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From Inquiry to Action: Teachers' Inquiry and Actions for Social Change

Different platforms, pathways and places for teacher training activities are constantly developing and evolving. While teacher training schools and higher education institutions are the recognised training grounds to nurture and develop teachers, there is a growing interest in how reflective and practitioner inquiry takes place in the workplace - the schools and communities they serve. Sachs (2000) suggests that while teacher professionalism should address the need for teachers to be more effective and efficient in their classroom practice, it should also foster continuous learning among them. Inquiry-based activities such as research, individual and group reflections and professional development activities interrogate their practice and situate them into the broader political, socio-economic and cultural discourses. However, even within their workplaces, teachers can find and cultivate different pockets of spaces and opportunities where teachers can reflect, write, and inquire about their practice. I argue that cultivating an 'activist teacher professional' requires an understanding the landscapes which support and foster teacher learning (Greene, 1978). This became my inspiration for this lightning talk. It offers a possible approach to understanding how they became teachers. It also builds insight how the schools, the classrooms and the communities around schools can provide pockets of opportunities to establish and build professional inquiry among teachers. The lived experiences of teachers in these places may provide them insights various actions to engage, inspire and work with the communities within and outside schools to achieve social change through a transformative professional practice.

Banderlipe I, M. R. S. (2023). From inquiry to action: teachers' inquiry and actions for social change. *Humanities and Social Sciences Mini Conference 2023*, Glasgow, United Kingdom.

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I begin my reflection on teacher activists and the role of the community as a site of teacher education and practice from inspired by my Master's dissertation (Banderlipe, 2022).

One of my research participants responded how community involvement among teachers has inspired me to expand this conversation and my PhD project.

> *"Personally, I have the choice not to go there (the community), right? I have the choice not to participate in the community. I just have to go to school, teach children. But we, my colleagues and I, chose to go there. We call it extra mile, right? [That] we go there, on our own without the supervisors telling us. We go there on our own decision because we want to help. And the only reward we can get is seeing them learning. Whenever we're able to teach a child to read, that's already a big accomplishment for us"* (pp. 69–70)

And to honour the passing of one of my musical icons, Tina Turner, last night. I quote a lyrics from one of her hits, "All Kinds of People"

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ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE

Hey hey we're finding our way

And today is just tomorrow's yesterday

Some will die for you, some will lie to you

There's all kinds of people in this world

Turn the world around, tear the borders down

There's all kinds of people in this world. (Tina Turner)

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Interrogating inequalities

I argue that there are several things we need to unpack and interrogate. Teaching is currently market-based and is a regulated profession in many countries. Teacher education has remained reflective of the State apparatuses towards creating conditions for harnessing productive capital - producing future workers equipped with credentials and skills required for highly globalised workplaces. One also needs to question the impact of pedagogy and teaching methodology implemented in these schools as they created inequalities within and among the students. The current emphasis on academic performance and

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class rankings, the objective to pass standardised achievement tests and measurements, have impinged pressure for schools, teachers, parents and the children. Achieving good scores in globally recognised measurement systems such as PISA and TIMMS have become an aspiration for many schools and institutions. These observations augur the institutional responses among schools to focus on administrative efficiency, hierarchy and teaching quality to meet national and local standards.

The tendency for schools to focus more on the meeting administrative deadlines and market-defined student outcomes add to the strenuous work of teachers within and outside their classrooms. Teachers are among the least paid professionals in many countries. Living conditions among teachers have been affected by decreasing teacher salaries. Salaries and benefits for teachers are inadequate. These studies remind us that inequalities among different professions exist in both Global North and South countries. Race, class and gender inequality among teachers became pressing concerns as well. White teachers are more likely to be trained for future school leadership roles (Collay, 2010; Lareau, 2011). Gender-based differences have created demarcations in the capacity of teachers to write and publish research, teach and engage in other school-based productive work, such as the case of East Asian schools (Ding, 2021). Traditional domestic and household arrangements, which affected women teachers to fulfil family-based roles have stifled their other productive capabilities for their profession. These intersections of class, gender and race have created inequalities within and among teachers and their schools.

These inequalities have been exacerbated and magnified with our collective experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Poorer families continue to deal with loss of employment and income. Access to digital devices and connectivity are insufficient. Inadequate conducive learning spaces and appropriate learning materials have challenged many students in joining online classes comfortably. These examples extend even among our teachers who delivered online classes without extensive knowledge of using online educational tools.

Despite these challenges, we have seen how teachers responded to their profession. Several teachers in the Philippines reached out to communities, worked with local leaders and parents to identify and locate

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their missing students in the online classes. As a researcher, I would like to interrogate to what extent their work in the communities is motivated by their sense of duty and understanding of the community they work with.

Taking the Activist Stance

Apple (2019) argued that school and teacher identities extend to the community. Community-school partnerships invite teachers to fulfil their social vocation in addressing community-related challenges. Professor Judyth Sachs, who coined the term 'activist professionals' (Sachs, 2000, 2003) , invites us to examine the roles played by teachers in addressing social inequalities. For teachers to exercise meaningful and transformative professional practice, they should be encouraged to collaborate, inquire and act – individually or collectively.

Among the visible collective forms of participation are protests, demonstrations and public actions. In most cases, these activities aimed at resisting the politics that have encouraged us to identify the different ways of acting in the community (Fraser, 1995, 1997). I wonder if we can also celebrate the invisible forms of social action that often are not surfaced in media but are considered transformative for teachers.

It may be attractive to be radical. However, not all teachers identify themselves as activists. This observation is understandable due to the precarious and risky situations associated with activists and activist work. Being strategic in their actions,[1] teachers can negotiate between the need to professionally productive and socially responsible. Teachers can problematise their own practice. Teachers can be encouraged to be more strategic and creative in challenging the curricula, the institutional norms and the current forms of instruction. They can understand how their work affects their students and the communities within and outside schools.

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[1] In my WhatsApp conversation with Dr. Gene Segarra Navera of the Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore (2023) we discussed the possibility of this terminology. Strategic does not invalidate radical actions. Rather, it broadens the spaces of participation without dissolving the essence of taking a radical stance.

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Current and Future Challenges of Teacher Activism

I think it is timely that as we interrogate the different inequalities, we also interrogate the possibilities of teachers' ways of contributing to solve them. Creative and consultative avenues for participation invite us to look holistically at the different dimensions of participation that can spark positive social action in the communities. Rather than causing more division in an already polarising world of the teaching profession, we still share common objective of promoting dialogue, meaning making and transformation of our communities. This also allows us to broaden and democratise the policies and avenues for teacher participation in promoting criticality and solidarity. By challenging schools as catalysts of inequalities, we can recognise the different positions and spectrums of actions and introduce socially-oriented pedagogies to drive participatory approaches involving teachers, parents, students, the larger community in their professional work. In doing so, activism can be described as a spectrum of possibilities for teacher education and action.

Moving forward to my PhD project:

Given these reflections and observations, I hope to answer my main research question in this PhD research project: What does teacher activism look like? A preliminary review of the research questions I designed based on my consultation and support from my supervisors were:

- Where does a teacher's activist work begin?

- In what way does teachers' activism expands, continues and transition to something else?

My project aims to ask teachers in Scotland and self-describe their own lived experiences of activism in their day-to-day lives. It also allows teachers to reflect on their own communities

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where taking an activist stance becomes crucial in understanding and acting on the daily lived

experiences of inequities and inequalities.

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