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## **WE LEARN TOGETHER: PHILADELPHIA EDUCATORS PUTTING SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIONISM PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE**

**ABSTRACT:** In the wake of Chicago's well-known teacher strikes in 2012, social justice union caucuses are popping up across the U.S. as educators seek to better organize through the auspices of their unions in response to what they see as the dismantling of public education. In this article, I explore how members of one educator-led social justice caucus, Philadelphia's Caucus of Working Educators (WE or the Caucus), engage in ongoing individual and collective learning processes as they take up principles of social justice unionism, inquire into race and racism, and make sense of these ideas in relation to their organizing practice. I show that Caucus members' engagement in individual and collective learning processes fundamentally shapes the nature, mission and practices of their broader grassroots educator-led organization.

### **Introduction**

What I'm learning about union ideas and community building concepts, I think that is just some of the deepest stuff I've ever approached, because nobody ever teaches about that... to see this in action... allows much more opportunity to gain a deeper understanding beyond theorizing about it – Zach, Philadelphia public school teacher

Educators like Zach are increasingly organizing within and beyond the auspices of their U.S. teachers' unions to resist neoliberal trends shaping the form and function of American public education. These educators are allying with local parent, student and community groups to strengthen a public response to market-based solutions in K-12 education. They emphasize community resistance to neoliberal discourses of efficiency, reduced public expenditures, enhanced competition and the privatization and standardization of public education, which they see as contributing to a slow but intentional dismantling of public education (Apple, 2006; Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Hursh, 2004; Ravitch, 2014, 2010). Educators are organizing within their unions to call for a strong public education system that respects the professionalism of teachers (Kumashiro, 2012), responds to the diverse and often localized learning needs of students (Nieto, 2009), supports strong local school cultures and structures (Senge, 2000), and adequately addresses long histories of racial segregation in neighborhoods and schools (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014).

The context of Philadelphia poses a potent case study for examining the form and function of grassroots groups as they struggle to respond to and resist neoliberal education reform. The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) has long faced challenges such as a funding formula that leads to the district having an “adequacy gap” that is nearly three times as large in Philadelphia than in other Pennsylvania districts (Steinberg & Quinn, 2013), extreme racial segregation that is reflected in both neighborhoods and the local schools and is believed to shape persistent inequitable funding patterns harming students of color (Blanc & Simon, 2007; Hazelton, 2014; Socolar, 2013), and chronic ongoing district shrinkage as public schools are shut down and replaced with charter schools which are thought to seriously harm the district’s budget (Gobreski, 2014). Residents and voters point to the 2001 district shift in oversight from local to state control as an ongoing problem. Since this time, the School Reform Commission (SRC), which is the body that replaced a local democratically run school board, has been weighted in favor of the state and consistently imposes state-dictated solutions with a bent toward enhanced marketization and competition on the SDP (Lytle, 2013). The ongoing closure of SDP schools and replacement with charter schools has led to a slow shrinking of the membership body and power of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), the local teachers’ union. In the face of local impositions of neoliberal reform, a plethora of grassroots groups have risen up to act as platforms for the voices of Philadelphia students, parents, educators and community members.

These grassroots groups have not taken the trend toward increasingly marketized solutions for public education lightly. Rather, they have consistently and actively organized to raise their voices and resist local neoliberal-inspired policy (Countryman, 2006; Fine, 2013). Educators take an active and front-line role in this grassroots movement for change and organize through a variety of politically motivated groups and actions (Anyon, 2009). The Caucus of Working Educators (WE or the Caucus) is Philadelphia’s newest educator-led grassroots change organization. It was established in March 2014 and seeks to promote a vision of a democratic, locally controlled and fairly funded education system that supports the social and academic learning needs of students from socially and economically marginalized family backgrounds.

This paper, which grew out of a pilot study, examines how Caucus members engage with broader circulating ideas as they work together to create change within their union and city. In particular, it looks at how members individually and collectively grapple with and take up ideas about SJU and race as they make sense of ideas and transform them into practice. In this paper, I first outline the conceptual framework informing this study and highlight literature in the areas of social and transformative learning, social movement unionism, and critical race studies. Next, I describe my data collection methods and then highlight relevant findings on learning in the Caucus. Throughout my findings, I thread central concepts from social justice unionism, critical race studies and social and transformative learning, and conclude by arguing that Caucus members actively engage in individual and collective learning processes that form the very basis upon which the organization itself rests. I show that intellectual engagement and thoughtful inquiry into abstract concepts like SJU and critical race studies allows members to individually and collectively make sense of the ideological stance of the Caucus as well as what they understand to be the broader assault on public education.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This paper looks at how adults engage in social learning practices as they organize for change within their union. In the process, the paper draws upon literature in the areas of social and transformative learning, social movement unionism and critical race studies. Together, these literatures provide a framework for understanding how people learn as they work together to transform their unions and to address inequitable systems of power.

***Social and transformative learning.*** Literature in social movement theory and adult education reinforces the notion that learning is an integral part of social movement participation. Adults who engage in organizing and activism learn through informal activities, such as movement participation and networking,

as well as through formal activities that explicitly seek learning as an outcome, such as participation during vision-making sessions or book clubs (Hall & Clover, 2005; Riley, 2015). Social movements may be understood as pedagogical movements, embodying a spirit of support for autonomous learning as well as collective knowledge construction (Hall, 2012). Foley (1999) cogently argues, “popular struggles and movements have a, so far little studied, learning dimension, which when examined yields insights into the dynamics and effects of social movement activity” (p. 143). This learning dimension is connected to a participant’s identity (Butterwick et al, 2007; Chovanec, 2009), extent or degree of relationship with other movement participants (Diani & McAdam, 2003), emotional involvement and attachment to the organization and movement focus (Goodwin et al, 2001), and the multidimensional ways in which a diffusion of ideas occurs within and beyond the movement (Givans et al, 2010).

Learning is both an individual and a collective process. Individual learning is seen in the varied ways agents assume roles in knowledge construction and engage in internal processes of learning. Individual learning processes can lead to transformation in internal understandings as well as inform outward actions and practice (Sawchuk, 2007). Learning is a collective process when actors create new knowledge through thinking together and engaging in praxis, wherein action and reflection create a continuous and circular process of reflexivity and revision in understanding and action (Freire, 2004). “Street theory,” such as blogs, social media, conversations and other local sources of knowledge, helps develop and spread new constructions of knowledge (Hall, 2012) alongside traditional forms of theory such as published books and academic literature. These different sources of information and theory inform learning that is often subtly embedded in the interactions between social movement actors and results in unanticipated, incidental and dynamic forms of learning that shape the nature of the member organization and broader movement (Choudry, 2012).

***Social movement unionism.*** As a theoretical framework, social movement unionism (SMU) offers new possibilities for the form and function of unions. Fletcher (2011) suggests that “a globally-oriented social justice unionism is essential in both confronting neo-liberal globalization and ensuring union renewal” (p. 271), and defines SMU as “a practice that is oriented towards broad movement-building; membership control of the union; clear societal objectives focused upon social justice; the conscious effort to build strategic relationships with other progressive social movements; and a clear sense of class politics” (p. 276). Built on “notions of social unity and collective action” (Fletcher, 2011, p. 279), SMU is born from a long tradition of American unionism that emphasizes the union’s goal as building the power of the working class broadly defined, rather than simply card-carrying union members (Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008). In this sense, SMU sees the union organization as vitally interconnected with local communities out of a necessity to together agitate for the public good (Hewitt-White, 2015). When applied to teachers’ unions, this emphasis on forming “deep coalitions” (Fletcher, 2011) implies that educators partner with students, families and local communities to together use unions for enhancing social justice and ensuring the public school system meets the needs of all constituents, especially those who have experienced the negative effects of structural racism and classism (Weiner, 2012). In this paper, SMU is considered interchangeable with social justice unionism (SJU), which is the term most commonly employed among education practitioners.

***Critical Race Studies.*** Critical race scholars assert that race is a social construct, one that is both material and ideological in nature (Holt, 2000; Omi & Winant, 1994). The materiality (or visibility) of race reinforces its existence as an objective and value-free category, while its ideological function allows it to act as a system of knowledge that organizes the world (Holt, 2000). In this sense, race is constructed within the minds of people and is reproduced through individual behaviors and the construction and function of social institutions, structures and systems.

Critical race scholars highlight ways in which racism is reproduced at individual, institutional and systemic levels. At the individual level, racism is perpetuated through an assumption of whiteness as the norm. This assumption can be expressed in outright and explicit ways, but is also frequently expressed in more subtle ways such as through aversion or silence (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Trepagnier, 2010). Social institutions like schools perpetuate racism and assert white dominance and superiority through

reflecting and reinforcing legacies of racism within their values, structure and functions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Social systems perpetuate racism when some people are advantaged and others are disadvantaged along racial lines as a result of historically situated institutional structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

## Methods

Drawing on scholarship in social and transformative learning, social movement unionism and critical race studies, this qualitative study examines how Caucus members inquire into SJU and race as they work to transform their ideas into action.

**Organizational context: *The Caucus of Working Educators.*** WE was founded in March 2014 by a small group of educators who had previously been active in other grassroots groups in the city. The organization has grown quickly from just a handful of initial founders to over 165 members in January 2015. WE's membership is primarily composed of educators, although there are some active members who are parents, community members and academics. Approximately 20% of its membership identify as people of color, and the remaining 80% identify as white. Overall, the Caucus' membership tends to be primarily composed of white middle-class educators with varied histories of previous involvement in organizing and activism. Since its founding, the Caucus has emphasized membership-building and strives to reach out to educators and their allies across the city through running events like monthly happy hours, a summer book club series, organizer trainings, an annual membership training boot camp, and an annual conference featuring keynote speakers and social justice unionism workshops. It also takes an active role in organizing around key issues and waging issue-based campaigns, employing tactics like letter-writing, political protests, and other explicit forms of resistance.

WE is intentional in reaching out to local students, parents, academics and community members and strives to create close partnerships with area grassroots organizations. The Caucus distinguishes itself from other local groups by publicly emphasizing a commitment to pushing the PFT to adopt a more radical and militant stance (see Denvir, 2014). On its website, it supports a six-point platform that articulates its commitment to member-driven unionism and to working in partnership with local communities in defense of public education. WE identifies its vision as working within the union and the state to support principles of "transparency, accountability and shared decision-making" in order to secure "high quality, fully funded public education" for all students "regardless of family, income, racial background, or neighborhood" (Our Platform, 2014). The Caucus is unique in that it is the only organization in the city seeking to transform both the PFT and broader Pennsylvania state-level decision-making powers.

WE models itself after comparable groups in Chicago IL, Los Angeles CA, St. Paul MN and Portland OR, where union members similarly adopt a caucus structure in order to push their union to take a more radical stance in protecting and enhancing public education. These official coalitions construct and assert cohesive platforms in order to exert political influence. The caucuses centralize SJU and strive to more closely ally with constituents like parents, students and community members to counter neoliberal trends toward standardization and privatization. SJU caucuses seek to transform the union into a more radical entity from which to agitate for policy change at the local, state and national levels (see Brogan, 2014; Weiner, 2012). American SJU caucuses tend to reference the Chicago Teachers Union and their 2012 strike as a model for their work, and emulate its approach to structure and strategy (see Bradbury et al, 2014; Uetricht, 2014). Philadelphia's Caucus of Working Educators poses an excellent case study of one SJU caucus in the midst of formation and membership building, and provides a good model for understanding how a new educator-led grassroots organization finds its feet.

**Researcher positionality.** My involvement in the Caucus began in April 2014, one month after its official formation. At this time, I was loosely acquainted with a key Caucus organizer who invited me to join WE's Outreach Committee. After several months of involvement in the organization, in July 2014 I proposed to the steering committee the idea of conducting a pilot study that would examine how members

understand the work of the Caucus, and what they believe they take away from their involvement. The steering committee was supportive, articulating that they felt research could strengthen the organization through nurturing a “pedagogy of reflection.”<sup>1</sup> This article is based on my experiences working as an “activist participant observer,” where I straddled two roles: I was both an active member and supporter of the organization as well as a researcher seeking to identify and understand broader social patterns and tendencies within the organization. This article is based on data collected in my work as an activist participant observer with the Caucus from April 2014 to February 2015.

**Data sources.** The data informing this paper was collected through participant observation of Caucus meetings and events, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Since April 2014, I have conducted more than 150 hours of participant observation in the Caucus. This involves attending and participating in meetings and events sponsored or attended by Caucus members. This paper is also informed by audio-recorded interviews with eight members. Documents were collected from electronic communications including social media posts, public emails and organizing emails to dues-paying members in which I was included during the pilot study. The pilot study is ongoing, and the findings highlighted in this paper reveal observations and findings based primarily upon the interviews, my activist participation, and my observations.

**Data analysis.** Data analysis was conducted as follows. Prior to starting formal data collection, I constructed a coding key based on my reading of the scholarly literature. I transcribed handwritten observations and field notes to electronic descriptive versions shortly after observations took place, while making notes about emerging themes and trends in relation to both the coding key and my own observation of trends and themes. During interviews, I similarly noted themes in relation to my coding key and observation of emergent themes from the data. I listened to each of the eight interviews multiple times and transcribed parts of the interviews. Near the end of data collection, notes about emerging themes were compiled, triangulated with the interview data and written into analytic memos. These memos were used to form the broad arguments of this paper. In the final stage, I re-visited the scholarly literature and assessed my argument against the findings of related research. I asked four Caucus members to review the paper and provide feedback on its contents at different points in the writing process in order to ensure both that Caucus members felt comfortable with the organization’s representation in publication, as well as to engage in an ethical and feminist-grounded process of member-checking to receive feedback on the ways in which I was understanding the work and patterns of Caucus members (see Delgado-Bernal, 1998). It is worth noting that during the first round of member checking, a Caucus reader expressed concern that I was misunderstanding patterns of learning around organizational mission. This critique led me to revise my analysis and is reflected in this paper.

## Findings

This article examines how educators in a burgeoning movement seeking educational change engage in learning practices to make sense of ideas circulating both in the mission of the organization as well as in the broader context. In this section, I examine how members engage with three main themes that arose from my data. First, I explore how members articulate their learning experiences as they engage in activism and organizing in the Caucus. Second, I examine how members conceptualize the work of WE in relation to principles of social justice unionism. And finally, I explore how members put ideas about race and racism into conversation with social justice unionism.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I define pedagogy of reflection as a practice of inquiry and reflection which is intimately entwined with the very structure and nature of the organization. Indeed, this paper argues that the Caucus fundamentally embraces a pedagogy of reflection as it engages in its initial processes of formation, membership-building and campaigning, and that this approach serves the important purpose of defining the organization itself.

## Learning in the Caucus

In describing what they gained from their Caucus involvement, many members took care to highlight their personal and collective learning experiences. This learning was consistently articulated as important for shaping the ways members came to understand the Caucus' work and their individual roles in the organization.

***The role of individual learning.*** In the interviews, members frequently spoke about the Caucus as a place that nurtures personal growth. Personal learning experiences took different forms: sometimes learning was theoretical, other times it was technical, and still other times it nurtured the growth of life skills.

Technical learning experiences involved members identifying specific skills they felt could enhance their Caucus duties and organizing. Honing personal skills was framed as vital for improving both their own organizing practice and the broader organization's potency. One member with a history of activism prior to WE involvement connected his personal quest to improve social media skills with his commitment to improving the Caucus' public communication: "I have been playing around on Facebook here and there with language and wording and trying to look more critically at other people's social media and communications strategies... sort of like self-training myself." Here, a commitment to building individual skill was framed as one that stemmed from the member's desire to strengthen WE as an organization.

Learning also took place in more intimate and personal ways, such as in supporting the development of life skills. A member with a background in community organizing expressed that he felt involvement in the Caucus allowed him to grow in highly personal ways, such as through honing team-work skills and personal reliability:

In terms of skills, Working Educators is personally helpful for me in learning how to step up to just be better at turnaround, commitments, organizing skills. That's one-on-ones, that's making sure that when we do a [references specific event] that I can be reliable for that stuff. It feels like a very good inflection point for myself as an activist, where it's like, no, I'm not just going to lone wolf it.... Working Educators is really a good chance for me to feel like part of a team.

Many Caucus members saw their involvement as providing them with an opportunity to grow their skill-base in ways that benefitted them in highly intimate and personal ways.

Members often expressed that they were motivated to become and stay involved in the Caucus because it nurtures personal learning experiences that keeps them feeling intellectually engaged and challenged. A member said, "I think being in the Caucus and going to other stuff to keep my brain pumping, outside of school, you know that's the teaching and learning part, keeps me in [the Caucus]." WE seemed to sustain members' involvement through nurturing an intellectual community among members.

Members frequently linked personal intellectual learning with their involvement in the organization. Many interviewed members identified having read a great number of theoretical and political texts on their own prior to involvement in the organization. Activities such as the Caucus-sponsored summer book clubs allowed these members to engage in ongoing refinement of their personal analysis and knowledge. It also allowed members to bridge their prior experiences and learning with new ideas (Foley, 1999). For example, a member with a long history of community organizing referenced a book by McAlevey (2012) in the summer reading series that resonated strongly with her:

Jane [McAlevey]'s book really really allowed me to see how the organizing could be brought into a union structure, even despite the union structure itself. I feel like part of my idea of union organizing over time has always been like, 'oh, it's so limiting. It's just prescribed by the bureaucratic structures that are inherent.' And so that book really helped me see that you could blow that shit up, and use the organizing principles that I know and believe in and understand to be the ones that really build democratic power.

Here, the participant described the way that involvement in a Caucus-sponsored book group allowed her to understand how prior experiences as an organizer could be applied to union organizing in a way that

she had not previously fully grasped. In this sense, the learning she experienced as a result of her involvement in the Caucus led to personal transformation in how she understood herself in relation to the organization and its work.

Overall, individual members felt that the Caucus provided significant personal learning experiences as they learned new technical skills, honed personal life skills, grew intellectually, and built a stronger personal theoretical base that allowed them to link personal experiences prior to Caucus involvement with new learning resulting from their involvement. Individual learning provided strong motivation for sustained involvement as it provided members with new opportunities to feel challenged and to grow personally.

***The role of collective learning.*** I found that members tended to speak extensively about how collective learning impacted their personal learning and the shape of the Caucus. Many participants described how the Caucus provided shared experiences of learning that led people to see the world in new ways.

Sometimes members found that it was not easy to pinpoint the exact nature of learning resulting from their involvement. For example, a member who is new to activist organizing described an experience of attending a national conference of social justice unionists from across the country: “There’s that visceral feeling that you get [in a group of people sharing the same experience]... A bunch of people asked when we got back ‘what were the cool things you learned’... but I kept coming back to that, the shared experience thing. It was the biggest thing I took away from it.” Across the interviews, I noticed that members frequently had difficulty articulating specific ways in which people came together to make sense of ideas, but that they consistently believed collective learning processes were significant for determining the work and direction of the organization.

Caucus-sponsored activities were often referenced as an opportunity to translate abstract ideas into concrete practice. Many members mentioned having done scholarly and political reading and theorizing prior to becoming involved in WE. However, they found that the Caucus offered a unique opportunity to explore ways that their ideas live in the world and are made real through practice. A member who has done a lot of reading but is new to organizing described this feeling as follows:

I can read the articles and books about the successes of Chicago and stuff like that... but when it’s in that sense it’s still very abstract, so kind of like sitting with a group of, with a small group... like the book groups... it makes it more real. And then hearing about it at the conference... it made it more concrete than just sitting on my couch and reading *How to Jump Start Your Union* alone.

Through talking about ideas with others and then putting them into practice through involvement in the Caucus, members came to engage in Freire’s (2004) concept of praxis, in which ideas are collectively and cyclically reflected upon and put into practice. In this sense, knowledge is always in the making and is fundamentally a social process.

Caucus members tended to express that they were excited by the opportunity to be involved in collective theorizing processes, where ideas could simmer and take shape over time. Intentional spaces for inquiry like decision-making meetings or book clubs, and more informal spaces such as happy hours and social events provided a plethora of opportunity for members to bring individual ideas and wonderings into collective conversation. As one member stated, “It’s not like, let’s sit down and have a structured conversation. It’s more like informally hearing people’s thoughts and having it all percolating.” In this sense, the individual grows through involvement in collective sense-making processes, and in turn shapes the learning of the broader group (Foley, 1999). As individuals engage with ideas about how to take up SJU in their organizing work and how to understand and address racism, they are able to contribute to collective sense-making processes that are rich in social learning experiences. Members together form an understanding of the work of the organization and make this understanding real through putting these ideas into practice.

### **Social Justice Unionism as a Continuum**

Publicly, the Caucus and its members articulate a commitment to social justice and deep alliance with local families and communities. This is reflected in texts accessible to the public such as the Caucus' website, which asserts a clear and coherent statement that aligns with SJU values, and articles published by media allies, which provide a platform for members to vocalize their desire to transform the PFT to a more radical entity and to partner better with families and communities (see Denvir, 2014; Schroeder, 2014). In my study, I found that these publicly available documents summarize the intended work of the organization, while simultaneously glossing over the internal work and diverse understandings of SJU inherent within the membership body.

As members work together in informal social settings like happy hours and in more formal vision setting and organizing experiences like the annual retreat or protest planning meetings, they actively engage with questions about the appropriate goals and actions of the Caucus. Through my interviews, observations and exploration of textual data, I found that there is a continuum of understandings about the meaning of SJU within the membership body. This continuum of understanding is significant because it highlights the diverse ways in which an organization's membership makes sense of broader philosophical principles in relation to the work of their organization. Members tend to take up SJU principles in ways that fall along a continuum of local to system-level change. Interestingly, individual members often predominantly gravitated toward one end of this continuum or the other, even as they sometimes engaged with other points on this continuum for desired change.

**Local-change.** The local-change side of the continuum involves members understanding the Caucus' primary intended work as triggering change in the local schools and communities in which WE members work and live. This perspective emphasizes the role of SJU as strengthening local schools' abilities to respond to and provide for the needs of students, families and the neighborhood. Members who referenced the Caucus' work primarily in terms of an emphasis on local change talked about the importance of shifting the way that local school institutions respond to local student and neighborhood needs. For example, a member who articulated a central concern with students and classroom practice described the Caucus' work as follows: "We know what our schools and what our communities need, and we're just trying to get back to that." This desire to get to work on meeting the needs of local constituents was frequently framed as requiring stronger relationships between local constituents such as teachers, administrators, parents and communities. For example, another member spoke about his own school's needs:

There's just not a lot of solidarity between teachers and parents, and teachers and the community. So, it would be really nice to see that. It would be really nice to see more... solidarity between teachers themselves at the school... right now my goal is just to get more positivity, even if it might be naïve, more positivity in the school. We can be doing something, we should be doing something.

From a local-change perspective, the Caucus was seen as a solution for helping to strengthen local relationships and nurture stronger ties of trust between schools and local families and communities. WE's focus on local relationship building aligns with SJU's commitment to partnering in "deep coalitions" with constituents outside the union to represent public interest (Fletcher, 2011; Weiner, 2012).

The Caucus was also understood to be a tool for constructing an effective and cohesive political response to local school problems. In meetings, members frequently referenced how the Caucus' work might be used to remedy local school issues like oversized classes, lack of materials, fighting between students, difficulties posed by standardized testing, and other school-centered problems. The solution for these local problems was frequently identified as building union power. A member said: "Social justice unionism, I don't think it's just making the union a radical activist space, I think it's also working for the best teaching and learning that we can see in schools via the group, using the union for that kind of change." This perspective emphasizes that if the teachers' union is powerful then it will enable a strengthening of local schools through supporting strong curriculum development and positive experiences of teaching and



learning. In this sense, the PFT is understood to be tasked with protecting, representing and holding core responsibility to the interests of local children, parents, staff and schools, and the Caucus is framed as the tool that can push the PFT to live up to these political responsibilities. The Caucus is charged with centralizing social justice in its partnership work with local schools and neighborhoods (Fletcher, 2011).

**Organizational change.** Caucus members frequently spoke about their desire to create meso-level [i.e. organizational] change within the PFT in order to impact district, state and national decision-making. For example, a member articulated that as a philosophy, SJU seeks “to make [the PFT] more rank-and-file owned and run, more membership based as well as democratic and transparent in its operations as well as its goals.” Many members articulated that they saw the Caucus as a means for triggering this change, by “breathing new life into it” and helping create a new “voting block within the union and that would have significant influence in the goals of the union as a whole, political goals, even philosophical goals.” This understanding of the Caucus as a political entity that could help push the PFT to take a more radical stand on public education was consistently repeated.

The PFT was thought to be worth transforming due to its access to resources and potential for creating broad-based political change. A member with a history of activism and community organizing and a strong focus on system-change articulated:

The PFT has money, and money provides a staff that can dedicate full time to making sure that relationships are nurtured, that messages are getting out, a legal team that can sift through the reams of paperwork that are submitted by other foundations and school privatization organizations which get siphoned through the district. We need people with expertise in law, marketing, organizing in order to be able to actually tango with charter school operators and people who lobby in Harrisburg [the state capital] to change laws...

Many Caucus members believed that WE could help push the PFT to take up SJU principles. Meso-level PFT change was understood as a means to a variety of ends: triggering local change in schools, and allowing for entrance into system-level decision-making processes. Like SMU theorists, Caucus members understand meso-level transformation to be a vital component in partnering with locals and gaining political leverage as they fight for what they understand to be the public good (Fletcher, 2011; Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008; Weiner, 2012).

**System-change.** A system-change perspective of SJU emphasizes political campaigns that extend beyond the neighborhood and school, and fundamentally seek to change policy at the district-, state- and national-levels (Fletcher, 2011; Weiner, 2012). In meetings and interviews, I noticed that members with long histories of activism had a tendency to stress the system-change perspective. These members tended to emphasize the importance of fighting for broad, systemic goals, such as one member who emphasized how the purpose of the Caucus is to transform the union in order to “fight for the longevity of public education in Philadelphia. As far as I’m concerned, we’re fighting for the future of public education in Philadelphia.” System-change focused members tended to emphasize the importance of strengthening relationships with area grassroots organizations and networks working on similar education-related issues.

Expanded networks were identified as a way of strengthening the Caucus’ ability to create policy change. System-changers tended to reference meso-level transformation of the PFT as a necessary component in pressuring the district, state and nation to alter current education funding-patterns and decision-making processes (see Weiner, 2012). A highly politicized member summed up this perspective in the following way:

The Caucus I believe can definitely occupy a place or a space in the union to push it in a more radical direction to combat not only [neoliberalism] but to encourage teacher voice, student voice, and community members to be involved also... to be involved number one in the [opposition to] charterization, the destruction of the union, of the teachers’ union as a unit.

The system-changing perspective identifies the union as capable of asserting power to change political processes and decision-making at district, state and national levels (Fletcher, 2011).

***The SJU continuum and Caucus members.*** Specific interviewed members took care to emphasize their vision of the Caucus as a fundamentally system-changing entity at the district, state and national levels (Fletcher, 2011; Weiner, 2012). I found that the members who tended to explicitly push this vision were those who had engaged in many years of activism or organizing prior to their involvement in WE, had done a great deal of reading both prior to and during their involvement, and placed heavy emphasis on theory. Members who emphasized system-change understood the Caucus' role at the local level to be fundamentally concerned with countering the local dismantlement of public education in order to support a larger-scale vision for the future of public education in the country. This viewpoint sometimes contrasted with members who were more focused on a local-change perspective. I found that members focused on triggering local change tended to be newer to activism and often expressed a central concern with the students and families connected to their classroom. They tended to understand desirable change as located in the everyday experiences of the children and families that they knew or knew of in Philadelphia. But even as I noticed trends in the identities of activists subscribing mainly to a system- or local- change model, I also found that schools of thought were not isolated or static entities. Rather, many members engaged in active inquiry into these different perspectives, putting them into conversation while talking and working with others. I found that members understood the desired locus of change as a continuum, and that they hopped around on the continuum at different points in time in relation to their personal identities and experiences and their present extent of involvement in the Caucus.

### **Inquiring into Race and Racism**

The Caucus publicly critiques the inequitable provision of education along racial lines, with its website asserting, "WE are a social justice caucus that opposes institutional racism and organizes with students, parents, and other working people to hold schools and government accountable for providing a quality education for all students" (Our Platform, 2014). Members actively inquire into questions about race and racism as they work within the Caucus. They struggle to identify how historical legacies of racism continue to shape the ongoing form and potential of WE's work. In my study, I found that discussions about race and racism typically arose in one of three ways within Caucus meetings and interviews: race was mentioned in the context of problematizing current WE membership composition patterns, racial identity was framed as a barrier to creating strong relationships and alliances with local communities, or race was identified as a factor shaping systemic patterns of inequity in schools.

***Race as an internal membership problem.*** Since its inception, the Caucus leadership has maintained an acute and vocalized awareness of its membership's racial composition. The Caucus is currently primarily composed of middle-class college-educated white people and in my observations I observed a general sense that the membership needs to be racially diversified. At Caucus meetings, leaders frequently cited a desire for a more racially diverse membership. When this critique was raised publicly, I observed on numerous occasions that side-conversations would ensue, with people speculating about why WE is a predominantly white organization, and why its membership might not be accessible to, or desirable for, people of color. One white member with a long history of community organizing pointed out in a personal communication with me that perhaps WE needs to think beyond merely inviting people of color to join the organization, but instead think deeply about "the ways that we engage people, the hegemonic culture we unintentionally perpetuate, and the kinds of events and the culture of the events." Here, lack of diversity in membership composition is located as not simply a matter of extending membership invitations, but as a result of the Caucus being an institution embedded in whiteness (see Harris, 1993; Trepagnier, 2010) and thus undesirable to many people of color.

***Race and difficulty linking internal with external.*** In taking the principles of SJU seriously, the Caucus strives to reach out and closely partner with local communities (see Weiner, 2012). Members consistently express the importance of supporting local communities in their struggles, and believe that the Caucus should support community-led efforts such as minimum wage campaigns, health care affordability and accessibility campaigns, and others. However, there is an oft-expressed tension between the desire of members to partner effectively and thoughtfully with local communities and the uncomfortable idea that perhaps WE holds different interests or is not responsive to the needs of the community. While talking

about racial and cultural divisions, a participant of color observed, “If you look at successful Chicago protests, a lot of it had to do with the active caucuses within communities and being able to bridge those gaps and those interests, because interests do diverge.” Members often spoke of the desire to reach out to local communities of color in order to better understand where their interests lie, and to align WE’s work particularly with the African American community in Philadelphia. In this sense, the work of the Caucus transforms along SJU lines such that it strives not just to nurture change that aligns with the Caucus’ vision, but to form the Caucus’ work around the community’s self-identified need (see Fletcher, 2011; Uetrict, 2014; Weiner, 2012).

Participants sometimes complicated the idea of bridging interest gaps between the Caucus and communities. Communication skills were framed as a key component in making links across diverse racial and cultural lines. A white member stated, “Activists really do have to have the level of patience, understanding themselves, racial dynamics, all other the forms of difference to do the work of understanding where people are coming from, what they need, how to help, how to know when to shut up. Those are deep skills that are not covered in any one class. Without those skills, there is no real building of relationship.” A participant of color similarly identified the need for Caucus members to heighten their self-awareness of personal communication skills: “I think we need the acknowledgement of what language are we speaking to whom, and for what purpose.” Overall, there was explicit stated intention to ally with local racialized communities, but members acknowledged the real and sometimes tension-filled differences that could limit effective communication and partnership between WE and local parents and communities.

***Race as an external system of oppression.*** A few members identified the importance of extending and deepening WE’s critiques of neoliberalism to account for systemic and structural racism. These members felt that the Caucus needs to take up a lens that recognizes the role of racialization and racism in shaping the current context in which the organization rests, including accounting for chronic patterns of educational underfunding and the current dismantling of the school district (Socolar, 2013). One member of color with a strong system-level change perspective cogently described the need to theorize change through a critical race lens:

Sometimes I get worried when people just say neoliberalism because I think it oversimplifies the issues... I think that when people say neoliberal I think it leaves out the whole aspect of race which definitely has a huge role in how we look at education in inner cities, because they’re not going to Wyoming and saying, ‘we need to have charter schools, what’s wrong with education, these kids don’t want to learn.

Some members explicitly identified historical legacies of racism as the root problem facing education in America today. Here, systemically racist governance practices and policies were thought to result in the inequitable provision of education resources and opportunity for racialized communities (Countryman, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Socolar, 2013).

Many members, and especially those demonstrating a predominantly system-change perspective, tended to take up an understanding of racism that framed it as a systemic and structural problem and explicitly connected this historical legacy with the work of the Caucus. For example, members often linked internal difficulties in recruiting educators of color in the Caucus with institutionalized racism. One politicized white member touched on this in his description of how racism affects the Caucus’ work:

I’ve been in so many activist organizations where [race] comes up and... you know, at this point I’ve seen the answer a lot. If you’re opening a door that people are interested in walking through, they will walk through it. So it’s like, if we’re not opening that door, why aren’t we and how can we... I’m tired of saying ‘oh the Caucus isn’t diverse enough’, of course it’s not. But we live in a white supremacist, racist society... and a very segregated city, both economically and racially... you know, we’re fighting against big things, the question is what can we do, like how can we open these doors.

Members displayed a range of comfort levels in discussing the role of racism in shaping the work of the Caucus. Some members kept their analysis to a big-system level, such as through vocalizing support for local #blacklivesmatter protests in response to the 2014 police killings of Ferguson's Michael Brown and Staten Island's Eric Garner. Others were more in favor of pointing these discussions inward and engaging in thinking and conversation about the work of the Caucus in relation to broader legacies of racism and systems of power (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Overall, I found that this interrogation of racism holds great meaning and potency for many Caucus members as they think about growing the organization, partnering better with locals, and triggering broader system-change.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed how members of a grassroots educator-led organization, the Caucus of Working Educators, come together to experience individual and collective learning as they go about mobilizing members, engaging in political organizing, and waging campaigns. The Caucus serves an important pedagogical function by acting as a space in which members can access new ideas, inquire into philosophical and political frameworks like social justice unionism and critical race studies, and reflect on how to put these principles into practice. Importantly, WE provides a space for ongoing learning where members can both autonomously and collectively inquire into the form, function and applicability of social justice unionism for Caucus principles, goals and practice.

In this study, I found that members engage in active learning processes as they inquire into the meaning of social justice unionism and the significance of race and racism for the Caucus' organizing work. They make sense of these concepts along a continuum that ranges from local to systemic in focus. Members see social justice unionism as holding possibility for change within local schools and neighborhoods, and extend this idea to holding possibility for change within interlinked systems of the city, state and nation. Similarly, members vary in how they conceptualize the significance of race to the Caucus' work, ranging from seeing race as a local internal organizational problem to conceptualizing it as a broad systemic problem shaping historical patterns of educational inequity.

Members interact with this local-systemic continuum in highly dynamic ways. They engage in active processes of inquiry that shift how they understand social justice unionism, race, and racism over time, and sometimes hold views that fit into multiple points of the continuum concurrently. Through inquiry, members engage in active struggle to make meaning of their ideas, dreams and desires for the organization, and move around on the continuum in the process. This active process of making sense of new ideas, talking and sharing insights with others, and striving for clarity, constitutes a learning process that shapes members both autonomously and together. In this sense, individual and collective learning practices form the fundamental base upon which this new organization grows.

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