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Lynnette Mawhinney & Kira J. Baker-Doyle

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Nurturing “A Specific Kind of Unicorn-y Teacher”: How Teacher Activist Networks Influence the Professional Identity and Practices of Teachers of Color

Lynnette Mawhinney [a] and Kira J. Baker-Doyle [b]

[a]Rutgers University-Newark; [b]University of Illinois at Chicago

ABSTRACT
This article highlights the ways justice-oriented activist teachers of Color nurture themselves professionally through their involvement in critical professional development through activist teacher networks. This study conducted narrative inquiries of 26 activist teachers of Color across the United States. The counter-stories told by the teachers in this study reflect critical intellectual engagement and highlight specific ways in which these organizations further teacher sustainability, nurturance, and social change. This unified portrait shows a unique interplay between support of moral purpose, intellectual inquiry, and democratic change.

Introduction

The 2020s stand at the convergence point between two rapidly increasing phenomena in education: profound teacher turnover and attacks on social justice and equity work in schools. While the COVID-19 pandemic did not create these issues, it has added fuel to the fire. Since March 2020, higher numbers of teachers have left the profession, further widening the already significant diversity gap between the 82% white teachers and 18% teachers of Color (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Furthermore, the continued attacks on use of curricula that highlight the Civil Rights Movement, impacts of slavery, and other Black and Ethnic history topics are not likely to be helpful in convincing people of Color to join the profession.

In this article, we describe what we learned about the ways social justice activist teachers of Color nurture themselves professionally through their involvement in critical professional development (Kohli et al., 2015) through their activist teacher networks. Our approach to this research was a “for us, by us” perspective. We are researchers that identify as teachers of Color, researching *with* teachers of Color, in order to *support* other teachers of Color with the knowledge of how networks and organizations can play a powerful role in teacher retention. This research project was slated for fellow teachers of Color. Yet, we argue that it is critical that teacher education programs and schools identify practices and programs that nurture and sustain teachers of Color and support social justice and equity work in the classroom to maintain a diverse and effective workforce. We feel the power of this work lies in the voices of teachers of Color.

We conducted narrative inquiries of 26 teachers of Color across the country that were members of teacher activist networks. In particular, we had two overarching research questions: (1) What impacts do activist professional networks/organizations and support structures have on participants?; and (2) How do the biographies of activist teachers of Color inform and shape their interest and involvement in the groups? We used a critical theoretical framework focused on counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002a, 2002b) to frame our analysis of their stories. We found that the critical professional

CONTACT Lynnette Mawhinney lynnette.mawhinney@rutgers.edu Rutgers University-Newark
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development provided by activist teacher networks influenced participants' sense of professional purpose, critical professional development, and classroom practice. Most significantly, the networks served to equip teachers with both a sense of ethical purpose and practical pedagogical strategies for their work. Our findings have implications for how teachers and teacher educators can support teachers of Color committed to social justice and equity work. Ultimately, it is our hope that teachers of Color who were not aware of these networks learn how they can be powerful resources for them, and we hope alternative spaces that provide critical professional development can be considered when training preservice teachers.

Critical professional development in activist teacher networks

An extensive collection of literature on teacher activist networks exists in educational research (Baker-Doyle, 2017; Picower, 2012; Riley & Solic, 2017). Within this body of research, several scholars have conducted in-depth explorations into professional development and reflection in specific activist networks (Catone, 2017; Mosely, 2018; Pham & Kohli, 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2016, Pour-Khorshid, 2018, Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Kohli and colleagues (2015) describe the type of professional development offered in activist networks as *critical professional development* (CPD). They noted that this model of teacher professional development that stands apart from traditional forms of professional development due to the intentional acknowledgement of and attention to the ways in which social power and identities shape teaching and learning: "[CPDs are] where teachers are engaged as politically-aware individuals who have a stake in teaching and transforming society. In both pedagogy and content, CPD develops teachers' critical consciousness by focusing their efforts toward liberatory teaching" (p. 9). CDPs are the antithesis of anti-dialogical professional development, that is often held in school spaces and that is often experienced as oppressive and manipulative by teachers of Color:

CPD is seen to be connected with Friere's (2000) dialogical action, as:

> It is designed to provoke cooperative dialogue, build unity, provide shared leadership, and meet the critical needs of teachers. CPD engages teachers in political analysis of their role as educators in the reproduction or resistance of inequality ... CPD is rarely a formal part of schools or districts, and often emerges in direct response to oppressive practices *(Kohli et al., 2015, p. 11).*

CPDs are thus designed to provide teachers the tools to navigate and transform institutionally embedded racism within schools (Kohli, 2019).

As such, CPDs are an important professional development tool for social justice activist teachers of Color (Kohli, 2019). Here we define social justice activism (hereafter referred to as activism) as:

> ... acts that challenge the status quo and seek to reconfigure asymmetrical power relations. Activism involves undermining structures that privilege particular social actors and marginalize others, and it seeks to include in decision-making structures and processes those whose voices have been systematically muted. It paves the pathways for inclusion, access, and equity *(Conner & Rosen, 2016, p. 2).*

Studies of activist networks have demonstrated that CPDs can create nurturing and supportive spaces for teachers of Color. For example, Mosely (2018) designed and researched The Black Teacher Project, which had a dual mission to sustain Black teachers and address anti-Black racism in schools. Mosely described the Black Teacher Project's CPDs as:

> [seeking] to provide Black teachers with the knowledge, skills and community that will help them thrive in their work, while supporting non-Black teachers and other educators to examine how they can shift their own beliefs, practices and structures to attract and sustain Black teachers *(p. 268).*

Mosely used Love's (2010) liberatory consciousness framework with the idea to build Awareness, Analysis, Action, and Accountable/Ally-ship. In her research on the impact of the project, Mosely found that the Black Teacher Project created a space which helped Black teachers to not feel professionally isolated (Mosely, 2018).

The Institute for Teachers of Color (ITOC) Committed to Radical Justice provides another example of how activist networks use CPDs to build supportive and healing spaces. Held annually in California, ITOC is considered a nurturing space for teachers of Color and uses CPDs to build these support spaces (Pham & Kohli, 2018). ITOC is exclusive to teachers of Color and is based off five constructs: (1) community building; (2) cohort of racial justice minded peers; (3) theory driven content facilitated by people of Color; (4) reflection, healing, and self-care; and (5) systemic plan for racial justice work. The foundational framing of the CPD workshops revolve around radical justice and justice-oriented practices for the classroom, along with healing activities (e.g., yoga, comedians, etc.) for the teachers.

Similar to ITOC, H.E.L.LA., is a teacher activist network for teachers of Color located in California, which builds its network around five concepts: "healing, empowerment, love, and liberation and action," (also the acronym for their name) (Pour-Khorshid, 2016, Pour-Khorshid, 2018, Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Their CPD work was grounded in praxis through *testimonios*, a storytelling method used to "testify and theorize lived experiences navigating various forms of oppression" (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 323), and fugitivity, "a way of learning which refutes capitalist logics and societal control mechanisms by creating spaces and modalities existing outside of the logical or logistical ways of being" (p. 325). CPDs such as H.E.L.L.A and ITOC, therefore, work to create spaces that are free from white supremist paradigms and provide opportunities for healing and enrichment.

It is clear from these studies that activist teacher networks can, and often do, provide professional development for teachers, and that this professional development is often critical and transformative in nature. Martinez et al. (2016) refer to these spaces as "teacher survival programs" (p. 301). Specifically, they explore a group called People's Ed and how "members worked to create a space for learning, outside of the constraints of their [professional development], to develop decolonizing pedagogies" (p. 305). In essence, critical professional development is an alternate "re-humanizing professional development model" due to its objective to decolonize (Fernández, 2019, p. 3).

Thus, we approach our study of the influence of activist networks on teachers of Color with these understandings in mind. This study adds to literature in the field because it looks at teacher experiences across a range of activist teacher networks in the United States, capturing broader trends of professional development in these network spaces. In our study, we are interested in understanding how professional development that happens in activist networks shapes teachers' beliefs and practices. We are particularly mindful, also, of the ways that white supremacy challenges the sustainability of teachers of Color through demoralization.

Interrogating teacher sustainability: on de-moralization and white supremacy

Another much-researched topic in teacher education is teacher retention and turnover (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Dworkin, 1987; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Although a myriad of research and literature has focused on this subject since the early 1990s when it became apparent that the churn of teacher turnover was negatively impacting schools, few approaches have successfully stemmed the tide of leavers (Bryner, 2021). The issue of retention and turnover is compounded for teachers of Color, who enter in lower rates, and leave at higher rates than white teachers (Dixon et al., 2019; Mawhinney & Rinke, 2019). Previous studies of teacher turnover generally focused on four factors that influence teacher turnover: low salary, under-resourced school environment, lack of professional development, and few opportunities for career advancement (Loeb et al., 2005). Popular responses to these factors, such as merit pay based on test scores, pre-scripted curricula, and school reorganization/staffing have done little to change the trajectory of low retention (Berlinski & Ramos, 2020; Johnson et al., 2004; Mathis, 2009).

Yet, there is a growing body of literature on teacher sustainability that introduces an additional, superseding factor: moral purpose. Scholars such as Zembylas (2007; 2015), Wronowski (2020), and Santoro (2011; 2018) have looked closely at teachers' responses to school policies and curricula implementation as well as their rates of retention and found that, at the heart of many issues are the moral conundrums that teachers face. For example, a teacher might need to make a choice between

teaching a curriculum that they believe is harmful to children or be punished by their superiors for not implementing the curricula. Santoro (2011) and others call the feeling that teachers have when they are forced to engage in practices contrary to their moral codes as "de-moralizing." A demoralized teacher is likely to leave the profession; it is simply too unsustainable to work in such a way.

Teachers of Color often work in schools that are embedded with racist practices and white supremacist logics, and thus face moral conundrums frequently (Mawhinney et al., 2021). For example, a teacher of Color might need to make choices about teaching a mandated curriculum that centers or celebrates white stories and histories over BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) stories when most of their students are students of Color. Or, a teacher of Color might need to decide how to handle classroom management in a school that disproportionally punishes students of Color. Providing additional professional development on a curriculum that a teacher has deemed harmful to children will not keep that teacher in the profession. Providing merit pay will also fail to attract teachers that have come into the profession to nurture and support children if they are in a school that has a demoralizing regime. Demoralization is thus a superseding factor in teacher sustainability. This research tries to understand how teachers of Color are working among themselves to sustain through their own counter-stories.

Counter-storytelling as a conceptual framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a foundational understanding to how race, ability, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation can be a primary lens through which to view data (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Tate, 1997; Wolfe, 2011). This is why CRT serves as the groundwork for other critical research lenses: LatCrit (Latinx critical race theory), DisCrit (Dissability Studies and Critical Race Theory), QueerCrit (queer critical perspective), and the like. Counter-narratives, also referred to as counter-storytelling, is "a critical race methodology [that] provides a tool to counter deficit storytelling" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b). Stories of monolingual, white, female teachers saturate scholarly pages and media representations of teachers. These representations can mask important phenomena that impact teaching and learning and reinforce silencing of teachers of Color. Counter-storytelling is meant to reveal the often-obscured voices of marginalized peoples and provide a fuller picture of a phenomenon. Solórzano & Yosso (2002b) describe it as:

> . . . a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform . . . within the histories and lives of people of color, there are numerous unheard of counter-stories. Storytelling and counter-storytelling these experiences can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance *(p. 32).*

Reynolds and Mayweather (2017) explain that counter-storytelling is a tool to gain explicit knowledge, and acts as a "vehicle by which voices from the margins are heard [and] often proves to be an important methodological tool employed to make a significant contribution to educational research" (p. 288). Although counter-storytelling is a method, it is also a conceptual framework that guided this study.

We used counter-narratives to "challenge both the artificial sterilization and dominant rhetoric" (Henning et al., 2018, p. 6) and use activist teachers of Color's voices to change and defy majoritarian teacher narratives in order to shed a different scholarly light. In essence, the use of counter-narratives is a conceptual framework with activist roots, as the act of counter-storytelling continues to challenge conventional norms (Burns Thomas, 2020). This conceptual framework helped us to understand how activist teachers of Color construct their teacher and activist identities (Tolbert & Eichelberger, 2016). These counter-stories highlight how both teacher and activist identities speak to each other, and how the activist organizations reinforce and uplift their identities within school spaces.

Table 1 List of participants represented in this article.

Name	Race (self-identified)	Gender	Location	Years Teaching	Current Teaching Background	# of Networks	Leadership Role
Abby	Black	Female	East Coast	22	High School	2	Yes
Ayotunde	Black	Male	East Coast	13	High School	2	No
Cynthia	Latina	Female	West Coast	5	Middle School	1	No
Hong	Asian/Mixed race (Japanese/white)	Female	East Coast	5	High School	2	Yes
Isaac	Black	Male	East Coast	9	High School	2	Yes
Jenna	Black with West Indian Heritage	Female	East Coast	20+	Instructional Coach	1	Yes
Kalynn	Mixed race (Af-Am /Creole)	Female	East Coast	14	High School	1	No
Krissi	Black/Multiracial (Black/ white)	Female	East Coast	13	High School	1	No
Laurinda	Black	Female	East Coast	5	English (Various)	1	No
Mateo	Latinx/Chicanx	Male	West Coast	N/A	Higher Ed.	2	Yes
Neta	Latina	Female	East Coast	4	High School	1	No
Nicholas	African American	Male	East Coast	4	Elementary	1	No
Theresa	Black	Female	East Coast	Fluctuating	Middle/High School	1	Yes
Uma	Black	Female	Southwest	9	Elementary	1	Yes

Methodology

Our study sought to explore the professional experiences of self-identified activist teachers of Color (e.g., Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, and Pacific Islander) who belonged to teacher-led activist networks in either a membership or leadership capacity. We used snowball sampling (Griffith et al., 2016; Waters, 2015), with the aid of advertising on various social media platforms, which allowed for setting up a community nominations sampling strategy (Foster, 1997).

We were able to identify 26 activist teachers of Color: 62% Black/mixed race, 27% Latinx, and 12% Asian. The majority of the participants were female (73%), and the remaining 27% identified as male. Fourteen teacher-led activist networks were represented in our participant pool, and some participants had multiple memberships in the organizations. Leadership roles in the organization were held by 16 of the 26 participants (62%). Although we received IRB approval to use participants' real names and organizations, we opt for pseudonyms throughout this article. Moreover, we do not use the names of organizations in connection with people to ensure anonymity. Table 1 outlines only the participants used within this article.

Participants' professional life histories (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Foster, 1997), narrative forms of explaining a person's professional experiences in depth, were gathered qualitatively through the use of semi-structured interviews. All interviews were done with a common protocol either face-to-face or via a video conferencing platform (e.g., Skype, Zoom, FaceTime). The interviews were 90 minutes to two hours in length, and they were all audio recorded with consent from each participant. The interviews were transcribed and sent to participants for member checking prior to the data analysis phase of the study.

Data analysis

All individuals of the research team analyzed the data separately using within- and cross-participant analysis (Miles et al., 1994). Later, we also had a graduate assistant analyze the data individually. This process helped to ensure interrater reliability of the findings. Then, we collectively compared the *a priori* and emergent codes across all team members for a total of 43 thematic findings. The key themes used in this article are: (1) network influencing practices and (2) encouraging student activism. In reporting our findings, we lean into the practice of narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) and rely primarily on the narrative voices of our participants to tell their stories. As such, we offer assemblages of narratives within the themes that emerged through our coding process. This

format offers a deep and authentic view of teachers' counter-stories within a broader range of a theme. From there, our discussion draws from these findings to build connections across extant literature and the phenomena observed in the study.

Positionality

We feel it is important to discuss our positionality as researchers, as it certainly has an influence on our connection to participants and our qualitative lens as researchers. Specifically, we take the time to discuss our racial identity, our background as teachers, and our connection (or lack thereof) with activist groups.

Lynnette

I am a biracial (Black/white) cis-gendered woman who identifies as a Black woman and is seen as such by society. Until recently, I have lived most of my adult life in Philadelphia, PA, where I was a high school English teacher. I worked in an all-Black school with majority Black staff in North Philadelphia, yet I did not become aware of teacher activism and organizing until I left the high school classroom. Midway through my career as urban teacher education professor within higher education is when I became connected with such organizations.

Kira

I am a white-passing multiracial (Black/white) cis-gendered woman. I identify as a Person of Color. Raised by civil rights activist parents, I became involved in community organizing and teacher activism as a preservice and in-service teacher in Philadelphia, PA, where I was born and raised. I stayed involved with several teacher activist groups when I became a university professor. My racial identity development has been (and is) a journey, as I have experienced a sense of invisibility, often being positioned by others as white; marginalization by being positioned as an "ambiguously brown" "urban" person in white spaces; and while being aware of the privileges that being white-passing affords. Such experiences have led me to take a continuously reflexive stance about my family history, positionality, and racial identity.

Network influences on professional identity and development

Mateo, a Chicanx teacher activist leader, often would refer to activist teachers of Color participants in his organization as a collective of "a specific kind of unicorn-y teacher." Mateo's reference speaks to the fact that teachers of Color are unicorns in many ways, only making up 18% of the teaching population (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The activist network of teachers of Color are even more rare, as they are like-minded in their approach to their teaching profession. The gathering of like-minded teachers led to the organizations/networks influencing teachers directly in two ways: (1) the activist organizations and networks provide a grounding, often reminding the teachers, through the hard work, *why* they are teachers and *what impact* they plan to serve, and (2) the offering of extended learning experiences, outside of school, acted as spaces for critical professional development (see Figure 1).

Grounded perspective: influencing the 'why'

A recurring theme in our interviews of teachers of Color was how the organizations and networks grounded their perspective, while also serving as a reminder as to *why* they became teachers. Uma, a Black elementary teacher, explained how her network organization influenced thoughts on *why* she is a teacher.

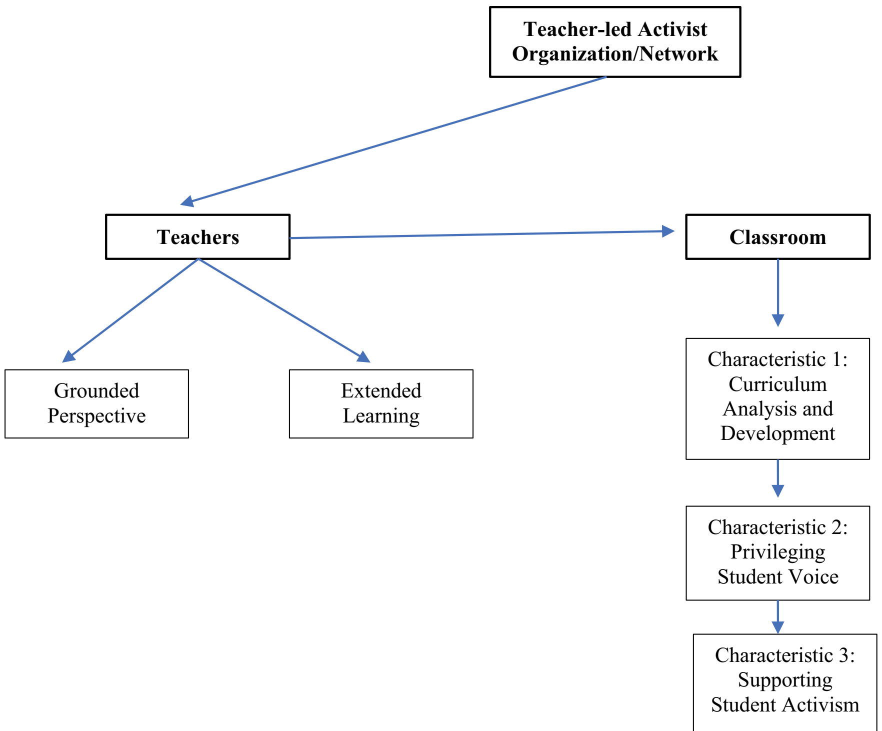

Figure 1. Organizational influence on classroom practice.

> I think it [the organization] helps guide me to my "why." And I found that as I've just recently become an educator, I ask teachers, what's your "why"? And some people are confused by that question, are thrown off by it. But what I do every day is my "why." Because it matters for kids, it matters because when I'm older, these are the people that are going to be taking care of me and making decisions for me. And so, I want to make sure that I'm doing my part to enlighten, and to enlighten myself about what are the issues that matter to kids and to parents of Color.

Uma continued to describe that her *why* is based on the concept of justice-oriented practices for her students and her community.

> That [the "why"] kind of drives my life, drives my work. And social justice, being in a classroom, seeing students, listening to their stories. Being sympathetic to and empathetic to their experiences helps me continue my work and direct it not to test scores, or things to that nature, but to what's going to make them a person who can see their value, and who can recognize their worth within the space that they're not designed to be successful.

Cynthia, a Latina middle school teacher, explicated the power of connection to others within her organization. But she continued to discuss how these connections, and the organization itself, helped to reinforce her *why* behind teaching.

> I think that having done [the organization] kind of connects me to different things, especially as a first and second-year teacher. There was another teacher there who was science who … she was like a resource … Just basic things like, "When you collect homework, this might be helpful for you." This is basic stuff that I think was important, but also just thinking about when I'm in the classroom, and the framework, and just kind of reminder, especially my first and second year of teaching when it was really, really hard. And I had to remind myself like, "Why did I even do this? Why did I choose to go into the classroom?"

Cynthia also explained how the activist network space allows her to think about the larger, systemic issues in education and how this influenced the thoughts behind her pedagogical practice:

> We do a lot of processing, and looking at the bigger picture, and looking at it [education] as a system and looking at sort of where the school fits in and what we can do to counter these different messages that studies might get from testing, or from experiencing this or whatever it is, which we did a lot with [the organization] also. So, I think it [the organization] definitely just helped me keep that lens and keep that perspective throughout the years that I've been teaching.

Neta, a Latina high school teacher, talks about how the organization makes her reflect on what and how she approaches the classroom as a teacher.

> My biggest interest is what impacts students directly, and what am I doing in my classroom? How can I improve my practice as a teacher? That's what I'm most interested in, because that's my day to day. And then I'll be interested in less direct things, like policy and politics, in general. The [organization's] campaign against charter school expansion, or things that will definitely impact my students, but in a less direct way, it's not my day to day classroom stuff, that's probably like my second highest interest [with the organization]. Yeah, so both of those clearly effect my students.

Hong, an Asian high school teacher, discussed how the multiple organizations she belongs to allowed room for connecting that provides motivation, energy, and empowerment as a grounded perspective:

> I think that, especially being in a new school, teaching two subjects I've never taught before is like doing nine months of curriculum development for two subjects. That's just really draining, and I just feel like so much of this year, I have been so narrowly focused on it at my school, that just connecting in those other spaces is empowering because it just gives me a lot of energy, and it reminds me to continue to be innovative, and think about other options, and reach out to people when I feel like I need support, because it's easy to just sort of get in your own little bubble.

Extended learning and critical professional development

Another emergent theme was that the networks provided participants with space for extended learning or critical professional development. Ayotunde, a Black high school teacher, exclaimed how activist organizations provided the space for extended learning through the power of community:

> So, I think activist organizations . . . they give you a community of people that you can bounce ideas off of and think about your own practice and reflect. 'Cause sometimes it's hard to reflect by yourself. Sometimes you need to reflect with other people. Sometimes you need to go to the bar, have a couple drinks, and reflect. You know, tell some stories, tell some lies, and sit back and laugh. And then you don't feel as bad. It's like, "Okay, yeah."

Jenna, a Black organizational leader, had recently transitioned to a new role as an instructional coach at a school. Similar to Ayotunde's stance, Jenna cherished in the power of community and teacher agency brought about by her involvement in her activist network.

> I was mesmerized by the whole idea of the agency of teachers meeting up, because, not unlike any hundreds of thousands of teachers, that's what we do, we go to Happy Hour and we sit there and we drink while we're talking about work, and, "How'd you do this today?" And, "I can't get my students to get with this lesson. I try to teach unreliable narrator in Tell-Tale Heart, and I just cannot lock it down, they just don't get it."

Moreover, Jenna explained why teacher collaboration in organizational spaces was critical to her longevity in the profession and professional learning:

> I just feel like if you want teachers to succeed, apart from the salary conversation and the tenure and the this and that, teachers need time to talk to each other on the ground, in collaborative spaces, so that they're able to share practice. There is nobody in my entire decade-plus-long career that has come into my classroom as a consultant and taught me more in a three hour PD clip than sitting with teachers I work with [in the organization] and us sharing how to best do it or how to not do it.

Cynthia spoke directly as to how she brought what she learned from the activist organization into her own practice.

> I think the one thing that sticks out is when I first started going to the [organization's] stuff. It was kind of like a workshop-style thing that they did. And so, it was like a work session where we did . . . I think it was a gender

> and sexuality activity, which I thought was great because that's one of the areas that sometimes I miss things in. And so, it was just a really great activity to open my eyes and like, "Oh, this would be really cool to do in the classroom." Or just, "This is something I need to think about when I go into the classroom."

Aside from professional identity and development, the networks also have indirect influence on the teachers of Colors' classroom practices.

Network influences on the classroom practices

The activist organizations and networks influenced the teachers' professional identity, which in turn, influenced and affected their practice in the classroom. We found there were three key characteristics of teacher practice that were influenced by teachers' participation in activist networks: (1) Critical curriculum analysis and development; (2) privileging student voice in the school and classroom; and (3) support of student activism. These characteristics were observed at varying levels across the participants' practices. The majority of participants made changes to their curricula as a result of their participation in the networks. Participants that held leadership roles in the activist networks tended to demonstrate higher levels of support of student activism than newer network members.

Critical curriculum analysis and development

Activist teachers of Color used the influence of their organizations to impact their pedagogical or curricular approaches. Ayontunde spoke directly to the influence of his organizational membership on his classroom, "All the organizations I've been a part of, or I am a part of, have informed everything I do. They've influenced me in many ways . . . And they influenced me heavily. And I brought a lot of their work into the classroom. So, I think the network is definitely key." He elaborated about this direct connection to the classroom and the encouragement of unorthodox approaches:

> The first thing that came to mind was these "Do now" assignments that I put up. It'll be a math problem, but it'll be based on something historical. It will be like a simple word problem. ('Cause the real issue is . . . Another thing I realize is public school . . . It's really about propaganda. Textbooks are all propaganda). So, I say, "Okay, well, I can promote my own propaganda." So, I'll make a question about the 1967 Philadelphia Student Walk Out, and that was my "Do Now" question. And I think that . . . So people from [the organization], they promoted it. They gave me a lot of positive reinforcement from doing it and other people, too. And then I posted some of my "Do Nows" on Instagram and on Facebook. I've gotten a lot of positive reinforcement from doing it, so that's influenced my teaching. 'Cause what it does, it's made me do more of it. Try to be more, I guess, unorthodox. And even more creative.

Neta discussed how her connection to others influenced larger curriculum pushes in the district:

> As I work on it [ethnic studies curriculum], I need to learn a lot, so I would implement it into my classroom tomorrow, if I had the resources and the knowledge, but I don't. So right now, I feel like my role [in the organization] is just connecting people, advocating, learning. I'm not in a place to implement anything, but in that process, I know it will influence my teaching, because as I learn about it, as I find opportunities to go to conferences, to go to workshops, to meet teachers, to find curriculum, as I do that, that'll influence my day to day practice, but I'm working towards bringing it [the curriculum] to the district at the same time, right? I guess, the thing I'm working towards, is bringing an ethnic studies curriculum to the district, in the process, I know it will influence my practice in the classroom, but it's not . . . that's not the end goal for me, if that makes sense, I just know it'll happen

For Neta, the direct influence on the classroom is progressive, but still mixed with a traditionalist approach to curriculum and teaching:

> I'm, obviously, a progressive, radical thinker, and then at the same time, I feel like I'm a traditional person too . . . Like sometimes the basic, simple things are the most important . . . When it comes to the stuff that maybe isn't the typical stuff that I'm doing in the classroom, it's about the counter-narratives, and being really conscious about what materials I choose. I am definitely conscious about that, but the day to day skills to me, is the most important thing, that they're learning how to debate, speak their mind, and rebuttals. We do that through debates, through writing persuasive arguments, through DBQs [document-based questions] they're called, which are very in right now, so that's nothing radical.

Although Ayontunde saw the textbook as propaganda, Neta posited that the textbook could be viewed as a tool of social capital which required a critical lens.

> I do think they need to know what's in the textbook, because that to me, is social capital, as well. I don't want to deprive them of that, either, but then thinking . . . Anytime we do look at the traditional material, looking at it through a critical lens, yeah. Just the basic stuff of being a history teacher, I think. Being a history teacher by itself is just important. Activist or not activist, it's just important.

Krissi (a Black middle school teacher) saw the organizational relationships as influencing her as a worker and being able to bring her work into the organization:

> There are people who I'm not close to in [the organization] who had already begun to influence my teaching. Probably it was the relationship of working together on teaching that brought us closer together in [the organization]. So, it's more the other way around . . . I feel like [the organization] has more influenced the bigger picture of how I am a worker at my school as opposed to directly influencing what I teach in the classroom. If anything, I feel like I'm more likely to bring things that somebody has taught in the classroom at workshop and bring it to [the organization]. I feel like the flow would be that way. Not teach people but as to share as opposed to the other way around.

On the other hand, Theresa, a Black high school teacher, took the materials from her organization and directly infused it into her curriculum:

> I mean always making my students aware of what is available to them. Using a lot of the readings I used in [my organization] in my English classes . . . using a lot of videos that I use for workshops, and conversations over here in the class. I actually just did a whole thing on colorism in our class yesterday. It was basically teaching them how to write a thesis statement, but it also was allowing them to have this opportunity.

Privileging student voice in the school and classroom

Participants frequently talked about what it means to elevate student voice in a classroom or school environment. Uma explained how she views voice in her school:

> In the work that I do I hear a lot of things that sound good, and people will say them because, yeah it makes sense. "Giving a voice to the voiceless." I'm like, people aren't voiceless, they actually speak very loudly. We're just not listening. So, I think that I'm trying to resist ... a lot of my belief system helps me to give an acceptable way of speaking to people that make those decisions in power. And to show them that this is something that we've always been doing, but you're just not recognizing.

Uma was clear that student voice is there, but that there needs to be an avenue for listening to those voices. Likewise, Krissi spoke about how she advocated for student voice by providing small avenues to be heard:

> That there have just been moments in history when people didn't have to wait until they were 20-something or 30-something to find their voice and speak up. Students can find their voice now and have an analysis of what's going on now. If that means planting seeds, then I plant seeds. I'm not going to see the plant flower, but my hope is that with nurturance the seed that was planted will become a plant which will become a flower and will change the world just by being there. By its very existence. So, I try to plant seeds constantly.

Krissi made a critical point that students' use of voice may not happen immediately, but it may be acted upon later in adulthood. Laurinda, a Black English teacher, stated that students' stories were a critical aspect to her classroom.

> I think there's a difference between an educator not knowing and not doing it on purpose and actually making a concerted effort to be mindful of other people's stories when it comes to what they're providing for students day by day, versus an educator that knows that they have this one window, this myopic view of what they're putting in front of students, then don't make an effort to be mindful of the stories that are in the classroom. They're two completely different educators and the one that I just described, to be completely honest, that's not giving our students what they deserve, which is an educator that is mindful of the stories that each and every single one of them is bringing into the classroom and mindful of making things relevant for them as well.

For Laurinda, privileging student voice comes from honoring and cherishing the stories each student brings with them to school and into the classroom.

Support of student activism

Half of the participants in our study were leaders of their teacher-led activist network. The leader participants went beyond centering student voice in the classroom to encouraging students to be civically active in their schools and communities. For example, Isaac, a Black high school teacher, invited his students into his numerous teacher activist networks.

> Another way is inviting them to participate in [the organization]. Ever since the first one that I participated in, for three years afterwards of that, I've actually facilitated. Every single one, I've had two or three students from my classes participate in it. Also, I try to really encourage students to be actively aware of what's actually going on right now. Whether that would be talking about Yemen and Libya, to net neutrality, to the tax bill, and kind of reconnecting that to the historical context in which we're learning in class. And then I always like to say, it's easy to ignore what's going on if you don't recognize what it is. But I want my students to get to the place where it's harder to ignore than to face it, 'cause it's hard to face it. And, really, at that point . . . I always say also that, "You'll go through the five stages of grief repeatedly in this class." But at the end of the day, I'm like, "Okay. Since you accept what it is now, now what? What are you gonna do about it?" . . . It also helps that [a student activist organization] is across the street. I'm able to point certain students to that. That's not—one size don't fit all [approach], but, having as many opportunities for students to plug in as possible is really what I try to do.

Isaac's support of activism has a learning component by trying to expand students' understanding of local, national, and international issues and topics that directly or indirectly effect his students. Krissi spoke about engaging student and teacher activism primarily around school and community issues:

> We have a library, but we almost lost it. The high school didn't have its own library. We used to go to the [the community] library . . . The mayor said he was going to close 11 libraries and ours was one of them. Our students and I fought back. Our whole school did. We challenged all this rhetoric about, "Well it's just two miles to your next library." We're like, "We know how to add. Two plus two is four. That makes it a four-mile trip. We challenge you to make the trip with us." Students wrote letters. We went to the public meetings and challenged him to follow us. The media caught on and we went to City Council. We spoke about why our library is important, why literacy in general is important, we had a read-in in our library about the importance of libraries. We had a huge event, like a march, which was supposed to be the walk [but] the mayor "disappeared" conveniently. But, the media followed and watched as two-year-olds made this two-mile trek to their library.

At the time of this interview, there was an elementary school in the district that was slated to close. Krissi explained how she encouraged student activism through a questioning process:

> At any moment what's going on at [Harbor] elementary school right now, I know that I have students from [Harbor]. So I just ask, "How were things at [Harbor] for you? Have you heard about what's going on? What do you feel about that? Would you like to speak up?" Not telling them what to say. I might disagree with some of the things that they will say or have said. But they have a right to be heard. I just talked to students yesterday like, "Yeah, I want to say something about that. I want to speak to people." I can't give them the words because it's their words, their experience. But, I can at least connect them to people who want to hear their experiences and here are people who have the experiences and I can bring them to you . . . So, I wouldn't be like, "Which one of you were at Harrington last year? All right, we're all going to write letters to the parent-teacher whatever." I wouldn't do that. But I would ask a lot of questions and just how do you feel about this?

Similar to Krissi's approach, Abby, a Black high school teacher, also used questions as a catalyst to encouraging student activism. When students were upset that the district instituted leveling, or tracking, in the school, Abby asked, "Well, what are you going to do?" Students wanted to have petitions signed and to do a protest. Abby explained:

> I said, "Okay. How does that look? You all need to have some discussion, how does this protest look? Who's going to be the speaker? How are you even going to walk to the principal's office? With this petition signed? Are you going to get it handwritten? You going to type something up? What exactly is your plan? You just can't be angry. You got to figure out a plan to do something."

One of Abby's students, Mark, took the lead as the spokesperson, and the students came back with a plan:

> They said, "Okay, well, we're going to walk in two lines down to the principal's office silently. I'm going to be the first speaker, and then this person is going to be the second speaker. And we're going to address our issues." And they wrote down the issue they had, both their issues. So initially, the principal couldn't see them. She was in a meeting. So, they stood outside the main office for about 20 minutes, 30 minutes. And they talked amongst themselves, but they weren't loud. Then she seen them and heard them.

This process eventually led to next steps of the students contacting the Senator and the students leading a town hall at the school where they invited the local church and other members of the community.

During December of that school year, a councilwoman put on a school town hall. Abby relayed what happened:

> So [Mark] and some other 12th graders and some 11th graders and a few 10th graders stayed that evening. And they spoke their voice, and people were given out business cards left and right. "You kids need help, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh." They gave [Mark] a card, "We want you . . ." . . . So now, this small group of these students want to put on another round table discussion here, but I just told them they could take their same topic and they're going to participate in the [city's] Black History Collaborative, and it's student-led. So, they're going to lead a workshop, and just getting them to get that voice and have enough courage to speak up and be heard and have conversations.

Abby demonstrated how her use of questions provided a guiding force to encourage the students to continue to advocate for themselves.

Most of the encouragement of student voice occurred in the secondary classroom, as students are developmentally older and can advocate more for themselves as compared to pre-adolescent students. But this did not stop Nicholas, an African American elementary teacher, from starting to encourage student activism with his elementary students. He explained:

> So, in terms of having discussions about real life issues being able to connect students to movements and to all the young people who are organizers sometimes . . . All of my activist friends of Color I invite to come talk to my kids about stuff. Why they, too, can be an activist and see themselves in these people.

Lastly, Kalynn, a mixed race high school teacher, discussed how her encouragement of student activism continued with her summer job working with students at a local theater. She said:

> [The students are] paid as an artist. They have a focus of their specialty, whether it's music, dance, or acting. And they also have to do advocacy work. They have to choose a social justice topic that they're going to develop a skit [about], and they going to be advocating for whatever major issue they think it is. So, the students I worked with last summer, we had 57 students we worked with, they picked the four topics of ableism, racism, classism, and sexism. And they were divided into four different groups. They created some really great, original skits, original music, original dance pieces. But, we went to the statehouse, and they presented their advocacy project. We had state senators listening to them. There was actually a vote they happened to be doing that week, cutting the state arts budget. We had performed in the morning, and then we had gone back to the theater for the afternoon. Our [state] representative had called up my boss asking me to come back down, and to actually go onto the house floor and do a presentation for the whole state representatives for [the state].

Discussion: sustaining, nurturing, and changing

Lisle-Johnson and Kohli (2020) contend that the critical professional development that occurs in activist teacher networks is constructed to "engage with teachers as critical intellectuals who play an important role in transforming schools and society" (p. 353). The stories told by the teachers in our study do reflect this type of engagement and highlight specific ways that this kind of engagement furthers teacher sustainability, nurturance, and social change. Teachers spoke of how the activist networks gave them a "why" for what they do and helped them see the "big picture" of their work. Uma said her "why" drove her to teach, and when Cynthia asked herself "Why did I even do this? Why

did I choose to go into the classroom?," she found that her time with the activist group helped to give her an answer—a purpose. Teachers also had a place to take time out and reflect on who they are and what they want. Hong needed a space outside of school to process and not be so narrow in her thinking. Her activist network provided a more liberating space. These examples show how CPDs in activist networks can provide counters to demoralization, and particularly demoralization that comes from white supremist logics/policies. They provide moral strength and a space for thinking beyond the constraints of their institution.

In addition to highlighting how the activist networks supported sustainability, the teachers' stories also told of the ways the networks acted as a nurturing space for new ideas and criticality. The rich dialogue around the relationship between curricula and propaganda raised by Ayotunde and Neta demonstrated sophisticated critical and intellectual analysis of instructional materials. Jenna's stories of how her connections with a range of people and perspectives showed how she broadened her understandings through the network. As such, these networks fostered intellectual inquiry and curiosity.

Finally a unique, yet rather telling, feature of the impact of the activist networks on the participants was how the networks supported democratic change through the teachers (and their students). The teachers placed great attention on power and voice and were therefore committed to building avenues for student voice. Krissi's story of how her students organized a two-mile march to the local library in protest of their school not having a library offered a poignant image to how her support promoted collective action and social justice. Abby's story of promoting questioning which led to her students participating in a city-wide advisory board was another example of direct impact. Beyond sustainability and intellectual nurturance, the activist networks supported the teachers to engage in social change work.

Conclusion: survival is not an academic skill

In this study, we examined the narratives of 26 teachers of Color across the U.S. that were members of activist teacher networks. These narratives spoke of the ways in which the networks influenced teachers' identities, beliefs, and practices. We knew from prior research that the kind of critical professional development that occurs in activist spaces is uniquely attuned to the needs of teachers of Color. Yet, many previous studies focused on individual organizations. By looking across organizations, we were able to build upon these previous studies toward a unified portrait of the impacts of teacher activist networks on teachers of Color.

This unified portrait shows a unique interplay between support of moral purpose, intellectual inquiry, and democratic change. The activist networks are places where the "specific kind of unicorn-y teacher" finds a community to keep them from being demoralized, feeds their intellectual curiosity through critically exploring and exchanging new ideas about curriculum, and helps them make and support social change beyond the classroom walls. These supports go well beyond traditional notions of professional development. As Lorde (1984) argued, what is needed to support Black and Brown people (educators in this case) goes far beyond academics; what is needed is healing and systemic change:

> . . . those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *(pg. x)*

These insights are critical to teacher education research and practice. They suggest a need for a more humanizing and democratizing conceptualization of professional development for teachers, particularly teachers of Color and others in marginalized groups. The activist networks are communities that teachers are seeking because they are not finding these supports in their workplace. We are not arguing that schools or universities try to replicate the work of activist teachers. However, we suggest that teacher educators take a closer look at what teachers are seeking in these spaces and why. From there,

teacher educators can develop greater understandings of the experiences of teachers of Color and devise meaningful learning experiences that support sustainability and nurturance of teachers of Color.

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Notes on contributors

Lynnette Mawhinney, Ph.D. is Professor and Chair of the Department of Urban Education at Rutgers University-Newark. She also is affiliated faculty in the Department of Africana Studies. Dr. Mawhinney's research focuses on the professional lives of urban teachers of Color. She is an award winning scholarly and children's book author of five books. Her most recent is the academic co-edited book, *Strong Black Girls: Reclaiming Schools in Their Own Image.*

Dr. Kira J. Baker-Doyle is an Associate Professor of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Illinois at Chicago where she studies urban teacher networks, organizing, and community literacies. Dr. Baker-Doyle has a forthcoming book entitled *Critical Network Literacy: Humanizing Professional Development for Teachers*, to be published in Spring 2023 by Harvard Education Press.

ORCID

Lynnette Mawhinney http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6662-6941
Kira J. Baker-Doyle http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3239-3537

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