

Teacher Activism as Assemblage: Fighting for Public Education in Neoliberal Contexts

Research Overview

Public education is increasingly influenced by neoliberal policies worldwide. Using assemblage theory, this study examines how teacher activists in Saskatchewan, Canada function within political assemblages. Findings highlight how human and non-human elements continuously interact to shape advocacy and generate new possibilities for more socially just education systems.

Study Purpose

Neoliberalism—an economic and political ideology that treats education as a market rather than a public good—has shaped curriculum, pedagogy, autonomy, and equity globally (Apple, 2012). Although teachers are often expected to remain apolitical, their growing frustration with reforms exacerbating societal inequality has spurred new forms of political engagement (Kramer, 2024). Teacher activist identities are vital to sustaining public education and propel teachers' everyday political and professional interactions.

This study examines how teacher activists in Saskatchewan, Canada enact educational advocacy in support of public education. The following research question guided the inquiry:

- What human and non-human entities comprise political assemblages and how do they interweave to shape teacher activism?

Research Methods

Guided by Harding et al.'s (2018) post-structural framework of alliances, assemblages, and affect, this paper draws from a larger study of teacher activism (Author, 2025). Focusing on assemblage theory, this paper examines the relational and affective dimensions of teachers' political involvement. Drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Harding et al. (2018) define assemblages as “the process of arranging, organizing, and fitting together parts” (p. 9), with attention to what the assemblage is and does. Assemblages extend beyond human participants to include non-human elements such as policies, ideologies, or emotions. Assemblages highlight how capacities (e.g., skills) and identities shift across contexts, creating new possibilities for political action.

This study employed a comparative case study (CCS) approach (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Data was generated through 10 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with the same participants. Focus groups functioned as both member checking and collective sense-

making, allowing attention to group relationality, shared meaning-making, and networking. Interviews and focus groups were conducted via Zoom, enabling participation across locations.

The study took place in a Canadian province with a population of just over one million across a large, geographically diverse area. Participants were 10 full-time public school teachers who engaged in political advocacy both within their provincial teachers' union and beyond through grassroots activism. Ethics approval was obtained, and confidentiality was prioritized. Pseudonyms were used and identifying details were minimized to mitigate risk (Allen & Wiles, 2016). Extensive member checking occurred through transcript review, feedback on findings, and follow-up survey.

Data were analyzed using Saldaña's (2021) eclectic coding across four cycles. Initial coding included versus, in vivo, and emotion coding, later expanded to values coding to better capture affective energies. Subsequent cycles involved code mapping and code landscaping, resulting in major categories represented through X vs. Y contrasts. Employing evocative qualitative writing (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000), narrative vignettes were constructed as assemblages of collective teacher voice.

Results and Discussion

This paper focuses on the finding "Us vs. Them", illustrated through the following vignette excerpt:

"I love politics" and "I hate them at the same time."

"Problems in education these days are outside of [the union's] control"

with

"a huge group being ignored" in favour of "a vocal minority."

When **"amoral factors inform educational policy"**,

teachers wonder

"How can I communicate better?"

because

"If you help teachers", "students are the ones that are going to thrive."

Teachers cannot

"meet kids' needs" because "there just isn't the funding."

"Every year, it's gotten a little worse in the classroom in Saskatchewan."

The study assemblage comprised bodies (e.g., teachers, public, government officials, family members); actions (e.g., learning, union work, social media posts); technology (e.g., social media, e-mail, Zoom); policy (e.g., The Education Act, administrative procedures); identities (e.g., teacher, activist, union representative, family member); ideologies (e.g., neoliberalism, conservatism, social-justice minded); and emotions (e.g., satisfaction, fear, empowerment, anger, joy). Assemblages' instability affords activists the ability to disrupt and re-articulate societal structures rather than sustaining seemingly fixed structures. For teacher participants, their involvement in assemblages was not merely a virtual or physical arrangement. Teachers forged meaningful friendships and shared anger, frustration, joy, and satisfaction. They connected around shared perceptions of the union as formal, polite, structured, and cautious and grassroots activism as inspiring, hopeful, demanding, and engaging. Shared relationality contributed to more uniform social norms and increasingly stable assemblages where teachers' advocacy skills could develop and expand.

Through poststructural narrative vignettes, this study shows how teacher activists strategically seek individual and collective means to advocate for teachers, students, and equitable public education. Assemblage theory offers a hopeful perspective. Teachers can move beyond present relations such as a union committee, social media activism, or community involvement. Assemblages demonstrate that actions as bodies and non-human elements continuously interact, suggesting that teachers and the public can fight back against inequities and create more socially just education systems.

Works Cited

- Allen, R., & Wiles, J. (2016). A rose by any other name: Participants choosing research pseudonyms. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 13(2), 149-165.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1133746>
- Apple, M. (2012). *Can education change society?*. Routledge.
- Author. (2025).
- Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. (2017). *Rethinking case study research*. Routledge.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Bloomsbury.

- Harding, J., Pauszek, J., Pollard, N., & Parks, N. (2018). Alliances, assemblages, and affects: Three moments of building collective working-class literacies. *College Composition and Communication*, 70(1), 6-29.
- Kramer, B. (2024). *Activists, advocates, and agitators: 21st-century justice-oriented teachers*. Myers Education Press.
- Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. (2000). A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923–948). Sage.
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). Sage.