Is it Possible to be an Activist Educator?

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What happens when professional educators1 are involved in political activism for social justice causes? Given the expectations of the education profession and the challenge of participation in social activism, how do educator activists manage the often competing demands? How do they protect their career status when they are involved in political activism that challenges the status quo? What dilemmas and choices do they face, what are their fears, and how do they manage the challenges? This book explores these questions using research on 52 educators who have espoused social justice causes, heroically, subtly, sometimes painfully, but more often with pride.

The Context: Educators’ Professional Cultures

Education is often imagined as an apolitical enterprise. Both education and educators are assumed to maintain a respectful distance from hot-button issues and significant political and social movements. Venturing too close, in fact, carries risks. The professional risks associated with standing too firmly at any space along the political continuum can lead educators to avoid political activism. Teachers and administrators create boundaries, separating their private lives and their beliefs about social and political events from their educator work lives. Are educators in effect neutered politically? Must they check their interests at the schoolhouse door? Must they become less-than-full citizens to be educators? What do they do with their strongly held beliefs about political and social issues?

The case studies presented in this book explore these questions head on. This book is based on interviews with 52 teachers and administrators identified because of their reputations for taking some action, some stand, to address social justice issues. Such activism is often understood as an arena for making the personal political (Epstein, 1990), and as requiring advocates who are willing to take a vocal stand in support of projects often seen as controversial. Our research
focused on several strands of social justice activism—for African Americans, the rights of gays and lesbians, women's reproductive freedom, advancing girls’ and women's opportunities, and for protections against sexual harassment. Certainly these are progressive liberal causes, and they are only a few among the range of progressive issues. Certainly other educators’ passions, beliefs, and activism can entail conservative agendas, but these are not our focus. As explored below, our understanding of social justice led us to study educators active in the service of those long-marginalized or silenced: people of color, girls and women, gays and lesbians. Our book opens the questions and agendas on educators’ activism, and with these five causes and 52 cases we have uncovered fascinating patterns and a wide range of educators’ dilemmas, choices, and coping strategies as they asserted their beliefs and kept their jobs.

This chapter begins by situating educators’ activism in the context of their professional and socio-cultural socialization, and describes the theories we found important for framing our study of educators’ choices and actions. It then introduces the subsequent chapters of the book that tell stories of educators’ efforts to reconcile their interests in social justice issues with their work as school teachers and administrators.

Educators’ Professional Socialization and the Limits on Activism

Teachers and administrators are socialized to steer clear of overtly political positions that might interfere with their roles as school and community leaders. Those who seek leadership positions in education learn that taking a clear values stance or political action may mean losing sponsorship and career opportunities, because certain actions may alienate educators from students or their parents (Marshall, 1993b; Marshall & Mitchell, 1991; Ortiz, 1982). Anderson (2001) notes that “administration programmes increasingly are in the business of providing future administrators with ‘safe’ discourses that will not offend pluralist interest groups” (p. 211). The appearance of neutrality, so the argument goes, increases the likelihood of one’s acceptance among various constituencies. Teachers are also socialized to neutrality and passivity vis-à-vis political issues.

Leaping back in time, we see the historical origins of these safe positions: The overarching goals for schools in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were to control religious and moral development, and these are the roots of schooling in the United States. Town ministers expected teachers to adhere to the same religious and moral codes as the clergy; this applied not only to their professional conduct, but contractual expectations guided their personal lives as well. One contract stated that female teachers were “[not to] dress in bright colors, not to dye her hair, to wear at least two petticoats, and not to wear dresses more than two inches above the ankles” (Harbeck, 1997, p. 107). Female teachers had to promise to “take vital interest in all phases of Sunday school work, donating of my time, service, and money without stint for the uplift and benefit of the community.”
They complied with contracts prohibiting “immodest dressing,” they pledged, “I promise not to fall in love, to become engaged or secretly married,” and “I promise to sleep at least eight hours a night, to eat carefully, and take every precaution to keep in the best of health and spirits, in order that I may be better able to render efficient service to my pupils.” In addition, they pledged to remain circumspect: “I promise to remember that I owe a duty to the townspeople who are paying my wages, that I owe respect to the school board and the superintendent that hired me, and that I shall consider myself at all times the willing servant of the school board and the townspeople” (pp. 107, 108). With teachers “boarding around” (p. 105) in various homes, townspeople had more opportunities to scrutinize the personality, beliefs, and behaviors of their teachers.

Limitations have persisted to more modern times. Prior to 1960, the courts considered teaching to be a privilege subject to whatever conditions the government wished to impose (Harbeck, 1997). And today, conservative controls on educators are part of growing public sentiments against progressive activism, diversity, and curriculum innovation all of which are presumed to interfere in public schooling. Jerry Falwell (1979), representing the religious right in contemporary politics, was quoted as saying, “I hope to see the day when, as in the early days of our country, we won’t have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over and Christians will be running them. What a happy day that will be” (pp. 52–53). Thus, more progressive politics may be suspect or unsafe in schools, as the movement back to the days of educators reinforcing and modeling a particular morality may be on the horizon. The “Abstinence Only” movement in education is but one example of government efforts to control curriculum and support a conservative political agenda. Managerial controls have tightened monitoring and accountability in educators’ work lives in the early 21st century.

Despite the hopes of more conservative critics, however, contractual requirements for teachers are not quite as extreme as they were in the past. Teacher unions that emerged in the mid-20th century from workers’ rights and also the women’s rights movements have upended the most egregious limitations on teachers’ personal freedoms.

A review of the position statements of educators’ professional associations provides a telling context for educators’ activist work. Not surprisingly, the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have the strongest statements in regards to the issues detailed in this text. For example, a review of AFT Resolutions reveals well-developed position statements addressing all of the progressive issues in this text, including a 2002 resolution of support for the Ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment; a 2004 Brown v. Board of Education 50th Anniversary resolution to “help our nation realize the promise of Brown”; a 2006 resolution of Support for Reproductive Rights “to preserve reproductive rights, … call for medically accurate sex education programs in public schools,” and the approval of over-the-counter
emergency contraception along with a requirement that pharmacists fill birth control prescriptions; and a 2004 resolution in opposition to the Federal Marriage Amendment. The NEA also has an extensive list of resolutions that support equity for students and educators in regards to issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation. The NEA also takes positions against sexual harassment and in favor of comprehensive sex education.

On the other hand, teachers’ and administrators’ professional associations take more distanced and much safer positions in regards to progressive issues. Websites of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), the Middle Schools Association, and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) were reviewed to determine the scope and strength of the organizations’ position statements. Position statements and platforms for AASA, NASSP, NAESP, and ASCD were easily found, but in all cases their content focused on broad educational aspirations and leadership concerns, such as achievement, leadership, security, teacher quality, accountability, and “recognizing and valuing diversity.” Although not embedded in organizational principles, most websites also posted articles that provided members with content about issues including harassment and tolerance for gay and lesbian students.

School boards and townspeople are no longer able to contractually proscribe the private behaviors of educators, but professional norms are still at work. Professional associations may espouse broad goals with slight nods to equity, but these goals are nonspecific and stay clear of controversial topics. So what are the hurdles and inhibitions felt by educators who would participate in activism for social justice?

Educators’ Avoidance of Political Activism

Wouldn’t the specter of injustice, inequities, and silencing of the oppressed lead educators into assertive fights to end the oppression? Wouldn’t educators want to join in, becoming vocal and active in social movements? Wouldn’t educators, whose passion and caring for those who are treated unfairly and losing out, feel activism to be an extension of identifying with and caring for them? If they do not, isn’t this puzzling? Maddening? Missed and wasted opportunity for progressive energies?

Educators do see needs: Schoolteachers, teacher’s aides, school administrators and counselors recognize situations where “something must be done.” To offer just one example, the need for gay and lesbian students to have advocates and activists is illustrated in “Choices, Not Closets: Heterosexism and Homophobia in Schools” (Friend, 1993). In this text, Friend provides a few student voices and reveals their need. For example, Brenda age 18, says,

There are kids in high school who are scared and don’t know where to
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There needs to be something in the educational system so they have a place to go. Also, the teachers need to mention positive information in sexuality education classes…. it is important to include lesbian and gay teens, we’re always left out…we are there. Also, when you try to educate teachers, let them know to include us! (p. 233)

Similarly, in the conservative domain of schooling, social justice activism is needed for women leaders, for prevention of sexual harassment, for Black children, for poor families, for the rights of girls and women, for language and religious minorities, for disabled students, and so on.

In fact, some educators are activists. But they are working in a context characterized by managerial and political controls and a conservative professional culture. Clearly there are tipping points that lead to an educator being over-identified with a particular movement, losing professional status in the face of increasing activist status. What, then, are the conditions that inhibit educators’ activism for progressive movements and social justice in schooling?

Informal Professional Rules  As educators are socialized, both in universities and on the job, they come to understand often unstated and context-driven constraints. According to Fullan (1993) the conservative nature of education has various manifestations:

The way that teachers are trained, the way that schools are organized, the way that the educational hierarchy operates, and the way that education is treated by political decision-makers results in a system that is more likely to retain the status quo than to change. (p. 3, emphasis in original)

In Women Teaching for Change, Weiler (1988) elaborated the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of schools and school decision making, describing the negative consequences of maintaining the status quo:

Their hierarchical structure, the content of the formal curriculum, the nature of the hidden curriculum of rules and social relationships all tend to reproduce the status quo. Those who are in control, who dominate and benefit from this structure, attempt in both conscious and unconscious ways to shape the schools so as to maintain their own privilege. In this way, school organization and practices tend to reproduce classism, racism, and sexism…. (pp. 150–151)

Teachers’ activism and challenging creates trouble. Paul and Smith (2000) stated, “Teachers who do not toe the line, who question policy, and creatively maladjust to school cultures that do not value all children, are often dubbed as ‘troublemakers’” (p.137).

Marshall and Mitchell (1991) studied the careers of school administrators and described “school-site administrators’ understandings about the ways to
gain and maintain power, control, and predictability in their environments” (p. 396). They delineated the unstated rules of the profession referred to as the “assumptive worlds.” These assumptive rules serve to govern behavior within the context of work:

1. Limit risk taking to small and finite projects.
2. Make displays of commitment to the profession and sponsors.
3. Do not display divergent or challenging values.
4. Remake policy quietly as a street-level bureaucrat.
5. Keep disputes private.
6. Avoid moral dilemmas.
7. Avoid getting a troublemaker label.
8. Cover and guard all areas in your job description.
9. Build trust among the administrative team. (p. 15)

Assumptive worlds’ rules are insider information about “exhibiting loyalty, avoidance of trouble, keeping conflicts private, and avoiding unvalued work,… behaviors that will help them feel more comfortable in administration” (p. 412). For administrator aspirants to gain entry into the profession, they must learn political strategies and get insider information. Coupled with legal constraints, the professional culture of assumptive worlds serves as a driver and a restrainer. These understandings help facilitate collegiality among administrators while simultaneously serving to limit their drive to challenge the status quo.

The assumptive worlds’ rules especially come into play when educators seek to engage in social change. They learn, for example, to quietly fix a problem when “going though channels” of authority would just cause more problems, and to “fudge” on strict compliance with laws that get in the way of dealing with an issue in front of them, functioning as street level bureaucrats (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977).

Hartzell, Williams, and Nelson (1995) interviewed 90 first year assistant principals to frame their work lives in the context of school administration and found that “the attitudes they develop and the repertoire of responses they build have substantial influence on later behavior patterns and leadership capabilities” (p. 23). They further suggested, “The first-year socialization will likely influence whether they become keepers of the status quo, rebels against the system, or real leaders with a sense of role innovation” (p. 24). A study of female principals regarding the degree to which women in principalships were equity advocates—based on research about the inequitable treatment most women received in administration positions—left the researchers “disappointed, frustrated, alarmed, and angry” (Schmuck & Schubert, 1995). They found that the female principals studied showed little support or action to encourage equitable practices in schools. It appeared that, even with evidence of a need for change, these educators were still limited in what they would do.
Educators must tread carefully as they engage in behavior that illuminates problems of the profession. Marshall and Kasten (1994) warned, “Those who respond by bringing attention to the problems are viewed as disloyal, trouble-makers, or poor team players” (pp. 14–15). Activist work that is noncompliant with the governance of the assumptive worlds could impact career patterns, job promotion, and possibly lead to ostracism from colleagues and even the profession.

Evasion and the Social Construction of Non-Events Facing dilemmas, but finding few quick solutions and receiving almost no training or political support, educators concentrate their energies on the more manageable daily work. Taking attendance and creating workable lesson plans are manageable; reporting attendance and creating School Improvement Plans are within the administrator’s control. Educators learn to comply with the social agreements which indicate that their jobs do not include tackling sensitive issues stemming from historical and institutional racism, sexism, and sexual hierarchies and dominance. Demanding that policies against bullying and sexual harassment be enforced, questioning why so few girls take advanced math, why so few Black children are in gifted programs, and why so few women can find enough support to advance to the superintendency are provocative questions over which educators feel little control. They learn to accept that professionals like themselves keep quiet, and learn to classify the array of emotions, observations, and insights that might be seen as disruptive to the status quo as private and personal. Further, they learn that there are limits on the kinds of personal lifestyles, hobbies, and social causes that they as professionals can publicly embrace, much less pursue.

Events and circumstances that otherwise compromise a child’s education are transformed into nonevents. Policies and programs are devised in ways that treat educators as banks in which to deposit useful knowledge that will enable them to signify that the problem has been treated. In their working lives, educators are not exposed to deeply upsetting theories or insights that would take time and distract from daily work; succumbing to calls to redress these ills is seen as distracting, pulling educators from their required tasks. Reforms, professional literatures, training, and staff development offer packages and rhetoric, labeled as diversity training, color blindness, or equal opportunity. These serve to drive issues underground, silencing those who sense that the needs are deeper, and are tightly connected to societal ills that have included discrimination and unequal opportunity in housing and employment, domestic violence, homelessness, intergenerational poverty, hate speech, hate crimes, and physical assault, and women and girls faced with unplanned pregnancies.

In the context of this work, evasion is a consequence of rhetorical strategies designed to convince particular publics (including educators, perhaps especially educators) that policies are in place while at the same time discouraging activism to address ongoing inequities.
Educators’ Sociocultural and Regional Socialization and the Limits on Activism

Conditions for educators’ political and social activism vary because educators are affected by regional, political, and sociocultural contexts. Over 70% of our participants’ career experiences were primarily in Southern states, so conservative professional expectations were often exacerbated by expectations of the conservative South (Billington, 1969; Keith, 2002), often as part of their own background and as a constraining force in their on-the-job-socialization. For example, in the South, religion can provide motivation both for and against social change (Nesbitt, 2001; Stott, 1999). The story of the civil rights movement in the South includes the roles of the Christian faithful in stimulating social action through “moral energy and social discipline” (Marsh, 2005, p. 7).

Yet the South is more often associated with conservative traditions. McFadden and Smith (2004) argued that Southerners see themselves as more traditional and conventional, more religious and mannerly. Southern traditions include not challenging authority, and not regulating those with power—in government, in corporations, or class hierarchies. At the same time, traditions supported formulation and enforcement of antiliquor, anti-ERA, antisex education, and antipornography policies (Reed, 1993, p. 22). Southern states were slow to enact women’s suffrage and most never ratified the ERA. Guiding beliefs included assumptions that labor unions, civil rights, gay rights, and feminisms were disruptive.

Progressive incursions on gender and sexuality met resistance in the South. The traditional stereotype of the middle-class Southern White woman is that she is raised to project a genteel and fragile façade, trained to flatter her male protectors, and is educated for romance and marriage (Reed, 1993, p. 48); family and neighbors enforced rules of decorum—sit with legs together, no white after Labor Day, appear scatterbrained, but also be the caring saint (p. 49). Although categories of “Southern lady” and “belle” weakened in the late 20th century as women worked for prosperity and opportunity, traditional gender roles prevailed nonetheless. Wolfe (1995) argued that Southern women never renounced their femininity, so lesbians and feminists are often seen as antiservice, unladylike, and antimakeup and fashion. De Hart (2006) argued that feminism did come to the South, just later and to a narrower demographic than elsewhere (liberal, middle class, educated, less religious) (McFadden & Smith, 2004). In keeping with the feminist movement’s initial whitewashing of issues, however, Black women were conflicted with the arrival of the rights’ movements, often pressured to choose between being an activist for Black causes or feminist causes. In the 2002 report of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, Southern women were least likely to participate in political life, in the bottom third of the nation (except for North Carolina for reproductive rights) (McFadden & Smith, 2004).

Traditions of Southern Appalachia included glass ceilings for females and the segregation of African Americans; “national norms about race and gender… [were] not successfully challenged until recently” (McFadden & Smith, 2004, p.
75). White “worthwhile,” local men became school superintendents; they were Protestant, conservative, likely to reflect racial biases grounded in segregation, skillful at getting along with other men, and in rural and Appalachian areas, solicitous of mountain dignity. Southern and Rocky Mountain states have the lowest percentages of women superintendents (Glass et al., 2000, p. 82, cited in McFadden & Smith, 2004, p. 21). “Regional attitudes about the proper place of Southern ladies and racial minorities had long been and linger as shapers of access and performance…yet regions are complex, varied, in flux, and populated by different people with different aspirations” (McFadden & Smith, 2004, pp. 22–23).

Still, “the new Southerner” may move from a more local orientation to a more cosmopolitan orientation (Reed, 1993, p. 53). According to Luebke (1990), “modernizers” in the South put faith in public education and accommodate African Americans; some acknowledge affirmative action, the ERA, and women’s needs when pushed, but are still hostile to labor unions and other upsets of the economic order (pp. 25–27; see also Fleer, 1994). Modernizing and urbanizing influences in the late 20th century brought confounding influences, including outsiders with multinational firms that offer same-sex partner benefits in the same region where county commissioners voted down arts funding which was viewed as excessively homosexual. At the same time, the Southern Education Foundation (2007) found “For the first time in more than 40 years, the South is the only region in the nation where low income children constitute a majority of public school students—54 percent” (p. 2).

Thus, Southern traditions, especially those concerning women’s roles and sexuality, affect many teachers and influence their sense of propriety. Also affected are beliefs about the appropriateness of activism for progressive causes, as will be seen in chapters 3 through 6.

Avoidance of Activism: A Summary Educators, thus, sense the informal rules, the hierarchies and patriarchies embedded in education professions, the tacit agreements about avoiding uncomfortable issues, and the constraints presented by cultural traditions that define proper behavior and guard against upsetting influences introduced by “outsiders.” What are the supports, then, for educators who wish to change the world through their activism?

Breaking Past the Limits

Teaching is fundamentally a political activity in which every teacher plays a part by design or by default. (Cochran-Smith, 1991)

Ginsburg, Kamat, Raghu, and Weaver (1995) remind us:

Educators are political actors regardless of whether they are active or passive; autonomous or heteronomous vis-à-vis other groups; conservative
or change-oriented; seeking individual, occupational group, or larger collectivities’ goals; and/or serving dominant group, subordinate group, or human interests. (p. 34)

In other words, there is no escaping the political impact and import of education and thus, educators’ actions.

In spite of the presumed neutrality and apolitical nature of education, our research assumes that we are all political actors, agreeing with Ginsburg (1995) and others that political work is not distinct from the professional and intellectual work we do as educators, nor is it only public activity divorced from personal and private interests (Grumet, 1988). As Ginsburg (1995) argued,

Educators do not operate in a political vacuum and educators are not neutral. What educators do occurs in a context of power relations and distribution of symbolic and material resources, and what action (or inaction) educators engage in has political implications for themselves and others. (pp. 7–8)

When educators break past their political neutrality, what does it look like?

**Macropolitics**

One potential form of educator activism for social justice is in formal groups. For example, the National Coalition of Education Activists is a network of parents, teachers, and other school staff, community activists, and teacher educators, who work for equitable and excellent schools and hold a yearly conference to share ideas and strategies. The Education for Liberation Network is a collaborative of educators and community activists encouraging education that encompasses critical thinking, social involvement, positive racial identity, and a sense of personal efficacy. Rethinking Schools, similarly, develops and shares social justice curriculum through national networking and publications. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind legislation, educators and community groups have formed coalitions to point out ways this national legislation can, in fact, have harmful effects on minority and poor children and undermine educators’ best efforts with the children often left behind.

In spite of the advances they have achieved, teacher unions are not necessarily hotbeds of social justice activism. Teachers associations were formed with combined goals: an array of unionlike goals to improve educators’ working conditions, and the goal of amassing enough power to influence education policy in the directions matching teachers’ values and professional knowledge (Selden, 1985; Urban, 1982, 2000; West, 1980). When enough interest in social, political, or workers’ rights emerges from association members, task forces are formed in state and national levels. Thus, women’s leadership and health, retirement, the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer educators (GLBTQ), Af-
American educators, diversity, and the like, became task forces (Marshall, 2002). This tradition of grassroots constituency/majority rule subdues the more radical demands of subgroups. When groups of educators want the teacher unions to promote major social or political change, representatives from a large number of states must agree. For example, it was not possible to get strong support in the 1990s for taking a strong stand which asserted that birth control and abortion were part and parcel of teachers’ health care rights.

**Micropolitics**

At a more micropolitical level, educators’ activism may consist of getting personally involved with an issue or movement; promoting social justice through personal intervention, program creation, or by extending the curriculum; or simply taking up cases to get just and equitable treatment for individual students. Weiler (1988) shares examples of women educators who work in quiet ways, and this practice is seen in chapters 2 and 3 of this text, as African American and women educators find ways to use their jobs as platforms for pursuing social change. Activism, then, makes the personal political (Epstein, 1990). It is subtle, almost sneaky activism, as Hood-Williams found, what one participant described as acting “on the down-low” (Hood, 2005, p. 90) to try to stay out of trouble. It sometimes requires that advocates are willing to take a vocal stand in support of projects often seen as controversial in the conservative corridors of education. Even when learning the assumptive worlds’ rules (e.g., limit risk taking, make change quietly as street level bureaucrats), educators find ways to use and expand their jobs that promote social justice.

**Educator Activists**

Although theirs may be limited risk taking and only subtle displays of divergent values, educators do identify with social movements. Given their professional socialization, which shapes apolitical neutrality and thus places limitations on their sense of being civically engaged, educators frequently are underestimated or marginalized as agents of change in the academic literature, often presented as pawns of the dominant culture and reproducers of the status quo. Connell (1995) critiqued the notion of teachers as pawns in the social reproduction game or as mere producers of future members of the workforce, suggesting instead that teachers are formers and transformers of capacities for practice. Ginsburg et al. (1995) argued that decision making regarding curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and research, as well as collegial and familial relations, are imbued with politics. Educators’ actions, therefore, never fall outside politics.

There is a rich history of individual educator activists, those who chose to make the personal political (Casey, 1993; Crocco, Munro, & Weiler, 1999; Dove, 1995; Epstein, 1990; Freire, 1990; hooks, 1994; Urban, 1989). As described in the literatures on the lives of educator activists, these individuals are often motivated
by resistance to status quo or a desire to change status quo. Clifford (1987) explained the traditions of women teacher activists that emerged between 1850 and 1930, naming the concurrent development of women’s increasing independence and financial security after becoming teachers, alongside their development of speaking, organizational, and networking skills as critical events that facilitated their increasing activism. Munro (1995) detailed the lives five education activists in Chicago at the turn of the 20th century who recognized that activism for women’s emancipation was important not only for individual women, but for teachers and as part of “a larger vision of social change” (p. 274). These women drew on and enhanced traditions of women as educator activists.

In addition, there is generally a clear moral dimension to activism; the focus is on improving education for all students through changes in practices, policies, or curriculum. More recently, teacher personal narratives reveal, for example, layers of thinking and educators’ working through “White America’s repression of the voices of people of color” (Hankins, 2003, p. 23) and teachers’ fine-tuned awareness of the “subtextual dynamics of classroom life” (Gallas, 1998, p. 22) that influence children’s identities. Other examples of spaces for teachers to take exception to the conservative nature of education include organizations such as Rethinking Schools and Teach for America. However, as much as these organizations create locations for teachers to draw on curricula that challenge the Eurocentric bias of mainstream curriculum as with Rethinking Schools, or spaces to tap into pressing educational needs for more teachers, it is worth noting that these two organizations exist outside organized structures of education. Teachers that go to either must move beyond the normative practices of educational practice and preparation.

In this text, there are stories of educators acting at the micropolitical level, from Black women’s community work as described in chapter 2, “The Fight of the Their Lives: African American Activist Educators,” to the underground feminist educators at work as described in chapter 3. These narratives on teachers embracing social justice break the stereotype of the sociopolitically neutral teach-to-the-test employee in public schools (see especially Allen, 1999; Michie, 2005; Perry, 2000).

The Activism Choice

The decision to be involved in a social movement is a choice that can have varied and unanticipated effects on the lives of the participants. Such outcomes may be positive or benign, but also have the potential to result in negative or extreme consequences, depending upon the political and social significance of a movement. Such effects can occur within the private sphere of an individual’s existence; however, particular causes or activities could also affect the work life of such an activist. The educator’s identities and values, along with their socialization as professionals affect (and are affected by) their choosing to intervene micropolitically, and choosing to join a movement.
The educators whose work is presented in this book delve into their own lives, using their own words, and this book is thus an exploration and interpretation of their lived experiences. It shows the interweaving of both personal and professional resources and factors that frame how educators identify with social justice issues and how that identity drives their activism choices, their interventions, and the impact of their activism on the educators involved.

**Theory and Methodology for Studying Activists for Social Justice**

This book presents research that identifies struggles faced by educators affiliated with particular movements. The research progressed framed by common overarching theories, with the addition for each project of specific theories and literatures pertaining to each particular movement, and an elaborate and labor-intensive research design. The individual investigations looked at the implications of educational and extra-educational activism on the careers of educators and thus challenged the idea that educators avoid political activism in spite of the risks involved in taking public stands about social issues.

As citizens, it is reasonable that educators have personal investments in many social issues of our time. Yet as will be elaborated in chapters 2 through 6, the educators we spoke with did not necessarily endow their actions with the politics of activism and social movements. This is due, perhaps, to their profession's avoidance of political issues (Anderson, 1990). It is also important to repeat that while there are activists for various issues along the political spectrum, and while it seems to many of us that those on one end of the spectrum have dominated the rhetorical ground of late, we chose to focus on educators active for progressive politics as part of our study. Casey’s (1993) findings about the lives of educator activists were significant to our planning:

> As the progressive teacher increases her participation and collaboration in the development of the political project, her pedagogic intentions become increasingly incongruent with the prevailing objectives of the educational institution, and she must continually (re)position herself inside (or outside) of the established (public or parochial school system. (p. x)

Our study, then, sought to reveal the extent to which educators experienced their activism as congruent or competing with their professional lives as educators. Must activists with progressive agendas experience discontinuity with their roles as educators?

The Educator Activist Research Project sought to answer that question. In a seven-year collaborative effort, six scholars examined the role dilemmas educators faced as they engaged in educational, social, or political activist projects. The original conceptualization of the project sought to capture the lived experiences of activist educators, which required a qualitative approach. Following the recommendations of Miles and Huberman (1994) on group research, we
developed a common interview protocol and procedures that guided our individual research. Common interview protocols were based on extensive research in the literatures of social movement theory, activism, and educator identity development, literatures that shaped our original thinking in this research. The qualitative design of the protocol questions was chosen to solicit participants’ responses about definitions, background, experiences, meanings, and dilemmas related to activism in the context of their professional and personal lives. To capture a breadth of experiences, currently or formerly employed teachers and educational administrators in K-12 public education also involved in activist work were interviewed to look for patterns across a variety of activist projects. Each researcher conducted approximately 10 interviews with educators. Participants were chosen through a combination of snowball, convenience, and opportunistic sampling measures in order to locate cases that could provide meaningful data. Respondents were also sought from varied regions of the United States to create demographic diversity among responses. Interview transcripts and field notes were used to name and describe the themes that emerged within each researcher’s area of inquiry. Each researcher used NVivo software to analyze data with group themes and to generate themes unique to each area of activism.

This research needed the freedom to evoke reflections, perspectives, and knowledge driving educators; choices to engage in activism, and the barriers, constraints, and dilemmas they face in their activist work. Interviews with teachers and educational administrators involved in activist projects that include sexual harassment in schools; feminist educators in leadership positions; race-oriented issues; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered rights; and reproductive rights led researchers in this project to a better understanding of the experiences of educator activists as well as the identification of patterns across the variety of activist projects. Findings show that different reasons for and different ways of enacting change emerged among participants. Participants’ activism was at times hidden, at times overt; reasons for acting included role expectations, a spiritual calling, personal experiences, and deeply embedded identity issues. While we began by treating these areas of activism as discrete, dividing feminists in educational administration from educators involved in race-related activism, our cross-case analysis identified the shared motivations and challenges as educators engage in activist work.

Using Theory to Frame the Explorations of Educator Activists’ Choices

It helps to have a mental picture to conceptualize a question, and to design a way to explore for answers. Theories provide such pictures. The early meetings of our Educator Activist research group focused on identifying the primary research literatures we believed important to our study of educator activists. We chose social movement theory, identity theory (particularly educator identity), and existing
literatures on educator activists as points of departure for our collective research. As each researcher began her individual work, it was necessary to study additional literatures customized to the investigation of activists in particular areas (e.g., the civil rights movement, the women's movement; the emergence of sexual harassment legislation, LGBT rights movement, and prochoice activism). This section provides a brief overview of our collective research in the areas of social movements, identity, and educator activism. During the course of our research, it became clear that introducing additional literatures would help us more fully understand and contextualize the work of these educator activists, so this section also includes literatures examining how critical race theory, feminist theories, and literatures on the special contexts of Southern culture helped us explore and explain the patterns emerging from the research. Several of the authors in this text (see chapters 2 through 6) developed a conceptual model that enabled the researcher to apply theories to her particular focus in the research.

**Social Movement Theory** Social movements are large scale events or organizations that attempt to effect change or resist changes that affect large numbers of people (Oberschall, 1993). Social movements (e.g. proenvironment, peace, civil rights, etc.) have an identity, adversaries, and a vision or goal. The movement's identity is its goals, values, actions, leaders, slogans. Collective actions of a social movement result from collective identity, the development of which is an “ongoing process in all social movements struggling to overturn existing systems of domination (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 510). A movement's vision or goal is the “kind of social order or organization it hopes to achieve through collective action” (Castells, 1997). Movements are also characterized by identification of a clear opponent or opponents and are motivated by social breakdown or social solidarity (e.g., “big oil”; the Pentagon; patriarchy). In fact, Buechler (2000) argued that these collective actions are a reaction to societal stress or strain by individuals “who are experiencing various forms of discontent or anxiety” (p. 20). The advent of new social movement theory in the 1960s suggested that new social movements are increasingly noninstitutional (Darnovsky, Epstein, & Flacks, 1995; Epstein, 1990).

Social movements may be socially conservative or revolutionary or both. According to Castells (1997), there are no good or bad social movements: “They are all symptoms of our societies, and all impact social structures with variable intensities and outcomes” (p. 71). Larger numbers of social movements began to appear in the 18th century and are traditionally organized around three different features. One feature is formal hierarchical organization whereby goals are identified and attempts are made to accomplish these goals. Another feature of a social movement is its organization at the “point of contact with opponents” (Tarrow, 1998). Variations on this structure range from temporary gatherings of challengers, to informal social networks, to formal branches, and clubs and can be controlled by formal organizations, or by no specific person. Connective
structures are the final feature of social movements. These structures connect leaders and followers and other aspects of the movement allowing the movement to continue despite the absence of formal organization. Keeping in mind these features, we developed a working definition of social movements as collective political action aimed at challenging and changing social routines or institutions.

It is not the isolated, alienated individual who joins a social movement; it is the socially connected individual who exchanges ideas with other individuals to produce cognitive frameworks that question existing dominant frames. These submerged networks, according to Melucci (1989), are not always recognized by social scientists as playing a crucial role in movement recruitment, development, and maintenance. An important feature, however, is that submerged networks or social-movement communities support members and act as abeyance structures during periods of time when the political climate is not receptive to the movement’s agenda (Buechler, 1990; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). As our data will show, it is important to consider the abeyance functions of movements in the lives of the educators described in this work.

Participation in a social movement can occur along a spectrum of activity—from active and public activity (perhaps a demonstration or public awareness campaign) to more passive, symbolic displays of support. The level of participation a social movement receives varies according to the individuals who offer support, and as noted above, support depends on individuals’ identification with the movement. Oberschall (1993, pp. 22–23) offers a continuum of activist levels that is useful to consider. Participation in a social movement is typically not an all-consuming activity for individuals, although at the core of any movement are leaders and activists who work more or less full time for the movement (core activists). These leaders are the public face of the movement that the media and others associate with the movement’s activity, at times spokespeople, at times subjects of criticism. Supporting the leaders are part-time participants, or transitory teams. These individuals attend rallies, help with mailings, and gather names on petitions, supporting activities planned by the core activists. Costs in terms of time and money are minimal at this level, though feelings of solidarity are high. Sponsors are another level of participant, individuals who make small financial contributions, sign petitions, and generally nurture a positive climate for the movement’s goals among friends, neighbors, and coworkers. This “consciousness-constituency” is attracted to the movement because it appeals to their sense of justice or fairness. Little is asked of them; their reward is the feeling of doing the right thing. Finally, at the edge of the movement are sympathizers, sympathetic but passive bystanders. Rational-choice theories of social movement participation (Friedman & McAdams, 1992), according to which individuals make deliberate rational decisions to join a movement “only when they expect the private benefits to exceed the costs” (p. 159), also note free riders as those who reap the benefits of a movement without participating or bearing any of the costs. Oberschall (1993), however, argued that this designation underestimates individuals’ needs for social and psychological affiliation with a social movement.
Social movement literatures, especially those that consider participants’ identity issues, emphasize that an individual’s identities significantly influence that person’s activist choices. In this research, social movement theory points our attention to the social networks an educator claims or mentions; her sense of shared purpose or solidarity with a movement; forms and levels of involvement; experiences of collective action; and belief in clear or powerful opponents. Participation in a social movement occurs along a spectrum of activity—from active and public activity (perhaps a demonstration or public awareness campaign) to more passive, symbolic displays of support. Educator activism can fall anywhere along this continuum.

Identity Theory  Gilroy (1993) stated, “We live in a world where identity matters. It matters both as a concept, theoretically, and as a contested fact of contemporary political life” (p. 301). Identity theory was an initial focus of our collective research because it required us to consider how an individual’s attitudes, commitments, beliefs, and behaviors influenced her or his activist decisions. Though identity theories have emerged from diverse disciplines (including the social sciences and political sciences), ours was a deliberately sociocultural focus on identity—or rather identities—recognizing that “persons [take] form in the flow of historically, socially, culturally, and materially shaped lives” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p.5). Identities are thus fluid and adaptable, not fixed and unchanging (Calhoun, 1994).

When studying educator activists, issues of identity impact the decision to participate in activism, the kind of activism (individual or collective) one might choose to get involved with, the level and extent of participation, and the selection of social networks within a movement. As a group, we chose a working definition of identity that shaped our research, framing it as a person’s self-concept at a particular time, within a given context, and subject to ongoing construction and modification through various processes and experiences. Potential themes related to identity significant for our study included understanding a person’s educational and family background as well as other named social networks (hooks, 1994); evidence of critical events or “a-ha” moments that provoked decisions to participate in activism; professional and personal identity correspondence or competition related to activism (Stryker, 2000); identity politics related to issues including race, class, gender, or sexual orientation (Darnovksy et al., 1995); and perceptions of personal risk associated with participation in activist networks.

Our previous discussions of the impact of Southern culture and the conservative nature of educators’ professional cultures demonstrate how salient identity theories are for understanding educators’ choices, particularly the majority of activists in this study who were raised or work in the South. Some identities are of our choosing (e.g., educator, outdoor enthusiast), but others influence our lives and choices in ways we may not even recognize without the lens of theory. Many may fail to recognize the influence of Southern culture on their life choices,
for example, so embedded are they in the fishbowl that is the South. Theories of identity provide lenses for studying the beliefs and structures that belie and underlie “the way things are.” Thus theories of identity are explored with more depth in individual chapters of this book as they relate to choices made by educator activists. Chapter 4, “Approaching Activism in the Bible Belt,” for example, introduces the impact of being a victim of harassment as an impetus in activist decision making, and queer theories of identity development emerge in chapter 5, “Surprising Ways to Be an Activist.”

**Educator Activism**  Our collective research into activism serves as the basis of this chapter’s section on “breaking past the limits” (see above). As indicated, we initially focused on literatures that took educator activism as their focus, and developed a working definition of an activist as an individual who is known for taking stands and engaging in action aimed at producing social change, possibly in conflict with institutional opponents. In keeping with more recent developments in literature, we also focused on the language of social justice, framing it as activism aimed at increasing inclusivity, fairness, empowerment, and equity and fairness, especially for heretofore oppressed and silenced groups.

These were the literatures that shaped our initial research before interviews began. As the work progressed, as dissertations were written, and as this text came together, it became clear that additional literatures were necessary to fill out our images of educator activists and to more fully explore the interview data we gathered. As data were analyzed, social movement theory, though useful, did not emerge as the most salient when considering the lives of these educator activists. To explore their experiences, it was necessary for us to tease apart identity and critical theories to examine their significance for the stories we collected. Accordingly, we went back to the literature armed with the practices of the educator activists in this study in order to expand our framework. The next section explores critical race, queer, and feminist theories and their significance for this work.

**Empowering, Reframing and Disruptive Knowledges**

Decades of theory and research have provided perspectives that enable educators to view their work and themselves as citizens with special insights and missions for reframing the work of education. Many educators see incidents that beg for such reframing, but exposure to critical perspectives that would facilitate pursuit of action for social justice are increasingly limited in educators’ professional socialization. In this section, we introduce aspects of critical race, queer, and feminist theories that inform the research presented in this book.

It is important to note that the movements that frame the work of the educator activists in this text emerged from the civil rights movement, a critical social movement and political moment in U.S. history. Civil rights activists in the late
1950s and early 1960s fomented the energy that begat the women’s liberation movement, which in turn begat second wave feminism, the abortion rights movement, and activism against sexual harassment. The civil rights movement was also a model for the gay rights movement that followed the Stonewall Riots.

Table 1.1  Timeline of Key Civil Rights Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Brown v. Board of Education makes segregation in schools illegal</td>
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<td>1955</td>
<td>December 1: Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat in Montgomery, AL bus</td>
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<td>1957</td>
<td>Little Rock schools desegregated</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>National Defense of Education Act provided public and private aid to education</td>
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<td>1960</td>
<td>Women represent 4% of elementary school principals</td>
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<td>1st Sit-In, Greensboro, NC</td>
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<td>1963</td>
<td>President John F. Kennedy assassinated</td>
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<td></td>
<td>March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom; Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech</td>
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<td></td>
<td>President’s Commission on the Status of Women Report documenting gender discrimination</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Equal Pay Act abolishing wage differentials based on sex</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emergence of 2nd Wave Feminism</td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>Title VII of the Civil Rights Act establishes the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Freedom Summer attempts to register African Americans in Mississippi, a state noted for excluding Black voters</td>
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<td>1965</td>
<td>Voting Rights Act made literacy tests, as a requirement for voting, illegal</td>
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<td>1966</td>
<td>National Organization for Women (NOW) formed</td>
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<td>1967</td>
<td>Thurgood Marshall named 1st African-American Supreme Court Justice</td>
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<td>1968</td>
<td>Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated</td>
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<td>1969</td>
<td>Stonewall Riots launched the Gay Rights Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Women earn .59 to men’s $1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3.5% school superintendents are women</td>
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<td>1972</td>
<td>Title IX of the Education Amendments bars gender discrimination in school programs</td>
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<td>Ms. Magazine founded</td>
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<td>1973</td>
<td>Roe v. Wade legalizes abortion in the United States</td>
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<td>1975</td>
<td>US ends involvement in Vietnam War</td>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>Sandra Day O’Connor named first female Supreme Court Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Equal Rights Amendment defeated</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Defense of Marriage Act – federal law forbidding recognition of same-sex marriages</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Matthew Shepherd murdered</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Civil unions sanctioned in Vermont</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Same-sex marriage recognized in Massachusetts</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Supreme Court ruling outlaws a late-term abortion procedure</td>
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of 1969. The timeline above identifies critical social, political, and educational
dates in the history of the movements that frame this research.

As noted above, this text takes up progressive social causes, from race-related
activism to abortion rights. It is interesting to note that the precipitating events for
the activism described in this work occurred 30 to 50 years ago; as the timeline
demonstrates, these rights movements date to the 1950s in the United States. The
academic and theoretical literatures that followed the movements studied them
in relation to existing theories (e.g., Marxism), and also developed new theories
in response to the movements. It will be interesting to consider whether a sense
of public, political, theoretical, educational, or discursive energy is required to
support and extend the life of a social movement. For example, if there is no
longer a common sense of urgency or injustice in relation to a movement, to
what extent does the public recognize the issue as problematic? Consider, for
example, the suggestion of some postfeminist theories that gender discrimina-
tion is “solved” and is no longer at issue. It will also be interesting to note the
extent to which activists in this text identify with the actions that gave rise to
the movements of consequence in this text. Do ready points of entry for these
movements still exist?

The critical theories that follow in this section are also legacies of the energy
that drove civil rights activism in the United States. Critical theorists examine
the roots of oppressive and unequal practices to uncover the ways they have be-
come historically embedded in institutions, including schools, legal precedents,
political arenas, and community life. Critical perspectives help us see beyond
explanations such as “that’s just the way things are,” and “we don’t know what to
do about it.” Critical race, queer, and feminist theories start with this examination
but concentrate on the insights that come from focusing on race, gender, and
sexuality, and their intersections. Such theories could help educators move far
beyond “that’s the way things are” explanations for much of what they observe
and feel in schools and society. An additional strength of this line of research is
the recovery or reframing of theories and theorists long marginalized, perspec-
tives essential for more complex understandings in contemporary times.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) centers race as the domain of analysis, directing at-
tention to the ways in which White power and privilege are protected and reified.
CRT critiques “traditional claims of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and
meritocracy as camouflage for the self-interest of dominant groups in American
society” (Solórzano, 1998 p. 6). Many societal institutions and interactions silence
or minimize realities of racism and its effects. Critical race theory, emerging in
the 1970s from legal theory, initially examined how laws reproduce, reify, and
normalize racism in society. “By unmasking the hidden faces of racism, critical
race theory aims to expose and unveil White privilege…and reveal a social order
that is highly stratified and segmented along racial lines” (Lopez, 2003, p. 84).
While laws address blatant racism and categorize those committing conspicuous racist acts as bad people, Lopez (2003) points out that this perspective protects White privilege by focusing on the blatant but downplaying the hidden and structural facets of racism. As a consequence, most individuals see the “race problem” as something for others to solve since Whites are not challenged to confront racist beliefs (indeed, believe they have none), and because the topic is not part of their daily lives. CRT aims to present counterstories that depict how society has set up a system that actively subordinates, marginalizes, and silences people of color and their perspectives in indirect and often subtle ways (Lopez, 2003). According to Jay (2006), CRT has been embraced in the past 15 years in education by those “interested in the various forms racism takes in education and how schools assist in the maintenance of a subordinate status for students of color” (p. 9).

Critical race theory is significant in the present work as a lens for considering the actions of educators who are working to decenter or speak back to dominant culture ideologies that normalize master narratives that presume neutrality, objectivity, meritocracy, and color-blindness, for example, as guiding principles in educational practice (Jay, 2006).

**Queer Theory**

Queer theory is another significant lens for considering the work of educator activists. The term *queer* describes behaviors and activities at odds with traditional norms, not only about sexuality but also other facets of society (Hall, 1996). Queer theory, used to encompass the range of possible identities of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students (GLBT), is also useful for highlighting the limiting labels individuals put on others and themselves (Turcotte, 1996). Stimulated by the nonresponsiveness of governments to the AIDS crisis and hate crimes in the 1990s, queer theory seeks to break down dominant notions of what is considered normal so as to stop stigmatizing actions, beliefs, or behaviors (Pinar, 1998). Highlighting the damage of homophobia, queer theory begins by demonstrating how compulsory heterosexuality messages in institutions (e.g., schools, families, churches) cause harm.

Educators’ silence around sexual orientation, however, affects students in various negative ways. In the early stages of developing nonheterosexual identities, students can experience feelings of confusion, depression, and alienation under the best of circumstances (Cass, 1979), and children feel alone if they do not see gay/lesbian role models while they are developing same-sex affectional and sexual orientations. When schools are unsafe for gay and lesbian students, they may drop out of school, abuse drugs and alcohol, or commit suicide:

In 1989 the leading cause of death for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth was suicide. Lesbian and gay youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers, and they
account for up to 30% of all completed suicides among youths. (Besner & Spungin, 1995, p. 46)

Too often, educators remain silent on heterosexism and homophobia, despite pleas from students, because they are afraid of what talking about sexual orientation will lead to—that breaking the silence around sexual orientation will lead to significant public scrutiny and backlash from conservative publics (Friend, 1993). Ideological groups and parent groups that try to restrict school settings from fostering a greater understanding of genders and sexualities, provide evidence of the kinds of pressures a young person or group of young people could similarly experience (Leck, 2000). Queer theory is another significant lens in this work when considering the motivations of educators working to make schools safer places for all students.

**Feminist Theories**

The feminist movement is often described in terms of waves. First wave feminism encompases women’s activism in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and its focus was on basic rights for women, beginning with women's suffrage. Feminism's second wave emerged in the early 1960s as a successor movement to the civil rights movement in the United States. The third wave of feminism emerged in the 1990s in response to the perceived shortcomings and omissions of second wave feminism, including the experiences of nonmajority (i.e., non-White, nonheterosexual, non-Western) women worldwide.

Feminist theories developed as feminism—its principles and practices—began its slow movement into the academy. Feminism writ large begins with a critique of patriarchy and the recognition that many societal practices and institutions are structured to value and favor the progress of men. What came to be known as liberal feminism is widely recognized as the first iteration of feminist theory and practice. Liberal feminism focuses on providing equal access to the benefits of societal institutions, like school programs and employment. Socialist and maternal feminist theories demonstrate ways in which women are devalued, excluded, or silenced, and, then work to reframe structures and practices through the incorporation of women's needs, voices, and preferences. On the heels of these first feminist critiques of patriarchy, however, came various other feminisms that questioned the overwhelmingly White, Western, and heterosexual biases of the dominant culture (as well as their traces in feminism). Critical feminist theories identify the political and power moves that marginalize women's agendas. Feminist poststructuralist theories focus on the positive possibility of recognizing multiplicity in language as a means of understanding the contingent, in-process nature of people and actions, thereby allowing us to form a different conception of events, people, and change. The 1980s also saw the advent of postfeminists who questioned the relevance and focus of contemporary feminisms, with some postfeminist arguments suggesting that the feminist movement was no longer
necessary. Researchers operating out of feminist and critical frameworks, such as Britzman (2000), Connell (1987), Knight (2000), Laible (1997), Lather (2000), Marshall (1997), Stromquist (1997), and Young (2003), though diverse in their orientations, share a critique of patriarchal structures in education and often develop research agendas aimed at empowerment from repressive and oppressive structures.

Feminist theory highlights not only gender stereotyping and thwarted opportunities but also a range of issues about relationships, emotion, and issues often relegated to the private sphere. In recent reexaminations of the feminist movement, several themes emerge. The first is that as part of the movement’s mantra the “personal is political,” the personal must acknowledge and indeed embrace women’s commitments to children and family. For example, Willett (2002) asserts that the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s did not take into account the power of cultural desire for children, the protections mythically afforded women by patriarchal institutions, and the power of family life. Who’s Afraid of Feminism? (Oakley & Mitchell, 1997) also raises a range of issues about children, parenting, and family. It points to women’s vulnerability since “the term *feminist* is the name now given to the disliked or despised woman, much as man-hater, castrating bitch, harridan, or witch were used before the advent of second wave feminism” (Oakley & Mitchell, 1997, p. xix). Women increasingly want to or are expected to be in the workplace, but women report that men still do not share major burdens in housework, child, and aging-parent care. Meanwhile mothers are blamed for crime, and breakdowns in families and community support (taking place in the midst of governmental retreat from provision of safety nets and social services). In addition, it has become clear that hegemonic patriarchal forces orchestrate this backlash with rhetoric that increases feelings of vulnerability. The hidden curriculum, reinforced by hyperreal media and other social forces, continues to influence hypermasculinity for boys as well as adolescent girls’ perceptions of educational and career opportunities. Girls’ sense of choice is also undermined by pressures for unprotected sex although at the same time, the Christian right clamors against sex education in schools, and against women’s right to choose. Sexuality, sex education, and sexual harassment policies, schooling for pregnant and parenting girls, and professionals’ lack of training for dealing with gender issues, then, are often evaded in discourses about schooling. It becomes clear that class and race issues that intertwine with gender are often untouched—despite laws eliminating sex stereotyping in coursework and career counseling—as the life patterns of males and females continued to be channeled along class, race, and gender lines. The liberal feminist agenda, while bringing small gains for mostly White and middle-class women, was not able to address the needs of many poor women and women of color. What Collins (1991) has called “matrices of domination” had not been challenged.

Sex, gender, and sexual orientation rear up in human resource and hiring practices, as in the awkward groping to find out women applicants’ family planning methods and intentions while avoiding illegal direct questions. They appear
by avoidance, when men in power may avoid unspoken discomforts with being sponsors and mentors to aspiring women, and, conversely, when women victims of sexual harassment simply keep quiet rather than being labeled as troublemakers. However, clearly sexual dynamics in education was untouched; sexual harassment of students was not covered; and educators’ training and the male-dominated hierarchy of schools were unchanged in most educational institutions.

Critical race, feminist, and queer theories frame new issues for education politics, move such taboo issues from the margins of the private spheres to education politics, questions of curriculum, educator recruitment and retention, counseling, and employee and student rights. Their very visibility makes them subject to inquiry, and backlash.

**Backlash and Historical Selectivity**

Critical race, queer, and feminist theories are movements of the late 20th century that continue to exercise influence in academic literatures as well as the popular imagination. Given the persistent visibility of activism for civil rights for all citizens, backlash from the dominant majority remains a likely consequence. For example, backlash against the women’s movement is interwoven with the ways in which right-wing Christians are challenging multiculturalism and attempting to reassert church-based, Christian values through legislation and political influence (Cooper, 1997).

Backlash against the feminist movement meant that in gender equity debates, opponents easily invoke antifamily, antifemininity, antimarriage, antichildren claims and challenge the appeals of the feminist movement. Women and girls who are exploring the offerings of the women’s movement, while lured by promises of equal pay, personal freedoms, and changed perspectives, may also fear the (media-inflamed) specter of feminism. The perception exists that to embrace the movement may result in limited chances for a husband and children, and for being seen as normal and proper.

Conflicts arise in schools over curricular decisions about studying, or even acknowledging, sexual orientation; recognizing the sexual orientation of historical figures or literary personae may be seen as too inflammatory in some schools. GLBTQ students and their allies politick for space and budgets for student activities in schools. By force of Title IX\(^8\) or because incidents no longer are swept under the rug, school boards are searching for remedies and formulating policies against peer bullying and sexual harassment, and thus having to recognize the sometimes brutal and sometimes more subtle realities of sexual domination.

In spite of the growth of women’s studies, queer studies, and academic disciplines focusing on studies of ethnic and racial minorities (e.g., African American studies, Asian studies), many education scholars and practitioners, as well as the general populace, do not consciously ponder the consequences of the historical and continuing disadvantage of females, people of color, and LGBT citizens. It is as if, with Nancy Pelosi and Hillary Clinton “making it” and Title
IX on paper, for example, the gender problem, if it ever existed, has been taken care of. For example, Elliott (1997) notes the “selective reality” of students in a gender class—their choosing to believe that there is gender equity while at the same time giving personal examples of unequal treatment. Titus (2000) found that some preservice teachers “deny, dismiss, or discount women’s oppression, distance themselves from feminism, or express dismay or despair in the absence of any definitive solutions to the inequalities they acknowledge” (p. 26).

Pressing Ahead

The power and vibrancy of critical, critical race, queer, and feminist theories are multiplied when they are interwoven. When a 23-year-old teacher or a principal in her 40s is exploring and negotiating her sense of self she is doing so in the school- and society-generated contexts of her neighborhood, her skin, her sexuality, and her gender, as well as the expectations of her profession and her regional culture. The intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality in these theories allow exploration of the career lives and identities of activist educators.

The insight-laden discourses of critical, critical race, queer, and feminist theories and research empowered and deepened the analyses in our research endeavor. We wonder (and doubt) that these empowering discourses are part and parcel of professional pre- and in-service training or the teacher lounge talk of educators: and that’s too bad. Because while these critical discourses are challenging, they also could help educators feel comfortable with their instincts toward expanded identities, liberatory practices, and social movement participation. The discourses could help educators become fuller citizens themselves as well as provide educators with better ways to view their work as liberatory.

At the same time, conversations with practitioners challenged our theories. As stated, we began with one set (social movement theory, activist theory, identity theory), but necessarily revisited those and expanded our focus to account for the complex lives and practices of the educators with whom we spoke. What follows is an introduction to the next five chapters that in turn detail the experiences of educator activists in these times.

Introduction to the Individual Research Projects

In chapter 2, “The Fight of Their Lives: African American Activist Educators,” Annice Hood Williams looks at the impact of race-related activism on the careers of African American educators, reflected in her primary research question: What are the influences that motivate some African American educators to participate in race-based activism and how does this participation impact their lives and careers? Interviewing 10 educators, Williams’s research explored the elements that prompted Black educators to get involved in race-oriented activism, also seeking to describe and analyze possible impacts of this involvement on their careers.
Susan Walters examined “Activist Women in Educational Leadership—How Likely?” in chapter 3. Recognizing that the acceptance of women in leadership positions in educational administration has been slow, and that the field continues to be dominated by White males in the highest levels of power and influence, Walters interviewed 13 women to examine the impact of the women’s movement on their lives. In addition, she explored the women’s level of commitment to the ideals of the women’s movement as articulated in the field of educational administration, as well as how women educational leaders carry out their activism for women’s issues.

Chapter 4 presents Gloria Jones’s research, “Approaching Activism in the Bible Belt,” in which she studied the significant impact of student-to-student sexual harassment in the K-12 setting. Jones began with two primary research questions:

- How and why do educators emerge as activists to stand against student-to-student sexual harassment in the public K-12 setting; and
- When educators choose to engage in activism to alleviate student-to-student sexual harassment, what professional and personal dilemmas confront them?

She interviewed 11 educators to investigate their motivations and experiences intervening in student-to-student sexual harassment.

Wanda Legrand chose to study the impact of involvement in activism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people in chapter 5, “Surprising Ways to Be an Activist.” For this work, she interviewed 10 educators to describe and analyze the impact of political activism for LGBT rights on the personal and professional lives of K-12 educators. This study explored the actions of LGBT activists in the context of the limitations or risks educators face when advocating for rights deemed too controversial for public education. Legrand’s primary research questions included:

- What dilemmas and choices do LGBT educator activists face and how do they manage them?
- How safe is it for educator activists to work for LGBT rights within the educational system?
- What tensions, contradictions, and problems occur because of participation in activism related to issues of sexual orientation?

In chapter 6, “Is There Choice in Educator Activism?” Amy L. Anderson focuses on the lives of educators active for issues of reproductive choice. Her work is driven by the following questions: How public can educators be when they work as activists regarding reproductive choice? How do educators reconcile their prochoice activist politics and identities with their identities as teachers? What is the relationship of sanctioned health/abstinence curriculum
to educators’ prochoice activism? And, given that reproductive choice falls far outside the domain of sanctioned curriculum in the schools, how do activists for reproductive choice compare to activists in other areas? Anderson interviewed eight educators to gain better understanding of their experiences as activists for reproductive freedom.

Chapters 2 through 6 provide the stories of activists for social justice. The inspirations, the choices, the career and personal identity issues and dilemmas, the modes of activist work, and the collaborations and supports in social movements, will be displayed, drawing from these stories. The last two chapters serve two purposes: for those who are interested in using this model of collaborative cross-case comparative inquiry, chapter 8 provides detail and anecdotes to flesh out our procedures. Chapter 7 expounds on the bigger picture for those who are interested in seeing how we took advantage of the possibilities in comparing the five studies; how we used theory to expand and deepen the cross-case comparisons; and, finally, our assertions of the significance of the findings, for educators, for social justice, and for educational practice and policy.

To the Reader

Remember times when you want to scream, make a scene, jump up and immediately right some wrong or stop some stupid practice? Remember how it felt when some internal voice, some advisor, some practical caution prevented you? Ever had the comfort of joining with others who had the same values, the same urge to scream? Have you found ways to “do the right thing” without jeopardizing your career or your marriage or your mortgage? Research that delves into such dilemmas, and then finds that people construct identities and strategies for coping, can give evidence of allies in the work.

Exit, Voice, Loyalty?

When workers perceive their organizational practices to be wrong or ill advised, according to Hirschman (1970) they exercise exit, voice, or loyalty—either they quit, make a loud protest, or suppress their feelings and quietly comply with the practices. Public sector workers like educators work for an ambiguous and often unstated, but nevertheless understood public good, be it middle-class morality, compliance with federal policy to retain district funds, or sorting children into bluebirds and cardinals. Teachers and administrators learn they must help their districts avoid lawsuits, community outcry, and headlines reporting bad practices. Their professional preparation and their school district norms often support their loyalty. Part of the training for fledgling administrators includes learning to make their superiors look good, avoid moral dilemmas, and act as street level bureaucrats, keeping problems quiet, altering policies and programs quietly to suit the particular needs they see. Educators, then, make choices when faced with ethical dilemmas. So, educators face dilemmas upon seeing a pattern
of assigning African American boys to special education labels, seeing girls shy away from after-school events, and gay teens commit suicide when harassment goes unpunished, watching women being culled from their school leadership aspirations, observing the effects of state policies preventing sex education as pregnant girls suffer and drop out. More nuanced than exit, voice, or loyalty choices, their behaviors may include conducting a “moral triage” (Sjorberg, 1999), simulation (appearing to do what is required), “secret business, the metaphorical closing of the classroom and office door, complying with things with which they agree and presenting the appearance of compliance with the others) and resistance (overt disobedience)” (Thomson, 2001, p. 7). As Thomson says, “many still carry on the kinds of moral equity work that they hold dear while working within current frames...by tactically taking up submerged and lesser discourses, and mobilizing other aspects of their non-unitary self” (p. 7).

This book explores the behaviors, choices, feelings, hesitations, secrets, as educators carry on moral equity work.

The Promise from Releasing Activist Energies for Education

If educators who identify themselves as activists continue to believe they are working against the mores of their field, their piled-on frustrations are wasted energies. Their psychological, physical, and capital resources are expended not on liberating students through education (hooks, 1994), but on resisting internal conflict, limiting activist effectiveness, and slowing the pace of change. Recognizing the political nature of education professions then will require subsequent reevaluation and modification of educator preparation programs and socialization processes. Opportunities must be put in place for aspiring and practicing educators to reflect on and question political assumptions, then develop their own ways of articulating their political/professional stances.

Finally, educators’ sense of professionalism necessitates their taking ethical stands. Their responsibilities to promote and protect students’ needs mean that they will, at times, enter political frays when political arrangements and policies (or lack thereof) hurt students. Simply speaking out is a political act. Forming a group of educators and collaborating to create a program or assert a demand is a political act. Activist professionalism then is exhibited in such assertions and actions as helping students and their families when the current programming is not enough or is misguided. It is educators “reclaiming moral and intellectual leadership over educational debates” (Sachs, 2000, p. 81).

Education Professionals’ Moral and Intellectual Leadership?

Ever hear complaints from educators about those politicians who stop them from doing what’s best for kids? Ever wonder what schools would be like if educators’ professional preparation and work lives supported their taking strong stands to promote equity and democracy? Remember being impressed by an educator
who seemed so very brave, smart, idealistic, intellectual, and determined to make the world a better place?

Characteristics of professionalism include having training for expert knowledge, having an ethical code, having autonomy for making decisions in one's sphere of expertise, and having control over who gains entrance into the profession. Educators, then, are often viewed as semiprofessionals, since they are in constant professionalism struggles. Recognizing that teachers' professionalism entails not just expertise and a desire for autonomy but also that their ethical concerns center on a desire to look out for students' needs, Sachs (2000, 2001) demonstrated the desirability of activist professionalism and reclaiming moral and intellectual leadership. Such activist professionalism would contribute to democratic practices and emancipatory goals, as activist identities incorporate what Beane and Apple (1995) describe as "the open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible, … concern for the welfare of others and 'the common good,' … concern … [for] the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities" (pp. 6–7). Assuming that educators feel their primary obligations as being to their constituencies of students and parents, they would work to eliminate any exploitation, inequality, or oppression.

Our research and our book provide an invigorating look at the possibilities of reopening discussion of educators' identities, or their ideals, aims, and purposes. The book reopens conversations about the preparation, the professional status, and the political status of educators. As the following chapters show, educators have an opportunity to flex their political muscle through curriculum decisions, pedagogical actions, student evaluation, and research (Ginsburg, 1995). Readers, take a look at what could be!

Notes

1. We use educator as an inclusive term to include education professionals at all levels, including teachers, counselors, administrators, social workers, school nurses, etc. If talking about a specific group, we try to name that group (e.g., teachers).

2. McFadden and Smith (2004) stated that White Baptist traditionalists, for example, require hierarchical and deferential relationships with wives, Blacks, and working-class employees (p. 21). They go on to argue that Southerners are polite, and are more likely to attend church regularly, believe that religious faith is important, be Protestant, and identify as fundamentalist or Pentecostals. Southerners are less likely to drink alcohol, to live in a metropolitan area, or, if they are White, to identify as a Democrat, and to believe that relationships between men and women have grown worse over recent years. They are more likely to maintain clear gender roles for household responsibilities, and to value a sense of home and kin. They see small talk as crucial, communicate indirectly, and avoid open conflict (McFadden & Smith, 2004, pp. 41–42). In Appalachia, outsiders are those "from off" (p. 184), and range from do-gooders, exploiters, tourists and those born elsewhere; for women administrators, outsider status comes with being female, minority, or of a faith other than Protestant.

3. Jesse Helms' successful 1984 Senate campaign in North Carolina was famously against "the homosexuals, labor unions, those militant feminists, all of them..." (Reed, 1993, p 169). And since then the Democratic Party's core supports include conservationists, feminists, public school teachers, and those promoting social programs (Reed, 1993, p. 208).

4. "Rethinking Schools began as a local effort to address problems such as basal readers, standardized testing, and textbook-dominated curriculum. Since its founding in 1986, it has grown into a nationally prominent publisher of educational materials. … Most importantly, it remains
firmly committed to equity and to the vision that public education is central to the creation of a humane, caring, multiracial democracy” (http://www.rethinkingschools.org/index.shtml).

5. “Teach For America is the national corps of outstanding recent college graduates of all academic majors who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools and become leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” (http://www.teachforamerica.org/).

6. Details of the study’s methodology are shared in chapter 8.

7. Although GLBT (or LGBT) is most commonly used as a descriptor, MacGillivray and Kozik-Rosabal (2000) argue that “GLBTQ is currently the most inclusive term used to refer to nonheterosexual people in all of the various identities,” with Q requiring the inclusion of queer. They continue: “The term homosexual is not a preferred term for GLBTQ people because many consider it to be exclusionary and too clinical. The term gay was once considered to apply to all nonheterosexual people but is now used mainly to refer to gay men. The term lesbian refers to women who are affectionately (emotionally) and sexually attracted to other women. Bisexual people identify as being attracted to both sexes…. Transgendered is a broad term that has little to do with sexual orientation and more to do with gender identity. It refers to people whose gender identity as a man, woman, or somewhere in between does not correspond with their genetic sex (female or male). Queer and questioning are lumped together under Q for simplicity’s sake but entail very different identifications. Questioning refers to those individuals who are not comfortable claiming a sexual orientation identity, be they gay, straight, or somewhere in between…. The term queer is being reclaimed by the younger generation of GLBTQ people and is considered to be more inclusive in that it includes all nonheterosexual people, and is also considered to be empowering” (pp. 288–289).

8. “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/cor/coord/titleixstat.htm).

9. Chapters 2 through 6 are developed from the broader Activist Educators research project from which Hood, Jones, Legrand, and Walters completed research in completion of requirements for the doctorate in Educational Administration. For more information about the studies that produced these chapters, see the following dissertations: Hood (2005), Walters (2004), Jones (2005), and Legrand, (2005). Please note that during the course of the activist educator project Annice Hood became Annice Williams. Her chapter 2 in this text is listed as Annice H. Williams; however, citations in that chapter as well as chapter 7 also reference her dissertation research (Hood, 2005).