

**THE DILEMMA OF ACTIVIST TEACHERS: VISUAL  
METAPHORS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CONFLICTED  
PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Research has shown that teachers' professional identities are frequently represented as and conceived to be fixed and free of conflict. Semi-structured interviews and visual metaphors were used in this qualitative study to investigate the perspectives of self-described activist teachers regarding their experiences with integrating their activism into their professional practice and identity. The theoretical framework for this study was informed by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte, Debra Skinner, and Carol Cain. The research findings described how activism and professionalism are reconciled by participants who see themselves as both activists and professional educators, despite the tensions between these commitments. The intensity with which 'professional expectations' were felt to constrain and limit both the character and the educational value of activism suggests, however, that there may be considerable value in enlarging opportunities for teachers to talk about the importance of activism in their professional practices and identity-development.

## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my mother and father who provided constant support in countless ways throughout this entire process. I would also like to thank my brother for teaching me the importance of determination and persistence in reaching one's life goals. Finally, to all my friends who have blossomed into family, I greatly appreciated your kindness and for making the many cups of tea that sustained me while writing.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I began this study because of the many discussions I had with fellow teachers as an elementary teacher, as well as with other graduate student in the Faculty of Education. Through these intersecting conversations, I became aware that many teachers continuously struggled to integrate their personal beliefs within their professional practice and identity. However, teachers' professional identities are frequently represented as and conceived to be fixed and free of conflict.

Indeed, upon further research the complexity of teachers' professional identities is often concealed behind stereotypical representations portraying teachers in a static and singular nature (Weber and Mitchell, 1995). Interactions with the media contribute to images of teachers and understandings of what it means to be a teacher that are limited (Goodlad, 1984; Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Students' experiences and observations of teachers result in the creation of lasting images of teachers and beliefs about what it means to be a teacher. Britzman (1986) claimed that these images are often uncomplicated because teachers rarely share their struggles with students. Through curriculum, pedagogy and internships, teacher education influences and narrows student teachers' understandings of what it means to be a teacher, and a good teacher (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001; Segall, 2002).

As outlined above these narrow and simplistic representations of teachers, did not reflect my experience as an elementary teacher. Therefore I decided to investigate some of the tensions, contradictions and dilemmas involved in the construction and perception of professional identities. This required close listening to teachers' voices and lived

experiences. In order to better understand this phenomenon of conflicted professional identities, I chose to work with teachers who saw themselves as both activists and professional educators. These self-described activist teachers were committed to creating social change through their professional practices. The objectives of these activist teachers appear to further the aims of equity, and are in resistance to the reality of schools.

Various scholars have observed how schools often serve to maintain and promote the status quo. For example in 1974, Martin Carnoy wrote, *Education as Cultural Imperialism*. In this classic analysis Carnoy argued that schooling did not “offset social inequalities” (1974, p. 3). Carnoy (1974) made the case that the role of formal education is “consistent with the goals of imperialism: the economic and political control of people in one country by the dominant class in another. The imperial powers attempted, through schooling, to train the colonized for roles that suited the colonizer” (p. 3). Carnoy (1974) contended that in dominant countries, schools also function to “develop and maintain...an inequitable and unjust organization of production and political power” (p. 3).

More recently, critical social theorists such as Bob Mullaly and Michael Apple have explored how power, oppression, and hegemony operate within institutions such as schools. Mullaly (2002) explains the concept of cultural imperialism, which occurs when “the dominant group universalizes its experience and culture and uses them as the norm” (p. 46). Mullaly (2002) reinforces Carnoy’s (1974) work by claiming that institutions such as schools are one way in which cultural imperialism is reinforced in society, resulting in oppression at the personal, cultural and structural level. Similarly, Apple

(2004) refers to the institution of school as a mechanism for social control since it reproduces dominant ideologies in society. Apple contends that through the curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation activities in classrooms, schools “play a significant role in preserving if not generating these inequalities” (p. 62).

School, according to these theorists, results in inequality, oppression and maintaining the status quo in society. However, the objectives of activist teachers appear to contradict those outcomes. This dissonance inevitably leads to investigating how the participants integrate their activism into their professional practices. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the “dynamic tension” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 79) between teachers’ personal commitment to social change and the professional expectations and objectives of the institutions they work for, and how this creates conflicted notions of professional identity. This study’s aim was achieved by inviting a group of activist teachers to speak openly about their educational experiences. To this end, I sought to explore the various ways in which the participants experienced conflict between institutional expectations and their personal beliefs and commitments. This study has sought, then, to investigate the following questions: How do activist teachers experience and understand their professional identities? What do their understandings and experiences tell us about how professional identity is constructed? How do the participants integrate their activism into their professional practice?

### Order of Presentation

Chapter 2 provides a review of related literature exploring identity and, specifically, the professional identity of teachers, to establish the case for the study and

set out its theoretical frame of reference. Chapter 3, describes and explains the methodology of this study, including the procedures used to select participants, conduct interviews and analyze the data. Ethical considerations and consent procedures are also outlined. Chapter 4 describes the participants and data generated from interviews and photo elicitation. The first part of the chapter introduces each of the research participants, to allow the reader some salient background on the teachers whose voices are heard. The second section presents a comprehensive description of the analysis of interview data, and of the two broad themes, disconnection and renegotiation, which inflect the voices of the participants. Finally, Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the findings, and concludes with personal observations and suggestions for future research.



## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*“Observers of the twentieth and the onset of the twenty-first century will note how these times are distinguished by a peculiar passion for identity” (Yon, 2000, p. 1).*

### Theoretical Framework for the Analysis of Teacher Identity

In this study, identity is perceived through a sociocultural perspective that is informed by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte, Debra Skinner, and Carol Cain (1998). These scholars were selected to gain an understanding of how identity is formed in cultural, historical and institutional settings. These scholars’ writing on identity will support and situate this study’s theoretical framework for identity. This conceptualization of identity formation informs this study of teachers’ professional identities.

#### *Dialogic*

Bakhtin (1981) describes the construction of identity as dialogic since, in his view, it is through the process of being addressed by the world and answering back to it that identity is formed. Therefore, identity or as Bakhtin refers to it as self, “ ‘authors’ the world-including itself and others” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 173). In this way, individuals author their identities through the influence of others, which become intertwined with their personal intentions. Identity can be seen as a position which creates meaning from both a “position that is ‘addressed’ by and ‘answers’ others and the world (the physical and cultural environment)” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 173).

A variety of voices address the self, one of these according to Bakhtin (1981) is “authoritative discourse” which involve the “voices of authority” (p. 344) that are “fused with political and institutional power” (p. 343). Authoritative discourses can be articulated by governments, schools, and places of worship through both “talk and text(s)” (Gillborn, 1995, p. 19) including government policies, mandated curriculum, and holy books. Through years of exposure and repetition, authoritative discourses have the power to shape our thinking and identities often without our awareness of their influence (Beynon, 2008).

In contrast, an individual’s “internally persuasive” discourse is “tightly interwoven with one’s own words” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345). By this, Bakhtin is referring to how individuals form their personal understandings of the world based on their lived experiences. These discourses allow us to “tell things in our own words, with our own accents, gestures, and modifications” (Emerson & Holquist, 1981, p. 424). An individual’s internally persuasive discourse is also dialogic in that it engages in a “struggle with other internally persuasive discourses...[it] is *not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal new *ways to mean*,” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 346).

Answering back to the world, or the “space of authoring” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 169) is not a choice, “but the form of the answer is not predetermined” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 272). Being addressed by authoritative discourses and others’ internally persuasive discourses shapes the identities of individuals. Agency comes from individuals operating creatively in response to the discourses and practices they encounter.

Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic perspective on identity emphasizes the struggle between authoritative and internally persuasive discourses in the formation of identity. This approach to identity was appropriate for this research that seeks to investigate how activist teachers construct their professional identities. This study will attempt to explore the negotiation between the authoritative discourses of the institutions in which they teach and the participants' internally persuasive discourses. Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic insights will be used to investigate the dynamic process by which activist teachers acquire and develop their professional identities.

### *Figured Worlds*

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) draw on Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic perspective of identity construction to develop the concept of "figured worlds" which is a key conceptual tool in this study's theorization of identity. Identity, they contend, can be understood as a product of participation in a variety of "figured worlds". Holland et al. (1998) define a "figured world" as a social reality that is:

Socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents who engage in a limited range of meaning acts or changes of state as moved by a specific set of forces. (p. 52)

In this way, the concept of figured worlds allows for the recognition of multiple identities of subjects who participate in numerous social settings at any given time. Beynon (2008) lists various settings that can be conceived of as figured worlds, such as the local

community, schools and professional associations. Simply put figured worlds are social settings that have specific expectations for behaviours. In these settings, individuals are expected to participate in accordance with their roles. Graue (2005) writes that figured worlds, “provide a way of knowing and being known – they set up our sense making, provide boundaries for our decisions, and motivate evaluations of activities” (p. 160). Beynon (2008) explains that each figured world has its own discourses and this, “contributes to our construction of identities that are correspondingly multifaceted” (p. 30). The different discourses of figured worlds can lead to conflict in identity construction, since as Hall (1996) states, “Identities are constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses” (p. 4).

The concept of figured worlds draws upon Bakhtin’s dialogic perspective on identity since participation in various figured worlds results in competing and multiple discourses. Holland et al.’s (1998) definition of identity is, “the central means by which selves, and the sets of actions they organize, form and re-form over personal lifetimes and in the history of social collectivities” (p. 270). This definition emphasizes that identity is not formed in isolation, rather identities are formed in the contexts that they are embedded. The construction of identity is also revealed to be a continuous process.

### *Interconnected Identities*

Multiple identities in a single individual can be challenging imagery to conceptualize. In this regard, John Law (2004) suggests a metaphor that can be helpful. Law (2004) perceives identity, as outlined above, as a fractional object, which:

would be an object that was more than one and less than many. The metaphor draws on an elementary version of fractal mathematics. Thus a fractal line is one that occupies more than one dimension but less than two. (p. 62)

I found this metaphor useful in thinking about the abstract concept of identities in a concrete fashion. It acknowledges that identities are multiple yet it goes further to explain that these identities are not autonomous but also interconnected. In other words, the multiple identities that emerge from participation in numerous figured worlds are not independent entities, rather can be interrelated dimensions in an individual.

Taking my own identity as an example, Staples-the-researcher is not the same as Staples-the-teacher. I write and speak in different ways, in different circumstances, for different audiences. Conversely, neither is entirely distinct from the other, since Staples-the-teacher is integrated into Staples-the-researcher. Staples-the-researcher writes in ways that are informed and influenced by, but not reducible to, Staples-the-teacher. This distinction is important to note since multifaceted identities are not reducible to singularity. Haraway, (1991) referring to the ironic relationship between identity and identities:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. (p. 149)

As teachers inhabit multiple figured worlds that have competing discourses, the formation of multifaceted, fractal identities is important to consider and explore in relation to the participants' professional identities.

### *Narrative Perspective*

A narrative perspective on identity suggests that people use stories of their experiences to help them make sense of their lives (Olson, 1995). The process of selecting these stories can reveal what is significant to the teller (Burnett, 2006). As Olson (1995) explains “we author stories of our experience to explain ourselves to ourselves and to others” (p. 122). Similarly Maclure (1993) writes that, “identity should not be seen as a stable entity – something that people *have* – but as something they *use*, to justify, explain and make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to contexts in which they operate” (p. 312). This suggests that stories of experience can be a valuable way to explore the construction of professional identities since it is through stories that meaning can be attributed to what happens to individuals. Furthermore, it is consistent with a sociocultural interpretation that the formation of identities is an evolving process as new experiences offer opportunities to re-construct stories.

A narrative perspective acknowledges that stories are not objective accounts of reality, rather they may serve to highlight the personal values of the teller (Burnett, 2006). Stories are not only composed of personal narratives but also include authoritative discourses, which structure the practices and meanings of figured worlds. Beynon (2008) suggests the lived experiences of teachers can “reveal a great deal about the complexities of identity construction. They are a rich source of information about the diverse discourses...that are involved in this process” (p. 23). Therefore, stories of lived experiences narrated by activist teachers can uncover the complexity of professional identity and its construction.

As noted by the above scholars, the phenomenon of identity is multifaceted and dynamic. Law (2004) argues that when social science attempts to describe a complex phenomenon, “it tends to make a mess of it. This is because simple clear descriptions don’t work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent” (p. 2). Therefore, attempting to investigate the professional identities of activist teachers requires developing a set of methods that “give up on simplicities” (Law, 2004, p. 2).

### Conceptions of Teachers’ Identities

In contrast to the established complexity of identity, the general perception of teacher identity is frequently represented to be simple and one-dimensional. This misconception could be a result of various socializing influences that produce a simple “story” of what it means to be a teacher. These socializing influences include interactions with stereotypical images of teachers (Barone, Meyerson, & Mallette, 1995; Goodlad’s 1984; Sandefur & Moore, 2006; Weber and Mitchell, 1995), students’ rudimentary observations and perceptions of teachers (Britzman, 1991; Collay, 1998; Haritoe, 2004; Everhart, 1983), the authoritative discourses of teacher education (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001; Segall, 2002;) and of the institution of school ((Atkinson, 2004; Burnett, 2006; Dillabough, 1999; Jenkins, 1996) can all socialize individuals including teachers into increasingly narrow understandings of what it means to be a teacher. The majority of research looks at each socializing influence independently and fails to explore what the integration of influences might have on the perception of teacher identity.

*Popular Images of Teachers*

The complexity of teacher-identity is often concealed behind stereotypical representations portraying teachers in a static and singular nature (Weber and Mitchell, 1995). These one dimensional profiles of teachers are reinforced and disseminated through popular culture in the forms of print and visual media including television shows, movies, books, magazines, newspapers, music, cartoons, and music videos, (Alsup, 2006; Sandefur & Moore, 2006). Thus, before one enters a classroom, previously constructed images of teaching and teachers are formed through interactions with the media. As Weber and Mitchell (1994) explain, “Even before children begin school, they have already been exposed to a myriad of images of teachers, classroom and schools which have made strong and lasting impressions on them” (p.2).

Barone, Meyerson, and Mallette (1995) analyzed the images of teachers in children’s literature and found two types of teachers were portrayed. The more prevalent was that of a traditional teacher who was depicted as mean, strict, rigid, not sensitive to the needs of students, and usually disliked by them. The second type of teacher, rarely portrayed, was non-traditional, child-centered and valued by students. This strict binary interpretation of teachers allowed Barone, et al (1995) to observe that, “the authors of children’s books often negate the complexity of teaching and learning” (p.260).

Barone, et al. (1995) also discovered a paradox in the enculturation of teachers, “On one hand, teachers are valued as contributing members of society; on the other hand, teachers are frequently portrayed in the media and literature as inept and not very bright.” (p. 257). This contradiction is apparent in media coverage that also reflects a perception of teacher identity in which teachers are either presented as heroes or villains (Alsup,



2006). Alsup (2006) writes that televisual media represent teachers either as incompetent, immoral failures, who for instance engage in improper sexual relationships with students, or as heroes, “in ‘human interest’ segments that sentimentalize how they have worked overtime, or spent their own money, or otherwise sacrificed for their students’ benefits” (p.24). These caricatures are demonstrative of the often shallow, simple perspective of teachers’ professional identities that is portrayed in the media.

Cultural stereotypes of teachers has more recently been researched by Sandefur and Moore (2004), who also conducted a content analysis of images of teachers in children’s picture books examining 62 titles and 96 images. Their findings demonstrated that teachers were overwhelmingly portrayed as white women whose personalities and behaviours remained “static, flat, and unchanged” (Sandefur & Moore, 2004, p. 48) throughout the course of the story. Sandefur and Moore (2004) are concerned that repeated exposure to stereotypical representations of teachers as negative and narrow can ultimately shape a “worldview” about teachers that can have lasting impressions on students.

The power of these simplified representations of teachers can be further demonstrated in a study conducted by Weber and Mitchell (1995) that asked participants from diverse backgrounds to draw a teacher, resulting in their collecting six hundred such images. Their analysis revealed that many drawings portrayed teachers as female, Caucasian and frequently included, “ ‘markers’ such as blackboards, desks, apples, pointers, maths, and homework” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 18). Their study of the prevalence of stereotypical images of teachers in popular culture demonstrates how

media representations reinforce misconceptions of teacher identity as one dimensional, static and unproblematic.

These results are reminiscent of Goodlad's (1984) study where students and teachers from over one thousand American schools were asked to draw teachers. The majority of drawings depicted teachers who were typically white, woman standing in front of a blackboard or desk lecturing the class. The similarity of the results is an indication of how firmly entrenched and dominant the stereotypical images of teachers are.

Interactions with the media can create construct images of teachers and understandings of what it means to be a teacher that are narrow (Goodlad, 1984; Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). As already noted, teachers' professional identities are often categorized to fit within simplistic profiles that disguise the complexity of teaching and being a teacher (Alsup, 2006; Barone, et al., 1995). As a teacher researcher the oversimplification of teachers' professional identities in the media provided a strong incentive to look further into the construction of professional identity.

### *Student Perceptions of Teachers*

Teaching is not considered to be a complex undertaking by students and stemming from this misconception is the faulty inference that teacher identity is likewise free of conflict (Britzman, 1991; Collay, 1998; Everhart, 1983; Haritoes, 2004). Britzman (1991) attributes this misconception to the "overfamiliarity of the teaching profession" (p. 3) that is the result of years of classroom experience. Students' experiences and observations result in the creation of lasting images of teachers and beliefs about what it means to be a teacher. Britzman (1986) claims that these images are often uncomplicated

because “it is a rare teacher who lends students insight into his/her teaching struggles” (p. 445, as quoted in Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 2).

Britzman’s (1986) claim is supported by an ethnographic study conducted in Everhart’s (1983) classic study of a junior high school that discovered students’ perception of a teacher’s job primarily consists of distributing and evaluating work. Everhart describes the teacher’s world from the students eyes as, “straightforward, and linear, hardly complex at all” since the students “had little, if any, conception of teachers planning lessons, debating alternatives of what to teach, agonizing over grading, the treatment of a student...or anything like that” (1983, p.74). The classroom experiences and observations made as students contribute to a perception of teaching that frames teacher identity as uncomplicated. Much of this seems salient more than three decades on.

Collay’s (1998) more recent study researching the life histories of new teachers revealed that their lived experiences as students “illuminated their conceptions about teacher role” (p. 248). Participants in the study shared how their previous teachers became models of future teaching practices that they sought to emulate. The participants recalled different events experienced as students that impacted their construction of what it means to be a teacher. Collay (1998) suggests that learning how to teach should require “one to unpack years of experiences as a student” (p. 253) and yet this is often not the case.

Haritoe’s (2004) study explored how teaching candidates perceived the challenges of teaching and the role of the teacher. The participants in that study had firm beliefs about what good teaching entails and unrealistic understandings of the role of the teacher.

Haritoe (2004) interpreted these idealistic and naïve perspectives of teacher candidates as being the result of prior beliefs and experiences of when they were students. Teacher candidates were found to lack knowledge about how schools are organized and the politics within a school.

Similarly Flores (2006) discovered that novice teachers lacked knowledge about the reality of teaching. Novice teachers were often overwhelmed by the amount and variety of duties they were required to perform. The participants acknowledged that teaching was more demanding and complex than they had previously thought it would be.

The worldview of teachers formed during the time spent “on the other side of the desk” can have lasting impressions on the beliefs of future educators (Britzman, 1991; Colley, 1998; Haritoe, 2004). Haritoe (2004) maintains that prior experiences and beliefs can serve as “an interpretative lens through which candidates attempt to focus, see, visualize, perceive, characterize, understand and ultimately resolve their teaching concerns” (p. 640-641). Unfortunately, the beliefs formed by prior experiences as students in the classroom often only offer a limited and narrow interpretation of what it means to be a teacher (Everhart, 1983). When future teachers are guided by naïve and unrealistic beliefs about teaching and being a teacher, they can be resistant to change, overwhelmed and disillusioned by the realities of the classroom (Flores, 2006).

#### *Socializing Influence of Teacher Education*

As previously explained, teacher education is not the first exposure of individuals to the idea of teaching or what it mean to be a teacher. However, Segall (2002) argues that teacher education plays “a significant role in shaping prospective teachers’ understandings of education, teaching, and learning by establishing parameters of the

actual, the possible, and the imaginable” (p. 167). It is important to explore how teacher education is involved in the process of constructing the professional identities of teachers.

Britzman (1991) uses case studies of student teachers to explore their struggles to construct professional identities in light of the constraints of past practices, normative discourses and cultural myths. Her research identified the internship portion of teacher education as having a strong socializing impact on student teachers. The supervising teachers in Britzman’s study, sometimes referred to as cooperating teachers, often imparted their own theoretical and practical orientations on student teachers by valuing particular practices over others.

Danielewicz (2001) conducted a qualitative study, over a three-year period, using interviews, observations and teaching experiences of six participants to explore the process of becoming a teacher. When entering the program, these participants drew upon a wide range of resources to imagine themselves as future teachers including prior experiences as students and previous former teachers as role models. The teaching practicum (‘internship,’) provided Danielwicz’s participants with many challenges and constraints. The primary obstacle was the pressure to mimic their cooperating teachers’ styles and beliefs in order to be perceived as legitimate and competent. This also suggests that teacher education programs, in particular the internships, socialize future educators by promoting particular and narrow notions of what it means to be a good teacher.

Segall’s (2002) qualitative study of student teachers in university classrooms led him to him to believe that:

Whether challenging or affirming what prospective teachers already believe, teacher education is always active in organizing, facilitating, and promoting

particular notions about what it means (and what one must undergo in order) to be considered a teacher. (p. 4).

Segall (2002) identified a specific discourse of planning and organization within teacher education which contributed to student teachers' developing an understanding that teaching is primarily about planning and organizing lesson plans with appropriate objectives and learning goals. Unfortunately, Segall (2002) found, " 'why' questions often get left behind, silenced, pushed to the margins of student teachers' thinking" (p. 64). Despite student teachers at the beginning of the program listing diverse adjectives to describe good teachers, such as "lively, energetic, nice, interesting and caring"; at the end of the program four out of five of the student teachers interviewed listed organization as most important attribute and preparedness as second. This seems to confirm Banks and Parker (1991) warning that, "by narrow attention to questions of what methods are most effective, focus is fixed on the means, or technology, of teaching and kept away from questions that could change the status quo" (p. 682).

Alsup's (2006) study investigates the development of teacher identity in six preservice English education students in the United States. Alsup explained the focus of her study, "was on six individual preservice teachers and how they expressed their developing identities to their mentors, themselves, their students, and me" (2006, p. 10). Alsup (2006) hypothesizes that creating a positive professional identity is necessary to becoming an effective teacher and this might be challenging for individuals whose personal beliefs don't align with the professional expectations of school. She contends that the professional identities of teachers are constructed through intersecting discourses between both personal and professional discourses.

The previous studies demonstrate the socializing influence of teacher education. Through curriculum, pedagogy and internships, teacher education shape student teachers understandings of what it means to be a teacher, and a good teacher (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001; Segall, 2002). This socializing influence can produce a narrow perspective on what it means to be a teacher, as Segall (2002) was disturbed to discover in his study when student teachers one week away from graduation were asked to describe what makes a good teacher. The participants did not mention any:

aspect of teaching that moves beyond the delivery of content or the technical aspects of teaching. None of the students mentioned ethics. None mentioned equal opportunity, equity, and social justice. None mentioned questioning, challenging, reform, and change...(p. 72)

Clark & Drudy (2006) believe that there is a need to, “acknowledge that student teachers tend to rely on ‘tried and tested’ strategies” (p. 383) and to explore the implications this might have on maintaining the status quo within schools. This research raises important questions about how teachers’ identities can be influenced and narrowed by teacher education. A review of the literature demonstrates an array of conflicting and differing conceptions of teachers’ professional identities.

#### *Institutional Expectations*

Danielewicz (2001) claims that, “institutions influence identity when individuals participate in established practices and in the myriad of interactions between members” (p. 123). Jenkins (1996) describes the influences of institutions as being “organized and organizing with respect to social identity and behaviour” (p. 124). The institution of

school is guiding by discourses which can be characterized, following Bakhtin, as authoritative discourses that influence the formation of professional identities of teachers (Atkinson, 2004, Burnett, 2006, Dillabough, 1999).

Dillabough (1999) contends that ‘professional identity’ within the institution of school often refers exclusively to a teacher’s ability to behave competently. Competence is frequently measured against standards of practice. These institutional norms of professional conduct create a particular form of authoritative discourse referred to as “standards discourse” (Atkinson, 2004, p. 380). Atkinson (2004) views teaching standards discourse as an idealization of teaching that is made to serve as the measure of effective teaching. As Carr (1989) criticizes the standards discourse within education:

Teaching is portrayed as an unreflective technical process and ‘quality’ is synonymous with meeting pre-specified standards through a system of supervision, inspection and control. Teaching quality may use the rhetoric of professionalism, but in reality this amounts to little more than the right to exercise limited technical discretion. (p. 2)

The standards discourse has also been criticized for creating narrow understandings of professionalism that limits teachers’ autonomy and identity (Jones & Moore, 1993). Furthermore, Jones & Moore (1993) argue that the standards discourse often serves to regulate behaviour and results in technical control of teachers’ work and attitudes. Similarly, Mahoney & Hextall (2000) warn that the abstract descriptions of teaching standards can often constrain teachers’ conceptions of professional practices by validating some and suppressing others. Coldron & Smith (1999) write that standards



often present a one-dimensional view of teaching which leads to prescribed and limited practices (p.724).

Coldon & Smith (1999) see the emphasis on teaching standards as a facet of a larger discourse of managerialism within schools. Burnett (2006) also writes that the institutional discourse of school has become orientated, “towards managerialism through which schools are encouraged to embrace the commercial values of efficiency and effectiveness” (p. 320). According to Burnett (2006) this managerialist discourse has resulted in an emphasis on competition and accountability that often takes the form of standardized and comprehensive testing of students. Mahoney & Hextall (2000) argue that this focus on competition and accountability detracts from and devalues the alternative aims of education.

As is currently the norm, the province of British Columbia has a detailed list of standards in its, *Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia* (February, 2008). The managerialist discourse is evident in its reference to terms such as “competence”, “professional efficacy”, and “accountable”. Furthermore, presently in British Columbia, the Ministry of Education “manages an assessment program that systematically gathers information from a variety of sources to determine the extent to which BC students are achieving knowledge, skills and understanding prescribed in the provincial curriculum” ([www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment), visited June 12, 2008). This is consistent with the literature, which reports an emphasis on competition and accountability in institutional discourse that manifests itself through comprehensive testing in schools (Burnett, 2006; Mahoney & Hexall, 2000).

This focus on comprehensive testing is apparent in the two main forms of province-wide assessment in British Columbia. At the elementary level, students in grades 4 and 7 are administered the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA). The FSA is intended to evaluate students' academic skills in the areas of reading comprehension, writing and numeracy. In secondary school, provincial exams are administered in grades 10, 11, and 12 to ensure the performance of graduating students. The Ministry of Education collects and reports the examination results of each school based on the distribution of grades ([www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment), visited June 12, 2008).

Research on the formation of teachers' professional identities has often concentrated either on the development of teacher's beliefs through prior experiences and the consequences these have on their understandings of being a teacher (Conelly & Clandinin, 1999; Flores, 2006; Haritoe, 2004; McCarthy 2001) or on institutional expectations that influence teachers' professional identities (Goodson & Cole, 1994; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Mahoney & Hextall, 2000). Little has been written about negotiating the tensions between these two, and what has been written focuses mainly on professional identity formation for beginning teachers (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore this largely unexamined negotiation between teachers' personal belief structures, in Bakhtin's terms, their "internally persuasive" discourses, and the professional expectations they encounter in teacher education, in teaching internships and through institutional expectations which constitute of the profession's "authoritative discourses" (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001). Such an analysis might lay the groundwork for a richer and more

dynamic conception of teachers' professional identities than is frequently represented in the media (Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Teachers at various stages of their career have been included in this study to investigate the formation of professional identity as an ongoing process.

The merging of the personal and the professional can be challenging and be a dilemma for individuals whose personal beliefs are not aligned with those of the institution where they work. The concept of dilemma, as Burbules (1997) characterizes it, is:

not just a difficult choice between two options, not just a balancing act between alternatives, not just our second-guessing about a decision we might have made differently, but a recognition of a deep intractable contradiction between competing aims and values (p. 66).

This disjuncture between the authoritative discourses in education and internally persuasive discourses of teachers led Alsop (2006) to astutely pose the questions:

How do you develop a teacher identity that is both accepted by the school and palatable to you? How do you find and keep a job without losing the essence of who you are? (p. xiv)

Following this line of inquiry, the main aim of this study has been to examine what professional identity means to a group of activist teachers. Activist teachers were selected as participants since their stated personal objectives were to further the aims of equity. These personal objectives, which can also be referred to as internally persuasive discourses, challenge the institutional imperatives of schools that various scholars observe seek to maintain the status quo in society. By getting a group of activist teachers

to speak openly about their lived experiences, I hoped to gain an understanding of the process of their professional identity construction. To that end, I explored the ways in which activist teachers' conceived of and understood their professional identity. This study has sought, then, to investigate the following questions:

- How do activist teachers experience and understand their professional identities?
- What do their understandings and experiences tell us about how professional identity is constructed?
- How do the participants integrate their activism into their professional practice?

The following chapter will describe and explain how these questions will be addressed in this study. The methodology of this study, including the procedures used to select participants, conduct interviews and analyze the data will be outlined.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND DECISIONS

*“Methodology is important because it frames the questions being asked, determines the set of instruments and methods to be employed, and shapes the analyses...Methods become the means and procedures through which the central problems are addressed” (Smith, 1999, p. 143)*

The following chapter will address and outline the methodology that was selected to explore the research questions being investigated. The methods employed to collect data will be presented and a rationale for their use will be provided. In particular, I will explain the procedures that I used to recruit and select participants, conduct interviews and analyze data. I will also summarize how I addressed issues surrounding ethics, confidentiality, and validity in the study.

Since this study focuses on the perceptions, experiences and professional identities of activist teachers, the qualitative research process, with its emphasis on the accumulation of rich descriptions of people’s lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) was deemed the appropriate research methodology. One of the strengths of qualitative methodology, according to Miles and Huberman (1994) is the, “strong potential for revealing complexity; such data provide ‘thick descriptions’ that are vivid, nested in real context” (p. 10). Another strength of qualitative research that Maxwell (1996) highlights is that it seeks to understand how participants make sense of their realities. These strengths and characteristics of qualitative research are especially

suited to the study's purpose of investigating the professional identities of activist teachers through exploring their perceptions and lived experiences.

### Phenomenology

To address my research question, I could have selected from a number of qualitative methods. I determined that phenomenological approach was the most suitable for its focus on studying "lived, human phenomena within the everyday social contexts in which the phenomena occur from the perspective of those who experience them" (Tichen & Hobson, 2002, 121) This can be done by asking "What is this or that kind of experience like?" with the aim of providing a deeper understanding of the significance of experiences (Van Manen, 1990). The objectives of phenomenology effectively integrate with this study's purpose to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of activist teachers. Tesch (1990) describes the phenomenological researcher as one who:

studies the ordinary 'lifeworld': they are interested in the way people experience their world, what it is like for them, how to best understand them. In order to gain access to others' experience phenomenologists explore their own, but also collect intensive and exhaustive descriptions from their respondents. (p. 68)

Merleau-Ponty (1962) defines phenomenology as, "the study of essences" (p. vii).

Van Manen (1990) provides clarification that:

By essence we do not mean some kind of mysterious entity or discovery, nor some ultimate core or residue of meaning. Rather the term 'essence' may be understood as a linguistic construction, a description of the phenomenon. (p. 39)

In light of the above, a critical element of this study is to gather rich descriptions of the lived experiences of the ways participants integrate their activism with their professional practice and identity.

There are, however, noteworthy divergences in conceptions of phenomenology's scope, content, and objectives. This results in the term 'phenomenology' being used by different scholars in different texts to mean different things. Therefore it is important to situate this study within the particular conception of phenomenology that was selected to address the research question.

In an attempt to gain access to and make sense of the lived experiences of activist teachers, I used the phenomenological methodology developed by the Dussanes School, and articulated by Giorgi (1975, 1985, 1992), and Van der Mescht (2004). This is an interpretative methodology that seeks to focus on how individuals make sense of their experience through an emphasis on concrete, lived experiences. Another characteristic of this interpretative phenomenology is its attempt to grasp and to represent the lived world of the participant (Van der Mescht, 2004), which Schutz defines as, "the world every individual takes for granted" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 485). This particular feature was appealing as this study seeks to describe the concrete, lived experiences activist teachers have within their schools, as a way to gain insight into how participants integrated activism into their professional practice and identity.

This school of phenomenology distinguishes itself from a Husserlian approach to phenomenology that seeks to discover the essence of an experience in order to discover absolute and universal truth. In contrast, interpretative phenomenological claims can never be true for more than the given case or situation and thus are modest in scope and

ambition (Van der Mescht, 1994). This distinction is important since the goal of this study was, similarly, limited in scope: to understand the experiences and perceptions of a specific group of individuals, and not to seek for any kind of universalizable insights.

Van Manen (1990) alerts the potential phenomenologist to “the problem that... our ‘common sense’ pre-understanding, our suppositions, assumptions and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge, predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon” (p. 47). This requires the researcher to adopt a position of “conceptual silence” (Stones, as quoted in Van der Mescht, 1994, p.5), and is also commonly referred to as “bracketing” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 47). This bracketing involves explicitly attempting to suppress prior theories, hunches and ideas in order to value all data equally and not make premature judgments.

Informed by this requirement of phenomenological methodology, in preparation for the study I wrote out my own views on teacher identity and activist teachers, my knowledge and my personal experiences as a teacher, and my expectations for the study, in my researcher’s journal. I crafted this initial researcher identity memo following using questions crafted by Maxwell (2005) with the aim of making explicit to myself how my identity, worldview, and goals might affect the study:

What prior experiences have you have that are relevant to your topic or setting?...How have these experiences, assumptions and goals shaped your decision to choose this project, and the way you are approaching this project? What potential advantages do you think the goals, beliefs, and experiences that you have described have for your study? What are the potential disadvantages do you think these may create for you, and how might you deal with them? (p. 28)



Additionally throughout the study, I attempted to keep a reflexive stance by writing detailed fieldnotes that were both descriptive and self-reflective (Creswell, 2003).

### Confidentiality and Ethical Issues

Rubin & Rubin (1995) define the realm of research ethics as “how to acquire and disseminate trustworthy information, in ways that cause no harm to those being studied” (p. 93). Although the definition of ethical research often refers to ‘doing no harm’, Denzin & Lincoln (1994) alert researchers that the possibility of harm always exists. House (1993) observes that “ethical difficulties are abstract and it is not always clear how they should be applied in given situations” (p. 168). In light of these insights, I took the following concrete measures to minimize the likelihood of harm.

### *Institutional Approval*

The university requires studies that intend to utilize human participants to submit an application detailing the purposes of the research, what the research requires of the participants, and the potential benefits and risks of the study. This study was categorized as “minimal risk” and approved by the Director of the Office of Research Ethics, on behalf of the Research Ethics Board in accordance with University policy.

### *Informed Consent*

Denzin & Lincoln (1994) define the concept of “informed consent” as “the subjects of research have the right to be informed that they are being researched and also the nature of the research” (p. 90). Berg (2004) further elaborates the meaning of informed consent as “the knowing consent of individuals to participate as an exercise of

their choice, free from any element of fraud, deceit, duress, or similar unfair or manipulation” (p, 64). Informed consent was met in this study by having participants sign a written consent form. The written consent form notified participants of what they were being asked to do, why, and their rights as participants. These rights include voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study at anytime. Since the consent forms record the participant’s names and contact information, these documents have been stored in a secure location.

### *Confidentiality*

Berg (2004) defines confidentiality as the “active attempt to remove from the research records any elements that might indicate the subjects’ identities” (p.65). Every effort was made throughout the process to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. The anonymity of participants was protected by having a pseudonym of their choice linked to their transcripts, field notes, visual metaphors, and audio recordings. The settings of the interviews were described generally as not to give away their exact locations since the names of places can make it possible to ascertain a participant’s identity. The written consent form also addressed issues of confidentiality. The participants were informed that their name would not appear in any transcript or report of research.

### *Selection and Recruitment of Participants*

A characteristic practice within phenomenological research is to investigate and try to describe a phenomenon from the perspective of a target group made up of individuals with extensive experience with the matter being examined (Van der Mescht,

1994). The non-probability sampling strategy of ‘purposive’ or ‘purposeful’ sampling, or criterion-based sampling, was employed in this study. Purposeful sampling is “based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most” (Merriam 1988, 48).

This necessitates the use of criterion sampling (Creswell, 1998) where the selection of participants is based on a set of pre-established criteria. However, phenomenology insists on description rather than interpretation during the collection of data this requires the researcher to adopt the position mentioned earlier, “conceptual silence” (Stones, as quoted in Van der Mescht, 1994, p.5). Furthermore, this study was interested in the participant’s *perceived* reality of being an activist teacher:

The perspective on the events and actions held by the people involved in them is not simply their account of these events and actions, to be assessed in terms of truth or falsity; it is a *part* of the reality that you are trying to understand. (Maxwell, 1996, p. 17)

From that understanding of informants’ accounts, I employed a minimalist approach when defining the criterion for this study. I sought participants who had the desire and ability to speak directly about the topic under investigation based on their lived experiences. The participants were identified as activist teachers because they self-identified as such, that is, as advocates for social change who recognize conflicts, contradictions and inequalities in society. Participants were sought across a broad spectrum of selection criteria included gender, subjects taught and years of experience. I determined that a maximum of five teachers could provide the rich description I required. Berg (2004) identifies as one limitation of purposeful sampling that it lacks wide

generalizability. Since the purpose of this study was not to generalize across larger populations this limitation was not considered to be significant.

The first activist teachers approached for this study were teachers participating in a Global Education diploma program. This decision to recruit participants from this source was that global education scholars generally advocate for teacher activism (Boulding, 1988; Gaudelli, 2003; Pike & Selby, 1988). This particular diploma program seemed promising as its stated topics of inquiry included advocating for social change and awareness of various social issues. To recruit the teachers from this group, I explained my research to the instructors and was given permission to give a presentation to the class. If they were interested, and if they self-described as an activist teacher, they provided me with their contact information and I sent a detailed e-mail outlining the study. I received the contact information from one teacher from this group who agreed to participate in the study.

Afterwards, I explored various provincial specialists' associations and discovered Peace and Global Educators (P.A.G.E). Within the brochure for P.A.G.E., there were references to its members as activist teachers and explanations of how the association promotes meaningful social activism. I approached the president of P.A.G.E. who gave permission for members of the organization to participate in the study and he e-mailed members of the executive committee to nominate members of P.A.G.E. who were activist teachers. I secured one participant from this source of recruitment.

The third, fourth and fifth participants were identified by key informants in education networks who worked with teachers and had knowledge of educators who were considered to be activists by their colleagues. These teachers were sent an e-mail

outlining the study, asked if they self-described as an activist teacher and would like to participate.

Table 1 Summary of Teacher Participants

Name	Gender	Subjects Taught	Years of Experience
Margaret	Female	French	3 years
Eleanor	Female	Alternative Social Studies	20+ years
Michelle	Female	Social Studies, English	20+ years
Anna	Female	Physical Education, Art	20 years Recently retired
Spartacus	Male	Social Studies	10 years classroom experience Recently retired from a provincial educational organization

#### Data Collection

I sought to conduct the research collaboratively with the research participants in this study. Rose (2001) describes the meaning of collaborative research as:

...doing work *with* your respondents or informants, rather than *on* them. It means acknowledging their own skills and understandings and being open to those skills and understanding mediating and altering your own. (p. 252)

As I set out to design a collaborative research study, through research I found my intent of collaboration mirrored in a movement “by critical and interpretative visual anthropologists, visual ethnographers, and visual sociologists, to reflexively engage with those they study” (Prosser 1998, p. 102). I determined that I wanted to incorporate the strategy of photo-elicitation as a method of data collection. The decision to incorporate a visual method of data collection was unexpected as I was initially under the impression

that phenomenology solely relies on loosely structured interviews. However, I was pleased to discover as I learned more about this methodology that “non-discursive artistic material is also commonly used for phenomenological human science” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 74).

### *Photo-elicitation & Visual Metaphors*

Photo-elicitation is a strategy that was initially described by Collier (1967) and later explained by Harper (2002) as, “based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (pg. 13). One strength of photo-elicitation is that “images can provide a means to remember and retell experiences that interview questions can not”, as pointed out by Warner, Karner & Karner (2005, p.179). Rose (2001) claims that images “also give research participants a means to reflect on aspects of their lives that they may usually have given little thought to” (p. 238). This aligns well with the purpose of the research questions, which seeks to explore how participants experience and perceive their professional identities.

As Rose (2001) suggests that photo-elicitation can be used in many different ways: “As with any simple idea, there are endless possible permutations” (p. 241). Therefore I employed photo-elicitation within this research process as a means to allow the participants “autonomous self-expression” (Rose, 2001, p. 241) and thus be a concrete step to increase the collaborative nature of my research and the richness of my data. I was also interested in gaining insight into thoughts and feelings that interviews might not allow access to.

“Contemporary visual sociologists classify images primarily in three ways: subject-produced; researcher produced; or pre-existing (Warren, Karner, & Karner,

2005). The decision to use pre-existing images from a digital database was made to allow the participants a greater range of images to select from and I believed it would be less time consuming for participants. The Wikimedia Commons ([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)) was the digital database the participants used to select pre-existing images. This database was selected for its wide range of 2,559,134 available images, its perceived ease to navigate and that the images are freely usable by the public.

Before the interviews, participants received a detailed set of instructions on how to navigate the website, select images and to proceed once they had completed the process by sending the selected images directly to my e-mail. The licenses of the photographs within this database allowed the images to be reproduced without copyright complications.

I also provided my contact information in case participants experienced any technical problems. Two participants experienced difficulty in retrieving specific images from the database and contacted me. I assisted these participants in conducting a thorough, but fruitless search of the database to locate their desired image. It was determined in consultation with my supervisor that it would fulfill the purpose of the creation of visual metaphors to allow those participants to sketch their image, in order to preserve their original vision rather than having to select a different image from those available.

The participants were asked to select one digital photograph to complete each of the statements below:

1. I see activism as...

2. The professional expectations I encounter are...
3. As an activist teacher, I see myself as...

These statements were intentionally crafted to invite metaphor so that the image would be selected to create a visual metaphor. This was done on the understanding that the creation and analysis of metaphors can provide insight into identity since, “a large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate metaphors that make sense of our lives” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 233). A metaphor can be defined as, “a characterization of a phenomenon in familiar terms. To be effective in promoting understanding of the phenomenon in question, the ‘familiar terms’ must be graphic, visible, and physical in our scale of the world” (Dickmeyer, 1989, p. 151). Metaphors serve many functions as they can be used to provide explanations, clarifications, descriptions, evaluations and entertainment (Knowles and Moon, 2006).

In the field of education, there is an on-going search for appropriate metaphors to conceptualize teaching and the teaching self. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) claim that, “It makes a great deal of difference to our practice...if we think of teaching as gardening, coaching, or cooking” (p. 71) and how one regards one’s professional identity can also be reinforced or challenged by metaphors. De Castell (1988) presents a sampling of the spectrum of images used in an attempt to describe teachers: “Socrates’ teacher as midwife, Dewey’s teacher-as-artist/scientist, Skinner’s teacher-as-technician, Stenhouse’s teacher-as-researcher, Eisner’s teacher-as-artist, Greene’s teacher-as-stranger, and her own teacher-as-strategist” (as cited in Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 24). The practice of using metaphors within the field of education also helped to determine how the statements were phrased.



Within my research the visual metaphors created by participants were designed to:

...act as a medium of communication between researcher and subject. The photographs do not necessarily represent empirical truths or reality. In this sense, photographs used in photo elicitation have a dual purpose. Researchers can use photographs as a tool to expand on questions, and simultaneously, subjects can use photographs to provide a unique way to communicate dimensions of their lives. (Stanczak, 2007, p. 177)

Therefore to further gain access to the lived experiences, emotions and perceptions of activist teachers, the visual metaphors created by participants served many purposes in this research study.

### *Qualitative Interviews*

“Interviewing may be defined simply as a conversation with a purpose. Specifically, the purpose is to gather information” (Berg 2004, 75). Qualitative interviewing allows researchers to explore, “what others feel and think about their worlds. Through qualitative interviews you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 1). Phenomenological research methods typically involve long interviews that resemble conversations since they are designed to be loosely structured, interactive and open-ended to as to constrain as little as possible, responses from participants (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2006; Van der Mescht, 2004).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants as a primary method of data collection over an eight-week period in the spring of 2008. This interview method is guided by a list of questions or main issues, and was selected as it allowed me the freedom to change wording and order of questions during the interview, as well as the flexibility to pursue some issues in greater depth. This permitted the interview to take on the form of a conversation. In-depth information was gathered from each participant through interviews that each ranged from 60 to 75 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a location of the participant's choice. Participants chose to be interviewed in their homes, and local coffee shops.

Initially each participant signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the research and the interviews. In the interviews, I focused on the visual metaphors the participants created. One at a time, each image was displayed on the screen of a laptop so the participant could refer to it during the interview. I would read the corresponding incomplete statement and the participants were asked to describe each image, what it represented to them and what experiences brought them to select the image. Probes also facilitated my interviews with activist teachers. The goal of the probes such as "*would you like to tell me more about that?*" was to invite participants to go into more depth about their experiences and provide clarification. Furthermore, probes like, "can you give an example?" or "what was it like?" were used based Van Manen's (1990) suggestion of how to bring the interview back to the level of concrete experiences. I also attempted to use silence as a prompt to gain further information and assure the participant had the opportunity to fully share their experience (Van Manen, 1990).

The interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's permission that was obtained at the beginning of each interview. I decided to audio-record the each interview based on Patton's (1987) suggestion that audio-recording the interview enables increased accuracy in data collection, and permitted me to be more attentive, allowing for a more interactive experience. I also took notes during the interviews to safeguard against equipment failure and to highlight key points. I transcribed the interviews, in most cases within in a week after the interview. The transcribed notes were e-mailed to the participants within two weeks of the interview. I asked the participants to review the transcription and to make any changes or comment further upon on it. One participant checked her transcript but did not offer any comments or elaborations. The remaining participants made minor adjustments to their transcripts. This 'member checking' was done to ensure the descriptive validity (Maxwell, 2005) of the study.

The interviews conducted in this study were conversational and thus "unavoidably collaborative" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 113). I strove to maintain a neutral stance during the interviews, hoping thereby to minimize my influence on what participants had to say and to avoid expressing judgments on their ideas and experiences. However, occasionally the participants asked questions of me during the course of the interviews and I shared my personal experiences. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) point out that, "the interviewer must establish a climate for mutual disclosure... This can be done to assure that they can, in turn, share their own thoughts and feelings" (p. 119). The interview was conversational and my disclosures to participants were characteristic of the collaborative research that I strove to achieve.

### *Fieldnotes*

Fieldnotes “are written account of what a researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study” (Bogdon & Bilken, 1998, p. 107-108). My fieldnotes were written immediately following each interview and divided into two sections: descriptive and reflective. The descriptive fieldnotes were written to highlight key ideas that I felt arose from the interview. The reflective field notes were written to describe my personal interpretations of the experience of the interview. The reflective fieldnotes also allowed me to write about my emotional reactions to what was being said and at the beginning of the process about the anxiety I experienced as a new researcher. I found these reflections beneficial in helping me to become aware of my own biases and reactions to the interviews in a concrete manner.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is “an ongoing process involving continual reflection” (Creswell 2003, 190). My analysis began with the first data collected and continued throughout the research process, for as Coffey and Atkinson (1996) warn, “We should never collect data without substantial analysis going on simultaneously” (p.2). The initial step that I took in my qualitative analysis was the process of listening to and transcribing the interviews (Maxwell, 2005). I listened to each interview without attempting to classify or analyze since I wanted to gain a deep understanding for what was being said (Taylor & Bogdan, 1988, p. 141). I was struck by the affect expressed in

the voices of participants and highlighted the portions of the transcripts when I encountered it.

After the participants read and revised the transcripts, I began the second phase of the data analysis, which was thematizing. I felt quite nervous since it felt like a daunting task being responsible for determining the themes within the data (Creswell, 1998, p. 78). I read through the transcripts several times before felt I had gained enough knowledge of their content to begin to hazard judgments about the essence of what each participant was saying. Then I read the entire data set of transcripts using the selective reading approach defined by Van Manen (1997) as the search for phrases or statements that stand out. I made notes in the margins of the transcripts of potential themes. Then I went back to the set of transcripts I had highlighted for instances of high affect and reflected on how these fit with the notes I had made during this phase. Additionally, I compared the transcripts of participants, looking for similarities and differences. By continuing to sift I these ways through the data, I was able to arrive at two themes, which I took to be central: disconnection and renegotiation and to a closer discussion of these I return in subsequent chapters. The analyzed data also assisted in the creation of a situated description of the participants and their particular lived experiences of the phenomenon under investigation.

The first step I took in the analysis of the visual metaphors was description. Looking closely and at length at each of the selected photographs, I attempted to absorb all it's details. After studying the photograph for several minutes, I wrote an objective description, which focused simply on what can be perceived visually, without drawing conclusions about the photograph's meaning. The description often began by stating the subject matter in the photograph and then elaborating on what I saw.

Afterwards, I reflected on the image by focusing on the emotions and interpretations it evoked in me. It is important to acknowledge that this portion of the analysis was very subjective since it was my interpretation of the image. Different people might react to the same image in different ways and those could provide new insights, but I began my analysis with my own perceptions and interpretations.

I compared the visual metaphors of participants in several ways. I looked for similarities and differences between and among each of the participants' visual metaphors created in response to the same incomplete phrase (i.e. I see activism as...). I also attempted match up all of a participants' visual metaphors to see if there were any incongruities or overlaps among them. I searched for ways in which, the visual metaphors both diverged from and reflected the lived experiences of participants.

### Issues of Validity

Validity is interpreted to be the credibility of the study and, as Maxwell (2005) states, "Validity is a goal rather than a product; it is never something that can be proven or taken for granted" (p. 105). This study strove for validity through the use of triangulation, which is "building checks and balances into a design through multiple data collection strategies" (Patton 1987, 60) and can be achieved, among other ways, through accessing a variety of data sources (data triangulation) and through using multiple methods (methodological triangulation). This study sought data triangulation by gathering information from a broad spectrum of individuals. Through criterion-based sampling I hoped to gather data from a diverse range of individuals. As explicated above,

I employed strategies of photo-elicitation and qualitative interviews as methods of data collection to satisfy the stipulations of methodological triangulation.

In addition to employing triangulation, the descriptive validity of this study was addressed through respondent validation that is commonly referred to as member checking. This entailed the participants reviewing their interview transcripts for accuracy with the option to suggest changes or withdraw responses. Internal validity was addressed in this study through a clarification of my bias and position at the outset through the creation of a researcher's identity memo using Maxwell (2005) guidelines. It was also attempted on a continuous basis throughout the study through descriptive and reflective fieldnotes (Creswell 2003).

In the following chapter I describe the information compiled and generated by this study. In the first part of the chapter each of the research participants and their visual metaphors will be introduced to allow some of the salient background on the teachers to be shared. The second section presents a comprehensive description of the analysis of interview data.

## CHAPTER 4: DESCRIPTION OF FINDINGS

The description of findings is divided into two sections. I will begin by introducing the research participants and the visual metaphors they created. The participant profiles will be followed by a comprehensive description of the findings. Each of two broad themes –disconnection and renegotiation- are introduced and the voices of the participants feature prominently in each of them.

### Participant Profiles

#### *Participant 1: Spartacus*

Spartacus completed his certification as a secondary school social studies teacher and taught social studies for the first ten years of his career in education. Afterwards he became active in a provincial teaching organization in a program designed to help teachers address social issues. During his time working for the provincial teaching organization, he designed and implemented workshops for practicing teachers on how to teach controversial issues. Over the years, he has also worked at different universities as a sessional instructor working with pre-service teachers. At the time of the interview, he had recently retired though was still participating in various research projects related to education.

In describing his decision to become a teacher, Spartacus is initially full of humour stating simply that he had a B.A. in political philosophy and history and needed a job. Afterwards he recounted his undergraduate years in the early 1970s and his background in activism during that time. He explained that he was involved in the



Vietnam anti-war movement and environmental activism associated with Green Peace.

He acknowledged that he was:

just on the fringes, as I said I wasn't a hard core activist. I was too busy actually studying [laughs]...I did have this kind of experience with activism while I was an undergraduate student. I came out of it with a left leaning orientation of how we should organize socially...There weren't that many things that I could do that would let me act on that. Teaching became a logical way to do that.

In contrast to his opening humor-filled remarks, Spartacus explained the reason why he became a teacher was that, "I was genuinely interested in, I thought at the time, changing the world...I saw teaching as having the most potential. Even though over time my attitudes have changed.

*Spartacus's Visual Metaphors*

1. I see activism as...



Figure 1. Photograph of a winding road.

2. The professional expectations I encounter are...



Figure 2. Photograph of a bridge covered in fog.

3. As an activist teacher, I see myself as...



Figure 3. Photograph of guerrilla gardeners.

#### *Participant 2: Eleanor*

Eleanor is a trained secondary school teacher who has taught for more than twenty years. Eleanor spent four years teaching in mainstream schools, but the majority of her career has been in the alternative school system. She helped to create the Alternative School Association and has been an advocate for alternative education for a number of years. At the time of the interview, Eleanor had returned to university and was pursuing a master's in education related to anti-oppressive teaching and curriculum.

Eleanor initially explained that her decision to become a teacher was inspired by being raised in a family of teachers: "I thought it was a noble calling, at least my relatives who taught took it seriously and were passionate about it." Throughout the interview, Eleanor explained her struggles in various teacher education programs that led her to quit three times before successfully completing a professional development program. Eleanor confided at the end of the interview:

I made a decision that I wanted to be political in the world. I actually looked at the places where I could best be political and I decided teaching

high school, I thought of teaching elementary...but I thought no, I think my best place for making people for social change is in high school...I quit a bunch of times but the thing that actually dragged me back was an agenda for social change...I don't know how common that is for teachers and I haven't encountered it every much. I don't really admit that very much to other teachers.

Throughout the interview, Eleanor frequently critiqued the school system and described experiences of frustrations with its shortcomings. However Eleanor acknowledged that:

Even though I am cynical of some of the negative aspects of the institution, I do see that I am really committed to the idea of public education even though it is terribly flawed in lots of ways, I think it's better than any of the other flawed systems.

*Eleanor's Visual Metaphors*

1. I see activism as...



Figure 4. Photograph of outdoor market place.

2. The professional expectations I encounter are...



Figure 5. Photograph of a kitchen funnel.

3. As an activist teacher, I see myself as...

3 for an activist teacher, I see myself as A door + United space...

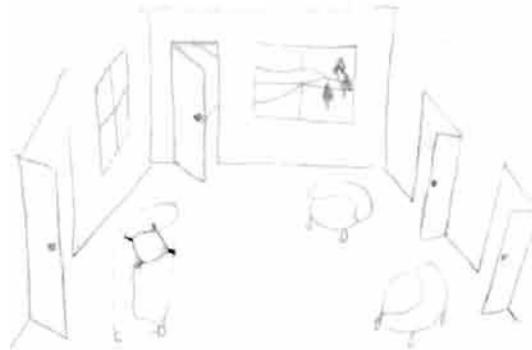


Figure 6. Sketch of a room with many open doors and windows.

### *Participant 3: Michelle*

Michelle is a trained secondary school teacher who has taught for more than twenty years. She is actively involved in her school and is a teacher sponsor for a number of student clubs and organizations. After completing a master's in education focused on community-based learning, Michelle created and assumed the position of community-relations coordinator at her school. This position allowed Michelle to create opportunities for purposeful collaboration between students, teachers and the wider community.

Michelle came to become a teacher as a result of merging interests and these interests still guide her practices as a teacher. Although she had considered teaching while she was doing her undergraduate work in agriculture, she felt this need was being met through teaching children horse back riding. She explained:

The more I worked and lived in rural communities, the more concerned I became about the expropriation of the land base for urban sprawl. So, I

went back to do my Masters in Urban and Regional Planning and I got involved in overseas development projects. I ended up doing a major in urban cultural geography and transferred to the Faculty of Education because I realized that people need to be fed, but they also need to understand causes. So, I came out a teacher not an urban planner.

Her past work and position as community-relations coordinator has assisted her in creating relationships with various community organizations and city departments that she frequently collaborated with. As an activist-teacher, Michelle sees herself:

As one small voice attempting to place seeds of thought to include perspectives or lenses of the varied communities, I interact with everyday...I believe that if activism could impart these seeds of thought to the masses, then we would obtain conflict resolution at all levels and for all agendas.

*Michelle's Visual Metaphors*

1. I see activism as...



Figure 7. Photograph of creek with many eddies.

2. The professional expectations I encounter are...

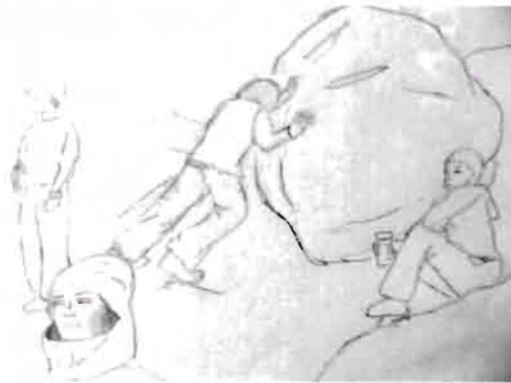


Figure 8. Sketch of an individual pushing a boulder uphill surrounded by others who do not assist or acknowledge the individual.



3. As an activist teacher, I see myself as...



Figure 9. Photograph of fingers holding two seeds.

*Participant 4: Anna*

Anna completed her certification as a secondary school arts and physical education teacher. She taught for more than twenty-five years before recently retiring. During her time as a classroom teacher, she created and sponsored a Global Issues Club at her school. Anna was also actively involved in various teaching organizations that promoted peace and global education. Anna has continued to remain in contact with her former students and described their accomplishments and commitment to creating social change with pride.

During the interview Anna shared, “I was born a teacher...I never even thought about anything else. I had that call from childhood. I always wanted to be a teacher; that was my dream through thick and thin.” She was born in Hungary in 1935 to a wealthy family. In 1945, “The Russians ran over Hungary...The Communist government took

away all the property from everybody, nobody could own anything, absolutely nothing...Those people born in a so-called well to do family, they were seriously discriminated against.” Anna had difficulty enrolling in high school, “When I wanted to start high school they wouldn’t take me because my father was an army officer and my grandparents used to have big lands.” Though she eventually attended and completed high school, she was unable to attend university. She later immigrated to Canada and was accepted to attend university despite not being able to speak English fluently.

Anna explained that she became an activist-teacher because:

I always wanted to change the world since I was thirteen and I saw that horrible, dark world around me. I decided that I am going to do everything in my power to change the world for the better. That is what I did, in different ways in my little circle.

*Anna's Visual Metaphors*

1. I see activism as...



Figure 10. A photograph of a classroom with children painting.

2. The professional expectations I encounter are...



Figure 11. Photograph of children with their teacher in the Louvre.

3. As an activist teacher, I see myself as...



Figure 12. Photograph of an outdoor scene with various trees.

#### *Participant 5: Margaret*

Margaret earned a degree in history and completed a one-year teacher education program. After graduation, Margaret substitute-taught for a year and a half. Her experiences as a substitute teacher were discouraging. As Margaret described it, “I was dissatisfied with what I was doing in my day-to-day life. I didn’t have any control over what I was doing. I was just kind of going in, filling in and it was boring.” These experiences led Margaret to believe, “in general I don’t think there’s enough real thinking going on in schools. It’s a lot of copying and regurgitation and memorization.” At the time of the interview, Margaret was teaching secondary school French at a mini school for academically advanced students and was enrolled in a global education diploma program.

Margaret described how she had always had an interest in becoming a teacher. During her undergraduate education, Margaret began learning about activism: “I did my degree in history, so, I studied a lot of political movements and feminist movements that started small and gained momentum and created some change.” She describes her

undergraduate experiences with activism: “As a student I was always involved in protests and gatherings...I was not necessarily spearheading them, but just a being a member of the body and making it stronger.” Her interest and belief in activism in education is fortified by her participation in the global education diploma program:

I had always been interested in social justice in education and I wanted more of a, not necessarily academic point of view, but how can we actually incorporate this. In teacher education we talked about it but we never really had the opportunity to build lessons to address it and I think this course is really trying to do that. So we are trying to take what global education is and put it into our classroom right away.

#### *Margaret's Visual Metaphors*

1. I see activism as...



Figure 13. A photograph of an avalanche.

2. The professional expectations I encounter are...

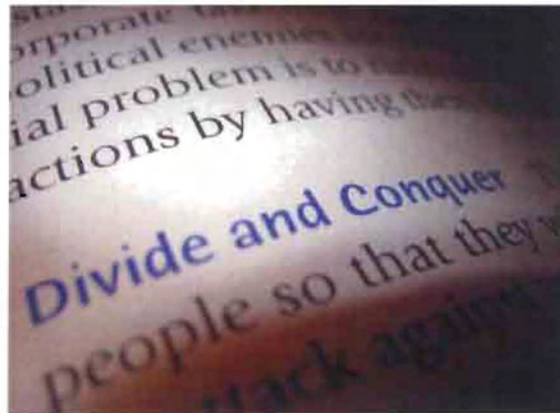


Figure 14. A photograph of a few words from a book.

3. As an activist teacher, I see myself as...



Figure 15. An icon representing global thinking.

## Description of Findings

### Introduction

Very early in the process of analyzing the interview transcripts, I began to see the complexities involved in the participants' perceptions of their professional identities. The participants' experiences revealed a great deal about the constraints created and imposed on them by formal institutional policies and procedures and the informal norms of schools. These constrictions led participants to experience their professional identities as sites of struggle. When describing their experiences in the education system, participants spoke not only of obstacles, they also spoke of responding to the obstacles that they encountered. This created a dynamic negotiation, where participants had to continuously construct a professional identity in response to professional constraints and their personal beliefs.

In the first part of this chapter I outline the theme of disconnection; in this theme I illustrate how the participants experienced their professional identities. I identified four dimensions of this theme: teacher education; professional relationships with colleagues; professional expectations of school administration and school districts; and systems of student evaluation and assessment. These dimensions appeared to me to be most significant as I listened the interview recordings for affect displayed by participants when describing experiences and during analysis of the interview transcripts by tallying the frequency of mention across participants. I also detail how the theme of disconnection was linked to feeling of isolation, alienation, and frustration in participants. It is important to note that, though at times discouraged, participants described how different

practices assisted them in renegotiating how they constructed their professional identities. Disconnection makes it difficult for participant to construct a professional identity that does not conflict with their personal identity. Participants navigated through these obstacles to develop a broader conception of what it means to be a successful teacher.

In the second part of this chapter I outline the theme of renegotiation. In this theme I discuss how activist teachers renegotiate their professional identities by working through constraining obstacles. Within this theme of renegotiation I identified four dimensions: seeking community; inhabiting strategic spaces; purposeful collaboration; and “sweet spots”. Both themes, disconnection and renegotiation, demonstrate the complexities of professional identity construction as a dynamic negotiation between authoritative discourses (i.e. school policies and procedure) and the internally persuasive discourses of participants (i.e. personal beliefs, past experiences and activism).

### Theme 1: Disconnection

The first theme identified is disconnection between the aims of activist teachers and the formal institutional policies and procedures as well as the informal norms of schools. This disconnection first presented itself to three of the five participants during their experiences in and observations of teacher education programs. The theme of disconnection also emerged as four of the participants described their professional relationships with colleagues with whom interaction was often limited and at times strained. Participants frequently described how they perceived their colleagues as hesitant and at times apathetic to becoming involved in social issues. This disconnection led most participants to feel professionally isolated from their colleagues. Furthermore the



policies, procedures and practices of school administration and school districts often constrained and alienated activist teachers. All participants described how they felt their concerns, interests and perspectives were discounted by their colleagues, administration, and school district. Most of the participants also experienced frustration with the current systems of evaluation and assessment, which they saw as emphasizing the importance of formal examinations and failing to acknowledge or reflect the importance of addressing social issues. Each of the four dimensions of disconnection is discussed below and illustrated by quotes from the participants.

### *Teacher Education*

As participants described their experiences in the education system, it became apparent that there was a discontinuity between their personal beliefs and the dominant discourses in teacher education. This disconnection resulted in one participant having to quit multiple times. Eleanor described how she initially decided to become a teacher, “I would like to say that I thought it was my calling but all my family are teachers and I think it was just poverty of imagination.” She went on to explain, “I think it was the typical thing where people get into it because it is what they grow up with. I thought it was a noble calling, at least my relatives who taught took it seriously and were passionate about it.” Eleanor came from a family of teachers, yet her experiences in teacher education programs in the early 1980s were full of unexpected struggle. She explained, “I first went into it when I was nineteen...I thought it was appalling, there was this fad that moved through behaviour modification. I looked around and I was looking for something else. I was not into to it at all, so I quit.” By quitting several times, Eleanor demonstrated

the strength of her internally persuasive discourse since she would not conform to the authoritative discourses of teacher education.

Later, Eleanor felt that teaching was drawing her back so she re-enrolled in a Bachelor of Education program; however, mandatory classroom observations of experienced teachers left her questioning her decision to join the profession. She explained, “We would go out to schools to observe and it was old school. I was so uninspired by what I was seeing.” She remembered thinking, “What are they doing? I can’t believe it!” Her family members tried to convince her to remain enrolled, “My sister who had gone through six years earlier said, “Just suck it up! This is what you have to do to become a teacher.” But I couldn’t suck it up, I couldn’t stand it.” In all, Eleanor quit different teacher education programs three times before successfully completing a professional development program. Eleanor’s experiences of struggle in various teacher education programs appeared in each case to be a result of a disconnection between her personal beliefs and the dominant discourses of teacher education and informal norms of the schools in which she observed. Experiences in teacher education created a narrow and negative view of teaching for Eleanor. Eleanor acknowledged that this narrow representation of teaching was very powerful and it led her to quit many times as she reflected, “I was too young to have enough confidence or imagination to think this is something I can overcome. I was too impressionable so I just kept quitting.”

Margaret’s personal values led her to understand that her role as teacher meant addressing and teaching about social issues. However, Margaret believed that her experiences in teacher education did not prepare her to teach about social issues. The emphasis in her teacher education program was on “having to adhere to the Prescribed

Learning Outcomes (P.L.Os)” and this conflicted with her personal beliefs about the role of a teacher. She discovered that her interest in social justice was often not reflected in the content of methodology courses. Teacher education did advocate, in certain courses, the importance of addressing social issues, yet it did little to practically prepare pre-service teachers to do so. Margaret acknowledged that:

We had courses in philosophy of education and social justice classes and in those classes, yes, we talked about social issues. We didn't ever talk about activism in classes like language arts or social studies, or math those core subjects. In the philosophy of education classes those types of ideas were talked about and we read articles but we never got to put anything together for what you could do in the classroom about it.

This lack of focus on teaching methods that address social issues left Margaret, as a beginning teacher, feeling unprepared. Margaret provided an example of the failure to include teaching strategies regarding social issues:

I think that is the hardest part is implementation because we can all sit around and talk about how it would be nice to address homophobia in the classroom but how you can actually do that and how you can actually put that into practice is another thing all together.

For Margaret, teacher education reinforced the importance of addressing social issues through teaching but did not prepare her to do so within the classroom. This resulted in Margaret feeling unprepared to teach and disconnected from the aims of teaching she found significant. Margaret's internally persuasive discourse of the professional identity

and practices of teachers stresses the importance of teaching about social issues.

However, her internally persuasive discourses conflicted with the authoritative discourses of teacher education which stressed organization and accountability through Prescribed Learning Outcomes.

In his role in a provincial education organization, Spartacus interacted with many teachers who echoed Margaret's sentiments of being unprepared to address social and controversial issues in the classroom:

There is a lack of preparedness to do it. The workshop we had for a long time that was most requested was called *Teaching Controversial Issues* because most teachers came out of their teacher training without the faintest clue about how to do it.

For the participants in this study teaching for social change was an important aspect, if not a defining element, of a teacher's professional identity. This resulted in several dissonances we see in the data.

#### *Professional Relationships with Colleagues*

The second dimension identified is a common feeling of alienation and isolation when participants described their professional relationships with colleagues. As four of the participants spoke of their experiences with their colleagues, it became clear that interactions with colleagues were limited and at times negative. Margaret said that she has inadequate interactions with colleagues and she described how she worked in her "own little bubble". Even so, Margaret acknowledged, she is relieved that she doesn't have, "anyone wandering into my classroom and breathing down my neck" because, she

says, “I would feel unnerved because I would feel like people are judging me. I like being on my own.” It is clear that Margaret experienced limited interactions with her colleagues and was also apprehensive about the form future contact could take.

Eleanor expressed how she has not encountered many teachers who have the same agenda to teach for social change and consequently she “doesn’t really admit that very much to other teachers”. She does search for conversations with her fellow teachers about social and educational issues she is interested in. She explained, “I am thinking I want to hear arguments, I want to hear people discuss this and people don’t discuss it.” Margaret also found the conversations available to her in school to be limited to planning events and coordinating evaluation:

Like I said I don’t have a lot of interaction with the other members of the French department, but when we do meet, we are planning events for the French department, or asking where are you in this unit? When are you doing this test?

Spartacus described his first experience encountering racism at school in the 1970s, when he overheard the conversations of students before class:

The attitude of these kids [pause] I thought them to be outrageous, I was shocked. I was appalled. I felt sick to my stomach. I mean, “They stink! They are going to take all our jobs! They are terrible, dirty people!” I mean it went on and on, I will never forget standing at the front of this classroom.

Spartacus described his reaction to this experience:

It was the most blatant racism I had ever seen. I stood there as a social studies teacher wondering what the hell am I going to do? I reflected on my teacher training and my university experience and about how well that had actually prepared me to deal with something like this.

He acknowledged that there were some teachers concerned about racism, but overall, “I was fairly singular voice in the midst of a lot of apathy around the issue, a lot of denial.” His initial observations of teachers were reinforced by his experiences throughout his years in the education system:

The story I told you about my first experience with racism in class is a good example of the confusion and hesitation, in some respects, to do anything with regards to that issue then, and even now. This concern on the part of a lot of teachers in particular to stay away from controversy, to avoid difficult issues and in general stay away from social activism or social issues...

These participants’ interactions with colleagues were limited and their descriptions of them illustrate a shared sense of disconnection between activist teachers and their colleagues.

For Anna, her interactions with fellow teachers instantiated not just disconnection, but more than that, they had a distinctly negative character. This began at the start of her teaching career when as a physical education teacher she decided to orientate her teaching practices away from competition and towards collaboration. This decision was

based on Anna's dislike of competition because "it was against my values because if someone is winning, someone else is losing." This was met with resistance by the head of the department and led to several heated exchanges during department meetings. She described one incident when the department head almost fainted when he found her class sitting in the lotus position practicing yoga breathing.

In another circumstance, fellow teachers reacted negatively to her actions outside of the classroom. In an attempt to raise money, Anna agreed that the members of the Global Issues Club would keep the school grounds clean for a monthly fee:

I worked with them, I did the garbage picking and the other teachers said, "Oh Anna, could you do that?!?" I walked with them and I picked the garbage, might as well. Why not? It is not going to kill me.

This led Anna to feel judged by her colleagues for her actions as the teacher sponsor of the Global Issues Club.

Teachers would also tease Anna for her unconventional dress:

First they didn't understand what I was doing and some of the teachers even made fun of it. I always had t-shirts of what I was teaching the kids. All of my t-shirts, I had about thirty or forty, they always had a message on them about global issues or symbols so that I was like a walking poster.

This teasing appeared to make Anna wary of interacting with her colleagues. This wariness might explain why Anna chose to work individually with students rather than collaborate with colleagues. Throughout the interview she made frequent references to collaborating with students who supported her in coordinating events for the Global

Issues Club. Anna described spending “tremendous amounts of time, every lunchtime and after school time for hours and hours” cloistered within her classroom with members of the Global Issues Club. However, Anna did not once during the course of the interview mention any assistance she received from colleagues.

Interestingly, in the last five years of her twenty-five year teaching career, Anna did recall gaining more acceptance and respect from her colleagues. This occurred when the media “came to visit my Global Issues Club” and she “was nominated for a humanitarian award.” Afterwards Anna also received accolades from the school board who “made a special presentation to the Global Issues Club and myself and the press was there.” Anna explained that this attention and approval led some of her colleagues to seek out opportunities to collaborate with her.

Unlike the other participants, Michelle sought out a group of like-minded colleagues in her school who were very supportive and who she appreciated collaborating with. She explained in a hushed tone, “Well, there is a group of us. What we love to do is work together.” She acknowledged that the large staff of her school assisted her in finding colleagues to collaborate with, “see there are eighty-five people on staff. So even if you have twenty teachers out of the eighty-five... Twenty teachers can do a lot.” Her explanation indicates that she did not have positive relationships with all members of staff, but had specifically chosen colleagues with similar interests and beliefs to collaborate with.

#### *Professional Expectations of School Administration and School Districts*

The participants described how experiences with school administration and school districts also led to feelings of alienation and disconnection. These alienating experiences



were often a result of practices and procedures that limited the participants' professional autonomy. Eleanor described how she has come to view the institution of school and the limited ability of teachers to make professional decisions within it:

The education system is very top down and I started realizing this when I went to Cuba on a teacher tour for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution. We went around talking with different teachers' unions and all levels of education there. I came away thinking that teachers had power to make decisions that affected their lives. Isn't that ironic we call ourselves a democracy and yet teachers really get less and less say about what they teach, about who they answer to, about what success looks like.

Eleanor feels that she has limited capacity to make decisions regarding assessment and evaluation in her classroom and that left her feeling disconnected from her profession. This will be further elaborated in the following dimension that specifically addresses systems of student evaluation and assessment,

Michelle, struggles with her school's expectations of accountability, which she perceives to limit her professional autonomy in the classroom. Michelle is puzzled by the emphasis on accountability, "It is not that you are not accountable, of course you are always accountable, absolutely. You end up worrying about forms and the bureaucratic red tape. It is tiresome and it takes the spark out of teaching." Recent experiences with school administration have led Michelle to believe:

If you have an administration that gives you autonomy then you can really flourish and be creative. If you have micromanagement, old style

management in place, then it becomes very autocratic, your autonomy is taken away and accountability replaces it. Then you begin to feel discouraged because you are not encouraged.

Michelle's visual metaphor of an individual pushing a boulder without assistance or acknowledgment (see Figure 8) is symbolic of the weight of professional expectations, which she describes as being an "uphill push". This struggle could be a result of a different definition of progressiveness than that of her school administration, as Michelle explained:

I think it could be administration inside a school, but it could also be the school district. I think it depends on their definition of progressiveness.

Also what they value, what they see as precedent, may not be what you or I do, or it may be the same.

Spartacus also emphasized the role school districts can play in the creation of barriers that prevent social issues from being addressed by teachers. Spartacus described his experiences of trying to implement programming that dealt with social issues and how his efforts had been met with resistance by school districts. He explains:

They denied the need for it, tried to sow confusion by stating if we incorporate or institute programs around racism we will create problems. Interestingly enough they have done almost the exact same thing almost a generation later with homophobia.

Spartacus's visual metaphor representing professional expectations was a bridge surrounded by fog (see Figure 2), he explained it was the fog of confusion and apathy that exists around addressing social issues in the school system. Therefore school administration and school districts can create restrictions on the professional autonomy of activist teachers and this often results in feelings of being discouragement and being disconnected within their profession.

### *Systems of Student Evaluation and Assessment*

The interviews revealed that the systems of student evaluation and assessment supported and advocated by school administration and school districts were particularly challenging for the majority of participants. The only participant who did not encounter such difficulties was Anna who taught art at the secondary school level for most of her career. Due to the openness of the required curriculum, she described that she was able design and implement her own forms of student assessment. All of the other participants described experiences with the systems of student evaluation and assessment as being a particular source of professional disconnection, which led to feelings of frustration and confusion. In particular, they described an over-emphasis on testing, including formal examinations that had crept into the school system on many different levels. This focus on testing and the types of tests being advocated for by colleagues, administration, and the larger community was disappointing to participants, who questioned both its purpose and its effectiveness.

Eleanor's earliest memory of encountering professional expectations regarding testing was implementing a grade ten English exam that she disagreed with. She described this experience:

There was a lot of emphasis on grammar and basic mechanics. Every English teacher had to give the same exam. I had a lot of trouble with that because of my dad was a professor and he focused his studies on the ineffectiveness of teaching grammar when you want to make writers. I just grew up with that idea, I came to that conclusion myself as well but I had a lot of help getting there. In the end, I just had to suck it up but I did ask and I did question why everybody had to do the same exam.

Spartacus describes that he, “never put a lot of stock in formal examinations” because he also questioned their effectiveness:

Despite everything we know about the best ways to evaluate and assess students, we still go back to this tried and true, paper and pencil, rote memorization of low level cognitive examination and use that as the primary determinant in the success of a school. I always have a huge amount of difficulty with that even though when you are within the system you have to play to that.

Michelle further questioned the value of provincial exams since she believed the questions on the exams were inadequate:

Here we are supposed to be teaching higher order thinking but then there will be very trivial, direct recall questions on exams. The questions of who was the first whatever? Does it really matter? Isn't it better that they understand the big picture?

Eleanor believed that emphasis on testing and formal examinations as the primary basis for assessment is, “a real step backwards. I think it is alarmingly unexamined why people give exams”. She expressed concern that assessment, “rather than being widened to accommodate all the different learning styles...is actually narrowing.” Eleanor’s visual metaphor for professional expectations is a funnel (see Figure 5) that she explained represented narrowing and she further explained the narrowest point of the funnel has been her experiences with systems of student assessment and evaluation. Eleanor described the province-wide exams as, “death by a thousand cuts...it’s just a crappy experience for the kids... a missed educational opportunity as far as I can see.”

Spartacus demonstrated the pressure from the community that places importance on the results of tests by referring to a recent newspaper article that reported the ranking of schools based on test results:

It is a good example of what you are up against if the newspaper of the city and province devotes so much newsprint for something that is completely beside the point. Not important, the ranking of schools based on two tests: one on numeracy and one on literacy. To say nothing about the social attitudes of these kids, what have they actually learned about the social functioning of their communities, how well will they function in those communities when they are out of school, what is their sense of community mindedness is. We don’t test that.

Despite being unconvinced of the rationale and effectiveness of provincial exams, participants still feel professional pressure to prepare students for these tests. Michelle felt professionally vulnerable when administering provincial exams, “I am so worried, I

know they are learning but some of the questions on the exam are so trivial.” As Eleanor further explained:

To willfully ignore it is not something I can bring myself to do, partly because I don't want my students to have this terrible failure writing the exam. The course is big and so you end up just screaming through details as fast as you can to cover all the materials that might be on the exam. Teachers more and more are using the workbook... There is a huge pressure to push, push, push.

The pressure also comes from students who want to succeed. Margaret's students often express feelings of anxiety to her about upcoming exams and evaluations. Eleanor was left questioning:

Do we want an education system where the assumption is that some kids aren't going to finish the race? What kind of a race is this anyways? Can you teach in an undemocratic way the goal of making a democratic society? That just seems absurd to me.

Bakhtin's conception of identity construction is a dialogue between internally persuasive and authoritative discourses. However, for the participants in this study there is a disconnection between the authoritative discourse of the institution of school and their internally persuasive discourses. The participants encountered this disconnection in the education system and it led them to experience their professional identities as sites of struggle. This disconnection presented itself in various dimensions such as their unhappiness with their teacher education preparation, their professional relationships with

colleagues, and their frustrations with the practices and procedures of the school administration and school districts. The disconnection participants encountered in the figured worlds of teacher education programs and schools manifested itself in feelings of isolation, alienation, and frustration.

### Theme Two: Renegotiation

Renegotiation refers to creative reactions to experience of disconnection. All of the participants found various ways to overcome and counteract the effects of professional disconnection. The theme of renegotiation is connected with the previously described concept of agency, but also the equally important idea of improvisations that Holland et al. (1998) describe as, “openings by which change comes about from generation to generation...potential beginnings of an altered subjectivity, an altered identity,” (p.18). This theme of renegotiation permeated all of the interviews as each participant described various techniques including seeking a supportive community. All of the participants described inhabiting strategic spaces in the education system, which allowed and encouraged them to address social issues. Four of the participants acknowledged purposeful collaboration with students, colleagues and the wider community as a strategy that allowed them to effectively engage with social issues. Four of the participants also spoke of the importance of recognizing and appreciating highlights or as one participant referred to them as “sweet spots” in their career as a source of sustenance and motivation. These practices and strategies of agency resulted in participants being able to renegotiate how they understood and experienced their professional identities.

### *Seeking Community*

As described earlier, the participants described feelings of isolation in their professional relationships with colleagues due to variety of factors including: limited interactions and a perceived lack of common interests. One dimension of renegotiation was the participants search for community and support outside of the schools in which they taught. Participants frequently accomplished this by pursuing professional development in the forms of diploma programs and/or masters degrees in areas that related to social justice and activism. This provided participants with opportunities to speak with individuals who shared their interest in social education, and professionally empowered them. Margaret expressed that attending a diploma program in global education prepared her to address social issues in the classroom by giving her, “opportunities to infuse global education into my lesson plans” which her teacher education failed to do. She further explained that she is able to have conversations about activism and social change with her peers in the diploma program, which she is unable to do within the school she teaches. This provides Margaret with occasions to discuss and think about issues she finds significant since this “happens in the diploma class and not inside school.”

Michelle, too, found an avenue to pursue her interest in community-based learning through graduate studies. Her experiences as a master’s student assisted her in envisioning a community relations position that had responsibilities that were different from the customary tasks of creating the school bulletin or finding advertising for the yearbook. The community relations position Michelle created for her school was aimed at forming meaningful connections between the community, teachers and students by



creating opportunities for purposeful collaboration. This position was designed as a response to the social issues in the community and within the school. For instance, Michelle worked with local community members, colleagues and students to create a documentary on the impact of humans on local water systems and the surrounding ecosystems.

Similarly Eleanor has discovered through her graduate studies new educational theorists whose ideas have fortified her beliefs about education. This was apparent in the interview as she referenced different theorists she had encountered in her courses when reflecting on her experiences and beliefs. These three participants found communities for professional development through their pursuit of graduate studies, and this enhanced their classroom practices, afforded them a theoretical support for their beliefs, and provided a forum to discuss education with teachers holding similar views.

While Anna did not pursue community in the form of a graduate program, she also sought opportunities to interact with teachers with similar beliefs. She did this through joining a variety of organizations that promoted peace and global education. Her participation within these educational organizations varied from being an active board member to raising money through fundraisers held by the Global Issues Club at her school. After her retirement, she remained an active member in many educational organizations.

Two of the participants found community through the process of designing and conducting workshops for teachers. Spartacus, through his work with a provincial education organization, gave workshops to teachers on how to address controversial issues. He described these workshops as being very hands-on, allowing teachers to

develop strategies for bringing social issues into their classroom. He found this to be very rewarding since it was encouraging to work with teachers who were committed to addressing social issues in their classrooms:

The thing I enjoyed the most was working with classroom teachers to help them do this... I was doing a workshop on teaching controversial issues. This was the sort of thing I enjoyed...I think that lots of times I did have an impact on teachers. Teachers did go away from the workshop, thinking I can do this differently, here is a good approach to use for this question, here are some questions I can raise with my students and ways I can address them.

After Anna retired she also ran workshops, as she wanted to share her experiences and knowledge with other teachers. Anna's workshops focused on establishing youth action clubs and teaching visual art from a global perspective she explained, "The first two years of my retirement, I did workshops, forty-two of them." This was very rewarding to Anna since the workshops were very popular and it demonstrated to her that other in her professional valued her experiences in the classroom.

### *Inhabiting Strategic Spaces*

The participants described teaching spaces and curriculum opportunities that allowed them to address social issues. These spaces varied with school subjects and school settings. For the majority of her teaching career Anna taught art at the secondary school level. She described the required curriculum as:

...drawings, painting, clay work if you have clay facility that we had.

What the art project's topic, or theme was up to the art teacher. It was not given to the art teachers so there were no restrictions and lots of freedom.

The openness in the curriculum allowed Anna to focus on addressing social and global issues through art projects. She explained that she taught basic art skill through "art projects by choosing subjects that dealt with social problems like racism, bullying, violence, and the environment."

At the time of the interview, Margaret taught in a mini-school that encouraged teachers to enhance curriculum to challenge its academically-advanced student population. As she explained: "There is quite a bit a freedom because I teach in a mini-school. There is an expectation that I go beyond the regular curriculum." Margaret did this by attempting to infuse her teaching with global education. By participating in the diploma program on global education, this had taught her to be aware of and investigate what is missing from mandated curriculum. For instance during a recent unit on stress, Margaret described that she immediately saw that:

...the causes of stress didn't go into very much, they simply stated what causes stress in teenagers as homework, parents, teachers. There was mention of death and divorce, but there was no mention of body image, anorexia, homosexuality, nothing like that.

To address the gap Margaret had her students examine the causes of stress presented in the textbook to see what issues were missing and create a more comprehensive list based

on their experiences. Margaret also incorporated her students' interests into her lesson plans and collaborated with students to design cumulative projects for units.

At the time of the study, Eleanor taught in an alternative school that encourages going beyond the curriculum to capture students' interest. Eleanor explains she is able to bring social and controversial issues into her classroom since, "one of their mandates of alternative schools is to socialize and so it is easy to justify." This allowed Eleanor to "have the permission to really change the curriculum and look at everything." It also enabled her to draw from students' interests and she believed this was "democratizing education because obviously it is not a monologue anymore." Eleanor found this process of going beyond the mandated curriculum and modifying it rewarding.

Only one of the participants, Spartacus, left the classroom after ten years of teaching to work for a provincial education organization that allowed him to pursue his commitment to social issues such as racism, the status of women, homophobia, and global education. One of the purposes of this organization was to help teachers address social and controversial issues of this kind in their classrooms by providing them with materials and workshops that offered teachers "opportunities to engage with one another around these questions." In this way, Spartacus found a space where his activism and beliefs were appreciated and rewarded. This allowed Spartacus to integrate activism with his professional identity. Likewise, all the participants were able to creatively react to disconnection and resist the authoritative notions of professional identity by inhabiting spaces in the education system that allowed them to experience professional satisfaction through activist pursuits and create new their own views of professional identity.

### *Purposeful Collaboration*

The participants described how collaborating with students and colleagues who had similar beliefs and interests helped to diminish their experiences and feelings of disconnection. Furthermore, collaboration allowed the participants to pursue social activist agendas that would be significantly more difficult to accomplish if they had acted on their own. Most participants described discussions with students inside and outside the classroom as a source of collaboration, which allowed the participants to bring social issues into their classroom. Michelle believes discussion with students emerges from relationships, “Once you have a relationship, then you have dialogue and from there you can meet their needs.” She further explained how discussion in the classroom allows her to address social issues in her classroom:

Most of it comes out of conversation. It could be conversation of people in the community. I will share the conversation with my students, “Guess what I was at this last night and we got talking about... What are your thoughts on that?” Other times, it will be students that will come to me and say, “Michelle, what do you think about this?” I say, “Let me find out about that.” So it goes back and forth both ways.

Michelle provided an example of how classroom discussion around curriculum can be the launching point into environmental issues:

This is a classic example, in this is the textbook we never got past page forty-eight for six weeks, but we covered the entire unit on the manor and medieval times. The reason why is because of this title, *Sustainable*

*Farming.* We started off looking at first of all the word, what does sustain mean? How did they do that? We looked at their field system. We asked, “Why did they have these three fields?” So we studied the manor, and it eventually led to how do we do it today? How do we grow our food today?

Margaret also collaborated with students on designing curriculum and classroom activities since, she believed, “if the students aren’t interested, then they are not going to get anything out of it.” She attempted to give students “some form of control over what they are doing” by allowing them to help plan assignments. This requires Margaret to be flexible in her planning and teaching to allow room for student input.

Eleanor echoes the importance of collaborating with students and furthers the discussion by explaining that this requires teachers to know students as individuals. As an activist-teacher, Eleanor stresses she strives to purposefully maintain an openness when working with students by not imposing her own views and beliefs. This is reflected in her visual metaphor of how she sees herself as an activist-teacher, when she sketched a room with many open doors and windows (see Figure 6). When describing this metaphor she spoke of attempting to maintain openness in her classroom. This proved to be a challenge for Eleanor who found the current system of student evaluation and assessment as narrowing, but nonetheless she struggles to keep openings available to students who each have different perspectives. Eleanor explains, “Last year I had a student who wanted to be in the military forever. I am not into the military but I was quite respectful, I was respectful about his opinions and his choices. We came to some common ground about some things. All I am doing is keeping the doors open so you have to find out what

different people need.” It appears Eleanor might suppress her activist beliefs when interacting with students in an attempt to have a professional relationship with students.

Spartacus also spoke of the importance that activist teachers not set out to indoctrinate students with their belief systems. Spartacus believed collaborating with students and engaging students in inquiry were important practices to avoid indoctrination. He explained the dangers of carelessly teaching from an activist standpoint, “Taking advantage of your position in a way that is not mindful of the power you have in that position. It goes back to using your classroom as a soapbox and that is abusing the power that is given to you as a professional teacher.” Rather Spartacus believed it was important that activist teachers bring students, “through a process and that they are going to make up their own minds. You might not like what comes out at the end of the sausage machine. But nevertheless, the pedagogy is thoughtful. If you really are leading these kids through genuine critical inquiries, then you are turning them into thoughtful, responsible, democratic citizens.”

Michelle echoed the importance of collaborative inquiry as a preferred teaching practice. Her visual metaphor for how she views herself as an activist-teacher depicts a fingers holding seeds (see Figure 9), and she explained it represented, “Spreading seeds of, [pause] I don’t think I am worthy to say of knowledge because I am such a microscopic drop of stuff in the bucket of things. So I can’t really say spreading seeds of knowledge but how about spreading seeds of inquiry and of curiosity.” Margaret also believed in the importance of inquiry her visual metaphor for how she sees herself as an activist teacher depicted a light bulb illuminating a globe (see Figure 15) and she has worked in the classroom to make students more aware of the world and their own biases.

Collaboration with students was not limited to the confines of the classroom, as many of the participants also described working with students outside of the classroom. Michelle was the teacher-sponsor for numerous student clubs and activities. For example, she is the teacher-sponsor of the school newspaper that was initiated and run by students. She characterized her role as a teacher-sponsor this way: “ I enable them but I don’t tell them what to put in, I don’t tell them the content. I don’t do anything like that so everything from the artwork to the articles is from the students.”

Anna described creating a Global Issues Club at her school with her students:

Kids would ask if they could spend their lunch in my room. This gave me the idea to start a youth club. Since the school had a great variety of ethnic groups I started a Multicultural club. Over the years it became so popular we extended into environmental projects too and finally we named it Global Issues Club, the first one as far as I know, not only in our district, but in BC.

Anna also coordinated Global Issues Week at her school, which involved bringing a number of speakers from the community to speak and coordinating different classes to attend. Since Anna was teaching full-time during this week, she collaborated with students to help her by planning different events ahead of time.

For some participants purposeful collaboration also occurred with select colleagues. Michelle created and assumed the role of community relations coordinator in the secondary school in which she taught. She explains, “I am in the community and I take kids with me. If I see a student and I see something in the community, I think oh what a perfect match, I am going to help them make that opportunity happen.” Michelle



further explained, “My self-defined role as community relations person is to get the theme and get as many teachers on board to work with the theme across the disciplines, cross-curricular. Then the students begin to see that they are learning about the same thing across all these different subject areas. Many teachers see that everything is interconnected and ask, “how do we have the time to do it?” So that is my role, I do it for them. I’ll bring people together.” She provided an example:

The marketing teacher was really swamped, right before Spring Break. I said, “I have an idea, let’s create an assignment with a real life situation and that is, how would you market Earth Day? If they have any questions send them to me cause I have knowledge on that topic so that will free you up and takes a little bit of the load off you.” On the final day, they will present and I will book the multi-purpose. I will have people from the community come in and judge them to select the best marketing proposal. The winning team will then work with me to implement it. It will be helping me too because I have to put on Earth Day. Then in their proposal it will involve all the groups like Leadership Class and Student Council. So it will get all the students in the school involved and it will fan out to the larger community.

She acknowledged that occupying this role creates a lot of additional work, “sometimes I think I am crazy. I don’t need to be doing this, right? But yet I couldn’t not do it.”

After the media and school board recognized Anna’s work with the Global Issues Club, a social studies teacher approached her with a problem he was facing in his

classroom. He explained the students were not interested in learning about World War Two and she suggested that she share her experiences with the class:

I told them about, as a ten-year-old, sitting in the basement in Budapest when the city was surrounded by the Russians. I told them how I felt when one of my friends, an eleven-year-old boy, was killed by shrapnel. You see the movies and you are doing those video games shooting people and it is all just fun. But when you step out on the street and you are stepping over dead people or when you see the blown up body parts on the trees like Christmas decorations hanging, it is different. I was talking about that and they didn't even move because it was the personal experience that I was telling them.

This experience of collaborating with a colleague was rewarding to Anna, who is committed to peace education, and who often felt that, in the past, her colleagues discounted her knowledge and beliefs.

#### *“Sweet Spots”*

As outlined above, the experience of being an activist-teacher can be rewarding but also challenging at times. One form of professional sustenance and motivation for participants was what Eleanor referred to as “sweet spots”. Many participants described recognizing and appreciating “sweet spots” (although they didn't all use this actual phrase) as important sources of professional motivation and sustenance. These sweet spots were discovered in innovative implementations of mandated curriculum, the

accomplishments of students and the rewarding interactions with students that took place over their teaching careers.

Frequently referenced in their interviews as experiences of professional satisfaction were innovative implementations of required curriculum. Participants creatively integrated social issues into the required curriculum and this allowed their activism to be enacted in the classroom. When asked about her best experience as an activist-teacher, Michelle described a project she remembered fondly:

It was eleven years ago and I got a grant to implement First Nations curriculum across the disciplines. I decided that how I would spend the money of the grant was to give it all to First Nations communities. I had eleven different teachers and fourteen different First Nations people that represented a variety of First Nations groups. I coordinated the blocks with the teachers and they would come in and they became the teachers. Let me give you an example, I had a carver in one of the art classes and another artist who worked with the painting class on medicine wheels.

The impact of this experience on Michelle is clear since it occurred over a decade ago yet it was the first memory she shared. Perhaps Michelle knew the limits of her personal knowledge and recognized that her ability to address First Nations curriculum was limited. She redistributed the funding to allow her to bring First Nations community members into the classroom. Her conceptions of activism seems to recognize that her knowledge is partial and she seeks to expand it by collaborating with others.

Eleanor enjoys exploring the processes involved in the creation of curriculum and classroom practices with her students:

For example, I think I can teach students about the details of how to write an essay, at the same time I am doing that I can tell them who decided that writing essays is important. Even when we are talking about what novels are on the reading list, I can tell them about the history of that and who selects these things. Who makes the curriculum? Why is it important? In whose vested interest is it important?

This is important to Eleanor who works with alternative students who have not found success in mainstream schools. It allows her to simultaneously teach her students how to succeed academically and to critically explore biases within the school system. This is rewarding to Eleanor who is committed to democratizing education and attempting to raise awareness of how power is distributed in society.

Spartacus also found innovative ways of implementing mandated curriculum as sweet spots in his career. He found satisfaction in designing projects that encouraged students to examine social attitudes and issues that are often neglected in the school system. He described one project:

It was on the historiography process, on how do we think historically, what are the factors that cause us to perceive the past the way we do that was at the core of the question. It did have to do with social attitudes for example and a comparison of social attitudes. The kids had to make some questions about what they would consider to be good times. They would say things like everybody has good jobs. They would say that their health would be looked after and that they are not going to be poor. Then they

had to make up some questions and the idea was to go and ask the oldest person they knew these questions.

This implementation of curriculum allowed the students to be exposed to perspectives outside those, which would be available within the classroom. Spartacus demonstrated to students the value of going beyond the curriculum and school to find new voices to share their perception of history.

Two participants prized the achievements of students as sweet spots in particular. Michelle described her reaction to students who are about to graduate:

I am just over the top this year, I have three students in grade twelve that I have worked with since grade eight. They are going to McGill and a top university in the states. They are doing agriculture and land management. I thought, “Wow you guys that is great!” Isn’t that neat? I think “Wow that is fabulous!”

This indicated that Michelle found professional satisfaction in the achievement of students as it allows her to see the impact of her activism in the classroom.

Anna echoes this sentiment, since she has maintained close contact with many of her former students and is proud of their achievements. She shared her former students’ accomplishments:

Right now they are lawyers, doctors, health professionals, teachers and they are still doing things for the future, they are former students, present friends. They keep in touch with me and they are carrying the torch.

This is also apparent in Anna's visual metaphor for how she sees herself as an activist teacher that depicts a large, old tree surrounded by smaller younger trees (see Figure 12). She explained that she represents the old tree and the younger trees are her former students who are committed to creating social change.

Interestingly, the sweet spots of participants were not always directly linked to their social activism. One participant was particularly touched by interactions with her students. These moments provided Eleanor with sustenance to continue working in challenging circumstances. Eleanor described how she was personally touched by her students' compassion during a difficult period of mourning:

Two or three years ago, when my dad died I learned about grace from my students. They wrote me poems and cards saying how they understood and they had the right words. I never did, I never knew what to say to people who had lost somebody and I learned. I just learned they have been through a lot and they know a lot and none of it is valued in our education system. Like nobody says, how do you deal with grief?

The actions of these students demonstrated to Eleanor that many of her students' strengths and skills are often not recognized or valued in the school system. This is significant as it has been previously discussed in the theme of disconnection that activist teachers often also feel discounted in the school system. Eleanor's empathy with alternative students is also apparent as she shared another story of being touched by the actions of one her female students:

She was a loner and angry. She was not a happy girl. We have an Arts Fair every year and there is a component of it that is performance. It is just beyond bravery to get up there and yet this girl got up there and sang along to a country song. She doesn't have friends, she wasn't a popular kid at all and then there's that moment where everybody starts to sing along and her voice grew stronger [pause] and it was just [pause] I knew that that moment she was going to remember forever because [pause] she was accepted by her peers and had never been before. It was that incredible bravery of getting up there, that sort of baring all and being accepted.

As Eleanor shared both stories of her sweet spots, she was overcome by emotion and shared how touched she was by them. Eleanor acknowledged these sweet spots were “addictive. They demonstrated the similarity of struggles that her alternative students and herself as an activist-teacher faced in the school system. She further stated, “I don't see myself as being in anyway different than alternative students in the sense that we all have the same fears and the same vulnerabilities.”

### *Summary*

In the first theme of disconnection, I illustrated how participants encountered many obstacles created by formal institutional policies and procedures as well as the informal norms of school. This disconnection presented itself in the dimensions of dissatisfaction with their teacher education, estrangement from colleagues, frustration with professional expectations of school administrators and the school district, and

disagreement with the commonly used systems of student evaluation and assessment. This theme of disconnection demonstrates a conflict between the authoritative discourses of schools and the internally persuasive discourses of participants. This conflict appeared to be centred on teaching for social change, which was a defining element of the teachers' professional identities. The participants did not feel the importance and value of teacher for social change was not reflected in the education system and its authoritative discourses, which created feelings of disconnection in participants.

However, participants creatively reacted to experiences of disconnection with different practices and strategies that allowed them to renegotiate their professional identities. In the second theme of renegotiation I identified the dimensions of seeking community, inhabiting strategic spaces, purposeful collaboration, and "sweet spots". This theme is closely linked to Holland et al.'s (1998) conceptions of agency and improvisations in identity construction. The participants' professional practices and actions outside the classroom allowed them to view their professional identity differently than the authoritative notions they often encountered and resisted in the education system. The practices and strategies of the participants strengthened their internally persuasive discourses about the importance and value of teaching for social change.



## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Methodology

#### *The Challenge of Representing Emotions in Research*

I was struck by the intense emotions expressed by the participants as they recounted their experiences of struggle in the education system. When, for example, participants described how they felt isolated and estranged from their colleagues, there was a revelatory, affective quality to their stories. As I listened to the recorded interviews, the emotions of participants appeared to me significant because they demonstrated the powerful impact particular experiences had on the participants. The affect of participants displayed itself during the interviews in a variety of ways. A key way in which affect was demonstrated was in the vocal behaviour of participants. This was displayed as the volume of the participants' voices altered often becoming louder when sharing experiences of frustration and lowered when reflecting on experiences of struggle. Lengthy pauses were taken between thoughts when participants described difficult circumstances or were overcome with emotion. The participants' voices also expressed feeling such as anger, sadness, and frustration when recounting experiences. The affect of participants was also visible through their body language such as their hand gestures, facial expressions and movement in their seats. At times, participants labelled their emotional reactions to situations using phrases, which described how they felt as being "frustrated", "pissed off", "dismayed", and "discouraged".

As a researcher, I was unprepared to represent the emotions that arose in the interview data. I attempted to include the relevant quotes and label the emotion in the

participants' voices as they spoke. However, I found the medium of writing extremely limited in its ability to reflect the intensity and, therefore, the significance of emotions as they presented themselves through the tones of the participants' voices and body language. I felt frustrated that the impact I experienced during the interviews and when listening to the recorded interviews would not be as potent for the readers of my study.

I had asked the participants to create visual metaphors that represented their activism, encounters with professional expectations and identity as an activist-teacher. The visual metaphors were, according to my interpretation, able to convey the emotions of participants and provide insights more effectively than textual representations of the interview data. This surprised me. If you were to ask me at the beginning of the data collection process, I would have said self-reports of the lived experiences of teachers would have created the greatest most powerful and insightful data since stories are often the core of human expression. However, the visual metaphors the participants created called that presumption into question. They appeared to me to reveal greater insight into the participants' professional identities than did their verbal accounts, by allowing access to thoughts and feelings that the interviews did not. They also allowed inconsistencies, tensions and struggles of the participants to be visible and accessible for analysis and interpretation. I now think researchers should incorporate more metaphor creation and visual thinking into their methodologies.

#### *Study Limitations and Areas for Further Research*

The greatest limitation of my study is probably my own personal biases. As a teacher researcher, I have a unique perspective on education and activism that is formed by my personal background, experiences and beliefs. First, without my own elementary

school teaching experiences and subsequent experiences as a graduate student, I would not have developed an interest in the professional identities of activist teachers or devised the research questions that way I did. Second, from my situated position and viewpoint, I interpreted and analyzed the interview data and visual metaphors in ways, which are likely to be very different for different interpreters.

The small sample used in this study precludes generalization of its findings. While this was never the intention of this small qualitative inquiry, it would be enriched by interviewing a larger group in different settings or contexts. A natural extension would be to interview activist teachers from differing ideological positions, such as religious and social-conservatives, to explore, comparatively, their experiences in the education system.

I experienced difficulty in recruiting activist teachers to participate in this study. I approached various educational organizations, addressed a diploma program and pursued various educational networks to recruit participants. Often I received e-mails from potential participants outlining their various commitments and explaining why they did not have time to allocate to this study. This revealed that activist teachers spend a large amount of time outside the classroom volunteering for various organizations. It would have been interesting to focus future research on the practices and activities of activist teachers outside of the classroom.

#### *Discussion of Visual Metaphors*

Upon reflection, the separate analysis of interview data and visual metaphors was an approach that might not have best served data. In the future, I would seek to analyze the interview data and visual metaphors under integrated themes of analysis. However, as

a beginning researcher I chose to approach the analysis separately in an attempt to value both forms of data and place at the forefront the participants' voices.

*I See Activism As...*

The visual metaphors for activism created by the participants spanned a wide range of images, reflecting the differing interpretations and conceptions of activism participants held. Margaret selected a photograph of an avalanche to represent how she sees activism (see Figure 13). In this image, the avalanche appears to be thundering down a mountainside, just about to bury the trees that stand in its way. This dramatic image suggests a conception of activism as involving powerful, indeed relentless, change and upheaval. Margaret's visual metaphor for activism is in sharp contrast with Michelle's.

Michelle selected a photograph of a creek and in this image the creek runs through a wooded area before diverging into two directions (see Figure 7). Michelle explained that she selected this particular photograph of a creek because it had many eddies which are instances where the water moves in a contrary direction than the main current. Within this image eddies are visible behind the emergent rocks in the creek. This creates an impression that Michelle's sees activism as being embedded within the "mainstream" and as a response to the conditions, which surround it, rather than being a source of powerful and dramatic change, like an avalanche.

Spartacus selected a photograph of a winding road to represent how he sees activism (see Figure 1). This road winds through country fields and a wooded area obscures the direction of the road from the viewer. The winding road has no vehicles on it or building alongside it. Since the viewer does not know where the road is going, this

seems to indicate that activism is a journey into the unknown, which can take one to different and unexpected places. The image also suggests that it is an individual journey, since the road is deserted.

This is very different, again, from Eleanor's selected representation for 'activism': a market place, outdoors in a public space (see Figure 4). The image features several people, who could be farmers selling produce and others who are looking at different assortments of produce. This suggests activism is a social endeavour where people come together for as a market would create social ties as people engage in mutually rewarding exchanges.

Anna's selected photograph for activism is a large and open classroom (see Figure 10). In this black-and-white photograph the majority of the children are painting independently. This indicates for Anna there is a strong connection between activism and teaching, In fact unlike the other images it directly links activism to an educational setting. Clearly, the conceptions reflected by this set of images are very different.

#### *The Professional Expectations I Encounter Are...*

The visual metaphors the participants created to represent the professional expectations they encountered have a distinctly different feel from the images they created or selected for activism. These images representing professional expectations seem to convey strong sentiments of negativity linked to struggle, restraint and narrowing.

Eleanor selected a photograph of a white kitchen funnel for her visual metaphor of professional expectations (see Figure 5). This indicates Eleanor encounters professional expectations as a narrowing of her practice and identity. It is clear not every

item would fit through the funnel and perhaps this suggests that, for Eleanor, not all of her commitments to activism can be incorporated in her professional identity. This was reflected as well in Eleanor's interview as she recounted stories of being respectful of a student's decision to join the military despite her personal objection to the military.

Michelle could not find a suitable image within the database and elected instead to sketch her visual metaphor. In this sketch, she drew an individual pushing a boulder up a hill and nearby people are neither assisting nor acknowledging the struggle of the individual (see Figure 8). This shows the struggle and weight of the professional expectations she encounters. It is interesting to note that Michelle, unlike other participants, described having strong relationships with most of her colleagues. Furthermore, she assumes a community relations position in her school where she collaborates with students, staff and the wider community on a variety of projects. Yet her image reflects that she not only feels alone in her struggle but others nearby do not seem to be aware and if they do notice her plight, they offer no assistance.

Spartacus selected a photograph of a bridge being covered in fog for his visual metaphor of the professional expectations he encounters (see Figure 2). The viewer of the image does not know where the bridge is heading because of the fog. It is worthy to note, in his visual metaphor for activism the winding roads destination is also unknown, however the photograph has a distinctly different tone. For 'activism', the winding road seems to be able to lead to infinite possibilities, whereas the fog obscuring the bridge representing professional expectations seems to be ominous and suggests the need to proceed with caution.

Margaret selected a page of a book for her visual metaphor for professional expectations (see Figure 14). The text of the page is primarily written in black, with the exception of the words “divide and conquer” which are written in blue. The viewer’s eyes are drawn to these words that stand out from the rest of the text. Indeed, professional expectations did lead the participants to experience a divide from their colleagues. Many of them, including Margaret, experienced isolation in their schools and estrangement from their colleagues. In this way, teachers seem to have been divided and conquered by professional expectations.

Anna once again selected an image that directly references teaching and education in her visual metaphor for professional expectations (see Figure 11). The photograph she selected shows the backs of children facing a sculpture. On the left side of the picture a adult woman faces the children and her hands are in motion as she crouches closer to the height of the children. Two other adults in the picture are both positioned away from the group of students. The teacher in the image seems to be trying to speak to the students, however the students seem fixated on the statue. This could imply that Anna attempts to engage with students but is always aware of the presence of professional expectations in her practice.

These visual metaphors for professional expectations demonstrated the constraints experienced by participants. This, again, supports the interview data, which suggested that contradictory institutional and personal imperatives had a significant impact on the participants’ career experiences and ultimately their professional identities. One of the dimensions of the theme of disconnection, which seemed to produce the strongest feelings of distress and frustration in participants, concerned the systems of student

assessment and evaluation required by the Ministry of Education. This 'disconnection' is consistent with literature, which reports an emphasis on competition and accountability in institutional discourse manifested through comprehensive testing in schools (Burnett, 2006; Mahoney & Hexall, 2000).

Pressure from the Ministry of Education defines students' academic achievement for students by reference to results on provincial exams was a source of struggle for participants. Participants were all unconvinced of the rationale for and effectiveness of provincial exams. Furthermore these systems of student evaluation and assessment which teachers are obliged to support, are experienced by the participants as undercutting their ability to address controversial issues, which are not part of the mandatory curriculum nor assessed by provincial exams. That the insistence on standardized examinations frustrates these teachers is consistent with literature that warns the emphasis on testing could result in the suppression and devaluing of the alternative aims of education (Mahoney & Hexall, 2000).

The weight placed upon exams and results serves, these teachers report, as a hindrance to their practice as professionals. The emotional impact of encountering the authoritative discourse of accountability and competency was apparent throughout the interviews. However, the visual metaphors provide more powerful representations of this reported struggle. Defining educational success entirely by reference to students' performance on provincial exams greatly narrows the basis upon which a teacher's competence as professional is judged. This left many of the participants feeling professionally vulnerable since their practices of going beyond mandated curriculum to address social issues is not valued or appreciated within the current system of evaluation



and assessment. Participants feel angry that the way academic performance is measured does not recognize or appreciate the importance of addressing important social issues.

*I See Myself as an Activist Teacher...*

The visual metaphors for how the participants see themselves as activist teachers provided an assortment of images, all of which suggest participants' views of professional competence are wider than institutional expectations expect and impose.

Michelle's image of fingers holding two seeds was intriguing (see Figure 9). The photograph was taken close up which suggests the image is under scrutiny, as perhaps activist teachers feel negatively evaluated by colleagues and administrators. In her explanation, Michelle is very quick to explain the seeds do not represent knowledge but inquiry. She expressed that she is attempting to sow seeds of inquiry in the various communities she interacts with. This seems aligned to her metaphor for activism being within the mainstream of a creek but diverging from the current in the form of an eddy.

Margaret selected an image of a light bulb illuminating a globe for how she sees herself as an activist teacher (see Figure 15). This seems to be quite different than her conception of activism. Whereas her image of an avalanche for activism seems drastic and results in dramatic change, her image of herself seems to be more subdued. The light bulb could signify bringing light, the world imposed on it could suggest to global issues. This is aligned with her participation in a Global Issues diploma program. However, bringing attention to global issues seems different than her image of an avalanche for activism.

Spartacus's visual metaphor is of young adults in a garden taking part in guerrilla gardening (see Figure 3). Guerrilla gardening is when an often neglected public, urban space is taken over to grow crops, plants or flowers. The guerrilla gardening is not officially condoned or supported. This results in some guerrilla gardeners working in relative secrecy while others seek to engage members of the local community. Spartacus admitted he was the most pleased with this visual metaphor since he sees teacher activism as a form of guerrilla gardening. Spartacus believes activist teachers try take on social issues that are neglected in the education system to assign them new purpose and importance in their professional practice.

Anna's image for herself as an activist-teacher is a photograph of a variety of trees (see Figure 12). She explained that she is the mature tree and the younger trees are her students. Again there is an explicit link to activism through education for Anna. During the interview, Anna expressed how her former students have taken on different professions and are committed to the causes she introduced in her classroom. This brought Anna a deep sense of professional satisfaction and personal joy.

Eleanor's sketch of a room with open doors and windows (see Figure 6) is a sharp contrast to her 'professional expectations' metaphor of a funnel. She seems to be pushing against the metaphor for professional expectations in order to create a metaphor for her vision of herself as an activist-teacher. Creating space and openings for students is important to Eleanor who finds herself in an education system that has narrow definitions of student success and professional competence.

Consistent with literature, the creation and analysis of metaphors provided insight into the participants' professional practice and identity (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The

visual metaphors promoted an understanding of professional practice and identity in graphic and visible terms (Dickmeyer, 1989). The participants' visual metaphors served many functions as they were used to provide interpretations and descriptions of the participants' conceptions of activism, professional expectations and professional identity (Knowles and Moon, 2006). The visual metaphors also highlighted differences and similarities between different participants' interpretations. Furthermore, the visual metaphors highlighted inconsistencies in participants' beliefs.

### Conclusion

The description of the findings (Chapter 4) and discussion of visual metaphors, suggests the professional identity of teachers is more complex than is often conceived and represented. Teachers' identities are often portrayed in a simple, static and singular in popular culture (Goodlad, 1984; Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). The misconception that teachers' professional identities are free of conflict is reinforced by years of classroom experiences and observations made as students, which create lasting images of teachers and beliefs of what it means to be a teacher that are necessarily limited (Britzman, 1991; Collay, 1998; Everhart, 1983; Haritoe, 2004). Furthermore through curriculum, pedagogy, and internships, teacher education can influence and narrow conceptions of teachers' identities (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001; Segall, 2002). All of these socializing influences contribute to cultural expectations and definitions of "teacher", which can minimize the complexity of and tensions of teachers' professional identities. The participants in this study did not accept a narrowly defined,

prescribed role, but rather they continuously constructed and negotiated their professional identities.

### *Personal Reflection*

I began this research intrigued by the representation and construction of teachers' professional identity. My experiences as an elementary teacher and my discussions with fellow teachers, led me to believe that constructing a professional identity is not simply a matter of fulfilling externally defined roles or mirroring stereotypical images prevalent in popular culture. I was particularly intrigued with how self-described activist teachers incorporated their activism into their professional practice and identity.

In the process of analyzing the visual metaphors and interview data, it became apparent to me that the participants had significantly differing conceptions and interpretations of activism. At times, my own personal beliefs aligned with the participants and other times diverged greatly. "Teaching for social change", something all these teachers endorsed and saw themselves as promoting, was in fact thought about and implemented differently by each of the participants. For some participants, activism involved building meaningful connections with the community to develop collective responses to local and international issues. Others focused on raising awareness of issues as an individual through their classroom practice. Some saw activism as an inexorable physical force, others as opposing currents within the mainstream, a road to be travelled, a public, social exchange, or a supportive open classroom,

All the self-described activist teachers faced difficult circumstances, obstacles they saw as created by formal institutions policies and procedures, as well as informal institutional norms that stood in opposition for teaching for social change. These barriers

can also limit how professionalism is perceived and practiced by activist teachers. The participants in this study firmly believed that teachers should not impose their worldviews and beliefs on students. The majority of participants thought that students should be encouraged to make their own decisions about controversial and social issues. The participants spoke of the importance of using critical inquiry and thoughtful pedagogy to allow for this.

The participants did not recount experiences where they overtly shared their own commitment to a particular viewpoint with students. This struck me as unusual. This attempt at refuting indoctrination and instead implementing critical inquiry of social issues, without including one's own world view might potentially be an indication of the boundaries of activism in education.

Activist teachers sought to expand and renegotiate conceptions of being a professional teacher through developing communities outside of their schools. For instance, engaging professional development through their pursuit of graduate studies. Their experience in graduate school enhanced their classroom practices, afforded them a theoretical support for their beliefs, and provided a forum to discuss education with teachers holding similar views. These self-described activist teachers still seemed limited in how they could incorporate activism in their professional practice and identity because of constraining professional expectations.

The diversity of conceptions of and implementations of activism suggests the field of education must create opportunities for professional dialogue about activism and its place in education. This discussion could usefully extend to explicitly considering the role and purpose of professional expectations within the education system. Such

discussion should include teachers of various subjects with varying degrees of experience, as well as other stakeholders, including parents, administrators, Ministry of Education staff, and academics.

### *Educational Implications*

Despite its various limitations, this study did enable a fuller grasp of how we might better understand how activism and professionalism are reconciled by teachers who see themselves as both activists and professional educators, and how, despite the tensions between these commitments, teachers can make their own ways, not without stresses, frustrations and difficulties, towards negotiating a sometimes fragile integration of institutional and personal imperatives, and building for themselves workable identities as activist educators. The intensity with which 'professional expectations' are felt to constrain and limit both the character and the educational value of activism suggests, however, that there may be considerable value in enlarging opportunities for teachers to talk about the importance of activism for their professional practices and for their professional and personal identity-development.

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