

**ORGANIZED:  
AN EXPLORATION OF TEACHERS' ENGAGEMENT IN GRASSROOTS  
ORGANIZING**

by

Dana Morrison

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Fall 2018

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## PREFACE

Built in the late 1800's, the Berean Institute was an industrial school for African Americans who were denied entrance into other training schools. Here, they could come “to study business and the trades, to acquire self-sufficiency and a stable way of life” (Persinger, 2016). The Institute was evicted from the building in 2012 after a loss of state funding and deep financial struggles. The bricks and mortar were purchased by the Philadelphia Technical Training Institute, which now operates in place of the departed Northwest Philly landmark. This history was framed by those organizing the Our City Our Schools (OCOS) Coalition meeting as one more example of public education being laid to rest in Philadelphia.

OCOS came together in the fall of 2016 as the School District of Philadelphia concluded its fifteenth year under State control. The coalition was made up of Philadelphia residents and organizations that sought to bring local control back to the district by organizing a campaign to end the appointed School Reform Commission (SRC). Just a few days before the meeting, the Pennsylvania suburb where I grew up held its local school board election. While I had moved out of the area years ago, friends and family quietly cast votes for their neighbors, their children's soccer coaches, and other district parents who opted to run. So when I arrived at the meeting centered on returning control of Philadelphia schools to Philadelphia families, I was struck by the discord.

I walked into the building well after 6 pm, but it was still filled with noise and people moving about. Five chairs were in the front of the room where the meeting

took place, a chair reserved for each member of the SRC. Estelle Richman, Christopher McGinley, Farah Jimenez, William Green, and chair Joyce Wilkerson had been invited to the meeting to engage in conversation about dissolving *themselves*. Thanks to the law that created the SRC (PA Act 46), the only means to its end was for three of the five unelected commissioners to vote to dissolve the very body by which they were empowered. Until such a vote, the School District of Philadelphia would remain “state controlled” in perpetuity. But on this evening, at this meeting, none of the commissioners spoke with the families whose schools they governed. Those five chairs remained empty.

Residents of the city had had their power seized by these absentee commissioners for years, and in that time budgets had been slashed, teachers, nurses and librarians had been laid off, union contracts had been canceled, and over thirty public schools had been shuttered, much like the Berean Institute. At the meeting that evening, speaker after speaker drew lines between their beloved, deceased neighborhood schools and the SRC’s dictates. It was clear that these closings had deeply affected those in attendance. As expressed by one of the attendees, “closing a school isn't just emptying a building, it is ending a community.”

What was unclear, however, was how a handful of residents could get an unaccountable apparatus like the SRC to dissolve itself. Yet just a few months after attending this meeting I would stand in the district headquarters on North Broad Street and watch the SRC come to an end.

How did this reality come to be?

Grassroots organizing.

## ABSTRACT

This multi-method qualitative study explored *why, how, and in what contexts* a group of Philadelphia teachers engaged in grassroots organizing (McAlevey, 2016). At a time when educators across the country are increasingly participating in bottom-up, grassroots movements seeking more democratic visions of education reform, this critically bifocal (Weis & Fine, 2012) project situated the motivations and activities of these teacher-organizers within the larger neoliberal context of the city and school district of Philadelphia. Drawing on narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005; Connely & Clandinin, 1990), critical place inquiry (Massey, 1993; Massey, 1994) and ethnography (Vargas, 2008), this dissertation provides insight into the understandings and experiences of the teachers as well as the tangible means by which they engaged in grassroots organizing in the challenging environment of Philadelphia.

More specifically, teachers of this inquiry were found to be embodying the two key elements of Freire's (1970) definition of praxis, "*reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it*" (p. 70, emphasis added). Pairing activities centered on learning and reflection (e.g. book groups) with activities centered on taking action and seeking change (e.g. policy campaigns), the dual elements of praxis played an essential role in actualizing McAlevey's (2016) model of grassroots organizing within the teachers' work.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION: ORGANIZING IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

According to Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine (2012), “what we consider “public” in the United States is under construction” (p. 1). This redefining of collective interest has had undeniable effects on life in 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet nothing has shifted quite as dramatically as the educational landscape. For much of our history there has been an articulated commitment to the ideal of education as a universal and public good. While other ideals rivaled this commitment (Labaree, 2010), it often curbed the crasser impulses of contrarian education reformers. Within the past twenty years, however, neoliberal policies of wholesale privatization have swiftly elbowed out the rhetoric of ‘the public good’ in modern discourse around education. Subsequently, schooling in the United States has been in a state of constant flux.

What this tumultuous atmosphere has meant for the nation’s schools and teachers has been well documented (Hursh, 2001; Lipman, 2011; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Weiner & Compton, 2008; Webb, Briscoe, & Mussman, 2009; i.a.). Continual uncertainty, decreased professional autonomy, and increased racial and economic inequality has plagued schooling at every level. What is emerging both in the world and in the literature, however, are the ways in which school teachers have sought to resist these trends via grassroots organizing (McAlevey, 2016) in their schools and communities. At a time when neoliberal ideology has been, essentially, reified in the discourse around education, analyzing the work of these teachers is fundamental to understanding the possibilities for public education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 1.1 The Context: Neoliberalism and Education

At the core of neoliberal ideology is the belief in a fully marketized (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002) world or, as articulated by David Harvey (2005), the belief that “human well-being can best be advanced” by a fully marketized world (p. 18). Built on the premise that arenas of *market competition* provide the most effective and efficient means for fulfilling individual needs, neoliberal policy makers have been supremely successful in positioning marketization as *the* solution to educational inequality. As articulated by market-proponent and current Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos:

We must open up the education industry...*This is how families without means will get access to a world-class education...* We are the beneficiaries of start-ups, ventures, and innovation in every other area of life, but we don't have that in education because it's a closed system, a closed industry, *a closed market*. (Strauss, 2016, p. 1, emphasis added)

The implication is clear: operate schools like businesses, and we will all get what we want.

Adapting the *laissez faire* economic tradition of classical liberalism, what makes neoliberalism “new” is the expansion of this tradition into social, political, and cultural life. As explained by Lipman (2013), neoliberalism champions both economic *and* social policies that seek to restructure “values, social relations, and social identities” (p. 10) in ways that mirror the market. As implied by DeVos, it is the market, not collective public action, that will solve our educational inequities. With widespread bipartisan support, neoliberal policies have been largely successful in replacing the rhetoric of “public citizen” with that of the “strategic consumer” (Miller,

2007, p. 225), fundamentally altering our understanding of public education in the process.

Yet as evidenced by the perspective of DeVos, *neoliberalism* is “eminently interventionist” (Heidemen, 2014) in nature, unlike the hands-off model associated with its namesake. The neoliberal envisions a just world as a marketplace and thus seeks to create markets where none exist and, in many cases, where none are desired (Galston, 2007). Subsequently, one of the hallmarks of the neoliberal era has been the promotion of highly centralized policies seeking to deflate the public sphere and marketize social goods (e.g. Social Security, public water authorities, city transit, and so on).

These policies, however, have not marketized social goods uniformly. The neoliberal project, while global in scale, has played out in “locally specific ways” (Lipman, 2007, p. 158). In no area have social goods been more marketized, however, than in the school districts of our nation’s large urban centers. As explained by Pauline Lipman (2013), these urban schools, serving primarily poor students of color, have been the leading laboratories for neoliberal restructuring (p. 46). Because of this, we have seen a surprising range of neoliberal experiments exacted upon city schools, particularly those favoring standardization, accountability, teacher merit pay, vouchers, charters, school turnaround, school closure, centralized state/mayoral takeover, and even private management in the hands of for-profit entities. Policies such as these have played out in highly classed and racialized ways (Picower & Mayorga, 2015), fundamentally restructuring city schools across the country while leaving wealthy, white, suburban districts largely undisturbed.



## 1.2 Problem Statement

The advance of such reforms, however, has had a near universal impact on teacher work in the modern era, undermining autonomy and professionalism (Webb, Briscoe, & Mussman, 2009; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009; Giroux, 1988) as well as collective bargaining and worker protection (Weiner, 2005; Weiner & Compton, 2008) in the name of the market. Perhaps not surprisingly, teachers in the neoliberal era feel increasingly disempowered and dissatisfied with the state of education in the country (Rubin, 2011; Smith & Kovacs, 2011) and are leaving the profession at alarming rates (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

In this environment, however, teachers have been at the forefront of movements fighting the neoliberal turn. Joining a long history of teacher-led organizing (Barnett, 1993; Butchart, 2010; Clifford, 2014; Donley, 1976; Fairclough, 2009; Mead, 2006; Robnett, 1996; Rousmaniere, 2005; Spring, 2011; Urban, 1982), educators in Chicago (Lewis, 2014; McAlevy, 2016; Strauss, 2013), New York (Cersonsky, 2012), Newark (Winslow, 2013a), Seattle (Bult, 2016; Hagopian, 2013), Los Angeles (Winslow, 2013b; Winslow, 2014), New Orleans (Buras, 2015), and most recently West Virginia (McAlevy, 2018), Oklahoma (Carlson, 2018), Kentucky and Arizona (DiMaggio & Furman, 2018), have been engaging in community-driven, bottom up, or grassroots organizing in support of more democratic visions of education reform. Perhaps most importantly, these teachers have, in many instances, claimed victory over the neoliberal reforms in their states (Kunichoff, 2012; Strauss, 2015; Benschhoff, 2015).

As this hopeful work emerges across the country, educational researchers are only beginning to investigate the organic, grassroots organizing generated by public school teachers. Such study, however, has important implications for the field,

documenting not only the challenges 21st century teachers face, but also how they have sought to confront those challenges collectively in the public arena. Recent work has found that engagement in such activist communities has crucial benefits for both pre-service and practicing teachers in the modern policy environment (Stern & Brown, 2016; Picower, 2012; Riley & Solic, 2017). Acting as sources of support, these organizations provide a “therapeutic antidote” (Stern & Brown, 2016) for educators struggling against the neoliberal tide.

Yet while the benefits of grassroots communities are becoming apparent “potential teacher activists who are interested in forming groups or organizations often struggle to find models of collective movement-building that can help them understand what teacher activism entails” (Picower, 2012, p. 563). As the profession increasingly aligns its mission with social justice, equity and change, educational scholars must take up research that can provide the field with guidance on how to work for such transformation. Understanding *why*, *how*, and *in what contexts* teachers engage in grassroots organizing has the potential to offer educators essential insight for developing and contributing to grassroots organizations of their own.

### **1.3 This Project**

As a critical teacher-educator committed to a vision of pedagogy and scholarship that extends beyond the classroom to seek just social change, I was drawn to this project with these hopeful possibilities in mind. Academic coursework provides an unparalleled opportunity for my students and me to problematize and reflect on the state of education, yet it often falls short of providing us with a clear direction for acting on our analyses. It was my hope that in seeking a deeper understanding of the educators engaged in grassroots organizing today, I could provide educational

scholars, teacher-educators and their students with a more comprehensive vision of education in the service of justice, one that includes strategies for tangible action beyond the classroom.

With this in mind, I sought out educators actively engaged in grassroots organizing in Philadelphia, a city long embroiled in neoliberal “policy churn” (Travers, 2003). I began by contacting teachers that I had met at various educationally focused community events in recent years. I also reached out to several grassroots groups whose work sought change around issues of educational, racial, or social justice. After interviewing ten teachers from seven different organizations, I asked four of the teachers to collaborate more closely. In the following months I worked and learned alongside these educators, conducting interviews, engaging in observations, and participating in the grassroots work they took up.

Beyond this, however, I analyzed the larger context within the city and School District of Philadelphia (SDP) in an attempt to discern the “limit situations” (Freire, 1970) within which the teachers were operating. By providing this larger contextual analysis, it is my hope that the readers of this study will be able to identify the limits of their own environments, seeing them less as obstacles and more as opportunities for action.

### **1.3.1 Methodological Framework**

This dual focus in educational research on individual experiences *and* larger social contexts was most clearly expressed by Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (2012, 2013) whose concept of “critical bifocality” is the methodological framework for this dissertation. First articulated by Weis and Fine (2004) as “compositional ethnography,” the authors charged justice-oriented researchers with adopting an

“oscillating” or *bifocal* analysis whereby the “public and private institutions, groups, and lives” that typically serve as the subjects of educational research “are lodged in relation to key social and economic structures” (p. xiii).

Contending with the longstanding tension in social theory between societal structures and individual agency, approaches grounded in *critical bifocality* seek to uncover the “linkages and circuits” through which structural conditions are enacted, metabolized, *and* resisted (Weis & Fine, 2012, p. 174). For researchers who intend to generate knowledge that can be used to spur just social change, highlighting the lived experiences of individuals generating local sites of possibility is an essential task. Yet as noted by Weis and Fine (2012), the “spatial membranes” of such change-seeking sites are “semiporous” and can rarely avoid the “seepage of injustice” from wider structural contexts (p. 175). It is for this reason that they argue local sites of resistance must be lodged within the large-scale webs of power (Weis & Fine, 2004, p. xvii) to reach what Lather (1986) termed “catalytic validity,” knowledge that is capable of spurring genuine change.

In support of this bifocal lens, this project drew on multiple methods from the qualitative traditions of *narrative inquiry* (Chase, 2005; Connely & Clandinin, 1990), *critical place inquiry* (Massey, 1993; Massey, 1994) and *ethnography* (Vargas, 2008). These methods (more thoroughly attended to in Chapter 3) yielded data that highlighted both the individual experiential *and* structural elements that this investigation hoped to uncover. It was through this bifocal lens that I investigated the following research questions with regard to this specific population of teachers.

## 1.4 Research Questions

The first questions were directed toward the individual teachers and their grassroots organizations.

1. **Why did these teachers take up grassroots organizing?** What motivated them to get involved? What motivated them to stay involved? And, how did their involvement connect with their lives as teachers?
2. **How did these teachers engage in grassroots organizing?** What issues did they take up in their work? How were these issues taken up? And, why?

The next questions, however, were directed toward to the larger neoliberal context in which the teachers were operating.

3. **How did the teachers' grassroots organizing relate to the neoliberalization of the city and the district?** What aspects of the neoliberal project shaped the work taken up by these educators? And, how did those aspects shape their organizing on the ground?

## 1.5 Layout of the Dissertation

In Chapter Two, I begin by detailing the concept and activity of grassroots organizing as defined by labor activist and educator Jane McAlevey (2016). I then highlight the existing research on teachers' engagement in grassroots organizing both historically and presently, situating what we know as a field within the contributions to be made by this project.

In Chapter Three, I delineate the methodology of this inquiry. Detailing Weis and Fine's (2012) understanding of the purpose and scope of *critically bifocal* research, I provide a description of the various qualitative methods utilized to

investigate this project's bifocal concerns. More specifically, I detail the influence of narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005; Connely & Clandinin, 1990), critical place inquiry (Massey, 1993; Massey, 1994) and ethnography (Vargas, 2008) on this dissertation. Additionally, this chapter provides a summary of the procedures used for data collection and analysis, a discussion of the participants of this inquiry, as well as a statement on researcher positionality.

In Chapter Four, I present the findings derived from my investigation of *why* the teachers took up grassroots organizing. More specifically, I will provide data collected from narrative interviews that highlight the ways in which the teachers' engagement was colored by a range of personal, relational, and professional influences.

In Chapter Five, I present the findings that emerged from my investigation of *how* the teachers took up grassroots organizing. Showcasing data from both narrative interviews and my own observant participation (Vargas, 2008), examples of organizing activity are discussed as expressions of the two essential components of Freire's (1970) definition of praxis: a) reflecting and learning, and b) taking action, seeking change. These examples are then discussed within McAlevey's (2016) framework describing the key aspects of successful grassroots organizing.

In Chapter 6, I present the findings derived from my investigation of *the context* in which the teachers took up grassroots organizing. A contextual analysis of the neoliberalization of the city and School District of Philadelphia is provided and discussed in relation to the grassroots work of the teachers.

In Chapter 7, I discuss the findings that emerged from each of the research questions as well as their implications. I also reflect on the limitations and challenges

of this project, making recommendations for future research on teachers' engagement in grassroots organizing.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW: TEACHERS' ENGAGEMENT IN GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

As articulated by organizer and educator Jane McAlevey (2016), assessing the capability of a movement for affecting genuine social change requires exploring “not merely *if* ordinary people—so often referred to as “the grassroots”—are engaged, but *how, why, and where* they are engaged” (p. 9, emphasis original). In *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, McAlevey delineates the meaningful differences between three common approaches to seeking social change in the new millennium. These approaches, which she terms *advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing*, integrate the grassroots base to various degrees, and thus, as argued by McAlevey, hold different potential for effectively contesting social problems.

For the purpose of this inquiry, I will be focusing on the third of McAlevey’s approaches, “grassroots organizing.” Throughout this chapter I will elaborate on my use of the concept of grassroots organizing, situating it within McAlevey’s three approaches to social change. I will then attend to teachers’ engagement in grassroots organizing both historically and presently, highlighting the emerging research on educators who create, join, and direct grassroots organizations.

#### **2.1 What is grassroots organizing?**

Grassroots organizing has a long and rich history in the United States. The labor movement, the Civil Rights movement, the Women’s Rights movement



generated tangible changes through their integration of a continually expanding base of ordinary people. As argued by McAlevey (2016), however, we've experienced a decades long shift away from grassroots organizing toward more shallow methods of social change. These more superficial methods, termed *advocacy* and *mobilizing*, stand in stark contrast to the grassroots organizing that brought victories like the eight-hour workday and the end of Jim Crow. As argued by McAlevey (2016) while *advocacy* and *mobilizing* may produce victories, "not all of these victories are equal; some are actually defeats" (p. 2).

The approach termed *advocacy*, for example, "doesn't involve ordinary people in any real way" (p. 9). Instead, "lawyers, pollsters, researchers, and communications firms are engaged to wage the battle" (p. 9) directing their attention to litigation, polling, or advertising that might sway policy makers or voting constituencies. This approach relies on the alignment of a limited population of knowledge producers with ordinary people on a given issue. If alignment exists, the knowledge producers then utilize their professional expertise to advocate on behalf of the masses. If alignment between these groups does not exist, however, the opportunities for ordinary people to address social problems can actually shrink.

Assessing the *advocacy* approach within the context of neoliberal education reforms highlights this critical limitation. For example, while public school teachers, students, and parents have often strongly opposed policies that increase standardization and testing (Ferman, 2017), a strong coalition of what Au (2016) calls the "professional and managerial new middle class" has found an ideological home in measurement focused accountability policies. Because these individuals make up the

vast majority of the knowledge producing elite who would be primary advocates on the issue, the *advocacy* standardized testing.

Due to the *advocacy* approach's limitations, the primary mechanism utilized by change seekers in recent times has been what McAlevey terms *mobilizing*. As explained by McAlevey (2016), unlike the *advocacy* model, *mobilizing* brings large numbers of people to the fight, yet "a professional staff directs, manipulates, and controls" that fight (p. 10). This approach often relies on a core group of dedicated members to turn out to meetings, actions or events (to *mobilize*) but does not seek to meaningfully and sustainably engage the full community as agents of change.

The main focus of the *mobilizing* model, then, is the designated leadership. These individuals set the goals of the organization as well as the blueprint for achieving those goals. When collective action is determined to be appropriate (e.g. a strike, a protest, a rally), they will *mobilize* the most active "rank and file" members in order to convey the image of a mass, united front. Yet as critiqued by McAlevey (2016), "it matters little who shows up, or, why, as long as a sufficient number of bodies appear" (p. 10). When the action is ended, the vast majority of members are turned back to their posts while the core leaders continue their roles as decision makers.

This approach, McAlevey notes, has been adopted by the majority of labor unions in the United States over the past forty years. While widespread unionization emerged as a grassroots movement at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modern unions have focused primarily on a small staff negotiating contracts without widespread involvement from the membership. Even when contemporary labor unions take up

collective action, such as a strike, the action is decided on, organized, and ended by the leaders.

The recent wave of teacher strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and beyond, however, flew in the face of the mobilizing model of the modern union, as rank and file teachers within each locale inspired, organized and drove the actions to meet their demands. In many cases, such as in West Virginia, the union leadership actually followed the direction of the membership that took up the groundwork of coordinating the effort in the first place (F. Caputo, personal communication, March 13, 2018).

As articulated by McAlevey (2018), these strikes were crucial examples of her third model of change seeking, *organizing*. As opposed to the *advocacy* and *mobilizing* models, *grassroots organizing* “places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people” (McAlevey, 2016, p. 10). More importantly, those people are essential in the change-seeking process. They come together on shared issues, determine strategies for seeking change, and achieve outcomes collectively.

In contrast to the fixed leadership of the *advocacy* and *mobilizing* models, a key focus of *organizing* is the development of what McAlevey (2016) calls *organic leaders*. Rather than limiting leadership to hired staff or a small, unchanging pool of the membership, the *organizing* model seeks out trusted members of the community who could play a pivotal role in connecting with and recruiting a larger base. In fact, it is integration of people who may have never previously been involved that is the *point* of organizing. As explained by McAlevey (2016):

In the organizing approach, specific injustice and outrage are the immediate motivation, but the primary goal is to transfer power from the elite to the

majority... Individual campaigns matter in themselves, but they are primarily a mechanism for bringing new people into the change process and keeping them involved.

In what transpired in West Virginia, for example, organic teacher-leaders sparked the initial resistance and played a critical role in building a large scale movement that culminated in the temporary closure of every school in the State.

It is this understanding of grassroots organizing that I have used to frame the scope of this project. Both within this review of literature and the inquiry that follows, I have focused on educators engaged in change-seeking activity that centers on the following components of McAlevey's *organizing* model: 1) a continually expanding base, 2) people as central actors, and 3) the development of organic leaders.

To begin, I looked to the historical literature documenting teachers' engagement in grassroots organizing. Although a traditionally conservative group throughout history (Spring, 2011), distinct pockets of educators made lasting contributions to social movements that fought against the grain of the day's dominant ideologies. Situating their work and their circumstances can provide important insight for today's educators who similarly swim against the tide.

Building on this historical review, I then turned to the contemporary literature exploring teachers' participation in grassroots work, detailing what we currently know of these educators. The results of this analysis are then discussed within the context of this project, highlighting the aspects of this inquiry that can contribute to the broader understanding of teachers and grassroots organizing moving forward.

## 2.2 Teachers and Grassroots Organizing: An Historical Review

As members of a profession long associated with social equality, justice, and democracy, teachers have often been drawn to change-seeking movements throughout history. Prominent abolitionists such as Lucretia Mott, Abbie Hopper Gibbons, Maria Chapman and the Grimké sisters were teachers, as were nearly half of the feminist abolitionists of the time (Clifford, 2014, p. 295). These women wrote essays, made speeches, arranged local meetings, and created organizations in support of the abolition of slavery. As noted by Clifford (2014) this grassroots work in the abolition movement spurred their development of organizational and tactical skills as well as wide-reaching personal networks that would figure prominently in the woman's rights crusade (p. 295).

In the years leading up to and following emancipation, teachers from all over the country also took on the crucial task of creating schools for freed people (Butchart, 2010). As noted by Butchart (2010), while the battle for freedom raged, black educators in particular “played a leading role in assuring that the freed people’s struggle for literacy began and continued as an expression of black aspirations and intentions” (p. 19). African American teachers who taught secretly before 1861 continued and even expanded their work. As documented by Butchart (2010), “with the collapse of the Confederacy in 1865, black teachers accelerated the pace of school creation across the South, opening no fewer than *400 new schools* from North Carolina to Texas, Missouri to Florida, in one year” (p. 22, emphasis added).

In addition to their engagement in the liberation struggle, teachers were also prominently involved in the movement for women's suffrage (Clifford, 2014; Mead, 2006; Rousmaniere, 2005). As explained by Rousmaniere (2005), “many of the earliest women's rights activists in the nineteenth century had been schoolteachers

who had perfected their public speaking skills by standing in front of classrooms” (p. 127). It was these women teachers, often economically independent and highly literate, who “made up the bulk of suffrage supporters and activists through the turn of the century” (p. 127).

Often plagued by race and class divides, many of the suffrage movement’s grassroots successes were won on the backs of local activists, often teachers (Mead, 2006). In one poignant example of a mass meeting in Southern California in 1911, college affiliated suffragists connected with working class and racially minoritized women in the community, asking *them* to organize the meeting. Maria López, a local high school Spanish teacher, spoke at what was described as “the largest political gathering ever held in the district” (Mead, 2006, p. 138). This mass meeting was accompanied by the distribution of nearly 50,000 suffrage leaflets in Spanish.

Teachers were also found in the struggle for *universal* suffrage and civil rights. Throughout the civil rights movement, Black female teachers took on crucial roles in extending the base, engaging young and old alike in educational and training efforts (Barnett, 1993; Robnett, 1996). As noted by Robnett (1996), the very seeds of the model used for rural mobilization were planted by Septima Clark, a seasoned activist and teacher. Where more formal methods had failed to connect with the rural Southern population, Clark's Citizenship Education Program had achieved tremendous success in voter registration (p. 1679). Thus, while scholars emphasize the decisions of the movement’s (largely male) national leadership, Robnett (1996) argues it was the activities of organic leaders like Clark and “their efforts to connect through interpersonal ties that facilitated recruitment of the rural masses” (p. 1680).

In addition to these engagements, teachers became players in the labor and school reform movements, creating thousands of local teachers' associations and solidifying nationwide unions like the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). They took up work around pensions and equal pay, but also teacher autonomy and the gender disparity of the profession. In *Citizen Teacher*, historian Kate Rousmaniere (2005) provides an insightful account of early Chicago teacher organizers like Margaret Haley, Catherine Goggin, and Arvilla DeLuce.

In one particularly relevant example of the teachers' engagement in grassroots labor organizing, Rousmaniere (2005) recounts DeLuce building a pension battle from the bottom up. Beginning in her school in 1892, DeLuce gauged teachers' support for a pension campaign, speaking with colleagues and sending questionnaires to every school in the city. As noted by Rousmaniere (2005), "by 1894, DeLuce had attracted a core of newly activist teachers" who then "identified a single teacher in each Chicago school who they felt had the savvy to get signatures for a petition supporting a pension" (p.38). A pertinent example of McAlevey's concept of "organic leaders," future Chicago Federation of Teachers (CFT) Vice President Margaret Haley was pegged to organize the teachers at the Hendricks school (p.39).

Beyond battles for pensions and pay, however, the teachers often fought what Haley called the "factoryizing" of education, the policies that framed the teacher as a mere factory hand, whose duty it was "to carry out mechanically and unquestioningly the ideas and orders of those clothed with the authority of position" (Haley, 1904). Their challenge against the 1898 Harper report, in particular, deeply echoes the policy plight of modern teachers in the neoliberal era. As explained by Rousmaniere (2005):

The main impact of the Harper Report was the proposal to reorganize the school administrative structure from a local community-based organization to a smaller more centralized body. Accompanying this administrative centralization was the adoption of business principles to the management of schools with the goal of a streamlined system emphasizing financial efficiency over educational principles. (p. 50)

While Haley became the public face of many of these fights, Rousmaniere (2005) notes, she “was rarely alone in this work; she was usually supported by a mass of teachers who did much of the footwork and office labor of this grassroots political organization” (p. 57).

Examples such as these showcase the long tradition of grassroots organizing within the teaching profession. More importantly, these examples showcase the similarities between the issues around which the teachers of the past organized and the issues faced by educators still today. Perhaps not surprisingly, within the current neoliberal context, teachers have been increasingly reclaiming their heritage of grassroots organizing to fight against the new “factoryizing” of education.

### **2.3 Teachers, Grassroots Organizing and the New “Factoryizing” of Education**

Much like the reforms of Haley’s era, the push for educational centralization and business-like management has had a tremendous impact on teacher work in the modern era. Policies of standardization and accountability, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, challenged teacher autonomy and professionalism (Giroux, 1988; Webb, Briscoe, & Mussman, 2009; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). As argued by Webb, Briscoe and Mussman (2009), such policies create an environment of “surveillance”



and “fear,” diminishing teacher’s control over their work “through the continuous measurement of students’ and teachers’ academic performances” (p. 7).

These market driven reforms have also sought to weaken, if not eliminate, worker protections and teacher unionism (Weiner, 2005; Weiner & Compton, 2008), seeing them as barriers to the free market. As noted by Weis and Compton (2008), in the neoliberal era “teacher unions have been placed under enormous pressure to yield to performance based or “merit” pay, while governments have used new governance arrangements, such as charter schools...to offer differential wages to teachers” and undermine collective bargaining. This has set the stage for some of the most damaging policies imposed on the nations city schools. Mass closures, systematic divestment and centralized management have become almost synonymous with urban districts serving poor communities of color (Lipman, 2011).

Perhaps not surprisingly, research indicates that teachers in the neoliberal era feel increasingly disempowered and dissatisfied with the state of education in the country (Rubin, 2011; Smith & Kovacs, 2011) and are leaving the profession at alarming rates (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In this precarious atmosphere, however, teachers are increasingly at the forefront of movements fighting the neoliberal policies gripping their schools. Much like their predecessors, teachers in Chicago (Lewis, 2014), New York (Cersonsky, 2012), Newark (Winslow, 2013a), Seattle (Bult, 2016; Hagopian, 2013), Los Angeles (Winslow, 2013b; Winslow, 2014), New Orleans (Buras, 2015), and most recently West Virginia (McAlevy, 2018), Oklahoma (Carlson, 2018), Kentucky and Arizona (DiMaggio & Furman, 2018), are engaging in *grassroots organizing* in support of more democratic visions of education

reform. Educational researchers have only begun to investigate the organic, grassroots organizing generated by public school teachers.

### **2.3.1 Why Teachers Engage in Grassroots Work**

Much of the literature focuses on exploring the reasons why teachers, in addition to their personal and professional responsibilities, might participate in this type of political work. Similar to the teachers of the past, these modern teacher activists are often motivated by deeply held beliefs about social, racial, economic, and educational justice (Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Montaña, López-Torres, DeLissovoy, Pacheco & Stillman, 2002; Picower, 2012; Urrieta, 2010). More importantly, these beliefs inform their understandings of what it means to be professional educators. Thus, a key motivation for teachers' engagement in grassroots organizing is their conceptualization of themselves as "cultural workers" (Freire, 1998) who play a critical role in movement toward a more just world.

In their qualitative study of five such teachers, Montaña, López-Torres, DeLissovoy, Pacheco and Stillman (2002) found that participants' definitions of a "good" educator stretched beyond the walls of the classroom. Confronted by daily inequities, the teachers saw the issues that plagued their schools as embedded in broader issues of social injustice (e.g. systemic racism and class inequality). As noted by the authors, the teachers had an expanded notion of professional engagement that included "participation in a collective project for change" (p. 272). Thus, it was their understanding of teachers as agents of justice that spurred much of their grassroots work. As stated by one of the participants, "you cannot be a social justice teacher and *not* be an activist" (p. 272, emphasis added).

Picower's (2012) inquiry with nine teacher activists uncovered similar sentiments as participants expressed that standing up to injustice beyond the classroom was an essential part of their work as educators. For many of the teachers, in fact, struggling for justice was a large part of their personal and professional identity. As articulated by Picower (2012) their engagement in grassroots activism "was not a conscious choice that the teachers made—rather it was a fundamental part of who they were" (p. 565). Because of this, they felt their calling was to reconcile their own visions of justice with what was happening in the world (p. 565).

While these studies highlight the ways in which teachers' beliefs impact their grassroots work, it is important to note that activist educators, by definition, are not merely theoretical in their engagement. They often note the deeply personal concrete realities that direct their activism. Montaña et al (2002), for example, found that the teachers were passionately motivated by tangible injustices in their students' communities, things like poverty and systemic racism. The participants expressed that while implications for wider justice were on their minds, their students remained "the reason and reference for their engagement" in organizing outside of the classroom. As articulated by Montaña et al (2002), "their sense of the strategic necessity of a social movement remained rooted in the needs of inner-city students and in particular the students in their own classrooms, who continue to give their struggle meaning and urgency" (p. 272).

Teachers who engage in grassroots organizing are also often motivated by their own personal experiences with injustice. In Keith Catone's (2017) work, *The Pedagogy of Teacher Activism*, we are provided in depth histories of four educators engaged in various forms of grassroots, justice-oriented work. One teacher in

particular, a self-identified queer woman named Rosie, noted that much of her commitment was due to her experiences with systemic discrimination as a youth. Her involvement in a sub-group of the New York Caucus of Rank and File Educators (NYCoRE), NYQueer, was explicitly connected to this goal. Rosie's engagement was motivated by wanting to "combat homophobia and transphobia in schools" because she had witnessed them herself growing up (Catone, 2017, p. 38).

Luis Urrieta's (2010) ethnographic work with Chicana/o activist educators echoed this finding, noting that the primary factor motivating the teachers to engage in grassroots work was their identity within and relationship to the Chicana/o community. As explained by Urrieta (2010), "the main principles of Chicana and Chicano activism identified by the participants referred to joining *la causa* (the cause) in an attempt to empower themselves and their communities" (p. 73). For these educators, it was their personal relationship to and experiences within an historically oppressed community that motivated them to organize.

### **2.3.2 Challenges to Seeking Change**

In addition to explorations of why teachers engage in grassroots organizing, the literature has also attended to the challenges faced by these educators as they seek to change the present reality. In their edited collection of research on activist educators, Marshall and Anderson (2009) contend that many of the challenges faced by these teachers stems from the fact that "education is often imagined as an apolitical enterprise" (p. 1). Thus, education *and* educators are expected "to maintain a respectful distance from hot-button issues and significant political and social movements" (p. 1). This belief, the authors suggest, informs the "professional culture" of teachers so that when they venture too close to the political world it carries

significant professional risks that “can lead educators to avoid political activism” (p. 1).

Annice Williams’ (2009) study in Marshall and Anderson’s (2009) anthology highlighted that predicament. Researching the experiences of 10 African-American educators engaged in race-based activism, Williams (2009) noted that participants consistently made comments about the “difficulty of being political while being an educator” (p. 41). These difficulties were perceived by the participants as threats to their career mobility, job security, and even their professional credibility.

Another study in this edited work highlighted the challenges faced by educators who were activists for LGBT rights (Legrand, 2009). The ten past and present educators who participated in this qualitative inquiry noted the many obstacles they faced being activist educators in unsupportive work environments. These activist educators, Legrand (2009) explains, had to “navigate hidden sets of rules in order to remain employed and achieve career mobility” (p. 98). Because of this, the educators “reported that they tempered their activism choices” and made often compromising “decisions about their participation and degree of involvement in activist activities” (p. 98).

While most of this pressure was perceived as coming from administrators in their schools and districts, there can also be pressure exerted from sources that would traditionally be considered allies in teachers’ political work. Simon, Quinn, Golden and Cohen (2017) found in their case study of grassroots organizing against the 2013 school closures in Philadelphia that teachers often felt constrained by their own union, which had adopted more of a *mobilizing* approach to fighting back. As explained by the authors, teacher-activists often felt constrained as the presence of union leadership

inhibited them “from arguing for more aggressive, on-the-ground strategies” aligned with McAlevey’s *organizing* approach (Simon et. al., 2017, p. 64).

These studies make it clear that the core purpose and strategy of *grassroots organizing* can set the stage for significant challenges to teachers dedicated to the model in the current environment. Whether those challenges stem from professional culture, administrative pressure or even alternative approaches to change-seeking work, teachers who engage in grassroots activism often run into powerful roadblocks.

Moreover, Stern and Brown (2016) found that the stress generated from struggling against neoliberal reforms was also a significant challenge for activist teachers. As noted by the authors, the fifteen educators of their study described “a kind of professional depression” that grew out of working in the precarious environments they were seeking to change (p. 333). The teachers expressed becoming a “stressed out mess” and likened their experiences with professional uncertainty to a form of “post-traumatic stress disorder” that impacted their lives both inside and outside of the classroom (pp. 343-344). Activist teachers in the neoliberal era “have been laid off and accused of failure, watched their salaries get cut, and have experienced their craft and calling being deprofessionalized...listlessness, hopelessness, anxiety, and depression are almost logical products of this kind of environment” (pp. 336-337).

### **2.3.3 Grassroots Organizing as a Source of Support**

In the face of these significant challenges, however, many teachers continue their change-seeking work. For those that do, the support provided by their collective action has proved crucial in their persistence. As noted by Stern and Brown (2016), for example, teachers located their engagement in grassroots work as a “therapeutic antidote” to their feelings of professional depression. Participants found others whose

goals mirrored their own and a clear path toward achieving those goals collectively. This form of support was a professional life saver for many of the teachers. As expressed by Lou, a high school history teacher, “there’s no way I would have kept going” (p. 347) without finding community in the organizations he joined.

Much of this support comes from the outlet of having a course for change within a community. While neoliberal policies offer a vision of individualized educational actors, grassroots organizing offers a vision of collective agency. As expressed by teacher-organizer, Kelley:

anytime you do any kind of organizing work you are putting yourself in a position to be working toward solutions and that, in and of itself, is empowering. You’re not in a victim mode. [Instead it is] these things are wrong, how are we going to fix it? You’re involved with a network of teachers and identifying problems and solutions. (Stern & Brown, 2016, pp. 349-350)

Picower’s (2012) investigation of nine self-identified teacher activists also found that working with likeminded educators was essential for teachers’ sustainability. Working with others in grassroots organizations “provided them with knowledge, motivation, strength, a sense of accountability, and the ability to keep going in the face of adversity” (Picower, 2012, p. 570). This proved to be essential as educators took up work that went against the grain of mainstream neoliberal policies. “Rather than always feeling like an outsider, working in a group of allies helped teacher activists “normalize” their stance and their work” (Picower, 2012, p. 570).

Riley and Solic (2017) found additional opportunities for support when they brought a group of pre-service teachers together with activist teacher communities in their area. As noted by the authors, engaging with critical practicing teachers

encouraged the students to take up critical questions about teaching themselves and gave them “a place to return to as they asked new questions, sought additional knowledge around urban teaching, and imagined their futures as teachers” (p. 189). Many of the pre-service students continued their involvement in the organizations as they progressed in their program. This, as articulated by Riley and Solic (2017), “points toward the possibility that communities of politically and intellectually involved educators have potential to form mentoring relationships with teacher-candidates and support their ongoing learning beyond the confines of the traditional teacher preparation curriculum” (p. 189).

#### **2.4 Discussion**

Because of these promising possibilities for sustaining educators that seek to extend the work of the profession in the name of just social change, it is imperative that educational researchers continue to expand their explorations of teachers’ engagement in grassroots organizing. This study seeks to fill some of the gaps in the current research. Analyzing the historical accounts of teachers’ engagement in grassroots work turned up surprisingly limited results. While several authors have documented the rise of teachers unions (Clifford, 2014; Donley, 1976; Rousmaniere, 2005; Spring, 2011; Urban, 1982) or teachers’ involvement in social movements (Barnett, 1993; Butchart, 2010; Mead, 2006; Robnett, 1996) there has not been a detailed uncovering of the ground level work that took place in these historical moments, making it difficult to discern where teachers’ engagement in change-seeking movement fits within McAlevey’s three approaches.

My review of the literature, however, suggests that this gap is not due to an historical *absence* of teachers’ engagement in grassroots organizing, but due to the



absence of this *lens* in the historians' analyses. Many of the authors seem to have had access to personal journals and organizational proceedings, and many even cite examples of grassroots organizing as demonstrated above; yet the authors' analyses focus primarily on the large-scale decisions of the movements, a few well-known leaders, and the wider social context, rather than the day-to-day activities of the membership. In brief, the accounts center primarily on *what* happened in these important moments, rather than *how* it happened.

This gap is a critical one. The demands of the time (abolition, suffrage, equal pay, job protection) were seen as radical, yet the demands were obtained anyway. Social changes such as these are not historical accidents; they reflect the contexts, experiences, and actions of people on the ground. If those things are not thoroughly attended to, however, a crucial part of our understanding of teachers' engagement in change-seeking activity is lost as we fail to identify the historical practices that could help modern educators take up the charge.

Where the historical accounts may not take up the grassroots framework, however, the contemporary research has focused more carefully on this unique population of teachers. Whether the authors refer to them as activist teachers, teacher-activists, or sometimes even social justice teachers, researchers in the field are now attending to those educators that engage in grassroots organizing. Much of the research we have provides qualitative analyses of participants, utilizing case studies, life-histories, and in-depth interviews to investigate the educators' motivations and experiences with change-seeking work. I hope to extend this line of inquiry by exploring the motivations and experiences of the teachers I worked with in Philadelphia (see research question 1).

Beyond this, however, I hope to provide an additional layer to the current research by focusing on *how* the educators of this project engage in grassroots organizing (see research question 2). What does this grassroots work *look like*? What *issues* do these teachers take up in that work? *How* were those issues taken up? And, *why* were they taken up in that way? The current research stops short of providing future and practicing educators with a vision of how they might engage in such activity themselves. Thus, potential teacher activists often struggle to find models of grassroots engagement that could bring them into the arena of collective action (Picower, 2012). This is particularly problematic as the profession increasingly aligns its mission with “social justice,” yet gives educators muddy definitions of the concept and minimal guidance on how to work for change (Cochran-Smith, 2010).

A key part of making this knowledge useful, however, is situating the on-the-ground activity of these teachers within the larger context in which they are operating. Essential to the grassroots model that McAlevee (2016) details is the collective analysis of the structural power that organizers are confront, what she terms a “power-structure analysis.” By definition, seeking change ‘at the grassroots’ means working against the “limit situations” (Freire, 1970) within a given context. Yet to do so, one must first identify those limits. As noted by Lipman (2011), however, the neoliberal project in education has played out in locally specific ways, differing greatly among rural, suburban and urban districts, but also among the most affected large city school systems across the country.

Because of this reality, this project situates the teachers’ work within their specific environment, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), in order to connect the neoliberal context to their grassroots organizing. Documenting the neoliberal

project of the SDP and describing how that neoliberal project connects to their organizing on the ground provides practicing educators with an important framework for identifying similar structural neoliberal problems in their own environments in order to act.

Beyond this, however, the methodology and findings of this inquiry hold important insights for critical educational scholars and teacher-educators who hope to reach through and beyond the academy with their work. Educational researchers can look to the design of this project, informed by a bifocal framework, for ways to connect their large-scale theoretical analyses to the direct experiences of teachers in the field. Additionally, it is my hope that given the topic at hand, teacher-educators can utilize the findings of this inquiry to provide their students with a more comprehensive vision of education for social justice, a vision that includes strategies for tangible action beyond the classroom.

### Chapter 3

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this investigation was to explore *why, how, and in what contexts* teachers engage in grassroots organizing, in hopes of expanding the literature *and* providing educators today with a deeper capacity for organized engagement in their own environments. In order to make this meaningful contribution, I explored the work of these teachers through a *critically bifocal* lens that situates their organizing in relation to the “deep structural constraints” (Weis & Fine, 2012, p. 174) of the city and School District of Philadelphia (SDP).

The motivation behind this framework goes beyond a mere desire for confirmation between data sources. Weis and Fine (2004) articulate their drive as both a theoretical and ethical commitment to not simply “dislodge the dominant discourse” of structural conditions, but to also “help readers and audiences imagine where the spaces for resistance, agency, and possibility lie” (p. xviii). As argued by the authors, only through documenting those spaces with conscious attention to their boundaries and limits can inquiry aim for what Lather (1986) termed “catalytic validity,” knowledge that is capable of spurring meaningful action.

This bifocal framework challenges the tendency in social science research, particularly in the field of education, to center analyses on *either* large-scale systems, trends, and policies, *or* localized sites, groups, and individuals. As argued by Weis and Fine (2012) this oft-repeated binary reproduces “the fantasy that institutions or people survive in hermetically sealed spheres” (p. 173). Whether inadvertent or purposeful,

such analyses frame teachers, students, and communities as either having unconstrained agency within (and, thus, complete responsibility for) their contexts *or* as having no genuine ability to alter the direction of schooling in the United States. Taking up research that intends to contribute knowledge for transformative change means situating “local qualitative descriptions” within the “webs of power that connect institutional and individual lives to larger social formations” (Weis & Fine, 2004, p. xvii). As argued by Weis and Fine (2004), “if we do not draw these lines for readers, we render them invisible, colluding in the obfuscation of the structural conditions that undergird social inequities” (p. xix).

Thus, as explained in Chapter 1, I took up two categories of questions in this project. The first questions were directed toward the teachers I worked with. I wanted to know **1) why this group of teachers took up grassroots organizing**. What motivated them to get involved? What motivated them to stay involved? And, how did their involvement connect with their lives as teachers? Beyond this, I wanted to know **2) how these teachers engaged in grassroots organizing**. What issues did they take up in their work? How were these issues taken up? And, what were their experiences with organizing?

The next questions, however, were directed toward to the larger context in which the teachers were operating. I wanted to know **3) how the teachers’ grassroots organizing related to the neoliberalization of the city and the district**. What aspects of the neoliberal project shaped the work taken up by these educators? And, how did those aspects shape their organizing on the ground?

### 3.1 Study Design

These questions provided the groundwork for a critically bifocal design that situated the experiences and actions of educators actively engaged in grassroots organizing within the context of the city and School District of Philadelphia (SDP). I began by contacting teachers that I had met at various events that focused on educational issues within the city. These “key informants,” all members of various grassroots groups, then connected me with similarly engaged educators who they believed would be interested in participating. In addition to this, I reached out to several grassroots organizations whose work focused on seeking change around issues of educational, racial, economic, and/or social justice in order to solicit participation from their members who were teachers. After an initial meeting and interview, four of the teachers were asked to collaborate more closely. In the following months I worked and learned alongside these teachers, conducting interviews, engaging in observations, and participating in the grassroots work they took up.

In addition to this, I took up an analysis of the larger context within the city and the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) in an attempt to discern the “limit situations” (Freire, 1970) within which the teachers were operating. As argued by Freire (1970), human actors “exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom” (p. 99). More importantly, they consider what is and is not possible within the context of these “limits” as they seek to act on the world. Because the teachers of this study were consciously seeking to act *against* such limits, any quest to understand their work required understanding what and where those limits were. In attending to this larger analysis, my hope was to document how the teachers of this inquiry operated within their unique context,

encouraging readers to identify the limits of their own environments and providing them with a greater capacity for taking up their own grassroots engagement.

In order to deeply explore these bifocal concerns, I built on the overlapping qualitative traditions of *narrative inquiry* (Chase, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), *critical place inquiry* (Massey, 1993; Massey, 1994), and *ethnography* (Stern & Brown, 2016; Vargas, 2008). Each of these methods brought a unique but important toolkit for investigating the grassroots organizing of the Philadelphia teachers under the umbrella of a critically bifocal framework. In what follows, I detail these qualitative influences.

### **3.1.1 Narrative Inquiry**

At the heart of this project were the educators who, in addition to their personal and professional responsibilities, spend hours of their time organizing in their schools and communities for social change. Centering their understandings, experiences, and work meant attending to their stories throughout the research process in an ongoing *narrative inquiry*. As articulated by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), narrative inquiry envisions the participant as a storyteller, centering the ways in which people live “their stories in an ongoing experiential text” as well as *tell* “their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others” (p. 4).

This focus on human experience as data highlights a distinct turn from the “position of objectivity defined from the positivistic, realist perspective” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 9). Instead, narrative inquiry is situated as a relational interpretation, as a search to understand the meaning derived from participants’ experiences. As explained by Chase (2005), unlike a simple a chronological account, a narrative also “communicates the narrator’s *point of view*” (p. 656, emphasis added). Thus,

participants' narratives are not only a way "of organizing events and objects" like a plot line in a novel (Chase, 2005, p. 656), but a means to understanding the *storyteller* experiencing that plot. In addition to describing *what* occurred, narratives convey the "emotions, thoughts, and interpretations" that color individuals' experiences (Chase, 2005, p. 656).

Narrative inquiry, then, provides important methodological and analytical tools for situating the work of teachers engaged in organizing work. As discussed in Chapter 2, at its core, grassroots organizing "places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people" (McAlevey, 2016). Diverging from other forms of social action, grassroots organizing *itself* centers the experiences of the people on the ground. As stated by McAlevey (2016), the people "make the power analysis, design the strategy, and achieve the outcome" (p. 10). Understanding this grassroots work means understanding the teacher-organizers. Grassroots organizing could not happen without them, therefore, research on the teachers' grassroots organizing should not happen without them, their motivations, their experiences, and their interpretations. Narrative inquiry's focus on methods that explore these very aspects made it an ideal approach for this investigation.

### **3.1.2 Critical Place Inquiry**

As stated by Tuck and McKenzie (2014), while "much of social science takes place in a place," places are rarely "featured in the articles, reports, and books that emerge from those studies" (p. 26). Rather than continuing to situate place as an inconsequential backdrop, however, critical place inquiry highlights the role of the locality by attending to the contextualized location in which social actions take place. This reconceptualization shifts researchers' understandings of place from a static



backdrop of human experience to an undeniable “entanglement” of social life (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014, p. 42). As argued by Tuck and McKenzie (2014) *who we are and how we are* is influenced by our physical location and thus, the context of that location should be attended to in research.

Yet while *a place* is typically conceived in a highly specified way (it is *one* demarcated location), Massey (1994) suggests that places are always a “distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations” (p. 156), which may produce unique effects between different localities even as they bear the weight from the same large-scale structures. These relations, Massey (1994) explains, culminate to form the “accumulated history” of a place, the aggregate layers of interactions between a locality and the larger social forces at play. The advantage to this method of inquiry is clear. As stated by Massey (1993), exploring the accumulated history of a place can “make more concrete the links between 'us' and 'them'” and aid in our understanding of how the actions of local people at the local level impact the wider social reality (p. 144).

A key element of this method is, of course, the construction of a rich description of what makes a place unique. Yet as argued by Massey (1993), any serious inquiry into a place or a locality also requires explicit theorizing (p. 147). This understanding of place-based inquiry deeply aligned with the bifocal framework of this project. Weis and Fine (2013) have articulated their bifocal approach as highlighting the “twinned importance of theory and design” where qualitative research on “the daily lives of people must, at root, be theorized and researched in relation to deep structural formations” (p. 223). With this in mind, Massey’s (1993, 1994) conceptualization of critical place inquiry provided a set of methods that would guide

an investigation of the specific context in which these teachers were operating. Joining descriptive and theoretical methods, I chose to conduct a “contextual analysis” (described below) of the city and School District of Philadelphia (SDP) that was not only informed by reflections from the field but was also situated within the theoretical literature around the larger neoliberal project.

### **3.1.3 Ethnography**

Ethnographic research relies on in-depth fieldwork to understand the cultural practices embedded in a particular site, phenomenon or group (Hammersley, 2016). Founding ethnographers, such as Franz Boas (1888) and Margaret Mead (1928), historically focused their efforts on understanding a particular culture, nearly always a culture different from their own (Gullion, 2016, p.4). As noted by Guillion (2016), these “early ethnographic accounts were particularly interested in researching in ‘exotic’ locales” where researchers could map the practices, rituals and beliefs of “untouched” communities by quietly observing their lives (p. 4). Both the choice to study cultural *others* and to observe at an objective distance were considered essential methodological parameters to uphold the definition of scientific validity of the time.

Contemporary ethnographers, however, have sought to problematize the ethical consequences and epistemological assumptions of these methods, questioning the extent to which researchers *can* and *should* seek to maintain an “objective distance” from the sites they study. As argued Vargas (2008):

Despite what is still taught in anthropological methods classes, no detached, fly-on-the wall approach is possible. Such an approach in anthropology, considered an antidote to the influences of one’s subjectivity on the research process, only obscures the fact that even those who try to be invisible are, at the very least, already

influencing the social environment in which they choose to do their fieldwork and, more importantly, are already committing themselves to a very clear moral and political position—that of letting things remain as they are, of leaving the status quo untouched. (p. 171)

With this critique in mind, Vargas (2008) repurposes the traditional ethnographic method of *participant observation* into *observant participation*. As he explains, “while *participant observation* traditionally puts the emphasis on the observation, *observant participation* refers to active participation in the organized group, such that observation becomes an appendage of the main activity” (Vargas, 2008, p. 175, emphasis original). As articulated by Stern & Brown (2016) being involved as an *observant participant* provides an “embodied knowledge” wherein the experiences, feelings, and reflections of the researcher are taken as additional elements of observation in the field.

This conceptualization of ethnographic methods was essential to my exploration of *how* the grassroots work of the teachers was taken up. By both observing and engaging in grassroots organizing, I was able to collect data not only on the actions of the participants, but also on my own actions, insights and reflections. This data, in conjunction with the above methods, provides a more complete and useful picture for educators who may similarly want to take up grassroots organizing.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

Informed by these qualitative traditions, I undertook several methods of data collection. In this section, I will detail the use of these methods over the course of this research project as well as their relation to the aforementioned research questions.

**Table 1 Research Questions and Data Collection Alignment**

Research Question	Data Source 1: Narrative Interviews	Data Source 2: Fieldnotes	Data Source 3: Contextual Analysis
Why did these teachers take up grassroots organizing?	X		
How did these teachers engage in grassroots organizing?	X	X	
How did the teachers' grassroots organizing relate to the neoliberalization of the city and the district?	X	X	X

### 3.2.1 Narrative Interviews

Between June and August of 2017, I interviewed a total of ten teachers who were identified as actively engaged in grassroots organizations in the city. These initial interviews focused on understanding the educators' identities, their perspectives on issues of injustice in the city and the district, and their relationships to the grassroots groups in which they were members (see Appendix A). While also used in future data analysis, these initial interviews were first used to identify a smaller group of four educators that presented distinct opportunities for understanding the grassroots work. The selection of the four educators I worked with is detailed more thoroughly below in section 3.4.

After this smaller group of educators agreed to participate, we met again for a second interview that more deeply explored their beliefs and commitments to issues of justice as well as their experiences with engaging in their grassroots organizations.

This interview was semi-structured, focusing on understanding why and how the educators took up grassroots work while remaining flexible enough to follow emerging inquiries specific to each of the participants (see Appendix B).

The third interview was completed in November of 2017, after I had joined the teachers in engaging in several (between 2 and 4) events with their organizations. This final interview was informed by our shared experiences at these events. The teachers were asked to share their reflections on the meetings, but they were also asked to respond to my reflections on what took place. Structured between an interview and a dialogue, this discussion was, in a sense, an adapted “member check” in which we jointly explored our understandings and perspectives on our engagement. Because of this, the final interview protocol was reflexively tailored to each of the teachers based on our previous conversations and experiences (see Appendix C).

### **3.2.2 Field Notes**

Between July 2017 and February 2018, I engaged with the teachers as an “observant participant” at fifteen events and meetings coordinated by the grassroots organizations of which they were members (see Table 2). Because my participation was central in this process, field notes were primarily taken in private at the conclusion of each event and attended to data such as the timeline of activities, participants’ actions and conversations, the physical location, and my own thoughts and experiences as a participant. When possible, jottings, photographs and artifacts (such as flyers or information pamphlets) were collected during the meeting and included in the fieldnotes.

**Table 2**      **Events/Activities Attended for Observant Participation**

Event	Host Organization	Date(s)
Strategy meeting	Our City Our Schools Coalition (OCOS)	7/20/17, 8/10/17
SRC protest/rally	OCOS	6/15/17, 9/14/17, 11/16/17
Medicare for All canvassing	Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)	9/23/17
Socialist Night School	DSA	10/17/17
After Charlottesville: Confronting White Supremacy	Teacher's Action Group (TAG) Philly, Caucus of Working Educators (WE)	9/13/17
System of Great Schools Meeting	N/A	Two dates withheld to protect anonymity of the school
Black Lives Matter Week of Action organizing meeting	WE	11/15/17, 1/9/18
Summer Reading Series book group	TAG Philly, WE	7/17/17, 7/31/17
Colorism: Women of the African Diaspora	WE	3/6/18

### **3.2.3 Contextual Analysis**

As part of the bifocal design of this project, I also conducted a contextual analysis (see Chapter 6) of the city and district. Informed by Massey's (1993, 1994) method of exploring the accumulated history of a place, this analysis integrated place specific documents within the theoretical literature around the larger neoliberal project. More specifically, I synthesized examinations of neoliberalism (Bartlett et al, 2002; Harvey, 2007; Lipman, 2011; Metcalf, 2017; Monbiot, 2016; Peck, Brenner, & Theodore, 2008) and neoliberal trends in education (Elmore & Simone, 2015; Hursh,

2007; Lipman, 2011) as well as Philadelphia specific news sources (Lubrano, 2014; Denvir, 2014; Graham, 2018; Hurdle, 2013; Laker, Ruderman & Purcell, 2018; Moselle & John-Hall, 2018; Young, 2018; Whitehorne, 2013), press briefings (Corbett, 2011; Educations Voters Pennsylvania, 2013; Knudsen, 2012), and analyses generated by organizations and scholars (Cucchiara, 2013; Education Law Center, 2013; Jack & Sludden, 2013; Power, 2018; Public Interest Law Center, 2014; Travers, 2003).

Because this analysis was to be a key source of data in the exploration of research question 3, this contextual analysis began with an open coding of all of the narrative interviews and fieldnotes. More specifically, this coding process was focused on exploring the aspects of the city and district that were identified as issues by the teachers or that the teachers' grassroots work sought to address. These issues were then explored for potential similarities, leading to the development of the three key themes that characterized the context in which the teachers engaged in grassroots organizing, a) top-down, "privatized" governance, b) economic inequality, and c) racialized stratification. While there remain many other aspects of the neoliberal project in Philadelphia, these aspects remained the focus due to their salience in the qualitative data of this investigation.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The above described data was analyzed in multiple stages with each of the three research questions in mind. To begin, data was prepared for analysis by converting the audio recorded interviews into transcripts, which were edited for clarity. Direct quotes were only altered to remove filler words such as "um," "uh," and "like" or to clarify meaning and protect confidentiality. Any changes to direct quotes

will be denoted by ellipses or brackets, yet all changes were made without the altering of the meaning or intent of the speaker. These transcripts, as well as the observational fieldnotes, were then uploaded into the qualitative software program, Dedoose, which was used to aggregate the data identified within each of the codes detailed below. To more clearly delineate the procedure used for this analysis, my process is broken down by research question below.

### 3.3.1 Research Question One: Why?

Research question one explored the potential reasons why the teachers took up grassroots organizing. What motivated them to organize? What motivated them to keep organizing? And, how did organizing connect with their lives as teachers? The work of analyzing the data to answer this line of questioning was conducted as follows:

1. An initial open coding of all interview data was conducted with regard to the teachers' motivations for engaging in grassroots organizing. Emerging codes included a) educational experiences, b) professional experiences, and c) growth as a teacher (see Table 3 for description).

**Table 3 Code Descriptions from Open Analysis**

Code Name	Educational Experiences	Professional experiences	Growth as a teacher
Code Description	K-12 and higher educational experiences described as motivations for/introductions to organizing	Experiences as a teacher in the current, neoliberal district environment that motivated their organizing	Engagement as supporting the development of teaching practice or becoming a better teacher.



2. A second a priori coding was then conducted utilizing findings from the existing literature on teachers’ motivations for engaging in grassroots work as discussed in Chapter 2. These codes included a) teachers as “cultural workers,” b) personal background/experiences, and c) seeking support/relationships (see Table 4 for description).

**Table 4            Code Descriptions from Literature Analysis**

Code Name	Teachers as “cultural workers”	Personal background/experiences	Seeking support/relationships
Code Description	Descriptions of the role of the teacher as an agent of justice inside <i>and</i> outside of the classroom.	Family background, personal experiences that informed their engagement of grassroots organizing	Connecting with likeminded people, building relationships, and finding personal/professional support

3. The codes from these separate processes were then scrutinized for important differences and potential overlap. Through this process they were condensed into the three overarching themes discussed more deeply in Chapter 4: a) the personal, b) the relational, and c) the professional. Because this analysis drew on narrative interview data from the larger pool of ten participants, the findings are discussed both broadly in relation to all of the teachers and specifically, highlighting certain teachers whose stories exemplified the codes and themes described above.

### 3.3.2 Research Question Two: How?

Research question two explored the more direct means by which the teachers of this study engaged in grassroots organizing. I hoped to understand what issues they took up, how they took them up, and why. The process of analyzing the data for this research question was conducted as follows:

1. All of the interview transcripts and fieldnotes were reviewed for concrete discussions and/or examples of the activities undertaken by both the participants and myself in our engagement in grassroots work. Examples included activities such as: a) tabling at a community event, b) attending a rally, c) participating in a conference call, d) engaging in a planning meeting, e) joining a book group, f) engaging in a topical event, among many others.
2. These instances were then explored in an open coding process in which two common categories of activities emerged. Each of these categories, I argue, represented a critical aspect of Freire's (1970) definition of praxis: "*reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it*" (p. 70). Thus, the instances of organizing were categorized into examples of a) learning and reflecting, and b) taking action, seeking change (see Table 5 for descriptions of themes).

**Table 5 Theme Descriptions from Coding Analysis**

Theme Name	Learning/ Reflecting	Taking action/ Seeking change
Theme Description	Activities or discussions of activities that were focused on learning, reflecting, or theorizing	Activities or discussions of activities that were focused on taking action or seeking change

3. Within these categories, I used McAlevey's (2016) framework describing the key aspects of grassroots organizing (see Chapter 2) to discuss the examples. Results are presented in Chapter 5 through the teachers' narratives derived from the interviews as well as through field notes from my own observant participation in specific activities or events. This section in particular focuses on the narratives of the four educators with which I worked most closely. As noted above, I utilized subsequent interviews with these teachers as an adapted "member check" in which we discussed the activities or events that we shared during my fieldwork. Thus, Chapter 5 situates their and my reflections on how grassroots organizing (McAlevey, 2016) was taken up by the teachers of this study.

### **3.3.3 Research Question Three: In What Context?**

Research question three explored the relationship between the teachers' grassroots organizing and the neoliberalization of the city and the district. More specifically, this line of questioning sought to understand what aspects of the neoliberal project shaped the work taken up by the educators. The procedure for analyzing the data connected to question three was conducted as follows:

1. The contextual analysis (described above) began with an open coding of the interview and fieldnote data that focused on exploring the aspects of the city and district that were framed as issues or "limits" by the teachers or that the teachers' grassroots work sought to address. These aspects were then explored for potential similarities, leading to the development of the

three key themes that characterized the neoliberal context in which the teachers engaged in grassroots organizing, a) top-down, “privatized” governance, b) economic inequality, and c) racialized stratification.

2. These themes became guideposts in my investigation of structural neoliberal trends and their Philadelphia specific outcomes. Theoretical literature, local news sources, press briefings, and other scholarly examinations were analyzed to create a contextual analysis of neoliberalism in the city and School District of Philadelphia.
3. The data derived from this contextual analysis was then used to discuss the teachers’ engagement in grassroots organizing, connecting their work to the aforementioned themes within the Philadelphia neoliberal context.

### **3.4 Participants and Recruitment**

In June 2017 I began reaching out to Philadelphia teachers that I had met during my attendance at events hosted by grassroots organizations over the course of several years. As a nearby PhD student and adjunct instructor, I would venture into Philadelphia for community conferences, rallies and conventions hosted by teachers actively engaged in work connected to issues of educational justice. After identifying three teachers that were well connected in these circles, I solicited their interest in participating in the project as well as their recommendations for other educators I could contact

While I reached out to seventeen teachers total, ten were able to meet me for an initial interview. Of the ten educators I met with, five identified as male and five identified as female. Two of the male participants identified as people of color while the other eight participants identified primarily as white. Of the eight white teachers,

three identified as ethnically Jewish. The ten participants held incredibly diverse levels of teaching experience ranging from two to near thirty years. Likewise, the participants held positions across K-12 grade levels and subject areas. While all considered themselves public school teachers, several had also taught in private and charter schools.

In order to more deeply observe, experience, and reflect on grassroots organizing with the teachers, I utilized this initial interview to select a smaller sample of educators with whom I could work more closely. After compiling detailed profiles of the participants from these interviews, I selected four teachers who provided the broadest scope of 1) engagement in different grassroots organizations, 2) levels and types of teaching experience (e.g. years, grades and subjects taught at private, public, and charter schools), and 3) representation of racial, ethnic and class backgrounds. While this selection gave me greater access to different organizations and prioritized the voices of the two teachers of color, it did lead to a male-heavy investigation with three out of the four selected teachers identifying as men. Because of the research questions driving the study, however, this more focused sample of educators from a range of organizations provided a more thorough initial exploration of *why*, *how*, and *in what contexts* teachers in Philadelphia were engaging in grassroots organizing. A snapshot of the total participants can be found in Table 6, while more detailed profiles of the four selected teachers is provided below.

**Table 6 Participant Information**

Participant * denotes teacher selected for extended participation	Years teaching, subject, grade level, type(s) of school	Racial/ethnic identification, class, gender
Marisa	10 years, English, 10 <sup>th</sup> & 11 <sup>th</sup> grade, public magnet school	White/Asian American, middle class, female
Samantha	16 years, Math, middle grades, public school	White, working/middle class, female
Zack	4 years, Spanish, 9 <sup>th</sup> grade, public magnet school	White/Jewish, middle class, male
Jessie	28 years, 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade, public school	White/Jewish, working/middle class, female
Jackie	23 years (retired), Kindergarten, public school	White, working class, female
Chris	6 years, Humanities, High School, charter and public school	White, middle class, male
Leah*	6 years, Math, Middle School, charter and public school	White/Jewish, middle class, female
Jorge*	25 years (retired), Science and History, private and public school	White, middle class, male
Peter*	2 years, Social Studies, Middle School, public school	Afro-Caribbean, middle class, male
Isaac*	9 years, African American History, High School, public school	Black, working class, male

**Note:** Pseudonyms were used for all of the participants. They were given the option, however, to choose if the names and details of their organizations should be altered. All of the participants discussed below gave permission for the names of their organizations to be used in this report.

**Jorge**

Jorge is a retired teacher and activist. He identifies as a white male of working and middle class origins. In attempt to avoid the draft, he began teaching at an elite boarding school after completing his bachelor's degree. He eventually joined the AmeriCorps Vista program, which brought him to Baltimore and Philadelphia to work with gang affiliated youth. After taking up employment at different times in both the auto and garment industries, Jorge returned to school to get his teaching credential and taught over 20 years in what he described as a "racially segregated" school in the "poorest neighborhood in the city." Jorge is currently a core member of the 215 People's Alliance, a community-based organization "fighting for equity and justice" in the city of Philadelphia.

### **Leah**

Leah is a middle grades math teacher who identifies as a white woman from an upper middle-class background. She began her career in a local charter school in 2010 and left after several years to teach in a district school where she felt she would be better supported in her organizing work with the Caucus Working Educator's (WE). A subset of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), WE centers a model of teacher unionism that is grounded in and directed by the membership, the *working educators* of the union. Leah has been involved with WE as well as the Teacher's Action Group (TAG Philly) since the beginning of her career and is now a tireless organizer for the organizations.

### **Isaac**

Isaac has taught African American History at the high school level for ten years in the SDP. He identifies as an African American male from a working-class background. After his first school was shuttered in the wave of closures that plagued

the district in 2013, Isaac moved to another district school that he described as racially diverse but economically isolated. He currently teaches 11<sup>th</sup> graders, many of whom, as articulated by Isaac, “come from extreme poverty.” Deeply motivated by issues of structural racism and white supremacy, Isaac is an active member in Black Lives Matter Philly, WE, TAG Philly, and several other organizations where he engages daily in campaigns for racial justice.

### **Peter**

Peter is a middle school social studies teacher entering his third year as a full-time educator in the district. He identifies as a male of lower middle-class origins and of Afro-Caribbean descent. Becoming engaged in labor struggles while in college, he was among a small group of Philadelphia teachers who organized a local meeting with the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), a member-driven subgroup of the Chicago Federation of Teachers. This meeting sparked the development of WE in 2013. Beyond this, Peter is an active member of the Democratic Socialists of America’s (DSA) Philadelphia Chapter, which he joined because he felt that teachers must also engage in organizing around broader issues of economic justice.

### **3.5 Researcher Positionality**

The role of the researcher in qualitative inquiry has steadily gained attention in contemporary scholarship (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, & Muhamad, 2001; Milner, 2007; i.a.). In an attempt to better explicate the richness of qualitative work, modern researchers have chosen to explicitly delineate their own positionality within specific inquiries rather than pose as the disconnected, “objective” observer. Authors like Dwyer and Buckle (2009) as well as Merriam et al (2001) have charged researchers with illustrating their roles on the



“insider/outsider” continuum, or what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) call “the space in between,” in order to map the limits and advantages of the researcher’s purview. It is with this in mind that I frame my positionality and role within the context of this inquiry.

### **Insider**

As a critical scholar and educator, I support the work taken up by teachers of this study. Like them, I am committed, both personally and professionally, to analyzing systems of power and seeking just social change. This position, perhaps not surprisingly, meant that there was frequently ideological commonality between me and the teachers of this study. Likewise, over the years leading up to this project I would occasionally attend events hosted by WE, TAG Philly and other community organizations centered on educational justice. Because of these things, I was known to several of the teachers that I contacted as, at the very least, an interested ally.

These affinities provided an initial foundation of trust and access on which my future relationships with the teachers were built. Additionally, these commonalities allowed my *observant participation* in the grassroots work to be genuine. I believed in the organizing of these educators and thus my own experiences with engagement were valid sources of understanding *why, how, and in what contexts* grassroots organizing is taken up by educators in Philadelphia. These ideological commonalities, while never complete, could also be noted as a potential drawback to this project, which openly affirms the work of these teachers. While I contend that no researcher can maintain pure objectivity in qualitative work, I want to state explicitly that my commitment to social change influenced the research questions, design, and analysis of this inquiry.

This open commitment, however, is situated within a rich and growing framing of justice-oriented research as “scholar activism” (Gitlin, 2014; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Stern & Brown, 2016; Weis & Fine, 2004; i.a.) whereby researchers map injustices *as well as* sites of resistance with the expressed goal of informing social change. Hoping to provide the field at this critical juncture with a deeper capacity for grassroots engagement, this project focused very purposefully on the motivations, successful strategies, and challenging contexts of the participants’ grassroots work. While many additional lines of inquiry should be taken up with these grassroots teacher-organizers, this project was shaped by my explicit theoretical and ethical commitment to critically bifocal scholar activism.

In addition to my ideological affinity, many of the teachers of this study also mirrored my identity as a professional class, white woman. While I took care to contact a diverse set of educators for participation, the majority of the teachers who were able to meet with me and the majority of the organizations’ membership shared my race, class and/or gender identity. These race, class, and gender similarities were important aspects of my “insider” status and likely prefaced my welcomed inclusion into the work of the teachers’ organizations.

The most personal “insider” aspect for this project, however, is my own background as a working-class kid that grew up on the outskirts of Philadelphia. While I have never lived within the city limits, I spent my entire childhood and the largest portion of my adult life in the suburbs of the city. Thus, I realized throughout the research process that I had an important level of implicit, nuanced knowledge of the city and the district. It was this knowledge, in fact, paired with my own racially and economically segregated suburban schooling experience, that spurred my early

analyses of the institution of education and inspired my voyage into the field. It didn't take much academic prodding to transition the social messaging of "Philthadelphia" [sic] from my upbringing into a critique of race, class, and injustice in Pennsylvania education. This, along with the above-mentioned relations, anchored my role as an "insider" on the continuum discussed by Dwyer and Buckle (2009).

### **Outsider**

While these "insider" aspects of my role were important, there were several key ways in which I was still very much an "outsider." As noted above, in the years prior to this inquiry, I had been occasionally engaged in the grassroots work these teachers took up. My attendance, however, was peripheral and sporadic. Thus, while I frequently shared similar political and educational perspectives with these educators, I was fully aware that I had not been down in the dirt, putting in the work as they had.

More importantly, as I began my engagement, I would not be operating in the immensely precarious context that they were. As a teacher-educator at a local University, I am largely isolated from the draconian neoliberal reforms that crash into the K-12 classrooms of city schools. I do not fear my school being closed. I do not work years without a raise. I do not worry that my political activity within the district will end my career. Where these teachers often put themselves in jeopardy while organizing, my participation in this project would reap the benefits of completing my degree and building my scholarship. Thus, while I could genuinely engage in the work of organizing, I was still the privileged university-based researcher. These aspects of my "outsider" status meant that my *observant participation* had important limits that needed to be accounted for when utilized as data. I shared in the work of these

teachers, drawing important reflections from my engagement; but with regard to the analysis of this project, the insights from the teacher-organizers took priority.

## **Chapter 4**

### **FINDINGS: WHY DO TEACHERS ENGAGE IN GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING?**

Much of the previous research around teachers' engagement in grassroots activity has focused on understanding the motivations behind their work (Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Montaña, López-Torres, DeLissovoy, Pacheco & Stillman, 2002; Picower, 2012; Urrieta, 2010). This line of inquiry is a particularly worthy endeavor. For one, it is often difficult to imagine why educators, in addition to their personal and professional responsibilities, would be driven to spend hours of their time fighting against the status quo. But for scholars and teacher educators who hold their efforts in high regard, the question of why they organize holds important insight into how to support current and future educators who choose to engage in grassroots work.

Why did this group of teachers take up grassroots organizing? What motivated them to get involved? What motivated them to stay involved? And, how did their involvement connect with their lives as teachers? In this section I will detail the findings from this line of inquiry regarding the Philadelphia teachers' engagement in grassroots organizations. More specifically, I will highlight the ways in which their engagement was colored by shared personal, relational, and professional influences.

#### **4.1 Theme One: The Personal**

As we explored what brought the teachers to focus on issues of justice and change, they often recounted stories that centered the importance of their personal histories. For many of the educators, their families, backgrounds, and educational

experiences were identified as salient connections to justice-oriented activities like critical approaches to pedagogy and grassroots organizing. These connections were most commonly expressed during our exploration of the teachers' initial engagement with issues of justice and were frequently framed as their first memories of this aspect of their lives.

As argued by Robinson (1992), in the recounting of personal histories first experiences often “mark changes in an ongoing developmental process” and are retained in the narrative “because they are integral to the history” (p. 224) of the individual. In particular, the stories detailing the teachers’ first memories of their concern with issues of justice offer insight into an essential prerequisite of their change-seeking via grassroots organizing: deciding that something needed to be changed in the first place. Thus, the stories told by the teachers frequently highlighted the connection between their early understandings of social problems and their current engagement in organizing. In what follows, I explore key examples of this relationship within each of themes that emerged from the narratives.

#### **4.1.1 Family and Background**

Narratives centering the participants’ family’s background, values, or perspectives on political issues were common themes in our interviews together. Several of the participants shared stories about family members who directly discussed topics like fairness, inequality, race, and class as meaningful in their development toward a justice orientation. And, these stories aligned clearly with their current grassroots work.

Chris, for example, recounted his mother’s consistent discussion about her own political activism when detailing his concern with racial and economic justice:

I think it was something that I was always like brought up to at least think about. My mom grew up in Virginia in the 1950s...so she was sort of around segregated schools and like herself went into activism and organizing. So, like she always sort of had those conversations about race and important issues with us growing up. (Chris, personal communication, August 1, 2017)

While Chris explained that his political lens was fairly narrow at that point in his life, it was this initial introduction that he used to frame his subsequent journey into anti-racist work as a white educator and organizer.

During my project this work culminated with the formation of a group that would bear the acronym BAR WE, short for Building Anti-Racist White Educators. Created in conjunction with the Teacher's Action Group (TAG) and the Caucus of Working Educators (WE), BAR WE was envisioned as a space for white-identifying teachers to develop an explicitly anti-racist stance as professionals. Defined by Sonia Nieto (1996) as working affirmatively to combat racism, an anti-racist stance first requires educators to look both inward and outward to discern the impact of racist beliefs, practices, and structures in modern schooling. Thus, Chris and the other educators who engaged in BAR WE met routinely to learn and reflect on school policies, curricula, and even their own biases as white educators. This work, the group acknowledged, has traditionally fallen on the shoulders of people of color and it was for this reason that BAR WE was formed as a space for white educators to take responsibility for their own racial education.

Following Nieto's definition, however, BAR WE also participated in working affirmatively to combat racism beyond themselves. During my participation in the group, for example, we paired off to take on specific tasks for expanding the group and supporting the 2018 Black Lives Matter (BLM) Week of Action. While some members thoughtfully constructed potential names for the group, I worked with Chris

and others to draft an Op/Ed detailing why white educators should get involved with the BLM Week of Action. In recent months the group has gone public with its activities, creating outlines for educators elsewhere to have similar reflective conversations and develop BAR WE practices in their own contexts.

While many additional life experiences were shared as motivations for Chris' organizing, the initial centering of his mother's own anti-racist perspective and activism highlights the role that family can play in framing the grassroots work taken up by educators. In fact, family members' conscious discussion of social and political issues was a meaningful theme not only for Chris, but for several of the teachers.

Jesse, for example, similarly noted the impact of her family on her engagement in justice-driven activity. When asked when she began caring about issues of justice she replied that she was "just raised that way," explaining that her Marxist family frequently talked about issues of fairness:

They [her parents] believed in a world where things were more fair... and that stuff got taught to me. I know it's a touchy term because what does it mean? It's not just 'the same as' right? It's a term that you really have to sort of dig deeper... what does it mean to be fair...but yeah, [it impacted me] from the very start. (Jesse, personal communication, June 21, 2017)

Isaac similarly noted his mothers' candor in speaking about issues of race at an early age. Stemming largely from his own early experiences with discrimination as a black child, Isaac recalled his mother's conscious discussion about racism in the world. As explained by Isaac, "my mother was very purposeful...actually speaking honestly about her own experiences cause she was black being raised in Liverpool England, so she had a very traumatic childhood in that regard" (Isaac, personal communication, July 25, 2017). Isaac explained that his mother helped him process his



own experiences with racialized prejudice, which was a crucial first step in the development of his critical racial lens.

While it was clear that several of the white participants' parents had played an important role in their growing understanding of injustice, for Black parents these discussions have unique social and historical meaning. As articulated by educational scholar, Janie Ward (1996), "as agents of socialization, Black families play a central role in orienting their children to the existing social environment, teaching them what they need to know about their world and their place in it" (p. 86). For black parents in the United States, this socialization is often based on "cultural and political interpretations and assumptions derived from their lived experience of being black in white America," or in Isaac's mother's case her experiences in the United States and abroad.

What has come to be known as "the talk" (Lopez, 2016), highlights the significance of these discussions in Black families in the United States. A purposeful conversation about race and the police, "the talk" is but one example of how Black parents have to prepare their children for a highly racialized world out of fear that daily interactions could have serious repercussions for their kids (Lopez, 2016, p. 1). As noted by Lopez, similar conversations are not often had by parents and children of other races, and this is evident in the comparison between the stories of Chris, Jesse, and Isaac as well. Whereas Chris' and Jesse's stories of parental discussions of injustice were abstract (e.g. "we talked about fairness") or turned outward (focusing on injustices experienced by others), Isaac's stories were personal, connected to his and his mothers' experiences with discrimination. These differences, however, showcased the unique relationship between the educators' family background and

their approaches to grassroots work later in life. Both Isaac and Chris, for example, took up organizing with an explicit focus on racialized oppression, while Jesse engaged in groups that approached issues of justice more broadly and centered their work on teaching practice.

The importance of this relationship between the educators' family background and their approaches to grassroots organizing was particularly meaningful in the narrative of Leah, a white woman of Jewish heritage. When asked about her racial and ethnic identification, Leah stated clearly that she was "white first," explaining the complicated historical context within the Jewish community that she argued often erases or plays down issues of race. Because of her detailed response I asked if she felt that this background informed her perspective. Leah replied, with a resounding "yes," explaining that her Jewish heritage impacted how she engaged in conversations about "race and social justice and white supremacy" (Leah, personal communication, July 17, 2017). More specifically, she detailed her reflections on the complex social history within the Jewish teaching community, particularly the Jewish educators that served urban students of color in cities on the East Coast:

I think also, there is a history, especially in East coast urban cities... of like staunch teacher's [unionism], first generation Jewish men and women, [who] were often the first college educated people in their families, but very often union first, community second...teachers first, students second, students of color second, families of color second. So...it informs the way that I talk about [race and ethnicity]. (Leah, personal communication, July 17, 2017)

What seemed most relevant in Leah's story was not the fact that she identified as white and Jewish, but her critical analysis of this heritage within the historical landscape of race, class and schooling in the United States. While she did not discuss conversations she had with specific family members, as did the other participants, her

centering of her family's ethnic background shined a spotlight on the relationship between her personal history and her engagement in WE.

WE, or the Caucus of Working Educators, is a faction of the PFT dedicated to a vision of social justice unionism (Peterson, 2015), an approach to organized labor in the profession that is member focused. More than that, however, this approach to teacher unionism seeks to integrate the needs of students, parents and communities into the more traditional demands of organized labor (e.g. salary and benefits). Gaining prominence after the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) took leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) in 2012, social justice caucuses now exist in over twenty cities and join together under the umbrella of the United Caucuses of Rank and File Educators (UCORE). WE is one such caucus that has cemented issues of racial and economic justice for students, schools, and communities into their mission of teacher unionism. Leah's involvement in WE as a lead organizer, then, becomes particularly salient when considering the "teacher first, community second" model that she critiqued within the historic East coast, Jewish, teaching community.

Perhaps the most contentious example of this came in the 1968 New York City teachers strikes that were sparked by tensions in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools of Brooklyn. After transitioning to local community control in the wake of desegregation efforts, tension arose as the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school board, run by black parents and educators, dismissed nearly all white and Jewish teachers from the school system (Erickson, 2013). The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), New York City's 90% white, majority-Jewish teachers union, launched three citywide teachers' strikes over two months in attempt to restore the teachers' jobs. For weeks students in Ocean Hill-Brownsville entered school through the police barricades that

separated picketing teachers from community-control proponents (Goldstein, 2014). Beyond this, the conflict affected nearly one million students across the city and was accompanied by increasing racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric that, as argued by Erickson (2013), generated “lasting political and social divisions that prevented whites and blacks from uniting” on the damaging school reforms to come in the neoliberal era.

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict exemplifies the most contentious aspects of the relationship between teachers’ unions and the local communities they serve. As articulated by Goldstein (2014), the urban teacher strikes of the late 1960s and early ’70s saw a “business unionism” take hold in which unions opposed black and Hispanic community control in favor of job security for predominantly white teachers. Social justice unionism, however, upends the logic that unions should solely focus on obtaining job security, pay, and benefits for its members. While these are essential aspects of any healthy union, organizations like CORE and WE contend that the power of collective labor should be used to simultaneously advocate for and with students, parents, and communities. Leah’s deep reflection on the fraught history connected to her heritage as a white, Jewish educator in the Northeast, underscores the importance of the teachers’ personal and family histories in their current grassroots work.

#### **4.1.2 Education**

In addition to the impact of their families, the teachers also recounted a variety of educational experiences that were framed as important moments in their commitment to justice and transformation. Zack, for example, articulated his attendance at both a progressive public school and a justice focused Jewish after-

school program as formative in his engagement in grassroots organizing. Speaking specifically about the latter, Zack explained,

[My] education was for me, in retrospect, it was all a grassroots organizing approach. We learned a lot about social movements all around...it was very much like ‘the Jewish struggle has been a struggle for liberation, so let’s like learn about all liberation struggles.’ We learned a lot. (Zack, personal communication, July 11, 2017)

Zack’s experience in this program was grounded in what he described as a radical Eastern European working-class tradition and something he spoke about as having shaped his view of social and political struggles. In addition to this, Zack also situated his learning at a progressive middle school as formative in his politicization,

I remember in middle school I went to a really amazing school that was... a project-based school where three days a week, we went to museums and we did work based around whatever was in the museums. And somehow in 8th grade we learned all about European history, we learned about Cuba and the cold war and stuff and I remember at that point being like “What? They killed the Guatemalan president because he wanted farmers to have a decent living? That doesn’t make sense!” (Zack, personal communication, July 11, 2017)

Zack’s discussion of his schooling was followed by his reflections on how these educational experiences set the stage for his early engagement in political protests against the Iraq war, highlighting how an explicit focus on social and political transformation within an educational curriculum can open the door for students to see themselves as agents of change.

Leah’s story similarly displayed the potential impact of educational experiences, particularly teachers and the content they chose, on students’ journey toward future change-seeking activity. When asked about influences on her politicization, Leah recalled a particular English teacher’s curricular decisions,

When I was in high school I had a teacher...he was Jewish and he was an English teacher and he taught really intently about the holocaust and Japanese internment during WWII. There was this way that he brought all of that work into our classroom and all of our conversations that we were having as a super privileged student body. And I think that in high school I became very aware of the fact that there was stuff I *wasn't* being told. (Leah, personal communication, July 17, 2017)

In addition to Zack and Leah, several other teachers recounted stories of educational experiences that were meaningful in their development as future organizers. These stories, however, often extended beyond the classroom. Chris, for example, explained that while he was interested in civil rights and racial justice throughout his life, it wasn't until he engaged in deep experiential learning as an African American studies major that he began to develop an organizing mindset around issues of race.

One course in particular paired in-class learning and community organizing around racialized gentrification near his university. As stated by Chris,

It was a very different class and a different way about looking [at] justice... I was involved in some like grassroots organizing work done around gentrification. There was a sort of a university community collaborative through a church [that was in] a historically African-American neighborhood that was experiencing gentrification and they were like building a huge high rise next to it. So...it was like an active organizing experience...that was pretty transformational for me. (Chris, personal communication, August 1, 2017)

The potential impact of experiential learning, however, was best exemplified in the narrative of Samantha. Identifying herself as an organizer turned educator, Samantha detailed a particularly meaningful educational experience that played a key role in her identification as a grassroots organizer. When asked when she realized she wanted to be an organizer, she explained that she spent a large portion of her senior year in college in Zimbabwe and South Africa exploring women's liberation struggles

and that this experience was formative in her subsequent commitment to grassroots organizing.

When asked what in particular about her experiences in African countries contributed to this motivation, she explained,

I had studied all the national liberation movements across Southern African countries in an academic way... you look at the national liberation movements and the role of Marxism, socialism, class conflict, but it wasn't until I lived with ex-combatants and women, specifically, that I saw those big movements from the ground up and picked them apart from the perspective of women on the ground. (Samantha, personal communication, July 17, 2017)

This “on the ground” analysis from her experiential learning made a world of difference for Samantha as she learned important lessons that informed her conclusion that grassroots work was the best solution to social problems. As she reflected on speaking with dozens of women across South Africa and Zimbabwe, she realized that “the farther away things got from the local level the more unprincipled it seemed to get, the more corrupt it seemed to get [and] just flat out sexist and...abusive toward women” (Samantha, personal communication, July 17, 2017). This realization was articulated by Samantha as solidifying her commitment to grassroots organizing. As she articulated,

[those experiences] made me realize that stuff that happens at a local level is...the building blocks of everything else and is the most meaningful. And those are the kernels of where the world change happens, everything is built off of that, if you don't have that nothing is to come... there is no above without below (Samantha, personal communication, July 17, 2017).

As highlighted by Samantha's narrative, these direct experiences through a study abroad made tangible her previous academic studies and solidified what would become her commitment to grassroots organizing. It was this portion of Samantha's

narrative, in fact, that most clearly connected with her current work a founding member of WE. Her belief that “there is no above without below” resounds throughout WE’s platform in the organization’s expressed commitment to organizing. As stated on the caucus’ website, “when we organize, we harness the power of millions of people (teachers, students, parents, citizens) who care about Philadelphia’s schools. When we organize, we build the power we need to make real change” (Working Educators, 2018).

Stories like Samantha’s highlight the true possibility of critical approaches to education whereby teachers engage students not as empty receptacles for storing knowledge, but as potential agents of social change. Theorized by founding thinkers like Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and many others, critical pedagogies insert schooling into the political sphere by problematizing the social world, encouraging students to become aware of injustice, and making the case for struggling toward a qualitatively better world for all people (Giroux, 1988, p. 127). Much like the stories recounted by the participants, this means incorporating curricula as well as experiential opportunities that shine a light on injustice and direct students toward transformative restoration.

While educators at all levels will find comfort in the promise that their practices have a genuine impact on students, it is important to note that not all of the teachers’ formative educational experiences were positive. Some of the teachers also recounted significant stories of injustice and discrimination in their education that connected to their subsequent engagement as teachers. Jesse, for example, recalled her increasing awareness of a “feminist explosion” during her childhood, which pushed her to question several of the gendered practices in school. Jesse detailed becoming a



“radical leader in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade” as she “got the rules changed about girls having to wear dresses.”

When I was in 6th grade I wanted to wear pants and every morning I'm waking up and my brother's putting on his pants and I'm getting on dresses and skirts and I'm thinking this is wrong! So wrong! So, I gathered all the girls together in 6th grade and said we are gonna wear pants tomorrow. What are they going to do? Throw us all out of school? You *have* to go to school, it's the law. And, they didn't throw us out of school. They hollered at me, but they didn't throw us out of school and that was it, they changed the rule. They couldn't tell us to wear dresses, it was absurd... That was my first foray into politics. (Jesse, personal communication, June 21, 2017).

For most young people school is the first step beyond the family, and thus often their first experience with the social politics of the larger world. Inequality, sexism, and racism were underlying themes within the stories that highlighted the teachers' direct experiences with injustice in their schooling.

Perhaps the most salient example of such experiences came from the narrative of Isaac as he recounted his journey toward a critical position on race in America,

I used to have a stuttering problem and one time the teacher asked the class a question and I raised my hand and started stuttering before I answered and the class started laughing and the teacher replied “don't mind him his people talk like that.” So, in 4th grade I told my parents and they made a big deal out of it. The teacher apologized, but, as a result my librarian heard about it and so she gave me her original 1965 copy of the autobiography of Malcolm X. I read that in 4th grade, and then my mom helped me read it... but to have that direct experience in front on the whole class and then reading the book... by like by 5th grade I was wearing Malcolm X hats and kids were calling me [Isaac] X. (Isaac, July 25, 2017)

This experience was closely connected to Isaac's extensive involvement in grassroots organizations that focused on issues of racial injustice. A member of Black Lives Matter Philly, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the Philadelphia Black History

Collaborative, as well as WE and TAG, Isaac's philosophy of organizing was informed by his constant reflection on personal and systemic racial oppression.

His work with the education-focused groups like WE and TAG particularly showcased the connection between his own racialized educational experiences and his drive to create a more just school system through organizing. In addition to the discrimination showcased in Isaac's first story, he also detailed being steered away from becoming an educator by a guidance counselor,

I remember at the time when I was graduating, I only graduated high school with a 1.6 GPA and when I was graduating the counselor.... was like "so what do you want to do after high school?" and I told her I wanna go to community college and Temple and become a teacher in Philadelphia. She was like "No, I don't think college is right for you, have you ever thought of a technical school?" So, like it was just kind of like that, ongoing, I felt like I had to prove myself with folks and I think that's just the reality for a lot of people of color growing up in this society, especially in environments where...people aren't really aware of your experience. (Isaac, July 25, 2017)

This story connected deeply to Isaac's work on the National Black Lives Matter Week of Action organized by the Racial Justice Committee of the Caucus of Working Educators. Inspired by 2,000 Seattle teachers who coordinated a day of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement in the Fall of 2016, Isaac and other Philly teachers organized a week of action in January of 2017. Educators across the city collected curricular resources, developed lesson plans, and organized community events centered on the 13 guiding principles of Black Lives Matter.

In 2018 the week went national with educators from 20 cities coordinating local activities and putting forth collective demands. These national demands were informed by each city's working group and included the call for public schools to 1) end zero tolerance policies and replace them with restorative practices, 2) mandate

Black history and Ethnic studies in their curriculums, and 3) hire more Black teachers. It was the last two demands that resounded in Isaac's stories of his educational experiences where he recounted struggling in schools that didn't understand his experience or provide him with a meaningful curriculum.

Isaac was, in his words, a "voracious reader, going out of [his] way to read biographies, trying to get to the deeper route of why people function the way they function" (Isaac, July 25, 2017). Yet his experiences with a largely white teaching population and Eurocentric curriculum led him to describe his schooling experience as "dehumanizing." It was because of this history, however, that he wanted to become an active teacher in Philadelphia. He found teaching to be a synthesis of his love for learning and his "total disgust" with what happens in schools. It was with this synthesis in mind that he chose his first placement in a racially isolated school. As explained by Isaac,

I was drawn to [this school] because I felt like I know that the kids that go to schools like [this] weren't getting you know, the real deal, the authentic storytelling. They were getting the mythology, you know work hard, pull up your pants type nonsense and for me, I was going into the situation with eyes wide open, so a lot of teachers come in like "I'm going to save the world!" No, I didn't come in with that mentality, I realized, if I can reach one kid in 10 years of teaching, that's much more than I can ever imagine. (Isaac, July 25, 2017)

This motivation to share "authentic storytelling" informed not only Isaac's teaching practices, but also his organizing work in the Black Lives Matter Week of Action as evidenced by the demands. He was intentional about embodying this vision of education not only in front of the classroom, but also when he "speak[s] with colleagues and [is] involved with things outside of teaching in the classroom" (Isaac, July 25, 2017).

## 4.2 Theme Two: The Relational

As I explored the teachers' motivations for engaging in grassroots organizations, they often noted the role the groups played in facilitating relationships with others. In fact, a full nine out of the ten participants detailed the importance of building connections in their rationales for engaging in their organizations. The various benefits of these relationships were frequently at the center of their narratives, highlighting their motivation for continued engagement in grassroots work. One benefit, noted by Marisa, was the ability to understand the educational landscape beyond her school. While she admitted that taking up organizing put a lot more on her plate, her narrative implied that the extra work was worth having a deeper understanding of the district. When asked what her engagement in organizing brings to her as a teacher, she said that it gives her "a sense of context" and an understanding that she is not "living in a bubble" within her school (Marisa, personal communication, July 25, 2017). As Samantha explained, her first impulse in joining organizations was to "see what else was out there."

I want to meet people in different buildings, I want to be able to go there, I want to learn about their environment you know. Because our kids come from middle schools all over the city, it helps if I have been to their school, know who works there, and can ask them about the school, you know? (Marisa, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the relational aspects of the grassroots groups were often articulated as providing a sense of "camaraderie" (Jorge, personal communication, September 12, 2017) and professional support (Peter, personal communication, August 30, 2017). As explained by Peter, he found WE to be an important "support network" for teachers in the city to provide resources and curriculum ideas. In his words "there's this whole network of people you can go to for

support with problems...and that's definitely needed in this school system" (Peter, personal communication, August 30, 2017).

This desire to find connections, camaraderie, and support, however, was not just an arbitrary search for relationships. The teachers often explained that the connections they sought were with others who had a similar focus on seeking change. When I asked Chris, for example, about what the Caucus brought to him as a teacher he explained,

The most powerful thing that I've gotten from being involved in the Caucus is being connected with so many more teachers from so many more schools that I probably never would have known or like may have known through TAG but I mean the Caucus has managed to expand the network. (Chris, personal communication, August 1, 2017)

Citing the Caucus's dedication to fore fronting racial, economic, and social justice, Chris made it clear that it was not just about meeting other teachers, but about meeting other teachers who shared similar values and commitments.

Much like Chris, Leah also expressed her desire to connect with justice-oriented educators, detailing the negative reaction she experienced from the administration at a charter school as she engaged in organizing:

i went to [my school] to be with people that I know. I needed to be in a school where I would feel supported by my coworkers and I needed to be in a district school where like I knew that there was already a Caucus presence. I didn't care what subject I was teaching really, and I didn't really care what grade, the context mattered more to me...after experiencing what I did at my last year at the charter school, which was basically being harassed out of there, my priorities shifted. I just want to be in a place where I have relationships with the other teachers that aren't just centered around teaching but are centered around organizing because I needed to be in a place where it was safe to be politicized. (Leah, personal communication, August 17, 2017)

Leah's narrative highlights the unique challenges faced by educators who take up grassroots organizing. As detailed in chapter 2, these teachers often deal with retaliation for their openly political activity, which places them in a dangerous position professionally. It was for this reason that Leah sought the safety of a school with a solid presence of justice-oriented teachers engaged in grassroots work who could be sources of support.

Given the research discussed in Chapter 2 (i.e. Riley & Solic, 2017; Stern & Brown, 2016; Picower, 2012), the educators' focus on forming relationships for personal support should come as no surprise. The importance of such relationships, however, was not merely personal. Several of the teachers' narratives detailed the essentiality of building relationships to the overall goals of grassroots organizing. As argued by Isaac, "building relationships is at the root foundation of true organizing" (Isaac, personal communication, September 26, 2017). Whether the focus was expanding the base, centering people as primary actors, or developing organic leaders, the teachers held these relational concerns at the center of their grassroots work.

As argued by Leah, for example, "any event people go to outside their own school [where they are] feeling listened too and they have a community of some kind that they are connected to" helps uphold the mission of grassroots work. Discussing an event organized in the wake of the Charlottesville protests, Leah explained that such activities play an important role in connecting people, making them "feel hopeful" and ready to take on the work of grassroots organizing.

Commitment to the relational focus of grassroots organizing was most clearly expressed in Zack's narrative. He consistently shared that building relationships was

his primary passion in the organizing done by WE. When asked what it was about the Caucus that kept him involved, he replied,

I think the part that I love about the Caucus is that it's just all about "hey, you have energy and you want to do something cool, let's do it." And, of all the activities that I've been involved with, I always really wanted to do the outreach, bringing people in... I think those were things that really made me feel like "this is really cool, I want to do this, I want to help bring other people into this"... So, the part I really like is connecting to people who are already looking for those outlets, they might not quite articulate it the same [as] I did at the time, but being able to be like "hey, you're cool, we've got this little stuff we should do something about it." (Zack, personal communication, July 11, 2017)

Zack's focus on bringing others in made his engagement with WE a perfect fit. As he noted during our interview, the member-driven orientation of the organization gave him the freedom to find affinity with others and build relationships around shared commitments and goals.

#### **4.3 Theme Three: The Professional**

As I explored the teacher's motivations for engaging in their grassroots groups, they often expressed motivations that connected to their roles as teachers. Several of the teachers, for example, articulated the importance of grassroots organizing in their growth as educators. Connecting them with likeminded teachers, their work facilitated the sharing of curricular resources as well as the development of skills that translated into the classroom. Additionally, the teachers often noted the impact that the uncertain professional environment had on their motivation to get involved in grassroots work. Beyond this, or perhaps because of it, the teachers' narratives also showcased their vision of teachers as "cultural workers" (Freire, 1998) who should seek just change

both inside and outside the classroom. In this section, I explore these aspects of their narratives.

#### **4.3.1 Growth as a Teacher**

Many of the teachers expressed motivation for their involvement that centered on what their grassroots organizations brought to them as educators. This was particularly emphasized by the participants involved in the Teacher's Action Group (TAG) Philly. As stated on the TAG website, the organization is "a member of the Network of Teacher Activist Groups, a national coalition of grassroots teacher organizing groups" that work "to build an education movement for liberation, locally and nationally, through shared analysis, political education, mutual support and learning, and joint projects." TAG Philly, in particular, organizes yearly Inquiry to Action Groups (iTAGs), a summer reading series, and a conference highlighting the work done within the community.

These activities were noted by many of the teachers as crucial in their growth as educators. For example, when I asked Chris what he got involved with TAG he replied,

I think in some way it's really like teacher-led professional development, but obviously through like a social justice lens. But [it was] the type of thing that I didn't get much early in my career but I get a little bit more now. But like, I don't know, to have someone like I recognize the work that you're doing and like really supporting each other in our development. (Chris, personal communication, August 1, 2017)

I followed up by asking Chris if he felt this impacted his work in the classroom and he replied with an emphatic "Yeah!" As he explained, "a lot of the work that I've done in



iTAGs and book groups has direct implications in my classroom” (Chris, personal communication, August 1, 2017).

This focus on utilizing grassroots groups to develop as teachers was evident in Chris’ work with BAR WE. Growing out of his and others’ engagement in iTAGs as well as the summer reading groups, BAR WE became an extension that focused explicitly on developing white educators’ practice and engagement. As expressed in the description for the iTAG led by Chris and the other BAR WE teachers, the explicit goal of the inquiry group was to turn “conversations into anti-racist action in our own classrooms, schools, and districts.”

The development of BAR WE was just one example of TAG facilitating a process of growth for Philly teachers, something that many of the participants articulated as a motivation for their involvement in grassroots work. This, perhaps, should not be surprising. As expressed by Isaac, helping educators grow is “the whole purpose of TAG” (Isaac, November 29, 2017). Speaking candidly about this purpose, Isaac explained that events like the iTAGs and reading groups were organized “to create a situation where teachers can actually improve their practice and their professional knowledge while at the same time being somewhat experimental with what they're talking about and what to do and how they're dealing with it” (Isaac, November 29, 2017).

This experimental atmosphere is a key aspect in the development of what author and educator Jay Gillen (2014) has called “crawl spaces,” sites where individuals can “rehearse, plan, and try on personas that might later be used in the public arena” (p. 131). As stated by Gillen (2014), a crawl space is “a place to crawl

until you can walk” (p. 131). Inspired by this concept, TAG dedicated its 2017 conference theme to Gillen’s work, stating in the conference’s description:

Crawl spaces for liberation can exist everywhere, from daily interactions between educators and students to curriculum design to policy making. How can we identify and seize opportunities to create these crawl spaces? When the work of education is subject to competing agendas, how do we harness our power to build towards a movement for individual and collective transformation? The Conference’s panels, workshops, tables, and lunchtime conversations will create space to witness, learn from and build on the crawl spaces that exist within our school communities.

Particularly for justice-oriented educators working on openly critical approaches to education, these crawl spaces can be essential. As noted by both Picower (2011) and Dover (2013), justice-oriented educators frequently meet challenges spurred by the ideological orthodoxy that teachers should be apolitical. Whether it is a dearth of curricular resources, mandates for scripted instruction, or “environments characterized by fear, compliance, and pressure to conform” (Picower, 2011, p. 1112), these educators face significant obstacles.

As noted by Picower (2011), however, the justice-oriented educators in her qualitative study recounted the importance of having a professional space such as the one generated within their teacher education program’s critical inquiry group. Having a place “to bounce ideas around for curriculum,” “to learn to teach for social justice,” to “learn more about current social issues,” “to present their experiences to others,” and to “share resources,”” (p. 1111) was pivotal for the teachers as they engaged in openly political work.

Much of this was evident in Isaac’s discussion of the organizations he was involved with. The opportunity to explore complex issues with others and develop pedagogical skills was clear as he explained,

WE and TAG made me a much better teacher. I always say that...I love facilitating dialogue. I love it with adults, I love it with students more now, I've definitely learned from other folks and collaborate with folks is something that never really happens within the classroom and also gives me an outlet to explore my intellectual curiosity that sometimes gets hampered down by being in the classroom. It allows me to approach ideas and subjects differently which I then bring back to the classroom....Whether that be facilitating iTAG groups, to facilitating book clubs or participating in book clubs or participating in iTAGs, to explore different subjects of my interest and also deepening my knowledge while also challenging me to really step up my game. (Isaac, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

The grassroots structure of the organizations seemed to play an essential role in providing this opportunity. Centering people as primary actors rather than top down leadership meant that the teachers led meetings, iTAGs, reading groups and more. Likewise, the organization's focus on continually expanding the base meant that new people were constantly brought into this process. As expressed by Isaac, WE in particular has focused on structuring opportunities for learning and development aimed at supporting the development of organic teacher-leaders within the school system. He explained, "WE has clarified how to interact more with folks on a scale where you're trying to be like an example or trying to lead and show other people that they can lead also. And be confident in what that is, not just within your classroom to your students but in your workplace"

Particularly relevant was the alignment between the skills developed in these groups for grassroots organizing and the skills often needed to run a classroom. Leah in particular expressed how the activities of organizing generated a skillset that was directly applicable to her life as an educator. When asked if she thought her organizing work impacted her work as a teacher she clearly connected her organizing skills and her classroom skills:

I think the organizing part where like...building a contact list [for an event]...like I built my first parent spreadsheet this year, where I keep track of who I've called. And I understand that you have to, in same way you have to envision an event, you have to envision your lesson and in the same way you have to have the program prepared and the materials prepped, you have to have your lesson prepped for your kids. And in the same way you need to follow up with people when you don't hear from them, you have to follow up with kids and tell them how they are doing. (Leah, personal communication, September 22, 2017)

Additionally, Leah saw her work empowering communities through grassroots organizing as connected to her work in empowering students in their learning. She explained,

This year I am on very top of my grades and very top of parents and I think I have been motivated to do that not just because it's good, but because I'm like oh this is how you build power in your classroom, for yourself and for your students and for your families...I've always struggled so much with keeping in touch with families and grading and being ready, having my materials all laid out and everything, but this year I'm doing it! I think part of the reason I'm able to is that I finally have realized that the reason is that I can take the same reasons and ways that I am successful at like planning a convention and bring them to my classroom which I've never really thought before...this summer I had this come-to-Jesus moment, like "oh, I have done a layout for the convention before, why can't I do a layout for my classroom?" And it helps! Astronomically! Who knew? (Leah, personal communication, September 22, 2017)

In essence, we concluded, the skills of teaching and the skills organizing were inherently aligned. Leah's reflection on the connection between organizing and growing as a teacher echoes the sentiments of the other participants, highlighting how educators' engagement in grassroots organizations can be an important site for growth as a classroom teacher.

### 4.3.2 Professional Experiences

In our discussions about the teachers' engagement in grassroots organizing, several recounted very tangible professional experiences that spurred them to take up work seeking transformative change. These professional experiences were characterized by many of the effects of the neoliberal era. The city's massive budget cuts, school closures, and unsupportive labor environment were all reasons that the teachers noted for joining grassroots groups.

As explain by Leah, for example, she got involved when she first moved to the city and became aware of the devastating budget cuts that occurred in 2010 and 2011. Isaac spoke about experiencing the closure of the school in which he wanted to have a life-time career. Many of the teachers, in fact, expressed the direct connection between the current problematic conditions of their professional lives and their motivation to organize. When I asked Peter, for example, why he engaged in grassroots work he explained,

Well, for one it definitely, clearly affects me. I mean with teaching obviously my life is a lot worse if I have forty kids in the class as opposed to twenty. So, I mean that whole range of things like the building conditions I work in, conditions of the student to life. It definitely has a direct impact on me. I mean this is so clear if we don't do something, the only trajectory is worse for everything...So it's very clear that it relates directly, like my whole career is just going to get shittier and shittier, that's like the only truth if we don't. (Peter, personal communication, August 1, 2017)

It was this understanding that led many of the teachers of this study to join WE in particular. The social justice caucus within the PFT, WE's expressed goal is to prioritize the concerns of the rank-and-file members that make up the union, something that the large-scale teachers unions have often ignored in recent decades.

Aligning more closely with McAlevey's (2016) description of *mobilizing* wherein "a professional staff directs, manipulates, and controls" the direction of the union's goals, the country's largest teacher unions have often failed to represent the interests of the rank-and-file in the policy realm, choosing instead to accommodate many of the neoliberal reforms in order to maintain close relations with political elites. The teachers bearing the brunt of these reforms, then, often have no recourse for the problematic conditions in which they work. Perhaps not surprisingly, the effects of neoliberal reforms in conjunction with the lack of support from the existing union structure were articulated as strong motivations for the teachers' engagement in organizing.

For example, when I asked Leah why she, as a lead organizer, thought that teachers got involved with WE she explained,

I think it happens in different ways. I think one way is people have a really specific experience or incident or something that happens to them in relation to the PFT leadership that totally agitates them, I think that's one thing, like they are politicized by a bad person's stupidity and they are like oh my God this doesn't happen in WE, WE is trying to organize against this. So, I think that's one thing that happens. I also think people see that the caucus is the organization doing the work to fight for them, so with the contract, there was a clause in the contract that they didn't like and the caucus is the one that was like "yeah you're right, that doesn't make sense, you should ask a question about it" or "Oh, why isn't the PFT coming out in favor of black lives matter? Oh, the Caucus is..." the Caucus is doing something that the PFT leadership is not... like I don't think we exist on our own. I think some people think we do, but I don't think we do. I think that the caucus politicizes people because we are doing something that the current Union leadership isn't... I think that they are moved to do something about it when they see that the Caucus is like doing the real work and we are doing the real work in relation to the union.

Leah's analysis of why teachers engaged in WE was evident in her own narrative as well as the narratives of others. After experiencing negative reactions to

her organizing in an unprotected charter school, she sought employment in a school where she would be safe to engage in WE's work. Other participants had similar stories of their involvement being spurred by their experiences with failed reforms, negative working conditions, and a perceived lack of opportunity to change things through the union.

This was particularly evident in the story shared by Jackie, a retired school teacher who worked in the district until 2013. Spurred to grassroots work by the increasingly oppressive reforms she experienced at the end of her career, Jackie's frustration with the limited pushback at the hands of the PFT was evident. She recounted the following story about her initial engagement in the Alliance for Philadelphia Public Schools (APPS):

I started independently...I was not a "joining" kind of person and independently I started questioning and pushing back. I started like registering to speak at an SRC meeting when I had no idea what they were. I was petrified and was like by myself like there was nobody else. And, I had gone to, I had registered to speak at one SRC meeting towards the end of my teaching career and in my speech I gave [a member of the SRC] a present and the present was a book, "Reign of Error" by Diane Ravitch, because it was right around then that he had made this quote [about taking education advice from M. Night Shyamalan, so my speech was around that. Taking the advice of a movie producer, maybe you might want to consider an educator! And, I gave him the book.

Then...one of the founding members of APPS approached me after the meeting and was like "that was awesome!" here is my card. And, at that time I still thought I could find a place in the union. I needed something and I thought I could find a place in the union to help to work to advocate, to fight, to whatever, but I was beginning to realize, there probably wasn't. And, she gave me her card and I ended up joining APPS and that's how I got involved with them and they fit perfectly. (Jackie, personal communication, August 7, 2017)

As described by Jackie, APPS operates with the expressed goal to hold the SRC accountable for its decisions. Led by parents, community members, and school staff, APPS works to “assure that the public is present” when issues regarding the district are discussed. As stated on the APPS official website, members work to “prevent true stakeholders from being pushed aside by private organizations who meet in secret to decide crucial issues including principal training, which schools receive additional funding, and school closures.”

For Jackie, the work that APPS took on exposing the decisions being made by the SRC was an essential task to sustaining a system of public education as budgets were slashed and over thirty schools closed. This task, however, was not being taken up by the mechanisms that she had expected to fight for public education. As she stated during our discussion,

We (APPS) are the only group that is the watchdog of what they are doing. My own union is not a watchdog of what they do. As they spend money, as they pass resolutions that affect the lives of every student and every teacher, nobody is coming up and saying “this is what they’ve done now, this is what they passed” or “this is the ramifications of that.” And, nobody in my own union, and they pass things that affect teachers, they don’t even comment to the members on how they should or could react to this imposition. They just, never even address it. So, our organization is the only organization and we’re new, but yeah, we’re the only ones. We post information about what is going on and try to bring it to the public’s attention...but yeah, it was the lack of movement of our union to counteract what I saw happening that truly motivated me to say “Wow, we are in deep shit.”

Stories like Jackie’s show how much of the teachers’ organizing work was spurred by a very tangible threat within their professional lives. While Jackie was retiring during one of the most tumultuous times in the district, she felt compelled to continue her activism for the teachers and students who would remain in the system.



Her narrative, as well as the narratives of the other teachers, show how the unstable environment of the neoliberal era generates troubling professional experiences that often spur teachers to take up grassroots work.

### **4.3.3 Teachers as Cultural Workers**

In addition to motivations from professional experiences, many of the teachers articulated rationales for their engagement that stemmed from their vision of teachers as “cultural workers” (Freire, 1998). As articulated by Freire (1998), educators are more than temporary parents or guardians of children; instead, teachers should be held responsible for a type of education that encourages students to “read the word” as well as “read the world” in a critical manner. This approach to education, however, is not limited to work inside the classroom. As argued by Freire (1998), “the class’s space, the space of the classroom, stretching out into the play yard, and into the surrounding areas of the entire school... must also constitute an object of this reading by teachers and students” (p. 52). In essence, educators as cultural workers must facilitate a critical reading of the world outside of the schoolhouse and seek to act on it as agents of transformative change.

This vision of teachers as cultural workers was something that several of the participants noted as reasons for their engagement in grassroots organizing, acknowledging that their responsibility lay both inside and outside of the classroom in an ongoing struggle for justice. When talking with Chris about his engagement, for example, he stated,

I think that going to all these meetings and being involved in groups is like obviously extra work, but it's also the type of thing that like keeps me grounded and going and moving forward and I also like seeing the

significance of the work that we do beyond our classrooms and trying to push the significance of our work beyond the classrooms...

I think we live in an unjust, unequal society in a lot of ways. And I think my role as a teacher extends beyond just my classroom. Like I think I need to be active for justice not just in my classroom but beyond and all...I believe that it's our job as educators to also, in addition to supporting our students who were here with us now, to also put in the work. (Chris, personal communication, August 1, 2017)

Sentiments like these were often expressed when the participants were asked what they thought it meant to be a justice-oriented educator. In-class practices like centering students, engaging in dialogues, and utilizing curricula that focused on the struggles (and victories) of marginalized peoples were consistently shared as examples of justice-oriented teaching. Like Chris, however, many of the educators believed that their responsibility lay outside of the classroom as well.

As articulated by Samantha, for example, being a justice-oriented educator meant having an “organizing view about what it means to be a teacher,” where educators teach *and* organize in search of justice. For Marisa it meant looking at the larger systems in which teachers’ work exists, being aware of the impact of those systems, and trying to change them. Isaac expressed that there was an important level of “potential power” in teachers being intentional about their work inside and outside of the classroom, and this was reflected in his organizing activity in both educationally focused groups like WE and TAG as well as non-educationally focused organizations like Black Lives Matter Philly (BLM Philly), the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, and the Philadelphia Black History Collaborative (PBHC). Centering his work on the search for racial justice, Isaac found it essential to address issues of racism beyond the institution of education, participating in actions like record expungement clinics and organizing large-scale events like the PBHC’s annual conference.

This vision of teachers as cultural workers, both inside and outside of the classroom, however, was most distinct in the discussions with Peter. As an early-career history teacher he articulated his practice of teaching about social movements and “ordinary people making history and people having power” (Peter, personal communication, August 1, 2017). Yet Peter also expressed the crucial importance of organizing to address systemic problems, even those often perceived as outside the educational sphere.

A strong supporter of organized labor and longtime member of WE, Peter was also heavily involved in the Philadelphia chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) with the expressed intent of seeking change outside of the educational landscape. When asked why he got involved with the DSA, for example, Peter explained,

To me it was very clear it's not just one issue, like clearly this is a systemic thing and you could have a different system that works better. And, teachers getting a raise here and there is still not going to change the fundamental problems, there's an issue of broader poverty, so even if you have students going to brand new schools, if their communities are in such poverty, like teachers themselves cannot solve everything in that way, so like there needs to be a broader economic transformation or like social justice. (Pete, personal communication, August 1, 2017)

From Peter's perspective, seeking just social transformation meant more than just teaching politically minded material and also more than organizing around educational issues. It was with this perspective in mind that he articulated his involvement in the Philly DSA.

While the DSA was founded in 1982, it has experienced an exponential upsurge in membership since the Presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders. Beginning with 6,500 members at the start of the campaign in 2014, the DSA currently stands at

over 40,000 members nationwide. Peter’s discussion about his involvement in the organization centered on his commitment to seeking change around the broader issues that the DSA has made its priority, issues like employment and health care. While he spoke about the necessity of organizing within teachers’ unions for educational change, he explained that socialist groups like the DSA offer a “broader perspective on a more long-term political vision” for the country as a whole, something that was essential for teachers to engage in.

Beyond this, however, Peter believed that educators could not be the only ones doing the organizing, that true change required a base of stakeholders that may fall outside of those within the education system. As he expressed, this kind of work “can’t just come from us “(Peter, personal communication, August 1, 2017). Organizations like the DSA, Peter explained, offered opportunities for grassroots organizing that involved those not engaged in the educational sphere and thus, held additional potential for developing a “broader movement.”

Experiences like those of Peter reappeared throughout the teacher’s narratives, highlighting how the participants envisioned their quest for change as extending beyond the classroom and, in many cases, even the school system. More importantly, these discussions were connected to their motivations for engaging in grassroots organizing in addition to their daily activities as educators. Much like Freire, they articulated grassroots work and the pursuit of broader justice as a direct responsibility of teachers.

## Chapter 5

### FINDINGS: HOW DO TEACHERS ENGAGE IN GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

A key goal of this project was to explore not only *why* educators engage in grassroots work, but *how*. This element of the inquiry was explored in hopes of providing educators with insight for developing organizations and strategies for tangible action beyond the classroom. In my analysis of the direct means by which the teachers of this study engaged in grassroots organizing, I found the educators to be embodying the two founding elements of Freire's (1970) definition of praxis: "*reflection* and *action* upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 70). Thus, examples of their organizing are discussed below as expressions of a) reflecting and learning, and b) taking action, seeking change.

These two elements of Freire's definition of praxis were essential components in the teachers' work, particularly with regard to actualizing McAlevey's organizing model. The activities taken up by the teachers, whether focusing on *reflection* or *action*, were geared toward 1) continually expanding the base, 2) situating people as central actors, and 3) developing organic leaders. This chapter highlights the tangible activities taken up by the teachers as examples of a liberatory praxis (Freire, 1970) in service of grassroots organizing (McAlevey, 2016).

### **5.1 The Role of Reflecting and Learning in Teachers' Grassroots Organizing**

*I think we've all been learning together and sort of coming to common vocabulary and understanding. All of us bring different stuff, you know, they're all on-going conversations...how to approach and what it means to approach our work in a way that stays positive...so I feel like there's definitely sort of a constant flow of ideas and conversations and reflections that inform what we do. (Zack, personal communication, July 11, 2017)*

As the common adage goes, the first step to solving a problem is identifying the problem. For those attempting to create transformative social change then, it is essential to map out the present social reality, identifying the circumstances that should be changed as well as where power resides in the current system. Undertaking this “power-structure analysis,” as termed by McAlevey (2016), provides change-seekers with a layout of the landscape that will inform not only where they should focus their attention, but also what strategies might be effective when seeking transformation in the present environment.

While this first task is a critical one, as argued by McAlevey (2016), understanding the terrain and who/what the correct targets are “should be *only one step* in a power-structure analysis” (p.4, emphasis added). A corollary project should also be conducted, a “careful, methodical, systematic, detailed analysis of power structures among the ordinary people who are or could be brought into the fight” (p. 4). Much like the initial power analysis, locating the potential power of the masses of people to affect change should inform the focus and strategies undertaken in any genuine grassroots campaign for social change.

While these endeavors are essential elements of member-driven, bottom-up movements, they are not always easy or intuitive on the scale needed for widespread social transformation. Large numbers of people don't spontaneously become serious social actors striving toward a unified goal. As argued by McAlevey (2016), this can

only happen when ordinary people learn about their potential power through direct engagement in the development of a power-structure analysis of the issues that affect their lives (p. 6). In brief, for grassroots movements to take shape, they must make central a politicized process of learning with and from one another as they seek change collectively.

McAlevey's contemporary assessment echoes that of Paulo Freire (1970) in his widely read text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Concerned with developing educational practice for the liberation of oppressed peoples, Freire realized the importance of people becoming critically aware of the reality that structured their oppression. As articulated by Freire (1970), "one of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings' consciousness...to no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it" (p. 51). According to Freire, this requires engaging in *praxis*, a key component of which is learning about and reflecting on the world in service of transforming it.

The teachers' use of activities that prioritized learning and reflection were apparent throughout the course of this project and played an important role in facilitating their engagement and success in grassroots organizing. Through educative exploration, the events detailed below supported participants in expanding the base of their organizations, identifying and developing organic leaders, and centering people as primary actors in the creation of a conscious power-structure analysis that would inform the strategies of their campaigns. In the following sections I will detail the events of my observant participation that focused on learning and reflection as well as their significance to the work taken up by the teachers of this inquiry.

### 5.1.1 Summer Reading Series

Co-sponsored by WE and TAG Philly, the summer reading series was entering its fourth year when I attended my first meeting in July of 2017. I drove in the sticky hot weather to the Northwest Philadelphia neighborhood where the group was set to discuss several texts focused on organizing. While I had plenty of experience reading books with and for classes, I was unsure what to expect of an informal teacher-led book group. Yet as I walked up to the house, watching participants chat on the front porch with snacks and books in hand, I was struck by how organic and communal the atmosphere was (Field note, July 18, 2017).

Over twenty people from a variety of different backgrounds piled into the living room lined with a smorgasbord of chairs. Practicing, student and retired teachers from all levels joined community organizers and other interested readers in grabbing food before sitting in a large circle around the room. It seemed like everyone knew each other as people traded familiar hellos and shared conversations about their summer plans (Field note, July 18, 2017). This shouldn't have been a surprise as meetings like these were an important mechanism for bringing members into the work of grassroots organizing.

In my first interview with Isaac, for example, he noted getting involved with WE in the first summer reading series. As he recalled, “we read Jane McAlevey’s *Raising Expectations*, *Raising Hell* about unionism and then I also was reading *Up South* and then from that, I just, you know, I was brought in that summer to the Caucus” (Isaac, personal communication, July 25, 2017). These texts, among the many others he mentioned, seemed to have played a formative role in Isaac’s personal philosophy of grassroots organizing, which centered on social justice unionism and racial justice.



McAlevey's (2014) book, for example, provides a detailed analysis of what she termed "whole-worker organizing," an approach to unionism that connects labor issues to larger issues of social injustice experienced by working people. Isaac passionately articulated this approach in his own words, arguing that the model he and the Caucus called social justice unionism (see Peterson, 2015) "represents the last stronghold, the last institutional possibility of resistance for the trends that we see in this country." In brief, he explained, "I feel like social justice unionism is at the front of any type of realistic attempt to kind of hold back the tide of what we see today" (Isaac, personal communication, July 25, 2017).

Similarly, Matthew Countryman's (2007) *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* details the efforts of two generations of black power activists in Philadelphia to create a genuine, grassroots movement for racial justice in the city. In the years following Isaac's reading of these texts in the summer reading series, he became an important member of WE, taking on leadership positions in the Caucus, pushing the group to maintain a genuine commitment to fighting for racial justice, and engaging in organizations like Black Lives Matter Philly, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, and the Philadelphia Black History Collaborative.

So influential was his introduction through the summer reading series that Isaac began to organize additional reading groups with other educators of color throughout the year. This, among other initiatives, was articulated by Isaac as part of an explicit effort to "bridge the gap between black educators throughout the city" (Isaac, personal communication, November 29, 2017). The rationale for utilizing reading groups to accomplish this became clear as Isaac spoke directly about the

benefits of engaging with others in a process of learning and reflection through activities like the summer reading series:

I've noticed how much easier it is for me to make connections and then also understand people more, you know. If you want to understand the designs of people, look at your own designs and once you look at your own designs and then you see designs of other people, you start to see patterns. (Isaac, personal communication, November 29, 2017)

More than just an opportunity to meet people, the book groups fostered an environment where participants could learn with and about each other, where they could make sense of the social landscape around issues that they cared about. As expressed by Isaac, activities like these generate “conversations between professionals” that reflect their shared circumstances (Isaac, personal communication, November 29, 2017) and thus provide the opportunity for collective understandings of collective problems.

Activities such as these are crucial to genuinely expanding the base of grassroots organizations that seek to direct reflective activity into tangible action. Freire (1970) provides some insight into why learning and reflecting on the world with others can be so powerful in bringing people into a process of seeking collective change. As argued by Freire (1970), when individuals have the opportunity to develop an “awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves” they frequently “take the initiative in acting to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation” (p. 29). By providing a space for teachers to learn and reflect on themselves and the world *in conjunction with* a path for active participation, meetings like the summer book groups tap into this dormant initiative, bringing people into the work of organizing for change.

I experienced this first hand in my own engagement during the summer reading series. I chose to participate in the book group centered on labor organizing after my faculty union had its first ever strike the previous fall. I was inspired by the possibility for teacher labor to affect change and wanted to know more. After years of state funding cutbacks, we had finally been pushed to strike by a hostile Chancellor who continuously sought to impose an intensely neoliberal agenda on the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE). Seeking changes in faculty work load, shared governance, and an increase in classes taught by adjuncts (without an increase in pay), the bargaining agreement proposed by the Chancellor and the Board of Governors galvanized our campus communities.

At the book group, I shared the room with teachers and organizers from across the city as well as with two of my own faculty colleagues who were also in attendance. After brief introductions, the facilitators encouraged us to reflect on Jane McAlevey's text *No Shortcuts*, first individually and then in small groups, before coming together as a whole. Those in attendance engaged in a lengthy discussion of McAlevey's different models for seeking change, drawing connections between their own experiences, contexts, and the three approaches she outlined. As participants traded stories and perspectives, I began to realize that the model used by my own union during our strike fit McAlevey's definition of mobilizing (Field note, July 18, 2017). After a nervous but exciting build-up to a three-day strike that saw faculty and students picketing in solidarity, we returned to our posts as the collective bargaining leaders completed our agreement. Large portions of the rank and file members turned out enthusiastically, but in the days and weeks that followed they were not integrated

into the decision-making process for the overall direction that the union would take moving forward.

I recalled feeling let down as we returned to our classrooms and our power dissipated, but it wasn't until this book group meeting that I understood why (Field note, July 18, 2017). More importantly, it wasn't until this book group meeting that I understood another path could exist. McAlevey provided a detailed discussion of the 2012 Chicago Teacher's Union (CTU) strike and the steps they took to embody a model of social justice unionism grounded in grassroots organizing that would center the rank and file consistently, not only when needed for mobilization.

As the meeting came to an end I spoke with the two university colleagues who were in attendance and we discussed the text within the context of our strike. We knew we wanted to do something more than what had been done in the past, which is when I recalled a news announcement from earlier that day. The Chancellor was resigning. We talked about creating a campaign for a better Chancellor and worked toward that in the coming months (Field note, July 18, 2017). We connected with similarly interested faculty from across the State System and started our own routine communications, eventually forming the Coalition Against the Corporatization of Higher Education (CACHE). While in its infancy, the group has begun working together in favor of a strictly public vision of higher education and a social justice model of teacher unionism.

As argued by Freire (1970), before people are able to collectively struggle for change, "they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (p. 49). Until my learning with the group, my union structure seemed set, stagnant, closed.

Afterwards, however, it seemed ripe for transformation. The book groups facilitated this important transition by providing a space for me and other participants to jointly analyze the world, opening up the possibility not merely for an increased awareness, but an increased awareness that was built with others and relevant to our specific contexts. In brief, the book groups centered people as primary actors in the creation of a conscious analysis that would inform their engagement moving forward.

In my case the book group set up the important recognition of McAlevey's organizing model. What I had previously perceived as standard operations within my union became nothing more than a limiting situation that could be altered. The creation of CACHE and the future work I took up with the group of faculty members in our union was facilitated by the learning and reflection that began in the book group. For the teachers in this study, the book groups were similarly identified as important catalysts that informed their organizing of coworkers and parents (Leah, personal communication, November 30, 2017) and white educators (Chris, personal communication, August 1, 2017). The book groups also enhanced their organizing for racial justice (Isaac, personal communication, November 29, 2017) and immigrant justice (Zack, personal communication, July 11, 2017).

As demonstrated by Isaac's story specifically, the book groups' centering of people as primary actors in the reflective process of analyzing their circumstances also played a critical role in expanding the base of members, integrating him into WE and TAG. Beyond this, however, his narrative highlights the potential that such experiences hold for identifying and developing organic leaders who will continue the work of grassroots organizing by bringing others into the fight. While not all attendees join to become core organizers, the opportunity fostered by the collective reflection of

the reading groups makes them an important strategy for any individual or organization dedicated to grassroots work.

### **5.1.2 After Charlottesville: Confronting White Supremacy**

In addition to recurring activities like the summer reading series, many of the participants also organized reflective events in response to critical moments as they arose, seizing opportunities for learning after the election of Donald Trump (Leah, personal communication, September 22, 2017), the presentation of a new collective bargaining agreement (Leah, personal communication, November 30, 2017), and even the turmoil created by the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. This last critical moment occurred during the course of this project and sparked an event organized by TAG that provided participants with a place to reflect and learn in the wake of the racialized violence. The event, titled “After Charlottesville: Confronting White Supremacy,” took place on September 13, 2017 with the expressed goal of helping educators develop an understanding about how to “individually and collectively confront white supremacy in ourselves, our classrooms and schools, and our city” (TAG event page, 2017).

I walked into the North Philly High School where the event was taking place to find nearly half of the old auditorium filled with people. Worn out lockers and shoe scuffed floors decorated the hallways where several of the teachers from this project were actively engaged in facilitating the event. Samantha and Leah were coordinating the sign-in table, collecting attendee’s contact information, but also directing them to flyers and other information on getting involved, while Chris and Isaac were in the auditorium, working among the group of teachers who would facilitate the meeting (Field note, September 13, 2017).

With well over one hundred people in attendance, the high ceilings of the meeting space reverberated an excited yet serious energy. As I noted in my observations,

Many of the attendees were talking and introducing themselves. While some of the conversations indicated that they knew each other, I also witnessed people meeting for the first time. As I turned to greet the people seated around me, we happily introduced ourselves, where we were from, and our occupations, but the introductions inevitably turned to the topic of why we were at an event centered on the tragedy of an open white supremacist rally taking place just a few weeks before. Two young, white female teachers expressed that they “couldn’t believe” what had taken place, but knew they had to address it in their classes. The older white woman just shook her head somberly. (Field note, September 13, 2017).

The work that we were undertaking here wasn’t frivolous. It felt important and that was reflected in our demeanors. Yet while the discussions I had with attendees echoed feelings of shock, disappointment, or disbelief about the situation in Charlottesville, the teachers organizing the activities wanted to center the event on the longstanding structural foundation of white supremacy in the United States. As articulated by Isaac, the group organizing the event wanted to convey clearly that white supremacy was “the founding ideal and the philosophical orientation for most of America’s history” and that “deviation from that narrative has been somewhat recent” and even then, has been met with concerted backlash (Isaac, personal communication, September 26, 2017).

This point was clearly shared with the audience as well; as the facilitators implied, what we were doing there was not talking about an isolated event. We were talking about the fabric of our country (Field note, September 13, 2017). The teachers chose to emphasize this by beginning the event with a history lesson led by Isaac and a colleague on racialized economic oppression in the United States. While the lesson

lasted no more than ten minutes, it expertly explored the racialized hierarchy devised in the colonial era by contrasting Slaves Codes to laws created for the fading system of white indentured servitude. But more than just highlighting legal issues from the past, the lesson highlighted the link between these previous structures and our modern issues around race. As expressed by Isaac, the history lesson tried “to tell the story and to show continuity” between the institutionalized white supremacy from a 1705 Virginia law and the “racially coded appeals” used by modern politicians to enact neoliberal policies that devastate communities of color disproportionately (Isaac, personal communication, September 26, 2017).

Accompanied by a handout and the offer to share the PowerPoint slides, this opening lesson was the first indicator that the event would prioritize shared learning and reflection on the issue at hand, racism and white supremacy in the United States. The subsequent activities only reinforced this. Directly following the history lesson, we collectively read a poem by Martin Espada titled “Imagine the Angels of Bread,” which had the recurring phrase “this is the year” followed by empowering statements of injustices that would end. We were asked by the organizers to create our own lines to the poem, filling in the blank to “this is the year \_\_\_\_\_” with how we would choose to incite change. After a few moments of free writing, we were prompted to discuss and share with others in small groups where the two young teachers I met earlier committed to being reflective about race in their classrooms and making time for learning and growing on issues of race. I wrote that “this is the year that I refuse silence” both in my life and in my classroom around issues of racism (Field note, September 13, 2017).



These activities, in addition to the breakout sessions that followed, operated like a well-planned class session designed to foster communal learning and reflection on race in the United States post-Charlottesville. As I recalled, the atmosphere felt “like a classroom although there were more than 100 people in the space” (Field note, September 13, 2017). I attributed this to the practices utilized by the teacher-organizers. They facilitated clear delivery of content, a large-group read aloud, a free writing activity, and small group discussions that all played important roles in orienting attendees as learners who were there to reflect on the realities of race.

In my subsequent discussion about the event with Isaac, the reason for this became clear. The planning of “After Charlottesville” deeply mirrored the planning of a classroom lesson. Isaac explained about organizing the event,

You have to develop a framework for what you want at the end... What do we want folks to step away from and walk away with? How are we going to get there? What do we need in order to get to that part? So, you are already clear about what you want folks to walk away with. And you find different ways to scaffold it and provide those structures for folks to be able to approach it and also dialogue around it. (Isaac, personal communication, September 26, 2017).

This exchange highlights the intentionality of the organizers around the learning and reflection that participants would undertake at the event. Each aspect of the evening was carefully constructed to best generate a space of genuine learning and reflection around race and white supremacy that would be shared by the attendees. One decision in particular, exemplifies the care with which the teachers constructed the event in order to adhere to the core goal of being collectively educative.

At the outset of the meeting the facilitators had directed participants to breakout discussion groups by racial affiliation. There was a group for those who identified racially as white, as well as distinct groups for those who identified as black

and as non-black people of color. These “affinity groups” were utilized for the breakout sessions to “encourage real dialogue,” acknowledging “the barrier and gap that there is between groups when talking about” race (Isaac, personal communication, November 29, 2017). As noted at the event, this conscious pedagogical decision was made so that “everyone could feel comfortable and safe digging deep into their racial understandings” and to “lessen the burden often placed on people of color to educate white folks on issues of race” (Field note, September 13, 2017). As was stated in the white affinity group, “we need to do our own work” and realize that our presence as white people can impede others working through sensitive issues such as the racialized violence that took place in Charlottesville (Field note, September 13, 2017).

This intentional focus on the unique learning and reflection of attendees highlighted how the organizers sought to utilize this critical social moment to integrate people into grassroots work. While influential social movements must be sustained over time, it is often after crises like Charlottesville that people are most passionately spurred to action. Seizing those moments and supporting people when energy is highest, then, can be a powerful means of organizing. As articulated by Leah, events like “After Charlottesville” make people feel hopeful, like they have likeminded people to talk to, and like they have a community they are connected with (Leah, personal communication, September 22, 2017). Having shared learning experiences (e.g. the history lesson and poem) as well as differentiated learning experiences (e.g. affinity groups) reflects the conscious pedagogical decisions made by the organizers to create the reality described by Leah.

These benefits, in fact, were becoming evident throughout my participation in the event, as attendee after attendee shared their worry about the implications of

Charlottesville, but also the consolation they felt knowing others were similarly concerned. In my fieldnote from the event I expressed similar sentiments, writing about a discussion I took part in with other attendees:

There was a serious but restless energy to our conversation. We were asked to respond to questions about how we felt after Charlottesville and how we might move forward toward living as anti-racist allies, but mostly we talked about our experiences and frustrations not living up to our own expectations in challenging racism. We didn't come up with any clear and immediate strategies for moving forward in our quick discussion, but I felt empowered to know that there were people who shared similar concerns and experiences. It wasn't just me. (Field note, September 13, 2017)

While they may be brief, engaging in discussions at events like these, Leah explained, “helps people get ready to fight” against the issues on which they collectively learned and reflected (Leah, personal communication, September 22, 2017), something that I felt first hand. As I concluded in my fieldnote on the event, “the fact that there were this many people who cared about race and education after this horrific event felt empowering, like I knew there were people I could work with if I wanted to go further” (Field note, September 13, 2017).

Directing the energy generated from these critical moments into an intentional process of hopeful learning and reflection was identified by the teachers as a purposeful instrument for bringing others into grassroots organizing. When asked about the thought process that went into the creation of “After Charlottesville,” Isaac explained that the core teachers of TAG saw the event as a key opportunity to introduce the white educators’ group that would become BAR WE to the larger community. As articulated by Isaac, the teachers believed that “exploring what happened in Charlottesville” would serve as a solid launching pad for the group (Isaac,

personal communication, November 29, 2017), directing the emotions stirred by Charlottesville into productive outlets for change.

The rationale for this was clear. Only a few months before “After Charlottesville” the teachers had organized an event titled “Educating in the Time of Trump,” a meeting where teachers could reflect on the election and share their thoughts and concerns. As articulated by Isaac, this event was a “success,” generating continued engagement from attendees beyond the event and thus expanding the base of members. Following this format, “After Charlottesville” built interest that the teachers hoped to “lead into real purposeful work” organizing for racial justice (Isaac, personal communication, November 29, 2017). As Isaac expressed, this was a key motivation for many of the events organized by WE and TAG. He explained,

we want folks to feel like they can get plugged into the future work, future conversations and future dialogue with the other educators... that’s the entire framework of what we’re doing...to educate individuals and organize folks around issues...and show them what folks who have full time jobs teaching every day are still able to produce and create the conditions for (Isaac, personal communication, September 26, 2017).

In brief, he stated, the opportunity of such events to further conversations and build relationships is the “foundation of true organizing” (Isaac, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

### **5.1.3 Socialist Night School**

In addition to events that played important roles in building relationships and expanding the base of members, there were also learning centered activities organized by participants of this inquiry that served the primary purpose of centering members as primary actors in the creation a power-structure analysis that would inform the

strategies of their campaigns. One such event was the Socialist Night School organized by the political education committee of the Philly DSA on October 17, 2017.

The meeting, which was to center on the “complex entanglement of race and class,” took place after hours in a small café on Temple University’s campus. Over twenty-five people packed into the cafeteria-like setting, moving tables and pulling up chairs to accommodate each wave of incoming attendees. Three articles were assigned for the group to explore, each setting out an important discussion of how socialist movements should approach the issue of race in their programs (Field note, October 18, 2017).

Founded on a critique of capitalism, socialist organizations like the DSA have often maintained that campaigns for social change should have an explicitly class orientation, focusing on issues that reach across race, creed, gender, and sexuality to address problems experienced by working people more generally. This position, however, has not been universally adopted by socialist organizations and instead represents a key point of contention on the left (Backer & Cairns, 2017), something that was evident at various times throughout the meeting.

After a round of introductions, one of the facilitators introduced an article, describing the author and the topic of the text. They provided us with a few questions to reflect on and sent us to smaller groups to discuss. The text we turned to first was by Adolph Reed, a professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. In my group we had the unique opportunity to discuss Reed’s work with one of his students, a Ph.D. candidate who took the lead on our discussion of the proposed questions. With a total of six people in the group, we reflected on Reed’s claim that

race-focused analysis were “fundamentally counterproductive” to a working-class political position.

The conversation was often cautious, with people prefacing statements and couching their views as “just my opinion” (Field note, October 18, 2017). I rarely spoke during the small group discussion, choosing instead to survey the landscape and see where others stood. As we turned back to the large group to share out, however, attendees started to become more forthright and I ventured a statement of my own that challenged Reed’s contention on pedagogical grounds. While the discussion had long conceded the use of race to historically “divide and conquer” politically, socially, and economically, I referenced specific teaching experiences where students had developed class-based analyses *because* of their initial introduction to critiques of race. I argued that if a mass movement is what was sought, reaching the masses where they were would be essential to building relationships.

While there were no direct confrontations that followed, I could see disagreement in certain body language, a head shake here, a smirk there. The room was divided, although it was difficult to identify by how much (Field note, October 18, 2017). As the evening concluded, my initial reaction was to feel dissatisfied. After nearly three hours at the Night School, it seemed that a clear-cut conclusion would not be reached. Yet as I followed up with Peter, a member of the political education committee that organized the Night School, I realized that this process of collective learning and reflection provided a unique opportunity for grassroots organizing.

As expressed by Peter, there was a strategic purpose to the meetings in addition to the “intellectual stimulation” associated with reading political theory (Peter, personal communication, November 29, 2017). Events like the Night School

centered the members as primary actors in the creation of a power-structure analysis that would ultimately inform their organizing work moving forward. When asked what he and others got out of night school meetings, for example, Peter explained,

I think it has a practical use... like our conclusion from that [race and class] session, for example, if we agree with Reed then universal programs like Medicare for all or free education are better to organize around than maybe something that's more race specific or whatever. So, even though they are intellectual discussions, I think they have a practical use in terms of what we orient to when organizing. (Peter, personal communication, November 29, 2017)

The Philly DSA's Night School taking up such a challenging conversation about race and class, then, was particularly meaningful and timely for the organization. The DSA had seen thousands of people joining the group inspired by Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential bid in which he identified openly as a democratic socialist. This was on the minds of organizers of the Philly DSA as they created the Night School. As explained by Peter, "a lot of people literally just joined from Twitter. They're like "I like Bernie Sanders and found you on Twitter." So, I just realized that people get better and clearer politically the more they talk and discuss. I know it was the same for me, so I think that's like our goal...to develop the new members" (Peter, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

With this wave of membership often taking place online, the likelihood of ideological and strategic disagreement was high. Particularly in a racially diverse city like Philadelphia, the organization's developing orientation toward race would be crucial to any sustained success in the city of brotherly love. Likewise, the democratic internal structure of the DSA meant that analysis developed by the membership of each local would play an important role in informing the organizing strategies taken by the organization both in Philadelphia and across the country.

The discussion taken up at the October 17th Night School meeting, in particular, traced a line between the learning and reflection of the membership and the organizing strategies that the Philly DSA would center on. Situating a national campaign for Medicare For All as one of its primary goals, the Philly DSA on the whole seemed to lean toward Reed’s analysis with regard to strategy. Thus, the process of exploring such analysis and discussing with others played an important role in developing grassroots support for such a campaign among the membership. As expressed by Peter, “having to talk through things clarifies your own perspective, so even though there are definitely members who actually are on opposite poles...I think they are intellectual discussions that have a practical use for the work of the DSA” (Peter, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

Activities like the DSA’s Night School provide a space where member-driven organizations can learn and reflect on how they will think about and organize around specific issues. Particularly in socialist organizations with a history of contentious debates around race-class strategizing, it was particularly meaningful to map out the boundaries of theoretical tensions and collectively grapple with analyses that would inform their work moving forward. When tensions arise within organizations committed to grassroots work, the ability to learn and reflect can be an important mechanism for addressing differences and continuing to grow the movement. As articulated by Peter, this type of shared, democratic deliberation “will help keep people long term” in the process of political organizing because they have been provided a space for their voices to be heard (Peter, personal communication, November 29, 2017).



#### **5.1.4 Our City Our Schools Strategy Meeting**

Another key example of centering learning and reflection in service of grassroots organizing was observed in my attendance at two Our City, Our Schools (OCOS) Coalition strategy meetings. The OCOS Coalition formed in the fall of 2016 under a campaign to abolish the state-run School Reform Commission (SRC). Comprised of parents, educators, community members, and students from a wide range of Philadelphia organizations, the coalition structure generated a consistent atmosphere of learning and reflection at the weekly strategy meetings. Drawing on organic leaders (McAlevey, 2016) from diverse experiences and backgrounds, the OCOS strategy meetings often centered on exploring the city's power-structure, identifying elite stakeholders, and discussing how to place pressure on those stakeholders to return the district to the hands of the local community.

In July and August of 2017, I attended two OCOS strategy meetings held in a small West Philadelphia storefront that was home to one of the coalition's supporting organizations. Representatives from each of these groups would consistently pile into the space on summer evenings to discuss the direction of the campaign. What was unique about these meetings was the surprising level of learning and reflection that took place within the span of an hour as attendees traded ideas, insights, and experiences that would inform the strategies of the campaign moving forward. As I recalled in my field note from August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017, "Everything moves so quickly because everyone seems to know the city so well. Names and perspectives of key players are thrown around in informal, energetic discussions about next steps as the facilitator feverishly takes notes to make sure no ideas that could impact the organizing get left behind."

With community members and seasoned organizers from many divergent backgrounds, there was a wealth of knowledge about the city's power-structure in each OCOS meeting. Jorge, for example, a member of one of the primary organizations in the coalition, the 215 People's Alliance, had engaged in grassroots campaigns since the early 1960's. After working in the auto and garment industry and being active in numerous political and labor movements, Jorge returned to school to get his teaching credential. Having taught for over twenty years in the district before retiring, he, like many members of the coalition, brought critical insight into the landscape of the city and school district of Philadelphia. In addition to this, Jorge's work with the 215 People's Alliance often centered on expanding his and others' learning and reflection on the city's power-structure in order to be more successful organizers.

In one interview, for example, he discussed a recent leadership training organized by the 215 People's Alliance where attendees learned about the corporate and political power players in the city. Taking place over three days, Jorge expressed a learning format that mirrored Jane McAlevey's (2016) dual focused power-structure analysis. As stated by Jorge, the leadership training included sessions that centered on both "mapping power in the City" and beginning conversations about where the power of the ordinary people could be found and built up (Jorge, personal communication, September 12, 2017). Detailing a session that he led at the event, Jorge recounted,

I took the 10 companies that sponsored [a complete transformation of West Philadelphia] and identified all of the board interconnections. Then we did this activity where some people represented these power players and others represented the companies they were involved with. Then we ran yarn between them so at the end you saw this whole web of interconnections. And then we had a discussion afterwards, so what does that mean? You know, what do these people have in common?

They're mostly wealthy and white. So, is this who should be making all the decisions about economic development for our communities? (Jorge, personal communication, September 12, 2017).

Aligning with how he approached classroom lessons when he was a practicing teacher, this activity was but one example of the analyses brought to the table at the OCOS strategy meetings.

By centering a comprehensive base of people as primary actors, the coalition format of OCOS was built and directed by *organic leaders* like Jorge, who sustained the movement through their deep ties to local constituencies. As articulated by McAlevey (2016), organic leaders “seldom identify as leaders and rarely have any official titles,” yet bring with them relationships and know-how that make them key assets for grassroots work (p. 13). By drawing on the skills and knowledge of these organic leaders, OCOS was successful in continually bringing new people into the fight as well as generating strategies that were contextualized to the unique political landscape of the city.

Beginning with a simple topical agenda, OCOS organizers would often share knowledge during strategy meetings that was similar to that described by Jorge, information that members had gathered in their individual work and experiences that would also be relevant to the OCOS campaign. As expressed by Jorge, this was identified by the primary organizers as an essential element to success within a broad-based coalition like OCOS that sought to bring together a large base of diverse people around a shared issue. He explained that given the challenges of building a city-wide coalition,

We've got to kind of analyze, to do the research and analysis of what approach [the issue] demands as well as figure out who were the targets. Who do we need to be talking to? I think [a coalition] drives that kind of a space and it's a critical one, because it's bringing together

different forces. All are clearly important and can't be ignored. It's really an important space for hearing differences and commonalities and hashing out some of that stuff. (Jorge, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

This process of sharing and learning from the wide range of coalition members was a key facet of the strategy meetings I attended. At one meeting in August, for example, the attendees spent a significant amount of time discussing their connections to the offices of city council members, the mayor, and the governor. They also discussed how they believed these individuals could be targeted based on their knowledge of the politicians' political relationships. This educative dialogue immediately influenced the strategies chosen by the campaign moving forward. One specific strategy that grew out of this particular discussion was a clear plan for several coalition members to engage in a process of "bird-dogging" the new mayor, Jim Kenney.

Much like a bird-dog on the trail during a hunt, members were to closely monitor the mayor, his activities, his press conferences and his public appearances in order to relentlessly interject questions about abolishing the SRC. The goal of "bird-dogging" is to pressure politicians into taking a stand on an issue publicly, nailing them down so that a targeted and open campaign can be waged against their position. As a newly elected politician, it was calculated that the mayor would be under close scrutiny in his first year, making him particularly susceptible to such a process. Members at the meeting reflected on this unique situation and shared insights into how the chosen "bird-dogs" could go about identifying his schedule and generating their efforts (Field note, August 11, 2017).

As an outsider to the Philadelphia political scene, I had little to offer in this discussion. So, during the meeting I took up a thorough accounting of positions that

candidate or mayor Kenney had taken thus far on the SRC and local control of the district. While attendees discussed connections to the mayor's staffers and schedule, I researched news reports, campaign speeches and public statements made by Kenney with regard to the district (Field note, August 11, 2017). This activity returned little in the way of a public position by the mayor on the topic, making the subsequent bird-dogging campaign all the more crucial. In the following weeks several members of the coalition would detail the mayor's schedule and push him in public to either take a stand on abolishing the SRC or be observed ignoring the issue altogether.

Public political pressure, like this bird-dogging campaign, was exerted on key politicians that OCOS members identified as people who could be moved to support the abolition of the SRC. At the meetings, organic leaders in the form of parents, city union workers, retired and practicing teachers, district students, school nurses, and even neighborhood community members shared their insights on city councilmembers, office staffers, and even journalists who could be brought into supporting the end of the SRC. Their collective efforts culminated a few months later when, after sustained public political pressure, the members of the SRC voted to abolish the commission.

The dynamic process of strategizing taken up at OCOS meetings highlights one of the many ways in which the coalition format of OCOS played an important role in creating an environment that supported learning about and reflecting on the political landscape in service of grassroots organizing. By centering people as primary actors, particularly the organic leaders within the Philadelphia community, OCOS was able to reflexively and contextually strategize, leading to tangible success for the campaign to abolish the SRC.

## **5.2 The Role of Acting Upon the World in Teachers' Grassroots Organizing**

*In order to denounce the world, we have to be willing to envision something else, something that acknowledges what we're denouncing and then work towards actually making that happen. Even if it seems unrealistic...even if it has no way, a snowball's chance in hell to ever happen, you know, if you actually do believe it... then you need to be doing something about that. (Isaac, personal communication, November 29, 2017)*

While activities and events that focused on learning and reflection were critical aspects of the teachers' engagement in grassroots work, the participants' organizing did not stop there. In exploring the question of *how* these educators took up grassroots organizing, it was clear that they consistently constructed activities and events that also focused on taking action and seeking change. This commitment to both reflection and action solidified the two constitutive elements of Freire's definition of *praxis*, both of which, he emphatically argued, must be prioritized for transformation.

As Freire articulated, when it comes to reflection and action in service of fundamental change, "if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers" (Freire, 1970, p. 87). Action without reflection, he contended, runs the risk of being mindless and ineffective "doing," action for action's sake. Yet, reflection on the world becomes nothing more than idle chatter if not connected to tangible attempts to change the circumstances reflected on. Embedded within several distinct campaigns constructed by the participants of this inquiry, the instances of organizing discussed in this section will highlight how the educators extended their learning into tangible and direct actions in their schools and communities. More specifically, the activities they took up will be discussed through their connection to the key aspects of McAlevey's (2016) definition of successful grassroots organizing.

### **5.2.1 The 2018 National Black Lives Matter Week of Action**

In January of 2017 the Philadelphia Caucus of Working Educators (WE) joined with organizations across the city to plan the first annual Black Lives Matter Week of Action. Inspired by nearly 2,000 Seattle teachers who wore Black Lives Matter t-shirts to school in October of 2016 (Cornwell, 2016), Philly educators moved quickly to organize an entire week of activities centered on the 13 guiding principles of the Black Lives Matter movement. At the height of my fieldwork in the fall of 2017, the teachers that made up the Racial Justice Committee of the Caucus were already busy planning for the 2018 week of action, which would ambitiously take the national stage by working with justice-oriented educators from cities across the country. Scheduled to take place between February 5<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>, teachers from New York, Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, Seattle and many other locations joined with WE to organize the 2018 National Black Lives Matter Week of Action.

#### **5.2.1.1 Curricular and School Engagement**

A key aspect of this action was the teachers' development of resources that supported fellow educators' participation in the week in their schools and classrooms. Recognizing the sensitive nature of the week of action, the teachers created Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sheets that reinforced the importance of the work in public schools. As stated on this handout,

Black Lives Matter is currently in the news. Most students are aware, to some degree, of this movement. Addressing this in the classroom is acknowledging an important current events topic. Bringing issues of racial justice into the classroom not only affirms the identities of our students, but is crucial to fostering critical engagement with the world - regardless of where you, your students and their families stand on the issues. (Caucus of Working Educators, 2017)

The sheet addressed potential fears that many educators might have in publicly supporting the action in their schools, provided tips on how to have conversations with colleagues and administrators about the week, and discussed how to deal with potential pushback. Dispelling common misunderstandings about the Black Lives Matter movement and strategies for approaching difficult conversations with students and parents, resources like this FAQ sheet were distributed widely and increased the likelihood that educators across the city would engage in the week of action.

More than this, however, the information provided on the FAQ recognized the importance of identifying and developing organic leaders in schools throughout the district. While members of WE can be found across the city, participants of this inquiry often recalled previously teaching in schools where they felt isolated in their mission to connect teacher unionism to issues of justice (Leah, personal communication, August 17, 2017; Chris, personal communication, August 1, 2017). At one time, teachers like Leah and Chris were unidentified organic leaders, looking for an outlet to enact their vision of teaching and organizing. The FAQ sheet was one way in which WE tried to access individuals like Leah and Chris, encouraging them to have the tough conversations in their schools and providing them with tangible strategies to develop their skills as organic leaders. As stated on the FAQ sheet in response to the question of how to get colleagues and parents on board with the week of action, the Caucus explained,

The best way to get anyone on board is through conversation - encourage all parties to ask and answer questions. When talking with colleagues, encourage them to consider that these are issues that affect the majority of our students on a daily basis. Teachers and parents share the common goal of helping our children navigate the difficult conversations that they will inevitably confront in this world. Reach out to parent networks in your school and let them know what your



building is planning. Consider an informational picket on a morning before school to speak to parents directly if many drop off their children. (Caucus of Working Educators, 2017)

Resources like these demonstrated WE's commitment to organizing through an ever-expanding base by supporting the development of potential leaders who might not yet be involved, but who held the drive and possibility to organize in their schools to affect change.

In addition to sharing these strategies, the organizers generated a substantial collection of curricular resources that would support teachers in bringing the 13 guiding principles of the Black Lives Matter movement into their classrooms. Lesson plans, discussion questions and even direct links to public reading and viewing materials were created and shared in open source folders for all age groups and subject areas. Curricula were connected to key learning objectives set out by the Common Core State Standards, providing educators with clear institutional rationale for integrating the material into their classes. Everything from coloring pages to read alouds to in-depth research projects on the water crisis in Flint, Michigan were included in this publicly accessible folder that continued to be expanded throughout the year.

Generating direct and widely shared resources like these was essential for the overall success of the week of action in expanding the base of participants. As noted by Dover (2013) in her inquiry with twenty-four justice-oriented educators, the largest challenges they faced in integrating material centered on critical social issues was “a lack of support from colleagues, resistance from students, and insufficient personal or professional resources” (p. 89). Addressing these concerns and providing strategies and lessons from the outset helped mitigate the fears often noted by justice focused

educators in the scripted neoliberal era (Picower, 2011), thus creating an environment where more teachers would feel empowered to participate in the week of action.

More importantly, because these resources were developed by teachers who themselves would be engaging openly in the week of action within the city, the FAQ sheet and curricular materials came with an important bonus, a community. As noted by Picower (2011), Picower (2012), Riley and Solic, (2017), Stern and Brown (2016), and even the teachers in this inquiry (see Chapter 4), a community of supportive and like-minded educators provides justice-oriented teachers with the emotional, social, and professional support needed to take on often politically polarizing work.

The Caucus' conscious effort to develop resources that would support educators' curricular and school engagement was an impactful direct action that reinforced key elements of McAlevey's organizing model. Centering local ordinary teachers in the creation of these resources provided unique opportunities for bringing educators into the work of grassroots organizing within the Caucus of Working Educators.

#### **5.2.1.2 Community-wide Events**

In addition to providing teachers with resources to support engagement in their schools and classrooms, the organizers of the Black Lives Matter Week of Action hosted a variety of community-wide events that sought to connect the school-based work being done by teachers to the broader Philadelphia community. Beginning with a Friday evening happy-hour kick off at a local Black owned business, an array of events took place throughout the week covering various topics: stigmas and misconceptions of race and gender, immigration and ethnic studies, domestic violence, sexual assault, and other subjects.

Events were hosted at local schools, community colleges, universities and even Duafe, a local Black owned salon that provides holistic natural hair services. The activities were spread throughout the city to provide accessible locations for community attendance and were facilitated by people of color engaged in planning the week. One of the events that I attended was a roundtable on colorism that explored the problematic social norm of dividing people based on skin tone. More specifically, this discussion centered on the impact of colorism within the African Diaspora particularly with regard to female beauty standards. With nearly one hundred people in attendance, clips from the documentary *Dark Girls* were played to generate dialogue within the audience, which was facilitated by a handful of Philly teachers who organized the event.

Having volunteered to operate the sign-in table, I was able to observe the incredible diversity of participants engaged in this event. While several teachers were in attendance, the vast majority of the room was filled with community members of all ages. From young girls to middle aged men to college students and even senior women, the group of largely black attendees shared deeply personal experiences and reflected with the room on how colorism operated in their lives (Field note, February 8, 2018).

Whereas other aspects of the week focused more specifically on teachers, students and the school community, events like these extended the reach of WE through the Black Lives Matter Week of Action by building relationships in the larger community that could bolster their grassroots work moving forward. As I noted at the time, “the [colorism roundtable] was truly a broad-based, intergenerational event. Those signing in were not only teachers and students, but children, parents,

grandparents, clergy, and a whole host of others with deep connections to the Philadelphia community in attendance” (Field note, February 8, 2018). Each person who signed in was greeted by others with warm hello’s and conversations that continued well after the event concluded. In a completely packed sterile classroom at the Community College of Philadelphia, it still felt like we were having a conversation in someone’s living room (Field note, February 8, 2018).

The connections and relationships generated by events like this one were a crucial first step in expanding the reach of WE’s efforts, informing the public of their work but also engaging them in future action. While attendees came and went, I, along with another organizer, headed the sign in table, selling t-shirts for the week, handing out buttons, but also gauging interest for new supporting members. As the event concluded and the vast majority in attendance stuck around to discuss further, I helped three people, two of whom were new educators, join the Caucus. With a clear and forthcoming campaign to make the list of demands a reality, actions like these signaled to teachers and community members alike that this was the group fighting for Philly’s students, which, at my event alone, led to an increase in membership. This, along with the focus on supporting teachers’ curricular and school engagement, highlights the strength of activities like the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in laying the groundwork of genuine grassroots organizing.

### **5.2.2 Medicare for All**

As mentioned above, the Philadelphia chapter of the DSA, in conjunction with DSA national, made a campaign of Medicare for All central to their organizing goals. Medicare for All is a proposal for health care reform that would improve on and extend what we currently know as “Medicare.” Whereas Medicare has been

successful in providing health insurance for senior citizens that is operated by the federal government, the DSA's plan of Medicare for All intends to provide greater coverage for seniors (who often have to carry supplemental insurance) *and* extend that improved coverage to all citizens of the United States. This, the organization contends, would eliminate the need for the vast majority of Americans to participate in today's profit-driven health care market. As stated on the DSA's official Medicare for All flyer,

Americans pay more for healthcare than any country in the world. Yet we are far from the healthiest. We have the highest infant and maternal mortality rates, and the lowest life expectancy of rich countries. So where is all that money going? Nearly \$278 billion per year is currently wasted on a bloated corporate bureaucracy, and almost \$342 billion per year is given away in tax subsidies to big insurance companies... Healthcare should be about healing the sick, not giveaways to the rich. We need a system that prioritizes the health of working-class Americans over the profits of insurance companies and their billionaire executives. (Democratic Socialists of America, 2017)

#### **5.2.2.1 Neighborhood Canvassing**

A key action utilized by the DSA while organizing for Medicare for All was the systematic canvassing of neighborhoods throughout the city. To raise awareness of the organization and the campaign, the DSA membership engaged in frequent canvassing across Philadelphia. I joined in this activity on a hot Saturday afternoon in September of 2017. Scheduled to canvass a portion of West Philadelphia, I met Peter and at least thirty others in a church where we began by receiving canvassing resources before coming together as a large group.

Several facilitators brought the group together before giving a run-down of the campaign and the goals of the day: inform people and get them involved. We were then broken into smaller groups to introduce ourselves and share our purpose for

wanting to canvass in support of Medicare for All. I was joined in my small group by Peter as well as people from a variety of backgrounds. Many had personal stories of family or friends who nearly lost everything because of an illness; others were health care providers or nurses who saw how constrained care was under a for-profit system. I shared my family's situation as small business owners who had to pay over \$25,000 a year in insurance to sustain my father's ongoing health needs (Field note, September 25, 2017).

It was clear that this action was personal for those of us involved, which made the next step quite intuitive. In pairs we practiced conversations that we would have with people as we walked through the neighborhood canvassing. Facilitators provided essential information, handouts, and tips from their experiences so that our afternoon would be successful. After nearly half an hour of practicing, we headed out in pairs to knock on doors throughout the neighborhood.

While nerves were evident in our first few attempts, Peter and I quickly became comfortable talking to people about the campaign. We often spoke from our experiences, but also drew on the clear information provided by the facilitators. Many doors never opened, but for those that did, we engaged in both cordial and lively conversations with West Philadelphia residents who were quick to share their experiences and concerns (Field note, September 25, 2017). Of the individuals we spoke with, more than half signed on to be involved. Whether attending a town hall, calling a representative or even joining the DSA, people were receptive to the personal one-on-one interactions with people just like them.

In my subsequent discussion about the canvassing with Peter, it was made clear that this activity served two purposes in service of grassroots organizing. The

obvious, it expanded the base of people who were engaged in the fight. As explained by Peter, “people who canvas usually only get maybe eight or nine people to sign up,” but frequently enough those people get involved further. Recalling our canvassing in particular he noted that “one person [whose door we] knocked on...they signed up and then phone banked for the Town Hall” that followed later in the month (Peter, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

Additionally, however, activities like neighborhood canvassing were important in the development of organic leaders within the organization. As explained by Peter,

We’ve talked a lot about this, even people who haven’t had experience, they’ll be nervous and very quickly get very comfortable. That was one of the things we talked about with this campaign, [creating] a better face for ourselves and getting our members better at talking about these issues with people, about socialist issues, and social democratic reforms, just getting better at talking to people. (Peter, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

As a first-time canvasser, I experienced this first hand during my afternoon in West Philly. While Peter was quite seasoned, having canvassed many times, I reflected in my field note,

Walking around the neighborhood, talking with people, talking with Peter, it feels like a traveling classroom centered on Medicare for All. We have unique conversations with each person and develop ways of explaining the campaign to them, but also to ourselves. I don’t think I could have gotten so comfortable talking about Medicare for All in another setting. The face-to-face makes it real and personal. (Field note, September 25, 2017)

While my interaction with members of the DSA was limited to Peter throughout the course of this project, my experiences, coupled with his intentions as a leader, highlight the ways in which direct activities like these can take tangentially involved participants and develop leadership skills around grassroots campaigns.

### **5.2.3 System of Great Schools**

In addition to member created campaigns like the Black Lives Matter Week of Action and Medicare for All, there were also actions that arose out of members' immediate needs within a system of ever-changing neoliberal reforms. One such action was the organizing that took place after the System of Great Schools (SGS) announced that six Philadelphia schools were at risk of turnaround. As reported by Wolfman-Arent (2017) on the date of the SGS announcement,

In what's become a yearly ritual, the School District of Philadelphia said Tuesday it will reshuffle six low-performing schools in hopes of turning them around. How exactly the district reshuffles the sextet of schools won't be announced until later this school year, but it's possible the schools could experience a massive turnover of staff or administrators. (p. 1)

With this announcement affecting several of the teachers in this inquiry, participants sprang into action, seeking to prepare for the coming evaluation that would determine the fate of their school. Working around the SGS schedule that set out an assessment of the school, a series of focus groups, and community meetings before reaching a decision, teachers began organizing to keep their school intact.

#### **5.2.3.1 SGS Meetings**

An essential aspect of this action was the community meetings that took place throughout the evaluative process of the schools. The first meeting I attended was to focus on collecting feedback from the school's teachers, students, parents, and community members who turned out in large numbers to defend their school. After a brief discussion about the stakes of the meeting, a research team from Temple University broke attendees into focus groups based on their preferred spoken language. In the focus groups, designated researchers asked questions about the



school's climate, resources, teachers, staff and much more. Overall, the goal articulated by the researchers was to give the school's stakeholders an opportunity to be heard in this process of evaluating the state of the school (Field note, October 23, 2017).

As I observed in one of the focus groups, parents and students were emphatically in favor of keeping the school and its faculty intact. Most of the discussion, in fact, centered on the systemic lack of resources that the staff were forced to operate with. Parents consistently reiterated that necessities like copy paper and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers were what the school needed, not a turnaround (Field note, October 23, 2017). What I did not realize during the meeting, however, was that the significant turnout and consistent messaging was part of a concerted effort to organize the school community to save the school.

In a subsequent interview with Leah about the SGS meetings, she articulated an immensely detailed process of teachers organizing to get colleagues, parents, students and community members involved. As she explained, "every school has a turnout plan for every meeting, they know how to get families, they have their own flyers, they have sign-in sheets and there is a steady message for the people to feel confident and help them going to these focus groups" (Leah, personal communication, November 30, 2017). At her school more specifically, teachers created a detailed contact list of parents that was organized by homeroom so that each organizer could be assigned a set of parents to contact about attending the meetings. Additionally, the teachers kept detailed notes identifying potential organic leaders among the parents. As Leah expressed, the teachers kept record of which meetings the parents came to as well as whether "they were a strong parent, if they were someone who could be

prepped on messaging, and be willing to speak up” (Leah, personal communication, November 30, 2017).

Beyond organizing the parents, however, the teachers made a concerted effort to organize their colleagues, many of whom were unaware of the implications of the SGS decision. Leah, for example, recounted the efforts she took up when she unexpectedly had a double period for preparation. Leah explained

I told the building committee, I'm going to go around and talk to every single staff member and make sure that they are coming [to the meeting] and I'm going to ask them to contact 5 parents over the weekend. It took like 2 hours to get to everyone, but what I learned over the course of that was that a lot of people didn't know what was going on...until I got to like look them in the eye and say...”when teachers have come to this meeting, they get to see the two page report out before it's printed and you can push back on it” and they were like “Oh my God, that is so great that we can do that, oh I'm totally going to come!” (Leah, personal communication, November 30, 2017)

Without efforts like this, teachers, parents, and the larger school community would be left unaware and disempowered in the decision-making process that would determine the future of their school. The teachers’ commitment to grassroots organizing, however, situated person-to-person relationship building as the primary mechanism for fighting back.

This behind the scenes work was most evident in the final meeting where the results of the evaluation would be shared. As the research teams turned over the floor to community questions for the SGS district directors, parents, faculty, community members and even alumni had a clear set of consistent questions to ask about the decision to be made by the district regarding the fate of their school (Field note, November 20, 2017). Leah explained that this was the result of numerous meetings organized throughout the process where school stakeholders coalesced around a clear

message that would be reiterated throughout the public meetings with SGS staff. More importantly, the teacher-organizers drew on the existing parental and community leadership within the school, centering these organic leaders who would have the greatest impact on swaying the district's decision makers. As Leah articulated, it wasn't just about "pulling people into the room" but also about "what we actually did with the people once they were ready to be there" (Leah, personal communication, November 30, 2017).

This action taken by the teachers affected by the SGS process demonstrated their commitment to grassroots organizing. Working toward change with a clear commitment to expanding the base of participants, centering people as primary actors, and identifying and developing organic leaders, the efforts of the teachers truly embodied Jane McAlevey's (2016) definition of organizing, something that Leah reflected on in our final interview together. As she explained,

I think the reason that the big community meetings felt so successful is that people in the school really took on reaching out to their own personal relationships, former students, former parents that they were tight with, former teachers that were in the school building, community members who had been like fighting for [the school] for a long time. That was all really intentional. (Leah, personal communication, November 30, 2017)

#### **5.2.4 Abolish the SRC**

The campaign to abolish the School District of Philadelphia's (SDP) School Reform Commission (SRC) began in the fall of 2016 with the forming of the Our City Our Schools (OCOS) Coalition. While members of the Philadelphia community had been against the SRC from its inception (Bishop & White, 2001), the threat of a reform friendly Federal Department of Education under Trump and a looming

gubernatorial election in Pennsylvania raised the stakes for a district that suffered tremendously under the last conservative administration (Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia, 2014; Jack & Sludden, 2013). As noted in the preface of this dissertation, the campaign kicked off with an event at the former Berean Institute, an event at which all five members of the SRC refused to discuss their potential abolition with Philadelphia parents, teachers, and students.

Over the following months, the OCOS coalition would engage in a concerted effort to abolish the SRC, something that could only take place if a majority of the existing commissioners voted to end the very body which empowered them to operate the SDP. Members of the coalition devised a thorough and targeted plan to exert public pressure on political figures. Whether it was bird-dogging the newly elected mayor, writing Op/Eds to local publications or meeting collectively with city councilmembers, the organizers of the OCOS coalition relentlessly worked openly in the city's political landscape to end the SRC.

#### **5.2.4.1 SRC Meeting**

One method of public action that proved particularly useful in the campaign was the consistent presence of OCOS members at the official meetings of the SRC. While the SRC was functionally unaccountable to the citizens of Philadelphia, they would symbolically hear testimony from community members after business concluded in the first half of the meetings. Throughout the course of the campaign, the OCOS coalition utilized this open public forum to take key stands on the abolition of the SRC.

One of the first meetings I attended utilized the visibility of the district headquarters on North Broad Street to hold a pre-meeting rally mourning the almost

twenty-five neighborhood schools closed in the last five years, with more proposed closures on the way. Teachers, school nurses, parents and community members within the coalition set up tombstones for each of the shuttered schools as individuals spoke about the damage done to their communities after the closures (Field note, June 15, 2017). With local news present and hundreds of cars passing by on the widely used roadway, the message was loud and visible. The SRC had overseen some of the most traumatic years of the SDP.

The rally concluded as members moved inside for the SRC meeting where they would engage in direct action and public testimony in favor of abolition. As individuals piled into the space, organizers handed out clocks, signs, and song lyrics. The theme of the action was “your time is up,” a sentiment that would be consistently proclaimed by the activists throughout the meeting. Holding up the timepieces and chanting “tick, tock,” the OCOS members would only relent for direct testimony to be given in front of the commissioners making the case for them to vote in favor of abolishing the SRC (Field note, June 15, 2017). Jorge, a seasoned speaker at these meetings, gave a powerful speech in the allowed three minutes in support of ending the SRC, but what I reflected on most in my notes was how little the commissioners seemed to pay attention to those giving testimony.

Some would briefly glance at the speaker, others would read the printed transcript of the words being delivered, but many scrolled on their phone, scribbled onto papers, or worse, weren't even present. I wondered, “how could these people be moved toward voting if they weren't even listening?” (Field note, June 15, 2017). When Jorge and I discussed his testimony at this meeting, however, I began to see the true purpose of these actions. As he explained,

I have never seen the main role the testimony influencing them because that's not what influences them...what influences them, you know, is their place in the political power. I mean, I'm not saying they're never influenced...but to me [testimony] is mainly to influence the public, to drive home the message about their policies, and... think that we use that forum for that purpose pretty effectively. (Jorge, personal communication, November 30, 2017)

Efforts such as the rallies and SRC testimony were used to shine light on the negative situation at hand, but also to direct people toward outlets for getting involved. As shared by Jorge, he had met several people over the years who came to an SRC meeting to testify about one thing, but had been swayed by organizers' testimony to discuss another thing and even join a campaign because of it (Jorge, personal communication, November 30, 2017).

While deep organizing strategies were the bread and butter of the OCOS coalition with their efforts connecting ordinary people across the city, it was often public events like these that first alerted interested parties to the work. Direct actions that take place in the public arena, then, have the potential to bridge the initial divide between grassroots organizers and the general population. Seizing opportunities to grab the public's attention and direct that attention into clear actions moving forward was an effective strategy used by the OCOS coalition in their successful campaign to abolish the SRC.

## Chapter 6

### **FINDINGS: IN WHAT CONTEXTS DO TEACHERS ENGAGE IN GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING**

Building on the first two research questions of this project, this chapter situates the grassroots organizing of the teachers within the particular neoliberal context of Philadelphia. Adapting Massey's (1994) conceptualization of an "accumulated history" of place, I have documented the aggregate layers of interactions between the locality of Philadelphia and the larger social forces at play, namely the neoliberal project. Informed by the commitments set out by Weis and Fine (2012) for critically bifocal research that situates sites of resistance in relation to the structural constraints of individuals' contexts, this chapter will provide a contextual analysis of the landscape in which the teachers of this study took up grassroots organizing. More specifically, I will detail the aspects of the neoliberal project that most acutely contextualized the teachers' engagement in grassroots work.

I began this process with an analysis of the qualitative data of the project, seeking to identify aspects of the city and district that were framed as issues or "limits" by the teachers or that the teachers sought to address in their organizing. Three key themes emerged that characterized the unique neoliberal context in which the teachers engaged in grassroots organizing, a) top-down, "privatized" governance, b) economic inequality, and c) racialized stratification.

These themes defined the parameters of my investigation into structural neoliberal trends and their Philadelphia specific outcomes. Theoretical literature, local news sources, press briefings, and other scholarly examinations were analyzed to create the following contextual analysis of neoliberalism in the city and school district of Philadelphia.

## **6.1 Neoliberalism**

Described as “the idea that swallowed the world” (Metcalf, 2017), “the defining social paradigm of the past 30 years” (Lipman, 2011), and “the ideology at the root of all our problems” (Monbiot, 2016), neoliberalism has garnered much attention in the discourse around political, social, and economic theory. Widely informing both public policy and general ideological trends, this “ism” has transformed the present reality to such an extent that it often seems the natural state of things. Unpacking neoliberalism, then, is essential in understanding the most basic aspects of life in the 21st century.

Neoliberalism has often been simplified to denote a prioritization of the private over the public, yet what drives this prioritization is the ideological position that the principles of classical liberal economic theory are the principles on which we should structure all of society. As noted by David Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is a theory “that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 19). The rationale behind this ideology is clear. Only through an open system of unrestricted choices can genuine human needs be efficiently and effectively met.



While guided by classic economic theory, as noted by Harvey, neoliberalism has not been relegated to the economic sphere. Instead, the ideology has been successful in integrating a prioritization of market competition into our most basic assessments of socio-cultural life, our norms, our beliefs, and our values. Characterized by Lipman (2011) as an ideological project to “change the soul,” neoliberalism has reshaped our very social identities into extensions of free market capitalism (p. 10). As articulated by Lipman, this reshaping began a steady “assault on collectivity, social responsibility, equality, and solidarity” ending with a complete redefinition of “democracy as choice in the marketplace and freedom as personal freedom to consume” (p. 10). This shift from shared power to market competition ultimately replaces the government’s responsibility for collective social wellbeing with each individual citizen’s personal competency in the marketplace (Lipman, 2011, p. 10). Thus, the solidification of the neoliberal ideology has ushered in systematic efforts toward governmental “deregulation, privatization, and a general withdrawal of the state as a source of social welfare” (Elmore & Simone, 2013).

## **6.2 Neoliberalism and the City of Philadelphia**

This neoliberal project, while global in scale, has impacted individual locations in specific ways, particularly in the nation’s large urban centers. As argued by Peck, Brenner, & Theodore (2008), in an increasingly competitive global marketplace cities have become “institutional laboratories for a variety of neoliberal policy experiments” due to their unique characteristics, namely the proliferation of highly concentrated pockets of racialized inequality that make them ripe for takeover. The goal of these “experiments,” the authors contend, is “to mobilize city space” as an arena for “market-oriented economic growth” (p. 1). Subsequently, test policies have

consistently incorporated strategies that seek to privatize the city spatially. Programs of urban renewal, property redevelopment, tax abatements, and private management partnerships have been common experiments in the push to make the physical space of cities less public and thus more accessible to business (Cucchiara, 2013; Lipman, 2011; Peck, Brenner, & Theodore, 2008).

Philadelphia, of course, has not been excluded from such experiments. With a population of approximately 1.5 million residents, the city of Philadelphia is the fifth largest in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Labeled the poorest big city in the country, Philadelphia has the highest rate of “deep poverty,” defined as individuals with incomes below half of the poverty line (Lubrano, 2014). As noted by Lubrano (2014), “nearly 185,000 people, including about 60,000 children” or 12.2% of the city’s population live in deep-poverty. The deep poverty experienced in the city of Philadelphia, however, is hardly experienced uniformly. Dramatic inequality manifests throughout the distinct geographic pockets of the city, a reality that has coalesced with the rise of the neoliberal policies enacted within Philadelphia.

One particular reform that contributed to this stark divide within the city was the creation of the Center City District (CCD) in 1991. With the expressed goal of maintaining Philadelphia's downtown in a condition conducive to business activity and tourism, the CCD oversees the sourcing and implementation of supplemental resources to be used in Philadelphia’s Center City. One of many “business improvement districts” across the country, entities like the CCD are private organizations with deep ties to local businesses that are authorized “to levy taxes on properties within a specific geographic area in exchange for additional services to that area” (Cucchiara, 2013, p. 29). As stated on its official website, the CCD consists of a

23-member board of directors “representing Center City's major property owners and a wide cross section of downtown businesses, labor unions, neighborhood, civic and health-care organizations.”

The CCD is an important example of the neoliberal project’s prioritization of top-down, privatized governance over democratic, public control. Informed by the growing ideological elimination of collective social commitment, the creation of the CCD placed the responsibility for (and the benefits of) city renewal into the hands of an unelected, unaccountable, independent body of business investors. While wildly successful in drawing business, real estate investment, and tourism to the downtown area, the transformation of Center City took place alongside a nation- and city-wide divestment of public resources (Cucchiara, 2013), accelerating the stark trend of neighborhood gentrification, both of which impacted communities along race and class lines.

Today, Philadelphia is listed as the ninth most racially segregated metro area in America, with many Philadelphians living in neighborhoods “where a single racial group represents 75 percent or more of the population” (Young, 2018). In this already divided environment, a variety of incentives, most commonly in the form of tax abatements, have been utilized to attract and retain young professional ““knowledge workers” in the Center City area. As articulated by Cucchiara (2013) the assumption behind this push is “that this group—with its skills, motivation, and expendable income—would help revive the city’s economy and build prosperity” (p. 1). Older residents, however, have struggled with increased taxes, decreased public services, and huge shifts in the racial and economic makeups of their neighborhoods (Moselle & John-Hall, 2018). In one poignant example from the Pointe Breeze section of the

city, Moselle and John-Hall (2018) explain that between 2000 and 2006 the median housing price in the area went from \$29,000 to \$234,000, and “during that same time, the neighborhood went from 80 percent black to 46 percent black” (p. 1).

Initiatives like the CCD, the city’s tax abatements, and many others, push privatized governance and marketization to the forefront in the name of economic development. This economic development, however, is typically enjoyed by a small portion of Philadelphians, accelerating the geographic racial and economic stratification of the city. While the CCD is but one example of how neoliberal policies have shaped the Philadelphia context, it is an important one for the purpose of this project. With location intertwined with the public-school system, the work of the teachers studied herein was contextualized by reforms seeking to remake the city for market-oriented economic growth.

As detailed by Maia Bloomfield Cucchiara’s (2013) text exploring the connections between the CCD and the School District of Philadelphia, the marketing of cities through privatized policies like business improvement districts is deeply interlaced with the marketing of schools through neoliberal reforms. In brief, “education is integral to housing markets and cultural representations of the city” (Lipman, 2011, p. 44) and is therefore a prime target for neoliberal reform. In order to maintain and extend the success of initiatives like the CCD, it has been argued that adjustments needed to be made to the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). As stated by one editorial published in the Philadelphia Daily News, “If people want white and affluent parents to send their kids to public schools and have a greater stake in the system, some accommodation has to be made” (as cited by Cucchiara, 2013, p. 1).

Sentiments like these have driven much of the competitive mechanisms enacted in the SDP.

One mechanism in particular, the Center City Schools Initiative (CCSI), was developed by the CCD with the expressed purpose of keeping families in Center City by improving the schools in its jurisdiction (Cucchiara, 2013, p. 65). Intent on partnering with the District to bring additional attention and resources to these schools, the CCSI posed significant questions about prioritizing certain institutions in the name of marketing public education to the largely white, affluent, young parents living in Center City. This initiative leveraged the political and economic clout of the CCD board in support of making the schools in Center City more attractive to this population. As noted by Cucchiara (2013), through the CCSI, the CCD “coordinated efforts to publicize and market downtown schools, assisted individual schools with raising funds, helped secure funding from large corporations, and organized volunteers and donations from local businesses” (p. 73). The CCSI, in essence, was a systematic effort “to “rebrand” a subset of Philadelphia’s public schools to distance them from the rest of the stigmatized school district” (Cucchiara, 2013, p. 67). Programs like these were often charged with exacerbating a tiered system of public education in which the more elite schools in the city were increasingly privileged by private entities while neighborhood schools saw shrinking public assistance and even closure (Cucchiara, 2013).

### **6.3 Neoliberalism and Education**

The case of the CCD and the marketing of schools for economic development provides an important example of how the neoliberal project has impacted the city and the school district of Philadelphia. It is, however, but one illustration of reform in the

neoliberal era. As introduced in Chapter 1, the neoliberal ideological shift that has transpired over the past thirty years has had tremendous implications for our most widely used public institutions, our schools.

Initiated by fears that America's students were falling behind in the globalizing economy (Hursh, 2007; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), policies of increased standardization befell the country in the 1980's, seeking to make the school system more effective and efficient, and thus make the United States more economically competitive. As the neoliberal ideology took hold in the following decades, the argument was made that standardization alone could not improve the "closed system" (DeVos as cited by Strauss, 2016) that was U.S. public education. Thus, beginning in the early 2000's with federal initiatives like the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, policymakers began devising reforms that would mimic economic markets in the public system.

In the name of increasing student outcomes through the interjecting of market incentives, the Act centered on a system of standardized testing that would hold teachers and schools accountable for student performance. If schools consistently missed the ever-increasing benchmarks, accountability sanctions such as school choice and school turnaround would replicate the feedback loop of the marketplace, allowing students to seek out other schools and closing or converting the existing school into a privately-operated charter (Hursh, 2007).

This rationale is embodied in the economic concept of "creative destruction" whereby market competition acts as a feedback mechanism for ensuring efficiency, innovation, and success in the economy. As explained by Joseph Schumpeter (1942), who coined the phrase:

The opening up of new markets, foreign or domestic, and the organizational development from the craft shop to such concerns as U.S. Steel illustrate the same process of industrial mutation—if I may use that biological term—that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. (p. 83)

The impact of Shumpeter’s analysis on neoliberal education reform was clear in the expressed rationale for imposing markets in education. As articulated by Hursh (2007), true quality and “increased efficiency can only be attained, argue neoliberals, if individuals are able to make choices within a market system in which schools compete” (p. 498).

While the idea of “destroying” schools may seem harsh to some, as argued by Sellers and Arrigo (2018), neoliberal ideology has made the removal of safety nets and the adoption of punitive responses seem rational (p. 61). Thus, whether it is mass school closures, stringent standardization, high stakes testing, or strict zero tolerance policies, the reforms are, at their core, neoliberal. With this rationale firmly supplanted in the political discourse, the nation’s struggling city schools were often the first guinea pigs for neoliberalization. Thus, no case is better situated to facilitate a clear understanding of the impact of these policies than that of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP).

#### **6.4 Neoliberalism and the School District of Philadelphia**

Although the district had long suffered from racialized stratification and economic inequality, the SDP was thrust into the world of neoliberal education reforms in the early 1990’s beginning with the legislature in Harrisburg voting to freeze the State funding formula in 1993. With a significantly lower tax base than the surrounding wealthy, and largely white, suburban districts, this policy change meant

that the State's largest district was quickly "confronted with ongoing (\$200 million plus) deficits in projected district budgets," setting the stage for the dramatic reforms to come (Travers, 2003).

With a civil rights suit against the State's funding decision pending, the Legislature passed Act 46 in 1998, a State Takeover provision that allowed the state to take control of financially struggling districts. As contended by Travers (2003), Act 46 "was specifically written with Philadelphia in mind" by the increasingly neoliberal legislative body in Harrisburg (p. 2). Having attempted and failed to pass voucher reforms, a key staple of neoliberal reforms, the politicians instead enacted legislation allowing for the creation of privately-operated charters schools in the Commonwealth. Viewed as "the first step in breaking the stranglehold of the public system" (Travers, 2003, p. 3), charter schools began proliferating in the SDP.

Citing this charter expansion, low student performance, and the district's deep financial woes, the State announced plans to take over the SDP in 2001. As recounted by Travers (2003), "legislators in Harrisburg argued publicly that the educational system in Philadelphia was so broken that radical strategies were needed to fix it" (p. 3) and radical strategies are what were proposed. In a dramatic departure from tradition public governance of school systems, "the district hired Edison, Inc., a for-profit educational management company...to make recommendations for the state takeover" (Travers, 2003, p. 3). Soon after, Edison issued its report proposing to eliminate the local school board, hire a CEO, and place nearly 100 district schools under the private management of companies like Edison.

Months of conflict between politicians, student groups, the teacher's union and community organizations forced the negotiators to scale back their proposals, but the



process still concluded with the creation of the School Reform Commission (SRC), a five-member body appointed largely by the Governor of Pennsylvania. By way of this privately centralized commission, many of the reforms most challenged by the public were able to be enacted, beginning with the placement of 70 of the lowest performing schools into the hands of both for- and non-profit entities. Edison Inc., the organization whose report recommended such action, was given control of 20 of the district's lowest performing schools, largely schools servicing poor communities of color (Travers, 2003).

From this point forward, the SDP was a neoliberal district in which the most crucial educational decisions were to be made not by the public, but by a handful of commissioners, private management organizations, and the SRC hired CEO. Such extreme measures were claimed to be necessary to stabilize the district financially, with many politicians selling the transition by claiming State control would mean a genuine State commitment to funding the district (Power, 2018). While funding did increase for a time, beginning in 2011 with the newly elected Governor, Tom Corbett, over \$1.1 billion in cuts were made to the K-12 general education fund.

Seeking “restraint,” Corbett pushed to eliminate educational programs that were not “critical” (Corbett, 2011; Educations Voters Pennsylvania, 2013). Citing a statewide deficit after the economic recession, Corbett argued that dramatic education defunding was necessary for a fiscally disciplined approach to the State's budget. As stated by Corbett, “education cannot be the only industry exempt from recession... this budget sorts the must-haves from the nice-to-haves” (Corbett, 2011). In reality, the newly enacted funding cuts did nothing more than further sort the haves from the have-nots in districts across the State.

Department of Education data attested to the fact that low-income students in Pennsylvania lost on average “50 percent more in state funding than higher income students” (Public Interest Law Center, 2014). While many wealthy districts were deprived of a mere \$30 or less per student, the largest system, the School District of Philadelphia, lost over \$1350 per child. This translated to 3,800 staff members being removed from the city’s schools including 676 teachers, 1,202 support staff and 283 counselors (Public Interest Law Center, 2014).

About a decade after the state takeover, the 2011 budget reduction created a \$304 million gap, pushing the district into a financial tailspin. The SRC, in response, proposed the “Blueprint for Transforming Philadelphia Public Schools,” which sought to close sixty-four of the city’s neighborhood schools over the next five years (Knudsen, 2012). Proposing to dismantle the district’s central office in favor of “achievement networks” run by contracted organizations, the ‘blueprint’ would open the floodgates to the national educational market. In true neoliberal fashion, the plan eagerly anticipated that 40% of all students would be in charter schools by 2017 (Knudsen, 2012).

This proposal, while never fully implemented, marked what would become a steady stream of school closures in the district beginning with six in 2012. By March of 2013 the SRC voted to close twenty-four more amid a protest that saw nearly 500 community members blocking the district headquarters (Hurdle, 2013). Citing the \$1.35 billion deficit, the school closures were part of the district’s plan “to cut expenditures and close its budget gap” (Jack & Sludden, 2013). These actions, which displaced nearly 15,000 students from the district’s lowest performing schools, was challenged by researchers as having little potential impact on the district’s financial

crises. As noted by Jack and Sludden (2013), “research on the experiences of other major school districts that have undertaken large-scale school closings suggests a gap between the stated goals of the district’s plans and the likely outcomes, particularly regarding academic and financial benefits to district students, staff, and taxpayers” (p. 1).

What the research was supportive of, however, was identifying the highly racialized outcomes of the budget cuts and the subsequent reforms. Given the stark geographic racial and economic segregation in the city and State, as noted by the Public Interest Law Center (2014), when the 2011 budget cuts took effect, “Caucasian students lost on average only \$366 per student while non-white students lost on average \$728 per student, twice the amount of funding cut from the average Caucasian student” (p. 1). With such dramatic difference in consequences, it should come as no surprise that the “failing” schools most targeted for closure were schools serving primarily poor students of color. As noted by Whitehorne (2013), while 55 percent of the overall student population in Philadelphia was African American, “79 percent of the students in schools projected to close are African American” (p. 1).

This accumulated history of the SDP highlights the dramatic and consistent transition toward greater forms of top-down, privatized governance within the system. Whether it was the State takeover and creation of the SRC, proposals for privately managed “achievement networks” or even the proliferation of privately-operated charter schools, the trend of the SDP in the neoliberal era has been characterized by the systematic replacement of the collective with the market.

Yet as discussed above, the explicit purpose of opening schools to the marketplace is to allow the competitive arena to act as a feedback loop on school

quality and efficiency. Good schools will thrive, the argument goes, while bad schools will rightfully be “creatively destroyed.” As argued by Pedroni (2011), such creative destruction “remakes” the city and its schools, but not with the collective good in mind. Instead, this process “reproduces and intensifies inequality and exclusion along lines of race, class, and ethnicity” (p. 206).

### **6.5 The Philadelphia Neoliberal Context and Grassroots Organizing**

This landscape within the city and School District of Philadelphia acutely contextualized the teachers’ engagement in grassroots work. Throughout our interactions there was a clear and consistent acknowledgement of these unique neoliberal manifestations among the participants. Whether it was in the topics we discussed during interviews, the issues their campaigns sought to address or the strategies they selected within those campaigns, the teachers’ organizing was informed by the neoliberal project highlighted above. More importantly, however, I argue that the grassroots work taken up by these teachers embodied a direct resistance to the reality of their context. Their organizing consciously contested the top-down governance, economic inequality and racial stratification that marked the neoliberalization of Philadelphia.

The increasingly privatized governance structure of the district was the expressed focus of at least two of the campaigns I observed in this inquiry, the OCOS effort to abolish the SRC and the teachers’ organizing around the top-down market-informed efforts of the System of Great Schools (SGS). As discussed above, the public had been strongly opposed to the privatized governance of the SRC from its inception. Yet as this project began, the SRC was approaching its seventeenth year of imposing near constant neoliberal reforms. One of the more recent aspect of the SRC’s reform

efforts, in fact, was the creation of the SGS, a data gathering body that is used to “assess when, where and how to (1) open new schools; (2) transform existing schools; (3) expand high-performing schools; and (4) close or merge schools to move more children into higher-performing schools across our District” (The School District of Philadelphia, 2017).

The sentiments expressed in the mission of the SGS exemplified the neoliberal commitment to imposing market-like accountability on public schools. This culture, which became embedded in the era of the SRC, was often referenced by the participants of this study in relation to their organizing efforts. Leah, for example, in speaking about the atmosphere of the district, lamented that “there is this commitment, this systemic nasty commitment to the idea that we can only change our system by erasing what we have...that there is nothing to be learned from what we do have now” (Leah, personal communication, July 17, 2017). While she acknowledged that change was needed in the district, she stood firmly against the type of change that sought to close schools without making any effort to improve what existed. Instead, as detailed in Chapter 5, Leah’s organizing around the SGS meetings sought to democratize the process of reform, bringing parents, students, colleagues and community members into the conversation about how to improve their school.

While Leah’s organizing with colleagues around the SGS process was a needed response to an immediate threat stemming from the top-down governance of the SRC, the OCOS campaign sought to attack the Hydra (Picower & Mayorga, 2015) at its core. As was expressed at the very first OCOS meeting I attended, “Philly public schools could not survive another round of cuts from this unaccountable body” (Field note, June 7, 2017). With no recourse for protecting the district while it remained

under state control, the teachers engaged in the OCOS coalition throughout the year to replace the SRC with an accountable, local school board.

In both the SRC and SGS campaigns, the teachers' engagement in grassroots work was both a response and an affront to the privatized governance embodied by the neoliberal context of the district. Whereas school operations in Philadelphia had long been characterized by a top-down, privatized system of governance, the teachers' work was bottom-up and public by definition. This played a key role in the success of their campaigns. With hundreds of parents, students, and staff vocalizing their support, Leah's school was not "creatively destroyed," but provided time and resources to improve. Similarly, the ending of the SRC was a huge victory for the district that had been operated for nearly two decades by a body that was unaccountable to the parents and students of the city.

With the SRC abolished, it remains to be seen how the new school board will approach governance. What is known for sure, however, is that the increasingly expanding base of citizens that was brought into the fight during these campaigns are unlikely to settle for more of the same. As this project concluded, organizers like Jorge, Leah, Zack, Marisa and many others were already pivoting to address potentially new issues of privatized governance. Working within their communities to support candidates for the new school board as well as for city council, it appeared that the engagement of these teachers in grassroots organizing would continue to be contextualized by the push for top-down, privatized governance of the neoliberal era. The only difference was that their organizing was committed to embodying the opposite.

In addition to the impact of neoliberal governance, the organizing taken up by the educators of this study was consistently undergirded by the economic inequality and racialized stratification of their context. Within the city these manifested in distinct geographic pockets of economic and racial isolation (Cucchiara, 2013; Lubrano, 2014), which were commonly mirrored in the neighborhood schools. This reality was one faced by the teachers daily as they entered racially isolated schools suffering from a dramatic lack of basic resources, such as clean drinking water (Laker, Ruderman & Purcell, 2018), safe temperatures (Graham, 2018), or school nurses (Education Law Center, 2013). When asked about the most pressing issues they faced as educators, the teachers unanimously cited the systemic resource deprivation in the SDP and the highly racialized form it took.

Leah, for example, listed the wide range of physical conditions that were connected to economic and racial inequity in the district including “buildings, water, internet, air conditioning, pencils, notebooks, class size” (Leah, personal communication, August 17, 2017). She explained that racism and classism were at the core of the present context, from teachers to administrations and even the funding of schools. Thinking even beyond Philadelphia she argued that racial and economic disparity were the single biggest issue, that “students of color and students that are poor in every district in the country are set in classrooms and schools and I don’t know anywhere where that’s not happening...I don’t think that one district in this country is doing work to end racism and classism for kids of color and kids who are poor” (Leah, personal communication, August 17, 2017).

Jorge echoed Leah’s sentiments when asked what he considered to be the most pressing issue for Philly schools. For Jorge, not only were economic and racial

stratification important elements, they were the essential context that needed to be addressed in grassroots work. As he explained,

The seminal issue is segregation and racial inequality, which, means class inequality as well, but in our concrete conditions that takes a racial form... And I think any attempt to take up education reform divorced from that context inevitably is going to fail. (Jorge, personal communication, July 12, 2017)

Thus, just as the teachers' organizing sought to tackle the problem of privatized governance, their work also centered consistently on economic inequality and racialized stratification. On a city and nationwide level, the DSA campaign for Medicare for All was a clear example of organizing contextualized by economic and racial inequality, in this instance, by focusing on how these issues prefaced citizens' access to health care (Sohn, 2017). Likewise, the OCOS and SGS campaigns were created in direct response to the classed and raced consequences of neoliberal education reform within the city.

Yet it was the organizing that took place around the 2018 Black Lives Matter Week of Action that centered the intersection of economic inequality and racialized stratification most acutely. As expressed by the key organizer of the campaign, Isaac, the interconnectedness of racism and economic inequity was clear for city schools. He noted that "even though Pennsylvania isn't the lowest in state funding for education, Pennsylvania one of the lowest in the way education funding is equitably distributed. Philadelphia gets the short end...it's looked at as a metaphorical "black hole," if not literally to some people's minds" (Isaac, personal communication, July 25, 2017).

For the organizers of the 2018 Black Lives Matter Week of Action the state of Philly schools was consistently connected to the city's population of poor students of color in the context of race and class inequality. Subsequently, the demands set out by



the week were constructed to *affirm* the lives and humanity of the black students within the Philadelphia school system. Organizers focused their curricula, their events, and their grassroots work around the goals of 1) eliminating zero tolerance policies and replacing them with restorative practices, 2) mandating Black history and Ethnic studies in all Philadelphia schools, and 3) hiring more Black teachers to support and develop a student body taught largely by white women.

In addition to these goals, the approach the organizers took to enacting the week contested the highly unequal racialized context of the city and district. Events were held in and supplies were purchased from black owned businesses throughout the city. Parents, students, teachers, and community members of color facilitated the activities of the week. Likewise, the planning of activities was conducted with the expressed norm of prioritizing the voices of young people of color, the students of the district who bore the brunt of the city's raced and classed context.

While the activism following the 2018 Black Lives Matter Week of Action fell outside of the scope of this project, the organizing taken up by the teachers for this campaign highlighted the ways in which the neoliberal context of the city and district informed their work on the ground. Much like the efforts of the OCOS and SGS campaigns, the Week of Action subverted the structural reality of economic inequality and racialized stratification. By not only fighting *against* such forces, but embodying a radical alternative to the neoliberal reality in their work, the teachers of this study showcased how organizers everywhere can turn deep structural "limits" into opportunities for grassroots organizing.

## Chapter 7

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

With educators across the country increasingly participating in bottom-up movements seeking more equitable and just visions of education reform, the purpose of this investigation was to explore *why*, *how*, and *in what contexts* a group of ten Philadelphia teachers engaged in grassroots organizing. A multi-method qualitative inquiry explored not only the teachers' motivations and actions but also the neoliberal environment in which they were operating. Between June of 2017 and February of 2018, I conducted semi-structured narrative-based interviews with participants, engaged in a process of observant participation in their organizing efforts, and conducted a place-specific contextual analysis of the city and school district of Philadelphia. This research shed light on the teachers' engagement with the hopeful purpose of providing educators elsewhere with critical insight for taking up similar participation in their own contexts.

In this chapter I will discuss the key findings that emerged from each of the research questions as well as their implications to the field. To conclude, I will reflect on the limitations and challenges of this project, making recommendations for future research on this topic.

#### **7.1 The Personal, the Relational, and the Professional: Influences on Teachers' Engagement in Grassroots Organizing**

One of the first questions that drove me to this project was *why*, in addition to all of the work that teachers are responsible for, would so many educators be

increasingly engaging in grassroots organizing. While the professional and economic factors were somewhat obvious, teachers have been low paid (Balingit, 2018), deprofessionalized (Wills & Sandholtz, 2009; Giroux, 1988), surveilled (Webb, Briscoe, & Mussman, 2009) and made to work under untenable conditions (Laker, Ruderman, & Purcell, 2018), more deeply exploring why they organize *at the grassroots* (as opposed to say, the ballot box) held important insight for supporting and inspiring grassroots work in this critical moment. Analyzing the data collected from the narrative interviews with the educators highlighted several important findings with significant implications for the field of education and its various stakeholders.

### **7.1.1 The Personal**

As a teacher educator, I would first like to draw attention to the incredible promise and responsibility that educational experiences held for directing the participants toward grassroots work. Whether it was through direct integration of justice-oriented content into the curriculum or the structuring of deep, experiential learning experiences around community work, the participants consistently recounted aspects of their schooling that informed their engagement in grassroots organizing. As noted in Chapter 4, teachers like Zack and Leah articulated specific curricular decisions made by schools and teachers as factors in their commitment to justice and social transformation. Likewise, Chris and Samantha provided detailed narratives recounting justice-oriented experiential learning as meaningful in their commitment to grassroots organizing.

Even under Isaac's self-described traumatic racialized educational experiences, there was still the opportunity for an educator to open the door to a vision of social change instead of social defeat. For Isaac, this was a librarian providing him with the

*Autobiography of Malcolm X*, but for students everywhere, the teachers' narratives highlight the promise and responsibility that educators hold for structuring educational experiences that open up possibilities for students to become active agents in their learning and their lives.

### **7.1.2 The Relational**

In addition to the educational motivations, the participants also expressed forming relationships and building social connections as important factors in their engagement in grassroots work. Adding to the emerging research detailing the social, emotional, and professional possibilities for grassroots groups to support educators (Riley & Solic, 2017; Stern & Brown, 2016; Picower, 2012), the teachers of this inquiry similarly discussed their motivation to connect with other teachers who shared similar values and commitments. Teachers like Marisa, Chris, Jorge, and Peter described their participation in grassroots work as being driven by a desire to find “camaraderie” (Jorge, personal communication, September 12, 2017) and professional support (Peter, personal communication, August 30, 2017).

This project, however, also extended such findings by exploring the connection between relationship building and the expressed goals of grassroots organizing. More than just providing relational socio-emotional and professional support, the teachers articulated being motivated to engage in grassroots organizing *because* it centered on building relationships in service of expanding power for tangible change. Teachers like Isaac, Leah, and Zack noted the relationship-driven foundation of grassroots organizing as meaningful in their motivation for engagement in WE, the justice-oriented, grassroots caucus within the PFT. Instead of simply participating in the traditional top-down structure of the union, they noted choosing to participate in the

community focused organizing work taken up by WE, which prioritized building relationships to affect change.

With these findings in mind, continuing research into why educators engage in grassroots organizing must extend its focus beyond the internal motivations of the educators and look also to the structures of grassroots organizations, their goals, their strategies, and how they, as outliers in an organizationally top-down world, might drive educators' engagement in grassroots work.

### **7.1.3 The Professional**

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## **7.2 Embodied Praxis in Service of Grassroots Organizing**

Hoping to provide the field with insight into the actual activity of grassroots organizing, the second question this project centered on was an exploration of *how* the teachers engaged in grassroots organizing. Throughout my analysis of the tangible steps the teachers of this study took in their work, I found the teachers to be embodying the two founding elements of Freire's (1970) definition of praxis: "*reflection* and *action* upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 70). Categorizing my participation in key activities as based in reflection and learning or taking action and seeking change, I found how deeply these dual elements worked to actualize Jane McAlevey's (2016) organizing model. Whether centering on reflection or action, the activities structured by the teachers served the goals of 1) continually expanding the base, 2) situating people as central actors, and 3) developing organic leaders.

Reflective events and activities like reading groups, night schools, and even strategy meetings provided engaged members with an outlet to learn and reflect

together, building a collective analysis that would shape their campaigns moving forward. This was observed both in my engagement with campaigns like the Our City Our Schools Coalition's work to abolish the SRC, but also in the narratives of the teachers who often noted the essential role that these reflective activities played in informing their strategies. As highlighted in Chapter 5, teachers like Isaac, Chris, Leah, Zack, and Peter all identified events centering on learning and reflection as important catalysts that informed their organizing.

These reflective activities also played an important role in generating relationships that were developed on a foundation of shared understandings and goals. This communal process of learning and reflection brought individuals into grassroots work by providing them with an outlet that was counter to the top-down environments of the district and placed trusted organic leaders at the forefront in directing change. Teachers like Isaac, for example, were initiated into their organizations through their engagement in reflective activities like the Caucus of Working Educators' Summer Reading Series. After his initial participation in the book groups, Isaac became a core organizer, taking on important leadership positions within WE and directing campaigns that were informed by the learning he and others had shared.

The events and activities centered on actions also supported the teachers' work in living up to McAlevey's (2016) key aspects of grassroots organizing. By focusing on community events that increased visibility, articulated a clear mission, and provided potential participants with specific strategies for acting, the teachers of this study were able to successfully expand the base of members, center people as primary actors, and develop organic leaders. As highlighted in Chapter 5, direct actions such as the Black Lives Matter Week of Action and Medicare for All canvassing were

concrete grassroots engagements that brought in new membership. During my fieldwork I was privy to first hand observation of individuals joining WE and the DSA after active engagement in the two actions. Similarly, by centering people as primary actors in both the Black Lives Matter organizing and the Medicare for All canvassing, participants were provided with opportunities to develop their skills as organic leaders.

Often informed by their previous learning and reflection, the action-based campaigns of the teachers prioritized the key elements of grassroots organizing (McAlevey, 2018) and saw tangible outcomes as a result. Whether it was fending off harsh outcomes from the SGS or the abolishing of the SRC, the teachers embodied embodied the ongoing process of praxis, reflection and action in order to transform the world. Thus, for educators, teacher-educators, and educational scholars who similarly hope to work toward tangible social change, the various strategies centered on reflection and action detailed in Chapter 5 provide an important blueprint that could be adapted to their own unique contexts.

### **7.3 Working and Subverting in the Neoliberal City**

Beyond documenting the motivations and activities that characterized the teachers' engagement in grassroots organizing, this project situated their work within the unique context of the city and School District of Philadelphia. Informed by Massey's (1994) conceptualization of an "accumulated history" of place, this study detailed the aspects of the structural neoliberal project that most acutely contextualized the teachers' engagement in grassroots work, more specifically, top-down "privatized" governance, economic inequality, and racialized stratification. This contextual analysis displayed the ways in which the neoliberalization of the city and district interlaced



with the neoliberal project more generally, laying out the principles of neoliberal ideology and their Philadelphia specific manifestations.

Beyond this, however, connections between this context and the teachers organizing were discussed, highlighting the ways in which this reality informed what campaigns the teachers took up. In an environment of top-down privatized governance, the teachers organized against the SGS decisions and the SRC. Within the context of economic and racial inequality, the teachers organized for universal health care and an affirmation of black lives in the school system. These connections highlight an intuitive, but often ignored truism in change-seeking movements; in order to be expansive and successful, they must be grounded in the unique and immediate needs of the people. As highlighted in Chapter 6, the campaigns directed by the teachers of this study were informed by what they articulated in their interviews as the most pressing issues within the city and district: top-down governance, economic inequality, and racial stratification.

This analysis of the neoliberal context and the teacher's organizing also highlighted the ways in which the neoliberal atmosphere of the city and district informed how the teachers engaged in their campaigns. What was particularly meaningful about this finding was the ways in which the teachers' grassroots organizing *subverted* the neoliberal context within the city. Where the neoliberal governance was top-down and privatized, the grassroots governance was bottom-up and public. In the campaign to abolish the SRC, for example, the teachers engaged in a city-wide coalition joining a wide range of community organizations in proclaiming the democratically minded statement that it is "our city, our schools." Similarly, the teacher-led organizing around the System of Great Schools (SGS) decisions operated

as a clear foil to the privatized governance of the district. Teachers spent hours of their time engaging in one-on-one community building to influence the SGS process.

This subversion of the neoliberal context was also evident as the teachers took up organizing work that stood in direct contrast to the economic and racial inequality that characterizes market-based reforms. The approach organizers took to enacting the Black Lives Matter Week of Action, for example, directly contested the highly unequal economic and racialized context of the city and district. Parents, students, teachers, and community members of color were the driving organizers and facilitators of the week with the expressed intent to prioritize the voices of those most impacted by the city's and district's raced and classed context. With the Black Lives Matter Week of Action seeing substantial increases in participation both in Philadelphia and nationally, this approach is something that clearly resonates with large pockets of practicing teachers. Engaging in organizing that directly subverts the neoliberal environment, I argue, provides an important advantage to this and other campaigns, as it offers up a genuine alternative to the status quo.

#### **7.4 Implications**

The findings discussed above hold important implications for the field of education, particularly for educators, teacher-educators, and educational researchers that support a vision of the profession that extends beyond the classroom and into the world of generating positive social change. In this section I would like to highlight the specific implications and recommendations for these parties that were derived from this investigation.

The exploration of the teachers' motivations for engaging in grassroots work suggests that educators at all levels have a unique opportunity to support their students

in becoming transformative social actors. As highlighted in Chapter 4, the teachers of this inquiry consistently noted the role of their educational experiences in sparking their interest in and commitment to grassroots work. More specifically, the inclusion of justice-oriented content and the construction of community driven, experiential learning were two clear pedagogical practices identified by the teachers as factors in their engagement. Where I believe this finding holds the most important implications is in the field of teacher-education.

Teacher education programs have been increasingly aligning their mission with visions of social justice, yet often provide muddy definitions of the concept and minimal guidance on how to work for change (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Picower, 2012). In this environment, it is imperative that teacher educators more thoroughly support future teachers in developing not merely the professional understandings, but also the professional skills necessary to uphold this justice-oriented mission. The findings of this study indicate that clear justice-oriented curricula and active experiential learning within grassroots communities can aid teacher-educators in accomplishing this. Thus, programs like the one detailed by Riley and Solic (2017), which introduced a cohort of pre-service teachers to a group of teacher-activists, can provide teacher-educators with a helpful blueprint for structuring effective justice-oriented teacher preparation.

Additionally, preparation that directs pre-service teachers toward active engagement in grassroots communities could also provide an essential source of professional development and support for future teachers. As detailed in Chapter 4, a full nine out of the ten participants of this inquiry noted the importance of building supportive relationships in their rationale for engaging in their organizations. Similarly, the teachers frequently articulated the importance of grassroots organizing

in their growth as practicing educators. Whether it was connecting with likeminded teachers, sharing curricular resources or developing skills that translated into the classroom, the findings of this study highlighted the articulated benefits of teachers' engagement in grassroots work. As teachers in the neoliberal era leave the profession at alarming rates (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), connecting *pre-service* teachers with grassroots groups could be a critical inoculation against the professional malaise that pushes educators out (Rubin, 2011; Smith & Kovacs, 2011; Stern & Brown, 2016).

In addition to the implications of this project for teacher educators, I would also like to highlight the implications of this project for teachers' unions. The stark differences between the grassroots model utilized by the participants and the top-down model utilized by modern teachers' unions became increasingly obvious throughout the course of this inquiry. While this investigation did not set out to evaluate the practices of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) or other unions (i.e. my union, APSCUF), the teachers' engagement in grassroots organizing, as well as my own, was inevitably contrasted with our engagement in the existing structures of our bargaining units.

The grassroots strategies discussed in this dissertation can provide important lessons for today's teachers' unions, particularly as educators across the country engage in "wildcat" strikes and protests directed by rank-and-file members (DiMaggio & Furman, 2018; McAlevy, 2018), and create social justice caucuses that seek to unseat existing leadership and democratize teachers' unions (Gunderson, 2015). The organizing detailed in Chapters 4-6 showcases the ways in which the teachers of this inquiry effectively expanded their base, centered people as primary actors, and

developed organic leaders. Through activities that provided educators with spaces to learn, reflect, *and* directly engage in seeking change, the teachers of this inquiry exhibited a genuinely “bottom-up” or grassroots commitment to leadership that continually brought in membership, expanding their power and influence.

Things like reading groups, night schools, and reflective events were paired with meaningful and sustained campaigns (e.g. abolish the SRC, Black Lives Matter Week of Action, etc.), drawing rank-and-file members into the leadership structure of the organizations. With educators across the country engaging in grassroots work, this bottom-up approach to leadership appears to be uniquely appealing to 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers, particularly those most impacted by the neoliberal project in education. Subsequently, I argue that such grassroots approaches to leadership should inform the modern teachers’ unions that continue to operate under the more traditional models that the prioritize professional staff over the rank-and-file membership.

In addition to the implications of this work for teacher-educators and teachers’ unions, I argue that this project holds important insight for the growing number of teacher-organizers throughout the United States. As noted by Picower (2012), teachers that want to engage in grassroots approaches to seeking change often struggle to find clear models of collective action. I contend that the exploration of *how* the teachers of this study engaged in grassroots organizing can provide these teachers with tangible strategies that they adapt to their own unique contexts. More specifically, I would argue that the centering of activities that embody the dual aspects of praxis (e.g. the activities detailed in Chapter 5) sets up a solid foundation for the creation of social movements that live up to Jane McAlevey’s (2016) model of grassroots organizing.

By reflecting and acting collectively, as the teachers of this study did, educators across the country can build organizations that generate genuine social change.

Lastly, I believe the contextual analysis provided herein holds important implications for educators engaging or seeking to engage in grassroots organizing in their own locales. As noted by Lipman (2011), while the neoliberal project is global in scale it has frequently manifested in “locally specific ways” (p. 158). Thus, it is imperative for readers to understand the commonality of structural trends like neoliberalism, but also the importance of applying them to their own unique local contexts. This task, I argue, is essential in the development of grassroots activity that is grounded in the organic construction of a power-structure analysis by the collection of people that will serve as the ever-expanding base of the movement. As highlighted in Chapter 6, the teachers of this study organized campaigns that directly addressed the top down governance, economic inequality and racialized stratification that colored the neoliberal project in the city of Philadelphia. Whether it was the OCOS campaign to abolish the SRC, the DSA campaign for Medicare for All, or WE’s Black Lives Matter Week of Action, the educators’ grassroots work was grounded in the immediate contexts in which they operated. Additionally, however, the findings of Chapter 6 highlight the ways in which a clear and direct *subversion* of locally specific neoliberal consequences (e.g. privatized governance or racialized stratification) within the strategies of grassroots campaigns can be an important asset to garnering tangible wins.

## **7.5 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The first limitation I would like to note is the breadth of this study’s design. Seeking to gain an initial snapshot of why, how, and in what contexts teachers

engaged in grassroots organizing in Philadelphia, this project reached into several different organizations (seven in total) when soliciting participation. Even after narrowing to focus more deeply with four educators, the project was still spread out over four organizations, four distinct campaigns, and a wide variety of events. While this more generalized approach provided important insight across participants and organizations, it limited the depth by which the questions could be explored. I believe that a more focused project, investigating a specific campaign or a particular organization could provide more thorough insight into why, how, and in what contexts teachers engage in grassroots organizing.

Additionally, future research should seek to investigate this growing population of teachers across contexts, particularly those contexts that are quite different from Philadelphia. As teachers take up grassroots work in rural and suburban areas and even in traditionally “red” states like West Virginia, Arizona, and Oklahoma, researchers should take care to explore the potentially unique motivations, strategies, and limits of their grassroots work. In brief, I recommend that future investigations take up in-depth ethnographies of the many different groups of teachers engaging in grassroots organizing across the country.

My review of the historical literature revealed insufficient documentation of the on-the-ground activity of teachers who completed essential work in past social movements. At this critical junction, with educators across the United States organically generating their own grassroots communities for seeking change, educational researchers must act quickly in studying this trend and studying it thoroughly. The field needs this documentation now and will continue to need it in future.

In addition to this methodological limitation, I would also like to highlight an important analytical limitation of this inquiry. This dissertation was situated in the conceptualization of neoliberalism as the defining framework for understanding life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a conceptualization, while widely utilized in socio-cultural research in the field of education, is but one framework that could provide critical insight into the work of these teachers. Neoliberalism, as a concept, centers on the economic underpinnings of the political moment, often prioritizing class analyses over analyses informed by critical perspectives on race (Picower & Mayorga, 2015). While I took care to note the intensely racialized shape that neoliberalism takes in the context of the United States and Philadelphia (Lipman, 2011; Pedroni, 2011; Picower & Mayorga, 2015), a more overt critical race analysis would yield important findings with regard to the work of these teachers. Subsequently, I argue that future research should seek to explore teachers' engagement in grassroots work through a variety of critical frameworks that center on the many impactful social structures of our modern context (i.e. racism, white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, and ableism, among others).

## **7.6 Conclusion**

The system of education in the United States has undergone a tremendous shift in its mission. As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, what we consider to be encompassed in “the public good” is shrinking exponentially, leading to dramatic consequences for teachers, students, and school communities. In this environment, however, educators are increasingly pushing back against the neoliberal pendulum swing that has continually sought to reshape education in the image of the market. The findings of this study reveal important insights into the motivations, work, and contexts of teachers engaging in grassroots organizing for change.



In the preface of this dissertation I shared my observations and reflections on the very first meeting I attended for this project. It highlighted the frustration, exasperation, but also the drive and passion within the Philadelphia community to strive toward a different vision of education in the city, a vision of collectivity, community schools, and stability. In that moment I never imagined that a reality could exist outside the neoliberal environment, but the teachers of this study changed that. The findings and analysis contained in this project hold important implications for educators and educational researchers in all walks of life, but what I argue this project contains most is evidence of the possibility for change. It is my sincerest wish that readers will look to the discussions situated throughout this dissertation and utilize them to inform their own work with sustained hope.

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## **Appendix A**

### **INTERVIEW ONE SEMI-STRUCTURED PROTOCOL**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself or your background?
  - a. Are you from Philadelphia?
  - b. Where do you teach? What age group? What subjects?
  - c. How long have you been in your current position?
  - d. How long have you been teaching overall?
  - e. Have you held any other positions? What positions and where?
  - f. How do you identify racially/ethnically?
  - g. Which pronouns do you prefer? How do you identify on the gender spectrum?
  - h. What would you say is your class background? Growing up vs now?
2. When did you decide to be a teacher? Why did you decide to be a teacher?
3. Would you identify yourself as a social justice educator? Why or why not?
4. When did you realize you cared about issues of justice? What sparked that concern? Was there a certain situation or experience that sparked that concern?  
What motivates you to continue to care about justice issues?
  - a. Life experience? (Situation, event, family member, friend, that shaped view on social justice)

- b. Identity experience? (Treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality that shaped view on social justice)
  - c. Schooling experience? (Teacher, teacher education program, content, activity, that shaped view on social justice)
  - d. Political experience? (Political situation, event, context that shaped view on social justice)
  - e. Professional development? (Career learning situation that shaped view on social justice)
  - f. Professional context? (Situation of teaching at your school/in your district/under a policy that shaped view on social justice)
  - g. Co-worker? Administrator? (Colleague that shaped view on social justice)
5. When did you get involved with (insert name of grassroots organization)? How did you get involved with (insert name of grassroots organization)?
6. Why (insert name of grassroots organization)? What about (insert name of grassroots organization) do you think is important?
7. What do you think are some of the most pressing issues for social justice today?
- a. What do you think are some of the most pressing issues for Philadelphia?
  - b. What do you think are some of the most pressing issues for your school/Philadelphia schools?



8. What does social justice mean to you?
9. What does social justice in education mean to you?
  - a. What would a socially just classroom look like/feel like/sound like?  
What would the teacher be doing? What would students be doing?
  - b. What would a socially just school system look like for you?

## **Appendix B**

### **INTERVIEW TWO SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. Do you think these beliefs impact/influence how you approach teaching in your classroom? If so, how?
2. What does social justice in education mean to you?
  - a. What would a socially just classroom look like/feel like/sound like?  
  
What would the teacher be doing? What would students be doing?
  - b. What would a socially just school system look like for you?
3. What is the role of the teacher in social justice education? What are some qualities that are crucial for a social justice educator to be successful?
4. Why social justice in education?
5. Can you tell me about a time when you were especially proud of a classroom lesson/activity/discussion with regards upholding your view of social justice?
  - a. What about this situation was successful?
  - b. Did you plan/come up with this experience or did it just happen? If you planned it, how?
  - c. What did your students think of that lesson/activity/discussion? What were their responses/reactions?
6. When did you start this kind of teaching?
  - a. Has it always been part of your practice?

- b. How did it become part of your practice? Teacher education program? Colleague? Personal learning or experience?
  - c. Did you begin this teaching before or after joining (insert name of grassroots organization)?
- 7. Have you ever experienced any challenges with this kind of teaching? Tell me about a challenge you experienced.
- 8. Has your engagement in (insert name of grassroots organization) impacted your teaching? If so, how?
  - a. Has it supported your teaching? If so, how?
  - b. Has it distracted from your teaching? If so, how?
- 9. Can you tell me about the most recent (insert name of grassroots organization) event you participated in?
  - a. Where was it? Who was there? What was the purpose of the event?
  - b. Did you think this event was successful? Why/why not?
  - c. Did it have any impact on your teaching?
  - d. How did participating in this connect with your identity as a social justice educator?
- 10. Can you tell me about the most successful/powerful/meaningful event you've been a part of?
  - a. Where was it? Who was involved? What was the purpose of the event?
  - b. What about this event was successful/powerful/meaningful?
- 11. How/why did this event come together? How/why was this event organized?
  - a. What motivated (insert name of grassroots organization) to create this event?
  - b. How long did the planning take?
  - c. How many people were involved? How did you get others involved?
  - d. What was your role?

- e. Did you run into any problems/challenges? How did you overcome those problems/challenges?

## **Appendix C**

### **INTERVIEW THREE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

The following questions will drive the discussion about the events attended by the principal investigator for participant observations. Because each event was unique, these are semi-structured questions and relevant additions were added to tailor the interview to the participant and the specific event.

1. Can you explain the purpose of this event?
  - a. Why did (insert name of grassroots organization) organize this event?
2. How did the come together? How was it organized?
  - a. Who was involved in the organizing?
  - b. How long did the planning take?
  - c. How many people were involved? How did you get others involved?
  - d. What was your role?
  - e. Did you run into any problems/challenges? How did you overcome those problems/challenges?
3. Can you tell me about a meaningful interaction or conversation you had at this event?
4. How does this event align with your perspective of social justice or social justice in education?
5. Share experiences of the principal investigator and ask questions about participant's perspective on those experiences.

6. Why do you engage in events like this? What do these events bring to your life (personally, professionally)?

## **Appendix D**

### **INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

**Title of Project:** Experiences of Social Justice Educators in Philadelphia

**Principal Investigator:** Dana Morrison Simone

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form tells you about the study including: its purpose, what you will be asked to do if you decide to take part, and the risks and benefits of being in the study. Please read the information below and ask me any questions you may have before you decide whether or not you agree to participate.

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences of social justice educators actively engaged in grassroots organizations in the city of Philadelphia.

#### **WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you (along with 10-12 other educators) will engage in an initial interview. From here, 4-6 educators will be asked to participate in a more in-depth, one-on-one process. If you are one of these 4-6 educators, you will be asked to take part in a) three follow up interviews, b) a photo-journal activity, c) and two observations.

- a) The interviews will be one-on-one interviews that last approximately 45-60 minutes. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded for accuracy, although your identity will remain confidential. These recordings

would only be available to the principal investigator until they can be transcribed. After transcription, the audio recordings will be destroyed.

- b) The photo-journal activity will ask you to take a collection of photographs over the course of the research project that represent what being a member in teacher-led organizations means to you. You will then select 5 photographs to write a brief description about. These five photographs will be reflected on in one of the aforementioned interviews.
- c) The observations will take place at meetings or events hosted by your organization(s). I will take detailed field notes at these meetings or events and our shared experiences will be reflected on in one of the aforementioned interviews.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

I do not expect your participation in this study will expose you to any risks different from those you would encounter in daily life.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS?**

Potential benefits include: expanding the network of your organization(s) and informing the larger educational community. By exploring the lives of social justice educators, current and future teachers from a wide range of contexts could gain important insight on how to successfully engage in social justice work.

#### **HOW WILL CONFIDENTIALITY BE MAINTAINED? WHO MAY KNOW THAT YOU PARTICIPATED IN THIS RESEARCH?**

Your name will not be used or mentioned in any report. Similarly, the name of your school will not be used or mentioned in any report. Pseudonyms for both your name and the name of your school will be used in all data collection and data analysis, as well as in all subsequent publications and presentations.



With regards to your organization, however, you will have the freedom to determine whether you would prefer 1) that your organization's actual name be used in subsequent publications and presentations or 2) that your organization's name should be replaced with a pseudonym in all subsequent publications and presentations.

The research generated from this study will be shared with other educators and researchers at academic conferences or in scholarly journals. Information that would identify you or any individual will never be shared. All notes and printed materials will be stored on a secured server accessible only to the principal investigator.

The confidentiality of your records will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your research records may be viewed by the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board, which is a committee formally designated to approve, monitor, and review biomedical and behavioral research involving humans. Records relating to this research will be kept for at least three years after the research study has been completed.

**WILL THERE BE ANY COSTS TO YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH?**

There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

**WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION?**

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Taking part in this research study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to participate in this research. If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. If, at any time, you decide to end your participation in this research study, please contact the principal investigator, Dana Morrison Simone, at [DMSimone@udel.edu](mailto:DMSimone@udel.edu) or (484) 802-5952.

**WHO SHOULD YOU CALL IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?**

If, at any time, you have questions or concerns about the research or your participation, please contact the principal investigator, Dana Morrison Simone, at [DMSimone@udel.edu](mailto:DMSimone@udel.edu) or (484) 802-5952.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board at [hsrb-research@udel.edu](mailto:hsrb-research@udel.edu) or (302) 831-2137.

**Your signature on this form means that: 1) you are at least 18 years old; 2) you have read and understand the information given in this form; 3) you have asked any questions you have about the research and the questions have been answered to your satisfaction; and 4) you accept the terms in the form and volunteer to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

**Please sign your initials next to the option that describes your preference for reporting the name of your organization:**

I would prefer the name of my organization to be used in reporting \_\_\_\_\_

I would prefer that a pseudonym for my organization be used in reporting \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent  
(PRINTED NAME)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent  
(SIGNATURE)

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**Appendix E**  
**APPROVAL LETTER**



RESEARCH OFFICE

210 Hulihan Hall  
University of Delaware  
Newark, Delaware 19716-1551  
Ph: 302/831-2136  
Fax: 302/831-2828

DATE: June 6, 2017

TO: Dana Morrison Simone  
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [1066324-1] Experiences of Social Justice Educators in Philadelphia

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: June 6, 2017  
EXPIRATION DATE: June 5, 2018  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # (6,7)

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.

Based on the risks, this project requires Continuing Review by this office on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure.