order for teaching to be a politically neutral exercise (Marshall & Anderson, 2009). The participants in this research range from overtly political activists to those who do not readily identify as activists per se, but who support social justice and anti-oppressive ends that might emerge through social action. All along this continuum, participants told stories that revealed the overt and covert ways that politics are at work within their teaching, supporting Warnock (1975) and Hare's (2013) notion that open-minded teaching cannot be dependent on the teacher as a neutral transporter of knowledge and information. Perhaps the clearest example of this is Mindy, who explicitly delineates between the social and the political so as to identify her work with the former, but also describes her primary story as a "combination of teacher, and theatre, and politics." Likewise, Estevan is cautious in adopting the label of activist educator, and spoke in our conversation about a degree of division between his personal politics and his teaching. However, both his purple shirt day and "fag and run!" stories serve as acknowledgements that as an out, queer teacher, his mere presence in the school has a political element that cannot be parked at the classroom door. Like Mindy, Estevan's stories reveal that, while his purpose in enacting activist pedagogy may not be primarily to "rock the boat" of the public schooling establishment, there is nonetheless a political element inevitably present in his pedagogies. Helping activist educators all along the social-political continuum to understand the political character of their work is a significant contribution of this work, which may lead to more and better pedagogies of activist education.

Pedagogical Elements of Activist Education.

Wink (2011) defines pedagogy broadly as “the meaningful interaction between teaching and learning” (p. 47). She injects a normative condition to this definition by suggesting that teaching and learning should be action-based, and focused on improving social justice and anti-oppressive outcomes of education. Working from Wink’s (2011) understanding, all of the experience narratives in this study draw on and contribute to the pedagogical discourses that underpin action. More than many participants, Colleen’s stories resonate with pedagogical elements of activist education, and it is worth unpacking her experience narrative as an introduction to this section. Colleen’s mantra that “the act of educating is an act of activism” positions education as the preceding condition within activist education—that simply doing education means both teachers and students can be conceptualized as activists, at least in subtle ways. While perhaps not always realized within formalized school structures, her proposition may be made attainable to the degree to which her primary goals for education are attended: curiosity and self-directedness. Colleen’s stories reveal an assumption that curiosity and self-directedness are naturally present conditions within people, and the role of an educator, through pedagogy, is to help people access and apply these dispositions to learning. It is through this understanding that she conceives of education as an activist task—a resistance to the neoliberal assumption that educating is about creating people who serve the global market unquestioningly (Carr, 2011a). Thought of this way, activist education becomes less about drawing students toward any particular ideas about which they could or should take actions, but in offering pedagogies that spur curiosity and encourage self-directedness. Returning to the

experiential education literature reviewed in Chapter 2, Itin (1994) conceptualizes this interaction between teacher and student as an exchange of gifts, whereby the presented needs of the student(s) represent a gift to the educator, and the experiences that the educator designs in response are a reciprocal gift intended to draw on each student's unique abilities. Itin challenges educators to design these gifts carefully for maximum effect:

All individuals have experienced occasions of receiving gifts that did not reflect our unique needs, wants, desires, or personality (i.e., a fruitcake). On the contrary, there have been those occasions when a gift has been received that has been painstakingly chosen to meet our unique needs. This gift has been reflective of each individual, and usually the specific relationship between the gift giver and the recipient. This is the level of "gift giving" that practitioners must strive to achieve. (p. 21)

Through the natural or facilitated process of reflecting on an activist education *gift*, students may choose to become activists, alone or together, and perhaps supported by their teachers (Picower, 2012). Itin's (1994) notion of pedagogical gift-wrapping may be a factor that separates education from learning, or schooling, a distinction that Yang (2009) champions as necessary if activist education is to live up to the name education, and not "simply become a training ground for the rank and file in a political cause" (p. 462).

Coming back to Colleen's focus on pedagogy as drawing out curiosity and self-directedness, she is clear that her vision is not socially or politically neutral. She states that educators' views are necessarily a part of any curriculum, and points to the naivety of thinking that a teacher could deliver a neutral curriculum, or even one that they disbelieved. As part of the mentoring and role-modeling that is intrinsic to teaching, teachers' ethics and politics are quietly present in any pedagogical approach. This view

supports Warnock's (1975) argument against so-called neutral teachers. Colleen speaks of revealing these nuances to students as a means of protecting against indoctrination. In her words, "Being transparent about it... Talking about that with students, and helping the students figure out what some of their beliefs are, and how their beliefs... influence the way they're interacting in the classroom." In addition to Colleen's championing of a pedagogical element of activist education, other participants also shared ideas supporting a pedagogical foundation for activist education, across the conceptual inputs of this research: environments, ideas, and actions.

Pedagogical Environments. The most pervasive construct across the participant experience narratives is the notion of teacher identity (some participants expressed this differently, as beliefs or attributes). Participants attributed a range of characteristics to their teacher identities that made the label of activist educator resonate for them. Self-descriptors such as "maverick," "fringe member of society," "caring," "equitable educator," and "old broad who won't shut up about what's wrong with the world," show the range of attributes that may contribute to an understanding of what it means to be an activist educator. The breadth of ideas shared by participants makes it challenging to encapsulate what an activist educator identity "looks like," and how it might be possible to encourage more teachers to view themselves this way. At the same time, the broad range of descriptors that were provided underscores the richness of meanings ascribed to being an activist educator. These identity descriptors cascade across the social, political, and pedagogical elements of activist education, and range from conventional to radical. For instance, Dave's moniker of "maverick" and

Jennifer's self-description as a "fringe member of society" suggest somewhat radical outlooks on pedagogy, while Estevan's identification as an "equitable educator" and Nate's self-reflection on caring reveal more customary attributes that still resonate with the notion of being an activist educator to some degree. More so than other themes emerging from this research, the identity politics that strongly influence activist education pedagogical environments reveal that there is no one kind of activist educator. Rather, the data reveals a complex array of identities that all connect activism with education in different ways, and with differing emphases on social, political, and pedagogical elements, and some who would identify with the values around activism but struggle to adopt the identity of activist. The complexity of activist educator identities is a source of richness for activist education because activist student identities are presumably equally complex. A diversity of activist identities increases the likelihood that activist moments (following Goldstein, Russell, & Daley, 2007) will emerge as individual identities find resonant identities with whom and from to learn, and enact activist education through and as part of those learning experiences (Adams, Jones, & Tatum, 2007).

Pedagogical Ideas and Actions. Participants' experience narratives reveal a fundamental tension between loosely imagined social justice and anti-oppressive outcomes of activist education, and official curriculum expectations. Neither mutually exclusive, nor fully resonant, participants describe these two poles as being mitigated by the kinds of pedagogies that emerge from the polymorphous teacher-activist identities that were discussed above. Based in large part on how they view themselves

as teachers, activist educators (as evidenced through the participants in this study) enact particular teaching and learning strategies that aim to strike a dynamic balance between mandated curriculum and the social justice and anti-oppressive visions that drive activist education. To be clear, this opposition is not a good/bad dualism in either direction; many participants describe the potential for attaining activist education successes while simultaneously offering meaningful learning from the official curriculum. In fact, in some cases official curriculum documents explicitly call for the kinds of social justice content that activist educators are interested in delivering. Most participants would say that formal curriculum expectations are not so prescriptive as to kill potential for activist education. In fact, they would suggest that the kind of creative experiential pedagogies often associated with activist education—for instance, Grace’s story about her “speaker’s corner” lesson—actually help teachers attain formal curricular outcomes better than more traditional lessons.

Still, there is a nearly ubiquitous concern amongst the participants about limitations that formal curriculum can place on the potential for rich ideas and actions within activist education. This concern has two significant and related avenues: limitations on critical thinking, and sacrificing depth for breadth of coverage. In the first instance, informants noted that the kind of knowledge that is characteristic of formal curriculum content tends toward descriptive knowledge, rather than higher order thinking. This is related to the second avenue of concern, which is that the breadth of learning that is demanded from much formal curriculum means that while it might be possible to use descriptive content knowledge as a springboard for higher order critical thinking that is integral to activist education, the pressure for coverage of overstuffed

curriculum documents means that it is not often possible to dwell on any set of concepts for long enough to practice higher order thinking skills before moving onto the next set of required topics. Mindy, Dave, and Jennifer all spoke explicitly about this concern, and it is similarly noted in the literature (Bickmore, 2013; Lingard, 2007). Here I am reminded of Carr (2011a, b, 2013) and Chomsky's (2000) calls for better democratic education, and identify the imperative of curriculum coverage as a potentially significant barrier in helping students understand an idea of *thick democracy* (Carr, 2011b) and deep understanding of other concepts central to activist education, because such learning requires extended time for discussion and reflection in order for meaningful knowledge to be developed. In relation to this rush to cover curriculum, Dave, as a principal, had a particularly useful insight. From his perspective, there are no curriculum police, and he would rather that teachers cover less area to ensure depth of understanding. For Dave, and those who worked with him, this may have eased some of the tension noted above, but most teachers feel no such relief. From my own experience, most teachers understand that 100% coverage is unrealistic. However, there remains an implicit or explicit expectation that complete coverage is something to strive towards. In this way, curriculum can function as a governor on the throttle of activist education. Without outright condemnation, curriculum operates as a regulatory mechanism by creating time challenges for the implementation of creative pedagogies that bring about activist education (for instance, experiential education, service learning, theatre productions, sociopolitical campaigns, and interdisciplinary activities) by serving as a consistent reminder of what is valued, and indeed, evaluated by school authorities (Abdi, 2013; Carr, 2011b, 2013; Leistyna, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2013; Picower,

2012). This disincentive compels teachers who identify as activist educators to make choices about taking the easy route and doing what is expected, or taking risks and investing a great deal of time and energy into activist education pedagogies that better reflect their teacher-identities (Marshall & Anderson, 2009). Facing those choices can be daunting because of the dissonance that they create between how an activist educator views him or herself as a teacher, and what is possible or realistic given the circumstances in which they find themselves (Picower, 2012). Recall that both Andrea and Zoë commented on the isolation that they often felt as a result of their choice to do education differently than most traditional teachers.

Thankfully, while formal curriculum expectations can serve as a barrier for activist educators, the participants in this research also saw it as an opportunity. For instance, Dave suggested that curriculum was best understood as a vehicle for character development; Jennifer echoed this sentiment, stating that the content portion of curriculum is useless if not integrated with character education and the development of critical thought. Likewise, Mindy highlighted that the content of the curriculum was low level knowledge, and became higher level as it was connected with skills of higher order thinking; she said this ability to process raw content into critical thought was the crux of what it means to be educated. Taken together, these perspectives form the second edge of a double-edged blade that is formal curriculum within an activist education context. The activist educators in this study tend to regard curriculum as an anchoring place for their teaching, that while it may have limiting factors also in some cases provides cover for undertaking social justice and anti-oppressive activities, knowing that what they are attempting to achieve is supported by the formal curriculum.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I re-presented the research questions introduced in Chapter 1, and offered broad stroke responses to these lines of inquiry (more direct responses to each question are offered in Chapter 6). I extended my thinking about Deleuze and Guattari's (1987, 1994) metaphor of concepts as rhizomes, and developed a metaphor specific to this research, positing that activist education is a vine-like organism that has taken root within a machine that represents formal public education. The organism is dynamic, and demonstrates its ability to survive, despite the machine's efficient efforts to curb its flourishing. Within the machine, the vine has three key rhizomes: social, political, and pedagogical elements of activist education. However, these elements are not distinct; they intertwine closely, and at times morph interchangeably to suit a specific environment that they inhabit within the machine-like infrastructure of schooling. Each of the social, political, and pedagogical rhizomes of the organism is fuelled by the conceptual inputs of environments, ideas, and actions that were developed in Chapter 2—Conceptualizing Activist Education: A Review of Literature. As the rhizomes stretch further, the conceptual inputs give way to specific themes that arose from the experience narratives shared by participants. As a takeaway from this chapter, readers can remember that the conceptual inputs of environments, ideas, and actions function as nutrients supporting the growth of each of the three rhizomes, and that it is through this conceptual fertilization that the rhizomes are able to spread and develop into meaningful practices of activist education.

CHAPTER 6 LOOSE “ENDS”

As I begin this ending chapter, I cannot help but contemplate the nature of beginnings and endings, their role in stories, and in the quest for understanding that constitutes research. The opening paragraph of Chapter 1 began with a story that emerged in the moments that I put fingers to keyboard and began the process of explicating this research journey with the indispensable assistance of stories. It seems fitting to end on a similar note.

* * *

Just the other day, I had the opportunity to attend my first ever university convocation. As the holder of four university degrees, one might be surprised to learn that I had never attended a graduation ceremony before. Trent University, where I work, has a proud tradition of outdoor convocation ceremonies. Usually when I ask colleagues who have long service at Trent about what happens when it rains on convocation day, they smile and tell me that it just doesn't rain. I haven't yet made the effort to check the veracity of these statements, but there you have it. If my experience the other day is representative, it indeed does not rain on Trent convocation day. As I crossed the bridge over the Otonabee River from the building housing my office and walked toward the location of the ceremony at the central campus outdoor gathering venue, the sun shone brightly, and a light breeze blew creating a gentle ripple in the river beside which the ceremony would take place. Because I hastily misread an email confirming details of the ceremony, I had bad information about where I was supposed to be, and at what time. This meant that I was early and in the wrong place. I had gone to the location where students, not faculty, were marshalling. The benefit of my error

was that I had a chance to see and interact with students as they prepared to graduate. While I'm not one for propping up tired clichés, the sense of hope and accomplishment in the air was palpable. Not in the lofty idealistic way that convocation ceremonies are often portrayed, but in a very genuine sense, I could tell that students were excited to celebrate an ending, and embark on new beginnings.

The convocation speaker that day, Dr. Mark Dickinson, had recently been bestowed the university's annual award for teaching. While not specifically related to activist education, his address made me think about this dissertation and how I might draw it to a close. Knowing he was addressing teachers, and having just won a teaching award, Dickinson tailored his words to newly minted educators. In Socratic tradition, the "lesson" within his talk began with a question: "Where does the word education come from?" (Dickinson, 2014). Working from this rhetorical (and pedagogical) starting point, he highlighted the history of the term, working from the Latin root word, *educere*, meaning to draw forth, or draw out (see also Doll, 2002). He advised the graduates that in order to master a vocation designed around drawing forth, a new teacher might "apprentice yourself to life on earth." Drawing on teacher candidates' recent exposure to schools, he posited that they probably encountered teachers who demonstrated what he politely described as "a profession in great flux," and, as such, not fully representative of, or responsive to, the *drawing forth* conception of *educere* that offers a historical underpinning to the modern enterprise of education. He further said that teaching is a profession of hope, and that hope has the potential for changing the cultural landscape through the stories that are told in the context of schools. This

potential, though, is unlikely to come to fruition without faculty who apprentice themselves to life on earth, as Dickinson suggested.

What that apprenticeship might look like, no doubt, takes a range of shapes depending on the interests of individual teachers. I suspect, though, that had I delved deeper into the 10 participants' lives outside of school, it would be have been easy to identify the ways that each of them undertakes such human development. Off the top of my head, I can suggest that Mindy's participation in community theatre, Jennifer's podcasting, Andrea's travels in Africa, and Grace's ongoing commitment to her childhood summer camp may all be examples of the kind of kind of life apprenticeship activities that Dickinson (2014) prescribes for effective teachers. I would further suggest that these life apprenticeship attributes give body to the three rhizomes of activist education that I sketched in Chapter 5, namely, social, political, and pedagogical elements, and also serve as the entry points into activist educator identities discussed in the previous chapter. Working further back to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, particularly around invitational education, experiential education, and the Deweyan tradition, I suggest that it is through these kinds of life apprenticeship activities that activist educators create and continually redefine the conceptual inputs of environments, ideas, and actions that give structure to the theory of activist education developed here, and as practiced by the participants whose experience narratives form the body of this research. Throughout the dissertation, I introduced and represented three research questions that give purpose to the dissertation. In Chapter 4 (Analysis: Storying the Findings), I showcased the data resulting from my story sharing interviews with the 10 participants, and then highlighted the most significant rhizomes that

emerge from that corpus of stories in Chapter 5 (Tracing Rhizomes: A Discussion of Trends and Trajectories). In a broad way, those two chapters serve as answers to the research questions for this study. In what follows, I offer more specific responses to each question in order to draw some degree of closure to them.

Repacking the Research Questions

Throughout the dissertation, I have returned to three main questions that underscore this research: What relationships exist between activism and education, and what qualities characterize their convergence? In what ways, and under what circumstances, can activism add richness and depth to education? How is the relationship between education and activism conceptualized and practiced by teachers who identify as activist educators? Briefly, I offer some final thoughts on each of these questions. The three rhizomes (social, political, and pedagogical) feature strongly for each question.

What Relationships Exist Between Activism and Education? What Qualities Characterize their Convergence?

As rhizomes, the social, political and pedagogical elements identified as constituting activist education in Chapter 5 (Tracing Rhizomes: A Discussion of Trends and Trajectories) serve as *ties that bind* between activism and education. The degree of strength of the tie for each rhizome, and whether it is more solidly rooted, is dependent on the particular activist educator. However, a general tendency that I noted through my analysis was the strength and complexity of rootedness of the social rhizome as compared with the political and pedagogical. That is to say, the degree of resonance

between ideas that each participant shared was stronger within the social rhizome than it was in the others. This was a somewhat surprising finding as the concept of activism typically carries strong political connotations. It is important to clarify here that this finding doesn't necessarily indicate a state of diluted politics within activist education. In fact, the educators who participated in this work seem to be working against political dilution in their schools as evidenced by the various political issues they discussed including broad categories of queerness, environmental degradation, poverty and classism, racism, and human rights. Rather, the experience narratives show stronger resonance between different participants' socially driven stories, while political rhizomes are more differentiated and less intertwined amongst the participants. Of course, the stories don't provide an obvious meaning for this pattern. What the data do suggest is a strong relationship between the social and political elements of activist education—pedagogy also, but the third rhizome is more loosely interrelated than the other two. The interaction between the social-political rhizomes might be described as a tension, but this explanation might be too simple, as the two rhizomes can be mutually supportive at times, thus demonstrating a complexity that warrants further investigation.

The pedagogical element of activist education is importantly related to the social and political rhizomes, but does not seem to share the same intimate interconnections found between the social and the political. This observation is in and of itself a significant finding of the research. While the social and political rhizomes tend to relate more to the content of activist education, the pedagogical rhizome is typically more about process, specifically the nature of experiences used to deliver activist education

(Itin, 1994; Yang, 2009). From a big picture vantage point of the 10 experience narratives, activist educators' focus seems to be more on the content they teach (for instance, controversial issues) rather than the methods they choose to engage students with the content. This may be a deficit in the praxis of activist education, given a common understanding within the literature that content cannot be effectively disentangled from pedagogy (Breunig, 2005; Carr, 2013; Freire, 1970; Monchinski, 2010); to paraphrase media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964), the media is, indeed, the message. This observation is suggestive of a need for widespread professional development for teachers on the relationship between content and instructional approach. Such in-service programming for teachers could specifically focus on strategies for effective teaching about controversial issues using hands on, experiential approaches. While there are resources for doing so available in the literature (e.g., *Green Teacher Magazine*, *Radical Teacher*, and many resources from *Rethinking Schools*), something like a professional learning community program might offer teachers ongoing support and encouragement for transferring ideas from the literature into actual practice in their classrooms. This recommendation aligns with North's (2007) call for more teacher professional development specifically addressing social justice, as well as mechanisms for evaluating the success of that programming. Such professional development and support opportunities may also serve to alleviate the sense of alienation and isolation associated with identifying as an activist educator.

In What Ways, and Under What Conditions, can Activism add Richness and Depth to Education?

It's worth noting that much energy went into the development and redevelopment of this question as the dissertation came together, particularly around whether the question should imply an *a priori* assumption that activism and education could combine to produce rich and deep educational results. An earlier iteration of the question asked: *Can activism add richness and depth to education? In what ways and under what circumstances?* While this configuration was an attempt at an unbiased question, it felt disingenuous given the strong social justice and anti-oppression stance that I articulated from the opening paragraphs of the dissertation. Given my interest in activist education as articulated through an anti-oppressive social justice framework, it made more sense to be transparent about my situatedness within the research problem, and to frame the question as a reflection of this contextuality. This is not to suggest that I would be dismissive of contrary evidence; in fact, I think taking a self-reflexive stance acknowledging my own assumptions made it easier for me to interrogate these assumptions alongside the ideas shared through the experience narratives as various idiosyncrasies arose in the data (for instance, Mindy's assertion that her work is not political, Estevan's suspicious overuse of inclusive education jargon, or Zoë's assertion that anti-racism education is unproblematic in schools).

It is through this self-reflexive lens that I feel cautiously confident in asserting the educative richness and depth that is contained in the experience narratives from Chapter 4. Each shows some aspect of a pocket or moment of rich learning through activist education within a model of systemic schooling that often fails to deliver on promises of rich and deep education. Despite the copious amount of time that I have

spent analyzing and re-analyzing each narrative, I still find myself taking new trips “down the rabbit hole” each time I immerse myself in the stories shared by participants. In other words, following Jickling (2005), the stories continue to do theoretical work in each rereading. I hope that this continues to ring true as the experience narratives are further disseminated through publications and presentations, and new readers are able to interpret their own ideas about rich educational experiences through these stories.

One particularly noteworthy point related to creating educative experiences through activist education is rooted in the potential for activist education to reframe the concept of professionalism that dominates education and teacher education. Sachs (2000, 2003a) identifies this approach as managerial professionalism, and other terms like bureaucratic or deskilling might also be descriptive. Reviving the rhizome in the machine metaphor developed in Chapter 5—Tracing Rhizomes: A Discussion of Trends and Trajectories, this model of professionalism casts the teacher as an obedient cog driven by the mechanistic demands of the schooling machine. As a foil to the dominant view of professionalism, activist education offers the possibility to serve as a catalyst in the ongoing development of what Sachs (2000, 2003a) identifies as *activist professionalism*. In comparison to more traditional understandings, activist professionalism positions teachers as community animators operating in a relationship of active trust amongst their professional colleagues and with the public stakeholder groups that they work to serve, beginning with the students in their classrooms and moving peripherally to parents and principals, central school board administration, and so on. The concept of activist professionalism is supported by a protocol characterized

by inclusiveness, collaboration, communication, shared expertise, mutual trust and respect, passion, and fun (Sachs, 2000, 2003a).

Throughout the experience narratives, it is possible to see examples of activist educators working directly on activism (for instance, through unionism). However, it is more common that they work indirectly, such as through their own day-to-day practices of professionalism, to reimagine what teacher professionalism “looks like.” They do so with a view to normalizing activist education activities that resist and deconstruct the status quo consciousness that classroom teaching is politically neutral. Further research is needed into how these efforts can be adjusted in order to maximize rhizomatic development—to find the thin edge of the wedge, so to speak. Such research might help activist educators and other organizers to understand how small efforts on the part of classroom teachers can have bigger change results (Weston, 2007)—increasing the strength of the rhizomatic organism in areas where it can have the most impact on the workings of the schooling machine.

In short, the social, political and pedagogical rhizomes described in Chapter 5 each function as a possible way for activism to add richness to education. Likewise, the conceptual inputs of environments and ideas discussed in Chapter 2 represent conditions that foster rich education through activism. The interaction of these factors through pedagogy represents an overarching condition that facilitates good education through activism.

How is the Relationship Between Education and Activism Conceptualized and Practiced by Teachers who Identify as Activist Educators?

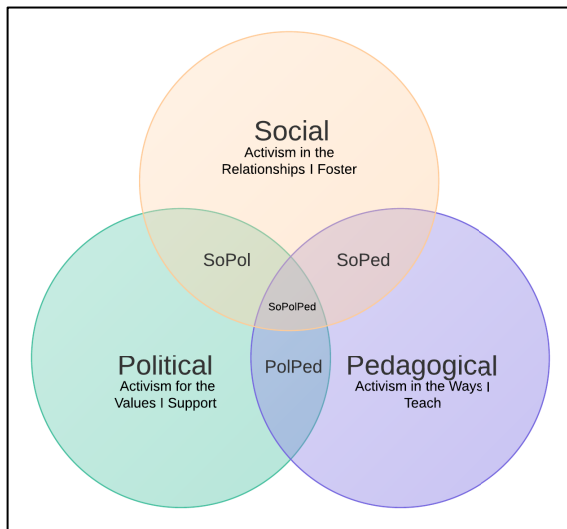


Figure 5 - Intertwining Rhizomes

At the outset of Chapter 5, I noted that it would be disingenuous to try and categorize each of the participants into one of the three rhizomes that emerge from my analysis of the experience narratives. However, the rhizomes do go a long way in describing the kinds of everyday routines that the ten participants describe as constituting their

teaching practices. While I wouldn't try and pigeonhole a participant into only one of the three rhizomes, it is useful to see dominant patterns of the social, political, and pedagogical rhizomes in each participant's stories. Rather than categories, these rhizomes may best be understood as a non-linear continuum. A three-ring Venn diagram may be a useful way to conceptualize this because visually it can represent a cross-sectional view of three intertwining rhizomes. As I was developing the image in Figure 5, my instinct was to mentally plot pinpoints where each participant would be located on the intertwining rhizomes map. As I worked through that brief exercise, I remembered why I had opted not to categorize the participants by rhizome in the first place; each time I mentally placed a participant's identity on the map, yet another complexity of their experience narrative would come to mind, calling into question the placement I had assigned them. Still, I think the idea of a map of the terrain of activist education is useful, as readers who identify as activist educators can reflect on the three

rhizomatic dimensions in relation to their own teacher identity. Based on this reflection, they may place themselves somewhere on the map either by pinpoint, or by identifying a comfort zone within which their praxis of activist education traverses. While it may not be appropriate to pinpoint the activist education praxis of others, the development of this mapping tool as an exercise of personal reflection represents a significant contribution of this research to activist education praxis, both for helping teachers understand where they *are*, and where they would like to be, as activist educators. Drawing on the discussion of entry points and processes of praxis from the previous chapter, this rhizome cross-section map may help teachers who do not readily identify as activist educators to move closer to an educator identity that champions social justice and anti-oppressive education by understanding how their own life experiences (entry points) contribute to their interest in adopting an activist educator identity. Teachers who already operate from social justice and anti-oppressive ethical positions can use the map as a reflection exercise for developing better self-understanding of why they occupy these particular pedagogical spaces in order to strengthen their resolve for working for a more just world, and also to serve as support mechanisms for other teachers whose activist educator identities are in early development (O'Sullivan, 2013). As this project draws to a close, it is clear to me that perhaps the most important *next step* in my activist education research trajectory is to enquire more deeply and broadly into the specific entry points that enable the development of activist educator identities.

Throughout the process of completing this dissertation (from planning, to data collection, to analysis, and writing), there was a lingering question of whether activism was the correct word to describe the constellation of educational environments, ideas,

and actions that I wanted to learn more about. Anticipating that the word activism itself might alienate participants, I made a point in each interview to ask how comfortable each participant was with the term, and to ask if there were other terms that they might use to describe their work. While some participants distanced themselves from the word activism itself, or offered other terms that were more central to their teacher identity, all participants were able to find some level of resonance in the list of descriptors for activist education that I provided in the recruitment materials (Appendix B). In reflecting on this, there is a key learning around *descriptive* versus *prescriptive* uses of the term activism within activist education. Because the design of the study used the word activism in a more or less descriptive way, where what it meant to be an activist was more concerned with a constellation of related ideas and actions that could bring about change focused on social justice and anti-oppression, I believe that participants were more likely to be open to identifying as activist educators than if the word activism had been more prescriptively, defined around particular political ideologies of social change. While social justice and anti-oppressive frameworks are, of course, ideologically rooted, maintaining a plural perspective through postmodern theory meant that the term could be more inclusive and less divisive.

Continuing to develop an inclusive conception of activism is an important facet of activist education. Some participants shared ideas that indicated their ongoing work in this direction, such as Jennifer's thought that a teacher need not chain him or herself to trees in order to be thought of as an activist educator. Andrea's comment about protesting banks in "dead Kennedy's t-shirts," and Mindy's quip, "Go occupy my coffee

cup” also point toward a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be an activist educator—that everyday acts of teaching for anti-oppressive social change can be as valuable as more radical acts of protest. The stories showcased in this dissertation serve as rallying calls for promoting a broader conception of activism anchored to social justice such that more teachers can get on board. This movement is no simple task; while it does not necessarily require radical acts of protest to qualify as activism, it does necessitate that teachers take an inventory of their own privilege, and that is, in and of itself, a radical asking.

Next Steps and Future Directions

In Chapter 5 (Tracing Rhizomes: A Discussion of Trends and Trajectories), I identified that a purpose of this research was to harmonize with the many current and historical examples of activist education literature that exist, rather than to identify a particular gap in the literature and attempt to fill it. Working from this premise, I offer some thinking about future directions in activist education research: as yet unproduced harmonies that may help to expand the enterprise of activist education research in effective ways.

A Further Diversified Sample

Because of the somewhat time limiting parameters of a doctoral dissertation, there came a time where I had to decide to stop looking for and accepting more participants. Following that decision, about every six months I would encounter a new individual who I thought would contribute a rich experience narrative. Given the need

to move the project toward “completion,” I had to let some opportunities to ask for participation pass. In particular, I was interested in recruiting more participants who were not White (specifically but not limited to First Nation, Inuit, or Metis activist educators working in formal schools), more activist educators working in the K-8 grade levels, examples of more radical activist educators whose work intentionally *rocks the boat* of the schooling establishment (for instance, Toronto District School Board teacher Lee Hicks, whose activist education projects include chronicling his female-to-male gender transition with his students, and planning a protest of the Enbridge Northern Gateway oil pipeline with grade 3 students. For more, see Majeed [2014]).

Adding more experience narratives to the sample could show a greater diversity of examples of possible manifestations of activist education, and the social, political, and pedagogical differences between these manifestations that bring complexity to the intersections of activism and education. As this dissertation moves toward completion, and I begin to think about spin-off projects based on this research, I am planning a book aimed at K-12 teachers. A book project would allow me to collect a few more experience narratives that strategically diversify the field of activist education as conceptualized within this research.

Mixed Method and Quantitative Approaches

Another future direction arising from this project is the need for broader kinds of data about activist education. The stories shared herein are fecund; however, as I struggled to recruit enough participants for a viable dissertation, and work with the stories that they shared, I found myself asking a variety of questions about the larger

population of teachers who identify themselves as activist educators: Just how many self-defined activist educators are there in any given school? How much activism does a teacher need to do to reasonably qualify as an activist educator? How many students does a typical activist educator impel into activism over the course of a career? What is the magnitude of impact that activist educators have on their students? Surely, these questions could give way to stories similar to those shared by the participants in this research. However, they are questions of a fundamentally different nature than those that framed this particular research. While the kind of qualitative research that I have done here brings richness, and even perhaps *heart* to the idea of activist education, it would be helpful as an activist educator and a researcher to know a bit more about the quantitative parameters of the field in which I am working. In future projects, I am interested in designing quantitative and mixed method approaches that attend to the kinds of questions addressed above, and bring a more concrete understanding of what it means to be an activist educator, and the impacts that activist education can have for students, teachers, and wider communities.

Teacher Identity and Life Apprenticeship

Two important findings revealed through this research, but not adequately analyzed, are the centrality of teacher identity (Sachs, 2003) and the participation in life apprenticeship activities (Dickinson, 2014) to activist education. It is clear through the stories told in this research that how teachers view themselves *qua* teachers is influential in the ways that activist education is taken up in daily classroom practice.

This finding has important implications for initial teacher education and ongoing

teacher professional development. Similarly, based on the findings of this study, I hypothesize that the tendency for teachers to identify themselves as activist educators and engage in rich activist education practice is positively correlated with engagement in life apprenticeship activities (for instance, Mindy’s community theatre work, and Jennifer’s podcasting). Further enquiry may provide valuable insight into how this relationship can be leveraged to encourage more teachers to identify as activist educators, and provide those individuals with rich life apprenticeship experiences that may fuel their activist education praxis.

Epilogue

It is difficult to bring a project like this to a close. The rhizomatic orientation of the research lends itself more to an ongoing and messy multiplicity rather than something that can be neatly concluded. Still, my sense of good storytelling demands closure—a signal that the curtain has come down, and that it’s time to move along. In attempting to prepare such closure, I began a search for song lyrics or inspiring quotations that might take the heat off of me as author to tie a neat bow around the project. Lyrics like Semisonic’s sappy late 90s hit, *“Closing time! Time for you to go out to the places you will be from”* or Neil Young’s activist call to action *“Keep on rockin’ in the free world”* came immediately to mind. Throughout the process of developing this project, though, I’ve been reminded of the importance of transcending the kind of trite “populist pabulum” (G. Walton, personal communication, March 2014) that might result from such representations. This isn’t to say that Semisonic missed the mark in reminding club goers that their next adventure depended on moving forward, or that

Neil Young's hit isn't really inspiring of activism (in fact, Young is an impressive activist in his own right). But, to put any kind of reproduced tagline forward as concluding sentiments might make it seem like the ideas discussed here are just that easy or simple. Nothing could be farther from reality. The participants in this study shared stories of the challenges and successes of their work as activist educators committed to making education, and in turn, the world, less oppressive and more socially just. In every case, that work requires passion and endurance—traits that aren't easily represented through pithy epigrams.

So, as I indicated at the opening of this final chapter, I will end with something from the beginning. In the opening pages, I indicated that the compelling reason for undertaking this project was to better understand the nature of activist education so that it might be employed as a strategy to combat the sense of political apathy that pervades public schooling. Apathy, I argue, is a significant deterrent to the development of social justice and anti-oppressive ideas. These ideas can help make schools, and their wider communities, more inclusive places where individual community members across a myriad of categories of difference can learn and live with fulfillment. I offer the stories shared within these pages as fodder for ongoing thinking and acting that can help to make schools better for all students, teachers, and community members. The stories are not blueprints for action, but rather sparks for inspiration. If readers find inspiration to reimagine environments, ideas, and actions for activist education within the contexts in which they find themselves, then my mission has been achieved.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Preliminary questions:

I understand you have been involved with [name project/issue of specific interest]. How important is this to you as an educator?

How has work like [reference project/issue] influenced your decision to work in education or

How did your work in education lead you to the project?

- In my research, I'm using the term activism [you've probably noticed that in my advertisements/consent form/project title]. How does the term activism fit with what you see yourself to be doing as an educator, especially when you are doing things that get students involved in actions that relate to particular social values, or norms [cite specific example from participants work, if possible, e.g.: green club, GSA campaign, class project, etc]?

oIf activism isn't the right term in your opinion, what different term(s), resonate(s) more for you?

o[spend some time here chatting about my use of the term activism, to figure out if my use of the term is going to be alienating in further parts of the interview. If appropriate, maybe use their term(s) as the interview moves along, but see if bridges can be built between my understandings of activist education, and their understandings of what they do as an educator]

Could you talk a bit about some of the key ideas you have about education, or principle(s) that influence(s) the choices that you make in your day-to-day decision making as a teacher, particularly where your [action activities/activism] are concerned?

How would you describe the fit between [activism] and education? Are there tensions in your experience, or does it seem/feel pretty natural?

Tell me how you would/or do justify you [activism] in an educational setting, to parents and/or administrators?

One of the things I'm interested in is educators as "carers." Does the notion of care, or caring play an intentional role in your teaching? If so, how so?

STORY SHARING -- Ask participant to share the story that they were asked to prepare to share before the interview. This may require some prompting... use the primer provided to participants (shown above) if any prompting is required.

Story Follow-up Questions:

If the story requires fleshing out in regards to the nature of "activist education," work through key prompts provided as part of the story primer. Use phrasing like "I heard you mention [abc] / In the story I heard you talk about [xyz] / I'm interested in knowing if when [pqr] happened, if there was... :

How does your story describe [activist education] in terms of:

Ideas that spark the [activism], or emerge from it.

Actions that take place

The environment that ideas and actions are situated in.

In your story of [activist education], who decided it would be worthwhile to take action? Was the [activist education] primarily driven by teachers, or by students?

What was the intent of the [activist education]? Was the intent achieved?

Can you describe any tension between your efforts at [activist education] and the culture/politics/ethics of the school or wider community in which you were working?

In what ways (if any) did the culture/politics/ethics of the school/wider community shape your approach to [activist education]?

In what ways (if any) did your [activist education] (re)shape the culture/ politics/ethics of the school/community in which it was situated.

Thinking about the story that you have just shared, how do/does the key element(s) (events, themes, etc) add richness to your teaching practice (if at all)?

how do you see/feel/experience that richness on a day-to-day basis within your teaching?

can you draw connections between the richness (or lack) of [activist education] that you describe and the key ideas about education that you described earlier?

Earlier I asked you to talk about some key ideas or principles that help guide your work as an educator... can you point to some elements of your story about [activism] where those ideas are evident? [offer specific prompts if possible]

Is there a place for activism in your philosophy or principle(s)? If so, I'd love to hear some examples

Do you have [or do you hear from others] concerns about indoctrination when [activism] is taken up within the educational context of schools?

In what ways are your role as an educator and your personal commitment to [activism] connected?

Is there anything else that you would like to share with me, about your story, or about the ideas or topics we have discussed together? Do you have any questions for me?

May I contact you if I have any followup questions as I think more about your story?

Can you think of one or two other people who I might be able to interview for my research? Could you help put us in contact?

Appendix B: Recruitment Materials

Recruitment Flyer Text

ARE YOU AN "ACTIVIST EDUCATOR"?

If so, you may be interested in participating in a study on the integration of activism and education.

What I mean by "Activism"...

In my study, I take a broad view of what activism means. Three main ideas help me think about what activism in schools can look like:

- Action on the part of teachers and students, in other words, *doing something* that connects students' learning to life in their community or in the wider world;
- Reflective dialog or other reflection to make meaning from activist actions;
- Understanding the "politics" of actions taken, to an extent that is developmentally appropriate.

Some Examples...

Educators who I believe are "activist educators" might do any of the following things:

- Talk about contentious current issues with their students, and encourage and/or facilitate students taking actions about issues that are important for them.
- Make space for activism within their teaching. This could be through whole class activities (food drives, fundraising, etc) or projects initiated by individual students.
- Integrate service learning or community service learning opportunities into their teaching.
- Supervise extra curricular initiatives that invite activist opportunities, such as:
 - Environmental clubs
 - Gay/Straight Alliance Groups
 - Amnesty International clubs
 - Multicultural associations
 - Some spiritual or faith based organizations.

Who I am looking for...

- Self Identified "activist educators" (if any of the above resonated for you, this might be you!!!).
- With progressive political outlooks (e.g.: social or environmental justice).
- 5 or more years of experience in K-12 contexts. (or have recently... eg: recently retired, on maternity leave, etc.).

IF INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN AN INTERVIEW OR FOCUS GROUP, PLEASE CONTACT:
bniblett@lakeheadu.ca

Information Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

Thank you for your interest in my study entitled “Narrating Activist Education through Stories of Concept and Stories of Experience.” I am a doctoral student at Lakehead University in the PhD in Educational Studies program offered jointly by Brock University, Lakehead University, and The University of Windsor. My doctoral supervisor is Dr. Bob Jickling, professor at Lakehead University Faculty of Education. I am inviting you to be a participant in my research because you have identified yourself as a K-12 activist educator.

I am conducting this study to better understand the relationships that may exist between education and social activism, and in particular to gain an understanding of how self-identified K-12 activist educators think about those relationships, and enact that thinking in their daily practices. While many educators integrate activism into education in one way or another, little research has been conducted that explicitly examines how teachers make sense of the integration between education and activism. The purpose of my research, then, is to begin to fill this knowledge gap as a means of facilitating better opportunities for activist education.

As a potential participant in this study, you will be invited to participate in an interview lasting approximately one-hour either in person, over the phone, or via digital conferencing technology such as Skype. The interview will be audio recorded with your consent, and will consist of some preliminary questions, an opportunity for you to tell one or more stories that are representative of your experience as an activist educator, and some follow-up questions based on the story you tell. If you choose to participate in the study, an additional opportunity will be available to participate in a one to two-hour focus group of around 5 people. The focus group discussion will be based on composite themes that emerge from initial interviews conducted with each participant. Focus group participants will discuss the importance of confidentiality for other participants at the outset of the meeting. A mutually agreeable date and time for the focus group will be arranged after I have conducted initial interviews.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. There is no foreseeable risk of harm in participating in this research, but I hope that intentional reflection on your teaching practice benefits you as a means of professional development. You may elect not to answer any specific questions, or to withdraw from the study entirely without penalty. Following completion of the study, a summary of results will be forwarded to all participants by email. Furthermore, all of the data collected during the study, including transcriptions, recordings, and related correspondence will be downloaded to a secure hard drive (not connected to the internet) and stored by the Department of Graduate Studies in Education at Lakehead University for five years before being destroyed. You will not be identified by name in any dissemination of the research results. At the interview and/or focus group, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym by which you may be referenced within the research. In disseminations of the research results, if it is possible to identify you as a participant due to evident personal characteristics, the researcher will consult with you in order to decide on the most effective way to make the data anonymous (e. g. presenting data in composite format to disguise your participation) or to remove your data if an agreeable solution cannot be reached. This research has been approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at [807-343-8283](tel:807-343-8283) or swright@lakeheadu.ca.

Attached you will find a **consent form** which I will collect (in person, or electronically) before we begin the interview and/or focus group. At the beginning of the interview, and/or the focus group, we

will review this letter and the consent form to ensure that each participant understands the nature of their participation in the research.

Also attached is a **list of prompts** that may aid you in putting together a story to tell during the interview. Consider the prompts as possible approaches to telling your story, but not as limiting your story in any way.

Thank you again for your interest in my research. I look forward to the possibility of sharing stories of activist education together with you!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Blair Niblett', with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Blair Niblett

Blair Niblett
416.560.1553
bniblett@lakeheadu.ca

Bob Jickling
807.343.8704

bob.jickling@lakeheadu.ca

LU Research Ethics Board
807.343.8283

Consent Form

I, _____ have read the informational letter for the study “Narrating Activist Education Through Stories of Concept and Stories of Experience” by Blair Niblett. I agree to participate, and I understand that:

I will be invited to participate in a one-hour interview where I will be asked to tell a story based on my experiences as an activist educator;

I may be asked to participate in a one to two-hour focus group that builds on composite themes arising from initial interviews conducted with each participant. A secondary consent form will be provided if I wish to participate in the focus group;

There is no foreseeable risk of harm in my participation.

There is no direct benefit to me through participation in the research. Indirect benefits include the professional development that may arise through intentional reflection on my teaching practice.

My participation in this research is voluntary; I may choose not to answer any question, and I may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty.

All of the data collected during the study, including transcriptions, recordings, and related correspondence will be downloaded to a secure hard drive (not connected to the internet) and stored in a locked office at Lakehead University for five years before being destroyed.

I will remain anonymous in disseminations of the research findings (publications, presentations, etc).

During the research, I will choose a pseudonym by which I will be referred in the research. If identifying characteristics make it possible for me to be identified in the research results, I may consult with the researcher to make adjustments in order to ensure my anonymity (e.g., presenting data in composite format), or request the removal of my data from the research.

A summary of the research findings will be provided to me, if I indicate interest and provide an email address below.

SIGNATURES:

Participant

Researcher, acknowledging receipt

Yes, I am interested in receiving a summary of the research results. Please email the

summary to: _____.

Approval of Research Ethics Board

processpathways.		Romeo [®] Research Portal						
APPLY NEW News Useful Links Settings								
Reset Filters		Export To Excel						
	Project Title	Principal Investigator	File No	Type	Application Form Name	Work Flow State	Project Status	Last Saved
	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	All	All	All	All	<input type="text"/>
View Events	Narrating Activist Education Through Stories of Concept and Stories of Experience	Dr. Gerald Walton	1462447	Human Ethics		Approval Decision Made	Completed	