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## **TEACHING AMIDST PRECARITY: PHILADELPHIA'S TEACHERS, NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS AND THE PUBLIC EDUCATION CRISIS**

**ABSTRACT:** The School District of Philadelphia's "doomsday budget" in May 2013 slashed 3,500 staff and \$300 million from an already stressed infrastructure of resource-poor, dilapidated schools. When educators entered their buildings in September, they found themselves working without critical staff like counselors and nurses, and attempting to deliver their lessons in overcrowded classrooms with no supplies. Arguing that neoliberalism must be understood as "an experience" and not merely a set of policy assemblages, this article explores how teachers' narratives of self, constructions of their school and the districts' struggle, and their larger responses to the perceived contradictions of neoliberal education policies coming to bear on their students came to constitute a rising critical consciousness. Drawing on 30 interviews with teachers and administrators, and 9 months of participant observation at a neighborhood high school, Johnson High, this article further ethnographically depicts the ways in which resistance and complicity to neoliberal education reforms were inextricably bound up in teachers praxis, educational care, and political engagements.

### **Introduction and Field Context**

***Betty (English-Language teacher):** In this country anymore, I don't feel that the average citizen believes that it's the government's job to educate their children. The pendulum is swinging into an area where the haves are saying, 'Well, that's a family's responsibility, and we'll take care of our own.' That leaves all of these undereducated, underserved people with no one looking out for them. You know, people care more about stopping you from aborting a baby that you don't want than they care about educating the one you have. They'll go and picket for that. They'll go and blow up hospitals for that. All of these nice, suburban people will come into the city to protest those things. But when do you see any of them saying that that kid that lives in a one-bedroom apartment with six other people deserves a better condition of living than that? Nobody protests that. Those same people driving Lexus SUVs are sending money every month to Africa to feed those kids. Who's feeding our kids? (Interview, 12/18/13)*

The School District of Philadelphia's "doomsday budget" in May 2013 slashed 3,500 staff and \$300 million from an already stressed infrastructure of resource-poor, dilapidated schools (Gabriel, 2013; Popp, 2014). Mirroring national trends in urban education reform pushing privatization, public intellectuals and

media have named Philadelphia the epicenter of the “slow extinction of public education” and “a city on the brink” of educational collapse (Ravitch 2014; Kerkstra 2014). Betty, a veteran teacher at Johnson High (JH), a diverse public school in the middle of rapidly changing neighborhood demography due to high volumes of immigration, levels an emotional critique in the throes of unprecedented fiscal crisis. Her monologue reflects the general morale of this public high school as it struggled to operate while facing the loss of dozens of critical support staff and 90 percent of funds for supplies (Fieldnote, 9/14/13). Betty conveys feelings of abandonment and anger toward what she perceives as a deteriorated American social ethic – a racialized, classed hypocrisy she understands to be product of the increasing geographical and socioeconomic distance between the haves and have-nots. She tethers her analysis of a retrenched state for urban schools serving low-income children of color to the unraveling of a social safety net for the poor. “Leaving all of these undereducated, underserved people with nobody looking out for them,” Betty laments the politics of school funding, driven by shifts in what the “average citizen” feels “the government” ought to do.

As low-income students of color in cities as well as their educators are left to fend for themselves in the void left by severely truncated state support for district neighborhood schools, Betty and her colleagues therefore act as not only educators, but also politically charged agents negotiating the ramifications of austerity at ground-zero. This article aims to capture an expanding critical consciousness among educators that gained momentum throughout 2013-2014, the year I spent doing research in their school. It further ethnographically portrays how educators responded to the task of educating amidst resource scarcity and threats to the integrity of their profession.

While neoliberalism has been written about extensively in the field of education as an entanglement of practices, discourse, and ideology linked to logics which position the free market as the ultimate mechanism for improving the provision and quality of public goods like education (Apple, 2001; Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005), few studies have focused on the ways in which teachers interpret, make meaning, and act on these reforms and their consequences for their praxis. There is also little recent scholarship that documents how teachers in traditional district schools apprehend their current roles and futures as educators current political economy of urban education, one which is marked by resource deprivation and constant school closure threats (Lipman, 2011). Their personal narratives are central to identifying how they position themselves in this schema and how their experiences inform the politics behind their teaching.

Drawing from anthropological theories of educational labor and resistance, I contend that the complicated relationship that public educators developed with their craft in the midst of one of the United States’ worst urban districts budget crises historically exposes much about the unintended consequences and limits of these reforms. I further argue that teachers must be understood as critical political actors with social narratives that reveal how complicity and resistance to neoliberal reform are inextricably intertwined in their lives, teaching, and educational care. To illuminate this argument, I set out to answer the following questions which center around two axes– the first related to their relationship to their perceptions around the district crisis and the future of public education, and the second to their everyday practice with students in the midst of growing resource paucity. First, how do teachers and administrators understand their work, professional responsibilities, and efficacy in the context of this crisis? Second, how are teachers responding in their classrooms and lives to perceived contradictions around the direction of neoliberal reform? These questions and the tentative findings rehearsed below are part of a longitudinal project that addresses how teachers’ career trajectories and political engagements are shaped by the direction of school reform in the School District of Philadelphia.

### **Relevant Literature & Theoretical Framework**

In the last 30 years, urban education reformers have embraced market-based strategies to increase “quality” and “efficiency” in educational provision (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Lipman, 2004; Ravitch, 2013). The inevitability of market-based restructuring

now denotes what Antonio Gramsci referred to as popular “common sense” in urban education reform, or a social field of struggle where the socio-political order is forged through hegemonic ideologies (Hill, 2007). Deregulation, accountability, competition, and choice have become the “common sense” principles guiding the direction of urban school reform in post-industrial cities like New Orleans, Detroit, and Philadelphia where disproportionate numbers of low-income children of color attend public schools (Gold, Simon, Cucchiara, Mitchell, & Riffer, 2007; Mullins, 2014).

Social scientists across the disciplines have widely deployed, circulated, and debated the substance and parameters of the notion of “neoliberalism” to characterize the current socio-political order, particularly those concerned with the ramifications for the privatized distribution of traditional public goods in the post-Keynesian welfare state (Brenner & Theodore, 2003; Harvey, 2005; Katz, 2008). Those writing about neoliberalism in education have generally examined the multifarious and oftentimes adverse consequences of mapping market-based models onto educational service delivery (Apple, 2001). While some have focused on issues of equity in resource distribution and high-stakes testing (Cucchiara, 2013; Koyama, 2010; Ravitch, 2013), others have railed against the racist assumptions undergirding the conception and rollout of neoliberal education policies like philanthropic school partnerships and school closures (Brown, 2012; Lipman, 2011). However, very few studies have addressed neoliberalism as an *experience* with consciousness-transforming potentialities for educators. For the purpose of framing the positional dilemmas surfacing from my ethnographic tracking of urban educators’ work in Philadelphia throughout the AY 2013-2014 school year, I draw on two particular conceptions of neoliberalism. The first situates urban educators as arms of the State, pointing to the disciplinary role they play as instruments of neoliberal education reform. The second locates potential agencies and spaces of resistance that emerge from their perceived contradictions of these reforms. This lens also has methodological implications for the employment of ethnographic methods to understand the interlaced modes of resistance and troubled complicity that educators’ engage.

### *Theoretical Framework*

First, I borrow from Soss, Fording, & Schram's (2011) conception of neoliberalism as a social field of poverty governance that is “pursued through a diffuse network of actors who are positioned in quasi-market relations and charged with the taking of bringing discipline to the lives of the poor” (p. 2). On a praxis-level, educators in urban schools participate as members of a “diverse network of actors” creating disciplinary spaces in their classrooms through the implementation of state-sanctioned curriculum, testing, and classroom management policies. As these traditional disciplinary mechanisms become increasingly tied to marketized models in the current political moment, teachers naturally straddle the tensions arising between policy implementation *in context*, and their charged role as implementers of state policy. This tension is apparent in testimonies like Betty’s, as educators identify as both representatives of the “government” and also as advocates that “look out” for the interests of disadvantaged children (Interview, 12/18/13).

While the first conception addresses the macro-level positioning of educators in a larger socio-political field as limbs of a market-mechanized State apparatus<sup>1</sup>, the tension that Betty points to between advocacy and discipline for low-income youth introduces another important conception that Carol Greenhouse (2010) refers to as “neoliberalism as experience.” She writes, “Neoliberalism as experience necessarily involves problems of interpretation, some of them fundamental to the shape of the future” (p. 2). By framing neoliberalism not only as a field of poverty governance but also one of interpretation, the ethnographer can illuminate how relationships and embedded histories influence educators’ critiques and sense of agency around the direction of reform.

Educators framed as both social agents and also disciplinary actors of a neoliberal State therefore opens up possibilities for asking about the political nature of their “work” and the ways in which their self-

understandings influence their construction of problems and responses in their school communities. Downey (2007) posits that often the “job” of teaching is often conflated with the “work” of teaching. He argues that when public educators are not teaching or preparing to teach, their “work” disappears off the radar of researchers, limiting the kinds of questions that can be asked about their labor process. Instead of understanding teachers as merely executors of curriculum or disciplinarians, one must question the ways in which the process of meaning making spills beyond the bounds of the classroom and into educators’ interactions with students in their homes, neighborhoods, and personal lives. This “narrative work,” or sense making through the telling of stories, offers a window into the knowledge that teachers develop to cultivate meaning in a desperate educational milieu that they otherwise understand to be unjust and immoral.

It is Greenhouse’s (2010) second conception of neoliberalism “as experience” that resonates deeply with Downey’s theory of “teacher work,” as it captures the totality of educators’ caregiving experiences which drive the interpretation, implementation, and emergent resistance to neoliberal reform in difficult educational contexts. By listening to participants during my years in the field, the notion of neoliberalism as a *personal experience* resounded with how teachers narrated their stories around the implementation of these reforms in context. In the following sections I want to consider how teachers’ narratives of self, constructions of their school and the districts’ struggle, and their larger responses to the perceived contradictions of the policies coming to bear on their students come to constitute a rising critical consciousness. If “social self-understandings,” as Gramsci argued, both enable and constrain social change, tracking the transformation of teachers’ consciousness in Downey’s conception of their “work” will animate the spaces of resistance that are primarily accessed through ethnographic inquiry. The duality of this framework speaks therefore to not only educator resistance, but also the moral dilemmas teacher face as they engage their mission as public educators in an increasingly privatized urban school district.

## Methodology

The data stem from a much larger ethnographic project at a diverse neighborhood high school in Philadelphia, Johnson High (JH).<sup>2</sup> Because my project examines the larger implications for neighborhood high schools of Philadelphia’s mass school closure threat, I chose JH because of its placement on the “school closures list” a document that has been issued by the School District of Philadelphia annually since 2011 that recommends schools for closure based on a series of criteria (Limm, 2012). JH, however, was not slotted for closure in May 2013, making it an interesting case study to understand resistance to neoliberal austerity policies (Popp, 2014). I hypothesized that JH’s unique demographics --- its student body comprised of 52 percent Asian, 10 percent Caucasian, 27 percent African-American, and 11 percent Latino students and its breakdown across 22 different ethnic groups, immigrant generations, and statuses --- played a role in the cultural politics it engaged to evade closure (Fieldnote, 10/14/13). Employing an embedded case study approach, I grounded my study at JH but also conducted fieldwork at multiple other sites – two community-based and immigrant-serving organizations, students’ and teachers homes, and district-level administrative offices in order to capture the layers of crisis at the state, district, and neighborhood levels coming to influence the trajectory of the budget crisis, and in turn, the experiences of educators and students coping with unprecedented funding and operating constraints.

My background as a former English-language teacher in Southeast Asia, a white female graduate student from a selective university, and the dire circumstances under which I was entering JH in September 2013 for full-time fieldwork, profoundly influenced the kinds of relationships I built throughout the school year. I worked closely with English-language teachers as a participant observer and tutor in their classrooms where labor and resource scarcity consistently textured our interactions. Teachers and the principal understood my presence as an “extra body” that they desperately needed to fill gaps in staffing and manage overcrowded classrooms. The stress of the budget crisis permeated my interactions as I became

not only a witness, but also a counselor that fielded existential questioning and entreaties for affirmation from distraught teachers and administrators. As a representative from an “elite” university, teachers sometimes questioned my motives for doing research. They often told me that I had to promise “someone making decisions” would read my work so that they would know “how bad it is” (Fieldnote, 12/13/13). While the counselor-role I came to play among the teachers I worked with closely wore on me psychologically throughout the year and blurred the line between ethnographer and therapist, it offered deep insights into the narratives of teachers that I argued as significant in my theoretical framework.

For this article in particular I draw on 30 formal interviews from those teachers and administrators, fieldnotes from 9 months of participant observation in 6 different classrooms, social media and email correspondence, document analysis of local and national news sources and circulating literature among staff, and attendance at assemblies, school-events, city-wide protests, and district School Reform Commission (SRC) meetings, a board elected by the state to oversee Philadelphia’s reform trajectory. Analysis for this particular facet of the larger study was conducted through the use of Dedoose, qualitative coding software. Interviews, fieldnotes, and documents were all uploaded to a database and sustained two rounds of open coding. A more refined coding schema was developed from the open codes as they pertained to the research questions motivated by the conceptual framework.

## Findings

### *Surviving September 2013*

In the days leading up to September 9<sup>th</sup>, JH’s staff waited with nervous anticipation to see whether the School District of Philadelphia would receive a release of funds from the state Congress to open schools (McCorry, 2013). In May 2013, the District closed 24 schools and eliminated 3,000 positions district-wide. Due to these shortcomings, JH lacked a full-time guidance counselor and nurse. Most classes had 35+ children and the lunchroom was overflowing, almost half of the students usually not making it to the front of food line before the bell rang for the next period (Fieldnote, 9/16/13). Walking in JH’s main office on the first day, I saw the principal and secretary desperately trying to enroll the deluge of students at the door. Another neighborhood high school had closed, bringing several hundred more students than JH had expected. With five empty desks of former administrative staff laid off by the May cuts, the principal gave me an exasperated look and sighed, “We’re the only ones sailing this ship” (Fieldnote, 9/9/13).

The fall was chaotic, teachers attempting to salvage lesson plans without paper. Broken copy machines, burnt out smart-board bulbs, and gaping holes in ceilings streaming rainwater, remained neglected. If a classroom did have textbooks, albeit dated, three and four students often crowded around one. JH, a building celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary at in December 2013, sealed off its asbestos-ridden 4<sup>th</sup> floor. Many students and teachers complained of tight-chests to me as I sat in corners observing their classes. While I was allegedly there to observe, I acted as a sounding board to the palpable stress. With the memory of JH surviving the “school closures list,” a compilation of schools the year prior considered for closure, staff admitted the danger of drawing attention to the JH’s infrastructural shortcomings. Anne, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade history teacher, explained,

We need a new roof and nobody wants to talk about it. If you say we need a new roof, then there’s another reason for them at 440 [District Headquarters] to shut us down and after all we went through last year, who wants that? But there’s only one cleaning staff this year responsible for the whole school! These children study in filth. Between the asbestos and cockroach droppings on these floors, and no school nurse, I’m surprised we haven’t had a lawsuit on our hands. I’ve been hospitalized three times this year for my asthma alone. Is this what you offer these kids? What do you think they learn from this? That they’re not worth it. That’s what they learn.” (Interview, 4/14/14)

Anne explicitly ties the state of the school building to the implicit message she feels her students learn by coughing in dusty, leaky rooms with rotting floorboards. Similarly to Betty, the English teacher introduced

at the beginning of this article, she embeds a critique of the social values informing the abandonment of these students' buildings. She also identifies the Catch-22 imposed by school closure policies. One cannot advocate for one's school without drawing attention to a problem that may position a school as worthy of closure. Anne shows that in the process of resisting closure and carrying on with business as usual, the school becomes complicit in the further emptying of its coffers.

### *Markers of 'quality' – Keeping Johnson High viable*

Staff at JH expressed resentment that survival required silence, brushing over the ugly parts, and recycling them into narratives that marketed the school as deserving of "investment" (Fieldnote, 11/4/13). Knowing that the building's awful condition boded poorly for their evaluation at the district level, and also witnessing the closure of another neighborhood school, teachers often remarked that there had to be visible markers of "creativity" in their classrooms. As district and state officials conducted walk-throughs of the schools, the teachers felt the need to demonstrate "resourcefulness" and "innovation" that could be easily checked on a list. The school biology teacher, Raymond, caught cockroaches in the early mornings on his classroom floors, corralling them in a tank in order to have live specimens available to his Advanced Placement class.

**Raymond:** We don't have money for fish or animals. That's why I keep roaches because I find them running around. They're cheap because I don't have to feed them and will eat each other if they grow too big. I just want the have the kids something to look at and that people who come to see if I'm doing my job will check off on it. It's cool, but I don't have the money to do animal behavior experiments. I ordered the kits at the beginning of the year but the kits still haven't come in for my AP bio labs because we never got the School Improvement Grant from the state and it's April. I was supposed to do 12 labs and I've maybe done 3. (Interview, 4/10/14)

Raymond shows that by making the best of a bad situation, he is actually depriving the students of a full implementation of the curriculum. Being surveyed by higher-level administration required him to think outside of the box, using school pests as a stand-in for frogs and mice. The question of doing "what's best" for his students therefore became increasingly distorted when notions of teacher "innovation" and "creativity" toed the line of reinforcing an objectionable status quo. Through the discursive reframing of the school as worthy of remaining open, teachers like Raymond involuntarily participated in a kind of silencing that rendered invisible the injustices perpetrated against their school through perpetual neglect.

### *Appeasing "standards agents"*

Many teachers in addition to Raymond acknowledged the need to appease "standards agents," or officials examining the execution of district and state teaching criterion, while also engaging in the use of what James Scott (1976) referred to as "hidden transcripts." Scott studied hidden transcripts in the highlands of Southeast Asia where he observed how peasants subverted imperial projects through activities, speech acts, and signs to respond, resist, or rejoin oppressive social situations imposed by state power. Transcripts are not readily interpretable in the public domain as insubordinate, but constitute and organize power to subvert perceived prejudices in ways that state actors that are attempting to assert control over a population cannot always make legible. Sonu (2012) highlights that in schools, hidden transcripts emerge from a "dual prerogative": "One that conforms to the gestures expected of them given the punitive consequences of expulsion and another that induced an 'acting out' against the controls of differential rank and regulation" (p. 242). At a professional development seminar in November 2013, I sat at a table with three teachers while the principal stood at the front of the room, lecturing the 45 educators present on the importance of placing neatly listed "Lesson Objectives" each day on the board. He emphasized that the superintendent and state officials carrying out evaluations would be measuring "student awareness" of the objectives on the board. "If the students cannot recite the objectives for the lesson verbatim when called upon, that is going to reflect poorly on us," the principal explicated (Recording, 11/7/13). The

conversation that followed at the table demonstrated the conflicted nature of the developing hidden transcripts.

**Betty (ELL teacher):** Why do we need to follow this stuff at all? It's insane to me that the ceiling is falling in and that my kids can barely speak a word of English, yet objectives regurgitation is our big worry.

**Frank (ELL teacher):** Oh I don't even care. I put the same thing on the board everyday. There's no way that I'm going to get through what they want me to get through in 45 minutes. My kids, especially the Central American kids, can barely read, let alone speak English. Some of them have never been to school before. I just put them up there to get them off my back, but that's not the important thing. Standards? Really? You want to talk about standards now? They hypocrisy kills me.

**Betty:** Oh yeah, I do too. I do the same thing with my lesson plans. They're crazy if they think that Common Core applies here. You expect us to jump 7 grade levels in a year with kids who just came into the country? Then you want them to test a year after they get here?

**Alice (History teacher):** I don't like the standards and they're unfair and all, but we have an obligation to uphold them. Where will these kids go if they don't? No charter school will take a lower level ELL student, or a kid with big behavior problems. Nobody wants those kids. The places for those kids to go are disappearing so we have a responsibility to those kids to keep this place open, even if it means putting up that bullshit. (Fieldnote, 11/7/13)

In this conversation, Betty and Frank understand the "standards" imposed from the district and state as hypocritical, punitive, and unrealistic. As ELL teachers, they work with students with interrupted educational backgrounds and low literacy levels, thus facing foundational as well as linguistic barriers in their praxis. Arguing that the expectation for them to compensate for their students' backgrounds is unfair, Betty and Frank interpret "standards" as absurd in the context of the obstacles they face in the classroom. In order to avoid a confrontation with administrators and district evaluators, they comply with the mandate and write the objectives on the board every morning.

However, they ultimately diverge from the curriculum and develop their lesson plans to meet perceived student capabilities. Their hidden transcript is configured by their analysis of the egregious disjuncture between the "standard" and the processing of nuanced classroom characteristics not considered by Common Core developers and curriculum specialists. JH's diverse student body of ELL students, many of which come across borders without parents or from refugee camps across Asia (Fieldnote, 2/13/12), positions Betty and Frank as advocates and social workers as they assume the responsibility of caretaking for these students in their classrooms and outside of them. Helping them navigate a water bill when it has gone unpaid, or finding an immigration lawyer to help their detained parent, transcend the task of merely teaching the English language. Betty and Frank's analyses are therefore informed by the totality of their experiences with these students in their homes, neighborhoods, and classrooms. The rift separating expectation and reality could not be more pronounced. The moral imperative to meet their students needs therefore necessitates this small, inconspicuous agitation.

Yet the "hidden transcript" of evading district and state standards is not without problems as Alice points out. The power struggle forged by Betty and Frank in their praxis could potentially have adverse consequences for the students it seeks to advantage. Alice sees the need for some kind of standard but also their "unfair" nature when taking into account overwhelming student needs. Her quote underscores the danger in agitating and being found out when the pool of schools serving "these kids" sits in jeopardy. It may be "bullshit," but the range of choices Alice feels these teachers can make is also shrinking. The political act of choosing to remain a teacher at JH, with the kids that charter and special admission schools "don't want", becomes the issue of larger significance for Alice. She understands the maintenance of her position as an act of implicit defiance, as the school closure current gains strength.

*Battling privatization with a double-edged sword*

This conversation therefore points to the dual-nature of transcripts as teachers make meaning out of ways to resist what they sense as a stacked deck. Whether discarding an objective or merely not quitting in the context of scarce resources and intensifying standards, transcripts take diverse forms across teachers as they confront power structures in their praxis. What one teacher sees as resistance, another understands as risking the larger project of preventing closure and the privatization of Philadelphia's public education system. It is this duality that also textured JH educators' scramble for resources throughout the school year. In an effort to beautify their classrooms and attract private funds for a fieldtrip, Anne, Betty, and Frank all agreed to teach credit-recovery classes on the weekends through a "community partner." While JH lacked a guidance counselor for the first half of the school year as well as a nurse, the school was home to 16 "community partners." This range of corporately sponsored and city-supported non-profits provided anywhere from after-school homework help and music classes to sports programs and college counseling.<sup>3</sup> JH embodied what Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk (2001) called a "Christmas Tree school," or a school with a proliferation of external programming with little coordination between partners and school staff. One particular partner, a non-profit I call Guitars and Hoops, offered \$500 supply budgets to each teacher that participated in their credit-recovery weekend programming. Buying reams of paper, markers, and poster board, these teachers secretly parsed several hundred dollars of supplies for their classes during the week. The teachers admitted that by wooing "community partners," the school was able to accomplish two objectives. First, partners provided them with resources that the state withheld for supplies, extracurricular programming, and critical counseling staff. Building relationships with them was central to remotely addressing student needs, particularly in light of the budget cuts. When I asked Frank in an interview about whether "community partners" were a necessary mechanism for keeping JH open, he explained vigorously.

**Frank:** OH! WE DO NEED THEM! Hands down. They're not like add-ons to the school anymore. We're building on top of them. They're holding us up because they have resources, manpower that they can bring into the school, and outside connections. They are the ones running most of the events. It's a little bit troubling because the grant for Guitars and Hoops' programming is running out in two years. They have to renew the grant, but if they don't get renewed, it's done. (Interview, 4/10/14)

Relying on several partners including the Guitars and Hoops organization, Frank shows that in order to attract extra resources and programming to retain students and offer them opportunities to engage in activities beyond the classroom, staff at JH had to create an internal marketplace of unstable privatized services. By enticing partners and cultivating relationships, Frank and other teachers tried to fill in the gaps in resources left by the budget cuts. The school, through partnerships, was also able to market itself as a school with opportunities for students in a market-like moment where charter school expansion threatened to diminish their attendance numbers. Many administrators and teachers felt that they were left with no choice but to find partnerships, but also acknowledged partnerships' problematic nature. On one hand, they felt they were advocating for their students in the face of retrenched state support for their education. Yet they resented that they were forced to be entrepreneurs in addition to educators. Betty explicates the contradictory nature of advocacy through partnerships in her own work.

**Julia:** How do you feel about having so many "community partners" in the building?

**Betty:** I'm glad they're here because the kids need stuff and these organizations have given me supplies and support and they've tried to make things interesting. From a critical standpoint though, that means that the district doesn't have to do it and that takes pressure off of them. I'm sure that they love all of these people coming in and supporting our schools. They use it as a marketing tool for schools and for the "quality" of what's going on and I resent that. I feel like the state doesn't fund us appropriately but they still get the benefit. The partners enable them to cut

and cut and it's a double-edged sword because they hold us to the same standards whether we have the resources or not. It does affect us as a school if we fail. And are we failing by the standards that I care about? I don't care if we fail by Keystone standards,<sup>4</sup> but I care if we fail because kids are getting hurt and they are. (Interview, 12/17/13)

Betty sees partnerships as part and parcel of similar trends across the district in terms of making marketplaces of school services in order to relieve pressure on the state for providing adequate funding to staff schools. By engaging “partnerships,” teachers felt they were forced into a predicament where they had to demonstrate school “quality” through the attraction private resources to accomplish rudimentary goals like improving college access and providing creative outlets like music classes. The “double-edged sword” of seeking out resources in their absence after a budget cut meant reducing political accountability for a state that would not release funds to rehire counselors, nurses, and thousands of laid off educators that formerly provided the same services. In this case, teachers understood the political act of resisting closure and continuing to provide a opportunistic haven for ‘undesirable students’ as inextricably bound up in the larger thrust to privatize public education.

The strategy of engaging private partnerships with non-profits stands in contrast to the silencing around school needs (i.e. caving roof) that would render the school unfit for operation. In the latter strategy, teachers are evading district surveillance of their building's condition, a problem they cannot resolve with the release of funds to make repairs. In a bankrupt district looking to consolidate schools as a means of refinance, the administration and teachers know that their options, in terms of appealing to a public institution like the district office for help, are limited. Yet, indirectly, the school calls attention to its needs the employment of “public-private partnerships” (PPPs) with non-profits to attract labor and resources. Engaging private partners, however, is a larger district-sanctioned strategy for ‘improving’ school quality and more broadly has been championed as the “new mode” of educational governance, ranging from support from private sector to collaboration with corporate entities for education reform (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Robertson et. al, 2012).<sup>5</sup> PPPs originally became a buzzword in Third Way Politics at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a governing paradigm adopted rhetorically by the Clinton and Blair administrations which promoted both centralization and decentralization of state power through the forging of partnerships with the third sector, a blend of NGOs, non-profits, community associations, and corporations (Giddens, 1998, 2000). “Community” was framed as both impetus and agent of social change, mobilized by government to solve problems formerly handled by the state.

However, scholars studying partnerships, particularly in contexts of political and humanitarian crisis in recent years, have seen the intent of PPPs shift in recent years, a shift which speaks to the crisis faced by schools like JH looking to PPPs as a means of survival. While the intent of the Third Way was to reinvigorate civic culture by offering a prominent role for third sector activities in welfare, healthcare, and education (Christie & Hargreaves, 1998; Rifkin, 1995), scholars have warned that the decentralization of power through PPPs could undermine the equitable distribution of traditional public goods as the state's regulatory ebbs in the face of rampant profiteering (Minow, 2003; Miraftab, 2004). Adams' (2013) recent ethnography documenting the work of PPPs mobilized to rebuild post-Katrina New Orleans demonstrated that when the responsibility of taking care of vulnerable populations is replaced by market-mechanized forms of care the result is an unregulated, uneven distribution of services that puts critical safety-net infrastructures at risk. The shift here is that partnerships were meant to complement state supports, not replace them entirely.

This critique within the literature on PPPs is also embedded in the critiques of JH's educators using partnerships in the context of a very different kind of crisis than a natural disaster; but nonetheless, a crisis. Teachers were forced to rely on PPPs because of unprecedented resource scarcity, a dependency that they resented and identified as part and parcel of the larger problematic of the privatization of public education. However, partnerships represented, under district surveillance, an indicator of ‘school quality’

and particularly the quality of an entrepreneurial administration and staff. If one considers PPPs as a form of privatization, or a neoliberal move to employ private means to accomplish the government's traditional responsibility to provide public education, one can also see that the very spaces opened for educator resistance (e.g. avoiding school closure) are simultaneously textured by complicity with the neoliberal project of privatization (e.g. partnerships). This duality raises questions about how neoliberal governance works to silence particular forms of resistance while legitimizing others that conform, in partial, to the pressures it induces through austerity.

### *Fighting the good fight*

In the former section I considered how teacher and administrators engaged private partners, a strategy which reflected the simultaneous complicity with the neoliberal project, yet overall resistance to the threat of closure. Here I consider the quarantined activism of educators and the potential protection that teacher collectives can offer more legible forms of resistance to neoliberal policies.

As the school year progressed, a core of four teachers at JH became increasingly present at district meetings. These teachers, who mostly taught ELL students, began protesting district reform policies that ignored context and disadvantaged English Language Learners. I attended multiple planning meetings where these teachers gathered at 440 Broad Street and collaborated with other ELL teachers across schools to plead with the SRC to change several policies. At these meetings this core was the most vocal among the educators present. Leading the charge, Betty and Alice brainstormed with the 40 other educators in the room and came to a consensus on several issues. They discussed the disservice done to ELL students by making them take the Keystones after only a year of coming into the country. Alice passionately lamented,

There is an expectation that we graduate students in four years that have limited English, interrupted education backgrounds, and aren't ready for college. They have over 15 days of testing that's mandated at the state level, all of those days, which they're not learning more English and instead, just sitting there confused. When the school year is only 180 days, there is no wiggle room. Oftentimes they fail and have to spend more days making up these tests at the end of the year. These also aren't comprehensive literacy tests! At the end of the day, we still don't have measures for understanding what their reading levels are! (Recording, 1/8/14)

Alice's diatribe was informed by two weeks of watching her Level 1 and 2 ELL students take standardized tests, most of who could not read the material. Observing several of these classes, I watched her pat her students on the shoulders as they slumped at their desks in defeat, encouraging them to "Keep trying. It's almost over" (Fieldnote, 1/23/14). Turning to me, she would whisper, "Why are we doing this to them?" Alice's understanding of these tests and therefore the content of her advocacy were therefore shaped by witnessing the unfruitful labor of her ELL students. Other teachers, building on her comment in the room, complained of the punishment they feel the school endures for accepting disproportionate numbers of these students. Another teacher from an elementary feeder school of JH's continued,

These children aren't getting into charter, magnet, and special admission schools. There are no counselors to help them navigate and the data on their admission is abysmal. Also, we are handing this district over to charter schools and I've never heard of a charter school admitting an ELL student below a 4 for many reasons, mostly because they will screw up their test scores. If they're taking our money, this should actually be a lottery. The students are also struggling to navigate the process of applying to charter schools without suitable guidance counselors. The kids, who also arrive late, in high school, or over the summer, don't have the opportunity to apply and the charter schools don't like to take kids later in high school because they don't feel they can do as much with them as with the younger students. (Recording, 2/27/14)

Naming standardized tests and access to charter and special admission high schools as the two main issues driving stratification and disinvestment in ELL students' futures, JH's core of teachers became presenters

and key organizers in a two-hour presentation delivered to the SRC on multilingual issues in Philadelphia's reform agenda in early April 2014. They additionally attended "Badass Teacher [sic]" rallies in Washington D.C. aimed at ending federal support for Common Core standards and end federal incentives to close and privatize public schools (Facebook Post, 7/28/14). Two teachers in particular distributed literature to other teachers on this movement, through brochures at professional development meetings, as well as through social media like Facebook and Twitter (Fieldnote, 2/2/14).

By attending district- and state-level meetings, teachers were not tied to their schools or seen in those contexts as representatives of their school's quality. Voicing their concerns in these forums as a group and sharing their experiences collectively divorced them from a context of surveillance to one of sanctioned legibility. Teachers, however, often doubted whether their complaints in these forums generated any momentum for policy change, particularly when the district continued to grapple with serious financial constraints. They felt, even in these forums, that the gravity of the budget crisis diminished the district's capacity to act on its educators' recommendations for change. In a sense, this resistance was siloed and therefore silenced in terms of an ultimately policy-translation of their grievances.

### **Conclusion - The Way Forward?**

Throughout the writing of this article (August 2014), regular lunches and correspondence with JH staff demonstrates increased engagement at the city level as yet another budget cut looms. This same core of teachers, led by Betty and Alice, have taken to Philadelphia's streets in addition to the doors of the Department of Education in Harrisburg to protest impending layoffs of 1,000 more teachers and a potentially truncated school year of 150 days (Facebook Post, 7/23/14). Almost every teacher in the school attended the prom, even those most skeptical of conspiracy theories of privatization and crisis, acknowledged that they did not want to miss these events should they be laid off and not be working at JH the following year. However, many teachers also began to question the viability of their profession and started taking steps to exit the field. Two were taking prerequisites at the community college to attend nursing school over the summer, admitting that with another salary cut on top of the 5 year pay freeze, they could not make ends meet for their families (Fieldnote, 5/4/14). Others saw themselves as enacting reform at a more advocacy-based level. Their internal conflict about leaving and therefore "giving in" to the very forces they understood as working against them, is evident in Betty's exit interview in late June.

**Betty:** I feel like I'm more of an education activist than anything else anymore. All I ever wanted to do was teach. That's it. But here I am ready to quit and go to Washington to work for someone who's fighting for these students. But who will be left to teach these kids then? They will just have teachers who are ready to retire or Teach For America types who have no interest in staying in teaching. That's what will be left (pause), if there's anything left. (Interview, 5/21/14)

The conflict Betty and other teachers grapple with now and going into 2014 speaks to the theoretical and practical questions at the heart of this article: What is the "right" response to these constraints? In what ways are teachers making sense of these reforms and what does their critical consciousness contribute to broader understandings of "teacher work" in urban schools? Each teacher at JH questioned whether remaining committed to a vision of public education, currently under attack, was really a form of resistance when the concessions to stay interfered with personal notions of dignity in their own craft.

These muddled consciences and fraught narratives suggest that further ethnographic research is needed to understand how "teacher work" (Downey, 2007), or how their contemporary interpellation of current policies influences the cultural politics around education reform in Philadelphia. This project provides insight into how neoliberalism is reconfiguring the *experience* of being an urban educator and, in turn, processes of meaning making around their labor. These responses tell much about the effects of controversial mechanisms like school closures, testing, charter school expansion, and private partnerships, driving privatization in the districts of poor, post-industrial cities across the United States. A theory of "teacher work" lies in further understanding the ways in which unprecedented crisis fracture or enhance educators' counter-imaginings of the "common sense" driving reform for low-income students of color.

Such work would ultimately be of interest to policy-makers, academics, and activists alike, interested in not only how resistance and complicity to these reforms are structured and how “teacher work” comes to encompass political engagement within and beyond the bounds of their classrooms, but also the translation of implementation of neoliberal reforms in the schools for which they are intended to improve.

#### NOTES

1. I conceive of “the State” as an assemblage of institutions that represent the interests of federal, state, and local governments.
2. The data come from a larger dissertation study that examined the implications of Philadelphia’s mass school closures and AY 2013-2014 district funding crisis for a non-selective neighborhood high school. The project aims to capture the resource-garnering and marketing strategies employed by the school to resist closure and remain open. The study also analyzes the strategies’ implications for the distribution of resources within the school as well for peer and staff relations.
3. Anthropologies of neoliberalism are currently using the proliferation of non-profits, particularly those working in crisis-ridden contexts, as a heuristic to understand the privatization of institutional public resources (Adams, 2013; Somers, 2008).
4. The Keystone Exam is a standardized state test that students must pass in order to graduate from high school in Pennsylvania.
5. The School District of Philadelphia’s Action Plan 2.0, released in the spring of 2014, mentions engagement of school partnerships as one of the two major strategies in improving district-run schools (The School District of Philadelphia, 2014).

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