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The State of Teaching in Urban Settings and The Importance of Teaching Unions

At the start of my research project, I had decided that I wanted to learn the role of unions within urban education. The question was something that I had personal connection with as I want to become a teacher in an urban school. I was also drawn to this topic because I have a sister that is working for the Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (ChiACTS) as an organizer. As I continued with my research, I grew an understanding of just how difficult it is for teachers and students in these environments. My initial essential question has since changed from learning the role of unions within urban education but rather concentrated more on the importance of teacher unions in these areas. I took time to learn about the difficulties teachers face and why these difficulties arise. Taking these findings, I applied to my own time working at a local neighborhood school in Philadelphia as part of my service learning experience. After learning about and experiencing urban education for myself, I conducted phone interviews with current teachers from Chicago, to gain insight on their working difficulties and opinions on unions. Synthesizing what I learned from articles, interviews, and from my own personal experience, I was able to develop a strong understanding on the importance of teaching unions in urban communities.

Literature Review

In areas like Philadelphia and Chicago, there is a large disparity of wealth between those within the city compared to those who live just outside the suburbs. The origins of this disparity are discussed by Cucchiara (2013) as a great exodus of the middle class creating a “dual city”. With Philadelphia there was a ten percent drop in population from 1980 to 2000 due to the decline of manufacturing jobs in the city and the surplus of new jobs in the surrounding suburbs (Cucchiara 2013). Other cities had seen decreases as well. Washington D.C also loss ten percent of their population, while Cleveland and Baltimore lost sixteen and seventeen percent respectively, Detroit had the largest decrease in population with over twenty percent (Cucchiara 2013). Today in these areas of poverty, there seems to be a significant lack of funding when compared to these better off suburban areas. In a different chapter of Cucchiara’s work (2013), it is stated that Philadelphia’s total spending as of the 2004-2005 academic year was approximately $9,299 per pupil. However in surrounding areas it was recorded that school districts spent as much as $13000 or $14000 per pupil; there was even one recorded to have spent over $17000 per pupil which is almost as much as double the amount Philadelphia can afford to spend (Cucchiara

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This problem arises because of how state funding is set up for the schools. Each school is given a certain amount of money by the federal government, but the rest money comes from state taxes, which is collected through property tax. Since there is more money in the suburbs, the schools are able to spend more on their students. This unfortunately makes schools in urban areas often under resourced and creates a more challenging learning and teaching environment for those who attend.

A lack of funding comes at the expense of the staffs who work in schools, which ultimately affects the students attending. With less money comes less staff and resources. Less staff and resources create an even more unstable learning environment which makes it more difficult for urban students to succeed. If urban students cannot succeed, it is there school that suffers with the treat of closure. In Daniel Denvir’s (2014) article, he mentions how

In 2013–14, the School District of Philadelphia had 6,321 fewer staff than it did at the end of 2011, according to district figures—a decrease of nearly 27 percent. The reduction included 2,723 fewer teachers, fifty-eight nurses, 406 counselors, 286 secretaries and 411 noon-time aides. The year began with a single counselor assigned to nearly 3,000 students (some counselors were rehired mid-year).

These are obviously improper numbers for a productive learning experience. However even though the evidence is prevalent that it is funding that is hurting urban schools, there is a belief called neoliberalism that has assumed that it is underqualified teachers who are at fault for the state of urban education. This mentality believes that schools can be run like a business. Neoliberalism is not confined to just one party; this belief is seen in both conservatives and liberals. In neoliberalism, teacher unions act against the interest of students because they protect bad teachers. This ultimately would put the blame on the teachers and students rather than the government or others who are responsible for the lack of funding that schools receive. Those who support this belief have invested in charter schools. They believe that charter schools, as an alternative, will close out poor preforming schools. Charter schools run at their own discretion, not having to abide to certain requirements public schools do. These schools do not have to have a union and often rely on Teach For America (neighborhood schools also have TFA teachers but do not rely on them as much). TFA teachers are often not equip for teaching, as they are only given a few weeks of training compared to teachers who have gone through undergraduate and graduate school to earn a degree in education. According to Valeria Strauss (2013), a major problem with TFA is that

Eighty percent of Teach for America teachers quit after two years, many of them headed for careers in law or business. Presumably those who sign on care for children, at least in
the abstract, but these cosmopolitans have been parachuted into a community about which they know nothing.

TFA teachers are not the enemy; they are often people who care a lot about others but are just not properly trained and prepared to teach in these improvised and difficult settings. They do not offer the consistency and community that these students need from their education. TFA also makes it difficult for charter schools to unionize, as they make up a near never ending pool of new candidates that can easily replace teachers. Diane Ravitch (2007) believes that

The union is thus necessary as a protection for teachers against the arbitrary exercise of power by heavy-handed administrators. In our school systems, as in our city, state, and federal governments, we need checks and balances. Just as the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government all act as checks on each other, we need checks and balances in our school systems.

Teachers can act as an extension and a voice for their students. Those who are experiencing the struggles from an educational system that has been set up to fail should have a say in what they need to succeed. Teachers and students have the experience and knowledge firsthand to know what they need to succeed. Unions allow these opinions to be heard. The voice of unions should be heard louder than the voice of policy makers with no educational background.

**Personal Engagement**

For twelve weeks I was given the opportunity to volunteer weekly at a Smith Manor Memorial High School\(^1\). Smith Manor is located in North Philadelphia and was almost closed in 2013. As a school it was constantly on the list of persistently dangerous schools up until the 2014-2015 academic school year. I got to work with a selected group of individuals who were talking a college level course. In this time I got to witness the hardships urban students deal with, while learning about what these students find important in their neighborhood school.

While volunteering, students informed me about the current state of their education. There is definitely a lack of resources, which I was expecting based. They had no air conditioning, no heating for the winter, and leaks in the ceiling. One teacher, Ms. Samson\(^2\), informed me that they were heavily understaffed to start the year (A.Samson, Personal Communication, September 11\(^{th}\) 2015). They had lost at least fifteen teachers and had many

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\(^1\) This is a pseudonym for the school I attended.

\(^2\) This name is a pseudonym
current teachers covering for others. Classrooms were also over crowded. There were reports by
the students of at least two teachers, one gym teacher and one Chinese teacher, who showed up
for the first day and never returned. Since I was last at the school, which was in late November,

these classes still hadn’t found replacements. For the gym class, the students would go to
the auditorium and basically were given a free study hall to do work and socialize. Many
students displaced distress over this, as they just want to learn. Two classmates of mine and I had
given out surveys asking the students we worked with about their opinions. One question
included whether they felt they had a voice or not in their school. Not surprising to me, it was a
resounding no.

The students however felt that the school was important to their community. They
enjoyed various activities like football and youth court, where they got opportunities to be part of
communities within their school. This is a point one of the teachers I got to interview stressed
about. The importance of community based school activities. They had recently fought for a
student government and had their first election process this past fall. In my experience
volunteering at Smith Manor, I could say that the major problems were the lack of resources,
staff, consistency, and voice the students have, all of which unions could help gain or retain

Recently I got the chance to interview over the phone with two charter school teachers
and one union organizer from Chicago. One of the teachers, Nadia Polk\textsuperscript{3}, became an English
teacher at W.P Neal Academy\textsuperscript{4} through Teach For America (Nadia Polk, Personal
Communication, December 8th 2015). She is a second year junior teacher. Ms. Polk told me that
W.P Neal is about ninety six percent Latino and is in a similar range for the percentage of free
and reduced lunch. Ms. Polk mentioned how the hardest struggle at her school is the lack of
resources like books and other amenities. There was acknowledgment to how the funding is tied
to property taxes and how the poverty of her students also affects their ability to complete work
outside of the class. With this being said, her relationship with her students is fantastic, but the
relationship between their parents is almost nonexistent due to her inability to speak Spanish.
She continued to inform me that her relationship with the administration is even more strained.
Ms. Polk plans on continuing with her teaching career after her contract with Teach For America
is up and use her experience and position to help in advocacy for urban education reform, but
plans on moving to a different school because of her relationship with the administration. Her

\textsuperscript{3} This is a pseudonym.
\textsuperscript{4} This is a pseudonym for a charter school.

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biggest complaint is that her school is dealing with a stream of different things and are constantly being given a million different directions without clear expectations of what's expected of them or how to accomplish it (N.Polk, 2015). She claims her admin tends to be punitive and has a hard time understanding why teacher morale is so low. Even though she is a part of union, she says that she is not actively involved in it. She said that

the reason I'm not more involved is because the union president for my school is somewhat incompetent and, while I definitely get more days off than my friends at other schools, my school actually seems to be more of a mess than many schools without unions. While I do believe unions are important for protecting teachers, I actually think in my case, it's not even close to the biggest problem. Especially because the union hasn't made the situation much better. (N.Polk, 2015)

Personally I believe this mindset comes from the misconception that unions will make large and immediate change. The problem she has with her administration seems like then can be addressed through a union, but unfortunately she feels she has no voice and would rather leave. Union organizer Karen Strong⁵ has been a member of Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers for two and a half years (K. Strong, Personal Communication, December 10th 2015) and shares similar ideals to Diane Ravitch in that

When teachers are part of a union, they are able to sit across the table from their administration/management/CEOs, as equals to bargain over their working conditions. Teacher working conditions are student learning conditions, so unionized teachers, if they successfully work with the community, can be incredibly important and powerful allies for parents. When teachers have a union, they can no longer be fired at-will, and are less afraid to speak out when something is happening that is harmful to students. (K.Strong, 2015)

A central theme that I had discovered while taking to Ms. Strong was the ability to give not only teachers a voice, but voice to students and parent as equals. This idea of giving a voice by extension reappears in my interview with social studies teacher, Max Stanton⁶. Mr. Stanton is a third year teacher at Welliver Charter School⁷ and had served as his union’s senator for the

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⁵ This is a pseudonym
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⁷ This is a pseudonym for a charter school.
2014-2015 academic year (M. Stanton, Personal Communication, December 9th 2015). This is his first urban school he had worked at, as he previously worked in suburban schools in Nevada and Colorado. Even though he works for one, he dislikes the idea of private charter schools and neoliberalism. Mr. Stanton expressed him distain towards the administration at his school. The average stay at his school is about two years before they leave. He explained that many teachers leave by then because either their Teach For America contract is up or that the environment had become too difficult to teach any longer. If you were there for more than four years you were there for a long haul, considering that Welliver has only been open for nine years. A major problem he has with his administration is the fact that his principal is younger than him and has less educational experience then he does, which is nine total years teaching. The principal was a part of Teach For America and was given the job of assistant principal after his contract was up.

Within the year he was given the principal job after the last principal was fired. Mr. Stanton fears that the current principal has developed an affinity for Teach For America teachers who are similar to him, rather than better qualified applicants. He also fears that the current principal acts in the interest of his higher ups and often disregards his own teachers. This may be due to the lack of academic background he has, so he may have a lack of understanding what his teacher’s needs. Mr. Stanton emphasized the importance of having a voice in not only the school but the community as well. An interesting point that Mr. Stanton made was that he believes a big factor into the struggles of urban education is the fact that many families cannot afford preschool education. Many students are showing up behind and playing catch up from early age.

Another struggle that he feels that unions should concentrate more on is giving students more programs to be a part of. Whether that would be after school clubs and sports or music and art classes, Mr. Stanton is adamant to the idea that these programs are essential to the development on inner school community. Kids need to find their niche, something they are passionate about. Unions are important to Mr. Stanton because teachers have the experience and knowledge to help their students. It is the solution to the unequal power balance in urban education. According to Mr. Stanton, “unions are the answer to what is wrong with education. Education doesn’t need to be fixed; it needs to be done properly.” (M. Stanton, 2015).

Conclusion

Initially I believed that unions were important for teachers so that they can become tenured and job security. This security would help teachers stay at their schools, thus creating stability and community within urban schools. After my own investigation to the matter, my previous thoughts were true but I have since learned that unions are essential for not only giving teachers a voice, but also students and parents. Teachers are active members in their students’ lives.
Unions allow for the opportunity for student voices to be heard and have legitimate change come about that could improve the learning environment in these already hinder communities. They are a true equalizer in a system that has been set up to fail. It gives power to those who know education best, the teachers and the students.

Works Cited


