

Beyond Teaching: Actions, Identities and Professional Learning of Activist Teachers in Scotland

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Introduction

- The study introduces **‘teacher activism’**, considered as broad and deeply embedded practice and which invites revitalising teachers’ work through **“advising, issue and problem identification, spreading ideas, providing alternative perspectives, evaluating programmes and advocacy”** (Sachs, 2003, p. 69).
- Teacher activism responds towards a data-focused education system, where learning and teaching activities and outcomes are reduced to measurable and comparable data (Stevenson, 2017).
- Our current professionalism policies, including our **professional learning**, have become largely orientated towards developing teachers with stronger managerial orientation. As such this poses a potential ‘policy problem’ resulting into the development of, or implementation of standards and regulatory practices in teaching and of teachers’ compliance to these standards (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Market-based orientation of education needs to be critiqued if our goal is oriented towards school improvement and the development of our students. In orientating professional learning from being a ‘transmissive’ platform into a ‘transformative’ platform can possibly benefit teachers, their profession, and their individual (and collective) pursuit of a meaningful practice (Kennedy, 2005).
- In manifesting these activist stance as a platform for dialogue and critical reflection of one’s practice, teachers’ **professional identities** intersect within the fabric developed within and outside the lives of our teachers (Mockler, 2011). It is a ‘career-long’ project shaped by personal experiences, professional context and the external political environment where teachers hold themselves as important actors and drivers (Mockler, 2011).
- As educators, there is an imperative to understand where these voices, actions, identities and aspiration for a transformative profession can emanate, establishing potential policy and political conversations about teaching and in the ways we professionalise our teachers.

Research Aim and Questions

The **general aim** of the study is to explore teachers’ activist professional identities and practices, specifically in relation to their professional learning.

The **objectives** of this study are:

- To examine the lived experiences of teacher activism among teachers in Scotland.
- To investigate how teachers’ participation in various formal, non-formal and informal professional learning shapes their identities and actions to respond to the social, political, moral, and ecological dimensions of their practice.
- To highlight teachers’ report and narratives of impact of their activist work.

This research hopes to answer the following **questions**:

- How did the participants become teacher activists?
 - In relation to their formal professional learning?
 - In relation to their non-formal or informal professional learning experiences?
- What do these teachers do that leads them to self-identify as activists?
- What impact, if any, do they believe their professional learning is supporting them to become activists?

Participants

- Regardless of where they completed their Initial Teacher Education (ITE), they should **be fully registered** with the GTCS to teach in Scotland. This means that participation is open to teachers who qualified outwith Scotland but are now fully registered with GTCS.
- Teachers must be currently working in Scottish schools (including early years, specialist provision, primary and secondary schools), in either full-time or part-time capacity, and in permanent or temporary contracts.
- Self-identify as activists.

Methodology

Qualitative research methodology will be used for this study.

- The study will be divided into 3 phases. In the **1st phase**, an online questionnaire created using a University-managed survey platform (Qualtrics) will be distributed to the participants. At the end of the form, a question will be asked whether participants would be interested to participate in the phases 2 and 3 of the study. Around 50-100 participants are expected to take part in the study. The data will be used aggregately regardless of whether they decide to do the survey only. For those who decide to do the survey only, an email will be sent to them expressing gratitude for their participation. Should they change their decision and decided to continue to Phase 2 and 3 of the study, the researcher will take note of their response. The decision on whether to take them in will still be subject to the shortlisting protocols the researcher will implement.
- At the **2nd phase**, identified participants will each be given 3 different **activity kits**. The first is a **historical timeline template** which symbolises one’s career time frame as a teacher and where professional learning takes place or has taken place. The second kit is a **blank campus map** where participants can draw and mark key areas within (or outside) the school grounds where activist identities and orientations are demonstrated or manifested. The third kit is a **blank signboard** with colouring/marketing materials where they can write a slogan or an action item, representing their advocacy or activist work. The participants will be given 1-2 months to work on this including a written reflection gained from working on the activity kits. The participants will also be prompted that these artifacts will be scaffolds during the semi-structured interviews.
- In the **3rd phase**, the participants will be invited for a semi-structured interview (either online using Zoom or in person at a neutral, accessible place the participant identified) which will last for 1 to 1.5 hours. During the interview, the activity kits, now their artifacts, will be used as scaffolds for the different questions.

Participants will be asked to send all the completed activity kits and reflective writing to the researcher. Audio data will be transcribed. The transcribed data will be coded thematically. Emerging themes will be interpreted phenomenologically from the participants’ point of view. If needed and when permission is sought, the researcher may opt to include photographs of the artifacts to illustrate examples during the writing of the manuscript.

Intersecting Sustainability

This research project intersects with the sustainability agenda, amplifying the need for further partnerships in education towards building sustainable communities and societies (SDG 4).

Teachers (or rather, activist teachers) are at the forefront of collaborative partnerships between fellow individuals and collective groups, between schools and the communities, and between schools/school agencies and policymakers.

References

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