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'In it together': activist teachers of color networks combating isolation

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ABSTRACT

Teachers of Color experience isolation due to racial microaggressions and institutional racism throughout their careers, leading to trauma and higher levels of teacher turnover in the profession. In this study, we use the 'pedagogy of activism'and scholarship on microaggressionsto explore how activist teachers of Color seek support to combat isolation and harm through participation in teacher activist networks. Using qualitative methods, we investigated the experiences of 26 activist teachers of Color from across the United States. We found that teacher activist networks were key to creating healing spaces for coping with the effects of microaggressions, and that the pedagogy of activism fostered agency to push back against racist policies and institutions. These findings have implications for sustaining diversity in the teacher workforce.

Noora has been teaching elementary students in the deep South for 18 years. As an African American woman, she identifies as an activist teacher. She shares with Lynnette pictures of her classroom, which has walls adorned with posters of 'metaphors in music' and 'similes in songs' from her Hip Hop as English class. Lyrics from Alicia Keys, Lil' Wayne, Beyoncé, Katy Perry, Rhianna, and Nikki Minaj are written on chart paper to emphasize the use of figurative language in English. In the photo, a sea of beautiful Black fifth graders are looking attentively at the front of the room. On the left side of the classroom is a self-affirmation poster titled, 'I Like Myself'. On the projector screen sits a photo of a neighborhood wall displaying the work of a local aerosol artist. Its message,'Stop the Violence', is accompanied by a gun whose barrel is tied in a knot. Noora is about to start her new curriculum on non-violence and the community. Eventually, as Noora explained, the students created a song for the community based on this curriculum: 'They [the students] made up a song about stopping the violence in the community. It's called "California Love". You know, so of course we talked about, we did an extensive study on Tupac and we read his poetry and I have kids stay after school.'

Noora has worked hard these last 18 years to build critical curriculums to mold her students into critical thinkers who question the status quo. But as an activist teacher of Color, Noora felt isolated in her work environment and drained by the teaching

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experience. She explained, 'I'm by myself and I think that's one reason why I'm getting drained. I am by myself. I mean, I do have friends that I work with, but it's kind of me in the trenches by myself.' The difference between Noora and the other activist teachers of Color voices profiled in this article is that Noora did not have an outside network of fellow activist teachers. Without this network, Noora had no support or safety network to work through the feeling of isolation. For Noora, this isolation was too much, and she planned to leave teaching at the end of the school year.

But Noora's story might sound very different if she was connected to an activist network or an affinity group of likeminded teachers of Color. Our study looked at self-identified activist teachers of Color who were active members in an out-of-school activist network. While there has been much research on teacher activist networks (Baker-Doyle 2017; Picower 2012; Riley and Solic 2017), there is little understanding of how teachers of Color are influenced by these networks. Existing scholarship includes several excellent examples of deep exploration into a single activist group for teachers of Color (Catone 2017; Mosely 2018; Pham and Kohli 2018; Pour-Khorshid 2016, 2018a, 2018b). This article attempts to widen the lens and extend this understanding by exploring the experiences of teachers of Color in a number of activist networks across the United States, answering the question: What impacts do activist professional networks'/organizations' support structures have on teachers of Color? In response to this question, we explore one dimension of our participants' experiences, examining the phenomenon of racialized, job-related isolation among activist teachers of Color and describing how the participants in our study drew on their activist networks as a way of sustaining themselves and feeling connected to like-minded others. This article, in particular, highlights the participants' experiences on racialized isolation in schools and how networks aid in combating racialized isolation. This discussion section unpacks how power, purpose, and possibility in the pedagogy of teacher activism (Catone 2017) lead to individual transformation.

Teacher isolation as a racialized experience

Teachers of Color play a significant role in the education for all students. For students of Color, having a same-race teacher has shown to enhance academic achievement (Dee 2004; Gershenson et al. 2018; Egalite, Kisida, and Winters 2015) with effects lasting over a number of years (Gershenson, et al., 2018). Teachers of Color also benefit white students, along with students of Color, through the demonstration of care and building up positive perceptions (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). Yet, teachers of Color often enter into the profession for reasons that differ from their white counterparts. Research shows that it is not uncommon for teachers of Color to have had negative experiences as students and thus enter schools with the goal of serving as teacher advocates or educational change agents (Mawhinney, Rinke, and Park 2012; Kohli and Pizarro 2016; Lynn 2002; Su 1997; Tolbert and Eichelberger 2016). In their study of racial justice-oriented teachers of Color, Kohli and Pizarro (2016) found that their participants 'wanted students to have an education that they did not have: one that was critical, rigorous, and affirming to their identities as students of Color' (p. 78). However, teachers of Color often encounter unique structural challenges that impact their ability to serve their students and sustain themselves professionally

and personally. Kohli (2018) explains that even 'on an institutional level, the limited presence of teachers of Color creates a climate of intense isolation and racialization' (p. 322). In this context, teachers of Color commonly report having their qualifications questioned, being perceived as unprofessional, being rendered invisible (Castaneda, Kambutu, and Rios 2006; Kohli 2018; Montecinos 2004; Sheets and Chew 2002), or being burdened with the additional emotional work of serving as parent figures or disciplinarians for their students of Color (Mawhinney 2011; Brockenbrough 2012; Brown 2012; Singh 2018). These racialized experiences of solitude, exclusion, deprofessionalization, and stereotyping often lead to feelings of job-related isolation.

These experiences are a result of structural inequities that have positioned teachers of Color as outsiders in a system that was not designed to nurture and serve people of Color (Fine et al. 2004). However, they are also examples of racial microaggressions, or 'brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group' (Sue et al. 2007, 273). These microaggressions stem from individual, institutional, cultural, and systemic racism (Sue 2010). Though the construct of microaggressions is also applied to other social identities, such as gender (Barthelemy, McCormick, & Henderson, 2016; Lester, Yamanaka, and Struthers 2016), class (Allen 2013), sexual orientation (Francis and Reygan 2016), disabilities (Dávila 2015), language (Huber 2011), and the intersectionality of audist abilities and race (Stapleton and Croom 2017), we draw on Sue's (2010) work around racial microaggressions to understand the particular experiences of teachers of Color that lead to feelings of isolation.

Sue (2010) defines racial microaggressions as a taxonomy in three parts: micro-invalidation, or 'verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color' (Sue et al. 2007, 278); microassaults, or 'explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminary actions' (p. 278), and microinsults, or 'behavior/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity' (p. 278). We focus on the form of microinsults as microaggressions. Microinsults can manifest as (1) an ascription of intelligence and connecting one's abilities to color or race; (2) treating someone as lesser than or a second-class citizen; (3) devaluing the the beliefs and communication styles of people of Color; and (4) an assumption of criminal status based on race. Although this framework uses the language of micro, some aggressions are more marco in nature.

An example of how racial microaggressions can be felt by teachers of Color can be found in Amos (2016) research, which explored the professional experiences of two Latina bilingual education teachers. These teachers were sought after by administrators for their linguistic and cultural background, yet they often had to 'prove their competency, which contributed to more work, thus more alienation, and a vicious cycle of further weakened professional networks' (p. 51). Ultimately, they felt physically and psychologically isolated in their school. The constant scrutiny of competency has even led some teachers of Color to question whether they belong in the classroom at all (Kohli 2018) and others to leave the field altogether due to feeling small or invisible as a result of

a constant barrage of microinsults (Mawhinney and Rinke 2019) or a general feeling of marginalization (Quiocho and Rios 2000; Vance et al. 1989). These obstacles can lead to a sense of racialized isolation for teachers of Color who want to make change in a system they view as failing to serve students and communities of Color.

The pedagogy of teacher activism for teachers of color

In the last decade, teacher activism has played a significant role in prompting educational change, especially in schools and districts that serve primarily students of Color. Conner and Rosen (2016) define 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. (p. 2)

Every teacher in our study was a member of an activist network that helped them feel affinity with like-minded others. We focused on the experiences of teachers of Color from activist networks that were teacher-led or focused on teachers' work, offered teachers critical perspectives, promoted change, challenged the current state of education policy, and provided a systemic understanding of educational change in power and politics while also embracing an explicit mission to promote equity and justice.
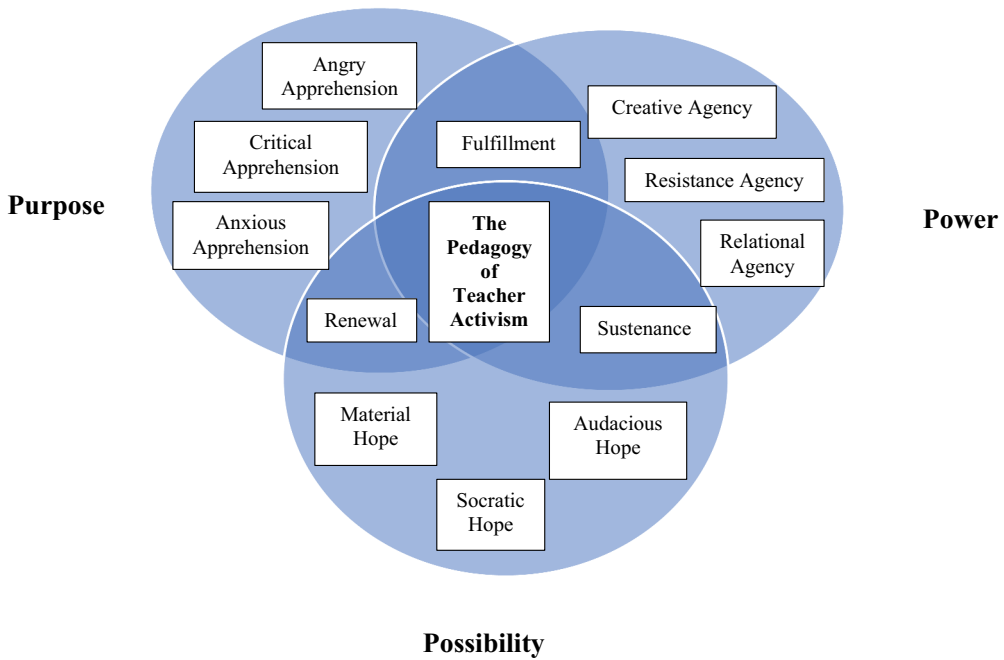
We implore Catone's (2017) pedagogy of teacher activism. Catone's (2017) description of the pedagogy of teacher activism captures the prefigurative nature of these activist networks and their potential to offer teachers the space to explore a sense of purpose, power, and possibility that helps teachers feel fulfilled, renewed, and able to continue in their professional role. He explains,

> For teacher activists, pedagogy is articulated through a commitment to education as a practice of freedom and possibility and the creation of a new just world . . . therefore, an effort to understand the pedagogy of teacher activism rests upon the exploration of why and how teacher activists ground their praxis in private and public arenas. (p. 131)

The activist teachers of Color in this article voice how the pedagogy of teacher activism plays out in their professional and personal lives (see Figure 1). They demonstrate how power, purpose, and possibility merge to bring fulfillment, renewal, and sustenance through individual transformation.

Some of the activist networks we studied also had formalized racial affinity groups as a part of their organization or were themselves only for teachers of Color. Affinity groups are composed of people with a shared social identity and set of experiences (Green 2018; Tauriac et al. 2013) in which 'members . . . face similar challenges and so come together for mutual support' (Douglas 2008, 13). Such racial affinity groups for teachers often provide informal learning opportunities (Green, 2016). For example, Mosely (2018) created The Black Teacher Project with a:

> two-part approach [that] seeks 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).

Figure 1. The pedagogy of teacher activism. (Note: This figure is adapted from Catone 2017, 131)

Mosely drew on Love's (2010) liberatory consciousness framework with the intention of building awareness, analysis, action, and accountability/ally-ship. Ultimately, The Black Teacher Project created an affinity space that helped Black teachers not feel alone in their professional roles (Mosely 2018). This type of affinity group has also been referred to as a critical professional development group (Kohli et al. 2015).

One long standing critical racial professional development for teachers of Color is the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Radical Justice (ITOC) held in California. This space is exclusive to teachers of Color and is modeled 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 (Pham and Kohli 2018). Active healing practices accompany the three-day focused work on justice-orientated practices for the classroom.

H.E.L.L.A., a racial affinity group for teacher activists located in California, actively built their network around the concept of 'healing, empowerment, love, and liberation and action', hence their name (Pour-Khorshid 2018a, 319). The group provided, what Pour-Khorshid (2016, 2018a, 2018b) calls, healing praxis through *testimonios*, a storytelling method used to 'testify and theorize lived experiences navigating various forms of oppression' (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). These individualized studies on racial affinity groups for activist teachers of Color are leading the way in the research, yet this article explores the larger impact on multiple groups and how they combat isolation in the field.

Methodology

We completed a national search to conduct professional life histories (Cole and Knowles 2001; Foster 1997) with teachers of Color (defined as teachers from a historically minoritized and marginalized group in the US, e.g. Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, and Pacific Islander) that were active participants within teacher activist networks or organizational/network leaders within active groups. Most of these networks think of educator activism as '*struggle for* rather than only *resistance against*' (Valdez et al. 2018, 246), which provides a common thread of shared understanding and collective struggle. All groups have been established for at least 5 or more years.

We used snowball sampling to identify activist teachers of Color who work in K-12 urban public schools (i.e. traditional public schools and charter schools), as this strategy is particularly effective in sampling hard to reach and hidden populations (Browne 2005; Griffith, Morris, and Thakar 2016; Noy 2008; Waters 2015) like teachers of Color. The main source to start our snowballing came from advertising for participants on social media platforms. Social media allowed for a community nominations sampling strategy (Foster 1997) in order to follow the various threads on the networks. We recognize some of the issues with snowball sampling can create some 'balance and imbalance' with the sample (Mawhinney and Rinke 2019), but it was the most effective method for uncovering a hidden population.

All the semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face if participants were within 1.5 hours drive or via a video conferencing platform (e.g. FaceTime, Skype, Zoom). Since we each interviewed people separately, we used a common protocol. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes to two hours in duration and were audiorecorded with consent. All the interview transcripts were sent to participants for member checks.

Participant overview

The participants represented a broad range based on race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other social identity categories, as well as type of school, age of students, subject areas taught, degree of involvement within the organization, and teaching experience. We interviewed 26 activist teachers of Color. The self-identified racial representations of the teachers of Color were: 62% Black/mixed race, 27% Latinx, and 12% Asian. Twenty-seven percent of the participants were male and 73% were female (see Table 1). Noora (previously mentioned), not included in the 26 interviewees, was an outlier to the research group as she is not in an activist group, but she still wanted her voice heard, so we granted her an interview.

The participants were involved within 14 activist networks with overlap of membership in multiple networks (see Table 2). Sixteen of the 26 participants (62%) were leaders or former leaders within the networks. The majority of the participants where from the East Coast (18), with the remainder coming from the West Coast (5), South/Southwest (2), and Midwest (1).

We received IRB consent to use the real names of the activist networks and the participants, but we opted to use pseudonyms for the participants' names. The further ensure anonymity of the participants, we do not link the organization names with the pseudonyms. We simply share the names of the activist networks in Table 2 in order to be a resource for other teachers of Color looking for affinity groups.

Table 1. List of participants.

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
Carlita	Mexican	Female	West Coast	N/A	Higher Ed.	1	Yes
Chloe	Mixed race (Black/White)	Female	East Coast	11	High School	1	No
Cynthia	Latina	Female	West Coast	5	Middle School	1	No
Doreen	Black, Sometimes identifies as Latina	Female	South	2	Higher Ed.	1	Yes
Hong	Asian/Mixed race (Japanese/white)	Female	East Coast	5	High School	2	Yes
Isaac	Black	Male	East Coast	9	High School	2	Yes
Jasmine	Chinese American/Asian American	Female	East Coast	8	Middle/High School	3	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
Kelly	Biracial (Latinx/White)	Female	West Coast	18	High School	2	Yes
Kenneth	Latinx	Male	East Coast	N/A	Higher Ed.	1	Yes
Kobi	Black – Ghanaian	Male	Midwest	6	Middle School	1	Yes
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
Nahla	Black	Female	East Coast	12	High School	1	No
Naomi	Chilena-Riqueña/Latina	Female	East Coast	12	Higher Ed.	1	Yes
Neta	Latina	Female	East Coast	4	High School	1	No
Nicholas	African American	Male	East Coast	4	Elementary	1	No
Phoebe	Black	Female	East Coast	7	Higher Ed.	1	Yes
Ramini	Southeast Asian	Female	West Coast	N/A	Higher Ed.	1	Yes
Talib	Black	Male	East Coast	15	High School	1	No
Theresa	Black	Female	East Coast	Fluctuating	Middle/High School	1	Yes
Uma	Black	Female	Southwest	9	Elementary	1	Yes

Table 2. List of teacher activist organizations and networks.

Organization/Network	Location(s)	Affinity Type
Caucus of Working Educators	Philadelphia, PA	activist; sub-racial affinity group: Educators of Color Group
Teacher Activist Group (iTAG)	National	activist; sub-racial affinity groups
Philadelphia Black History Network	Philadelphia, PA	racial and activist
Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice (ITOC)	Riverside, CA	racial and activist
Sankofa Foundation Inc.	Philadelphia, PA	racial and activist
New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE)	New York, NY	activist
EdCamp	National	activist
The People's Education Movement	Bay Area, CA	activist
MAESTR@S	San José, CA	racial and activist
Teachers 4 Social Justice	Bay Area, CA	activist; sub-racial affinity group: H.E.L.L.A. (Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation, Action)
Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED)	National	activist
Badass Teachers Association	Stoughton, MA	activist
Boston Education Justice Alliance	Boston, MA	activist
Teachers for Social Justice	Chicago, IL	activist; sub-racial affinity group

Data analysis

Each member of the research team analyzed the transcripts individually using both within- and cross-participant analyses (Miles et al. 1994). We had a fourth person outside the research team also analyze the transcripts individually. Then, we compared our analysis for interrater reliability. In total, there were 43 a priori and emergent codes, generated from participants' responses within the transcripts, created for the data analysis. The key themes used in this article are networks resist isolation, isolation, and resistance. We also used key word in context (KWIC) to analyze the transcripts within case. The KWIC terms used for this paper are: isolation and sustain.

Racialized isolation and teachers of color

Many of the participants and network organizers discussed feeling a sense of isolation as teachers of Color, an awareness that was compounded by their identities as activists. Our analysis unearthed nuance in the ways participants described that feeling and the circumstances that prompted it. For instance, Phoebe talked about the isolation she experienced as the only Black teacher in her school:

> It's extremely difficult being the only Black person or person of Color at your job. Much less a job that is so social and so interpersonal as teaching and learning, right, within a school community . . . It's not as simple as, 'oh, you just feel isolated because you're one of the only ones in the building.' It's the actions and interactions that are isolating.

The emotional toll of her white colleagues' behavior and her interactions with them was furthered by the challenge of bearing witness to her colleagues' overt racism against Black students:

> Another thing that's hard and isolating is watching the racism. Watching teachers being racist against Black students and not feeling empowered in that hierarchy to do or say anything about it without getting yourself in trouble or making the student a target. That is a daily experience. Watching these teachers, whether its casual racism, whether its presumptuousness, whether it's stereotyping . . . If we counted how often that happens on a daily basis, I don't think we have enough numbers to count. It's a moment by moment thing. If it's not happening to this one student, it's happening to another student. Whether it's about your hair or–it's just endless.

Phoebe's frustrations as a witness to and victim of racial microaggressions were amplified by the fact that she did not feel agentive to interrupt the racism that was ubiquitous in her workplace.

Jenna, a Black West Indian teacher, pointed out that her sense of isolation was not confined to the school building, but was also embedded in the culture of the professional development events she attended. She described the unspoken assumptions about who belonged and who did not belong in particular conference spaces:

> When I go to [name] technology conference, if I'm trying to go to that one, that's notorious among PLNers [professional learning network] on Twitter, notoriously not a Black space. Notorious to the point where I've had people in my PLN say, "I'm not going to [the technology conference], they don't love us." It's just a known fact, it's a known fact.

These points were echoed by activist network leaders, who were keenly aware of the need to help their members feel less isolated. For instance, Ramini, a Southeast Asian former elementary teacher and current network organizer, explained that in addition to the sense of exclusion and alienation described by Phoebe and Jenna above, activist teachers of Color in her network typically feel an ideological layer of isolation, an aloneness that is produced by the sense that, as the only person in the school with a critical political or pedagogical orientation, they are somehow 'wrong' for speaking out against their colleagues' racial microaggressions or employing counterhegemonic pedagogies in their classroom:

> They feel … not just racial isolation, but ideological isolation. They were kind of individualizing the kind of oppressive experiences that they were having, so seeing that people would question what they were doing in the classroom, or people would not acknowledge the humanity of students, and they would protest those things, and then they would be made to feel like they were the only one who was seeing it wrong.

As our participants' accounts illustrate, racialized isolation can be a layered experience that makes it challenging for teachers of Color to serve their students and feel content as professionals. However, the critical communities that are present in teacher activist networks can be an antidote to racialized isolation.

Combating racialized isolation

In the face of the varied manifestations of racialized isolation discussed above, our participants reported drawing heavily on the communities within their activist networks. For instance, when Cynthia, a Latina middle school teacher, was asked how she sustains herself as a teacher, she immediately credited her activist organization, saying, 'I think doing community stuff, so like with the folks who are at [the organization]'. Krissi had a similar response: 'The [organization] community makes it sustainable because so many feelings come up about taking action in the work and dealing with the non-sense that happens. So I have a space to bring that'.

Leaders in these networks also made a point of acknowledging this isolation and using the network to contradict it. Kenneth, a Latinx former high school teacher, worked with seven other colleagues to found a group that has since grown into a large statewide organization and also holds a national conference. He talked about the important role the network was able to play in helping teachers to reframe the cause of their isolation and connect them with other teachers who were having similar experiences:

> One thing that was really clear [about the network] was just combating the sense of isolation that folks felt politically and identity wise depending on who you're talking to in their schools. Just being a space … I always joke with folks of wearing spaces like this is instead of "it's not you, it's me," it's like, "no really, it is y'all, it's not me. I'm fine, y'all are crazy" … I think that sense of comradery and community, just having access to that and knowing that there are people who would understand you even if they weren't down the hall, or across the hall in your school.

These activist networks and organizations understand the impact of racialized isolation and structure themselves explicitly to combat this issue. Ramini discussed how her network was strategically combatting the kind of racialized isolation she mentioned above, pointing out that the network grappled with big questions about how teachers can feel connected to one another. She said:

> So [members' sense of ideological isolation] also kind of helped us think about how we explicitly build community building, put a map on the wall so people can find people who are from their region that are in these areas, and how do we support them, so their building project that they can lean on each other.

Other study participants also called attention to the importance of establishing connections with colleagues who have similar beliefs and commitments, as well as collaborating with teachers who share a similar commitment to and love for the students. A number of participants explained that their membership and participation in their organizations was what helped to sustain them as a teacher. Abby, a Black high school teacher, had been teaching for 22 years when she spoke to us. She noted that her membership in a summer organization that served as a racial affinity group for activist teachers created a context for her to interact with other teachers who were informed and shared her commitment to students, all of which sustained her as a teacher in the last couple of years:

> What has made me survive over the last four or five years is . . . Since the time I've met [Ayotunde], and so that's kind of why. And with the book club this summer was really like life. Like I was having people's engagement and conversation, and they knew stuff, and it was like, "Yes." . . . I enjoyed being in his company and other people who he's introduced me to, because they really are about their work for kids, and they really know their stuff . . . It gives me life. It gives me energy. And I'm like, "Okay, I might get through this [teaching] a little bit longer."

Given the immense pressure and complexity of a teaching job and the frustration of being part of a system that is actively harming children, networks of teacher activists helped teachers hold onto what Naomi, a Latina teacher, called 'critical hope:'

> If anything, I wanna emphasize the importance of [organization] or any teacher activist group that exists for teachers who are doing this work in schools. Because it is so hard to have to meet all of the expectations in a school building, whether it's making sure that you're grading kids' papers, or like you're talking to families, or like . . . that to be able to foster that intellectual curiosity and that critical lens and nurture that while you're still having to kinda navigate a fucked-up system that is failing our children, how to continue to have that hope, that critical hope, to push through despite the institution you're a part of.

Naomi continued, pointing to the importance of her affinity with network colleagues in facilitating her continual growth:

> And so I just think that that space is critical. And I wish it was a paid space for teachers, if you know what I mean. That would be dope. And it's not, and so for now, it's like, we're creating these spaces out of nothing because we think that . . . I mean I know it was fundamental for me in my teaching, both in the school but also outside of school, what it meant for me to continually grow. And grow in my consciousness, but also grow in community.

In addition to the pressures associated with the daily logistics of being a teacher, participants also noted that these networks offered them opportunities, strategies, and tools to address a wide array of social injustices and inequitable social structures. In response to our question about how she has sustained herself in her work, Mei, an Asian American high school teacher, cited her connection to her activist network as a means of coping with the forms of oppression that harm Black and Brown students:

> I mean, political development, the energy and the being able to stay in teaching. I really think that if I wasn't doing any of the political work connected to education, and with other teachers, I don't think I would be a teacher still. Because I think I would take it all too personally, or I would become so disconnected to the ways in which schooling is oppressive, that I would just feel depressed and give up. You know? Because it's just like, it's a lot . . . If that was just it, and that was how I ended my day, and I didn't think about poverty, and capitalism, and the ways in which we're all just really struggling to survive, and especially if you're a Black, young person growing up in poverty in [the city], I think that I will just take it personally, and be like, "I suck," or, "I can't do this job because it's too much."

Mei also noted that the community that emerged through her participation in several activist networks helped her to develop a vision of what could be by building solidarity beyond her school walls:

> I think as a result of these organizations, I also have a really strong community, a lot of educators, but also lots of people who also are engaged in work, to some degree, to try and create a different world. So being surrounded by that is like we are all in it together. We're not . . . I'm alone in my classroom, but we are all in this, in whatever capacity is, that we can engage with social justice work, or whatever it is.

Mei, like Kenneth, developed a sense of affinity with her network colleagues – what Kenneth called 'comeraderie and community' and what Mei referred to as being 'in it together' – even when she found herself 'alone in [her] classroom'. Her activist teacher network offered her the opportunity to deepen her own political consciousness in the context of a community, a form of personal and collective growth to which she believed it was worth devoting the kind of unpaid labor Naomi identified above.

Importantly, the critical community these networks create helped foster the will and the political analysis to contradict microaggressions that teachers of Color witness against students of Color. Kelly, a Latinx high school teacher, talked about how her network helped her address her work colleagues' problematic behavior toward their students:

> I think that [the organization] is really important because if you're not careful you start falling into believing what all the other teachers are saying, which is, "Oh these kids are a pain in the ass," or, "Those families don't care about X, Y, and Z." And it can be very alienating, especially to our own people, looking at Black and Brown students as if they fit this stereotype that's continuing to be fed to me, but if I'm careful and stay part of the organization, and stay part of more radical learning spaces, then I can resist, like, "no, that's actually not true." That's not the perspective, or the world view, or the analysis that I wanna have in the classroom. They're not the problem, it's actually our institutions, it's our legacies.

Over time, activist teachers of Color drew on their networks to build something bigger in collaboration with others, an experience that was, in itself, intellectually sustaining. Jenna, who earlier had recounted her experience of racialized isolation at a conference that was known as an uninviting space for Black people, talked about the rich social and professional connections she developed at the teacher activist conference she regularly attends and noted that those connections helped to sustain her in the face of this isolation:

> [The conference] sustains me in terms of every time I see another iteration of it, so today's one little small step, it sort of exhilarates me in a lot of ways because it's fun and it's exciting to watch people come together and they learn, but to hear some of the things that they say, and some of the things that I hear some people tell me that people are saying is just wonderful. [The conference] was dream space for me . . . it was a space to collaborate. It's a space to meet up, and we have the permission to because we want the permission, we didn't ask for it. So if anything, it's just amazing for those reasons. In terms of sustainability, it sustains me because I know there's another one coming, there's another one coming, and I know that it's gonna get bigger and better and then I'll be able to pull in all of the avenues of the interest levels in the things that I'm working on.

The 'togetherness' of these activist networks provided explicit structures and/or unintentional collectiveness that helped to combat racialized isolation felt in the school environment. These formal and nonformal structures ultimately led to providing coping mechanisms for dealing with the social injusticies and inequitable school structures in their jobs.

Discussion

The voices of the teachers of Color in this article further confirm that teacher activist networks continue to prevent the isolation experienced by teachers of Color in the workplace, especially those networks that create space for racial affinity groups. The research confirmed this on an individualized level (Catone 2017; Mosely 2018; Pham and Kohli 2018; Pour-Khorshid 2016, 2018a, 2018b), but this study further confirms this finding over 14 teacher activist organizations. The teacher activist groups in our study are formed around the social identity of 'teacher' with a purpose beyond simply connecting people, they are formed to fight *for* justice and *against* injustice. As participant Mateo explained, these networks attract a 'specific kind of unicorn-y teacher'.

The networks focused more explicitly on addressing the harm and repeated trauma caused by racism and racial microaggressions. Considering the microaggressions framework (Sue 2010), we can see how these teacher activist networks serve to counteract the pain and suffering caused by microaggressions. First, microinvalidations serve to make a person feel like what they think is wrong or not real. The groups affirmed teachers of Color's experiences and beliefs, and helped them feel less ideologically isolated. Second, microinsults attempt to dehumanize a person and make them feel less than equal. Phoebe and Krissi experienced the actions of isolation that through consistent microinsults (that are more on a macro level) that made the feel like a 'constant battle'. Yet, the networks were caring and healing spaces, made explicitly to address the harm that racism and microaggressions cause. Microassaults serve to violently exclude and push out
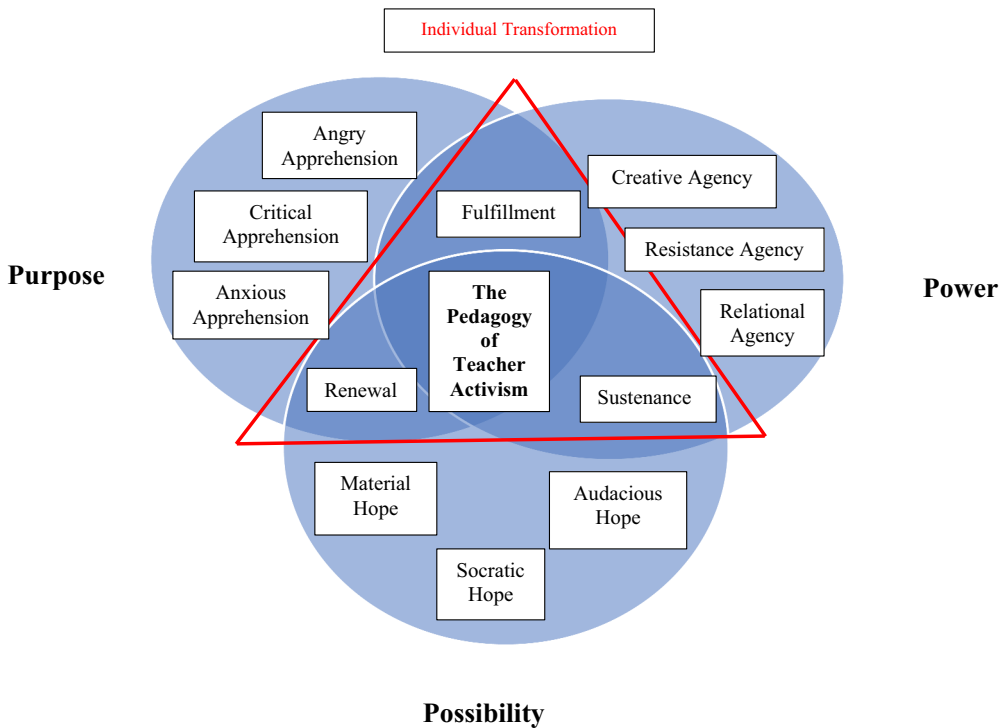
Figure 2. Individual transformation.

individuals from a community. In the case of our study, the pedagogy of teacher activism (Catone 2017) combined with the group support helped teachers to cultivate strategies to push back and gain power through their organization.

Ultimately, the pedagogy of teacher activism (Catone 2017) was of paramount importance in setting the context for hope and progress for all of the teacher activist networks, whether they were organized as racial affinity groups/sub-groups or teacher activist affinity groups. The intersection of purpose, power, and possibility seem to benefit the organizations collective concepts to *struggle* (Valdez et al. 2018), but further benefit the schools by retaining the teachers of Color through the outlets they created. The heightened sense of purpose, power, and possibility bring the 'critical hope' as Naomi mentioned. It is in this intersection that the resistance to the workplace's marginalized isolation occurs. Naomi's 'critical hope' connects with Catone's (2017) concept of possibility. This is also a core principle of social justice unionism and organizing for the common good. In functioning as affinity groups, the networks offered teachers of Color a way to connect with others who shared experiences of struggle, but also went beyond tranditional affinity group functions in that they also gave teachers of Color the power with the pedagogy of activism. Moreover, Mei and Kelly discuss the influence and importance of solidarity outside of school and contradicting microaggressions against their students. The networks provide a way for Mei and Kelly to feel agentive to respond appropriately to these injustices, combining the power and purpose of the pedagogy of teacher activism.

The participants, and the networks themselves, were simultaneously effected by inward and outward change. The relationship between inward and outward change comes from building a critical community that helps to sustain teachers to do their work while also doing the work of campaigns and broader change (outward change). Yet, the inward change (or as we call it, individual transformation), comes at the intersection of fulfillment, renewal, and sustenance in the pedagogy of teacher activism (see Figure 2). The inward change happens within the networks themselves, but in this case, it also happens within the individual.

These networks reinforce identity through community by having a space that sustains them in the job. Santoro's (2018) research on teachers leaving the profession finds that there are five overarching strategies for the re-moralization for teachers: activism, teacher leadership, student-centered action, voice, and professional community. Specifically under *activism*, she explains how 'connect[ing] with teacher activists' is vidal for sustainability in the field (Santoro 2018, 117). This study confirms that the connects in these networks were important for revitalization at work. As a result, teachers of Color have the space to connect with and benefit from their interactions with like-minded, politically radical educators without those interactions being mediated by administrators who have authority over the teachers in their workplace.

More notably, the teacher activist groups offer teachers the chance to act agentively on their work context because these activist networks are independent of the institutions in which they teach. The success of these groups being outside the confines of the school provides more empowerment, as opposed to the corporate models that have affinity groups in house (Biscoe & Safford, 2015; Blitz and Kohl 2012; Van Aken, Monetta, and Sink 1994). United States' schools were literally not created for people of Color, so to have affinity groups within the confines of the school structures might add, instead of take away, the issue of isolation. Thus, teacher activist networks need to remain in out-of-school spaces, but it is our hope that these activist networks recognize and incorporate racial affinity groups.

Further, this study provides implications for teacher education programs and policy. It is important for teacher education programs to impede networking and activism into the curriculum. By introducing teachers of Color to activist teacher networks or racial affinity groups during their teacher identity development, this will automatically plug them into spaces that will help them sustain in their teacher education programs and beyond. This provides an initial support in working toward retention for teachers of Color. For policy, we hope that more federal and private foundations are able to provide grants and funding opportunities for teacher-led activist networks. These monies can help sustain the current networks, while building more nationally, in order for these groups to maintain in out-of-school sites.

Conclusion

These networks combat isolation by offering teachers of Color power, purpose, and possibility (Catone 2017) and helping them remain in community with others in spaces that are both safe for their marginalized racial identities and afford them the chance to be brave by becoming more critical and exerting agency in their jobs. Connecting with like-minded others contradicts the sense of ideological and racial loneliness for someone who

might be witnessing violence against students of Color or feeling like they are 'seeing things wrong'. Without these networks, teachers of Color can experience a dangerous trifecta with lacking sense of purpose, possibility, and power. This is evident with how Noora's experience is the antithesis of the participants' experiences in this article. This stark contrast, we hope, should lead other researchers to explore how teacher activist networks affect teacher retention rates, as teachers of Color are too valuable to succumb to racialized isolation.

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