

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH TEACHER ACTIVISTS: WALKING
THE SPIRAL AND “MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE”

A Dissertation
by
Chris Gilbert

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CHRIS GILBERT
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APPROVED BY:

Beth A. Buchholz, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

Greg McClure, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Audrey Dentith, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Vachel Miller, Ed.D.
Director, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Mike McKenzie, Ph.D.
Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH TEACHER ACTIVISTS: WALKING THE SPIRAL AND “MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE”

Chris Gilbert:
B.A., University of North Carolina at Asheville
M.A., Middlebury College
Ed.D., Appalachian State University

Dissertation Committee Chairperson: Dr. Beth Buchholz

This dissertation explores a participatory action research (PAR) project, grounded in popular education, that occurred during the fall months of 2019 and involved the author and five K-12 teacher activists. This project is explored through three article manuscripts featured in this dissertation. The first manuscript, aimed at a practitioner audience and intended for publication in a practitioner-oriented journal, frames this PAR project as a form of professional development for teacher activists and provides a narrative of the experience from start to finish. The second manuscript, aimed at an academic audience and intended for publication in a peer-reviewed journal, provides an account and analysis of this PAR project and explores the various forms of growth teacher activists experienced from their involvement in this research endeavor. The final manuscript, aimed at an academic audience and intended for publication in another peer-reviewed journal, features an analysis of the challenges and tensions involved in this PAR project. Central implications explored at the close of this dissertation include the notion

that teacher activists possess valuable experiential knowledge that should be shared amongst the teaching corps; teacher activism can involve forms of cultural activism and public pedagogy; the teacher activist identity is more expansive than commonly perceived; and PAR may offer an empowering experience for teacher activists.

Acknowledgments

When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it, but all that had gone before.

“The Stonecutter’s Credo” - Jacob Riis

Serving in many ways as my “rock,” this dissertation was a tremendous test of perseverance and will, and a challenge I managed to overcome only because of the support I received from others.

Of most importance, I would like to thank my wife, Maria Blakeman, for her love, patience, willingness to serve as a sounding board, and for providing advice and motivation when I needed it most. She served as an invaluable source of support throughout my entire doctoral journey.

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge my fellow members of Cohort 24: Dr. Sarah Sexton, Dr. Elaine Gray, and soon-to-be Dr. Alex McAllister. Our conversations influenced my thinking and found their way into this dissertation in various ways.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to two important people with me now in memory: my grandmother, Virginia Sellers, who always pushed me to continue my education; and my father, Mike Gilbert, who I know is proud of me.

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Chapter One: Introduction - Previewing the Path to Come

From 2006-2016, I worked as a public high school English teacher in North Carolina. During this time, I also considered myself to be a teacher activist, and I worked intently to engage in forms of activism both during the school day and after the final bell had rung. I sought to educate my colleagues about education-related political developments through dialogue and by sharing resources; I spoke at local school board meetings about new, troubling educational initiatives; and I published a number of politically-focused articles and opinion pieces in both local and national outlets. These efforts, and those of other activist educators, were crucial then, but the need for teacher activism may be even greater now.

Public education is presently under siege, and teachers find themselves in the crosshairs of corporate and political actors who seek to deprofessionalize the teaching profession and weaken the system these individuals work within. In North Carolina, for example, newly hired teachers lack advanced degree pay and are unable to earn tenure, an essential job protection that ensures due process rights. These same teachers are vastly underpaid, with salaries that lag those of similarly educated workers in other fields (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2019). Further, these educators work in schools with few essential support staff, as the number of school nurses, counselors, and social workers fails to meet nationally recommended staff-to-student ratios (Childress, 2020). Relatedly, and perhaps most damningly, a recent educational report found that North Carolina's school system lacks the funding and resources required to meet the needs of the many poverty-stricken students and communities throughout the state (Kaplan, 2019). This current state of affairs speaks to the importance of teachers' activist engagement, as educators now serve as frontline defenders of public schools and invaluable advocates for the communities these schools serve. As made apparent by the #Red4Ed movement of 2018-19,

there certainly exist teachers willing to engage in activism. Over this two year period, educators in states including West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, California, and North Carolina engaged in rallies, strikes, and other forms of collective action to support public schools, students, and communities. However, the results of these activist efforts were ultimately mixed (Yan, 2018), and in states such as North Carolina, collective actions by teachers were brief and largely ineffective, as many teachers distanced themselves from political action and remained in their classrooms. The old mantra, one oft-repeated by my colleagues, of “close your door and focus on your classroom” is now at best misguided, and at worst, unethical. As Berliner (2019) argued:

teachers who just hunker down to address instructional and school issues may be failing many of the children they care about and for whom they are responsible. In contemporary America, teachers need to fight as hard for taxes to support healthy communities, families, and schools, as they do for the funds needed to buy paper for the copy machine...Today’s highly unequal society requires political activism by educators. (p. 108)

Somewhat encouragingly, professional expectations for teachers in some states now gesture toward activism. For example, the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards feature a leadership standard that reads: “Teachers advocate for schools and students. Teachers advocate for *positive change in policies* and practices affecting student learning” (n.d., p. 3, emphasis added). While this standard fails to go as far as endorsing “activism,” it does acknowledge the importance of teachers’ political involvement in areas beyond the classroom. This reference to political advocacy is indeed encouraging, but without the corresponding establishment of spaces and structures to support teacher activists and promote their ongoing development, the standard

itself is largely meaningless. Unfortunately, there presently exists a dearth of professional development opportunities designed to cultivate and expand teacher activists' mindsets and skillsets, especially in North Carolina. I sought to address this need by initiating the participatory action research (PAR) project discussed in this dissertation.

Project Description

This project occurred during the fall months of 2019, and it involved the author and five teacher activist co-researchers from western North Carolina who worked collaboratively to deepen our collective knowledge of, and take action on, several education-related issues. Our group met in both face-to-face and online settings, and our efforts were focused on sharing and augmenting experiential knowledge in order to educate ourselves, and each other, on issues of central importance to group members. As a participatory endeavor, we used a variety of interactive methods to produce knowledge and initiate actions intended to create positive change. Note that more extensive discussions of this project, and the methods and processes we employed for knowledge production, analysis, and action, are included throughout this dissertation. For now, though, I provide some necessary information regarding co-researchers before pivoting to a discussion of the research questions at the heart of this dissertation.

Co-researcher Snapshots

Co-researchers involved in this project were Clyde, James, Lisa, Ashley, and Trish (note these are pseudonyms). At the time of the study, they were all classroom teachers in middle and high school settings in western North Carolina. Clyde, a veteran educator with twenty-two years of experience, is exceedingly reflective, a careful listener, and someone who is immensely supportive of North Carolina public schools. With previous experience as a county-level, NCAE (North Carolina Association of Educators) leader, Clyde is intimately familiar with the political

dimensions of education and the corresponding need to serve as an advocate for public schools, teachers, and students. Interestingly, though, he does not view himself as an “activist” because he believes the word’s definition is too narrow; however, given his ongoing efforts to support public schools and local communities, I certainly view him as one.

Conversely, James fully owns the activist label and views it as a crucial part of his identity. A longtime educator in western North Carolina with twenty-four years of teaching experience, James has long engaged in activism alongside his classroom practice. He wears his political engagement on his sleeve, as he is a former NCAE county-level leader, and is presently affiliated with education advocacy organizations at the state level. Reflecting his deep activist dedication, his political engagement has also extended to the legal arena, as he participated several years ago in an education-related lawsuit against the North Carolina General Assembly. James has an assertive personality and is undoubtedly serious-minded when it comes to defending public education, but he balances this seriousness with a profound sense of humor.

Like James, Lisa places activism at the center of her educator identity. A veteran teacher with seventeen years of experience, she is presently involved in multiple education advocacy organizations in North Carolina. She has also held leadership positions within these organizations at both regional and state levels. Lisa is exceedingly passionate about public education, and she cares immensely about making positive changes that benefit students, schools, and communities, particularly those of color. She is bold, incredibly determined, and has a forceful personality.

One of Lisa’s close friends and so-called “partners in activism,” Ashley is a veteran educator with twenty-nine years of experience. Ashley presently holds a local-level leadership position in NCAE, and she considers her commitment to activism so great that she refers to herself as a “teacher warrior.” Similar to Clyde, Ashley is exceedingly thoughtful, and she easily

alternates between outward displays of enthusiasm and quiet moments of introspection. The co-researcher with the most experience in public education, she brings immense experience and wisdom to the group.

Trish, the fifth co-researcher, is a veteran educator with seventeen years of experience. She is a longtime activist who even possesses activist experience outside of education and in states other than North Carolina. Within the educational domain, she has served as a teacher activist for many years, and she just recently assumed a county-level leadership position in NCAE. Similar to James, Trish is exceedingly passionate about public education but tempers her seriousness with lightheartedness and an infectious laugh. In sum, while these co-researchers were all united in their support for public education and teacher activism, they each brought different personalities, experiences, and associated bodies of knowledge to our work together.

Research Questions

While the project itself was participatory, this dissertation explores several research questions of my own construction regarding the project under focus. These questions are:

1. In what ways, if any, does this participatory project encourage the growth of co-researchers?
2. What methodological and/or practical challenges, if any, are experienced by co-researchers during the course of this project?
3. What role, if any, can such a participatory project play within the larger domain of K-12 teacher activism?

The first research question reflects my interest in determining to what extent, if any, this project provided a beneficial, and useful, space for teacher activists. This is very much a practical question, as I am interested in knowing if such a project largely “worked” for co-researchers, and in what ways. This question is primarily addressed in Chapter Three with some related

exploration in Chapter Two. Research question two reflects my interest in exploring the challenges, if any existed, this project presented for co-researchers, including the author. This research question is primarily explored in Chapter Four. The final research question is geared toward analyzing the implications of this participatory project within the larger domain of teacher activism. Meaning, my intent here is to explore the potential utility of this form of participatory research for other teacher activists in other settings. Importantly, what I seek with this question is not generalizability or “replicability,” as these outcomes are methodologically inappropriate given that participatory research is so deeply contextual (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007); rather, I use this question to gesture toward the *possibilities* made manifest by this project. This question is explored in Chapter Two, as I assert that this project presented a form of professional development for teacher activists; this question is also addressed in the final section of this dissertation, where I unpack the practical and theoretical implications of this project. Note that this question is also explored in a more implicit fashion in other chapters. To better prepare the reader for this exploration, I now turn to a discussion and brief overview of this non-traditional dissertation.

Aims and Characteristics of this Non-traditional Dissertation

The purpose of this dissertation is to address the research questions above while sharing accounts and analysis of the project with readers located in K-12 public schools, academia, and community settings. As evidenced by its central aim, structure, and several other non-traditional features, this dissertation aims to fulfill its purpose in unconventional ways. Regarding its central aim, this dissertation is primarily intended to enhance participatory methodological practice. As alluded to above, I believe there exists a profound need for collaborative, supportive spaces that provide teacher activists opportunities to share and supplement existing knowledge while taking action alongside others, and I hope the knowledge shared in this dissertation

augments these spaces in various ways. Therefore, this dissertation is unconventional in that while it does supplement the literature related to PAR and teacher activism, filling a literature gap is not its primary aim; rather, the “gaps” it seeks to fill are largely located in social and political reality.

An additional unconventional characteristic, from a structural standpoint, this dissertation does not feature a traditional five-chapter format. While three “chapters” are included in this document, each one houses a manuscript intended for publication in a different journal (*Rethinking Schools* (Chapter Two); *Research for All* (Chapter Three); *Educational Action Research* (Chapter Four)). Given my primary focus on influencing participatory practice, this structure was selected to more rapidly disseminate knowledge to practitioners. Further, the organization of this dissertation is also unconventional in that it mirrors the action/reflection cycle commonly featured in action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Kindon et al., 2007). Meaning, each chapter, serving as its own form of “action,” is followed by a short reflective section before the action begins anew with another chapter. These “reflective bridges,” as I refer to them, provide discussions of intended audiences, justifications for associated writing decisions, and details regarding the process of writing for publication. A central purpose of these reflective bridges is to encourage transparency and demystify the process of writing a non-traditional, action research dissertation, something that will hopefully assist other doctoral students interested in taking a similar path. These sections also serve as the “glue” of the dissertation, as they provide linkages between the three major sections in an attempt to avoid fragmentation and instead create a unified, cohesive document.

Regarding additional non-traditional features the reader should be aware of, this dissertation does not include a conventional literature review. With the exception of Chapter

Two, literature is incorporated throughout the entire document and brought into continual dialogue with the data. This characteristic embodies Herr and Anderson's (2015) observation that in action research, a review of the literature is ongoing, and "[t]he end result should be that the data analysis is pushed by relevant literature, and the literature should be extended through the contribution of this action research" (p. 105). In a similar break from convention, this dissertation does not include distinct chapters dedicated to methodology and data analysis. Methodological content is foregrounded in Chapters Three and Four, but such content appears throughout the dissertation. In a similar fashion, data analysis is woven throughout the entire document. Therefore, for the reasons discussed above, this dissertation can certainly be viewed as an unconventional document.

Overview of the Dissertation

In terms of how this dissertation unfolds, Chapter Two features a manuscript submitted for publication in *Rethinking Schools*, a practitioner-oriented journal. In this piece, I provide a narrative of the PAR project under focus from beginning to end while framing it as a form of professional development for teacher activists; the audience of this piece is primarily K-12 classroom teachers, but school administrators may also benefit from this manuscript. Pivoting from the style and aims of Chapter Two, Chapter Three features a manuscript written for the more academically-oriented, peer-reviewed journal *Research for All*. In this piece, I provide an account of our group's "walk" through PAR and the popular education spiral before initiating an analysis of this process's "participatory impact" (Banks, Herrington, & Carter, 2017) on co-researchers; the audience of this piece is primarily practitioners located in academia, but given that *Research for All* is an open-access journal, I anticipate that this article's reach could also extend to researchers located in community settings. Importantly, due to space limitations and

differing aims, Chapter Three omits the challenges and tensions inherent in the research project under focus, and thus the methodologically-focused Chapter Four is dedicated entirely to exploring these difficulties; like Chapter Three, Chapter Four is directed toward academic researchers and has been submitted to *Educational Action Research*, a peer-reviewed journal. Between these three chapters, and as part of this dissertation's action/reflection cycle, readers will find the reflective bridges discussed above. Lastly, this dissertation ends with a deep reflection that explores several practical and theoretical implications of this PAR project.

Looking Ahead to Chapter Two

Before moving forward to Chapter Two, I would like to provide some context by offering a brief discussion of this chapter's intended journal, its audience, and my associated writing goals. Regarding the journal of interest, Chapter Two features a manuscript submitted to [*Rethinking Schools*](#). Established and edited by K-12 teachers, *Rethinking Schools* offers a space for social-justice themed articles related to classroom practice, curricula, and activism/organizing. According to Levin and Au (2013), "*Rethinking Schools* has become a focal point for teachers interested in challenging inequality in their classrooms, schools, and communities, [and] an organizing tool for teacher and citizen activists" (p. 72). The latter use is most relevant to my work, and is one of the primary reasons I targeted this journal. While there certainly exist other practitioner-oriented journals that feature similar social-justice themed work (*Teaching Tolerance* is one example), such outlets focus primarily on equity-driven classroom practice. With its broader focus that allows for an exploration of outside-of-school forms of educator activism, *Rethinking Schools* is an ideal outlet for my work.

An additional reason this journal appeals to me is its primary audience is K-12 teachers, one of my central audiences. In writing about the participatory project under focus, a central

goal was to convey a thorough account of the project that could inspire similar teacher-initiated projects in other settings, and/or that could feed potentially useful ideas into existing projects. Thus, I desired an outlet that could allow me to sufficiently story what we did in our group, and even share related resources, to potentially inspire and assist other teachers interested in initiating or participating in similar projects. Relatedly, from a stylistic standpoint, *Rethinking Schools'* articles are typically short (4,000 words or less), written in a non-academic voice, and feature narration and dialogue. I believed these characteristics would help me craft an engaging narrative that could appeal to busy educators, as most classroom teachers (especially those already involved in activism) do not have sufficient time to wade through lengthy, jargon-filled, academic articles. Therefore, the journal's readership aligns with my audience of interest.

For readers located in academia, and who expect to solely encounter conventional academic writing within this dissertation, the inclusion of this manuscript may be somewhat surprising, and even jarring. There is, for example, a lack of theoretical analysis in the piece; references are used sparingly; related literature is not woven into the writing; an explicit discussion of methodology is omitted; and the principle aim of the piece is not to provide extensive analysis, but rather to provide a storied experience for the reader. Given the stylistic expectations of *Rethinking Schools*, and my goal of reaching K-12 teachers with this piece, these common features of academic writing would likely be distracting for this particular audience. Importantly, while the academic writing characteristics mentioned above are absent in this piece, they readily appear in later sections of this dissertation. Also, this is one reason why this practitioner-aimed piece appears first in the dissertation, as it fails to mirror the more academically oriented manuscripts to come; additional reasons for the piece's early inclusion include its relevance to the audience of primary importance to me (K-12 teachers), and its

function of providing a base of knowledge that is built upon in subsequent sections of this dissertation. I follow the manuscript with some additional reflection, but I turn now to the piece itself, which is featured below.

Chapter Two: Making the Invisible Visible - Professional Development to Support Teacher

Activism

A manuscript submitted for publication in *Rethinking Schools*.

He held the sign high above his head, its surface scrawled with Standard I of the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards: “Teachers advocate for schools and students. Teachers advocate for positive change in policies and practices affecting student learning.” The poster shook to the rhythm of the man’s voice as he shouted in unison with other red-clad, public education supporters gathered in the square: “What do we do when public schools are attacked? Stand up! Fight back!” Joining in the chant, I admired the energy of those around me. While clearly not educating students in classrooms this morning, assembled educators were fulfilling another essential professional responsibility: we were being activists.

A Need for Activist Professional Development

As demonstrated by the Red4Ed movement, activist teachers are indispensable in the current educational climate, one featuring ongoing assaults by corporate and political actors who seek to decimate social programs, destroy labor unions, and privatize public education. Politically-engaged teachers, like those described above, counter these assaults by engaging in activism when they can. However, to expect teachers to assume and maintain this additional, yet essential, role without support is both unfair and unrealistic. Like other roles teachers are tasked with, this one deserves professional development (PD).

During my ten years as a high school English teacher in North Carolina, I witnessed a barrage of attacks on educators, public schools, and communities. Embracing the role of activist, I pushed back through writing, speaking at school board meetings, and other means, yet I was struck by the absence of PD to support what had clearly become a necessary part of my job.

Now involved in teacher education, but still an educator activist, I recently initiated an activist-focused PD experience that involved “making the invisible visible.” I explain how in the story of this experience, which begins below with the drafting of a plan.

Drafting a PD Plan

To plan this experience, I first reflected on the ironically *deprofessionalizing* PD I often had encountered, which taught me what to avoid: the so-called “expert” lecturing teachers and devaluing their knowledge and experience. Thankfully, I had learned of several empowering possibilities for PD: the inquiry-to-action groups of [NYCoRE](#) (New York Collective of Radical Educators, n.d.), the Paulo Freire inspired “[Critical Professional Development](#)” framework (Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015), and the popular education approach of the [Highlander Research and Education Center](#) (Mission & Methodologies, n.d.). Each of these influences frame learning as a participatory process in which participants serve as both teachers and learners.

With the above influences in mind, I drafted a brief document that specified the PD purpose and several supporting ideas (see Appendix F). Our purpose would be to engage in collaborative learning and action centered on an educational issue of our choosing. To learn, we would dialogue, read, reflect on connections between readings and experiences, and share existing knowledge and skills. Regarding action, I gestured in the document toward activism’s more subtle forms. In recent years, the most common image associated with teacher activism has been that of marching, sign-wielding educators. While important, the heightened visibility of these mass actions has obscured quieter, yet equally important, forms of activism such as writing and political education. This project would provide us space to make these underrecognized activist tools more visible.

Finally, I framed this project not as a grand solution to the problems facing us, but rather as a beginning. I believed this experience could provide a catalyst for further teacher engagement in social and political struggle while providing a rough sketch of activism-focused PD. Armed with this document and a belief in this project's potential, I next sought out participants.

Finding Participants and a Location

To locate interested teachers, I first connected with Lisa, a local high-school social studies teacher and longtime educator activist. Lisa invited me to several activist-related events in our area and introduced me to other teacher activists, several of whom would become participants. Along with Lisa, I recruited (note these are pseudonyms) James, a sixth-grade language arts and social studies teacher; Trish, a middle school digital lead teacher; Clyde, a middle school science teacher; and Ashley, a middle school art teacher and self-proclaimed “teacher warrior.” All of these educators hold, or previously held, leadership positions in public education advocacy organizations in North Carolina, and they teach in districts throughout western North Carolina. Importantly, these educators brought their own deep, activist expertise to the table, and they had much to teach and learn from each other.

With teachers recruited, I next worked to determine a meeting location. I searched for a local space that could provide some quiet, offer access to technology, and ideally, award continuing education credits (CEUs) to teachers. I had some initial difficulty finding such a space, and I asked Lisa for advice. She suggested Western Region Education Service Alliance (WRESA), a collaborative offering PD to teachers in the area.

Taking her advice, I called WRESA and explained the project. After some emails back and forth, they agreed to host us and award teachers CEUs. Given that some teachers would

have to drive long distances to WRESA, it was also decided that some meetings would occur online through Zoom, a video conferencing tool.

Planning PD with Teachers

It was essential to me that this project be co-planned and driven by teachers' interests. To determine these, I asked each teacher via email, "What is an educational policy or topic you would be interested in exploring and acting on?"

Trish replied, "I am quite interested in the inequality of charter schools and school choice."

Ashley wrote back, "I wouldn't mind looking at why teachers are not advocating for their profession. It's perplexing to me. What are the barriers?"

After all responses were received, I shared them with the group and had them rank their top choices on a Google Form. The "winners" were two broad themes with several sub-topics: socioeconomic status (SES) and education (school choice and inequality; resegregation of schools; and the achievement gap were sub-topics), and the lack of political engagement from teachers and associated barriers.

Next, we planned our meeting structure. Communicating mainly through email, text, and a shared Google Document, we decided that each meeting would feature blocks of time dedicated to a practical activist tool (holding press conferences, for example), a theoretical activist tool (a concept such as hegemony, for example), and readings and personal experiences related to our selected topics. We would strive to explore each of these elements during meetings, but we were also open to deviating from this plan if it failed to serve our evolving needs.

For our practical activist tools, and in an effort to foreground teachers' oft-unrecognized skills and knowledge, I asked several participants if they would deliver presentations and share their related experiences during meetings. Aware of James' skill with a particular activist tool, for example, I texted him: "You up for giving a short presentation on infographics?"

My phone buzzed with his reply: "My pleasure."

Turning next to the task of locating readings, Trish asked me, "Can you locate primary readings while the rest of us suggest supplemental ones?"

"Absolutely!" I replied, and set out to find resources. I also volunteered to provide our theoretical tools.

Our final task was scheduling, and we decided on six to eight meetings, every other week, for roughly two hours in the evening. After some additional coordination and sharing of resources via text and email, we planned our first few meetings (see Figure 1 below) and were set to begin.

➤ **1: Monday, August 12 (f2f)**

- Critical concept of the evening: *Critical consciousness*
 - Related readings/viewings: [Critical Consciousness](#).
- Activist tool of the evening + presenter: *Press conferences* - Trish.
 - Related readings/viewings: [Sample Press Release](#) and [Red4EdNC Example Press Release](#) and [Follow this Path](#) (directions to put on a press conference)
- Focus: SES and education from a critical perspective
 - Essential texts to be discussed: Short [video clip](#) on poverty and education; [Berliner, 2013](#); [Anyon, 2014](#) (pp. 1-23) **Also, if you see a chapter referenced in Anyon's intro. that you think our group should read for future meetings, please let me know.
 - Supplemental texts: [NEA's poverty and trauma document](#); [Anyon, 2005](#); "[Effects of poverty on WNC children's education](#)" "[Want to boost test scores and increase grad rates? One strategy: look outside schools and help low-income families](#)"
 - Activity/Protocol: Mapping exercise - What is the relationship between poverty, students, and teachers?

Figure 1. Meeting one's plan. Our initial meetings followed this structure.

Meeting One: Sharing Experiences and Exploring Myths

Trish opened meeting one with a presentation on our practical activist tool of the evening: the press conference. Drawing from a recent personal experience, she first described the entire process of holding a press conference. Next, she shared several successes before discussing an obstacle teacher activists often encounter when addressing local media: restrictive school district policies and personnel.

Trish explained, “Our district’s PR person does not want anybody saying anything that she hasn’t heard them say first. She coaches you and tells you what you can and cannot say. The press wanted to interview me about the governor’s school supply drive, and yet she said ‘you cannot say that you don’t have enough school supplies.’”

Pulling from his own related experience, James addressed Trish’s challenge, saying, “What comes to mind is the importance of cultivating a network of surrogate parents. If teachers feel constrained, or have been admonished to not go on camera and not talk to the press, fine, we won’t talk to the press. We know thirty parents and we schooled them up on the issue and that’s just as good, if not better, than us speaking to the press.”

Other teachers quickly jumped in, sharing challenges and suggestions, and even swapping names of supportive, local media figures. Trish’s presentation had ultimately been much more than a one-way informational session; instead, it had created a collaborative space for participants to share their knowledge and experiences with each other, a central goal of this PD experience.

Next, we briefly discussed the conceptual activist tool of the evening, Paulo Freire’s “critical consciousness” (1970/2016), before turning to our central topic: the SES of students and educational impacts. To prepare for this discussion, we had read articles from [David Berliner](#)

(2013) and Jean Anyon (2014), and highlighted copies of these texts were strewn across the table. As the group's facilitator, I opened our conversation.

"Let's talk about SES," I said. "This was the most popular topic. Why?"

Ashley spoke up first, saying, "It's always in your face when you're at a school with poverty. When we look at those statistics about the percentage of those kids you've got, you know, ten kids in your class in poverty, and the numbers suggest maybe one will make it."

These comments triggered a lengthy conversation about "No Excuses" style school reform, the accountability movement, and policies that punish teachers and schools for not "saving" students from poverty.

Taking us deeper, Clyde argued that these flawed policies are entangled with larger beliefs, or narratives: "I am really coming to believe that as these policies are pushed, there's a narrative, there's a story creating a reality about why this policy should exist. The whole thing about school testing, school accountability, and teacher accountability, what did it move from? It's not just the kids are poor because it's their fault. These teachers are bad teachers too. In reality, this is a much bigger issue than some teacher in a classroom."

He paused briefly before continuing: "I think of the ways that I've internalized these stories. And sometimes it's not at the level of thought. You're carrying it around and you don't even recognize it because you don't want to believe it up here (pointing to his head), but your body's carrying it."

Energized by Clyde's comments, we launched into a deep discussion of how these stories are repeated so often that they enter the subconscious and become invisible.

During our conversation, James had scribbled a series of thoughts and questions on the whiteboard at the front of the room. Pointing at the board, he said, "So taking the critical

consciousness question about making the invisible visible, the question that spurs off of that is what things regarding poverty do we need to make visible? What are the bullshit myths that teachers, parents, and broader society are buying into?”

Sadly, our discussion lasted only a short while longer, as time ran out. This last interaction, though, validated my hope that this PD experience would encourage deep learning and reflection, as we not only explored policies, but also the larger myths undergirding them.

Meeting Two: Continued Analysis and Movement Toward Action

Held online, meeting two began with a brief presentation on our practical activist tool of the evening: the opinion piece, or op-ed. As an author of several op-eds, I gave this presentation, emphasizing the importance of concise writing, hooking the reader early on, and being timely with one’s writing. I also shared several related [resources](#) (University Communications, Duke University, n.d.).

Next, we turned to our conceptual activist tool: hegemony. After our conversation on myths during meeting one, this concept seemed relevant, and I had asked teachers to access a related [article](#) (Cole, 2020) and [video](#) (Nicholas, 2017) to learn about it. Hegemony ended up being a useful tool for participants as it illustrated how widely-accepted beliefs regarding teachers, public education, and SES (e.g., public education is broken; if lazy teachers simply worked harder, poverty would be erased; etc.) are promoted by corporate and political actors for their own benefit. As Trish put it, “I think it’s done very consciously. If the only vision is a vision that they want you to see and very few people own the corporations that control what you’re seeing, it makes it a lot better for them. I think it’s very intentional, very calculated, and it’s working.”

Her comments sparked a spirited discussion of hegemony that led us to our central topic of the evening, one nested within our larger focus on SES and education: the achievement gap. This topic mattered greatly to Ashley, as her district had struggled for years with a growing achievement gap between white and black students, and the troubling narrative accompanying the gap was that it was largely the responsibility of already-exhausted teachers, through redoubled in-school efforts, to close it. Extending from our previous conversation about making the invisible visible, we noted how language, and the phrase “the achievement gap” specifically, spotlights in-school educational factors while minimizing those outside the school walls.

Commenting on this, and how a [related reading](#) (Thomas, 2013) had impacted her thinking, Ashley said, “This reading did help me. That is some new knowledge that helps me understand better why ‘achievement gap’ is not a comprehensive and probably not even a very good term to use because it’s not inclusive of all the contexts. ‘Opportunity gap’ I think is a much better term. I think it does take the focus away from testing and brings in those other conditions that you have to consider. Yet, we’re blamed by the ‘No Excuses’ group.”

After a thoughtful pause, she continued, “I put a lot of places in my notes: ‘This is a gap game.’”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked. “That’s interesting.”

“It’s a blame game. It’s a gap game. It’s like a hoax,” Ashley replied. “It feels like the elites have a narrative, and they’re using the gap to justify their failures. Like the gap is teachers’ fault.”

Ashley’s comments provoked a discussion of how a shift in language, such as using “opportunity gap” or “equity gap,” could bring outside-of-school factors more clearly into view

while disrupting the “blame game” and the associated myth that the “achievement gap” is largely rooted in deficient schools and teachers.

Sadly, teachers shared that many of their colleagues had heard this message, and others like it, so often that they had come to believe it. “I feel like there's this heavy burden that a lot of teachers are carrying,” Clyde said, “and that's part of the reason why they're not even trying that hard to speak up anymore. These myths have sunk down inside of them.”

Ashley nodded her head, saying, “You're demoralized and feel guilty because you are buying into the ‘No Excuses’ framework too. Because that's been pushed down our throats for decades.”

As our dialogue wound down, the recipient of our forthcoming action became clear: teachers. While unsure at this point what our action would be, it was clear that there existed a profound need to “wake up” educators who had internalized, and become demoralized by, narratives promoted by years of accountability-focused, “No Excuses” style education policies. To boost morale and inspire teachers to action, we would need to make these now-invisible myths, and their hidden alternatives, visible.

Meetings Three & Four: Infographics and Action Planning

Our third meeting had a heightened focus on action, as we only briefly discussed a theoretical tool, Naomi Klein’s shock doctrine (2007), before transitioning to James’ presentation on the infographic, a practical activist tool he was intimately familiar with.

Displaying some of his work, he explained how infographics, shared via Facebook, could move rapidly through digital space and create offline change: “This infographic got shared across partisan lines,” he said. “I posted this at four o'clock in the afternoon. Superintendent is in my room at eight o'clock the next morning, saying that the phone had rung off the hook. And

then two days later there was a joint meeting between the school board and the county commissioners.” James added that during this meeting, as a result of the infographic and the public reaction it had inspired, county commissioners reversed a plan to slash the local school budget.

Next, James fielded questions from the group, and like Trish’s presentation in meeting one, his talk quickly turned into an exchange of experiences and ideas. We discussed offline uses of the infographic (James, for example, learned that Ashley had once used one of his infographics as a flyer at a local event); optimal days and times to share them online (“You’re going to get your maximum shares, 6:00 AM Monday morning. If you’re dealing with teachers,” James said); tools for making them (Piktochart, Adobe Spark, and Canva were popular); and the possibility of including QR codes on printed infographics to connect smartphone-equipped readers with digital resources.

After James’ presentation, we moved into a collaborative [“Chalk Talk”](#) (Wentworth, n.d.) activity to focus teachers’ thinking regarding the action(s) they wished to take. Markers in hand, they moved silently around the room and responded to four questions, each written on poster paper:

- In relation to our target audience, what are our goals? (responses included: “believe they can make something happen,” “budget/policy awareness,” “move out of the dark - look for some light”)
- “Making the invisible visible”: Which hegemonic myths need to be challenged? (responses included: “income inequality is not real,” “SES is the sole responsibility of education,” “teachers are glorified babysitters”)

- To accomplish our goals, what will we do/create? (responses included “posters/infographic,” “toolkit”)
- What physical/digital tools can we use to facilitate this action? (responses included “social media,” “Piktochart/Canva/Adobe Spark”)

After completing this exercise, we initiated a related and wide-ranging discussion that would continue in meeting four.

During our fourth meeting, we immediately resumed our action planning. We narrowed our goals and forged a plan to act: we would “make the invisible visible” by constructing a number of texts for teachers. These texts would serve as myth-busting tools in that they would challenge troubling educational beliefs, or narratives, that teachers had internalized. Ideally, while viewing these texts, teachers would pause, reflect, and broaden their awareness, which could inspire further action.

Commenting on this action plan, Ashley stated, “I was motivated to put that statement on one of the poster papers about moving away from the dark and finding some light. I see that as action if it's self-awareness and self-actualization, something around yourself. You have to get to that point as an individual before you can move into collective action.”

Trish agreed, arguing for the importance of helping teachers “see” the invisible: “If they are not seeing it, how can we convince the public of it? If we can't even start from inside, how are we going to convince the outside?”

With these ideas in mind, we dedicated our next meeting entirely to text creation.

Meetings Five & Six: Action and Reflection

Everyone arrived for our fifth meeting ready to work. After our last meeting, we had decided that each teacher would create his or her own text. Since teachers taught in different

schools, and in some cases separate districts, we decided that each person would create a text relevant to the issues and myths prevalent in his or her location. Teachers arrived with these myths in mind and laptops firmly in hand.

Inspired by James' presentation during meeting four, almost everyone decided to create an infographic; teachers largely worked independently on this task with some occasional assistance from Ashley, our artistic "expert." After finishing, each person left with a plan to push his or her creation into the world.

While undoubtedly unique, each text connected in some way with our selected topics (SES and education; the achievement gap; the general lack of activism from other teachers, etc.), and reflected teachers' learning from our readings and discussions. Trish's infographic, for example, featured a statistic from one of our readings that countered the myth that public schools are failing. She shared this infographic with other teachers on Facebook.

Taking aim at the achievement-gap related myth that teachers are the most significant driver of student achievement, Ashley created an infographic that she subsequently printed and displayed at a local education association meeting; her infographic taped to a large whiteboard, she provided markers and asked teachers to reflect on it.

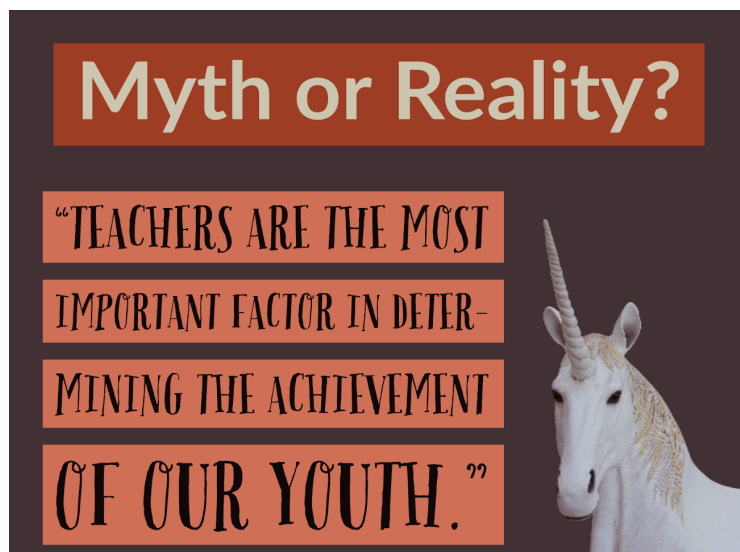


Figure 2. Ashley’s infographic.

James’s infographic supported North Carolina Medicaid expansion and challenged the myth that healthcare, with its economic implications, is *not* an educational issue. He also used his infographic to drive turnout at a local county commissioner’s meeting.

Lisa’s infographics challenged the belief that education, and by extension educators, should not be political. After creating several infographics featuring excerpts from our state’s constitution, she shared her texts offline and online, and included a linked survey to gauge the pervasiveness of the “teachers should be apolitical” myth while inviting her fellow teachers to challenge it. Lisa also published an op-ed arguing for the importance of teachers’ political engagement.



Figure 3. From one of Lisa’s infographics.

Instead of an infographic, Clyde handwrote messages on postcards. With “You Deserve Better” on the front, and various statements, statistics, and questions on the back, his postcards

were designed to uplift his demoralized colleagues while inviting them to question educational myths. My favorite postcard of his featured a list of several school performance grades next to each school's percentage of low-income students. This information disrupted the belief that school performance grades, and the standardized test scores behind them, largely reflect teacher and school quality. As mentioned in our group's readings, these performance grades primarily reflect the SES of the communities these schools serve.



Figure 4. The front of Clyde's postcards.

	% Low Income
Cane Creek B	Cane Creek 32.79
Owen Middle C	Owen Middle 56.31
Erwin Middle D	Erwin Middle 70.96
North Buncombe B	North Buncombe 47.94
Reynolds Middle C	Reynolds Middle 60.55
Enka Middle C	Enka Middle 60.5
Valley Springs C	Valley Springs 46.36
Nesbitt Discovery A	Nesbitt Academy 23.9

Figure 5. The back of one of Clyde's postcards.

During our sixth and final meeting, the group reconvened online to reflect on the actions each person had taken along with the PD experience as a whole. Teachers largely seemed positive about the experience, and they each mentioned something that resonated with them. Ashley actually found the experience so valuable that she expressed interest in leading a similar project to empower additional teachers in our area, and I connected her with staff at WRESA. All in all, this was a beneficial PD experience.

Looking Back and Forward

Perhaps the most valuable part of this experience was that it created a learning space in which we made the invisible visible. We did so by revealing and challenging troubling myths, and by sharing our often-unrecognized skills and knowledge with each other. Also of importance was that along with analyzing educational issues, we explored theoretical and practical tools. This dual focus on content and tools is essential, as it positions activists as both learners *and* doers. I believe effective teacher activists are both.

The actions taken were also noteworthy. The infographics, op-ed, and postcards teachers crafted did not instantly create political change, but they allowed counterstories to be told and dominant ideas to be challenged. They also promoted an expanded definition of “activism” by making visible some of its more underutilized forms. Marches and strikes are essential, but teacher activists also need creative ways to directly communicate ideas and change minds.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that this project represents a starting point. PD like this offers teacher activists an important space, but it should also provide them a bridge to similar groups, movements, and campaigns. In future iterations, this should become a larger focus.

Ultimately, I believe this PD approach is useful for teacher activists, and I am excited to see where it emerges next.

*****Note that dialogue was lightly edited for clarity**

Reflective Bridge: Looking Back on Chapter Two and Forward to Chapter Three

Perhaps coming as a surprise to the reader, while Chapter Two was relatively short and devoid of theoretical analysis, it was tremendously challenging to write. There were two primary reasons for this: the atrophying of “muscles” required to write for a practitioner audience, and a demanding revision process initiated by staff editors at *Rethinking Schools*. Regarding the first challenge, my time as a doctoral student has largely featured texts written by and for individuals located in the academy, and my own writing has come to mirror the style and voice of this work. Clearly, this is advantageous when it comes to writing for academics, but my ability to write for practitioners, the audience that matters most to me, has suffered as a result. I know this because this has not always been the case. Years ago, before becoming a graduate student, my first publication was in *English Journal*, the flagship journal of NCTE (The National Council of Teachers of English). This journal is primarily aimed at secondary-level English teachers, and the associated writing style largely omits what is now commonplace in much academic writing: jargon, complex sentences that seemingly persist for an eternity, and overly-complex theoretical analysis. When I wrote for *English Journal*, my writing was concise, exceedingly readable, and at its best, both emotionally and intellectually powerful. As a doctoral student, this sort of writing has become difficult for me to produce given my almost-exclusive engagement with “academically-oriented” texts. I have found that my writing typically mirrors my reading, and thus a steady diet of academic texts over the past few years has atrophied practitioner-related writing muscles that once were very strong.

Retraining these muscles for writing Chapter Two was a difficult yet necessary process. I did so by reading multiple articles from *Rethinking Schools*, and by creating extensive time to engage in careful editing. I continually read practitioner-oriented articles while writing, and I

kept a close eye on the associated style and voice I sought to evoke. Importantly, this process required me to resist some of the tendencies inherent in academic writing (elaborating *on* elaboration; downplaying personal experience; etc.) that undoubtedly serve readers in the academy, but conversely drive practitioner readers away. One of these tendencies, extensive elaboration, was particularly unwelcome in the *Rethinking Schools* manuscript because the word limit was only 4,000 words; I had to continually resist this habit by pausing and scanning my writing for its emergence, and by continually cutting words, phrases, and sentences that seemed inessential. Ultimately, by reading practitioner-oriented texts and providing myself extensive time to carve away narrative excesses, I was able to reawaken my practitioner-related writing muscles and craft a concise, clearly-written manuscript.

The second challenge I encountered while writing this piece was navigating the many revisions requested by *Rethinking Schools*' lead staff editor Grace Gonzales. Grace expressed interest in the piece, but she also indicated that I needed to make many stylistic and content-related revisions. One of her stylistic suggestions was to make the piece flow more like a short story by establishing a coherent narrative and including naturalistic dialogue from participating teachers; this echoed [guidelines](#) from *Rethinking Schools* that urged writers to show, as opposed to tell, the reader (yet another divergence from the extensive "telling" expected in academic writing). As mentioned previously, this was particularly challenging because of my recent lack of exposure to such writing. Presenting an additional challenge, Grace asked me to significantly downplay my researcher identity and position myself as a teacher alongside my teacher activist co-researchers. I found this request to be particularly difficult, as I recognized that I shared some characteristics with co-researchers, but I resisted fully positioning myself as "one of them" given my status as a doctoral student. Still, I accepted this challenge and attempted to position myself

more firmly alongside my teacher co-researchers. After spending significant time completing this first round of revisions, I submitted a second draft to *Rethinking Schools*.

After a short wait, I received an additional round of feedback from Grace and another editorial assistant, Elizabeth Barbian. Among their requests, Grace and Elizabeth both desired my “teacher self” to become more visible in the piece; the narrative and dialogue to become even more naturalistic and fluid; and the manuscript’s central theme and thesis to become clearer and more developed. After processing their many comments, I began the revision process anew and worked carefully to add material while also cutting inessential content to stay within the word limit. After sending a revised third draft their way and earning their approval, I now await a final decision on the manuscript from the editorial board.

In sum, I am very proud of this piece, and I appreciate how the editorial team pushed my writing and associated thinking. That said, the writing and revision process was certainly challenging, and the piece’s short length fails to reflect the extensive effort it required. Regardless of what the editorial board decides, I am grateful for the opportunity this piece provided me to reawaken my practitioner-related writing “muscles,” and I look forward to further developing these through future writing for practitioner readers. Below, I transition from this discussion of Chapter Two and offer some brief context for the next chapter that features a manuscript written for a very different audience from that described above: readers in academia.

Looking Ahead to Chapter Three: Audience, Journal, and Goals

The manuscript in Chapter Three was written with particular audiences in mind and driven by several associated goals. Regarding audience, this piece is directed toward individuals studying and/or working in the academy. More specifically, three types of academic readers are of interest: graduate students interested in PAR and popular education, and who might also be

considering the implementation of these approaches; faculty members interested in initiating PAR/popular education projects; and scholars with a theoretical interest in teacher activism. To reach these audiences, I plan to submit this manuscript to [*Research for All*](#), an open-access, peer-reviewed journal that publishes work related to participatory research, including collaborations between academic and community-based researchers. To benefit readers in the audiences mentioned above, this manuscript includes an account of this research project along with an analysis of its “participatory impact” (Banks, Herrington, & Carter, 2017, p. 542), or the perceived changes co-researchers experienced from their involvement in this project.

The manuscript opens with an account of our group’s movement through the PAR process and the popular education spiral. One reason for providing this account is that while there certainly exists an abundance of literature that provides methodologically and conceptually oriented discussions of PAR and popular education, there are fewer “on-the-ground” accounts of such approaches, particularly those featuring teacher activists. As Herr and Anderson (2015) noted, “there is more writing *about* action research than documentation of actual research studies” (p. 6, emphasis in original). Therefore, for a student and/or faculty member interested in “walking the spiral” with community co-researchers, I hope my account will preview the associated terrain by offering one possible version of this participatory journey and some potentially useful ideas. As Herr and Anderson stated (2015):

[such an account] may represent the documentation of a successful collaboration and be used as a case study of not only the process but also the product of the collaboration.... knowledge is transferred to someone in a receiving context that is similar...to the sending context that produced the study. (p. 6)

The second reason for providing the project account is to build a sufficient foundation for the analysis that follows. My hope is that by detailing our group's participatory process, the reader will possess the requisite knowledge necessary to deeply understand the participatory impacts (Banks et al., 2017) experienced by those involved.

Regarding the manuscript's second-half analysis, this is intended for the same audiences mentioned above along with scholars who possess a theoretical interest in teacher activism. An extensive analysis of participatory impact is included to supplement the related literature, and to provide students and faculty members who wish to implement PAR with some notion of possible positive outcomes; I hope that by highlighting the benefits of participatory research for teacher activist co-researchers, I can promote what I believe to be an important, and exceedingly useful, methodological approach. Lastly, this analytical section also includes a discussion of an underrecognized dimension of teacher activism, "cultural activism" (Verson, 2007), that serves as an important addition to the teacher-activism related literature. Importantly, I return to this discussion of the journal of interest and associated audiences and goals following the conclusion of the manuscript, which begins below in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Walking the Popular Education Spiral - An Account and Analysis of Participatory Action Research with Teacher Activists

A manuscript intended for publication in *Research for All*.

Introduction

In 2018-19, teachers across the United States engaged in rallies, strikes, and other forms of resistance to contest efforts by corporate and political actors to undermine educators, privatize public schools, and weaken social programs for vulnerable communities. Through their participation in these struggles, teachers took up the role of activist. Despite its overall mixed results (Yan, 2018), the #Red4Ed movement demonstrated the critical role activist educators now play in the current political and educational climate; as Oyler (2017) noted, there exists a pressing need for teachers to “[integrate] activism into the work of teaching... [or to add] ‘activist’ to one’s repertoire for teaching” (p. 30). While I certainly agree, if educators are to take up *and* sustain this role, they need collaborative spaces that afford them opportunities to hone activist skills, share and deepen existing knowledge, and take action, all while creating and strengthening relationships with fellow teacher activists. Despite the recent activist surge described above, such activist-focused spaces are still far from common, as the widely-held cultural belief that teachers must be politically neutral stubbornly persists (Ayers, Laura, & Ayers, 2018; Laura & El-Amin, 2015; Marshall & Anderson, 2009), and the central professional duty associated with the occupation of ‘teacher’ remains classroom practice. Importantly, I sought to create such an activist-supportive space through the participatory action research (PAR) project discussed in this article, an experience that provoked a number of beneficial changes in teacher activist co-researchers.

Article Aims and Overview

This article features an account and analysis of a PAR project involving the author and five teacher activist co-researchers that occurred during the fall of 2019. This piece has two principal aims. The first is to contribute to practitioners' knowledge and practice by offering a detailed account of a PAR project, grounded in popular education, that provided a largely beneficial space for K-12 teacher activists. This account should be of particular use for readers who are unfamiliar with popular education and PAR, and who also seek approaches to promote teacher activism. The second aim is to contribute to the teacher activist literature by providing an analysis of the perceived benefits of popular education and PAR for teacher activists, a topic that, to my knowledge, is presently underexplored.

This article opens below with a brief overview of PAR, popular education, and this project's central influences. This section ends with a discussion of the popular education spiral, which I next use as a guiding framework to unpack the PAR project under focus. During this account, I discuss the project's background and structure, methods employed, processes used to equalize power, and our group's intriguing focus on "making the invisible visible." Following this account, I present my analysis of this project. It is important to note here that while I was undoubtedly a co-researcher alongside my teacher-activist collaborators, I was also a doctoral student conducting my own research on this project. The second half of this article features this analysis, as I detail the many "participatory impacts" (Banks, Herrington, & Carter, 2017) of this experience on co-researchers. As discussed in the findings section, these included several beneficial changes including the novel understanding that teacher activism can include forms of "cultural activism" (Verson, 2007, p. 173). To provide the reader with some necessary methodological context, I open this article below with a brief discussion of PAR.

Methodological Approach: Participatory Action Research

PAR can be understood as a constellation of related methodological approaches located within the larger universe of action research. Kindon, Pain, and Kesby (2007) defined PAR as “a collaborative process of research, education and action (Hall 1981) explicitly oriented towards social transformation (McTaggart 1997)” (p. 9). Breaking from more conventional forms of research, PAR directly involves community members in the research process by positioning them not as “subjects” that knowledge is extracted from, but rather as co-researchers who tap their experiential knowledge while actively engaging in research (Hall & Tandon, 2017; Kindon et al., 2007; Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009; Pant, 2014). On this research characteristic, Call-Cummings (2018) noted:

A central assumption underlying PAR is that all those who have a stake or interest in a problem are experts and have valuable expertise, and that these stakeholders should be meaningfully involved in the production of knowledge around an issue. (p. 387)

An additional methodological feature alluded to above is that PAR is typically aimed at addressing social problems. This typically occurs through successive cycles, or “spirals,” of reflection and action in which those at the heart of the research process deepen their understanding of a problematic reality in order to positively transform it (Fals Borda, 1979; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Kindon et al., 2007; Pant, 2014). In sum, PAR can be understood as a collaborative and transformative research approach that produces knowledge and involves direct intervention in the world.

While these characteristics are central to PAR, they manifest in various ways since the approach draws from different locations, traditions, and theoretical strands. PAR’s origins, for example, can be traced to the “Action Research” of Kurt Lewin in Europe; the “Participatory

Action Research” of Orlando Fals Borda in Colombia; the “Participatory Research” of Marja Liisa Swantz in Tanzania; the “Community-based Research” of Rajesh Tandon in India; the participatory research of Myles Horton and others at the Highlander Research and Education Center in North America; and the culture circles of Paulo Freire in Brazil and Chile (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Kindon et al., 2007; Pant, 2014). These final two influences, those of Freire and Horton, deserve additional discussion as they significantly informed the PAR project under focus.

Central Influences: Freire, Horton, and Popular Education

The participatory project under focus was heavily influenced by Freire’s culture circles, or what Herr and Anderson (2005) referred to as Freire’s “thematic research projects” (p. 15). In these thematic research projects, participants engage in dialogue rooted in “generative themes,” or issues and topics of central importance to them (Freire, 1970/2016). Through this dialogical educational process, participants ideally develop “critical consciousness,” or a broader awareness of oppressive systems and structures that enables them to be acted upon and positively transformed (Freire, 1970/2016). Lastly, Freire (1970/2016) argued that this process should occur through “praxis,” or the cycle of reflection and action directed toward the world.

The second significant influence was that of Myles Horton and others at the Highlander Research and Education Center, located in Tennessee. Opened by Horton in 1932, Highlander has long been an important institution in the area of participatory research. Offering a form of adult education that privileges the indigenous knowledge of people, Highlander has long offered grassroots activists a space to analyze and confront pressing problems (Glowacki-Dudka, Dotson, Londt, & Young, 2012; Williams & Mullett, 2016). Relatedly, Horton believed that people carry within themselves the knowledge and experience needed to confront substantive

problems, but they often fail to utilize it because “they haven’t learned to analyze their experience and learn from it. When you help them to respect and learn from their own experience, they can know more about themselves than you do” (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998, p. 71). Through his work at Highlander, Horton validated people’s experiential knowledge while offering them opportunities to engage in collaborative analysis to promote the positive transformation of reality. Importantly, these opportunities still exist at Highlander today.

Given their shared interest in education for social change, it should be unsurprising that there exists tremendous theoretical and practical overlap between Freire, Horton, and others at Highlander (Horton & Freire, 1990). This can be partly attributed to their common embrace of popular education, an educational approach that “combines people’s experiences and knowledge to develop collective analysis and strategies for action for positive social change. In this process, everyone is a teacher, everyone is a learner, and everyone contains within them the seed to make change” (Highlander Center, n.d.). Like Freire’s (1970/2016) concept of praxis, popular education features an iterative cycle that involves people in alternating periods of reflection/analysis and action. Susan Williams, the long-time education coordinator at Highlander, described this process through the visual metaphor of the popular education “spiral” (see *Figure 1* below):

You are starting with people’s experience, building an analysis and strategy. You’re bringing in more information, which may be coming from within the group or from someone outside it. Then you are thinking about what to do, and you go and try and do it.

Then the process starts over again. (Brooks & Williams, 2017, para. 5)

The popular education spiral served as a guiding framework for the group during our PAR experience, and it now provides a useful “roadmap” for the reader during the account of this project, which begins below. It is worth noting here that while the spiral provides a useful set of

“guideposts,” these points in the path were tread upon repeatedly throughout our research journey. This provides an important reminder that popular education, and PAR, should not be treated as a linear set of checkpoints. As Fine and Torre (2008) remind us, “PAR is a deeply contextualized process for democratic and justice-based work that does not lend itself to a checklist” (p. 416). While some degree of linearity is provided in the account below for the reader’s benefit, the reality of this process was more fluid. Finally, readers are encouraged to view the account below as *one* possible manifestation of the spiral, and thus use it only as a sketch from which their own unique projects can be drawn.

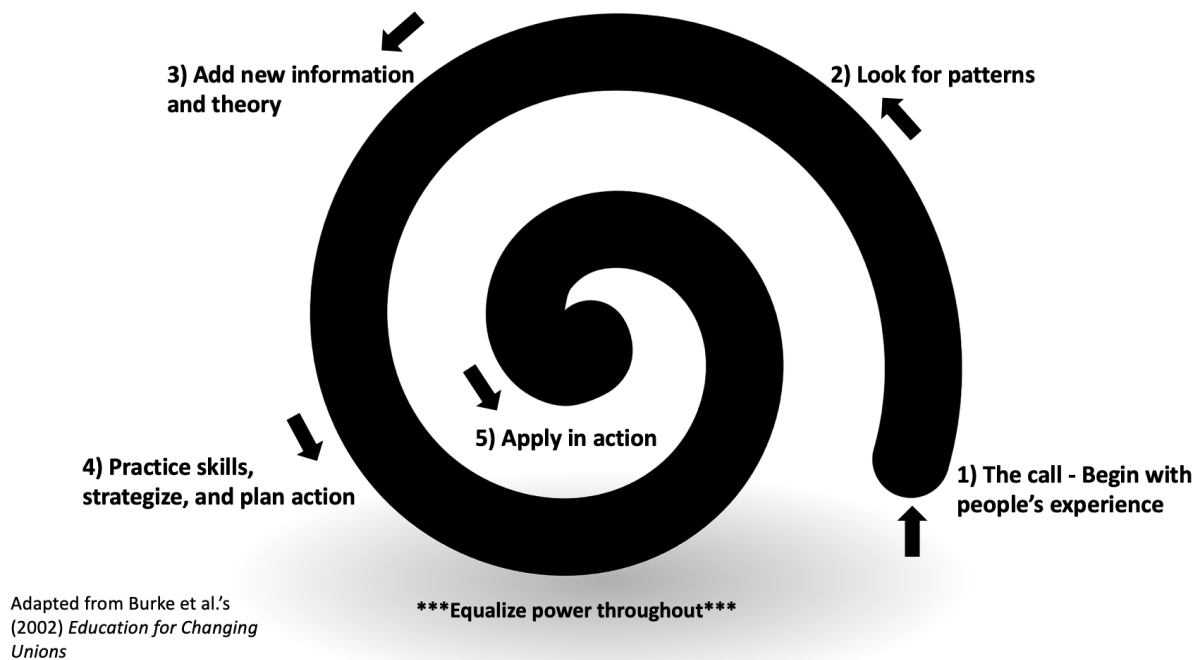


Figure 1. The popular education spiral (Burke, Geronimo, Martin, Thomas, & Wall, 2002).

An Account of PAR with Teacher Activists

The Need for a Participatory Activist Space

The impetus for this project emerged from my past experience as a teacher activist, and a more recent experience I had as a doctoral student. As a former high school educator and teacher activist, my experience as an activist in North Carolina was largely a solitary one; as discussed in

this article's introduction, political activism by teachers was (and still is) very much taboo, and support structures for activists were (and are) uncommon. It was encouraging for me, then, when a fellow teacher activist invited me in 2018 to attend several activist-oriented trainings for educators sponsored by a racial and social-justice focused caucus of the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE), our state's education advocacy organization. These trainings were action-focused and heavily oriented toward organizing educators to participate in massive rallies at the state's capital.

While encouraged by some of the content of these trainings and their overall commitment to teachers' political engagement, I was troubled because these sessions chiefly consisted of "banking education" (Freire, 1970/2016). Teachers largely sat silently, listening to presentations from "expert" organizers, and opportunities for dialogue and shared analysis were minimal; I found this approach to not only be tiresome, but also potentially demotivating for teachers. As Verson (2007) noted, "Giving people long sermons on the need for them to get involved in change can often be patronising and disempowering" (p. 175). The activist educators around me undoubtedly possessed their own valuable knowledge, but the didactic, action-centric nature of these trainings discouraged teachers from tapping their experiential knowledge and sharing it with others. Thus, I sensed a need for a participatory project, grounded in popular education, that could offer activist educators an opportunity to share knowledge, learn from each other through dialogue, and take action while furthering their activist development. Inspired by this idea, I next turned to the work of creating such a project.

Walking the Popular Education Spiral through PAR

Issuing the call and finding patterns. Drawing from influences discussed previously (Brooks & Williams, 2017; Freire, 1970/2016; Freire & Horton, 1990; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998), I crafted a short document (see Appendix F) outlining this PAR project and then shared it

with several teachers, some of whom I had encountered at the trainings described above. The creation and distribution of this document served as “the call” in the popular education spiral (Burke et al., 2002), or the initial outreach one does to engage people (Brooks & Williams, 2017). Through a snowball sampling process, I eventually recruited five veteran teacher activists as co-researchers (note that pseudonyms are used to mask identities): Trish, a middle school digital lead teacher; James, a sixth-grade language arts and social studies teacher; Lisa, a high school social studies teacher; Clyde, a middle school science teacher; and Ashley, a middle school art teacher.

Following the path of the popular education spiral and Freire’s (1970/2016) concept of “generative themes,” the next step was to ground the project in teachers’ experiences and interests, which I accomplished by asking them to identify a problematic educational issue/topic they wished to deepen their knowledge of and take action on. After each teacher responded, I shared all responses with the group and had them rank their top choices through a Google Form; we then organized these interests into two broad, thematic categories with several sub-topics: socioeconomic status and education (the achievement gap; school choice and inequality; and the resegregation of public schools were sub-topics) and the lack of advocacy/political engagement from teachers and associated barriers, were our central categories. Importantly, each of these themes and sub-topics were present in co-researchers’ lives to varying degrees, thus reflecting the idea that “PAR begins with issues emerging from the day-to-day problems of living” (Pant, 2014, p. 4). Additionally, this initial process of collectively sorting different ideas into themes and sub-topics marked the second guidepost in the popular education spiral: the identification of patterns (Burke et al., 2002).

Crafting a schedule and structure. With our overall focus determined, we next established a tentative timeline and structure. Using in-person and online communication

through a shared Google Document, we planned for between six and eight meetings, each occurring in the evening, every other week, and lasting for roughly two hours each. We also decided that meetings would occur both in-person at Western Region Education Service Alliance (WRESA), a local collaborative offering professional development for teachers, and online through Zoom, a video conferencing platform; holding half of our meetings online would hopefully ease the burden for teachers who would drive long distances. Each meeting would feature blocks of time dedicated to learning about a conceptual activist tool (concepts such as hegemony or critical consciousness, for example); a practical activist tool (holding a press conference or writing an opinion piece, for example); and a larger block of time dedicated to exploring readings and personal experiences related to our selected topics, and eventually, our action planning (see *Figure 2* below for Meeting One's plan and structure). At this point, we also established roles and responsibilities, an important part of the PAR process (Kindon et al., 2007). Given my flexible schedule as a doctoral student and associated ability to access research databases, I took up the task of locating readings relevant to our selected topics of inquiry; teacher co-researchers added supplemental texts and resources to our shared Google Drive folder. After establishing a flexible meeting schedule, we began our participatory research.

- **1: Monday, August 12 (f2f)**
 - Critical concept of the evening: *Critical consciousness*
 - Related readings/viewings: [Critical Consciousness](#).
 - Activist tool of the evening + presenter: *Press conferences* - Trish.
 - Related readings/viewings: [Sample Press Release](#) and [Red4EdNC Example Press Release](#) and [Follow this Path](#) (directions to put on a press conference)
 - Focus: SES and education from a critical perspective
 - Essential texts to be discussed: Short [video clip](#) on poverty and education; [Berliner, 2013](#); [Anyon, 2014](#) (pp. 1-23) **Also, if you see a chapter referenced in Anyon's intro. that you think our group should read for future meetings, please let me know.
 - Supplemental texts: [NEA's poverty and trauma document](#); [Anyon, 2005](#); "[Effects of poverty on WNC children's education](#)" "[Want to boost test scores and increase grad rates? One strategy: look outside schools and help low-income families](#)"
 - Activity/Protocol: Mapping exercise - What is the relationship between poverty, students, and teachers?

Figure 2. Our first few meetings were planned in this fashion on a shared Google Document.

Producing and analyzing knowledge. While some PAR projects utilize conventional field-based research methods to generate knowledge (Kindon et al., 2007; Pant, 2014), in our project, teachers' full-time work schedules and additional activist responsibilities prevented them from engaging in field work. Thus, instead of "collecting" data via field techniques, we produced knowledge by reading, dialoguing, diagramming, and presenting, several of the most common methods used in PAR (Alexander et al., 2007; Freire, 1970/2016; Kindon et al., 2007). Teachers' experiential knowledge was foregrounded throughout, as the dialogical nature of the project encouraged each participant to share his or her experiences and perceptions. Also, each practical tool explored was accompanied by a presentation from a teacher who had direct experience with it. Lisa, for example, shared her experiences holding press conferences while James shared his expertise with infographic creation. The use of such methods ensured that co-researchers' knowledge and experience remained at the forefront throughout the process, an essential feature of PAR and popular education (Brooks & Williams, 2017; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998; Kindon et al., 2007; Pant, 2014).

Therefore, the third stage of the popular education spiral, adding “new information and theory” (Burke et al., 2002) occurred via co-researcher presentations to each other (which often included storytelling), teachers identifying connections of readings with personal experiences, and the ongoing exchange and synthesis of ideas that occurred through group dialogue. These methods were rooted in the popular education approach of Freire (1970/2016), Highlander (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998; Williams & Mullett, 2016), and the associated belief that “information comes from a lot of places; people have a lot of knowledge. Giving people a chance to look at what they know and analyze it with each other is how we build an analysis of what is happening” (Brooks & Williams, 2017). As is typical of most PAR projects, analysis was a collaborative, ongoing, and iterative process (Cahill, 2007) facilitated via the methods mentioned above. Findings produced by this analysis were recorded as they emerged during each meeting, by a different co-researcher, on a shared Google Document titled “Big Takeaways.” In sum, a number of participatory methods were utilized throughout this process to produce and analyze knowledge.

Analysis and making hegemonic myths visible. As our research proceeded, one of the most striking and unexpected parts of this project was a focus on the cultural narratives, or “myths,” undergirding the educational issues under analysis. Our first few meetings featured readings on the educational effects of socioeconomic status from David Berliner (2013) and Jean Anyon (2014). These readings provoked a larger discussion of accountability-based, “No Excuses” style policies that minimize, or outright deny, poverty’s impact on students while attributing the primary causes of low test scores and “the achievement gap” to lousy teachers and schools. Diving deeper together, the targets of our analysis came to include not only these misguided policies, but also the flawed narratives underpinning them. As one co-researcher noted:

I am really coming to believe this: as these policies are pushed, there's a narrative, there's a story creating a reality about why this policy should exist...the whole thing about school testing, and school accountability, and teacher accountability...What did it move from?

It's not just [the narrative that] the kids are poor because it's their fault. These teachers are bad teachers too.

During our analysis, we identified a number of false narratives, or myths, perpetuated by these policies including the notion that public schools have failed and the related belief that many educators are deficient. A central finding was that these narratives had been communicated so frequently that they had been internalized by teachers, thus functioning at an “invisible,” or subconscious, level. An additional finding was that resulting from this myth internalization, many teachers had become demoralized, thus providing one explanation for the disappointing level of teacher activism in North Carolina. One co-researcher expressed this idea perfectly, stating, “I feel like there's this heavy burden that a lot of teachers are carrying...and that's part of the reason why they're not even trying that hard to speak up anymore.... these myths have sunk down inside of them.” Therefore, as we continued to walk the spiral together, we acquired a target for our activism: troubling educational myths internalized by teachers.

Planning and taking action. As we moved to the fourth guidepost in the spiral, “Practice skills, strategize and plan for action” (Burke et al., 2002), we worked to determine how to “make the invisible visible,” or challenge hegemonic myths and reveal their hidden alternatives (see *Figure 3* below). Using the popular education methods of participatory diagramming and dialogue, we planned our action: the construction of counter-hegemonic texts designed to provoke teachers to question flawed education-related myths, consider alternative ideas, and potentially inspire them to take political action. Each group member constructed his or her own texts during our fifth meeting, with co-researchers utilizing a number of textual forms. Trish,

James, and Ashley created infographics; Clyde created postcards; and Lisa crafted infographics and an opinion piece (see *Figures 5* and *6* for examples). Moving to the final guidepost in the popular education spiral, “Apply in action” (Burke et al., 2002), each co-researcher determined how to push his or her texts out into the world. James and Trish decided to publish their infographics online, largely through teacher-populated Facebook groups, while Clyde and Ashley disseminated their work in physical form. Ashley posted her infographic on a whiteboard during a county-level teachers’ meeting and elicited responses (see *Figure 4* below), and Clyde handed his postcards out to colleagues in his building. Lisa pursued both online and offline forms of distribution, as she published an op-ed and infographic in digital form while also sharing her infographic in poster form throughout her school building. While each text was unique and centered on specific myths important to its designer, all texts connected in varying degrees to our group’s explored topics (SES and education, the achievement gap, etc.).

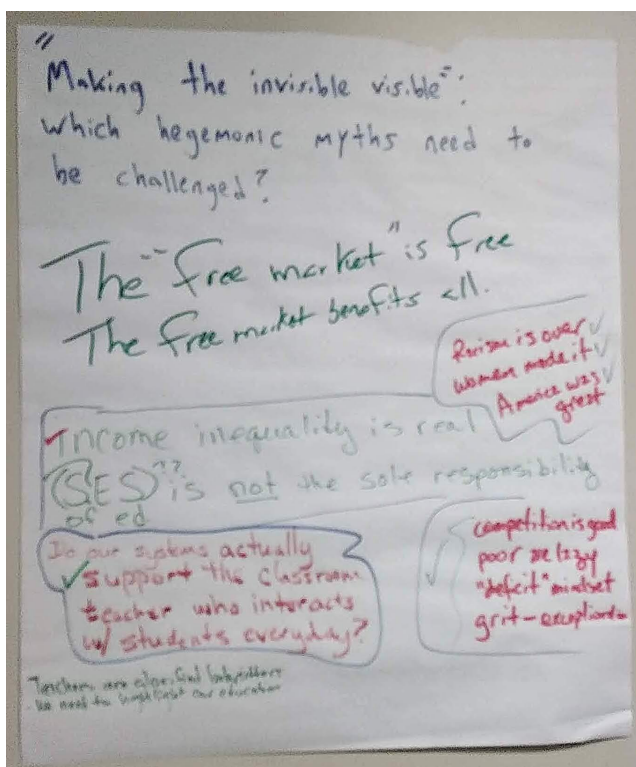


Figure 3. From a collaborative activity used to identify hegemonic myths.

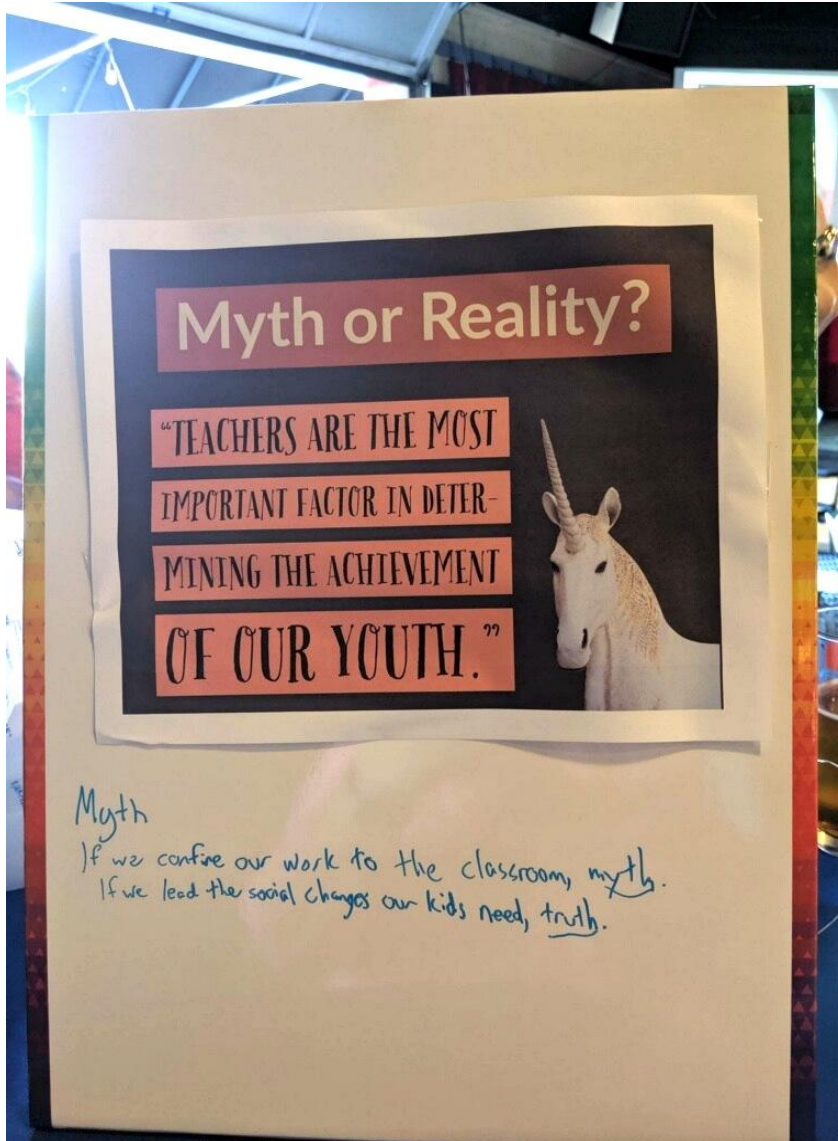


Figure 4. Ashley's infographic, displayed to elicit teachers' written responses.

Given the activist focus of this project, it is worth noting that this "action" of text creation and distribution may seem unconventional to some given that it is not a traditional form of activism (e.g., picketing, marching/rallying, staging a sit-in, etc.). As discussed in the second half of this article, though, this culturally-directed form of activism is noteworthy. It is also worth noting that our action embodied Chatterton, Fuller, and Routledge's (2007) assertion that activist-oriented PAR projects should "share relevant and accessible knowledges with

groups...[and] offer both radical critiques and inspiring alternatives” (p. 219). Given that our target audience was time-pressed, K-12 educators, the textual forms created for our group’s action (i.e., critical and inspirational texts that were both brief and readable) were ideal. We followed our action with a period of reflection during our final meeting, thus closing this iteration of the popular education spiral and the action/reflection cycle of our PAR project.



Figure 5. Trish’s infographic critiques the myth that American public schools have failed.

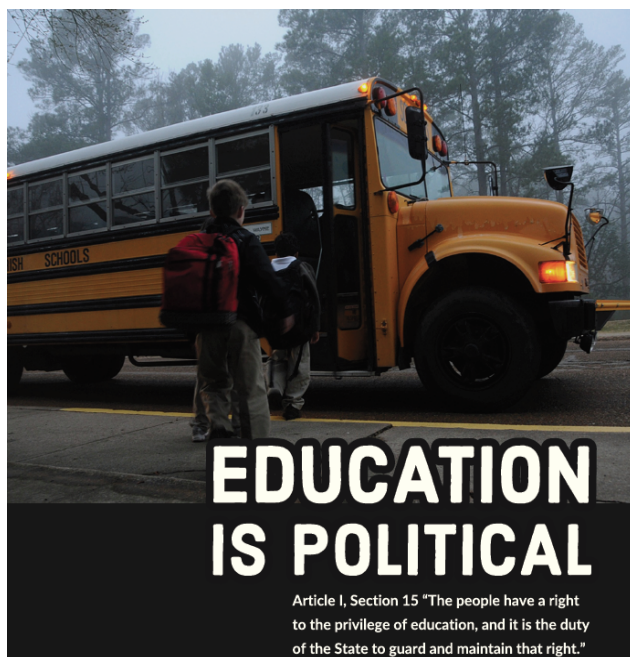


Figure 6. Lisa’s infographic features excerpts from the state constitution to challenge the idea that education is *not* political.

Equalizing power. Before concluding the account of this project, it is important to briefly discuss one remaining, and essential, aspect of the popular education spiral and participatory research: the equalization of power (Burke et al., 2002; Kindon et al., 2007; Pant, 2014). Several processes were utilized during the course of this project to “equalize power relationships” (Burke et al., 2002). One of our central means for doing so was through the use of a shared Google Drive folder that allowed each co-researcher to upload readings and resources of interest, comment on and edit our meeting schedule, and provide input on meeting agendas. We also established group norms and, as discussed previously, clarified roles and responsibilities early in the process. Finally, our group exchanged contact information early on, and group texts, reply-all emails and other forms of communication were utilized throughout the project to ensure that ideas were continually shared and decisions were made democratically.

Additionally, I established individual practices to encourage reflexivity and manage my complex positionality as both insider/outsider and facilitator/co-researcher. As someone who

spent a decade as a high school teacher and activist educator, I shared many experiences with my co-researchers, thus establishing an insider identity. However, my status as a doctoral student and prospective academic also marked me as an outsider. My positionality was further complicated by my dual-status as both facilitator and co-researcher/contributor. While I attempted to conduct myself primarily as a facilitator and discussion organizer, a common role for “outside” researchers in PAR projects (Kindon et al., 2007; Pant, 2014), the many strong views I held about the issues under focus often made me an active contributor. While impossible (and perhaps undesirable) for me to detach my perspectives and preferences from the research process, I did work to prevent them from dominating those of others. Following advice from scholars emphasizing the importance of researcher reflexivity in PAR (Grant, Nelson, & Mitchell, 2008; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Pant, 2014), I utilized a research journal to foreground my own perspectives and decisions and discourage them from overwhelming the project. In sum, a number of tools and structures were utilized throughout to promote a democratic research process.

In the sections above, I offered an account of a popular-education informed, PAR project that unfolded along a spiraling path. To reiterate a previous point, our progress on this path was not always linear. Adding new knowledge and theory, for example, did not only occur at the third guidepost, but rather at various points along the spiral. For those who wish to initiate a similar project, I suggest using the spiral as a guiding framework while allowing space to move freely and even revisit previous guideposts along the way. With that said, I now pivot from this account of the project and toward an analysis of it.

Analysis of this PAR Project’s Participatory Impact

As mentioned in this article’s introduction, I participated in this project as both a co-researcher and a doctoral student performing my own research, and it is to this research that I

now turn. The purpose of the analysis below is to explore the benefits perceived by those involved in this participatory project and to unpack associated implications. To do so, I utilize Banks et al.'s (2017) concept of "participatory impact," described as:

changes in the thinking, emotions and practice of researchers...which happen as a result of their involvement in conducting PAR. This may entail learning research skills, developing new insights and understandings that can be used in daily life or in community action, developing confidence, feeling empowered, or passionate about a cause, for example. (p. 543)

Further, Banks et al. (2017) mentioned "solidarity among community-based co-researchers through doing research together" (p. 546) as an additional form of participatory impact. Thus, I seek to explore forms of participatory impact experienced by researchers (which includes the author) involved in this PAR project. Before continuing, it is important to note that while this project certainly included challenges and tensions, my analysis here is confined to positive participatory impacts, or benefits. This is done primarily in response to space limitations, and to provide the ensuing discussion with depth instead of breadth; a much lengthier and broader analysis would be required to also address the challenging aspects of this participatory experience. This discussion opens below with an overview of this study's methods, data, and analytical process.

Methods and Data

To explore the participatory impact of this project, I primarily used qualitative research methods since they are used to explore human perceptions (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Utilizing methods from the qualitative tradition was key given my aim of exploring co-researchers' beliefs and perceptions regarding their experiences in this participatory project. Further, these methods reflect a constructivist epistemology in that they are undergirded by the

assumption that human beings construct, rather than extract, knowledge and meaning (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, primary methods utilized were participant observation and semi-structured interviews with co-researchers. Participant observation occurred throughout the entire PAR project, as I recorded jottings during each meeting. However, given my primary role as facilitator, and the associated energy and focus this role demanded, participant observation was exceedingly challenging, and my jottings were often fragmented and underdeveloped. Thus, I leaned heavily on full field notes to develop my observation-related insights, and I constructed these notes as soon as possible after each meeting to encourage deep reflection and enhance accuracy (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Semi-structured interviews were performed within the week following the project's conclusion to explore co-researchers' perceptions of the experience. During this time, co-researchers were busily involved in their full-time teaching jobs; to lessen the burden on these busy individuals, interviews were performed online, in the evenings, through a video conferencing platform. Holding interviews online and at this time seemed to encourage expression and candor, as co-researchers were relaxed and able to fully express their insights without the added burden of traveling to a physical location after the workday's conclusion to interact with me. Regarding timing, performing interviews after the project's end encouraged teacher activists to reflect on the entire process. The timing of these interviews was also intended to enhance credibility, as performing them immediately after the project's conclusion provided teachers a fresher experience to mine. Finally, the semi-structured interview format was chosen to encourage flexibility and provide teachers with space to expand responses and express emergent ideas (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All interviews were audio-recorded, submitted to a professional transcription service, and subsequently double-checked for accuracy.

Along with field notes and interview transcripts, forms of data also included audio recordings and transcripts of face-to-face and online meetings; shared group agendas and other documents; emails and text messages exchanged within the group; research findings documented on our “Big Takeaways” Google Document; and co-researchers’ post-meeting responses to reflective Google Form questions (these questions were used to encourage ongoing reflection during the PAR process). Thus, this project produced many forms of data. Importantly, a benefit of this data abundance was that triangulation, or the use of multiple forms of data to enhance credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), was easily accomplished; credibility was further strengthened through the use of member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), as various data excerpts were shared with co-researchers so they could verify accuracy and compare their interpretations of the data with my own. While not all co-researchers responded to my request for input, for those who did, their interpretations of the data mirrored my own. Much of these data were subjected to the analytical process described below.

Data Analysis

Analysis was performed primarily through three means. First, as mentioned above, after each group meeting I composed field notes in my research journal; this was done throughout the entire PAR process, and analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. Along with these analytical field notes, my research journal also provided space for me to extend my analysis by recording various hunches, thoughts, and connections that emerged between meetings. Second, inspired by Anyon’s (2009) assertion that researchers should “‘knead the dough’ of their data/theory mix, working it into a rich and heady brew” (p. 5), I read relevant theory alongside the data and allowed this theoretical content to inform my analysis of it. These theoretical texts were located primarily in the areas of teacher activism (Catone, 2017; Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Oyler, 2017; Picower, 2012), cultural resistance/activism (Duncombe, 2002, 2007; Verson,

2007), and social movement theory (Anyon, 2014). Given the centrality of theory in my analytical process, I thread some of this literature into the analytical sections below. As my final method of analysis, I annotated and coded much of the data. This was both an inductive and deductive process in that codes emerged from both the data and the theoretical texts mentioned above. Generally speaking, I moved from a fluid process of open notetaking and coding to the construction of categories that provide a basis for the participatory-impact related findings discussed below (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, this process did not unfold in a neat, linear fashion; rather, my analytical process resembled Creswell's (2013) "data analysis spiral," or the idea that "the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (p. 182). For me, reading the data alongside theory led to the generation of codes; these codes led to focused re-readings of the data; fresh readings of the data produced additional codes which converged into categories; categories invited additional readings of the data alongside related literature, which led to revised codes; and so on.

Findings

Stronger relationships. An important participatory impact resulting from this project was the strengthening of co-researcher relationships, a central goal of participatory research and popular education (Banks et al., 2017; Brooks & Williams, 2017; Williams & Mullett, 2016). While several co-researchers were familiar with each other prior to this experience, these relationships were deepened during the course of this project. Commenting on this, Lisa noted:

[Trish] and I have gotten to know each other better [through this experience] and that is good for building my 'core team.' Clyde invited me over to his school to talk to his colleagues and participated in my walk-in for our district. He and I have always been close, but he had stepped back for a while and this experience reignited him somewhat. Ashley also did a walk-in and is my stalwart companion in activism around here.... the

other folks in this group really are my ‘core team’ so the fact that they all put so much into it is a huge benefit to me as an organizer.

Throughout this project, Lisa was particularly attuned to the state of her relationships with other group members. Above, and elsewhere in the data, she repeatedly used the phrase “core team” in relation to her co-researchers, thus indicating her perception of them as close partners in her ongoing activist and organizing efforts. Importantly, deepening relationships with these individuals through our project resulted in positive activist outcomes for Lisa in that her increased interaction with Clyde led to their mutual involvement in a local activist event (a walk-in), and her deepened relationship with Trish supported the building of her core team.

Similar to Lisa, Trish reported feelings of increased closeness with her co-researchers. For example, during one group meeting, she stated:

This group connected me with you guys in a way that I hadn't [before]. Obviously, I knew Ashley, I knew Clyde, I knew Lisa from before, but I think being able to have that connection now... merged our counties a little bit better in a way that I don't think we would have just because NCAE isn't as [active] in the Western counties...So this allowed our locals to be a little more bonded, which I thought was pretty cool.

Like Lisa, Trish connected heightened bonds with her co-researchers to positive activist outcomes. One of the larger teacher-activism related issues in our state is, as Trish pointed out, the lack of an organized teaching force; educators tend to be more organized in urban areas such as Durham, while rural, Western counties are more disconnected. In the excerpt above, Trish linked strengthened bonds among co-researchers to better-connected local chapters of NCAE, the state’s education advocacy organization. Thus, there is an important linkage here of increased in-group solidarity to heightened regional, organizational connectedness.

Co-researchers' reporting of strengthened relationships with fellow activist educators is significant given that much of the related literature emphasizes the importance of teacher activists working collectively (Catone, 2017; Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Oylar, 2017; Picower, 2012). As Picower (2012) noted, "Since isolated teachers acting alone cannot have enough impact, another distinction of fully developed teacher activism is that action is taken collectively rather than individually" (p. 10). Similarly, Catone (2017) argued that relationship building is essential to teacher activism, asserting that educators "turn to the promise of relational agency--the proactive cultivation of relationships--to build power with others in order to fulfill their teacher activist purpose" (p. 138). Therefore, this relationship-strengthening participatory impact is noteworthy given that effective teacher activism may actually depend upon the presence of strong bonds within the activist corps.

Emotional benefits. An additional participatory impact co-researchers experienced was that of positive emotions. Specifically, co-researchers expressed validation and increased confidence as a result of this PAR project. Regarding validation, Lisa noted how this experience helped her overcome an activist leader "imposter syndrome":

[This experience was] good for helping me defeat my own "imposter syndrome" when it comes to being a leader. I don't see why I should be considered a leader when I compare myself to the other activists in my union and in education, but having a concrete certificate of learning and a published piece that was shared with hundreds of people shows me that I am indeed a leader and worthy of the positions I have found myself in. The "certificate of learning" Lisa referred to was a certificate issued by WRESA that verified her participation in this PAR project (see Appendix A), which I characterized as a form of professional development to legitimize it with school districts. Lisa's published piece, one of the actions she initiated, was an op-ed that was published by a North Carolina education news

organization; Lisa's piece was so widely shared online that it even garnered the attention of famed education historian Diane Ravitch, who promoted it on her Twitter account. It is apparent that the external recognition Lisa received from this participatory experience was validating in that it affirmed her identity as an activist leader.

Clyde also reported feeling validated as a result of his participation in this project. During his interview, Clyde explained that for many years he had participated in more conventional forms of organizing and activism. For the last several years, though, his participation had shifted to more reflective forms of equity-driven work, such as co-teaching a racial healing class. He described these more recent experiences as involving "small groups of people and quiet, quiet work." Given the contrast between this reflective work and the more common, and exceedingly more visible, manifestations of political engagement from teacher activists in our state (e.g., massive rallies featuring chanting and marching educators), Clyde expressed internal conflict and doubt regarding the importance of the quiet work he was engaged in: "Several times it [this contrast] made me start to wonder, am I doing this right? Maybe I should be on Facebook more. Maybe I should be making more noise somehow." However, during the course of his involvement in this PAR project, his self-doubt gave way to validation:

I started to feel as we started getting towards the end [of the PAR project] that no, there was a role for what I was doing....And actually it got me finally to a point where I felt comfortable where I am. My conversations with you have helped tremendously with that.

The reflective and analytical dimensions of PAR and popular education resonated with Clyde, validating "the deeper work" he believed essential. Lastly, James also expressed feelings of validation in that by working alongside others with similar concerns, he came to better accept his

own perceptions: “[Just] being in a room with five, six other people who have similar concerns, passions, and experiences is beneficial to center yourself and confirm that your sense of reality is not bonkers.” Thus, validation was an important emotional benefit experienced by several co-researchers.

Along with validation, another positive emotional benefit was that of increased confidence. For Trish, this was a significant outcome, as she referenced it during meetings and in her interview. Touching on how new knowledge produced by this experience benefited her emotionally, she stated:

I think [this group] just gave me more confidence and fodder and data to be able to not just speak my true feelings but to actually have things behind it. So if somebody goes, “What do you mean?” I can be like, “This is exactly what I mean.” So I think it made me more of a confident speaker within groups that I was talking to.

As a leader in NCAE, Trish often encounters opportunities to communicate with local media, other teachers, and various stakeholders in the community. Instead of merely speaking “her true feelings,” she is now able to bolster this emotional content with credible information acquired during our PAR project. For her, this increased “fodder and data” resulted in more confidence. Therefore, for the co-researchers discussed above, the positive emotional benefits of validation and increased confidence resulted from this experience.

Knowledge, skill, and tool development. As mentioned previously, a central goal of participatory research and popular education is the development of knowledge and skills (Banks et al., 2017; Brooks & Williams, 2017; Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009; Williams & Mullett, 2016). This was undoubtedly a participatory impact experienced by researchers in this PAR project, as it involved the deepening of knowledge related to educational issues/topics, and the

acquisition of skills and “tools,” the latter of which I break down further into categories of *conceptual* and *practical* activist tools. To quickly remind the reader, group meetings featured blocks of time dedicated to learning about issues/topics along with conceptual and practical activist tools.

Regarding knowledge deepened through this PAR experience, several participants discussed how the “issue” of poverty had now taken on a heightened significance. Clyde, for example, noted that our work together, which had involved multiple readings and discussions centered on SES, “put the poverty piece in front of me again.” Similarly, Ashley noted how the experience had resulted in a

deeper understanding that poverty really drives a lot of what we're concerned about...It's not everything, but it has to be addressed or we're not going to be able to do what we all want to do, and that's save every child.

Echoing Clyde and Ashley, I had a similar experience. During my decade as a high school teacher, I taught many students from low-income families. Now far removed from the classroom as a doctoral student, my experience with poor students and families has largely been limited to the many texts I have encountered on the subject of poverty and its educational impacts. Being in this PAR group with teachers who work in high-poverty schools, and hearing them discuss their related experiences, made this issue less abstract and reminded me of its significance. Therefore, a deepened knowledge and appreciation of poverty’s significance was one participatory impact experienced by researchers.

On *conceptual* tools acquired from this experience, co-researchers noted several. Ashley specifically mentioned hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) and critical consciousness (Freire,

1970/2016), while Lisa commented on the shock doctrine (Klein, 2007) and hegemony. She noted how these were

the most useful concepts to me. I didn't know anything about the shock doctrine, but it made so much sense to me and goes right along with the [alleged] "failure" of public schools. So, I was glad to have that added to my vocabulary. Hegemony was a concept I was aware of but wanted more information on...so having a better handle on the concept of hegemony as a bigger idea was very helpful.

Trish made a similar comment, noting how the concept of the shock doctrine allowed her to "name" the phenomenon of how crises are utilized by nefarious actors such as some charter school creators:

I've been following the New Orleans thing and the charter schools there, but I never had a name [for it] like "the shock doctrine"... I never had a specific name for it, but I knew after 9/11 it was way easier for so many things to get passed in America because we were in shock...But it's neat to just have a name to that theory. I thought that was pretty interesting.

These concepts provided co-researchers with the ability to name, or apprehend, aspects of reality through a more critical lens. Hegemony, critical consciousness, and the shock doctrine are concepts these activists can employ to not only unveil power imbalances, but to also address them. In this sense, I view these concepts as "tools" to be wielded. As Horton noted, "Ideas are tools: you can play with them, turn them around, look at them, use and test them" (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998, p. 137). The notion of concept-as-tool also relates to the larger idea that there are conceptual/analytical dimensions to teacher activism (Montano, Lopez-Torres, DeLissovoy, Pacheco, & Stillman, 2002; Oyler, Morvay, & Sullivan, 2017; Picower, 2012); meaning, teacher

activists are not only doers, but also “transformative or public intellectuals” (Laura & El-Amin, 2015, p. 3), and these two dimensions are linked. Tools of critical perception likely enable critical intervention in material and political reality, and thus are a crucial part of a teacher activist’s arsenal.

Of course, a teacher activist’s arsenal is not limited to theoretical tools. Oyler (2017) discussed how teacher activists maintain “repertoires” of “practices of constructive resistance” (p. 32), or what I consider *practical* tools and skills. Several co-researchers reported acquiring such practical tools from this experience along with associated skills. For instance, while speaking on one of the actions she took, Lisa noted:

I had never made an infographic before or used Adobe Spark [infographic maker], so that was good practice. I felt like mine was quite stylish and attention grabbing, myself. The contrast between the words and the black background looked good.

Similarly, Trish stated, “I didn’t even know about those infographic makers, so just a resource and tool was helpful.” While the experience of creating an infographic was already familiar to Ashley, she noted that the process of selecting a platform for it (i.e., an online and/or offline location for effectively distributing a text), and considering how to effectively design a document for an audience of busy teachers, was beneficial. As evidenced by their comments, this participatory experience allowed several co-researchers to become familiar with a new, and unconventional, practical activist tool, the infographic.

Additionally, as Lisa and Ashley expressed, the action of infographic creation forced them to consider issues of audience and aesthetic appeal, thus providing opportunities for them to hone their digital communication and design skills. It is clear, for example, that Lisa was thinking critically about design and audience reception when she commented on the “stylish and

attention grabbing” appearance of her infographic; and Ashley carefully weighed the advantages and disadvantages of various platforms (a website, Facebook, a physical location, etc.) when considering how to most effectively get her infographic in front of teachers with limited time and attention. In sum, these teachers added an important practical tool, and some deepened skills, to their “activist repertoires” (Oyler, 2017, p. 36). When considering these important practical additions along with the conceptual tools and forms of knowledge teachers both acquired and deepened during this experience, it is clear that in the domain of knowledge and skills, this project had a distinct participatory impact on researchers.

Expanded understanding of teacher activism. The final participatory impact of this project was an expanded understanding of teacher activism. During the past few years, as the #Red4Ed movement unfolded and educators took to the streets in protest, the dominant image associated with teacher activism has been that of sign-wielding, marching teachers. As Laura and El-Amin (2015) noted, “commonly accepted, yet narrowly defined, definitions of *teacher activist*...conjure images of fist-pumping call-and-response marchers with picket signs and union cards” (p. 2, emphasis in original). While this highly visible display of teacher activism is undoubtedly important, it is only one manifestation of activism. If “teacher activists” are broadly defined as educators who promote social justice by working toward transformational change both within and beyond the classroom (Laura & El-Amin, 2015; Niesz, 2018; Picower, 2012), this work cannot be limited to traditional forms of activism, as it can manifest in multiple ways and settings. As Laura and El-Amin (2015) put it:

The politics of transformational change require challenging dominant interests and the beliefs and practices that sustain power in everyday life...This change is not bound to, or

defined by, the images of chaotic rabble-rousing demonstrations that the word *activist* may invoke in some. (p. 2, emphasis in original)

Importantly, such an expansive view of teacher activism was developed by Trish and myself as a result of our involvement in this project. During one of our final conversations, we both acknowledged this broadened perception:

Trish: I think it [participation in this project] affected... just knowing [activism is] beyond action. Being part of an activist is research, rather than just action. I realized there's a lot of stuff on the front end that you need to do in order to get the action done.

Chris: That's something that really jumped out to me too, because I think in the past I didn't think about it. When I think of the word “activist,” I think of people in the streets holding signs, and that's definitely a part of it, but I think there are other dimensions too. I would say after meeting with you all for a couple of months, I have a broader definition of the word “activist.”

Trish: Yeah. As do I.

While Trish's view widened in terms of allowing space for an analytical, or research-related, dimension of activism, my view of activism expanded in a somewhat different sense.

During the course of this project, I found myself repeatedly struck by our group's focus on hegemonic myths, and our related goal of “making the invisible visible.” As discussed in the first half of this article, co-researchers assumed a focus on revealing and contesting problematic education-related beliefs that teachers had internalized (e.g., public schools have failed; teachers are to blame for not “saving” students from poverty; education is apolitical, etc.). This targeting

of *ideas* surprised me given that teacher activist campaigns in our state have mostly been focused on policies (e.g., restoring compensation for teachers with advanced degrees) and politicians (much ire has been rightfully directed at State Superintendent Mark Johnson and various Republican legislators). After one of our initial meetings, I even wrote in my research journal: “There is much talk about how we need to work on ideas as much as we need to work on politicians. We can act on people, policies, and ideas, and some activist tools are better suited for these than others” (research journal, August 28, 2019). This heightened focus on ideas, or myths, and our subsequent creation of infographics and other texts to impact them, broadened my view of educator activism by illustrating that teacher activists perform valuable, and perhaps unexpected, work through forms of cultural activism (Verson, 2007), which I discuss below.

Teacher activists as cultural activists. Verson (2007) defined cultural activism as: campaigning and direct action that seeks to take back control of how our webs of meaning, value systems, beliefs, art and literature, everything, are created and disseminated. It is an important way to question the dominant ways of seeing things and present alternative views of the world. (p. 173)

Thus, cultural activism is focused on challenging hegemonic beliefs, values, and ideologies, or as Verson (2007) called them, “our webs of meaning” (p. 173). As mentioned previously, traditional displays of activism often consist of forms of direct action centered on politicians, policies, and institutions; cultural activists certainly acknowledge the importance of these conventional political “targets” and the tactics used to affect them, but their work is driven by the understanding, following Gramsci (1971), that “Power does not just reside in institutions, but also in the ways people make sense of their world; hegemony is a political *and* cultural process” (Duncombe, 2007, p. 493, emphasis in original). Therefore, cultural activists use tools including

visual art, creative performances, and a myriad of textual forms, to create change in what Reinsborough and Canning (2010) called, “narrative space—the intangible realm of stories, ideas, and assumptions that frame and define the situation, relationships or institutions in question” (p. 21). Given their heightened focus on exposing and challenging myths, and the related creation and distribution of counter-hegemonic texts, teacher activists in this PAR project directed their activism toward this narrative realm, thus taking up the role of cultural activist. Through these texts, the activist goal was to create imaginative change in viewers/readers at “the point of assumption” (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010, p. 69), or the conceptual location(s) where education-related myths and stories had been internalized and congealed into “truth” (see *Figure 7* below for an example). By calling out these assumptions and gesturing toward their alternatives, teacher activists sought to create conceptual changes in readers/viewers that could also potentially lead them to take up activism.

Therefore, when I expressed to Trish that my definition of “activist” had broadened as a result of my PAR experience, this acknowledgement of the cultural dimension of teacher activism was emerging in my mind. Broadly speaking, this idea has important implications for the theory surrounding teacher activism, as it represents a dimension of teacher activism that is, to my knowledge, presently undertheorized in the literature. Perhaps of greater importance, though, the idea of teacher activists as also being cultural activists further expands the “activist repertoires” (Oyler, 2017, p. 36) at their disposal by calling attention to tactics and tools that explicitly challenge assumptions and belief systems. In sum, in addition to stronger relationships, developed knowledge and skills, and emotional benefits, this broadened understanding of teacher activism was an important participatory impact resulting from this experience.



Figure 7. The front (top) and back (bottom) of Clyde's postcards. A culturally directed form of activism, Clyde's cards target myths residing within "narrative space" (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010, p. 21). Namely, the hegemonic myth that many educators and public schools are deficient.

Discussion and Conclusion

As the above sections make clear, walking the spiral of this popular-education inspired PAR experience had many participatory impacts on researchers. From deepened knowledge, new tools and sharpened skills, strengthened relationships, and a broadened perception of teacher activism, this was an overall beneficial experience. While a limitation of this project was the sole involvement of veteran teacher activists, I believe their favorable experience suggests that

new activists, or even non-activist educators, may also find this approach empowering. As James noted, “I think it's important for people who share passions, concerns, experiences, to get together voluntarily and share ideas, share perspectives, and share strategies.” I concur, and I believe the acknowledgement and exchange of ideas is critical given how teachers’ experiential knowledge is consistently marginalized by politicians and even other organizers. Thus, one of the central implications of this study is that other teacher activists, both beginner and veteran alike, may also benefit from involvement in PAR.

The second implication of this study is that conventional definitions of teacher activism are likely too narrow, which has important implications for the production of material, social, and political changes teacher activists seek. While the externally-directed teacher strikes and rallies of the past few years have resulted in some gains, long term change will likely require more than just changing policies and political leaders. As this project made clear, there is a pressing need to also contest and rewrite dominant, and often “invisible,” cultural narratives. This process requires different tactics and tools than those commonly employed by activists. As Duncombe argued:

Politics is as much about who controls meanings as it is about who holds public office and sits in office suites. Knowing how to knock on doors, organize community meetings and plan a street protest is no longer enough, today’s activists need to know how to generate symbols, tell stories, and tap into popular dreams. (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010, p. 1)

If the substantive changes teacher activists desire are to be actualized and sustained, conventional tactics and tools must be supplemented by those that are more culturally, and thus internally, directed. As Clyde noted, “I think a lot of the changes that occur happen in people's minds and happen in people's hearts. To me, at the end that's got to be where the change comes.”

To conclude, this article provided an overview of a PAR project involving the author and five teacher activist co-researchers. It opened with a detailed account of the project that provided other PAR practitioners with potentially useful ideas, and perhaps even inspiration, for their own unique projects. This account was followed by my analysis of this project, which detailed its many positive participatory impacts on co-researchers while supplementing the existing teacher activist literature. In our current political and educational climate where attacks on educators, public education, and vulnerable communities are increasingly common, teacher activism is undoubtedly necessary, and activists would be wise to utilize all tools and approaches at their disposal. Perhaps PAR and popular education will gain a greater foothold within the teacher activist community as more activist educators come to embrace the immense value of shared learning and action.

Reflective Bridge: Looking Back on Chapter Three and Forward to Chapter Four

Below, I offer some brief reflection on the manuscript in Chapter Three. I discuss a significant limitation of the piece, reflect on the process of writing for *Research for All*, and then offer a transition to the next chapter which features a manuscript entirely focused on methodological challenges and tensions.

Looking Back on Chapter Three

In this reflection, it is necessary to address a limitation of the previous chapter: it features an exclusively positive depiction of the PAR project that completely omits the challenges this experience entailed. Importantly, such a selective depiction was provided for two reasons. First, as mentioned in the manuscript itself, space limitations of the manuscript precluded me from providing a thorough description of the project, an analysis of it, *and* a substantive discussion of related challenges. Second, the exclusively positive analysis of the project was intended to serve as a methodological “sales pitch” of sorts for practitioners. As evidenced by findings discussed in Chapter Three, this was a largely beneficial experience for co-researchers, with the implication being that other teacher activists may also benefit from similar experiences that offer them collaborative opportunities to share experiential knowledge, augment it, and take action. Thus, by focusing solely on the positive aspects of this experience, I sought to persuade students and faculty to consider initiating their own participatory projects. Relatedly, given the predominance of more conventional, non-participatory forms of research in the academy (Herr & Anderson, 2015), and the rise of post-qualitative methodologies that, from my perspective, can discourage researcher involvement in social and material reality, I believe this promotion of PAR to be much-needed. That said, my exclusively positive focus does indicate a larger limitation of

the manuscript which I address in Chapter Four. However, before transitioning to this analysis of methodological challenges, I provide some additional reflection on writing Chapter Three.

Reflecting on the Journal of Interest

When I first began writing the manuscript, I had a particular journal in mind:

[*Educational Action Research*](#). This journal's aims and scope were aligned with my focus, and the word limit seemed appropriate (5,000-8,000 words) given what I aimed to explore. As I waded deeper into my draft, though, I came to believe this outlet was perhaps not the best choice after all. This change mainly occurred for two reasons: I saw my writing as stretching far beyond 8,000 words, and I realized I wanted an open-access journal to feature my work. Open-access journals are important to me not only because I believe they increase readership, but also because they allow me to honor my commitment to write for audiences beyond academia. Certainly, as previously discussed, this piece was directed toward an academic audience, but I would be thrilled if my work extended beyond the academy walls to reach others (such as community researchers and activists) as well.

Luckily, I found such an outlet in the form of *Research for All*, an open-access, peer-reviewed journal committed to publishing accounts of participatory research, particularly accounts of collaborations between academics and community members; thus, I believed my work to be a perfect fit. Additionally, their word limit was higher (up to 10,000 words), which gave me space to expand my analysis. Once I felt I had an adequate draft, I reached out to the managing editor, provided a brief synopsis of the manuscript, and asked if she thought my piece might be appropriate for the journal. Soon thereafter, she replied with a "contributor questionnaire" (see Appendix E), which seems to be a "screening" tool used by the editors. Importantly, this form actually helped me reflect on the piece as a whole; by filling it out, I was

able to identify the manuscript's central takeaways and even reveal some "rough" spots that required revision. After completing and submitting this form, I now await the journal's response.

Below, I pivot from the previous chapter and begin looking toward the next one. I provide a transition to the next chapter which is centered on the challenges and tensions present in this research project.

Looking Forward to Chapter Four: Leaning Fully into Challenges and Tensions

As mentioned previously, one of the significant omissions in Chapter Three was a discussion of the challenges and tensions involved in this participatory action research project. In this sense, our research project was far from unique in that PAR projects typically involve challenging interactions, tensions, and dilemmas (Grant, Nelson, & Mitchell, 2008; Lenette et al., 2019; Pant, 2014). Despite the prevalence of these difficult aspects of participatory research, in many research accounts, they are simply "[b]rushed under the carpet" (Lenette et al., 2019). In their article "Brushed Under the Carpet: Examining the Complexities of Participatory Research," Lenette et al. (2019) noted:

The relative paucity of discussions of sensitive topics linked to the methodology can inhibit debate about key challenges in participatory research. ...In this paper, we critically reflect on incidents, anxieties, decisions and dilemmas that most of us either intentionally repressed or *had not dared* to mention in our publications until we came together as a group to share our experiences. (p. 162, emphasis in original)

Inspired by this statement, and the authors' exceedingly transparent article this quote was taken from, in the following chapter I lean fully into the anxieties, challenges, and tensions that emerged during the course of this PAR project. As discussed in the analysis to come, my aim in

this fourth chapter is not to negate positive accounts of this research I have already provided; rather, I seek to paint a fuller picture of this project by revealing what is often omitted in accounts of participatory research.

Before beginning, it is important to note that like the two chapters preceding it, Chapter Four features a manuscript intended for publication. While presenting an entirely different dimension of the PAR experience, this piece echoes Chapter Three in that it too is directed toward readers in academia. As discussed in the manuscript itself, I hope that by sharing challenges experienced during this project, other researchers considering such participatory work will find the discussion both insightful and useful. Further, I hope the manuscript inspires other PAR practitioners to acknowledge the more challenging dimensions of PAR while locating learning opportunities within them. In terms of the particular journal this manuscript has been submitted to, I selected *Educational Action Research*, an outlet that publishes accounts of action research and related analysis. Below, I share this piece, titled “Traversing Rough Terrain: Methodological Challenges of Participatory Action Research with Teacher Activists.”

Chapter Four: Traversing Rough Terrain - Methodological Challenges of Participatory Action Research with Teacher Activists

A manuscript submitted for publication in *Educational Action Research*.

Introduction

During the fall of 2019, I initiated a participatory action research (PAR) project with five teacher activist co-researchers. As a former high school teacher, activist educator, and current doctoral student, I initiated this project for reasons stemming from my experiences and research interests. First, increasing attacks by political and corporate entities on public education, educators, and vulnerable communities have made it apparent that in our current social and political climate, teacher activists are essential. Second, these individuals take up activist identities and behaviors in addition to the many responsibilities and duties associated with the already-demanding work of teaching. Given this “dual-load” that activist teachers carry, I believe they need spaces of collaborative learning and action that offer forms of intellectual, social, and practical support for their essential activist work. Thus, this research project resulted from this perceived need and my associated interest in exploring whether PAR could potentially offer activists such a supportive, empowering space.

Detailed accounts of this project and its “participatory impacts” (Banks, Herrington, & Carter, 2017, p. 542) on co-researchers have already been provided elsewhere. While this project presented a largely beneficial experience for co-researchers, it also entailed a number of challenges, tensions, and anxieties that previous accounts of this project omitted due to differing article aims and space constraints. In response to these omissions, the purpose of this article is to provide this essential exploration. In the pages that follow, I first provide some context for the project before specifying a rationale for this article’s analysis of methodological challenges and

tensions. Next, I initiate this analysis by exploring challenges related to this project's recruitment process and my related attempts to establish credibility within the activist community. Following this, I discuss tensions related to reflection and action; challenges related to epistemological orientations and facilitation style; and internal conflict and limitations related to our group's concluding action. Finally, I close with what I believe to be several central takeaways. This article opens below with some basic information on the research project under focus.

Research Context and Methods

As mentioned above, this research project unfolded over several months during the fall of 2019. Five co-researchers and I engaged in a PAR project that involved knowledge production and action centered on several issues of importance to co-researchers: socioeconomic status and its educational impacts; school choice; the achievement gap; and the overall lack of teacher activism in North Carolina and related barriers. During our six meetings, we explored these topics primarily through readings, group dialogue centered on readings and related life experiences, co-researcher presentations, storytelling, and diagramming, several methods common to PAR (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; Pant, 2014). In addition to exploring our selected issues, these methods were utilized to learn about activist tools, both of a conceptual and practical nature, that co-researchers could potentially utilize to affect social and political change. Practical tools, for example, included holding press conferences and writing op-eds, while conceptual tools included concepts such as hegemony and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2016; Gramsci, 1971). Throughout the PAR experience, co-researchers were encouraged to acknowledge and share their valuable experiential knowledge regarding both issues and tools with others, thus illustrating the significant role popular education played in this project (Horton,

Kohl, & Kohl, 1998; Williams & Mullett, 2016). As our work progressed, we decided on an action to take: the construction of counter-hegemonic texts intended to “make the invisible visible,” or to reveal and contest troubling education-related myths (e.g., the idea that public education is broken) that other teachers had internalized. In previous accounts of this project, I characterized this action as a form of cultural activism (Verson, 2007), or an action aimed at challenging commonly-held and largely unquestioned assumptions, beliefs, and values. After the creation and distribution of these texts to local teachers, the group reflected on the entire process and then concluded this iteration of our PAR project.

As anticipated, this project produced extensive data, as each group meeting was audio recorded and transcribed; jottings and field notes were composed from ongoing participant observation; semi-structured interviews, also audio recorded and transcribed, were performed with co-researchers after the project’s conclusion; and a research journal provided space for continual reflection throughout the experience. To perform the analysis featured in this article, I read across these data while looking for areas of tension. I annotated and coded while reading the data which led to the construction of the themes that frame the sections below; thus, a comparative analytic method was employed as I moved from emerging themes to the data and back again until these themes solidified. Before sharing this analysis and its findings, I briefly discuss why I believe this exploration of our project’s methodological tensions and challenges is both necessary and potentially useful.

Rationale for Acknowledging Challenges and Tensions in PAR

While challenges and tensions are undoubtedly common in PAR projects (Grant, Nelson, & Mitchell, 2008; Lenette et al., 2019; Pant, 2014), acknowledging difficulties encountered in the course of my own research provokes anxiety. This emotion admittedly stems from my worry

that discussing difficult aspects of this experience could threaten its perceived success.

Therefore, I strongly identify with Lenette et al.'s (2019) observation that those who initiate participatory research projects

are often reluctant to openly discuss difficulties associated with participatory research for fear of discrediting the approach. In other words, discussing the challenges presented by participatory research can be perceived to create suspicion about the quality of knowledge produced. (p. 162)

That said, I ultimately believe both the positive *and* negative aspects of this PAR experience merit exploration, and the presence of one fails to negate the other. It is also useful to discuss challenges and tensions because they offer learning opportunities, or invitations to consider what could have been done differently, and what could still be done in similar research projects to come. To my knowledge, PAR projects involving teacher activists are uncommon, and thus exploring associated difficulties may benefit other researchers who find themselves involved in similar projects. I begin this analysis below with a discussion of challenges that emerged during this project's recruitment phase.

Gaining Community Access, Establishing Relationships, and Recruiting Co-Researchers

A central challenge related to this participatory project entailed gaining access to the local teacher activist community and building relationships with co-researchers to facilitate recruitment. Importantly, successful PAR projects depend upon the construction of sound relationships. As Grant et al. (2008) noted, "we consider relationships to be the foundation on which the success of PAR depends. Within relationships between researchers and community members, trust is the central challenge" (p. 591). In my case, establishing relationships with prospective teacher activist co-researchers was certainly possible, but far from easy or

straightforward. While my former roles of educator and teacher activist provided me with a helpful degree of insider status, my outsider status as a doctoral student (and aspiring academic) far removed from the K-12 setting created significant distance between me and the local teacher-activist community. Thus, my complex positionality created challenges. As Herr and Anderson (2015) observed:

each of us as researchers occupies multiple positions that intersect and may bring us into conflicting allegiances or alliances within our research sites. We may occupy positions where we are included as insiders while simultaneously, in some dimensions, we identify as outsiders. (p. 55)

In order to initiate this PAR project, I had to traverse this distance to access the activist community and begin forging relationships with prospective co-researchers.

Utilizing the degree of credibility my previous activist endeavors and position as a former educator afforded me, I marshalled my confidence and began the search for a “community gatekeeper,” or an individual who could provide me access to the larger teacher activist community. Lenette et al. (2019) asserted that such gatekeepers “acquire an important role in social research, as they hold power to allow or deny access to a particular community or institution...gatekeepers often serve as cultural mediators or ‘brokers’, vouching for academic researchers’ credibility, and consequently influencing recruitment” (p. 169). To locate such an individual, I performed internet research to identify some of the teacher activist leaders in my area. This process eventually led me to Lisa (note that all co-researcher names appearing in this article are pseudonyms), who was an ideal gatekeeper given her proximity and numerous connections to education advocacy organizations across the state; I hoped these connections would allow her to not only introduce me to other teacher activists, but to also potentially extend

the reach of the action resulting from the PAR project. After making contact with Lisa via email, we met several times over coffee and discussed the teacher activist landscape in North Carolina, my current doctoral research interests, and the PAR project I sought to initiate. Thankfully, she not only expressed interest in participating, but she also suggested additional activist-oriented educators I could potentially recruit.

Thus began a challenging recruitment period, or “entry process” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 114), that persisted for several months. I utilized snowball sampling during this time to identify various activism-inclined educators, sent barrages of recruitment emails, and sadly received a significant number of rejections. Teachers mostly stated in their responses that they were too busy to take on an additional commitment (which, as a former educator, I completely understood), but while it went unstated by teachers, I suspect my status as doctoral student also hindered my recruitment efforts. I say this because during my time in the local school system, there existed pervasive distrust from K-12 educators toward so-called “out-of-touch” individuals in “ivory-tower” academic positions. Now, with one foot in “the tower” myself, I believed I was taking steps out of it by seeking to engage in research *with* community members, but my status as a student and prospective academic likely impeded my progress.

To address this recruitment and credibility challenge, I leaned more heavily into my relationship with Lisa, who soon thereafter invited me to several activist-related events in the area. These events included the two trainings by the North Carolina Association of Educators’ (NCAE) racial and social justice caucus (see *Figure 1* below); a local media event held by teacher activists (see *Figure 2* below); and a political event supporting a pro-public education candidate. During these events, I finally experienced some recruitment success as I connected with several individuals who would go on to become co-researchers in this PAR project: James,

Ashley, Clyde, and Trish. Throughout this entry process, I also maintained my own activist commitments by writing and publishing an op-ed in support of the May 1st march in Raleigh (see *Figure 3* below), North Carolina, a gathering of thousands of educators to support public education. I included quotes from several local teacher activists in this opinion piece, thus amplifying their voices while also establishing greater credibility and trust within the activist community. This action exemplified Herr and Anderson's (2015) point that "even a doctoral student entering the process after formal entry has been negotiated must establish credibility with participants to work effectively as a participatory researcher" (p. 115). The publication of this piece was significant in that it demonstrated to local activists that my commitments were strong and similar to their own. Importantly, I also learned during this time of the existence of an online teacher activist community. Soon thereafter, I created a Facebook account (perhaps shockingly so, I had no presence on Facebook prior to this experience) and was allowed to join several, private teacher-activist related groups (see *Figure 4* below for an example). I hoped my inclusion and interaction in these online spaces would further heighten my credibility while also strengthening my burgeoning offline relationships with activist teacher co-researchers.



Figure 1. Me (black shirt in second row) with other teacher activists at a local education advocacy training event (Jewell, 2019).

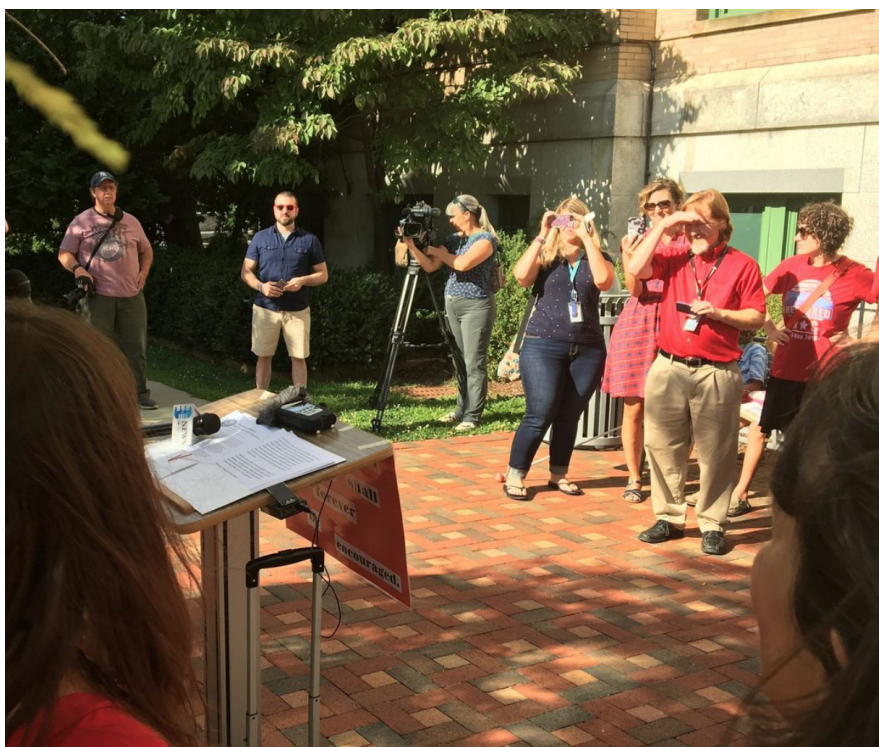


Figure 2. Attending a teacher-activist led media event in Asheville, North Carolina (WLOS Staff, 2018).

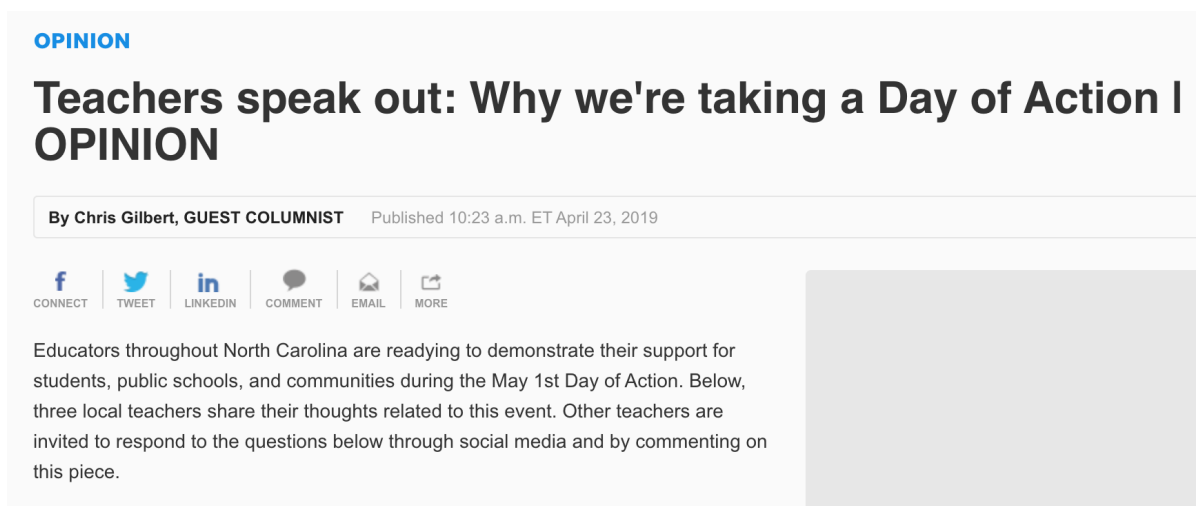


Figure 3. A screenshot from my piece that honored my activist commitments while heightening credibility with the local teacher activist community (Gilbert, 2019).

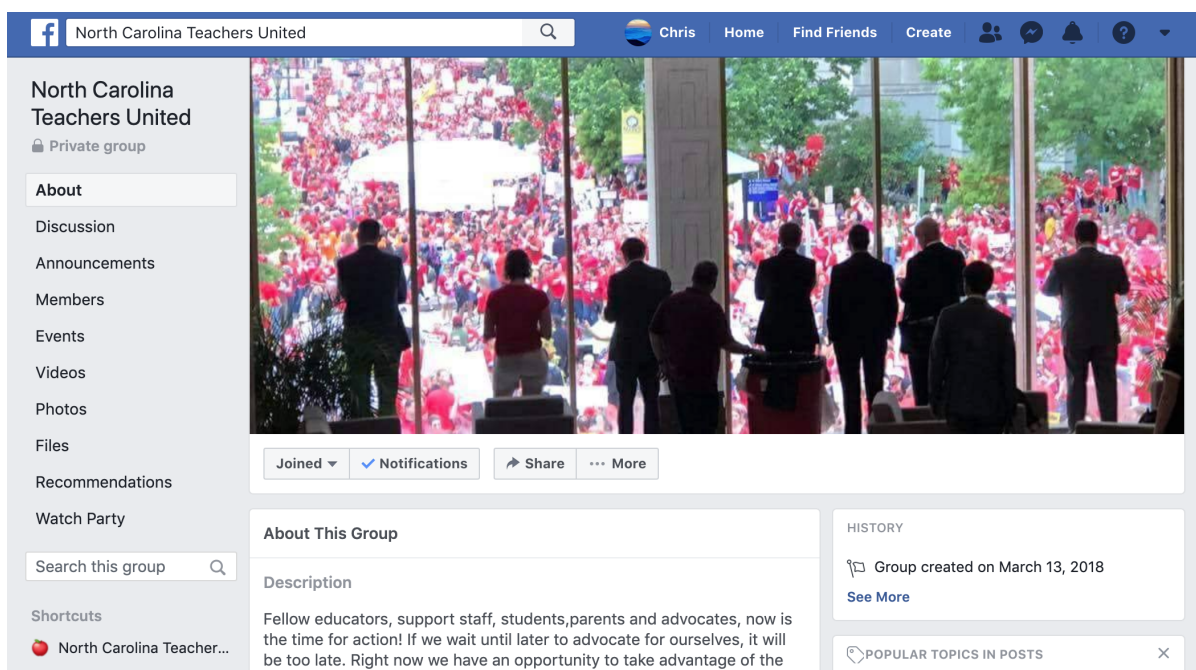


Figure 4. The North Carolina Teachers United Facebook group.

Overall, during this project’s “entry process” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 114), I maintained a focus “on building relationships and getting to know community partners...[a process that] builds trust and provides transparency” (Grant et al., 2008, p. 592). Through the efforts described above, relationships were indeed forged and co-researchers were successfully

recruited, but this process of gaining access to the teacher activist community, establishing relationships, and garnering trust, was incredibly stressful. Early in the process, when rejections from prospective co-researchers piled up, I sometimes wondered if this research project would even occur. Further, even as I began to connect with individuals and build the important relationships that would make this PAR project possible, I still encountered challenges in the form of maintaining continual contact with people and creating time to attend activist events, all while honoring additional personal and academic obligations. To put it simply, this process was at times both mentally and emotionally taxing, and I closely identify with Foster's (2016) observation that participatory research takes "a great deal of time and energy to work through, and extensive emotional labour in terms of forging and maintaining meaningful relationships" (p. 68). Therefore, many challenges occurred before the PAR process itself even began. Challenges and tensions also emerged during the course of the research process, and it is to these that I now turn.

Reflection Versus Action and Lessons Learned

In participatory projects, while consensus among co-researchers is desired, achieving it is often rare. Despite their mutual interest in a common problem or issue, co-researchers often converge with different, and sometimes opposing, goals, personality types, life experiences, commitments, and expectations for said projects (Grant et al., 2008; Lenette et al., 2019; Pant, 2014). This was undoubtedly true for the research project under focus, as our group was demarcated by opposing preferences for action or reflection, a situation that produced tension within the group.

When I reflect on our PAR group, I perceive it as consisting of two factions, or "camps," within the larger whole. Importantly, this is not to say that the group as a whole did not function

cohesively and effectively; it certainly did, but co-researchers were clearly pulled toward either reflection or action. One camp consisted of Trish, Clyde, Ashley, and me. While we all had an appreciation for both reflection and action, we leaned in more of a reflective direction and toward PAR's "learning process that provides knowledge about the social injustices negatively influencing life circumstances" (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). For me, this attraction to learning and theory stemmed primarily from two sources. First, the NCAE "activist" trainings mentioned above that I attended prior to the initiation of the PAR project made it apparent that there was (and still is) a disproportionate focus on action in the teacher activist community and a subsequent dearth of reflective, or learning-driven spaces, for teacher activists in North Carolina. Given this dominant focus on action, the activists who joined the PAR group did not require an impetus to initiate action, as they would likely participate in conventional forms of activism whether in the group or not. Therefore, I viewed the PAR project as being a supplemental approach, or even a corrective one, to the hyper-focus on action held by many teacher activists in the state. Second, my desire for reflection was informed by my positionality as a doctoral student and my related theoretical embrace of popular education and Freire's (1970/2016) concept of praxis (the cycle of action *and* reflection directed at the world). Thus, I saw the space created by our PAR project as being distinct from the conventional activist spaces co-researchers already inhabited, and I believed the reflective dimensions of the project addressed an important teacher activist need. This view, however, was not shared equally by all co-researchers.

The other camp in the group consisted of Lisa and James. Both of these activists seemingly exemplified the concept of "activism," or the belief that activism "emphasizes practicality, achievability, and implementation over all else" (Featherstone, Henwood, & Parenti, 2004, p. 4). Their overwhelming desire for action was present throughout the entire PAR

project, but it manifested most explicitly in the moments following our first meeting. As Trish, Clyde, and Ashley filed out of the room, I engaged with Lisa and James. Lisa, somewhat frustrated, stated that she was “craving action,” and expressed her desire to move toward the implementation of our group’s action sooner rather than later. Her comment jolted me not only because this was our *first* meeting, but also because Lisa played the most pivotal role of all co-researchers and was most familiar with the ideas behind it. As mentioned previously, she was the first person I had contacted about the project, and she served as the “community gatekeeper” (Lenette et al., 2019, p. 169) that had provided me access to the local teacher activist community. I had spent extensive time talking with her about the project’s popular-education related theoretical influences: the works of Freire (1970/2016), Horton (1998), and individuals at the Highlander Research and Education Center today (Williams & Mullett, 2016). Given my relationship with her and her extensive knowledge regarding the theoretical framework and initial aims of this project, I was taken aback by her comments. Additionally, given her role of gatekeeper, I also worried that if she became dissatisfied with the project, other co-researchers could follow her lead.

James weighed in after Lisa finished speaking and expressed a similar desire for a greater focus on action. Feeling somewhat defensive and with palpable irritation in my voice, I shot back, “I will not let this project become a play-diagramming session.” Through the use of this sports metaphor, I sought to emphasize that this PAR project would not devolve into a strategy-planning session. After this exchange, I left the meeting feeling frustrated, and I wrote in my research journal soon thereafter:

Some co-researchers seem to view activism as primarily about “the doing.” I think the

other three co-researchers [Clyde, Ashley, and Trish] are more open to the learning side of things, and they understand there are broader ideas (and that taking time to engage with these ideas matters) driving/producing reality. I made the point to Lisa and James that I'm not interested in having our meetings become play-diagramming sessions. Other teacher organizers in the state have that approach locked down; I would like to bring something different to the table. All that said, I have to ultimately honor my co-researchers' preferences, and if what we are doing is not working for them, we need to change it. (research journal, August 13, 2019)

After reflecting on and processing these emotions, I communicated with other group members and several changes were subsequently made to the project to provide a more action-oriented focus. For instance, more time was dedicated to exploring practical activist tools (the infographic, the op-ed, etc.), and action planning occurred during the first half of meetings as opposed to the second half (the logic being that if we ran out of time, action-planning would not be compromised). I had mixed feelings about these changes, but as noted in the research journal excerpt above, this *participatory* project had to be shaped by co-researchers' preferences; while I had initiated the PAR experience and given it a specific theoretical framing, it did not belong to me alone. This understanding reflected the project's high degree of "democratic validity" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 69), or what Herr and Anderson (2015) referred to as "the extent to which research is done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation....how are multiple perspectives and material interests taken into account in the study?" (p. 69). As co-researchers in a study with a high degree of democratic validity, James' and Lisa's perspectives and interests had to be acknowledged, thus leading to our group's

increased orientation toward action. However, this leaning further into action, especially early on in the process, did not please everyone. Trish, for instance, stated:

I think all of us that were in the group are all attempting to do stuff [action outside the group] on our own. I don't think that would have stopped. You know what I mean? I think it was a nice time for reflection and that stuff. I enjoyed that part...I think right when we started delving into the meat of it all, I think that's when people wanted to be like, "Okay, well, let's do something about it," before we had gone in a little deeper.

As evident in this interview excerpt, Trish was drawn more to the reflective and research-related aspects of the PAR experience, and she believed that by leaning further into action, we somewhat limited the depth of our research and learning. James, however, felt this shift toward action was absolutely essential:

I think to echo Lisa's earlier criticism, I think most, if not all of us, had pretty well plowed all that [theoretical] ground before we got to the group....We want to do something right now. Especially me, and probably Lisa too, I've been talking about this shit for 20 years. I just want to plot strategy and go kick some ass, and that's it. The theoretical stuff, I'm done with.

Interestingly, this comment perfectly embodies Ollis' (2015) statement that, "the urgency of activism and the desire for significant social change often prevents a critical space for reflection to occur" (p. 518). I certainly acknowledge James' perspective, but it puzzles me given that the reflective, learning-related dimensions of the project were communicated to all co-researchers at the project's outset. It should be noted that elsewhere in his interview, James did acknowledge positive aspects of the PAR experience, but I suspect this would have been an ideal project for

him if it had consisted entirely of planning and implementing action; the same could likely be said of Lisa, although she also acknowledged beneficial aspects of the experience.

Before concluding this section, it is important to note that the above discussion should not be read as a criticism of either of these co-researchers, as they are both exceedingly thoughtful people who care immensely about public education and view their activist efforts as essential. Further, they made invaluable contributions to this project. They simply brought overwhelmingly strong desires for action that contrasted the greater methodological and theoretical need to create a balanced space for action *and* reflection. In sum, tension certainly existed in this project between competing needs for reflection and action, and balancing these needs was at times challenging.

In future iterations of a similar PAR project involving activists, it would be wise to make co-researchers' aims and preferences more visible early in the process. Grant et al. (2008) emphasized the importance in PAR of establishing "open and honest communication, begun...with open discussion of mutual expectations. Regular team meetings to check in on process and progress also assist in...keeping dialogue open" (p. 591). While honest and open communication certainly occurred during the research process, perhaps such communication should have occurred more during the recruitment phase of the project. Investing more time in making co-researcher expectations visible before the project's beginning likely would have decreased some of the resulting tension. Also, while our group engaged in *collective* dialogue throughout the project, perhaps individual co-researcher expectations should have been foregrounded more during these interactions. Our conversations often included broad reflection on our group's process, but perhaps each co-researcher should have been given more

opportunities to share how the process was, or was not, aligned with his or her unique expectations for the PAR project.

An additional move to make in a similar PAR project involving action-oriented activists would be to better illustrate the practical value of learning and theory at the project's outset. Scholars such as Picower (2012, 2013) have discussed the importance of theory for activist educators. For instance, Picower (2013) argued, "Prior research indicates that the development of a broader political analysis of education seems to be a prerequisite for becoming involved with social justice issues within the field" (p. 171). Thus, for teacher activists, theory/learning/reflection have an important, practical role in activism in that conceptual understandings likely enable forms of social and political engagement. In a future PAR project with teacher activists, I would likely do more to stress this point, perhaps by illustrating how learning can reveal new activist "targets"; as Picower (2013) noted in the title of her article, "You can't change what you don't see" (p. 170). For veteran teacher activists, such as those in this project, the challenge is to also emphasize that such a critical awareness is *always* under development; knowledge is never "complete" or extinguished because its corresponding social and political reality is constantly changing. Therefore, even veteran activists' political engagement can be deepened as their already-refined theoretical apprehension of reality continues to grow. In sum, along with establishing additional spaces to better make visible and navigate co-researcher expectations, I believe it would also be wise to more heavily emphasize the practical value of theory and reflection. These are important "lessons learned" that could potentially mitigate some of the above discussed challenges in a future PAR project featuring action-focused, teacher activists.

Tensions Regarding Epistemology and Facilitation Style

An additional challenge was the epistemological tension present in this PAR project. Each co-researcher brought his or her own epistemological orientations and related expectations to our work together, and these sometimes clashed. As the initiator and facilitator of this project, my views regarding knowledge production, and the forms of knowledge that matter most, loomed large. My epistemological stance is constructivist and heavily influenced by Freire's (1970/2016) work, particularly his distinction between "banking education" and dialogical, "problem posing" education. The former educational approach positions human beings as empty vessels to be filled, and knowledge is characterized as a commodity to be deposited in them; while the latter approach, which I endorse, frames human beings as already possessing valuable forms of knowledge and of being capable of constructing new knowledge through dialogue. Importantly, these views are supplemented by similar theories espoused by individuals at Highlander, particularly Horton (1998) and the current education coordinator and librarian, Susan Williams. Before initiating the PAR experience, and to learn more about popular education and participatory research, I traveled to Highlander to meet Susan Williams. During this visit, Susan advised me to avoid lecturing since it devalues experiential knowledge and decreases engagement (see *Figure 5*). She emphasized that teachers *are* experts, and I should focus on drawing out their expertise. While I already believed these things to be true, hearing them from Susan reinforced these ideas, and her words were fresh in my mind as I began work with co-researchers.



Figure 5. A picture taken during my visit to Highlander, a space structured to promote communal learning, democratic participation, and a focus on experiential knowledge.

Drawing on these theories, and wearing my epistemological positions on my sleeve, my facilitation in our PAR group was focused on drawing out co-researchers' personal experiences and experiential knowledge, and thus I often leaned away from the readings under focus. This approach clashed with Lisa, as her epistemological stance was opposite of mine. Specifically, Lisa desired a PAR experience less focused on experiential knowledge and more on our selected readings. After our first meeting, she stated: "I would like to make the discussion more focused and academic.... I would like to improve the discussion by having a text focus and a guided protocol for discussing actual quotes from the text." In her interview after the conclusion of the project, she echoed this sentiment, stating:

I did crave more discussion of those readings. Now, I know we had lots of discussion, but I really do prefer discussion that is rooted in text in which the participants are referring back to quotes from the text. That is how I run my own classroom as much as possible, and I would have liked a bit more of that after having invested so much time in the readings themselves.

Lisa's preferences certainly differed from my own. While she and I both appreciated the use of discussion as a method, we placed different sources of knowledge at its center. From my perspective, as a PAR project anchored in popular education, it was essential that experiential knowledge be foregrounded through discussion. This method, as I perceived it, should be used in PAR to produce knowledge by inviting co-researchers to read both word and world (Freire, 1985, 1970/2016). In our project, texts certainly served as forms of data to be analyzed, but I believed this analysis should always occur in relation to the experiences of, and associated knowledge held by, co-researchers. This was inspired by Freire's (1990) statement that, "The question is not to impose readings...but how to put together critically, dialectically, the reading of the texts in relationship to the contexts, and the understanding of the contexts that can be helped through the reading of texts" (p. 158). Importantly, I did adjust my facilitation to honor some of what Lisa suggested (we focused on the texts a bit more than I initially thought we would), but I never allowed the project to lean too far in the direction she sought. Thus, an epistemological tension existed between us, which extended to James as well.

As previously mentioned, James maintained a significant focus on action, which I believe encouraged his tendency to primarily view knowledge through a pragmatic lens; simply put, knowledge was something to be acquired and then used. This is evidenced in part by the interview excerpt in the previous section in which he characterized theory as "ground" to be "plowed," and as something he "is done with." Thus, like Lisa, our epistemological orientations clashed. This difference was made apparent not only by our contrasting views of knowledge, but also by how we perceived the act of facilitation. As a facilitator, I often let discussions flow as I believed this allowed for optimal knowledge construction and participation. Further, I did not

hesitate to allow pre-planned activities to go unused if useful, analytical dialogue instead took up the allotted time. James, however, did not share my affinity for this approach:

I would say that you need a slightly more structured schedule. “I’ve given this 10 minutes, I’ve given this thing 15 minutes, and I’m moving on”....If I were running the meeting instead of you running the meeting, I would be pushing deadlines to topics. For one, to try to cover more topics, and secondly, I think sometimes the compression of that sort can force some creativity to the surface where open endedness might not do that.

James’ desire here to “cover more topics” is significant in that it suggests a view of knowledge as being fixed, and perhaps something to be deposited in others; there is certainly a connection to Freire’s (1970/2016) concept of banking education here. If this is how one perceives knowledge, then it seems logical to keep a close eye on time since the priority is to communicate a fixed body of knowledge to others. Again, though, this contrasts my epistemological position that knowledge is something to be *constructed* (as opposed to deposited) via social interaction; managing time is only important insofar as it allows every person a chance to fully engage with others and “the content.” Thus, the epistemological differences discussed above served as a source of tension in our PAR project. Before moving forward, it should be noted that while discussing the differing views above, I do not seek to position my epistemological orientation, or facilitation style, as the “correct” one. I view James’ and Lisa’s perspectives as both valid and valuable, and I appreciate their openness in sharing them. Their perspectives also served as an essential counterbalance to my own, as they brought our selected texts more firmly into view, and they introduced a sense of urgency that encouraged our forward momentum.

Challenges and Limitations Related to Action

Two additional methodological challenges (one of which also serves as a limitation) are related to the action that emerged from this PAR project. As discussed at the beginning of this article, the action co-researchers initiated, that of counter-hegemonic text creation, served as a form of cultural activism (Verson, 2007). I believe there was tremendous value in this action, as it allowed teachers to directly confront several, troubling education-related myths. However, I also battle a faint, but persistent, internal voice that expresses doubts regarding its larger significance, and that asks: *did we do enough?* This voice suggests that our project *should have* resulted in a protest, march, the removal of a politician from office, or some other large, conventional activist outcome. I knowingly disagree with this idea, but a sense of nagging doubt remains. Grant et al. (2008) explained that “there is often confusion about what constitutes change for PAR projects. Is comprehensive social change the only true form of change in PAR?” (p. 596). The doubting, internal voice would answer “yes,” but I know this to be false. While I suspect it would have been invigorating to accomplish a large-scale form of activism and witness widespread social change, such an action was unlikely to emerge from a group of six people engaged in a dissertation-related PAR project. As Grant et al. (2008) explained, “The reality is that change, and thus, PAR, is often a slow process...in social change work, it is important to achieve ‘small wins’ rather than expecting large-scale change to occur dramatically” (pp. 597-598). Thus, I tell myself this project’s action ultimately represents a “small win” that could still support the actualization of larger social and political change.

Along with the challenge of managing doubts regarding the scale and significance of the action co-researchers initiated, I am also confronted by an inability to explore the impact, if any, this action had on recipients. While the “participatory impact” (Banks et al., 2017) of this

project was apparent and thoroughly explored in another article, the impact of the group's actions on our "targets" (e.g., teachers outside the group) remains unknown. Of relevance again is Herr and Anderson's (2015) action research validity criteria, particularly the criterion related to actions resulting from PAR. Herr and Anderson (2015) argued that one goal of action research is the "achievement of action-oriented outcomes," which they referred to as "outcome validity" (p. 67). Elaborating on this concept, they stated:

One test of the validity of action research is the extent to which actions occur, which leads to a resolution of the problem that led to the study...Thus, outcome validity is synonymous with the 'successful' outcome of the research project. (Herr & Anderson, 2015, pp. 67-68)

Assessing our PAR project using this criterion produces a mixed assessment. In one sense, the research project was "valid," or successful, in that we *did* successfully initiate an action: the composition and dissemination of counter-hegemonic texts. However, whether this action led to the resolution of the problem at the heart of the study (e.g., the internalization of troubling educational myths by teachers) is presently unknown. Therefore, this indicates a limitation of this study, namely that the data fail to reveal if, and how, the texts co-researchers crafted and distributed to teachers actually affected them. Further complicating this issue of exploring external impact, as a quieter form of activism directed toward the "narrative space" (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010, p. 21) of beliefs and assumptions, our action's impact defies easy assessment. That said, I take some comfort in knowing that, as Lenette et al. (2019) stated, this is the case for much participatory research:

there has been increased awareness of the need for applied research to go beyond

being predominantly a tool for knowledge collection, and to make a difference to communities...[however,] common impact metrics privilege the tangible, quantifiable and global, rather than the subjective, qualitative and local changes that may be more subtle, complex and difficult to capture and articulate. (p. 171)

Consequently, even if our group managed to successfully explore the impact of counter-hegemonic texts on teachers who received them, these findings may still not register with interested parties (e.g., journal reviewers, tenure committee members, community members, etc.) as being meaningful, or “enough.” Regardless, the lack of data relating to this form of impact is still a limitation that merits acknowledgement, and one that likely would have benefitted from additional research.

Conclusion: Looking Back on Challenges

In this chapter, I discussed multiple challenges and tensions this participatory research project entailed. These included challenges that manifested during this project’s build-up and recruitment phase; the tension related to reflection and action that existed within the group; the challenge of navigating different epistemological positions and related expectations for facilitation; and my own internal conflict and doubt regarding the scale and significance of this project’s concluding action, which also involved a related methodological limitation. As I bring this chapter to a close, it is worth noting that one of the primary threads running throughout the above discussion is the significant degree of emotional labor involved in participatory action research. As a form of research that brings different individuals together in an effort to generate knowledge and action to produce change, PAR is an ambitious and highly involved methodological approach that is emotionally challenging. However, it is also intensely rewarding. While I have attempted to be as transparent as possible in this account, I wish to

reiterate once more that this account of challenges and differences among co-researchers should in no way be taken as criticism of these individuals. I would gladly engage in another PAR project with them, and I hope, and suspect, they would say the same. It is also important to note here that by revealing what is often “[b]rushed under the carpet” (Lenette et al., 2019, p. 161) in accounts of participatory research, I do not seek to negate my previous, more positive accounts, of this project. Rather, I hope that when taken together, these accounts provide a fuller picture of a participatory project that was rewarding for all involved, but one that also presented challenges common to this methodological approach. I also hope this account is of use for other researchers who find themselves engaged in such important and rewarding work alongside teacher activists.

Deep Reflection: Gazing Back on the Path - Reflecting on Practical and Theoretical Implications

The preceding sections of this dissertation featured multiple analyses of a participatory action research (PAR) project involving the author and five teacher activists. A central goal of this dissertation was to invite the reader to consider this PAR project from various angles and perspectives, as this document featured chapters written in varied styles for different audiences. These chapters included a piece written for K-12 classroom teachers, and two article manuscripts directed primarily toward academic researchers and students. Ultimately, this dissertation has offered its own action research journey for the reader's participation, or an action/reflection "spiral," as each chapter providing analysis (the *action* of this dissertation) was immediately followed by a reflective bridge (the *reflection* of this dissertation) before offering analysis yet again. The present chapter, the final reflective section, marks the close of this dissertation and the end of this action-reflection cycle.

To look back one final time at the path woven through this dissertation, the PAR project under focus was first introduced in Chapter One, where I provided some brief context and previewed the analysis to come. Following this, Chapter Two featured a manuscript written for publication in *Rethinking Schools*, a practitioner-oriented journal. In this piece, I provided a narrative of this project from origin to conclusion while framing it as a form of professional development for teacher activists. Pivoting from the style and aims of Chapter Two, Chapter Three featured a manuscript written for the more academic-oriented, peer-reviewed journal *Research for All*. In this piece, I provided an account of our group's "walk" through PAR and the popular education spiral before initiating an analysis of this process's "participatory impact" (Banks et al., 2017) on co-researchers. Due to space limitations and differing aims, Chapter

Three omitted the challenges and tensions inherent in this research project, and thus the methodologically-focused Chapter Four was dedicated entirely to exploring these difficulties. Between these chapters, brief reflective bridges were included to provide justification for writing decisions, and to provide the reader with a better sense of my research goals, intended audiences, and present attempts to navigate the publication process.

In the pages that follow, I provide closure to this dissertation by exploring a number of implications, or central takeaways, related to this PAR project and the associated analysis of previous chapters. Importantly, I divide these takeaways into two categories: practical implications and theoretical implications. I was inspired to do so by Herr and Anderson's (2015) statement that action researchers carry "the double burden," or "the concern with both action (improvement of practice, social change, and the like) and research (creating valid knowledge about [or in relation to] social practice)" (p. 5). In recognition of this double burden, I reflect below on both practice-related and theory-related implications of this project. To begin, I discuss several implications related to practice: teacher activists may benefit from involvement in collaborative spaces of learning and action; teacher activists possess valuable forms of knowledge that should be validated and shared amongst the teaching corps; and those who seek to initiate PAR may find it useful to vary how it is framed in order to effectively appeal to different audiences and stakeholders. I also include in this section some brief discussion regarding who could potentially implement similar projects, and where they could occur. Following this discussion, I touch on three theoretical implications: teacher activists engage in important forms of public pedagogy; the teacher activist identity is more expansive than commonly perceived, as teacher activists may also serve as cultural activists; and PAR may offer

teacher activists a space in which they can try out unconventional activist identities and practices.

Practical Implications

As discussed in previous chapters, this research endeavor, like most PAR projects, included both beneficial and challenging aspects. In Chapters Two and Three, I highlighted beneficial aspects of this project, or those participatory processes and experiences that furthered co-researchers' intellectual, emotional, social, and practical growth as teacher activists. Conversely, Chapter Four offered a view of the "rough terrain" of this PAR experience by highlighting its more challenging, tension-producing aspects. As mentioned previously, I believed it essential to present a fully encompassing picture of this PAR project, with both positive and negative dimensions in clear view. However, when looking back over the data, and the many positive participatory impacts (Banks et al., 2017) of this project, it becomes apparent that this was largely a positive experience for co-researchers. While James and Lisa certainly expressed valid complaints about the project and its facilitator, they maintained their participation and identified aspects of the experience they believed to be worthwhile. Clyde, Trish, and Ashley were exceedingly positive about the project, and their interviews showed them to be largely satisfied co-researchers. As for me, despite the challenges I confronted during this project, I recognize the growth that resulted from my involvement: I learned much about the process of PAR and popular education; broadened my knowledge of the educational issues at the heart of our research; and I made valuable connections with local teacher activists. Given the mostly positive experiences of those involved in this project, the first practical implication is that *teacher activists may benefit from involvement in collaborative spaces of learning and action.*

Importantly, I make the above statement with careful qualification, as PAR echoes qualitative research in that it strives for transferability instead of generalizability (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Consequently, I cannot definitively state that findings indicate that all, or even most, teacher activists *will* benefit from similar PAR projects. Instead, I can only assert that the positive experiences of co-researchers in this project suggest that teacher activists in similar situations *may* also find the process of “walking the spiral” to be a worthwhile, empowering experience. In order to make a more definitive statement, additional research is required. Ultimately, though, the burden falls on readers to decide if such an experience could potentially be worth their time and energy.

Regardless of how readers perceive this experience, I suspect there may be an important role for PAR to play in that it may provide teacher activists with an empowering form of professional development (PD). As individuals who manage activist-related responsibilities on top of the already-demanding job of teaching, educator activists may benefit from supportive PD that allows them to build relationships while honing activist-related knowledge and practice. Importantly, and as Chapter Two hopefully made clear, such PD should privilege teacher activists’ experiential knowledge; this is crucial not only because other activists benefit from this knowledge, but also because educators should be positioned as the knowledgeable professionals they are. Sadly, teachers “are increasingly positioned as passive subjects in both their development and teaching” (Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015, p. 9), and their knowledge often remains subjugated and delegitimized by those in positions of power (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Given this problem and the corresponding need to contest it, the second practical implication is that *teacher activists possess valuable forms of knowledge that should be validated and shared amongst the teaching corps*. Importantly, co-researchers appreciated this dimension

of the PAR experience while contrasting it with how their experience and knowledge are typically ignored. For instance, Ashley commented: “What jumps out to me is that we are trying to tap into people's experience and listen to that.” Clyde concurred: “You kind of honored our knowledge...where that is not a thing that happens very often where we work.” These are powerful statements that underscore the importance of foregrounding experiential knowledge, and they also testify to the associated power of popular education and PAR to do so (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998; Kindon et al., 2007; Williams & Mullett, 2016).

It is important to note that teacher-led spaces that allow for this foregrounding of knowledge and experience can go by various names, as I framed this project as a form of “critical professional development” (Kohli et al., 2015), a participatory action research project, a walk along the popular education spiral, and an inquiry-to-action group (ItAG). As evidenced by this dissertation, I have used these various titles to appeal to different audiences. For example, in Chapter Two I characterized this project as a form of PD in order to appeal to an audience of teachers and administrators; and in Chapter Three, I framed the project as PAR and popular education to better communicate with academic and community researchers. Significantly, this “code-switching” was used not only to strategically convey ideas *about* the project to particular audiences, but to also enable its existence in the first place.

For instance, when I first initiated communication with education coordinators at WRESA in an attempt to secure a meeting location for our group, I framed this project as a form of activist PD. When communicating with teacher activists, I emphasized that this experience would unfold in an ItAG, an acronym easily explained while still sounding somewhat novel and interesting for teachers. I believe that by leaning into this title, and somewhat away from “professional development” (this has a negative connotation for many teachers) and

“participatory action research” (this sounds too “academic” and even elitist for teachers), I was able to gain traction with teacher activists. Importantly, for teacher activists interested in establishing similar participatory spaces, specific labels/titles are needed to strategically position and frame such spaces to suit the needs and preferences of different stakeholders. Therefore, the third practical implication is that *those who seek to initiate PAR may find it useful to vary how it is framed in order to effectively appeal to different audiences and stakeholders*. Framing these projects appropriately, and “selling them” effectively to relevant stakeholders (e.g., principals, superintendents, other teachers, etc.) is essential if such projects are to be initiated and co-researchers recruited.

In terms of where such projects could manifest, and who could create them, there are several possibilities. Regarding setting, I suggest an outside-of-school location, one far removed from the prying eyes of administrators and even other teachers who may not view activism favorably. As demonstrated by our project, these spaces can also manifest online. Whether offline, online, or some combination of both, such a space should be accessible, and beyond anything else, ensure that co-researchers can communicate effectively and feel comfortable. In terms of who could initiate such a project, as indicated by the audiences of Chapters Two and Three, I believe teachers, academic researchers, and even graduate students certainly have the potential to do so. These individuals could do so independently, or they might initiate projects with the assistance of colleagues within district offices, teachers’ unions, education advocacy organizations, or teacher activist groups (TAGs). Teachers in some states (mostly those of a more progressive nature) are fortunate enough to have both unions and TAGs, and inquiry-to-action groups are sometimes part of their existing offerings (Niesz, 2018). In North Carolina, such radical organizations do not presently exist (given my experiences and observations, I do

not believe NCAE is interested in promoting participatory, learning-driven, activist spaces), so it is largely up to teachers and other engaged individuals at the grassroots level to initiate such projects from the bottom up.

Ultimately, I believe it falls on all of the individuals mentioned above, and others, to create structures and conditions that foster and sustain educator activism. Veteran teacher activists, such as my brilliant and dedicated co-researchers, undoubtedly still have an important role to play in ongoing education-related struggles, but these individuals will eventually look toward retirement. Their unavoidable exit from the activist landscape underscores the importance of bringing such individuals into dialogical, participatory spaces in which they can share their valuable knowledge and skills with others, particularly those who have significant roles to play but who currently sit on the sidelines: the academics who find themselves ensconced in “the ivory tower”; the school administrators who endorse political neutrality; and the classroom teachers who fail to perceive activism as a necessary professional responsibility. All of these individuals hold a responsibility to create and protect radical spaces in which they, alongside others, can engage in the essential work of developing activist-related dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Such spaces, though, likely will not materialize if the political nature of education goes unrecognized.

The research featured in this dissertation suggests that in order to encourage such stakeholders to become more politically engaged, we may first have to attend more closely to the hegemonic beliefs these stakeholders hold, particularly those ideas that inhibit political engagement. To make visible, for example, the flawed belief that education is *not* political is to allow for the revision of this belief and the possible development of an activist disposition. As my perceptive co-researcher Lisa put it, “I think ‘making the invisible visible’ is critical to

becoming an activist....The idea that education is political is my siren song at this point and I believe I will rely on it to convince others from here on out.” This statement points to the significance of consciousness-raising, forms of political education, and the usefulness of reflective, learning-driven spaces for radicalizing others and bringing them into the activist fold. PAR provides one practical avenue for creating such a space, but others are needed as well. A political view of education brings other modes of developing political consciousness into view, including those located in the field of teacher education. Could coursework, for example, be modified to better encourage education students to develop critical consciousness? In what ways? Similar questions could be asked of educational leadership programs, specifically those that prepare principals: in what ways could these individuals be better encouraged to apprehend the political nature of education and thus support the development of teacher activists in their buildings? Finally, there are related questions centered on the politically engaged role academic researchers must play in the field of education: how can forms of critically-engaged research be more forcefully promoted in the scholarly community? In what ways can researchers be incentivized to serve as activists alongside K-12 educators involved in political, economic, and social struggles? These are all practical questions associated with, and prompted by, the research discussed throughout this dissertation, and they merit additional investigation.

Theoretical Implications

As mentioned in Chapter Three, our PAR group’s goal of “making the invisible visible,” or of exposing and challenging internalized hegemonic myths through the construction of counter-hegemonic texts (infographics and postcards), revealed an undertheorized dimension of teacher activism. That is, it revealed a form of “cultural activism” (Verson, 2007), or action explicitly directed at the intangible “narrative space” (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010) of myths,

assumptions, and values. Importantly, Giroux's (2004) culturally-focused, theoretical work provides additional depth to this analysis, particularly his discussion of pedagogy. Giroux (2004) offered an expanded definition of pedagogy that contrasts the common, limited view of pedagogy as something consisting solely of in-school educational practices:

Pedagogy is not simply about the social construction of knowledge, values, and experiences; it is also a performative practice embodied in the lived interactions among *educators, audiences, texts*, and institutional formations. Pedagogy, at its best, implies that learning takes place across a spectrum of social practices and settings....pedagogy points to the multiplicity of sites in which education takes place. (p. 61, emphasis added)

Here, Giroux (2004) broadens the definition of “pedagogy” by framing it as a performative educational practice that occurs in a multitude of settings that include various audiences. Giroux (2004) goes on to refer to this form of pedagogy as “public pedagogy” (p. 62), thus reinforcing the idea that pedagogical practices also occur in spaces outside formal educational settings.

When considering this theoretical content alongside the PAR project under focus and the associated actions taken by co-researchers, it becomes apparent that by creating and disseminating a number of counter-hegemonic texts to fellow educators, teacher activists engaged in a form of public pedagogy, or an educative practice that functioned at the level of culture, or the “circuit of power, ideologies, and values in which diverse images and sounds are produced and circulated” (Giroux, 2004, p. 59). The language bits and images featured on teacher-created infographics and postcards forcefully confronted readers/viewers with internalized myths (e.g., public education has failed) while bringing obscured, counter-hegemonic ideas (e.g., public education *has not* failed; social and economic policies have) into view. When circulated in physical and online spaces, these texts served as powerful educational,

or pedagogical, tools. Thus, the theoretical implication here is that *teacher activists engage in important forms of public pedagogy*.

Importantly, Giroux (2004) also argued that culture serves as “an educational site where identities are being continually transformed” (p. 60). By plugging into the “circuit” of culture via their creation and dissemination of counter-hegemonic texts, teacher activists stepped firmly into the role of “cultural activist,” thus taking up an identity that significantly contrasted the conventional teacher activist role of “fist-pumping call-and-response marchers with picket signs and union cards” (Laura & El-Amin, 2015, p. 2). The central theoretical implication here is that *the teacher activist identity is more expansive than commonly perceived, as teacher activists can also serve as cultural activists*. This idea disrupts the limited view of teacher activism held by many, and it suggests that *PAR may offer teacher activists a space in which they can try out unconventional activist identities and practices*, the final theoretical (and practical) implication. This space provides a powerful, and potentially transformational, educational experience for these individuals, and it reflects Freire’s (1990) idea that “[t]he more people participate in the process of their own education... the more the people participate in the development of their selves. The more the people become themselves, the better the democracy” (p. 145). In closing, while some of the above theoretical content was referenced, or at least alluded to, in Chapter Three, the work referenced above provides this discussion with further analytical depth and nuance.

Conclusion

In response to Herr and Anderson’s (2015) reference to the “double burden” action researchers carry, I attempted above to provide several practical and theoretical implications related to the PAR project explored in this dissertation. Speaking to these dual audiences,

practitioners interested in doing PAR and popular education, and theoreticians primarily interested in the epistemological dimensions of this project, has been a challenge I sought to address throughout this dissertation. Doing so is essential given the significance of the research and the corresponding need to communicate it to various readers who may benefit from it. While the theoretical content featured above and in other chapters is hopefully intriguing for readers, I admittedly care most about the practice-related implications of this work, hence the careful accounts I provided in Chapters Two and Three. As mentioned repeatedly throughout this dissertation, ongoing attacks by corporate and political actors on public education, educators, and vulnerable communities have made teacher activism essential, and the dedicated individuals who perform this activism should consider all tools and approaches at their disposal, including PAR. While I certainly hope the analysis in the preceding chapters provides a valuable contribution to the existing body of literature related to participatory research and teacher activism, my central hope is that the discussion I have provided actually enhances participatory methodological practice and activist work in some way. I look forward to seeing if and how it does while I seek additional opportunities to extend the reach of this important work and continue my journey along the spiral.

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Appendix A

Certificate of Participation

**Critical Professional Development for Teacher Activists**

attended the Aug. 12- Nov. 5th-, 2019, sessions
completing 20 contact
hours of training.

Dr. Janet L. Webster
Dr. Janet L. Webster, Director

April Spencer
April Spencer, Secondary Education Coordinator

Working together for the children of Western North Carolina

Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Information to Consider About this Research

Title of the Study: Critical Professional Development for Teacher Activism

Principal Investigator: Chris Gilbert (gilbert5682@gmail.com)

Department: Educational Leadership

Faculty Advisor: Beth Buchholz (buchholzba@appstate.edu)

Department: Reading Education and Special Education

- **Purpose of research:**

The purpose of this critical professional development experience is to involve participants in a participatory action research project designed to further their development as critically conscious, teacher activists. Participants will converge within an Inquiry to Action Group (ItAG) focused on an educational issue or policy they collectively select; in the ItAG, participants will engage in collaborative study and initiate forms of activism to impact the issue/policy under focus. While engaged in this process alongside participants, I will be exploring how participation in the group impacts the development of the teacher activist identity. This study will serve as my dissertation research.

- **Explanation of the procedures of the study:**

As a participant in this study, you will be performing research and action alongside fellow group members. You will be involved in the selection of texts to deepen our collective understanding of the educational issue/policy under focus, and you will engage in the analysis of these texts both during and between group meetings. Between meetings, this analysis will occur primarily through forum discussions on a secure website (only our group will be able to access it), which I will collect as data. Face-to-face meetings will be held at WRESA, located in Asheville, while online meetings will occur via Zoom, a video conferencing tool. Face-to-face meetings will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed, while online meetings will be recorded via screen capture software and then transcribed. There will likely be between 6-8 meetings (half online and half face-to-face), but this range is flexible. I will also perform an interview with you at some point during the project, which will be audio recorded and transcribed. Finally, our group will initiate some form of activism; the form this activism takes will be determined by the group and will likely occur toward the end of the study. This will be some sort of publicly-directed action (writing an editorial or article together, holding a press conference, meeting with a school board, creating an online resource, etc.).

- **Details of any foreseeable risks, benefits, and compensation:**

You will receive no financial compensation for your participation in this study, nor will I or my financial advisor. One benefit for you is the receipt of continuing education credits at the conclusion of this study. Given that this project has an activist component, there is some risk involved. To address this risk, I will securely store all forms of data collected (audio recordings, transcripts of meetings and interviews, etc.). Further, your name will not be included in transcripts, my dissertation, or any other documents, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, produced in relation to this study (I will use pseudonyms). Do note, however, that you may decide to make your identity known through the form of activism we engage in. This decision is entirely up to you, and you are under *no pressure* to reveal your identity.

- **Volunteer statement:**

Please note that your participation is voluntary and there is no penalty or loss of benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to discontinue participation at any point.

- **Questions:**

You may ask any question about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research, you should contact the Principal Investigator Chris Gilbert (gilbert5682@gmail.com), or the faculty advisor Beth Buchholz (buchholzba@appstate.edu). Additionally, you may contact the Appalachian Institutional Review Board Administrator at 828-262-2692, through email at irb@appstate.edu or at Appalachian State University, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, IRB Administrator, Boone, NC 28608.

- - - - -

Appalachian State University's Institutional Review Board has determined this study to be exempt from IRB oversight.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Please sign below to indicate that you voluntarily consent to participate in this study, and that you consent to the inclusion of your anonymized statements in any documents (published or otherwise) related to this study.

Participant Name (print) _____

Participant Signature _____

Date _____

Please select how you'd like to be identified in research publications and presentations:

_____ I request that a pseudonym (fake name) be used in connection with tapes, transcripts, photographs or publications resulting from my participation with this Inquiry to Action Group.

_____ I request that my real name be used in connection with tapes, transcripts, photographs or publications resulting from my participation with this Inquiry to Action Group.

Photography and Video Recording Authorization

With your permission, still pictures (photos) and/or video recordings taken during the study may be used in research presentations of the research findings. Please indicate whether or not you agree to having photos or videos used in research presentations by reviewing the authorization below and signing if you agree.

Authorization

I hereby release, discharge and agree to save harmless Appalachian State University, its successors, assigns, officers, employees or agents, any person(s) or corporation(s) for whom it might be acting, and any firm publishing and/or distributing any photograph or video footage produced as part of this research, in whole or in part, as a finished product, from and against any liability as a result of any distortion, blurring, alteration, visual or auditory illusion, or use in composite form, either intentionally or otherwise, that may occur or be produced in the recording, processing, reproduction, publication or distribution of any photograph, videotape, or interview, even should the same subject me to ridicule, scandal, reproach, scorn or indignity. I hereby agree that the photographs and video footage may be used under the conditions stated herein without blurring my identifying characteristics.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Appendix C

Confirmation of IRB exemption

To: William Gilbert
Educational Leadership
CAMPUS EMAIL

From: Robin Tyndall, IRB Administrator
Date: 7/04/2019
RE: Notice of IRB Exemption

STUDY #: 19-0386

STUDY TITLE: Critical Professional Development for Teacher Activists

Exemption Category: 1. Educational setting, 2. Survey, interview, public observation

This study involves minimal risk and meets the exemption category cited above. In accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b) and University policy and procedures, the research activities described in the study materials are exempt from further IRB review.

Appendix D

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Potential benefits

- 1.) If such an example exists for you, can you walk me through a particular reading, interaction, or activity we engaged in that you believe was beneficial for you?
- 2.) Zooming out, in what ways, if any, do you believe your participation in this professional development experience was beneficial for you?
 - a.) From an emotional standpoint...
 - b.) From an intellectual standpoint...
 - c.) From a practical standpoint...
- 3.) Which aspects of this professional development experience, if any, do you believe were **not** beneficial for you, and in what ways?

Theories and concepts

- 4.) When you think back on the theories and concepts we discussed during our meetings, do any stick out in your mind as being particularly relevant or useful? If so, why? If not, why not?
 - a.) Which theories and concepts, if any, would you say were **not** relevant or useful? Why?

Learning from others

- 5.) What, if anything, do you feel you learned from your fellow participants during the course of this professional development experience?

Activist identity/actions associated with activism

- 6.) As someone who identifies as a teacher activist, in what ways **if any** did your participation in this professional development experience change the degree to which you identify with this role/identity?
- 7.) What are your overall thoughts on our group's focus on, and goal of, "making the invisible visible"?
 - a.) Is this a goal you would typically associate with activism? Why? Why not?

Action

- 8.) In terms of the action(s) you chose to take, what skills, **if any**, did you feel you sharpened or acquired during its implementation?

- 9.) Staying with the present focus on action, would you characterize it as a beneficial experience for you and those on the receiving end? Why? Why not?

Applicability of PD/PAR in other settings

- 10.) Do you believe this professional development experience, or some version of it, could be useful for other teachers in our state? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
- 11.) Did any of the NCAE trainings you received in the past mirror the project we just completed together? Or were these largely different experiences? Please explain.
- 12.) Is there anything else you would like to say that I did not ask you about?

Appendix E

Contributor Questionnaire submitted to *Research for All*



CONTRIBUTOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for your interest in *Research for All*. We're keen to receive outline details of proposed contributions so we can decide how to take them forwards. Please:

- (1) send *either* an abstract of up to 300-400 words for an academic article *or* an outline of no more than a page for a research commentary or non-academic piece; *and*
- (2) fill in the form below (it will expand as you type) - this helps us to judge very diverse materials and begin to shape balanced issues.

Do contact me if you have any questions: Pat Gordon-Smith, Commissioning Editor, UCL Press, p.gordon-smith@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract:

This article features an account and analysis of a participatory action research (PAR) project involving the author and five teacher activist co-researchers that occurred during the fall of 2019. This piece has two principal aims. The first is to contribute to practitioners' knowledge and practice by offering a detailed account of a PAR project, grounded in popular education, that provided a beneficial space for K-12 teacher activists. This account should be of particular use for readers who are unfamiliar with popular education and PAR, and who also seek approaches to promote teacher activism. The second aim is to contribute to the teacher activist literature by providing an analysis of the perceived benefits of popular education and PAR for teacher activists, a topic that, to my knowledge, is presently underexplored. This article opens with a brief overview of PAR, popular education, and this project's central influences. This section ends with a discussion of the popular education spiral, which I then use as a guiding framework to unpack the PAR project under focus. During this account, I discuss the project's background and structure, methods employed, processes used to equalize power, and our group's interesting focus on "making the invisible visible." Following this account, I present my analysis of this project and detail the many "participatory impacts" (Banks, Herrington, & Carter, 2017) of this experience on co-researchers. As discussed in the findings section, these impacts included stronger relationships, developed knowledge and skills, various emotional benefits, and the new understanding that teacher activism includes forms of "cultural activism" (Verson, 2007, p. 173). I then close with a discussion of the study's implications.

Name Chris Gilbert
Contact email & affiliation or other place of work (plus country where you are based) Gilbert5682@gmail.com; Appalachian State University (doctoral candidate); North Carolina, United States
Key contributors Chris Gilbert
Title of contribution - or up to 5 keywords for the main subjects to be covered Walking the Popular Education Spiral: An Account and Analysis of Participatory Action Research with Teacher Activists
Type of contribution (Please refer to ‘Submitting work’ on our website for article categories) This is possibly a “practice case study” (though, my piece is longer than the exemplars). Since I do integrate theory into this account of my PAR project, you may also consider this to be a “research article.”
Length of contribution 10,086 words (this number includes references). The length stems from my thorough description of the project (its account) along with the analysis that the 2 nd half of the piece consists of. I believe both are essential (some description is necessary for readers to grasp the analysis; and description has practical benefits for activist readers), but of course am open to ideas for revision if so desired.

How will the contribution meet the scope of the journal? (Please focus on the following key aims; your work should address at least two of them. Note that we don't publish research outcomes unless the research is into engagement.)

a) Processes of engagement with research

This is essentially the focus of the piece. In the first half of the piece, I detail how this participatory project unfolded via the popular education spiral, and I stop at each "step" of the spiral to explain how this framework informed the group's work together. For instance, I discuss how the research process emerged from interests of importance to co-researchers; and I detail how we added new information/theory during our participatory work together. The second half of the article explains how the research/action processes we engaged in together impacted co-researchers. The participatory impacts, for example, included increased solidarity with fellow co-researcher activists, increased knowledge, new skills, etc. In sum, the research process, and its impact on co-researchers, is the focus of the piece.

b) How it makes a difference to society and to research

As I discuss in the manuscript's introduction, I believe teacher activists have become absolutely essential in the United States, as they now serve as the frontline defenders of public K-12 education and the communities served by our public schools. However, there are not enough support spaces for these activists, and it is unrealistic to expect teacher activists to continue their important work in the absence of such spaces. I believe these individuals benefit from participatory spaces that honor their experiential knowledge while allowing them to share and augment it while taking action with others. The findings of this research suggest that other teacher activists should consider forms of participatory action research, as it could potentially provide a supportive structure for them that supports their growth as activists. Thus, this research has important educational, social, and political implications.

c) Principles and philosophies e.g. knowledge democracy, knowledge exchange

I do not think this one really applies to my work. I do, however, include some discussion of how this project widened my understanding of teacher activism to also include forms of cultural activism.

What key learning did you gain in the course of the work that will be featured? And what key learning will readers gain from the article? (Please summarise this learning in three bullet points; these are the ‘Key messages’ that appear at the beginning of each paper published in the journal.)

- The participatory impacts of this PAR study were largely beneficial for teacher activist co-researchers as they reported strengthened relationships with other activists, deepened knowledge, new skills and tools, and various positive emotional benefits.
- Given the above finding, other teacher activists may also benefit from participatory spaces that allow them opportunities to share their knowledge, augment it, and take action with others. These activists should consider PAR as a potentially useful approach.
- A broader definition of teacher activism is likely needed, as the conventional view of teacher activists as militant individuals participating in marches, rallies, etc., while “targeting” policies and politicians, is too narrow; this research project illustrated that teacher activists also engage in forms of cultural activism that directly target ideas, values, and belief systems.

What is the primary audience? Will it be of interest to the journal’s wider audience?

I believe both academics and practitioners will find this article of interest. Academics will be interested in the theoretical and methodological dimensions of the article, particularly the account of teacher activists doing popular education/PAR. Actual activists will also benefit from this, as I sought to provide enough information in the article for such individuals to create their own PAR project inspired by the one described in the piece. There are unions and teacher activist groups in the US that would likely find this work both interesting and useful.

Individuals/institutions who might like to know about (a) your article (b) the journal

Bree Picower, Cynthia Oyler, and other scholars I mention in the manuscript that have done work related to teacher activism. I also think individuals such as Gary Anderson and Michelle Fine could find my PAR work interesting. And, of course, the Highlander Research Center; I plan on sending this piece to Susan Williams, who works there and actually taught me about popular education at the beginning of this project.

Illustrations, audio/visual resources or other content that will feature (if any)

There are several images in the piece. An important one is the popular education spiral that I include early on since it serves as a guiding framework for the reader so he/she can better understand the account of this popular education/PAR project. I also include several amazing infographics that co-researchers constructed. This was the action part of our PAR process.

Appendix F

Document used for Recruitment

A Critical Professional Development Experience: Participatory Action Research in an Inquiry to Action Group

Facilitator: Chris Gilbert (gilbert5682@gmail.com). Former Buncombe County Schools high school teacher and current doctoral student at Appalachian State University.

Purpose: The purpose of this professional development experience is to involve teachers in a participatory action research project designed to support their development as critically conscious, public education advocates. Participants will converge within an Inquiry to Action Group (ItAG) focused on an educational issue or policy they collectively select; in the ItAG, teachers will engage in collaborative study and initiate forms of action to impact the issue/policy under focus.

Background and rationale for this PD project: For my dissertation research, I am interested in exploring how particular spaces and experiences can potentially promote the development of teachers as advocates for public schools, the students these schools serve, and the communities these students inhabit. As a former teacher in Buncombe County Schools, I experienced a multitude of professional development experiences. While helpful, almost all of these experiences centered on improving instructional practices, or on only intervening at the school/classroom level. Given that Standard 1 of the [North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards](#) refers to teachers' ability to "advocate for schools and students...[and] for positive change in policies," there exists a substantial need for professional development experiences that focus specifically on developing teachers' advocacy mindsets and skillsets.

Objectives:

- To engage ItAG participants in sustained, collaborative analysis of an educational policy/issue that involves an interrogation of its connections to political, economic, and cultural contexts
- To explore how an educational policy/issue is entangled with forms of economic and political power
- To initiate forms of action that support public education and contest entities and ideologies that oppress teachers, negatively impact communities, and weaken public schools

- To support the development of teachers as critically conscious, public education advocates who can effectively critique present circumstances and conditions while also envisioning and constructing a more equitable educational reality
- Additional objectives and goals are to be determined by participants

Features of this PD Experience:

- Drawing from the work of Brazilian educator and scholar Paulo Freire, this ItAG will be grounded in dialogue and shared leadership. To respect teachers as the professionals they are, and to acknowledge the associated knowledge they possess, this PD experience will not feature an “outside expert” delivering a lecture to passive participants. Instead, participants will construct meaning together through dialogue and collaborative inquiry.
- As mentioned previously, this professional development experience has a “beyond the classroom” focus. Meaning, we will focus on an educational issue/policy that teachers collaboratively select, and we will broaden our understanding of this issue/policy by analyzing it through cultural, economic, and political lenses (e.g., examining the history of the policy/issue and the “big ideas” behind it, interrogating how it intersects with economic policies, examining who it benefits and who it harms, etc.). I will assist teachers in the selection of relevant articles, editorials, and films that will serve as materials for our research efforts and collaborative inquiry. Throughout this process, teachers will also be engaged in a “reading of the world,” as they link content to personal experiences and observations. All of this supports the inquiry, or consciousness raising, goal of this professional development experience.
- As a participatory action research project, in addition to gaining knowledge and raising consciousness, it is also necessary for teachers to collectively engage in some form of action by extending their generated knowledge into the public domain and engaging in advocacy. “Action” could refer to collaboratively writing an Op-Ed for a newspaper, delivering a presentation to a local school board, arranging a town hall discussion, holding a meeting with policymakers, etc. Teachers will collectively select the form(s) of action they wish to initiate.
- Since this project is grounded in dialogue and features collective decision making, this professional development experience will feature a small group of local teachers (6-10). I am working now to recruit participants for the first iteration of this project.
- Group meetings will be held in a combination of face-to-face and online settings. Face-to-face settings will be held in an outside-of-school location convenient for all participants (these meetings will be held in the evenings, so subs will not be required).

The total number of meetings is dependent on what works optimally for the group, but I predict between 6-10 sessions. Teachers will perform readings and engage in related knowledge-deepening activities between meetings. Regarding timing, I would like to initiate this project during the early months of Fall 2019, if not earlier.

Vita

Chris Gilbert grew up in Advance, North Carolina. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in English with teacher licensure from The University of North Carolina at Asheville in 2005. He followed this with a Master of Arts in English from Middlebury College in 2010. From 2006-2016, Chris taught English at two high schools in Western North Carolina; he worked at A.C. Reynolds High School from 2006-2013, and at Buncombe County Early College from 2013-2016. He also spent a year teaching at A-B Technical Community College. When not busy teaching, he was writing, and his work found its way into *English Journal*, *Critical Studies in Education*, *The Currere Exchange*, *The Educational Forum*, *Democracy & Education*, *The Washington Post*, *The News & Observer*, and *The Asheville Citizen-Times*. He has also written a number of teaching and reading guides for Penguin Random House. Chris now works as an adjunct instructor at Warren Wilson College, and he lives in Hendersonville, North Carolina with his wife Maria, their two dogs, three cats, and four chickens.