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Book Groups in the Social Justice Unionism Movement

An Analysis of Teachers' Reasons for Participation

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Abstract

The past decade has seen a rise in social justice teacher unionism, with an emergence of caucuses that push for bottom-up, race conscious union reform in which members bargain for the common good. While a burgeoning body of scholarship has focused on understanding the goals and organizing strategies of these caucuses, there are few up-close accounts of their political education efforts. This study focuses on a summer reading series in which teachers joined a series of interconnected book groups, aiming to understand teachers' reasons for joining the groups and the role the groups play in the organization's larger goals. Findings indicate that participants saw building the base, developing skills, deepening analyses, and planning action as four core functions of the groups, and that tensions arose when locating book groups within a political organization. After analyzing subcategories within each finding, this article discusses implications for teachers, organizers, teacher educators, and researchers.



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Introduction

Public education is under attack by neoliberal reforms and policies that have led to the closing of neighborhood schools (e.g., Lipman, 2011), increased emphasis on standardized curriculum and assessment (e.g., Au, 2010), and a weakening of teachers unions (Goldstein, 2014). Teachers, scholars, and community organizers have critiqued the ways in which these tactics continue to disenfranchise communities of color, exacerbate wealth inequality, and undermine the profession of teaching (e.g., Buras, 2011; Love, 2019). In response, a growing teacher movement, largely located within unions, has mounted an increasingly strong and visible resistance to these forces (e.g., Maton, 2016; Stark, 2019; Weiner, 2012). The past decade has seen an emergence of caucuses that focus on bottom-up, race conscious union reform focused on bargaining for the common good. These caucuses aim to politicize teachers to see the power of their role in addressing inequality in society, not just within their classrooms (Weiner, 2012).

Over the past several decades, public schools in Philadelphia have undergone a number of neoliberal reforms including massive layoffs, outsourcing of school personnel such as counselors and substitutes, and the closing of neighborhood schools. These trends disproportionately impact schools that serve Black and Brown students. Within this political context, in 2014, a group of teachers that were part of the Teacher Action Group-Philadelphia (TAG-Philly) formed the Caucus of Working Educators (WE or the Caucus), a social justice caucus within the local teachers union to work for social change in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and build a more democratic union. Since its first year, a series of summer book groups have been an important organizing tool for WE (Riley, 2015b; Riley & Cohen, 2018). The book groups have provided a consistent infrastructure for political education among members since WE's inception, enabling participants to develop a shared analysis of their current conditions as well as a shared vision of a more just education system.

Empirical studies of book groups indicate that they have powerful relational and intellectual impacts on groups of people (Fox, 2017; Long, 2003; Sumara, 1996) and political education is widely understood to be an important part of social movements (Bobo et al., 2001; Evans, 1979; Zavala & Henning, 2017), including social justice caucuses in teachers unions (e.g. Bradbury et al., 2014; Riley, 2015b; Stark, 2019). Early on, WE's summer reading series attracted interest among other caucuses, who have replicated similar structures in their own unions (Stark, 2019). The summer reading series has remained a consistent component of WE since its inception.

In this analysis, I explore the value of the book groups to individual participants and to the organization by analyzing why participants join the book groups and what they report as the value of the groups to themselves and the organization. I draw on their responses to illuminate the various roles the book groups played in the organizing work, as well as some of the tensions that arose from conceptualizing book groups as an organizing tool. This study contributes to a growing body of research on teacher organizing (e.g., Catone, 2014; Picower, 2012; Quinn & Carl, 2015; Rodriguez, 2016; Zavala & Henning, 2017) and social justice teacher unionism (e.g., Maton, 2018; Stark, 2019; Stern & Brown, 2016) by providing an up-close look at how a group of educators are using the practice of reading together to grow their base, build skills, develop shared analyses, and plan actions. Understanding these purposes, as well as the tensions that arise, has implications for teacher-organizers, teacher educators, and researchers.

Background on the Caucus of Working Educators

WE was founded in 2014 as a social justice caucus within the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) by members of TAG-Philly who were dissatisfied with the leadership of the PFT. The Caucus's platform includes fully funding schools, providing culturally relevant curriculum, hiring and retaining more educators of color, providing baseline mental health services for students, and ensuring students have access to programs such as music, arts, and school libraries. In 2015 and again in 2019, the Caucus ran a slate of candidates against PFT leadership and lost, but remains an active part of the PFT membership by organizing campaigns for issues such as decreased standardized testing, immigration justice within schools, healthy building conditions, and protections for transgender students. In 2017, WE became a national leader in organizing the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools and the organization played an instrumental role in the dissolution of Philadelphia's state-appointed School Reform Commission during that same year.

Background on the Reading Series

WE and TAG-Philly have co-sponsored a summer reading series since the summer of 2014. The fifteen reading groups in the summer of 2016, when I conducted this study, were part of the third summer and the series has continued since then with a relatively similar structure. That summer, members recommended and voted on 15 books, facilitation teams of two to four members set the schedule (usually between three and four meetings), and participants signed up via a Google form for the groups they wanted to join (See Appendix A for a list of the books from the summer of 2016.).

Group size varied and each book group had a slightly different culture. Some were characterized by free-flowing conversation where members' questions and comments built on each other. Others were larger and more structured, with facilitators guiding participants through more specific responses to the book (e.g., writing questions/comments on sticky notes and organizing them together, paired conversations, brainstorming action steps). Groups met at members' homes, coffee shops, schools, book stores, public libraries, and university classrooms. Teachers joined with community members, parents, university faculty, and organizers to engage in dialogue about issues impacting their schools. Despite the variation, the groups all emphasized leveraging diverse perspectives within a framework of social justice and grounding learning in eventual directions for action.

Organizing within Teachers Unions

Social justice caucuses within teachers unions work in coalition with other local movements, and WE and its members play an active role in local fights such as raising the minimum wage, securing immigrants' rights, and divesting from the prison system. This commitment to seeing teachers unions as embedded within larger societal struggles for justice is a core principle of the framework of social justice unionism. In this framework, the focus of collective bargaining is not limited to workplace issues such as workers' compensation and benefits, but on "society-wide transformation on issues that affect communities beyond individual workplaces" (Uetrict, 2014, p. 111).

While there are many frameworks for community organizing, most emphasize the importance of a collective analysis of power, leadership identification and development, and bringing new members into the work (Bobo et al., 2001; McAlevey 2016). Political education is an important element of most organizing models, where participants engage in dialogue to develop a shared analysis of the world as it is, as well as deepen their understandings of how it could be changed (e.g., Alinsky, 1971; Horton & Freire, 1990). Within the labor movement specifically, McAlevey (2016) emphasizes the importance of involving ordinary people in the process of power-structure analysis “so they come to better understand their own power and that of their opponents” (p. 6). In the literature on teacher learning, several studies draw contrast between top-down professional development and critical forms of teacher learning in which teachers are positioned as change agents both inside and outside of their classrooms (Dover et al., 2020; Kohli et al., 2015; Riley, 2015a; Riley, 2015c). Others emphasize the importance of political education in developing the paradigm of teacher as community organizer (Chang, 2015; Zavala & Henning, 2017). While these studies focus on the social practices of these efforts, this study adds to that work by uncovering teachers’ motivations and organizational goals for political education.

In addition to political education, successful community organizing also relies on bringing new people into the movement, or “building the base” (Staples, 1984). Mondros and Wilson (1994) identify three elements of building the base: (1) recruiting and engaging new people, (2) keeping current members motivated and interested, and (3) deepening member participation (p. 37). Another central element of organizing is leadership identification and development (Payne, 1995; McAlevey, 2016; Ransby, 2003; 2015). The Midwest Academy, for example, discusses ways that organizations can create structures that provide opportunities for individuals to take on leadership roles within an organization to build a sense of collective ownership among members (Bobo et al., 2001).

Within social justice caucuses of teachers unions, study groups and other forms of political education have been a prominent part of building membership with a shared analysis of how power operates in public education and how unions can be a mechanism for social change (Bradbury et al., 2014; Kohli et al., 2015; Maton, 2016; Riley, 2015b; Zavala & Henning, 2017). For example, members of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in Chicago held study groups early in the group’s formation, where “through readings, conversation, and action, they developed a shared point of view” (Bradbury et al., 2014, p. 29). One CORE member noted how the organization made activism “enjoyable and welcoming” to newcomers (Bradbury et al., 2014, p. 29). Despite what we know about the importance of these structures for political education, base building, and leadership development within social justice union caucuses, little is known about individual members’ experiences of political education efforts such as book groups. This study fills that gap by asking: *What reasons do people describe for participating in the groups?* and *What do participants see as the value of political education efforts such as reading groups, both for themselves and for their organization?* Understanding the value of the groups from the perspective of the participants will guide future political education efforts within local social justice teachers’ union caucuses and will paint a more detailed picture of the on-the-ground social practices of such groups.

Data Sources and Analysis

As a resident of Philadelphia, former public school teacher, and current teacher educator committed to social change, I have been an active member of the book groups since their inception

and took on the role of participant-observer in the summer of 2016, when I formally studied the book groups. That summer, I selected two book groups to join, with the intention of better understanding how the groups supported the organizing of WE and the learning of individual members. I used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) to select 22 participants to interview who were diverse in terms of the book group(s) in which they participated, age, race, gender, years of teaching experience, and leadership involvement in WE (See Appendix B for a list of interview participants. All names are pseudonyms.). Data for this study are 22 individual audio-recorded and transcribed interviews, field notes and selective transcriptions from all meetings of two book groups (*For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too* (Emdin, 2016) and *Illegal People: How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Migrants* (Bacon, 2008)) for a total of seven meetings, a public blog in which group members documented the meetings, participant observation at other related teacher activist events during the summer of 2016 (e.g., a meeting of the facilitators at the beginning of the summer), and artifacts (e.g., book lists, agendas, chart paper with participant writing, etc.). Because this analysis focuses on participants' perceptions of the goals of the book groups, the primary data were the interview transcripts, which I triangulated with field notes from the meetings, blog posts, and other artifacts.

I took an ethnographic approach to the data to understand how participants themselves experienced the book groups. Data analysis was ongoing and recursive (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the summer and fall of 2016 and the spring of 2017, I analyzed the entire data set, creating inductive codes that spoke to my two original research questions about what kind of teacher learning occurred during the book groups and how the book groups supported the organizing of WE. For the second round of analysis, I looked back at the codes that specifically addressed how participants described the purposes and goals of the book groups. Next, I did another round of more detailed analysis and coding within the first-round codes to uncover the explicit or tacit frameworks for organizing, leadership development, political education, and taking action.

My social identities and social locations – as a queer White woman; a former K-12 teacher; a current teacher educator and faculty member; and a supporting member of WE – necessarily influenced my interpretations. Throughout the research process, I wrote memos on how my positionalities may have shaped my analysis and how I was perceived by participants. As a supporting member of WE, teacher educator, and former teacher, I was viewed as an insider. However, I also had outsider status as a university-based researcher and non-classroom teacher. I regularly shared my analysis with a diverse cross section of WE members to gain feedback and confirmation of the trends I saw. For example, my lens as a teacher educator led me to initially see the book groups primarily through the lens of teacher learning. When I shared my initial analysis with some of WE's leadership, their feedback caused me to re-focus also on how the groups served as a tool for leadership development and base-building.

Results

This section outlines the results of my analysis of the purposes, goals, and value of the book groups to the participants, representing the perspectives of people with a range of prior investment in WE (from experienced leaders and organizers to those just joining a group for the first summer). Interview data revealed that participants saw building the base, building skills, developing analyses, and planning action as four core functions of the groups. In some cases, the data point to the goals of individuals within the groups. In others, the data speak to the overarching

function of the book groups within WE. An additional finding is that tensions arise when locating book groups within a political organization.

Building the Base

The book groups played an important part in bringing people into the organization, deepening connections among members, building connections with other organizations, and developing leaders. This section draws on interviews to elaborate on each of these base-building functions.

Bringing people in. WE leaders saw the book groups as an important way to bring new members into the work and each spring, the organization built excitement for the book groups by inviting book nominations, having people vote on their top choices, and then promoting the book groups by encouraging social media followers to join a group and share with their networks. Interviews revealed a wide range of reasons people joined the groups, such as improving classroom practice, engaging in intellectual conversation, deepening their political analysis, feeling a sense of community, feeling less isolated, and building relationships. The book list – with books focusing on classroom practice, organizing tactics, history, and contemporary social issues – provided multiple entry points. In each of the first four years of the book groups, the number of books and participants grew larger. Jack, a more experienced member of WE, shared that the book groups served as “an organizing tool of bringing people into WE and getting them to know what the organization is about.” He went on to say, “I think they serve a base building goal of having an ‘in’ for people who can later take on leadership in WE.” Another experienced member, Katherine, shared that they enable people to get to know the Caucus: “Oftentimes people come to a book group having not really known about the Caucus or anything. It’s a way to draw them into the other larger work.” Even participants newer to WE saw the groups as a vehicle to bring people together around shared goals. Darryl shared, “it seems to be teachers coming together across schools to kind of build solidarity in the movement towards educational justice.” Since WE had just lost an election bid for union leadership in the year the study took place, the importance of the groups in building membership was a theme across many interviews, especially among those already involved with WE.

Relationships with people. Participants talked about the ability to build relationships with people who were different from them, as well as the value of building relationships with those who share their values. Several participants discussed the ideas of “bonds.” Charles, for example, shared “you’re getting to know one another in a new way. You’re finding a way to bond.” Calvin shared that the groups are for “building and expanding that sense of community and common ground among educators and activists. Building those networks and building those bonds and building that conversation.” In addition to the breadth of relationships, some participants mentioned the depth of them. Aviva, a leader in WE, shared the depth of the relationships that she made during the first year of the groups, saying “the people who are the most critical to me, who are my friends and loved ones and my most beloved teachers and organizer people, they’re from two years ago.”

Participants also mentioned the value of engaging in sustained conversation across different viewpoints. Aviva talked specifically about a group that read *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance* (Buras, 2014) in which members did not share agreement on charter schools. She discussed how the group offered the opportunity

to build relationships with people who both shared her views and had different ones. Facilitating a group that was contentious caused her to form a close relationship with a co-facilitator. She elaborated, “we get to see our colleagues grow and we get to know them more deeply and we trust them and we trust ourselves enough to teach each other stuff.” She also shared that she built a relationship with a pro-charter school member of the group and said, “James Smith who works in the charter schools office came and we can have a healthy debate for hours at a bar because we were in that book group together.” These examples emphasize the way the book groups led members to bolster their networks and support systems in various ways.

Relationships with organizations. The book groups also were an opportunity for WE to build relationships with other justice-focused organizations in the city. In the summer of 2016, the book group organizing committee focused explicitly on reaching out to other organizations to co-sponsor and co-facilitate some of the book groups. In a facilitators’ session prior to the summer, the organizing committee asked facilitation teams to brainstorm organizations related to the topic of their book to which they could reach out to co-facilitate. For example, *Illegal People’s* (Bacon, 2008) facilitation team was made up of members of both WE and a local immigration justice organization, and group membership was evenly split between educators and immigration justice organizers. Facilitators of other groups also reached out to the LGBTQ youth center, members of local socialist organizations, and members of other unions. In the interviews, many participants emphasized bringing non-teachers into the groups, and specifically those involved in other social justice struggles. Calvin, for example, shared how “bringing in other organizations and other people doing that justice work in other sectors in the city and outside the city” helped him understand education justice differently. He said, “obviously this work intersects with all sorts of other justice work. Education justice can’t stand in isolation from all the other types of justice work that needs to be done.” These examples suggest how the intentional effort to reach out to other organizations helped WE build relationships with different movements and created spaces for dialogue between teachers and other organizers throughout the city.

Leadership development. The organizers of the book groups also saw them as explicit venues for leadership development, and many interviewees who were also WE leaders discussed ways the groups served this role. Several of the longer-standing members of WE shared anecdotes of specific prominent members of the group who came in through the book groups. Sam, for example, shared that “a lot of our strongest WE leaders have come through book clubs.... Isaiah did one last year and he did it with Youssef and that moved Youssef in. And that brought in Desha...”

He went onto share the ways that the teaching-focused books led some teachers to shift from seeing their job as occurring mostly in the classroom to seeing their job within the context of greater political forces: “There’s a lot of people who are sort of like ‘I was just a nice teacher lady who cared about kids and now I see a larger political context.’” He named three specific people who came into the groups through teaching-focused books and said, “a lot of those people I think have gotten activated and were brought in through these books that are about practice but in a larger context...The leaders we’ve gotten out of the book clubs to a large extent have just sort of bitten. People who were looking for this and the book club was their way in.” These sentiments were echoed by several other interviewees, especially those with more experience in WE who saw the groups explicitly as a leadership development mechanism.

Building Skills

In addition to developing membership, relationships, and leaders, the book groups served as a space for teacher-organizers to learn important skills for both their teaching and organizing. This section discusses the skills and mindsets participants described building in the groups: Confidence, perspective-taking and empathy, facilitation, and organizing.

Confidence. When I asked participants to identify any skills they learned in the groups, the most common response was that they built the confidence to speak up. Sometimes confidence came from deepened knowledge on a topic. Rebecca, for example, shared that the book groups helped her become “a more confident advocate in my school community” by helping to “sharpen [her] ideas and thinking.” Another teacher, Jessica, shared the importance of becoming a leader through gaining knowledge: “When you come out of the book group you feel like a mini expert in whatever it is that you studied so you feel like a leader in that thing.”

In addition to building confidence through gaining knowledge, the groups provided a venue for practicing speaking up. Isaiah, for example, shared that the book groups made him “more confident in my ability to talk to folks about issues. And also just simply much more clear on diagnosing what needs to be addressed.” Aviva shared that she struggled to be assertive and said that the groups helped her deal with the feeling of someone not liking her if she’s assertive. These examples highlight the relationship between gaining knowledge, building confidence, and developing an ability to speak up.

Perspective taking and empathy. When asked about skills that she developed, Katherine shared, “I think that your perspective taking skills and your empathetic skills get a good workout,” and many others also spoke of these qualities. The book groups became a space where people drew on their capacity to listen closely and view things from other people’s perspectives. Elsa shared, “you grow emotionally as a human being. You give time and thought to listening to other human beings, which puts you in a place to be a better leader.” Other book group members spoke explicitly about their positionality and how that influenced their participation. Calvin reflected on his experience being both a facilitator and the only cisgender man in the group reading *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality* (Butler-Wall et al., 2016). He felt it was important for him to recognize his position in the group as he built his comfort in talking about issues of gender and sexuality. Many people identified listening as a skill that they built in the groups and some connected it to organizing. Aviva, for example, talked about the “value of uncertainty, of not knowing” and added that this mindset applies to “organizing and having a one-on-one conversation.” To emphasize the importance of empathy when organizing people, she added: “that’s not logistics. That’s your heart.”

Facilitation. People who facilitated groups spoke of their growth as facilitators. Within this category, people shared many specifics. Anne spoke of building her “comfort with silence, listening to people, and giving them time to process.” She mentioned the ability to “get people to talk about uncomfortable subjects.” Others spoke of the importance of “getting many people in a circle to feel included” (Charles) or “keeping a group of adults on track” (Elsa). Still others spoke of more specific facilitation moves that they tried out for the first time in the book groups. For example, Charles shared about his first time asking people to share their gender pronouns during introductions. He said, “I’m not usually the one who does that, but realized it needs to be done. It needs to be part of my protocol.” Aviva spoke of how the book groups helped her realize the value of a shared common text for groups of people and explained how she and others translated that

insight to a WE retreat in the fall in which she and others chose to have participants read a short text excerpt and discuss it.

Organizing skills. The final skill category that was identified by many participants was organizing skills. Each summer, there is usually at least one book group focused explicitly on organizing skills and strategies, such as *How to Jump-Start Your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers* (Bradbury et al., 2014) or *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (McAlevey, 2016). In the summer of 2016, which was right after WE lost its first election bid for union leadership, one group read *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* (Bradbury et al., 2016). Participants that I interviewed from that group shared specific skills that the group learned together. The following excerpt from the group's blog post makes some of these skills explicit:

In our third session, we focused on helping a [teachers union] member [who is also] a parent plan an action at the school her children attend. We spoke about recognizing potential leaders, having that all-important initial conversation, and arranging quickly for a meeting. Discussions revolved around identifying a discrete problem within an issue and focusing on a winnable action. We talked a lot about overcoming fear (our fear and others' fear) and identifying the person who can make a change.

Members of that group whom I interviewed spoke of the value of problem-solving around specific examples. Sam, who was a leader in the organization, shared how he read the book in light of the “hands-on experience” that he had gotten during the election campaign. He said, “I had this experiential learning, and read that book and was like ‘oh shit that’s what I should have been doing the whole time.’” Another member, Rochelle, shared that the group helped her differentiate between “speaking on someone’s radio show or showing up for a TV appearance” versus real organizing. She said, “it’s about doing the real hard work of looking someone in the eye and talking to them.”

Developing Analyses

Engaging in shared analysis of the present conditions and imagining new possibilities is an essential element of Freire’s (1970) concept of praxis – an ongoing process of reflection and action. This section draws on the interview data to show three ways that political education worked in the group through individuals’ analysis, shared analysis, and re-aligning the organization.

Individual analysis. Many participants spoke of the value of the groups in terms of the new understandings they gained. Jessica, for example, shared that “[she] could see something that other people couldn’t see.” Others spoke of new connections that they made among ideas. For example, Jack talked about “an intellectual shift” that he had during a discussion of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (Alexander, 2010) where he made new connections between slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. He added, “it was like a light bulb. It allowed me to contextualize. Because I was already familiar with the school-to-prison pipeline and I saw racism within schools and within immigrant communities, but I didn’t have a context, a frame, to put it in. So that was very powerful.”

Jessica discussed new connections she made from reading multiple books across multiple summers. She described how reading *The Teacher Wars: A History of America’s Most Embattled Profession* (Goldstein, 2014) during the summer of 2016 combined with *Charter Schools, Race,*

and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance (Buras, 2014) during the summer of 2015 helped her gain a historical perspective on the disinvestment from African American schools and teachers. She said:

In both [groups] we talked about how schools have been used to oppress Black people because it's an ongoing trend... What happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina is that they closed the entire public school district. And they just have charter schools there now and most teachers that taught there were African American women so they basically ousted all of these teachers who were middle class. And the same thing happened in the past when desegregation happened, where people were thrown out of their positions because the school was now integrated and the same thing is happening with the culture of teaching right now... that was kind of a trend and something that needs to be changed.

This example shows how reading over two summers helped Jessica gain more clarity about trends over history, which in turn allowed her to understand how dismantling teachers' unions, massive school closures, and conversion of public schools to charter schools were connected to a larger history of whiteness-as-property (Harris, 1993) with material benefits for those who are White.

Shared analysis. In addition to offering examples of individual transformation, book group participants spoke of the value of building shared analysis. Charles explained, "I think it's where we grow and we find new ways to think about things and new ways to structure our arguments. New ways to build solidarities with communities and find connections and build new networks." He differentiated between the inquiry-based mode of thinking in the book groups and the more focused mode when the organization is "in the midst of a campaign where there's a particular rhetoric that we're using." Others in interviews spoke of the value of "deepening our analysis of the context" (Calvin) and "being part of something much larger" (Rochelle). Collective analysis practices were visible in the field note data as well. For example, after the police murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, the facilitators of *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* (Emdin, 2016) posed the questions: "In light of recent events, how do these change our focus here? Does it make us think bigger then or more critically inside the classroom?" These questions led to a discussion where group members spoke of intersections between policing and schools as manifested in their personal and professional lives. Exchanges like this enabled participants to engage in sustained collective reflection and analysis.

Re-aligning the organization. The reading series organizers purposefully designed book selection to be driven by members' interests by creating a democratic book nominating and voting process. However, WE leaders also used the groups to deepen the organization's analysis on specific topics. In the summer of 2014, WE leaders designed some of the groups to educate members on social justice unionism. The next year, the groups were intentionally designed to build a deeper, more nuanced analysis of racism within education justice work. Many of the more experienced WE members clearly articulated how the focus of the groups evolved to support specific re-alignment of the organization over time.

For example, Rochelle spoke of the ways the groups have enabled WE to "keep the conversations going so you can see if there's a shift, or if there's a different focus or if we need to realign to something different." Charles spoke about how the groups have been a way that WE could "work out what its own internal ideology was... most of the books last year were about centering racial justice and I think it's important and they were intensively thinking about what

does it mean to be an organization that centers racial justice.” Maton (2018) has documented this intentional shift within the organization from a neoliberal to a structural racism problem frame, arguing that the refocusing was an ethical imperative within the organization to center racial justice issues within the union. While every summer’s list included books that centered racial justice, book group members in the summer of 2015 read all books, regardless of topic, in relation to guiding questions about race and intersectionality. In this way, the book groups became a mechanism through which the organization’s leaders could work towards creating a shift in the political consciousness of the organization and the members that made it up.

Planning Action

Of the eighteen participants interviewed, all but one mentioned some form of action as either a reason they joined the group or an outcome of their participation. Participants discussed new actions they would take as individuals, the ways the book groups fed Caucus-wide working groups that were attached to specific campaigns, and the initiation of further political education.

Individual action. Participants described ways that the book groups led them to take actions that they would not have taken before. Kerri shared how reading *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in School* (Morris, 2016) enabled her to rethink the unfair enforcement of a dress code policy at her school, develop a rationale for why it was important to address this issue, have an initial conversation with a colleague who was not in the book group, and make plans to bring up her concern at a department meeting. Rebecca shared how the *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality* (Butler-Wall et al., 2016) discussions caused her to stand up to colleagues about using the correct gender pronouns for a student, and Shane described how he changed the way he positioned his students when attempting to fundraise for classroom supplies after reading *A Good Investment?: Philanthropy and the Marketing of Race in an Urban Public School* (Brown, 2015). The blog posts also revealed various forms of actions groups or their members planned to take. For example, one of the blog posts from the group reading *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality* (Butler-Wall, Cosier, & Harper, 2016) listed “low risk, medium risk, and high risk” actions that teachers could take.

Research on other teacher activist communities has demonstrated how groups can provide a supportive space for members to try out and get feedback on ideas for action. Blackburn (2009) calls these moments “rehearsals of possible actions” (p. 148). These examples of actions that group members took or considered taking suggest that book groups were spaces where such rehearsals proved supportive for members as they left the group and moved back into their school contexts.

Working groups and interconnected political education. The book groups led participants to form or join various working groups that were attached to ongoing action within the union, school system, and city. In the summer of 2016, a Restorative Practices Project formed out of the groups reading *Pushout* (Morris, 2016) and *Being Bad: My Baby Brother and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* (Laura, 2014), an Immigration Justice working group formed out of the *Illegal People* (Bacon, 2008) group, the Becoming Antiracist White Educators (BAR-WE) group built membership with some participants from the *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* (Emdin, 2016) group, and a Queer Organizing committee was bolstered from members of the *Rethinking Sexism* (Butler-Wall et al., 2016) group. These working groups were instrumental in organizing campaigns that led to real wins for marginalized students. For example, in the 2016-2017 school year, WE’s Immigration Justice committee was part of a coalition that successfully demanded that

the school district provide mandatory training to teachers on how to support immigrant students and families during a time of rising xenophobia and anti-immigrant policies during and after the 2016 presidential election. Members of WE's Immigration Justice Committee testified before the School Reform Committee (Philadelphia's state-appointed school board that has since been disbanded) about the need for such training. In response, the District released *Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Students and Families: A Toolkit for Administrators, Teachers, and Staff*, which defined terms and provided guidance on issues such as addressing Islamophobia, supporting undocumented students, understanding the DACA program, and providing a safer school climate for immigrant students. Other working groups have provided an ongoing infrastructure for self-education among educators. Becoming Anti-Racist White Educators (BAR-WE), which started in Philadelphia with many book group members, has become a national model for White educators to reflect on their anti-racist practice while also working in coalition with local groups led by educators of color.

While it is debatable whether political education is itself a form of "action," (Grundy, 2020) it is notable how many book groups are tied to additional, ongoing opportunities for political education. Each spring, TAG-Philly sponsored Inquiry-into-Action-Groups (iTAGs) that enabled deeper learning about various topics and sponsored an annual Education for Liberation Conference with concurrent sessions, panels, and topical lunchtime discussion groups. It was easy to trace themes and participants running through these various opportunities for teacher and organizer led political education, with ideas started in book groups in the summer extended in iTAGs in the spring and presented at the conference. For example, the iTAGs in the spring of 2017 continued the dialogue from the summer with topics such as "Immigrant Justice and the Fight for Sanctuary Schools," "White Educators and Race: Exploring Our Practice," and "Trauma and Resilience in Education." Concurrent sessions at the 2017 Education for Liberation Conference also continued themes from the 2016 book groups with titles such as "White Teachers Building Anti-Racist Identities and Classrooms," "Queering the Classroom Through Everyday Actions" and "Sueños y Pesadillas / Dreams and Nightmares: Teaching Your Students to Understand the Immigrant Experience through Oral Histories." This interconnected web of learning spaces enabled newcomers to quickly find others with shared interests and veterans to deepen their analysis and create opportunities for tangible action.

Tensions with Book Groups as an Organizing Tool

The findings thus far have focused on the benefits of the book groups to WE by analyzing the various purposes they served for members and for the organization. However, the data from this study also highlighted some tensions in locating book groups within a political organization.

Tensions between learning and action. Analysis of members' purposes for joining the groups revealed a tension between learning and action within the organization. Traditionally, book groups are, by design, meant to be spaces that are free of pre-determined outcomes (e.g., Long, 2003). While many organizing groups include some element of political education, WE's book groups are unique in their scope (approximately 15 books per summer), consistency (every summer), diversity of book choices, framing as "book groups," and popularity. Nesting book groups within the work of a political organization like WE with a clear mission necessarily changes them, and may even create a conceptual tension about their form, value, and function.

The interviews reflected this tension. Some saw the groups as a personal learning space, with one participant even referring to them as “PD” (professional development), while others saw them as a strategic space for building the organization’s base. Some joined to improve their teaching practice, while others aimed to cull the history of labor organizing for lessons to transform the union. While the book groups were designed to hold all of these purposes, in the summer of 2016 after the Caucus lost its bid for union leadership, some participants felt a tension between groups as an organic learning space versus a strategic space to build power. One of WE’s leaders, Aviva, narrated her view of the focus of the groups over time:

The first summer that we did them they were places to raise political consciousness and last summer they were very much about “how do we make race central to our work?” And this summer the question is, “how do we bring more people into the different kinds of work and organizing that we’re doing after the election?” So, I think this summer the point is to bring people in, which is interesting. And I think a lot about sign in sheets now.

Her narration of the evolution of the groups, as well as her newfound focus on “sign in sheets” illustrates a tension in situating book groups, characterized by a free-flowing exchange of ideas, within a mission-driven political organization. Participants less deeply rooted within WE revealed this tension by expressing different understandings of the purposes of groups. For example, Rebecca, a teacher who was less deeply embedded in WE, expressed discomfort with the idea of book groups as strategic base-building spaces: “That gives me pause cuz I’m like ‘am I doing this because I was signing up to be mobilized in some way?’ That makes me feel a tiny bit resistant. I can’t quite put my finger on why.” Aviva and Rebecca’s comments juxtaposed highlights a tension in the competing purposes of the groups. Long standing organizers hoped that they would bring people like Rebecca into the organization, but Rebecca felt “a tiny bit resistant” to the idea that she was “signing up to be mobilized in some way” when she joined a book group.

Tensions between open discussions and the organization’s mission. A related tension with using book groups as part of an organizing strategy came up in the facilitators’ training at the beginning of the summer, when participants discussed the challenge in facilitating book groups within the context of an organization with clear ideological stances. The following exchange highlights this tension:

Charles: If we’re calling them social justice book groups, I think we should make that explicit. For example, we’re not going to debate standardized testing. We support Opt-Out [a movement that resists the proliferation of standardized testing].

Another participant: Yeah, like we take certain things as a given. For example, the tenets of Critical Race Theory. Like we believe that White supremacy exists and affects our institutions. And we don’t want to argue about whether opt-out is a good thing.

The group discussed several ideas, such as sharing the platforms of WE and TAG-Philly at the beginning and using guiding questions for the meetings. This exchange highlights the ways that facilitators and organizational leaders grappled with placing the “book group” frame within strong mission-driven organization. While the results of this study point to the value of a “big tent” model where a wide range of people find purpose in the groups, this discussion is a reminder that there were ideological limits to perspectives that would be sanctioned in the groups. Together, these

tensions highlight the complexity of this particular structure of political education within a social justice caucus in a teachers union.

Discussion and Significance

This study reveals the wide range of purposes that participants identified for joining book groups as individuals as well as various ways the groups served the goals of the organization. Because of the multiple book topics and the participant-centered structure of the groups, people who were differently positioned in terms of professional role, areas of interest, and experience with teaching or organizing all had access points. In this way, the book groups were a rich space for community building, base building, political education, and action planning. They deepened relationships among people, built alliances across city-wide social justice groups, and fed into action-oriented working groups.

Katherine, in her interview, shared how reading together makes sense for teachers: “It starts in your wheelhouse, but then you’re in the groups and you’re like ‘ok now I’m really getting outside myself.’” The model she describes is promising: bring teachers together around a shared interest (reading) and move them towards actions that are more “outside themselves.” The results of this study indicate the ways that the groups were in fact moving people in new directions towards deeper understandings, closer relationships, and new forms of action.

While there is a growing body of research into the social justice teachers union movement, there are few studies that take an up-close look at political education within these groups. This study offers insight into what motivates individual teachers to participate in such efforts and what they see as the benefits both to themselves and to the greater struggle for educational justice that their organization works towards.

For social justice caucuses in teachers unions, this study offers a roadmap to designing political education efforts, as well potential tensions that may arise. For example, data from this study suggest that teachers seek community, intellectual engagement, opportunities to sharpen their political analysis, and chances to build their skills with others. Offering a variety of book options – some focused more closely on classroom practice and others that take a broader view by allowing group members to make connections among various contexts – ensures a wide range of desires and needs are met and supports base-building goals. Participants’ identification of ideas built over multiple summers highlights the importance of creating predictable structures so that people can look forward to participating on a regular cycle. The ways participants connected the work of the book groups to other political education and organizing efforts suggest that various structures can support each other organically.

Analysis of tensions also offers insights into challenges that may arise when book group structures are situated within a mission-driven organization. Organizers should expect to grapple with the multiple roles of the book groups within the organization, and think about questions such as: When does political education for its own sake come into tension with base-building efforts? At what point does the organic feel of a book group get compromised by the non-negotiable ideological positions of an organization? What is gained and lost by focusing on measurable outcomes and organizational logistics, such as sign-in sheets and the like?

For researchers concerned with social justice unionism and teacher activism, this study builds on the growing body of empirical research on social justice caucuses within teachers unions.

It offers a fine-grained look at one organization's political education effort and suggests areas for further study. This analysis of the purposes of book groups points to future research that tracks participant engagement over time, as well as how the groups evolve along with the organization. For example, a study that follows book group participants across multiple years and attends to the range of other political education and organizing efforts they join would further inform the field about the value of book groups and other political education efforts. Furthermore, efforts to more deeply understand the evolution of an organization and its political education structures would add further nuance to what we know about the evolution of organizational missions over time (Maton, 2018), how particular organizers navigate various spaces (Morrison, 2018), and how learning occurs within organizing generally (Foley, 1999) and within teacher organizing specifically (Kohli et al., 2015; Zavala & Henning, 2017). Finally, the thoughtful, sharp, and nuanced voices of teachers throughout this analysis about their own political education points to implications for teacher educators, teachers, and facilitators of teacher learning. Specifically, we must continue to advance visions of teachers as public intellectuals (Giroux, 1995), abolitionists (Love, 2019), and cultural workers (Freire, 1998) who take action both within and outside of their classrooms as they build their understandings about the injustices of society and their roles in addressing them.

Appendix A

Summer 2016 Booklist

- Bacon, D. (2008). *Illegal people: How globalization creates migration and criminalizes immigrants*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Bradbury, A., Brenner, M., & Slaughter, J. (2016). *Secrets of a successful organizer*. New York, NY: Labor Notes
- Brown, A. (2015). *A good investment?: Philanthropy and the marketing of race in an urban public school*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Coates, T. N. (2015). *Between the world and me*. New York, NY: Random House
- Desmond, M. (2016). *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing.
- Emdin, C. (2016). *For white folks who teach in the hood... and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Seabury.
- Georgakas, D., & Surkin, M. (1998). *Detroit, I do mind dying*. New York, NY: South End Press.
- Goldstein, D. (2014). *The teacher wars: A history of America's most embattled profession*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. New York, NY: South End Press.
- Laura, C. T. (2014). *Being bad: My baby brother and the school-to-prison pipeline*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- López, I. H. (2015). *Dog whistle politics: How coded racial appeals have reinvented racism and wrecked the middle class*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Morris, M. (2016). *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Butler-Wall, A., Cosier, K., & Harper, R. L. (Eds.). (2016). *Rethinking sexism, gender, and sexuality*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.

Taylor, K. Y. (2016). *From# Blacklivesmatter to black liberation*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

Appendix B

Interviews of Book Group Participants

Name	Professional Position	Race	Gender	Books Participated in Summer 2016
Aviva	Teacher	White	Woman	Rethinking Gender; #BlackLivesMatter; Between the World
Rochelle	School Physical Therapist	African American	Woman	Secrets of a Successful Organizer; Dog Whistle
Elsa	Teacher	White	Woman	Pedagogy of the Oppressed
Kerri	Teacher	White	Woman	Pushout
Anne	Teacher	White	Woman	Evicted
Jack	Teacher	White	Man	Illegal People; For White Folks; #BlackLivesMatter
Darryl	Teacher	White	Man	For White Folks
Natalie	Community Organizer	White	Woman	Illegal People
Shane	Teacher	White	Man	Between the World
Rebecca	Teacher	White	Woman	Rethinking Gender; Illegal People; Teacher Wars; Evicted
Sam	Teacher	White	Man	Secrets of a Successful Organizer; Illegal People
Katherine	Teacher	White	Woman	Pushout
Calvin	Teacher	White	Man	Rethinking Gender; For White Folks
Isaiah	Teacher	Black	Man	#BlackLivesMatter; Dog Whistle
Patti	Teacher	Black	Woman	Pushout
Charles	Teacher, Organizer	Black	Man	#BlackLivesMatter
Jessica	Teacher	White	Woman	Teacher Wars

Name	Professional Position	Race	Gender	Books Participated in Summer 2016
Keisha	Educational Nonprofit	Black	Woman	For White Folks
Ayotola	Educational Nonprofit	Black and African American	Woman	For White Folks; Between the World

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