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Résumé de l'article

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Abstract

Amid the global neoliberal assault on public education, teachers and their unions are called upon to resist detrimental educational reforms. Employing photo-elicitation focus groups, this paper explored ten Saskatchewan teacher activists' perceptions of their political resistance to neoliberalism both within their union and beyond. Utilizing a comparative case study approach, the study employed a poststructural framework of alliances, assemblages, and affect to analyze teachers' intellectual and emotional views. Intellectually, teachers agreed that the teacher union was less responsive than grassroots activism because of their diverse membership and legislative requirements. Teachers expressed that, despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles, they valued equity, activism, mentoring, and group collectivity. Emotionally, teachers exuded feelings of anger and isolation, but also hope and empowerment rooted in learning. Featuring teachers' metaphorical interpretations, this paper delves into teachers' affective understandings of their activism as a potential antidote to neoliberalism.

Introduction

In recent decades, Canadian governments have increasingly drawn upon neoliberal conceptualizations of teacher professionalism to control and regulate the work of teachers and their professional organizations (Bascia, 2015; Smaller, 1998). As an economic and political ideology promoting market-driven practices (e.g., competition, standardization), neoliberalism has radically shifted educational policies globally with respect to curriculum, teaching pedagogy, and teachers' professionalism (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2003). Like other jurisdictions, neoliberalism in Saskatchewan calls for enhanced teacher accountability and fiscal responsibility while, at the same time, deregulates private enterprise.

Teachers' increasing frustration with harmful educational reforms exacerbating social inequalities has resulted in educators seeking new ways to become politically involved (Maton, 2018; Niesz & D'Amato, 2021) despite the expectation that teachers should be apolitical (Brickner, 2016). Scholars have highlighted the importance of activist teacher identities (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Sachs, 2000) as vital to sustaining high-quality, democratic public education (Darder, 2019; Freire, 2018). Carl et al. (2022) described teacher activism as "the politically motivated activities of teachers to change existing educational policies, routines, and arrangements in pursuit of a perceived vision of justice, fairness, and equity" (p. 2). Adopting Carl et al.'s definition, this research explored how teacher activists strategically disrupt oppressive social norms through both the institutional authority afforded by their unions (Bascia & Stevenson, 2017; Weiner, 2012) and the power of grassroots social movements (Niesz, 2018; Picower, 2012). In this manner, the study extends existing literature on teacher activism in Canada, where involvement in teacher unions has been the primary frame. The paper particularly emphasizes philosophical interpretations of teachers' involvement in political activism. It addresses the following questions:

- In what ways do teacher activists perceive their union and grassroots activism in response to whimsical, artistic images?
- How do teachers intra-act in focus groups as assemblages and what individual or collective cognitive and affective insights arise?
- How can focus groups as assemblages lead to more equitable ways of being?

Literature Review

To begin, literature related to teacher activism is described including democratic, managerial, activist, and advocacy teacher identities. Next, neoliberal ideology and related challenges for teachers and their unions are discussed along with how teachers resist harmful educational reforms. The literature review concludes by exploring the increasingly significant role of grassroots teacher activism and how teachers' unions might similarly draw upon social movement tactics to influence educational policymaking.

Terminology Related to Teachers' Professional Identities

Teachers experience diverse identities and discourses around teacher professionalism. According to Osmond-Johnson (2015), *teacher professionalism* refers to discourses of professionalism and is an intersection of teacher agency, union engagement, and the political context. Taking ownership of the power within teacher professionalism is crucial for educators, yet competing discourses of democratic and managerial professionalism exist (Osmond-Johnson,

2015; Sachs, 2000). *Democratic professionalism* emphasizes how teachers initiate joint action along with other educational stakeholders. In other words, teachers have a professional and social responsibility to contribute within and beyond the classroom to advocate for the teaching profession on substantive issues of educational reform (Osmond-Johnson, 2015; Sachs, 2000). Conversely, *managerial professionalism* adopts a neoliberal point of view claiming that private sector solutions are applicable to the public sector (Sachs, 2000). However, Sachs asserted that it is necessary to move beyond notions of democratic and managerial professionalism to explore the potential of the *activist professional* identity. The activist professional transforms the political and professional roles of teachers incorporating active trust (i.e., teachers working together collaboratively and in solidarity) and generative politics (i.e., teachers resisting adverse external forces).

Following Sachs (2000), Anderson and Cohen (2015) posited *advocacy professionalism* in which teachers exercise *critical vigilance* by considering how neoliberal influences threaten their professional identities, engage in counter-discourses as new ways to speak and write about public education, and attempt counter-conduct and reappropriation as resistance within existing policy parameters. But Anderson and Cohen (2015) acknowledged that these approaches, while valuable, are insufficient without "build[ing] new alliances of educators, students, parents, and communities" (p. 8). Consequently, advocacy professionalism is only realizable when teachers build internal capacity then form alliances in the local community to counter neoliberal reforms.

Neoliberal Ideology and its Challenges for Teachers and Teacher Unions

Within global neoliberal ideology, teachers and teacher unions are called upon to resist market-driven governmental policies intended to undermine public education (Apple, 2012; Weiner, 2012). The Saskatchewan education system is not unaffected by neoliberalism (Orlowski, 2015) and Saskatchewan teachers (Safe Schools Saskatchewan, 2021a; Simes, 2023), in growing numbers, are responding to what Weiner and Compton (2018) described as a global neoliberal assault on public education, teachers and teacher unions, and the teaching profession.

Neoliberalism is characterized by using the so-called free market to privatize public services (Harvey, 2005) creating opportunities to generate profit (Saltman, 2005). Harvey (2007) described neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced… within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). Government's role is merely preserving the institutional framework that supports such practices (Harvey, 2007). In education, Sahlberg (2015) described increased globalization and competition as the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) where governments promote school choice at the expense of equity, standardization over innovation, and narrow curricula over whole child development. Drawing upon Foucault, Yoon (2024) reframed Sahlberg's GERM to NERM or Neoliberal Educational Reform Madness (NERM) to illuminate how neoliberal educational reforms cause people to lose the ability to see injustices. Instead, a purported neoliberal madness drives people towards options like school choice to the detriment of public schooling and the common good (Yoon, 2024).

Intensifying the problem, many Canadian governments centralized education bureaucracies leaving teachers and teacher unions with less power to influence educational decision making (Bascia, 2015). Similar centralization legislation was enacted in Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2021) thereby reinforcing a distorted public narrative that

private business is trustworthy, but the work of public employees, including professional teachers, is not (Orlowski, 2015). Resultant, a neoliberal version of teacher professionalism is conflated with notions of authority and accountability which impedes teachers' ability to ensure equitable outcomes through inclusive pedagogical principles or practices (Hall & McGinity, 2015; Hargreaves, 2000; Keil & Osmond-Johnson, 2024a). Additionally, despite neoliberal reforms such as broad-based standardized testing being temporarily circumvented (Spooner & Orlowski, 2013), government austerity budgets (White-Crummey, 2020) and right-wing educational policies including a new teachers' regulatory board (Graham, 2018; Latimer, 2017; Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2021) have altered the complexion of public education in the province (Orlowski, 2015). In response to neoliberal reforms, Orlowski (2015) advised teachers to "wak[e] up to the fact that public services and assets are not to be taken for granted" (p. 242) and that "where there is power, there is also resistance" (p. 242).

Teacher Unions as Platforms for Teacher Advocacy

To employ resistance, teacher unions play an important role in supporting activist professionals to achieve advocacy goals by enhancing the capacity of teachers, both individually and collectively (Bangs & MacBeath, 2012; Bascia & Osmond-Johnson, 2012; Bascia & Osmond-Johnson, 2013; Rottmann, 2013). Osmond-Johnson (2018) suggested that teachers, using their unions as platforms, exercise collective voice to "counterbalance what might otherwise be a very one-sided approach to educational reform" (p. 68). Bangs and Frost (2012) similarly asserted that teacher voice is essential in discussions around educational reform but that teachers often "remain the ghost at the feast" (p. 1) and are excluded from key policy discussions. Therefore, institutions such as teacher unions play an integral role in ensuring that teachers' voices are respected (Bangs & Frost, 2012).

Bascia and Stevenson (2017) proposed that teacher unions can counter global educational reform efforts by simultaneously resisting attacks on teachers' working conditions and professional autonomy while elevating teachers' professional status through discourses of teacher professionalism and professional development (Bascia, 2001; Osmond-Johnson, 2015). However, as Bascia (2001) noted, significant differences exist between teacher organizations around the world as local contexts vary so teachers' influence is contingent upon public support, teachers' status, and educational legislation. Nevertheless, Bascia and Maharaj (2022) stressed that unions remain a vital platform for teachers' advocacy because of their ability to mobilize vast numbers of teachers, provide large sums of money to support political actions, and represent teachers with educational partners.

Teacher Activism as Resistance to Neoliberalism in Saskatchewan

In Saskatchewan, teachers have typically advocated within the auspices of their union, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF), amidst contentious contract negotiations. For example, in 2011, following cuts to education during a time of economic prosperity, Saskatchewan teachers went on strike for the first time ever as a province-wide collective (Graham, 2011). Then, in 2014, after the government unilaterally increased teachers' work hours without compensation (French, 2013), teachers rejected two consecutive contract offers (Prairie South Schools, 2014) citing work intensification and class size as main issues (paNOW, 2014). In conjunction with 2017 negotiations, teachers were encouraged by the STF to participate in a "Pick a Premier" campaign

where members joined provincial political parties to vote for new leaders (STF, 2017). The STF also urged teachers to engage in political actions such as "Tell Them Tuesday" where members wrote letters to the government to humanize the educational experience (STF, 2024). Though nascent, the STF's recent actions have demonstrated a more concerted effort to draw upon social movement tactics.

Some Saskatchewan teachers have also advocated beyond the STF through grassroots activism. Groups included the Sask Teachers United Facebook page created during the 2011 teachers' strike (Sask Teachers United II, 2021) and the Stop Bill-63 Facebook Page formed in 2017 as a counter to legislation which sought to centralize government power (Safe Schools Saskatchewan, 2017). In 2020, a Facebook group called Safe Schools Saskatchewan (2021b) formed in response to the government's return-to-school plan during the Covid-19 pandemic and grew to 12,000 members comprised of teachers and parents (Djuric, 2021). The group utilized various strategies such as rallies (Maxwell, 2020), phone/email blitzes (Safe Schools Saskatchewan, 2021b), and informational town halls (Canales-Lavigne, 2021) to advocate for science-informed educational policymaking (Safe Schools Saskatchewan, 2021b). Next, these innovative advocacy efforts are examined more closely as part of a discussion on how teachers and their unions might apply social movement principles and practices to teacher activism.

Grassroots Teacher Activism and Social Movements for Educational Change

As educators' frustration increases in response to neoliberal reforms, a growing number of teachers are becoming politically involved across North America (Brickner, 2016; Maton, 2016) with many leaning upon social movement approaches. Niesz (2019) explained that "[F]or communities and educators seeking local or broader changes in public schooling, there is a lot to be learned from social movement activism" (p. 57). Accordingly, teachers are adopting social movement tactics within or beyond their unions through social justice teacher unionism (Rottmann, 2011, 2013; Rottmann et al., 2015), social movement unionism (Weiner, 2012), teacher activist groups (TAGS) or teacher caucuses (Asselin, 2019; Carl et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2017; Maton, 2016, 2018; Niesz, 2018, 2019; Picower, 2012; Quinn & Carl, 2015), and grassroots social movements for educational change (Oakes & Rogers, 2007; Rincón-Gallardo, 2020). Teachers have also individually or collectively used social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs for educational activism (Brickner, 2016; Keil & Osmond-Johnson, 2024b; Niesz & D'Amato, 2021; Shiller, 2015). Niesz (2019) suggested that teachers must opt for creative, multipronged approaches to resist reforms since educational change cannot rely solely on institutional power as social and cultural changes are necessary to deconstruct the unjust status quo. In fact, Brickner (2016) explained that grassroots forms of dissent "[allow] teachers to articulate their multiple identities – as educators, workers engaged in caring labour, and unionists" (p. 12). When identities intra-act, teachers' engagement may translate into more conventional expressions of activism such as union activity or running for political office (Brickner, 2016). Snow and Benford (1992) likewise contended that social protest should be exercised generically and not restricted to noninstitutional political movements. In other words, teacher unions, as well as grassroots activists, can both benefit from social movement approaches to guide advocacy.

Conceptual Framework

Teacher Activism Through Post-Structuralism

There is a paucity of research exploring teacher activism within poststructural frameworks, yet teacher activism needs post-structuralism to reimagine the ways the world exists through deconstructing oppressive realities, embracing processual understandings, and acknowledging that change is inevitable (Sharma, 2015). Investigating teacher activism through poststructuralism allows researchers to reorientate themselves to find spaces of hope (Ahmed, 2006). Ahmed explained that being oriented in a different way (i.e., viewing the world differently) brings objects near that might not have been accessible before. Therefore, being oriented in different ways matters because how spaces are oriented makes some bodies feel at home and in place while other bodies do not (Ahmed, 2006). For example, neoliberalism has become a normalized orientation that reinforces dominant hegemonic structures in which some bodies (e.g., white, male, cis gender) feel at ease while others (e.g., people of colour, female, transgender) feel out of place. In poststructuralism, it is not enough to simply criticize the status quo and, instead, we must critically evaluate the ways in which bodies are oriented, consider how and why the world exists as it does, and problematize societal structures. Following, the study's framework is outlined offering a novel way to reimagine and interpret teacher activism.

A Theory of Alliances, Assemblages, and Affect

Drawing upon Harding et al. (2018), the study employed theories of alliances, assemblages and affect to examine the production of individual and collective activist identities.

Alliances. Diani's (2000) network theory of (new) social movements was used to examine social networks or alliances. Merging Rokkan's concept of a *political cleavage* and Simmel's *intra-action of social circles,* Diani (2000) theorized the capacity of social movements to develop systems of relations that "cut across established social and political cleavages" (p. 387). A *political cleavage* refers to existing political bodies with differing ideologies in which imagined concentric social circles exist. Within political cleavages, new social movements or alliances (e.g., grassroots activism) can cut across traditional cleavages (e.g., teacher unions, political parties) through the creation of intersecting (rather than concentric) circles representative of new potentially transformative connections. According to Diani, social movements are *new* when they generate novel solidarities and group associations by cutting across the boundaries of previous political cleavages. Moreover, intersecting circles recurring and consolidating over time are increasingly impactful resulting in the creation of a more established political cleavage. Dynamic intra-actions between individuals, groups, or non-human entities like values or ideologies represent potential as teachers challenge existing structures to advocate for issues of collective importance.

Assemblages. Harding et al. (2018) defined *assemblages* as "the process of arranging, organizing, and fitting together parts" (p. 9). Parts of the assemblage are neither pre-determined nor random and include both human and non-human entities. For example, an assemblage might comprise bodies (e.g., teachers, government officials), actions (e.g., writing, protesting), ideas (e.g., social justice), identities (e.g., union member), or emotions (e.g., joy, anger). An assemblage represents the potential for a circuitry of newness that "helps us to understand connections across space, movement, and the interweaving of ideas and action" (Harding et al., 2018, p. 16). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) referred to this newness as the becoming of something else in which

"*becoming* is the movement through a unique event that produces experimentation and change" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 87). DeLanda (2006), extending Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory, described how one's personal identity can shift resultant of new skills or capacities. New skills, in turn, "increase one's capacities to affect and be affected, or to put it differently, increase one's capacities to enter into novel assemblages" (DeLanda, 2006, p. 42). In this way, assemblages allow people to move beyond perceived limitations and exercise different capacities in multiple assemblages introducing different potentialities.

Assemblages and intensities of affect coexist as interdependent forces with assemblages comprised of intra-acting parts with affect as becomings. Coined by Barad (2012), *intra-actions* differ from the common notion of *interaction* which assumes that individual entities have pre-existing identities that act upon each other. Intra-actions disrupt binary understandings by questioning cause and effect, time and place, and fixed identities (Barad, 2012). According to Barad (2012), ""individuals" do not exist as such but rather materialize in intra-action" (p. 77) through constant de/rearticulations within assemblages. It is through these reiterative becomings in phenomena that bodies go through a process of deterritorialization (i.e., seeing differently) and reterritorialization (i.e., locating a new space). In applying assemblage theory to teacher activism, teachers can be viewed as bodies with always becoming identities shaped through intra-actions where teachers *affect* actants and are reciprocally *affected* upon.

Affect. In considering theories of affect, multiple definitions exist dependent upon one's philosophical orientation (Ahmed, 2015; Cvetkovich, 2012; Massumi, 1995). Harding et al. (2018) elucidated that "[Affect] helps us to consider the enthusiasm and passion that moves bodies but is otherwise unarticulated" (p. 16). This paper primarily draws upon Ahmed's (2015) feminist orientation towards affect and the notion of *affective economies* in which "emotions do things, [in that] they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (119). Affective economies are an accumulation of affective value whereby emotions can shape subjects and objects, but not because emotions reside within bodies but because affect circulates and accumulates through repetition (Ahmed, 2015). Recurrent affective values result in adherence (i.e., the sticking of objects together) and coherence (i.e., the coming together of the collective body); affective economies have the potential to move individuals or collectives in relation to other bodies, ideas, or objects. In Ahmed's orientation towards affect, normative values are addressed through considering how bodies are oriented in certain ways dependent on cultural and social contexts. Citing Hume, Ahmed (2015) analogized affect as forming impressions in the following way:

> [A]n impression can be an effect on the subject's feelings ('she made an impression'). It can be a belief ('to be under an impression'). It can be an imitation or image ('to create an impression'). Or it can be a mark on the surface ('to leave an impression'). (p. 6)

Feminist orientations of affect account for how affective values (e.g., solidarity, care, equity) circulate to create collective knowledges in social and cultural contexts. Thus, the power of affect can be found within affective economies that produce normative values (Ahmed, 2015; Gould et al., 2019; Keil & Osmond-Johnson, 2022).

Through a theory of alliances, assemblages and affect, a novel interpretation of teacher activism is made possible by "hav[ing] an orientation towards creating senses of possibility" (Gould et al., 2019, p. 106). Therefore, looking beyond solely cognitive understandings of teacher

activism and considering how affect functions within an assemblage provides ways to envision and enact more equitable ways of being. Next, the study's methods are explained including an exploration of how photo-elicitation focus groups as assemblages facilitated networked intra-actions between teacher activists.

Methods

The study was conducted in Saskatchewan, Canada with teacher activists who enacted political advocacy either within the union, through grassroots activism, or both. Ten teacher activists known to the author were invited to participate as trust and confidentiality is essential for activist teacher professionals who assume risk because of their activism. I came to know teacher participants through diverse union and grassroots activist involvements because of my role as a public-school teacher, STF member, union-active teacher, and grassroots educational activist. Our shared familiarity was characterized by a high level of respect and reciprocity which resulted in open and relaxed conversations during the data collection process. Moreover, my immersive understanding of participant experiences and the study context valuably informed the research process.

The study was approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Board and participant confidentiality was prioritized throughout. To increase confidentiality, general attributes of participants are provided as a summary and pseudonyms are used to honour teachers' unique identities (Allen & Wiles, 2016). For the same reason, specific names of school divisions and grassroots advocacy groups are also excluded. This is necessary as participants viewed risks associated with their involvement in this study in two ways: first, they perceived risks related to their grassroots advocacy; and second, they were concerned about personal or professional consequences for speaking openly about the Saskatchewan education system. Several member checks were conducted including opportunities to participants to review interview transcripts, provide feedback on preliminary findings, and respond to a brief focus group follow-up survey. Presented as optional and anonymous, the follow-up survey allowed teachers to provide additional thoughts and comment on their participation.

The ten participants – of which five identified as female and five as male - were all full-time teachers and members of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. Except for one participant with two years of local association experience, participants' union involvement ranged from 10-15 years of service in various roles such as local association president, local executive member, provincial councillor, special subject council executive, and provincial and federal committee member. Again, aside from the newer teacher who had been teaching for two years, all participants were experienced teachers with five teachers having taught between 10 to 19 years and four teachers having just over 20 years of experience. All teachers had worked in urban centres except for one participant who had spent their entire teaching career working in rural communities. Lastly, all teachers reported involvement in some form of grassroots advocacy via social media (e.g., Facebook, TikTok) or beyond (e.g., political affiliations, community activism) either as an individual or with a collective.

Data Collection

Focus group data centered on the photo-elicitation activity represent a subset of data from the author's dissertation research study. Reflecting the complexity of assemblage theory, the larger study employed a comparative case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) comparing meanings and

actions over time on three axes: 1) vertical- among local, provincial, and national/global levels, 2) horizontal- between teachers across different sites, and 3) transversal- explaining how phenomenon change due to social, cultural, political, or economic factors. Sources from the larger study comprised ten individual semi-structured interviews (averaging 90 minutes) and two focus groups (two hours in length) with the same participants (five in each session). Focus groups served to member check, elicit aggregate data, consider group relationality, and facilitate networking. Both interviews and focus groups were conducted online via Zoom web conferencing which allowed for the participation of teachers from multiple locations across Saskatchewan. The optional follow-up survey was also conducted online using Qualtrics and participants had two weeks to respond.

Focus Groups as Assemblages

Focus groups were employed as assemblages of teacher voice to bring teacher activists together thereby expanding social networks and putting theory to action. Walstra (2022) explained that a photo-elicitation focus group (PEFG) permits "the researcher to better understand the diversities and consensus of perspectives within existing groups, through their shared or different interpretations of signs" (p. 1). In this way, PEFGs serve as assemblages which facilitate the formation of affective energies with potential for something more in that moment and beyond (Harding et al., 2018). Indeed, according to Harper (2002), photo-elicitation has the potential to "evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words" (Harper, 2002, p. 13) and prompt different kinds of information. For example, images can evoke both intellectual and emotional responses (Weber, 2007), "represent different levels of experience" (Bagnoli, 2009, p. 547), increase empathetic understandings (Weber, 2007), and prompt "spontaneous revelations of a highly-charged emotional nature" (Collier, 1957, p. 858).

Regarding PEFGs specifically, Huss explained the process of group meaning making in the following way: "First, the image itself is an interpretation of reality. Second, the explanation of the image becomes another interpretive level; and finally, the dialogue with others around the image becomes the third level of interpretation" (p. 59). Harper (2002) agreed that photo-elicitation inspires collaboration, but it is important to note that images, like words, are complex social constructs and must be considered within the wider societal context (Huss, 2012). Thus, when choosing images, researchers must consider their potential meanings to both participants and the subject of the research in addition to how the media might shape the research and its message (Huss, 2012). And finally, though obstacles when using participant-collected photos are more frequently cited (Torre & Murphy, 2015), studies using researcher-provided images are less so. However, possible disadvantages of researcher-selected images are that they might not resonate with participants or could cause anxiety for those requiring more time to formulate responses.

In conducting PEFGs, Harper (2002) pointed out that "most elicitation studies use photographs, but there is no reason studies cannot be done with paintings, cartoons, public displays such as graffiti or advertising billboards or virtually any visual image" (p. 13). In this manner, the study used fantastical images from a board game called Dixit. The artwork offered participants an enjoyable and creative way (Colucci, 2007) to communicate their perceptions of activism through metaphorical imaginings. Images were chosen based on their abstract yet detailed nature to encourage deep-rooted, emotive evocations and to avoid generating narrower interpretations that could result from more concrete choices. Images were regarded as appropriate stimuli by the researcher whose positionality as a teacher activist-researcher was like those of participants. This

familiarity made it easy to envisage how the abstract, ethereal features of the artwork might relate to various types of activism and inspire original, potentially emotive elicitations. Moreover, since participants were known, there was little concern that the activity would cause anxiety, yet this was still accounted for by encouraging participants to contribute as ready and by providing plenty of wait time. Next, the specific procedure for how the activity was facilitated is described.

After initial introductions, the photo-elicitation activity served as an icebreaker activity for each meeting. Teacher participants were shown eight Dixit cards featuring whimsical, surreal images as potential hooks (Wetzel et al., 2017) to chronicle teacher activists' experiences. Dixit cards were used like a 'picture sort' (Colucci, 2007) where participants are given a selection of images to survey then choose the ones that best represent a certain category. In this study, teachers were asked to choose images that aligned with either their grassroots activism, union activism, or both. Specifically, teachers were prompted to "Choose an image that represents your experiences with teacher activism—either within the union or beyond—and explain how it relates." Teachers were given the option to use the same or different images for various kinds of activism and were invited to respond when they were ready to share.

Data Analysis

Transcribed focus group data were analyzed using Saldaña's (2021) eclectic coding including emotions coding, versus coding, and values coding (i.e., an intra-action of attitudes, values, and beliefs) to analyze the affective (i.e., emotional) intensities of teachers towards their multi-faceted educational activism. Additionally, in vivo coding—where participants' words served as codes— were embedded throughout all coding types to respect teacher voice (Saldaña, 2021). Using a table to organize data, teachers' choices and perceptions were compared alongside the main coding categories and images to identify perceived commonalities. Next, a narrative vignette was created by drawing upon and interweaving the five main coding categories and 54 researcher-identified sub-codes (e.g., *emotions coding*- distress, hope; *versus coding*- teachers vs. government; *values coding* including *attitudes*- "find some light", *values*- learning, and *beliefs*- progress requires work) to represent teachers' collective voice. As in the pilot study (Keil & Osmond-Johnson, 2022), Saldaña's (2021) codeweaving was utilized to form a textual representation as a new way of knowing. Richardson referred to such unique writings as evocative representations or "writing [that] touches us where we live, in our bodies" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000, p. 931) and reveals the humanity in social science. In this paper, the narrative vignette affectively introduces teachers' focus group intra-actions.

Findings

Findings are introduced with a narrative vignette followed by commensurate data and commentary. The narrative vignette, as an assemblage of teachers' voices, was interweaved using categories and codes to generate vivid descriptions of how teachers experienced activism. In the passage, **Capitalized and Bolded Words** represent the main coding categories (e.g., **Emotions**), *italicized words* indicate researcher-identified codes (e.g., *a challenging political environment*), "**words bolded in quotation marks"** reveal teacher voice (e.g., **"teaching is such a busy profession"**), and unformatted text links ideas (e.g., amid).

A Narrative Vignette as an Interwoven Interpretation of Teacher Voice

"It Seems Really Insurmountable" vs. **"Find Some of The Light"**

Teachers
conflicted with the
government
amid *a challenging political environment*
where
"[advocating for change] seems really insurmountable".
Because of this, teachers felt **Emotions** of
exasperation, *frustration*, *distress*, *impatience*, and *anger*.
They explained that it is important to
"get everyone on board with what you're trying to get done"
and
"aims are common, but how we get there can be very different".
Progress requires a lot of work
and though
"we work, and we work, and we work, and we work",
"maybe you move the mark one inch forward".
Some *teachers* felt
isolated by colleagues because of their activism,
especially
when colleagues lacked an understanding of the bigger picture.
Teachers shared a **Belief** that
the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation needs to educate teachers about neoliberalism
and especially *support new teachers*
because
"teaching is such a busy profession".
Union activism can be onerous, uncertain, and confusing
with
"a lot of rules and structures".
Moreover,
Saskatchewan teachers are diverse geographically;
however,
politics likewise *involve different people with different views interacting.*
Saskatchewan teacher activists endeavour to
"find some light"
and
remain *hopeful*
by *coaching and mentoring colleagues*, *being involved*, and *engaging in learning*.
Espousing *hope*, *determination*, and *empowerment*,
teacher participants encouraged their colleagues
"[to care] about the same thing",
and take
"small steps" to **"reach our goal".**

In the narrative vignette, teachers' affective states were derived and, in turn, affect readers who experience distinctive interpretations (Gould et al., 2019). Readers are invited to intra-act with the narrative vignette noting that its production and interpretation merely denote a moment in time. Building upon the affective mood set by the narrative vignette, teachers' perspectives are expanded upon next.

Teachers' Perspectives in Photo-Elicitation Focus Groups

First, Figure 1 shows the images that teachers were invited to intra-act with. Teachers were most drawn to the images of "the tropical island with the iceberg" and "the road signs" although nearly all illustrations evoked vivid, metaphorical connections.

Figure 1. Photo-Elicitation Images: Dixit Cards.
Note. Image cards originate from a board game called Dixit (Roubira, 2008).

In Table 1, teachers' image choices are listed for each focus group in the order that teachers contributed although similar selections elicited a variety of perspectives. Regarding choices, about half of the teachers viewed union and grassroots activism as separate entities and the other half perceived teacher activism as what Leo described as "a meld between the two" because "I don't see them as always being separate, exactly."

Table 1

Participant Image Choices

Focus Group #1	**Union Image**	**Grassroots Image**	**Both Union and Grassroots**
Lily	The Road Signs	The Winding Staircase	
Eric	The Road Signs	The Winding Staircase The Tropical Island with the Iceberg	
Christina			The Moose in the Pool The Tropical Island with the Iceberg
Dwayne	The Tropical Island with the Iceberg	The Castle-Like Doors with the Sliver of Light	
Violet	The Moose in the Pool The Road Signs		
Focus Group #2	**Union Image**	**Grassroots Image**	**Both Union and Grassroots**
Paul	The Road Signs	The Tropical Island with the Iceberg	
April			The Tropical Island with the Iceberg
Logan			The Tropical Island with the Iceberg
Leo			The Road Signs The Winding Staircase
Amanda	The Road Signs	The Match in the Tides	

Teachers' interpretations of the visual images are discussed in two ways. Initially, individual interpretations are communicated as an assemblage of more tacit collective affective intensities. Next, collective intra-actions are discussed by highlighting more explicit intra-actions where teachers directly referenced each other.

Individual Interpretations

First, teachers' individual interpretations are discussed all while acknowledging that teachers impress onto and upon each other through their intra-actions.

The Tropical Island with the Iceberg. As mentioned, teachers were most drawn to the tropical island with the iceberg which represented similar yet diverse understandings among participants. Whether union or grassroots activism, teachers felt that the iceberg embodied the extensive work involved in activism that is often unseen by others including teacher colleagues or the public. Christina explained, "What you see on the surface is just like a fraction of like the work that actually goes into what we did to get to that baby step, right?" For Logan and April, the island meant more local understandings (i.e., local association involvement, community-level activism) compared to the iceberg which represented larger perspectives (i.e., political ideology, social justice). Alternatively, Logan described the island as representing local issues and the iceberg as symbolizing provincial-level concerns. April extended upon this idea by explaining that the

iceberg, which sits farther outside our consciousness due to its relatively abstract nature, is not necessarily "bad" but contains some unknowns. Moreover, she believed that if teachers do not get off their own island and become more unified, teaching as a profession would become splintered leaving teachers more easily taken advantage of.

The Road Signs. The road signs were an oft chosen image in relation to teacher union activism. Teachers viewed the road signs as an indication of the diverse opinions of union members particularly with reference to geographical diversity. Lily explained, "Some are saying 'stop'. Some are saying 'go'. Some are saying 'left'. Some are saying 'right'." Paul agreed that union activism was more complicated because the union must consider different points of view. He indicated, "It can feel very hard to settle on an agreed upon direction." Another connection made to the signs was more tacit with one participant imagining the rules, structures, and legislation within the union's purview. Overall, teachers expressed that union activism is less responsive because teachers' unions must meet diverse teacher members' needs and abide by rules and structures.

The Match in the Tides. Though only Amanda referenced this image, it is worth highlighting as her insights drew attention to the importance of building alliances with the public. Alluding to social movement theory, she explained how a spark (i.e. action) holds the potential to spread and ignite a larger movement. She also pointed out that activism has the potential to move people in undesired ways so paying attention to public discourse is necessary to advocate and respond effectively. Amanda detailed:

> The picture that resonates with me as a teacher activist is the one with the match. You have to be really aware of what's going on in the tide to keep that spark going. And you're never totally sure when it's going to resonate with the public, and [if] it's going to be the thing that unites action against your cause, but definitely have to be aware of that water and going with the flow of it. But then also knowing when to strike and when that spark is going to kind of set the rest of it on fire, so that other people are with you on the activism, because you want the public with you.

In Amanda's comments, both strategic activism and emotional evocations are evident where teacher activists must attend to public discourses and remain sensitive to shifts in tone.

Collective Interpretations

In response to the following images, teachers openly referenced other participants' viewpoints in a process of group meaning making.

The Winding Staircase. In viewing the winding staircase, Lily observed that the small steps represented the process by which teachers become an activist. She pointed out that "you can see the treads on the stairs aren't very high and I think that's often the way to go... when we're working on growing teachers practice towards equity, building their resilience, so they have the resources to be more politically active…". She also stated that "I like that sparkly stuff in the background. That's nice because sometimes activism can feel angry" and "sometimes you have to dig through the anger to find some of the light and support people to get there." For Lily, the sparkles represented a positive aura which was important because she believed that "anger doesn't change minds."

Eric, a newer teacher, alluded to Lily stating that "I didn't notice that the steps were so short... that's cool." Eric explained that with "the staircase, I felt like definitely a sense of wonder and hope being brought into grassroots settings where there are people with a lot more knowledge and expertise." He also mentioned the sparkles but interpreted them differently than Lily. Eric explained:

The kind of sparkly letters that drew me to thinking about the information that I was being, you know, like led into this like secret knowledge. I was like, ahhh, finally, like a place where I can learn things. But it seems so mysterious that it was like… Why do I have to feel like I'm, you know, going up this mysterious staircase where I'm doing something that maybe I shouldn't be doing?

Both Lily and Eric drew different yet related interpretations. Lily, who was the more experienced teacher, adopted the view of a mentor or coach within a local school setting. Eric, on the other hand, was interested in learning more about activism but imagined it occurring in grassroots settings and conveyed some trepidation.

The Castle-Like Doors with the Sliver of Light. Regarding the castle-like doors with the sliver of light, teachers felt a sense of hope and determination despite obstacles and challenges. Dwayne explained that:

> The one with the big heavy gates is probably the one that I see as the grassroots stuff that we've done, where there is clearly something bright on the other side… this is what we are aiming for and that's the focus. And even though it's a very narrow piece in the illustration, it's what we are able to stay focused on, and kind of ignore the fact that there are huge doors in the way. That there are significant powers who do not want to hear what we have to say and are pushing back.

In response, Violet stated, "What Dwayne said was very true like the [political] party that we now have in power today, it is very much like closed doors towards us reaching our goal." In this case, Violet made a similar analogy but was more specific in identifying the existing government as a seemingly insurmountable obstacle represented by the large, heavy door.

The Moose in the Pool. A final image that evoked deeper feelings was the moose in the pool. For Christina, the moose connected with her sense of isolation among her colleagues since she is the one who speaks out. She perceived herself as different and wondered if her colleagues felt like she did not deserve to belong in the same pool as everyone else. Following Christina, Violet remarked that she had viewed the moose in a different way. She saw the moose as the one who was able to keep their head up out of the water when the others were struggling. This reframing of the moose, whether intended or not, had the potential to shift Christina's framing of herself from isolated to empowered. Conversely, it may have also influenced Violet in realizing how she, or others, might feel isolated because of their individual activism.

Follow-Up Survey Reflections

Following focus group meetings, participants were invited to voluntarily provide anonymous feedback via an open-ended Qualtrics survey. Teachers were asked about their general thoughts, if they had any additional points, and how they felt about meeting intra-actions. Though only three participants replied, responses were beneficial. One teacher wrote that "I really enjoyed connecting and hearing everyone else's experiences, both good and bad, with their activism in

education. I left the meeting with hope that there are other people out there fighting the good fight." Next, referencing the photo-elicitation activity, another participant expressed that "the picture activity was my favourite and was a great way to get to the heart of what people thought about different avenues of advocacy. For me, it was a great way to get to the heart of what I really thought." Teacher participants' positive assertions demonstrated that photo-elicitation can be a productive and promising way to explore teachers' cognitive and emotional orientations towards activism. Their expressed ease and engagement supported a more meaningful study analysis as portrayed in the discussion section next.

Discussion

Photo-elicitation focus groups allowed teachers to intra-act in assemblages imbued with affective intensities. Study findings are explored through a poststructural theory of alliances, assemblages, and affect by attending to the always becoming identities of teachers. To begin, Diani's (2000) network theory of (new) social movements is presented to imagine how teachers uproot and shift from entrenched political cleavages to explore novel alliances. Next, findings are explored through assemblage theory to consider actual or virtual entities in focus groups as assemblages. Finally, teachers' interpretations are examined through an affective lens to reflect upon teachers' passions, evocations, and relationality.

Alliances: Diani's Network Theory of (New) Social Movements

Teachers' attitudes around union versus grassroots activism align with how Diani (2000) envisioned political cleavages where institutions like teacher unions find it more difficult to uproot from entrenched political beliefs to build new alliances. As teacher participants indicated, grassroots activism offers a less fixed platform to respond expediently while still maintaining previous allegiances (e.g., teacher unions, political parties). Teachers can begin to create new spaces or cleavages beyond established ones to influence change; these shifts, while incremental, have the potential to chip away at the larger global neoliberal assemblage in favour of more equitable arrangements. In examining Ontario advocates resistance to neoliberal reform efforts, Farhadi (2024) similarly stressed the value of moving beyond teachers' labour union activism to disrupt neoliberalism and, instead, more generally explore how "public education advocates" (p. 103) who seek structural changes function amid non-linear social networks. Teachers in this study likewise embraced more diverse activist spaces and felt empowered and invigorated in discovering new avenues for performing political action. As Niesz (2018) noted, teachers are increasingly realizing the importance of influencing social and cultural change throughout North America for progressive educational change.

Evidently, neither education nor activism exists in a vacuum. Therefore, one must also consider how entities such as people, ideas, ideologies, or emotions intra-act with the potential for more equitable ways of being. To understand this commitment further, teachers' activism can usefully be envisioned within the larger political context.

Assemblage Theory

The focus groups among Saskatchewan teacher activists suggest an assemblage and circuitry that involves intra-actions across geographical distance including (but not limited to): digital technologies for communication (e.g., computers, cell phones, Zoom web conferencing); images (e.g., Dixit cards); bodies (e.g., teachers, teacher activists, researcher); institutions (e.g.,

the STF, the government); actions (advocacy, mentoring, coaching, learning); ideas (e.g., opinions, recollections, imaginings); and emotions (e.g., anger, exasperation, distress, hope, determination, empowerment). In fact, teachers alluded to the infinite and obscure complexities of political assemblages in the iceberg containing countless unknowns, the winding staircase exuding a feeling of mystique, and the heavy, castle-like door casting a glimpse of light. Harding et al. (2018) described an assemblage as having the potential to "[move] beyond the familiar as well as the social and affective dimensions of physical copresence... and thinking in this way (about assemblages) helps us also imagine the energies and intensities that made things happen" (p. 16). In other words, within assemblages, teachers connect on levels beyond the cognitive and social to connections across space and movement as an affective accumulation of the interweaving of ideas and actions. Resultantly, intangible energies and intensities drive teachers to take collective action (e.g., union involvement, community activism, mentoring, waving placards, posting social media content, participating in this study) based on shared goals.

Though teachers' interpretations diverged dependent upon personal experiences (e.g., urban versus rural, new versus experienced), common understandings developed. Teachers agreed that union activism is less responsive because the STF must accommodate the diverse views of the teacher membership and abide by institutional governance and legislative requirements. Grassroots activism, on the other hand, allows teachers the autonomy to act without elaborate consultation as they attempt to generate public support and influence social change. Through intra-acting, common values, beliefs, and goals were articulated by teachers thereby creating circuitries of newness representing the potential for something different. Harding et al. (2018) suggested that "building alliances where such emergent feelings of commonality are linked together" (p. 25) might be what is required to counter widespread oppression and injustice. For teachers advocating for equitable, high-quality education, building alliances is necessary to humanize the educational experience (Freire, 2018).

As conversations unfolded in focus groups, ideas recurred (e.g., teachers' determination and empowerment, a desire for learning, greater autonomy through grassroots means) with the potential to shift participants' views (i.e., teacher identities) and expand upon teachers' capacities (i.e., new knowledge or skills). New capacities, according to DeLanda (2006), can subsequently be used in existing or novel assemblages where bodies then have the potential to affect upon others. For teachers seeking to influence significant political change in the interest of the common good, assemblage theory inspires a sense of empowerment in viewing society as complex and ever evolving. Through activist involvements and related intra-actions, potential for learning, inter-personal relationality, and affective intensities exist. As such, teachers have the capacity to build more equitable assemblages through the always becoming of teachers' identities and ideally (but never indeterminably) shifting towards activist (Sachs, 2000) or advocacy teacher professionalism identities (Anderson & Cohen, 2015).

Affect Theory

Beyond intellectual understandings, teachers emoted through their narratives in response to the images. For example, teachers exuded affective intensities in relation to ideas, ideologies, values, and beliefs as they negotiated individual and collective interpretations of teacher activism. Ahmed (2015) and Gould et al. (2019) suggested that intangible emotions often bring like-minded people together with the desire to act towards achieving a shared vision and goals. When teachers can connect on a deeper level by drawing upon more senses and tapping into other parts of their

consciousness, affective intensities become more pronounced. In this section, the most prevalent affective intensities (i.e., care, empathy, trust, isolation, hope, empowerment, risk) are presented to ponder how teachers' profound desires motivate individuals and collectives to pursue shared goals.

Though difficult to detect, affective intensities were most evident through teachers' intra-actions as they shared and built upon each other's metaphorical interpretations. In doing so, teachers demonstrated trust, care, and empathy as they revealed their perspectives in response to the images. Farhadi (2024) suggested that mutual trust and reciprocity are the building blocks of solidarity and, citing bell hooks, that love and solidarity serve as an antidote to the heartbreak of neoliberalism. In this study, heartbreak was ostensibly evidenced through teachers' feelings of isolation, lack of autonomy, and a hostile political environment. However, echoing how Farhadi depicted love and solidarity as an antidote to neoliberalism, resilient teacher activists can find ways to cope with challenges; for example, participants shared moments of solace, connection, empowerment, and comradery. Intra-actions in the PEFGs represented mutual relationality as affective intensities (e.g., political understandings, shared values) circulated and accumulated in the virtual space. Gould (2012) encapsulated how affect can be utilized by activist collectives for social change:

> Organized with the goal of bringing about other realities, [social movements and other activist formations] often counter the common sense, the habits of feeling, and the ways of living that prevail in a given time and place. More than challenging what is, they offer something else: the ongoing intra-actions of participants produce sentiments, ideas, values, practices that manifest and encourage new modes of being. Along with being instrumental to social change, activist spaces are, in that sense, important sites of unlearning and learning. (p. 352)

In the study, collective meaning-making—through learning and unlearning—occurred when teachers referenced each other with respect to the moose as isolated or empowered and the sparkles of the winding staircase as hope or learning. These intra-actions represented the potential for teachers to alter each other's perceptions and create new, more equitable social arrangements.

Like trust and empathy, affective economies such as isolation, empowerment, or hope have the potential to draw teachers together in collective normative understandings. Though connecting over a perceptibly negative feeling like isolation may seem peculiar, Cvetkovich (2012), argued against restricting what they referred to as *public feelings* (i.e., a group's shared emotions) to positive or negative binaries. For instance, teachers bonded over feelings of empowerment and hope (i.e., the light, the match, sparkles) where light meant hope and, unsurprisingly for teachers, hope meant knowledge and learning. Teachers also connected over senses of isolation, trepidation, and fear (i.e., difference, darkness, water currents, the large gate) which represented activist barriers, risks, or unknowns. Exhibiting empathy across a range of feelings, teachers' visceral expressions in response to the images generated a sense of solidarity which is needed to support the kind of sustained activism required for resisting and overcoming neoliberalism. Referencing PEFGs particularly, Weber (2007) explained that:

> [T]his ability of images to evoke visceral and emotional responses in ways that are memorable, coupled with their capacity to help us empathize or see another's point of view and to provoke new ways of looking at things critically, makes them powerful tools for researchers… (p. 47)

Thus, photo-elicitation is also a potentially valuable way to generate accumulative affective intensities among teachers resulting in affective economies (i.e., the development of social or cultural norms) foundational to a burgeoning alliance. Teachers' intra-actions create the potential for teachers to uproot and shift from existing political cleavages to form new alliances with more equitable intentions. For any social movement to make progress in pursuing its goals, Snow et al. (2004) emphasized that "persistent, almost nagging, collective action" (p. 11) and temporal continuity is necessary. Therefore, for teachers fighting for equitable and inclusive public education systems, building solidarity based on shared goals and mutual trust is crucial. Adopting a poststructural lens which orients otherwise opens up much needed spaces of hope for activists seeking progressive educational change. Therefore, whether through union or grassroots activism, teachers can impress upon each other to create the social change necessary to not only fight for public education at large, but as Maharaj et al. (2024) underscored, to also address marginalizations in public school systems so all children truly belong.

Conclusion

In considering the valuable perspectives of ten Saskatchewan teacher activists in PEFGs, this paper provides a unique way of exploring how teacher activists intellectually and viscerally perceive educational activism both within and beyond the union. A poststructural theory of alliances, assemblages, and affect demonstrated how teacher activists intra-act and affect upon each other thereby developing new capacities as well as accumulated affective intensities in networked alliances with the potential and intention to act. Because a poststructural orientation adopts processual understandings and less fixed notions of societal structures, a theory of alliances, assemblages, and affect is hopeful and empowering. That is, change is inevitable, so teachers' individual and collective actions and intra-actions have great potential to influence progressive social change.

Regarding the study's methodology, photo-elicitation proved a provocative and engaging way to explore teachers' orientations towards activism considering teachers' vivid responses and positive testimonials in the feedback survey. Potential limitations of the study were its generality regarding participant descriptors, but this was necessary as many teachers perceived potential risks (e.g., loss of job, social stigma) in speaking out publicly against the Saskatchewan education system. Additionally, Saskatchewan has a relatively small population where seemingly everyone knows everyone, so anonymity was particularly crucial. In fact, because confidentiality was prioritized, teachers were candid and their extensive experiences as advocacy teacher professionals was apparent allowing for rich elicitations.

Future research might explore teachers' intra-actions in relation to specific political actions or events. It could also look at focus group participants' affective intra-actions by moving beyond spoken language and examining other social cues such as body language or vocal intonation. Engaging in empirical and theoretical research on teacher activism is critical as neoliberalism expands globally and teachers are increasingly called upon to counter detrimental education reforms in defending public education to preserve democratic educational values (Carr & Thésée, 2019; Darder, 2019). Utilizing poststructuralism, the study offered an innovative approach to explore the complex dynamics surrounding teachers' always becoming as activists. "Being a teacher" is quickly becoming synonymous with "being an activist" as teachers courageously lead the way as defenders of socially just, public education systems globally.

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