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Activist Educators and the Production, Circulation and Impact of Social Movement Knowledge

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Abstract

The burgeoning research on contemporary educator movements provides insight into what activist educators know and believe, what they learn through their collective organizing and activism, and how they conduct inquiry to generate new knowledge for praxis. Yet, although this work suggests that these educators engage, generate, circulate, and mobilize social movement knowledge, the process remains mostly tacit. In this article, I draw from several studies of educator movements to discuss examples of how communities of educators engage with knowledge generated by social movements, develop new local knowledge for their activist activity, and promote that knowledge within and beyond their movement communities. Circulating their knowledge through networks extending over time and space, activist educators ultimately bridge social movement knowledge into spheres of power and influence in education.

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> We conceive of social movements primarily as processes through which meaning is constituted. In addition to the instrumental and strategic actions which are a necessary part of social movement praxis, social movements, we contend, are producers of knowledge (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 94).

On the first day of fieldwork for my current study, I found myself sitting around a cramped conference table with a former state teacher of the year, an individual who filed a historic state Supreme Court case that ruled the state's public education funding unconstitutional, the state's former first lady, an individual who started the first Catholic school teachers union in a nearby state, the president of a statewide education advocacy non-profit, and leaders from teachers unions and local school boards. Most were former teachers. All were education activists. And all were knowledgeable about a range of interconnected topics underpinning their organizing for high-quality and equitable public education in their state. Discussion at this meeting, a Board of Directors meeting for an education advocacy non-profit, ranged from the history and future of state education legislation under consideration, the ongoing state Supreme Court case contesting the constitutionality of a school takeover bill, and people—from journalists to labor leaders to legislators—who have the power to influence state education policy. At this meeting, one member distributed a photocopy of an op-ed. Another provided legislative updates. In conversation, members of the group made reference to theories of organizing, politically powerful ideological and economic forces in the current education policy context, and shared understandings of what strong public education looks like. The group discussed obstacles to healthy public education in the state (e.g., legislators in the pockets of education privatizers), the roles of neoliberalism and institutional racism in the contemporary school policy environment, and upcoming actions planned to promote the mission and vision of the group. In their discussion, group members mentioned specific books, blogs, and social media feed that informed their understandings and provided news and information for their activist activity.

As impressed as I was by the knowledge and analyses shared at the meeting, I was even more struck by what I learned about the broader networks in which these activists were embedded. As the group collectively educated me on the landscape of education advocacy and activism in the state, a picture began to form of wide-ranging networks that extended across and beyond the state. Each of the activists in the room participated in at least two (and often more) advocacy organizations, and most served as formal or informal liaisons between and among them. They made frequent mention of other organizers and activists throughout the state to which they were connected. In the months following this meeting, I visited additional sites in these networks and continued to witness the generation and circulation of myriad kinds of knowledge for activism. I observed the ways in which activist knowledge moved through these networks and beyond. Through events and actions designed to inform the public and other educators, and through efforts to educate and influence state legislators, these activists promoted their knowledge through spheres of power and influence.

The early months of this project reinforced a lesson I had learned in several earlier studies: activist educators build knowledge bridges between social movements and state schooling. I had first learned this many years ago in studies of educators' participation in inquiry networks linked to movements (Niesz, 2006, 2010a). These professional communities fostered learning and knowledge production around questions of democracy, equity, and justice in schooling. Networked teachers introduced new professional and political knowledge in their classrooms and schools as a result of their participation. Years later, I learned this lesson again from South Indian activist educators who drew on social movement knowledge in their efforts to transform school practice across their state (Niesz & Krishnamurthy, 2013, 2014). In this case, educators who participated in popular education and other movements employed their movement knowledge about engaging and democratic learning to pursue a radical reform of government school pedagogy. Across these cases, at different scales and in different contexts, social movement knowledge made material impacts on schooling as a result of activist educators' efforts.

In this article, I unpack the idea of activist educators building knowledge bridges between social movements and state schooling by exploring empirical examples that demonstrate the production, circulation, and impact of social movement knowledge. The educator movements discussed here differ in focus, approach, context, and scale, yet all illustrate the role of social movement knowledge in work to create change. After providing a conceptualization of social movement knowledge, I discuss examples of how communities of activist educators engage with knowledge generated by social movements, create new local knowledge for their activist activity, and promote that knowledge within and beyond their movement networks. After addressing how knowledge is both deliberately and tacitly produced and circulated in contemporary educator movements, I conclude by discussing how such movement knowledge ultimately competes with other knowledges in the contested terrain of education policy and practice.

Social Movement Knowledge

Social movements, defined broadly by McAdam and Snow (1997) as "collectivities working with some degree of organization and continuity to promote or resist change through a mixture of extra-institutional and institutionalized means" (p. xxii), impact schooling in a variety of ways. Many of us first think of protests, strikes, and major litigation—*Brown versus the Board of Education* or the Red for Ed strikes, for example. In the contested terrain of schooling, our attention is often drawn to victories and losses in law and policy. Yet, major collective actions and their impacts take place well after movements have generated networks of actors with shared goals for change. Key to building the identity of a movement are the ideas that name the problem and guide visions for the future. Sociologists Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1991) have argued that it is in this constructive, generative work, what they called the cognitive praxis of social movements, that the true identities and impacts of movements lie.

Eyerman and Jamison (1991) posited that the development of social movement knowledges takes place through "a series of social encounters, within movements, between movements, and even more importantly perhaps, between movements and their established opponents" (p. 57). They illustrated this through historical analyses of the nature, contributions, and outcomes of the cognitive praxis of large-scale social movements like the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, European environmental movements, and 19th century working class movements. Ultimately, Eyerman and Jamison's cognitive praxis theory pushes us to take seriously the knowledges that make up the identities of social movements and that become the driving ideas and values of social movement actors.

The risk in using the term *knowledge* is that, for many, it evokes dry abstraction. Yet, social movement knowledge ranges from the technical to deeply held values. It is, according to Eyerman and Jamison (1991), "both formal and informal, objective and subjective, moral and immoral, and, most importantly, professional and popular" (p. 49). Social movement knowledges are the understandings that inform identities, activity, and practice.

Drawing from the work of Habermas, the authors contended that knowledges produced in social movements are of three kinds. *Cosmological* knowledge refers to the worldview of the movement. This is the set of fundamental beliefs and assumptions about the world that underpin the movement, such as systems ecology in the early environmental movement or concepts of equality and democracy drawn from legal and religious texts in the American Civil Rights Movement. *Technological* social movement knowledge refers to knowledge about specific issues around which the movement is oriented. Tenets of climate science in environmental movements, Marxist theory in working class movements, and the history and nature of police violence against Black citizens in Black Lives Matter are all examples. Finally, *organizational* knowledge refers to the understandings guiding how the movement works, including how to develop and communicate the movement's vision, how to organize, and how to take action. Eyerman and Jamison (1991) gave the example of the Civil Rights Movement's "innovation of organized mass action, an innovation which would carry over into the student movement and then on into the new social movements of the 1970s" (p. 124).

Social movement knowledge is not a central construct in the literature on contemporary educator movements, nor has its role in education activism been a direct focus of analysis or theorizing. The rapidly growing body of research on educator activism provides insight into what activist educators know and believe (e.g., Brickner, 2016; Brown & Stern, 2018; Dunn, et. al., 2017; Maton, 2018; Picower, 2012a, 2012b, 2013), what they learn through their collective organizing and activism (e.g., Montaño, López-Torres, De Lissovoy, Pacheco, & Stillman, 2002; Maton, 2016; Stark & Maton, 2019; Zavala & Henning, 2017), and how they engage in inquiry to inform praxis (e.g., Crawford-Garrett & Riley, 2016; Maton, 2016; Niesz, 2018; Picower, 2012a; Quinn & Carl, 2015; Riley, 2015; Zavala & Henning, 2017). Throughout this literature, we see the incisive critique that activist educators pose to the neoliberalism, the institutional racism, and the disdain for educators' professional knowledge that characterize the contemporary education policy context. We also see how activist educators promote these critiques and counternarratives through collective action (e.g., Picower, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Quinn & Carl, 2015; Thapliyal, 2018), professional development activity (e.g., Maton, 2018; Riley, 2015; Riley & Solic, 2017), and social media presence (e.g., Brickner, 2016; Dunn et al., 2017; Shiller, 2015; Thapliyal, 2018). Certainly, this work on contemporary educator movements suggests that knowledge is being generated, circulated, and mobilized for action, but, with rare exceptions (e.g., Maton, 2016, 2018; Stark & Maton, 2019), the process remains mostly tacit. Investigating how the knowledge underpinning educator activism is developed and promoted would ultimately benefit activists and their allies, not only through providing better understandings of these central processes, but also by highlighting new ways to contribute to the work of their movements.

Engaging, Constructing, and Circulating Social Movement Knowledge

Communities of activist educators are diverse. They develop with different goals and work in different spaces. Some activist educators are part of community organizing collectives. Others are involved with social justice unionism. Some participate in teacher activist groups outside of unions. Others are involved in specific campaigns to impact educational policy and practice at local, state, or national levels. And some communities of activist educators focus their energies on their own practice and classrooms. No matter the project, when educators in these communities participate in collective work and dialogue, they engage with existing social movement knowledge, produce new local knowledge to guide their work, and circulate their knowledge through projects and actions. In this section, I discuss three distinctly different educator movements, and their engagement, construction, and circulation of social movement knowledge.

Engaging Social Movement Knowledge: Activist Educator Inquiry Networks

Collectives of activist educators who direct their work to their own practice, classrooms, and schools often promote inquiry into teaching and leadership approaches that counter the status quo. The source of this knowledge is often contemporary or historical social movements. This was the case for several educator inquiry networks that were central to my earlier research.

I first encountered activist educators' inquiry networks during a critical ethnographic study of a public middle school in a high poverty community in Philadelphia. In this study, I explored how teachers employing progressive and critical approaches to teaching navigated and resisted the demands of the twin threats of increasing standardized testing and growing vulnerability to school closures in the face of charter school encroachment (Niesz, 2006, 2010b). A key finding of the study was that several teachers resisting what was happening in their school and district were involved in teacher inquiry networks. I worked most closely with Jennifer (pseudonym), a teacher of English language learners who considered herself an activist. She worked at the school, district, and community levels to advocate for her students and for critical approaches to literacy education. Jennifer participated in a number of teacher networks and explained to me the important roles these played in her teaching practice and activism (Niesz, 2006, 2010b). The inquiry network that was most prominent in Jennifer's work during the time of my study was a critical multicultural education practitioner inquiry group. Funded by a foundation and organized through a university, the group was comprised of 11 Philadelphia teachers, diverse by race and teaching context, who constructed a question about multicultural education to investigate in their classrooms. The group met regularly over three years to discuss their work.

Finding the inquiry communities of Jennifer and her colleagues powerful influences on praxis, I designed a follow-up study to research an activist educator inquiry network more directly (Niesz, 2010a). My goal in this study, which took place in the Midwest U.S., was to understand the role of inquiry network participation in the cultural production of meaning, identity, practice, agency, and change. The inquiry network, which I call the Democracy Collective, was organized and facilitated by an educational leader in the region who had co-developed a framework for considering socially conscious and democratically-oriented practice in schools. The goal of the network was to facilitate the growth of educational leaders, both teachers and administrators, who work for change oriented by a shared vision. This vision and the leader's framework were informed by John Dewey's work on education and democratic living, as well as that of other education philosophers and scholars addressing democratic, socially conscious education. After a call was made through a university education department and shared through word of mouth, 15 teachers and administrators joined the inquiry network, nine of whom became active members.

I conceptualized both studies as critical ethnographies of critical practice; through developing ethnographic understandings of the work of critical and progressive educators, I hoped to contribute something to broader movements for social justice in schooling. In both studies, ethnographic methods were required to document these educators' experiences, activities, and perspectives in their cultural contexts. I thus employed participant observation, formal and informal interviewing, and the collection of artifacts. In the Philadelphia school ethnography, I spent a lot of time in Jennifer's classroom, assisting her and her students, talking with them when appropriate. I also conducted formal interviews with Jennifer and her students. In the Democracy

Collective, I participated in all in-person and online meetings and interviewed almost all of the participants. As most ethnographers do, I straddled insider and outsider roles in the communities and worked toward reciprocity through supporting the work of the participants (as classroom assistant with Jennifer and providing some resources and assistance in the Democracy Collective).

Across Jennifer's networks and the Democracy Collective, teachers and leaders voluntarily joined these communities to work with others around ideas that were important to them, those related to social justice and democracy in schooling. They joined networks to think through these ideas and their implications for practice with other educators who shared their interests and commitments. They participated to grow in a direction aligned with their beliefs and identities. To do this, they engaged in shared reading, extensive dialogue in regular meetings, and forms of inquiry. Then they built from their inquiry to design and pursue social justice projects in schools and districts.

In these inquiry networks, knowledge artifacts, primarily texts, offered ideas about ways of educating, relating to students, and promoting social justice in schooling that contrasted with those guiding their schools and districts. According to activist educators in both studies, their own schools and districts were characterized by growing neoliberalism, overly technical approaches to education (including overreliance on standardized testing in education decision-making), institutional and interpersonal racism, the absence of culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate instruction, and the lack of attention to social justice. These two educator networks, situated hundreds of miles apart and differing in structure and style, were clearly centers of learning through their work with social movement knowledges. Educators' engagement with these ideas through dialogue and inquiry contributed to their own understandings, commitments, and identities.

The ideas that were central to the inquiry networks' readings and discussions first emerged through social movements. Jennifer's critical multicultural education group, for example, was grounded in theories of critical pedagogy and critical approaches to multicultural education. As such, knowledge central to the work of the group emerged from the Civil Rights Movement (with its direct links to the emergence of multicultural education; Gay, 1983; Sleeter, 1996) and Freire's literacy popular education movements in Brazil (a key context for the development of critical pedagogy; O'Cadiz & Torres, 1994; Torres, 1994). Similarly, when members of the Democracy Collective read theory about the role of socially conscious democratic practice in education, they engaged with knowledge developed in the Progressive Movement of the early 20th century (John Dewey's work in particular). They also engaged with knowledge from more contemporary movements for caring, holistic, and justice-oriented educational practice. To be sure, these movements were several steps removed from the inquiry networks. The connections between the ideas guiding the groups and social movements were never made explicit in my experiences or interviews. Even so, we can trace the knowledge central to such inquiry networks back to their movements of origin.

Beyond sites of learning, these inquiry networks were also sites of the production and mobilization of new, more local, movement knowledge. Abstract knowledge from texts was transformed into knowledge for action. In both Jennifer's network and the Democracy Collective, dialogue in meetings tacked between ideas from shared reading and the specificities of educators' practice, organizations, and broader professional contexts. Discussing their own contextualized practice through the lenses of the more abstract knowledge of their networks generated identity work and plans for action.

Projects, in particular, were a centerpiece to the Democracy Collective and to Jennifer's critical multicultural education practitioner inquiry network. Through their projects, educators used lenses developed through their network participation to introduce change in classrooms, schools, and districts. In the Democracy Collective, one teacher constructed an innovative unit for her third grade class. A high school English teacher developed a professional development program that she offered in her school district. A school district curriculum director created a learning community for teachers in her district. All of these projects emerged from the big ideas guiding the work of the network.

In Philadelphia, Jennifer explicitly described how her network participation led to a number of classroom projects that engaged her students in learner-centered inquiry into language, power, and identity. One extensive unit that was a direct outcome of her network participation focused on the theme of oppression in the decade of the 1930s. It featured young adult novels reflecting young people experiencing or contesting oppression in a range of national and international contexts. Through a collaboration between Jennifer and the school's art teacher, students developed a tile mosaic about world oppression based on the Wall of Remembrance at the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. Their mosaic addressed the European Holocaust, the Cambodian Genocide, and the racial oppression of the Jim Crow era in the U.S.

Activist educators' promotion of social movement knowledge in their local contexts was not always as deliberate as through their projects, however. Some educators drew strength from their activist educator communities to speak out in their workplaces against policies and practices that they understood as harmful to students, quality education, and social justice. Jennifer told a story about contesting her colleagues' interest in holding a "multicultural fair," and highlighted the role of her inquiry network.

> And I think this is also, again, because of this Diversity Teacher Research group. I stood up [in a faculty meeting] and I said, "Okay, I'm going to be honest with everybody here." I said, "I get really worried when I hear the word multicultural fair. It's very surface, very superficial." I don't know that I would have done that in the past . . . But I said, "Having a fair at the end to me is not what multiculturalism is about."

In the Democracy Collective, educators frequently discussed their work to build relationships with colleagues who could be allies in their work. They engaged in dialogue with these potential allies to share and extend knowledge (Niesz, 2010a).

To summarize, the local knowledge production that emerged from activist educators' collective engagement with social movement knowledges in these communities ultimately became levers for change in identities, practice, schools, and districts. Participating educators used the social movement knowledge codified in intellectual artifacts—books, articles, and others—as well as the new ideas developed through their dialogue together, to reflect on existing practice and guide new practice. In these ways, the inquiry networks were not only centers of learning but also centers for the production of new local knowledge that was mobilized for change. As such, these communities promoted *praxis*. Activist educators in these inquiry networks first sought to connect with others over ideas and then change their practice and their institutions in ways aligned with the shared knowledge of their communities. In doing so, they bridged social movement knowledge to state schooling.

Circulating Social Movement Knowledge: Networked Education Activist and Advocacy Organizations

Bridging knowledge from social movements to state schooling, activist educator communities circulate the knowledge they engage and develop into new communities, including schools and classrooms, professional communities of educators, unions and social movement networks, lawmakers, and various publics. How social movement knowledge travels with activist educators from movement spaces into these fields of influence has not been a focus of the literature—at least not in these terms. As described above, the educators involved in inquiry networks introduced change to classrooms, schools, and districts through engaging with social movement knowledge in activist communities and then changing their own practice, initiating teaching and leadership projects, and speaking out. Activist educators involved in movements to impact law and policy circulate their knowledge in different spaces. Those involved with the education activist and advocacy organizations (EAAOs) of my current research provide illustrations.

The focus of my study is a network of EAAOs in a Midwest U.S. state, all of which are aligned with contemporary educator movements fighting neoliberal threats to public education. Although the organizations have different objectives and types of membership, span different regions, and exist at different scales (city, region, state), they share the loose goal of promoting strong and equitable public schooling for all children that is guided by the professional knowledge of educators and the decision-making of local communities. The specific EAAOs with which I am working most closely also share the aim of promoting civic engagement in education policy activity at the state and local levels. The nature of their network is complex in the sense that some EAAOs are connected formally and others informally, through the relationships and communications among individual activists. The activists working in and through these EAAOs include teachers, parents, community organizers, union leaders, professors, and politically engaged citizens, among others. However, those with whom I am currently working most closely are overwhelmingly retired teachers. They participated in organizing and/or activism during their teaching careers, and it has become a primary focus in retirement.

I designed this study to explore social movement knowledge production, circulation, and impact through activism for state education policy change. Ethnographic methods were again most appropriate for pursuing this goal, but, in this case, a multi-sited design was also required. Specifically, I am engaging in participant observation in EAAO meetings, events, and collective actions; interviewing EAAO activists; social media harvesting; and collecting artifacts (e.g., reports, blogs, emailed communications, meeting handouts, etc.). The goal of my data collection and analysis is to understand and trace knowledge development and promotion through the EAAO network and into spheres of power and influence. As with the studies discussed in the previous section, I take a critical epistemological stance, aiming for my research to not only document but also contribute to movements for justice. Unlike the earlier studies, I am an insider to this movement, having become an active member of one of the EAAOs not long after the study began.

What is the social movement knowledge that activist educators in the EAAOs engage, develop, and circulate? Using Eyerman and Jamison’s (1991) categories, I argue that the cosmological or worldview knowledge of their movement is the fundamental importance of healthy, strong, and equitable public education in a democratic nation. Technological knowledge includes understandings of the contemporary policy context and its effects on schools, the neoliberal philosophies that guide their opponents, and the specific sources of power behind these opponents, who include privatizers, profiteers, and ideologues. For example, EAAO activists read about and discuss the roles of right-wing policy actors, including the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), the Fordham Institute, the Walton Foundation, and others that promote privatization of schooling through their funding, lobbying, think tank activity, and, in the case of ALEC, legislation writing (see Anderson & Donchik, 2016; Lipman, 2011). These activists have also become experts in the myriad problems of standardized testing regimes, problems that range from the flawed measurement logic to the profiteering of testing companies to the school-based impacts (e.g., narrowing of the curriculum, harmful effects on quality pedagogy, and gaming and cheating). Strong professional knowledge of quality educational practice (from years of teaching in most cases) also undergirds their work. Organizational knowledge within the movement centers around the importance of civic engagement to pressure lawmakers to support strong and equitable public schools. Promoting understandings of the problems and solutions in the contemporary public education context is required to foster this civic engagement. Reflecting on a presentation to a large group of school board members, one organizer explained that “we’re trying to make it easier” to help the public understand complex issues and their implications. “It takes the community to pressure elected officials to lead.”

In the EAAO network, the engagement and production of social movement knowledge is partly facilitated by the ubiquitous information networks that characterize the larger movement against neoliberalism in education. Through these networks I have observed the almost-constant circulation of information, ideas, and what I am calling “knowledge artifacts”: books, films, blogs, op-eds, reports, investigative journalism, and so forth. Similar to the educator networks of my earlier research, much of this takes place through meeting dialogue across participants with rich professional and experiential knowledge, who are working on projects with new sources of information. Information sharing peppers their meetings and planning discussions: “Do the districts understand what this legislation will do to their budgets?” “What does George think that Senator Jackson will do about the equity challenge to the bill?” “How will the unions help us with this campaign?”

In addition to sharing sources of knowledge in the form of news, stories, and knowledge artifacts, EAAO activists also develop new knowledge artifacts. Several write blogs and daily social media posts, either independently or for their EAAOs. Groups have developed resources for hosting educational events, including book discussions, film viewings, and community forums to discuss the impacts of new legislation. One group of three organizers from two different organizations developed a report about the impact of the state’s expanded voucher program on individual school districts. This project required research, analysis, and information requests from the state legislature to produce a powerful knowledge artifact, one that quickly gained traction in the state’s activist information networks.

Importantly, EAAO activists not only engage and develop knowledge through their connected organizations but also circulate it through space. Knowledge is shared within and across connected EAAOs as well as beyond the activist network into communities of educators, lawmakers, and the public. In terms of the network of EAAOs itself, the interpersonal connections that link organizations and individual activists play an especially important role in promoting social movement knowledge over geographical space. Key to this process is that activists within the network often participate in multiple EAAOs. Figure 1 illustrates this through a representation of a few of the organizations in a much more complex network. The capital letters represent specific individuals who are active members of two or three groups. During in person (and, post-COVID-19, live virtual) meetings, these individuals share information and knowledge artifacts from one group to another. Most often, such information sharing emerges organically as group members participate in dialogue. Insider information on the status of a bill going through the legislature is shared from a state group, located in the capital city, to a regional group, for example. In the case of formal connections among groups, formal reporting from one to another takes place as well. The organizers represented by letters D and E in Figure 1, for example, provide an oral report from the state EAAO meeting in their regional EAAO meeting.

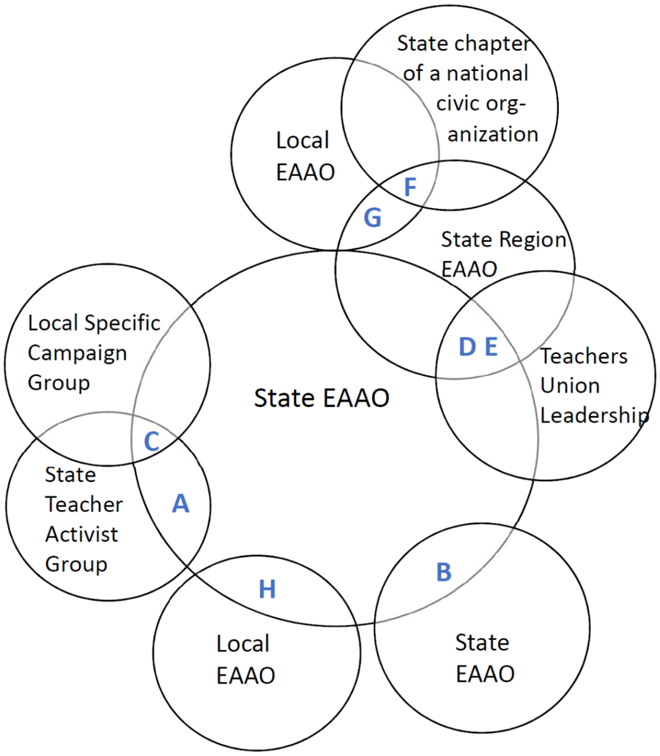
State chapter of a national civic org-anization
Local EAAO
F
G
State Region EAAO
Local Specific Campaign Group
D E
Teachers Union Leadership
State EAAO
C
State Teacher Activist Group
A
H
B
Local EAAO
State EAAO

Figure 1. Educator Activists in Networked Education Activist and Advocacy Organizations

The flow of social movement knowledge among individuals and groups is also, of course, digitally mediated. Resources, knowledge artifacts, and information flow among networked activists through email, websites, and social media. Groups deliberately share resources, like notes for use during book discussions, PowerPoint slides from presentations, and talking points relevant to particular campaigns. Organizations and individuals post or tweet specific blog posts, op-eds, reports, and news items; these are then re-posted through the social media feed of other organizations and individuals in the network. Social media also bridges the state and local organizations to national organizations, blogs, and other sources of information beyond the state networks. Very occasionally, information from the state network (e.g., news items, blog posts) are shared with a national audience through national organizations' social media or through nationally-known bloggers.

EAAO members promote information and knowledge *beyond* their activist networks through both social media and in person events. The Facebook and Twitter accounts of the EAAOs have many more followers than active participants. Extending the reach even more, individual activists repost items and commentary from their personal accounts. News items, commentary on legislative decisions, memes with EAAO messaging, blogs, and more circulate through social media, reaching those outside the network. Importantly, calls for participation aimed to draw educators and members of the public into collective actions also reach broad audiences through social media. These include phone call and letter writing campaigns, as well as in-person events (e.g., film viewings, panel presentations, etc.). Indeed, although social media facilitates the sharing of information, artifacts, and calls for action, in-person (and, post-COVID-19, live virtual) engagement with educators and members of the public is a priority of many of these organizations. Social movement knowledge is at the center of these events. For example, when a school finance bill was moving through the state legislature, one local EAAO organized an event that brought community members together to hear from legislators and social movement actors about the history of state school funding movements and the specifics of the bill itself. This community conversation was framed by knowledge from broader anti-privatization movements in education and the specific knowledge of the EAAO and its network.

Elected officials and policymakers are, as noted earlier, the ultimate target of the knowledge campaigns of these communities of activists. In addition to promoting civic engagement directly (through phone call and letter writing campaigns, for example) and indirectly (through discussion forums, for example), activist educators in the network lobby state lawmakers, provide testimony during education committee meetings at the statehouse, and promote the candidacies of those who support their goals. They speak at school board meetings and at conferences of educators, activists, and policymakers. They contact their own representatives directly to attempt to foster dialogue promoting movement goals. This work is intended to generate change through the use of knowledge to convince and pressure powerholders to make decisions that will lead to better and more equitable public schooling.

In summary, similar to the educators involved with inquiry networks, the EAAO activists engage with social movement knowledge, produce new knowledge for their activism, and promote it through communication and action. Although activist-framed news and information—and even research-based reports—are only fragments within the larger social movement knowledge universe, everyday knowledge work informs movement actors' broader conceptualizations of the problems and vision guiding the movement. Throughout the myriad ways in which EAAO activists work with each other, the public, and policymakers, social movement knowledge frames communication. In turn, communication carries social movement knowledge in the form of ideas and information across geographical space and into new communities. This work extends the reach of the social movement knowledge engaged by and produced in activist educator communities. Circulating knowledge through their networks and beyond, including into spheres of power and influence, EAAO activists mobilize it for action and change.

Developing Social Movement Knowledge Over Time: A Movement for School Change in South India

Networks of activist educators extend social movement knowledge not only across space but also over time. Jennifer's involvement in the city's activist teacher networks extended over many years, as she moved into leadership roles in both networks and schools. Her own social movement knowledge grew over time alongside her influence on others in communities of educators in her city. The ideas that guide entire communities of activists shift as participants engage with and develop knowledge from different sources and activities through their history together (see, e.g., Maton, 2018).

The development and promotion of social movement knowledge over time is exemplified by a movement for student-centered democratic education in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The movement, which grew over 20 years, was comprised of a network of educators and leaders committed to providing children underserved by state education more authentic learning experiences in more democratic contexts. Led by an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer dedicated to improving schools, the movement network included teachers and teacher leaders from both government and private schools, popular educators, leaders and educators located in NGOs, and state officials, among others (Niesz & Krishnamurthy, 2014). After several attempts at changing approaches to teaching and learning in schools, most of which had little long-term impact, their work together eventually culminated in the transformation of all (37,000+) primary-level government schools through an approach called Activity Based Learning (ABL; Niesz & Krishnamurthy, 2014).

ABL ultimately turned formerly teacher-centered government school classrooms organized around textbooks and lectures into centers of activity. Students (both independently and in small groups) worked with child-friendly learning materials developed by teachers in the movement. Traditional assessments were eliminated, replaced with frequent individual learning checks that guided the children's activity. Proponents argued that the replacement of testing schemes with self-paced learning activities eliminated failure and allowed children absent from school for extended periods to rejoin the class. They also contended that ABL encouraged more agency and social interaction across differently privileged students than was seen in the earlier era of teacher-centered instruction (Niesz & Krishnamurthy, 2014).

In 2010, at the height of the institutionalization of ABL in government schools in Tamil Nadu, I conducted research to develop a historical case study of the ABL movement. My goals were to learn how such a radical transformation took place and to document the history of the movement. I also sought to understand how differently-positioned educators and activists experienced the movement. Over two multi-week visits to Tamil Nadu, I worked with multilingual Indian research assistants and collaborators to visit schools, conduct interviews with 45 individuals, collect oral histories of the movement, and amass dozens of artifacts, including policy documents, curricular materials, and media accounts. Participants in the study were members of the ABL movement network, teachers in the schools, and outsiders to the movement (e.g., NGO leaders, professors, journalists, etc., some of whom were supporters of the movement and others who were detractors). My team members and I sought not only to share our findings with academic audiences but also to be of value to the movement. For this reason, we developed a report documenting the history and features of the ABL movement that was submitted to movement actors for their own use (Niesz, Krishnamurthy, & Mahalingam, 2012).

As with the state-wide network of EAAOs in my current research, the ABL movement network can be viewed as a series of communities connected over time and space through specific movement actors. The movement culminating in ABL began in the early 1990s, when IAS officer, Raman (pseudonym), asked local schoolteachers who were also participating in popular education movements to help him develop programming for child laborers out of school. The popular education movements featured enjoyable approaches to learning, including games, songs, and other engaging activities. Raman and his collaborators believed that these kinds of learning activities would be more attractive to out-of-school children than the rote kinds of instruction they had likely experienced in government schools. Drawing on their experiences in popular education and knowledge about learning developed there, the team developed a program for out-of-school youth that caught the attention of teachers in the schools. The team went on to collaborate with additional educators to develop the Joyful Learning program for local schools, which spread throughout the large state with UNICEF funding and new collaborators. Additional projects followed, though few achieved the kind of success movement actors sought. Over time and through iterations of the movement's work, the network grew, drawing together participants (and knowledge) from an innovative rural education NGO and a private school network influenced by Montessori and Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti. When Raman turned down a prestigious post to serve instead in a role that would allow him a leadership position in government schooling, the movement network turned its attention to developing and scaling ABL throughout the state's schools (Niesz & Krishnamurthy, 2014).

Over the years of efforts, the successes and failures, the connections to new activist educators and organizations, the movement produced knowledge for change that was closely linked to that of earlier movements, including popular education movements, Montessorian progressive education movements, and movements promoting culturally-relevant learning in rural schools (Niesz & Krishnamurthy, 2014). Though these precursor movements shared constructivist orientations to learning, they each brought unique knowledge to the ABL project.

The knowledge interests of the ABL movement, using Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) terms, included the cosmological knowledge that humans learn through active engagement with the world around them. In several interviews, movement actors explained that children learn easily outside of schools, when freed of the fear and boredom of the classroom, but the state's schools had not been set up to foster such authentic learning. Another element of the cosmological knowledge of the ABL movement was its democratic orientation. One educator explained, "no one is higher or lower." Additionally, in the context of increasing neoliberalism, activists in the movement stressed that the state is responsible for the quality education of its young citizens. The technological knowledge of the movement ranged from specific theories of learning and philosophies of education to the general and specific features of the ABL program (and precursor programs). Organizationally, the movement was characterized by egalitarianism and trust for educators and students. Traditional hierarchies were flattened as elite leaders worked collaboratively and at the same level as schoolteachers. Interestingly, the understandings of learning that characterized the cosmological and technological knowledge of the movement were also reflected in its organizational knowledge. In promoting ABL among diverse stakeholders, movement leaders avoided speeches, lectures, and theory. They instead engaged them in classroom observations, dialogue, and other experiential ways to learn about ABL (Niesz & Krishnamurthy, 2013). Whether for elites like the Minister of Education and the administrative heads of every state district, or for teachers, parents, and community leaders, the introduction to ABL began with experience and moved on to what one movement leader described as a Socratic-style discussion. Through its constructivist philosophies of learning and its democratic ethos, the organizational knowledge of the movement was a strong echo of its cosmological knowledge.

Activists in the ABL movement network developed this shared knowledge through many years in both precursor movements and their work together. Oral histories revealed that relationships among some activists spanned decades, contexts, and projects. For example, two schoolteachers who were active in popular education movements joined Raman in the early work to engage out-of-school child laborers. These two continued through the Joyful Learning project, developing songs, games, curricula, and even a guidebook at the request of other teachers. They remained active through the varied stops, starts, and changes over the years. Ultimately, these two educators became central leaders in the state's development, scaling, and institutionalization of ABL in Tamil Nadu. When we interviewed them over 20 years after they began participating in popular education movements, they were still able to trace the impact of what they had learned there on what eventually developed into the statewide pedagogical reform. Ultimately, the continued participation of movement actors through a range of projects over time—both inside and outside the ABL movement network itself—bridged social movement knowledge to state schooling through ongoing generative knowledge work and its mobilization into action.

In both the historical case of ABL and the contemporary case of EAAOs working for state education policy change, movement actors not only engaged with and developed knowledge for activism, they also built connections and networks through which to access new sources of knowledge, build shared understandings across movement communities, and circulate social movement knowledge over space and time. In both cases, movement knowledge was mobilized in their collaborative work for change, deliberately promoted in fields of influence over state schooling.

What of Impact?

Activist educators' engagement with social movement knowledge and development of knowledge for change, though fundamental to their work, is, essentially, only the beginning of broader struggles over education policy and practice. Bridging social movement knowledges from committed activist communities to schools, education systems, and policymaking arenas introduces them into fields of contested terrain in which existing knowledges—those associated with neoliberalism, scientific management, institutional racism, and so forth—are normalized, institutionalized, and supported by the weight of history. The educators I met through my inquiry network studies, for example, found that their identities and practice shifted, strengthened, and in some cases even transformed through their network participation; at the same time, most had difficulty extending their projects among their peers (Niesz, 2010a, 2010b). Several discussed being isolated in their school buildings. Some were even rejected by those threatened by their ideas or by change (and change agents) more generally. Comments from these educators included, "This work can be an island." "I feel like an outside insider." "There's times at the school I feel very alone." Others were able to identify likeminded colleagues but found that these colleagues felt they lacked the power to challenge the status quo. Even in Tamil Nadu, where educators' development and promotion of social movement knowledge led to the transformation of classrooms in over 37,000 schools, success was not lasting. ABL has been compromised in recent years by the reintroduction of textbooks and some traditional forms of assessment. When the networked ABL movement actors were no longer in positions of leadership in the state, more traditional established knowledges about schooling seeped back into the system (Niesz & Ryan, 2018). The contested terrain of state schooling, a site for the ongoing recycling of competing knowledges from competing movements, offers complex obstacles to change in thinking, in policy, and in practice.

Furthermore, it goes without saying that state schooling does not provide a level playing field for contests over knowledge. Organizing and activism must contend with existing power structures undergirded by different knowledge. In the case of elite opponents of public education, ideological interests are backed by material ones. As the organizers and activists I have met through my current research have been quick to point out, their state's prevailing party's lawmakers, fairly secure in gerrymandered districts, receive large campaign donations from those who stand to profit from charter schools and the privatization movement. These legislators are also influenced by pro-privatization organizations and lobbyists funded by the wealthy, including ALEC and the Fordham Institute.

Despite formidable challenges like these and the many more that could be added, victories of contemporary educator movements appear to be multiplying. Activist educators have made inroads in spaces of established sources of power through backing their messages with new sources of power. We have seen successful strikes in politically conservative (weak-union) states, growing social movement unionism, the slowing and halting of charter school growth in some states, and even credible candidates for the U.S. presidential election distancing themselves from the neoliberalist approaches to education of the last quarter century. Diane Ravitch (2020) recently published a book about the many accomplishments and victories of the Resistance, those who struggle against privatizers and others undermining healthy public education. If, as she argued, the Resistance is winning, this is at least partly because activist educator communities have circulated their knowledges far and wide, generating enough support to make an impact.

I have seen examples of incremental success in my current research with EAAO activists as well. In response to the work of at least one activist in the study, a state chapter of a major non-partisan civic organization adopted a position on the unethical use of standardized tests. A large city's school board issued a high-profile resolution chastising the state legislature for passing unvetted education bills without adequate time for public comment. In the months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, state legislators scrambled to address state-wide outrage, spurred by EAAO campaigns, over the state's school voucher expansion. Each of these small victories can be traced to the production and circulation of knowledge by communities of activist educators.

Important change happens at the individual level with specific educators as well. Although Jennifer ultimately left her unsupportive school, she found another in the same community that embraced her work. She eventually became a principal in the city and extended her work in critical pedagogy and in quality education for English Language Learners beyond her own classroom. In Tamil Nadu, although the government school classrooms now sit at the intersections of competing philosophies (as most classrooms do), many teachers and their practice were forever changed by ABL. For example, a number of teachers told us that their view of the learning potential of young people had changed as a result of the movement; several who had initially been socialized to believe some children were slow and unable to learn explained that their experience in ABL classrooms convinced them that every child can learn (Niesz & Ryan, 2018). Social movement knowledge—the knowledge related to learning and democratic practice that characterized the movement—lives on in the understandings and practices of some educators. Indeed, whether at the level of individual teachers or of widespread policy, these examples provide evidence that movement knowledges, bridged to spheres of influence through the work of communities of activist educators, have left indelible impacts on the contested terrain of schooling.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that activist educators' production and promotion of social movement knowledge is an important but underexplored dimension of contemporary educator movements. Without understanding how the knowledges guiding activism develop, circulate, and become mobilized in and for action, we are missing a central piece of the puzzle of how educator movements lead to educational and social change. Drawing examples from movements that differ in nature, scope, and context, I have sought to illustrate ways in which specific groups of activist educators built and bridged knowledge between social movements and state schooling. Across these diverse examples, educators seeking educational change worked together in communities directly or loosely linked to social movements. In these communities, they engaged existing social movement knowledge to guide their efforts for better and more just schooling. In their inquiry, dialogue, and projects, they developed their own local knowledge for action. Such knowledge was not abstract but interested knowledge, deeply felt and reflecting (and further informing) their values and identities. In the examples shared here, activist educators circulated their knowledge through networks that extended over time and space. Mobilizing their knowledge through activist projects, these educators moved their ideas and meanings into spheres of influence to create change—albeit sometimes limited or temporary change—in the contested terrain of state education.

Although the growing literature on contemporary educator movements provides clues about the knowledge work of activist educators, we have seen little research focused deliberately on the generation, circulation, and impact of their social movement knowledge. Better understandings of these processes would afford key lessons about the ideas and kinds of organizing around ideas that draw educators to movements, as well as those that drive broader professional, political, and public participation and gain traction across political and social fields. This research program would also benefit from longitudinal analyses of how social movement knowledge lives on (or does not) in educational practice and educational change over time. More broadly, explorations of how contemporary educator movements frame and circulate their visions and messages, as well as where and how those are *heard* in fields of influence, could provide valuable insight for movement actors and those who seek to further their work and impact. Such inquiry into how communities of activist educators bridge social movement knowledge to state schooling has the potential to inform ongoing struggles, as well as our understandings of the long-term legacy of contemporary educator movements.

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