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From neoliberalism to structural racism: Problem framing in a teacher activist organization

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ABSTRACT

Philadelphia’s teacher-led activist group, the Caucus of Working Educators, has displayed shifts in how it frames the central problems facing public education since its emergence in 2014. Initially, the organization tended to advance the notion that neoliberalist discourses and values were primarily responsible for “education reform” effects, including underfunded schools and districts, shrinking public school districts, and the privatization of formerly public aspects and services of schooling. Over its first four years of life, however, the organization has increasingly integrated critiques of structural racism in how it frames such issues in public education. This article asks: How do teacher Caucus members employ neoliberalist and structural racism problem frames within their activist teacher organization? I show how members have increasingly centred racial justice concerns, and argue that organizational strategy concerns and the desire to push the organization to align more tightly with specific ethical concerns have driven this transformation process.

In December 2012, the Philadelphia School District superintendent announced plans to close 44 neighbourhood schools by the end of the 2012–2013 school year. Many students, teachers, parents, and community members were outraged and began banding together to try to stop this latest round of closures. Highly vocal rallies, protests, and general public outcry quickly ensued. By the end of the school year, the district had dropped a dozen or so schools from its list, but ultimately still closed 24 schools and relocated or merged five more (Saying goodbye, 2013). Most of these school closures were in neighbourhoods primarily populated by racial minorities and low-income families (Socolar, 2013). The Notebook, a Philadelphia newspaper dedicated to monitoring and documenting local public education news, reported: “Neighbourhoods, many anchored by the schools that were closed in June, were altered forever, leaving many families uncertain about what the future of public education in the city would look like” (Saying goodbye, 2013).

The Caucus of Working Educators (Caucus) formed less than a year later, in the early spring of 2014. This teacher activist organization immediately voiced its
dedication to organizing teacher resistance and protest of austerity budgets and inequitable funding patterns in Philadelphia public education. And, it began pushing the local teacher union, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, to take a stronger stand against market-based reform effects, including school closures, privatization measures, and inequitable resource distribution.

I became involved in the Caucus just one month after it formed as both an activist and researcher. Starting from my attendance at their first meeting, Caucus members warmly welcomed me into the organization. They invited me to join several committees and help organize events. I quickly took up activist roles and leadership responsibilities, including co-facilitating book club groups, organizing social events and happy hours, and I became active in a few committees. After several months of involvement, I began designing a series of research studies that would build knowledge about activist teachers’ sense-making activities while simultaneously benefiting the work of the Caucus. In this article, I draw upon my four years of membership and involvement in the organization and engage ethnographic and practitioner inquiry methodologies in the process.

This article explores how Caucus members go about triggering an ideological shift in their activist teacher organization. I examine how some members seek to develop deeper and more community-responsive critical problem framings of recent public education reform efforts. Here, problem framing refers to the process of assigning values to particular words and ideas, and the effort to prioritize such values over competing explanations for what the problem is and why it exists. Problem framing processes are important to identify and understand because problems imply solutions—in other words, how one presents a problem also implies what solutions should be sought. And, while problem frames may at times be unconscious, culturally inherited, and perhaps even fixed, I argue along with other scholars that there is also space for agency within such ideological perspectives (see Klatch, 2002; Lakoff, 2004; Polletta 2006; Williams, 2002).

In this article, I investigate how teacher activists purposefully transform the problem frame of their teacher organization over time. I assert that examining the influence of multiple paradigms on teachers’ grassroots organizational activities provides an opportunity to better understand how teachers’ collaborative intellectual work shapes their work and decisions in organizations. In a time of significant political tension over the design and structure of public education, this article provides education scholars and activist educators with insight into how teachers approach their collaborative intellectual work in social movement organizations, and how such work can shape the organization’s strategic and ethical approaches and capabilities.

Specifically, I seek to answer the question: How do teacher Caucus members employ neoliberalist and structural racism problem frames within their activist teacher organization? In so doing, I examine the ways in which some Caucus members push their organization to move past a focus on neoliberalism as the primary culprit facing public education, and toward an intertwined problem framing of both neoliberalism and structural racism as responsible for inequitable patterns in public schooling (see DeRuy, 2016; Editors of Rethinking Schools, 2015; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Weiner, 2012). I argue that these caucus members push for organizational transformation.
through two primary types of appeals: organizational strategy concerns, which focus on strengthening the strategic capacity of the organization to trigger desired change; and appeals to ethical positions and values, which focus on aligning the membership and work of the organization more tightly with a specific set of values.

Teacher Organizations and Problem Frame Transformation

Philadelphia’s Caucus of Working Educators is just one of many teacher activist organizations found in Philadelphia, and North America more broadly. Teacher activist organizations are groups of teachers that work to effect sociopolitical change within the field of education. They commonly strive to achieve this goal through developing teachers’ professional agency within and beyond schools (Quinn & Carl, 2015), although they vary in their primary focus. For example, some groups tend to primarily focus on curriculum development initiatives, others on pushing for enhanced grassroots approaches within existing professional organizations like unions, and still others on organized resistance to broader political trends and policies (see Bascia, 2009; Maton, 2016a, 2016b; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Stern & Brown, 2016; Uetricht, 2014; Weiner, 2012). Of course, such categories are not isolated and teacher activist organizations frequently span multiple areas of foci. However, they commonly seek to create opportunities for teachers to challenge broader educational and political structures and build a stronger sense of collective agency (Quinn & Carl, 2015; Picower, 2012).

In order to understand the sense-making work of teacher activist organizations, it is useful to conceptualize them as a form of social movement organization (SMO). Social movement theory scholars Snow and Soule (2010) define SMO as “a bounded entity of individuals who have come together because of a shared goal concerning one or more grievances” (p. 151). SMOs commonly identify a central problem, or grievance, and members use the organization as a political platform from which to attract new members and enhance the political efficacy of activist work. Members often share a common set of values and engage in processes of defining the nature and cause of such grievances within and through their collective work (Klatch, 2002; Snow & Soule, 2010). Activist organizations may thus be understood to exist at both the micro- and the meso-levels – they are composed of individual members who share a common perspective (micro), while acting as an organizational entity within the broader social movement field (meso). This article is primarily concerned with what happens on the micro-level, and examines how members engage in problem framing work as they seek to shape their broader organization.

Social movement theorists define frames as connotations surrounding particular words and ideas that carry a set of attached values. Such frames impact how people experience and interpret the world, and are frequently unconscious (Snow, 2012; Snow & Soule, 2010). Frames are significant because the way in which a problem is framed also implies the set of available solutions (Lakoff, 2004). Thus, conscious efforts at frame repositioning may perform a transformative function, through “reconstituting the way in which some objects of attention are seen or understood as relating to each other or to the actor” (Snow, 2012). To some extent, such frame repositioning is bounded by the conventions and experiences of local context and the past, including
socio-economic and cultural background; parental values; the broader political climate; the influence of teachers, social leaders, and media (Klatch, 2002; Williams, 2002). And yet, activists also agentively manipulate frames in order to reap particular desired outcomes or sets of results (Lakoff, 2004; Polletta, 2006; Snow, 2012). In other words, members have some agency in identifying what problems or grievances exist, their significance, and in pushing the organization to address or respond to such problems.

Through political education and struggle, activists may undergo micro-level processes of perspective transformation, where they adopt new perspectives on power relations, epistemologies, and social interests (Chovanec, 2009; Foley, 1999; Freire, 2004; for more on political education, see Stark & Maton, in press). Such intellectual processes may help to support the development of what Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) terms a “pedagogy of solidarity,” where through active and creative pedagogical processes, people come to better understand and relate with one another. Micro-level political learning can lead to shifts in problem framing within the broader organization, as activists develop and advance new perspectives and organizing approaches.

Over the past 70 years, American social movements have tended to organize around specific identity-based concerns. In the post-McCarthy era, the labour movement, for example, has tended to weed out antiracist radicals (Taylor, 2016), which has contributed to the strengthening of a primarily class-based frame. The black freedom movement has historically primarily organized around a racial frame, although this is shifting with the uprising of the Black Lives Matter movement since 2014, which pushes an intersectional approach to understanding how intertwined and varied forms of identity shape the daily lives and institutional experiences of people of colour (Taylor, 2016; see also Black Lives Matter, 2017).

Despite the long tension between racial and class-based frames, there has been an increasing tendency to integrate intersectional analysis within today’s movements (for more on intersectionality, see Crenshaw, 2011). In his recent conflict with Ta-Nehisi Coates over Twitter, West (2017), for example, advocates for an intersectional analysis of “the complex dynamics of class, gender and sexuality in black America” combined with a critical analysis of the impact of imperialism, capitalism, and elitism. West (2017) argues that an all-encompassing critical intersectional analysis is necessary for the construction of an ethical position against domination broadly. Taylor (2016) similarly argues that such an ethical position might be supported by intensified alliances across the Black Lives Matter and labour movements in order to more effectively publicly counter enduring economic and social inequities. She advocates for a frame that acknowledges how neoliberal market-based policies inequitably target students of colour: “There is a clear relationship between privatization and ‘zero-tolerance policies’ that cause Black children to encounter law enforcement… Black students bear the brunt of the punitive turn in public education” (Taylor, 2016, p. 184).

Activist teacher organizations like the Caucus frequently draw upon historical traditions of analysis in their activist work, including both the labour and black freedom movements. How, though, do they bring these different traditions into conversation? What does a shift toward multidimensional problem framing involve? This article
investigates how one small group of activist teachers in Philadelphia’s Caucus of Working Educators make sense of two problem frames that are often perceived as ideologically conflicting: one that positions neoliberalism as the core issue facing public education; and a second that positions structural racism as the primary explanation for inequities in educational resource distribution and outcomes.

**Definitions: Neoliberalist and Structural Racism Problem Frames**

I adopt definitions of neoliberalist and structural racism problem frames that are derived from the literature but align with the sense-making work and emergent understandings of Caucus members.

Neoliberalist problem frames tend to extend from an economic and class-based analysis. Schmeichel, Sharma, and Pittard (2017) define *neoliberalism* as “a discourse of governmentality that restructures individual and collective life on an economic rationality [and] promises to serve the utilitarian goal of maximizing societal prosperity and the libertarian objective of securing individual freedoms and liberty” (p. 210). Weiner (2012), who is considered a Caucus ally and has been a featured speaker at their events, identifies that neoliberalist policy strives to: “Make public education a ‘free market’ open to entrepreneurs; … control teachers and students with standardized testing; and weaken public oversight by breaking up school systems and replacing them with privately operated schools” (p. 6). Broadly speaking, a neoliberalist framing of education reform policy emphasizes that corporate interests are destroying public education. Such a framing focuses on the negative effects of discourses of accountability and efficiency, and points to how political pressures to privatize public education lead to under-resourced schools with a focus on standardization rather than intellectually stimulating curricular and pedagogical approaches (see Apple, 2004; Kempf, 2016).

On the other hand, structural racism framings tend to emphasize social inequities across racial groups. Taylor (2016), who has given lectures at Caucus-allied events and whom the Caucus identifies as an ally, defines *structural racism* as:

> [T]he policies, programs, and practices of public and private institutions that result in greater rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization, illness, and ultimately mortality of African Americans. Most importantly, it is the outcome [sic] that matters, not the intentions of the individuals involved (p. 8).

Similarly, Crenshaw (2011), Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), and Powell (2014) emphasize the multiple intersecting systems of power and ruling, including the legal system, social systems and services (including education), sociocultural norms and others, and their work in privileging white people and harming people of colour. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) advocate for advancing a critical racial analysis in order to identify and intervene in patterns of educational inequity.
Context and Methods

Background

Since the late 1990s, American public schools have experienced increasing trends toward district shrinkage, privatization of schools and services, standardization of curriculum and assessment, and greater district and school oversight through state-designed and sanctioned accountability measures. Since the early 2000s, Philadelphia has acted as an experimentation ground for many of these new policies. This shift has involved the closure of public schools en masse, the granting of new charters to replace district schools, and the ongoing privatization of district-run resources and services.

The first charter school opened in Philadelphia in 1997, and charters have since expanded to serve over 30% of the district’s 207,000 students (Kelley, 2015; Charter school dashboard, 2016). Neighbourhood school closures are ongoing, and between 2012 and 2013 alone, 30 neighbourhood schools in the Philadelphia School District (PSD) were closed (DeJarnatt, 2014; Jack & Sludden, 2013). Closures tend to primarily affect racial minorities and low-income students. For example, of the schools closed in 2013, 93% of the students affected by closures were low income, 81% were African American, 11% Latino, and just 4% were white (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2013; see also Socolar, 2013).

Following broader trends within the USA (see Gadsden, Smith, & Jordan, 1996), there are longstanding patterns of racial segregation within Philadelphia. There is also a notable gap between the funding received by PSD compared with other districts in Pennsylvania. For example, PSD currently receives close to half the funding of neighbouring Lower Marion School District (Brown, 2015), which primarily serves white students (Lower Merion School District fast facts, 2018). In some ways, this funding gap is not new, as the district has long suffered from chronic underfunding when compared with neighbouring districts (Koski & Reich, 2006; Steinberg & Quinn, 2015). McWilliams (2017) argues that the micro-level effects of such funding inequities include a negative sense of self-worth and decreased future aspirations for both students and their communities. Many Philadelphia community groups and families state that funding gaps and local school closure decisions are rooted in systemic racial inequities (Good, 2017; Socolar, 2013). Highly vocal and organized resistance has greeted such policy measures at every turn in Philadelphia, with community members, educators, parents, and students organizing local and national activist networks to protest and resist policy changes (Blanc & Simon, 2007; Conner & Rosen, 2013; Eisenberg, 2016; Herold, 2013; Quinn & Carl, 2015; Roat, McQueen, & Pahomov, 2016).

Caucus of Working Educators

Since its 2014 emergence with just a handful of members, the Caucus has grown to include over 200 registered dues-paying members plus several hundred additional non-dues-paying supporters in January 2018. Many of the activist educators who initially spearheaded its emergence were associated with another local teacher-led activist organization called Teacher Action Group Philadelphia (TAG Philly), which primarily
focuses on advancing curricular approaches to social justice principles. Unlike other
teacher-led groups in the city, the Caucus differentiates itself through a focus on polit-
ical mobilizing. It asserts that the local teachers’ union, the Philadelphia Federation
of Teachers (PFT), presents the most strategic opportunity as a political platform for
advocating for local families, communities, schools, and the public school system. Its
long-term strategy focuses on pushing the PFT to take a stronger stand in contract
negotiations and in advocating for sustainability of funding and resources for the
local public education system in order to better meet the needs of local communities,
families, and students.

The Caucus is structured as a member-driven organization with a central 11-person
steering committee that makes decisions about the major campaigns and tactics
employed by the organization. It tends to run multiple member-driven campaigns sim-
ultaneously and, like many other grassroots organizations, embraces a horizontal
approach to leadership that seeks members’ engagement in strategic decision-making
processes.

Over time, the Caucus has established a highly active membership base and has
sponsored numerous campaigns focused on outreach, member politicization and edu-
cation, unseating the current PFT leadership, connecting with local communities,
and effecting political change in the educational field. Campaigns have included:
membership education on the teacher union’s contract vote; a campaign to educate
pre-service teachers about unions; outreach and membership committees; an annual
summer reading series where members and supporters can sign up for biweekly book
clubs over the summer (see Riley, 2015); partnership with the “Fight for $15” campaign
for a raised minimum wage; sponsored talks; anti-deportation campaigns; and many
more. Note that while some of these campaigns have been developed and organized
solely by the Caucus, many were run in partnership with area organizations, including
education-focused parent, student and teacher-led activist groups, tenant rights
groups, the teacher union, community groups focused on specific issues, and others.
The Caucus also organizes regular social events, including happy hours and trips to
educational and entertainment-oriented venues for prospective and existing members.

The Caucus’ organizing work has become increasingly political. In the 2015–2016
and 2017–2018 school years, the Caucus has devoted significant time and resources to
running a slate of candidates for election in the local teachers’ union. For example, in
the fall of 2015 members hosted numerous fundraising house parties with the inten-
tion of raising funds to support such campaigns and broadening their membership
base. They ran t-shirt campaigns, regular interviews on local media outlets, engaged in
mass flyer distribution and targeted one-on-ones with union members across the dis-
trict, and employed numerous other techniques for raising awareness of key political
issues, and building an election support base. The slate of candidates eventually lost
the election but obtained around one-third of the votes. The candidates articulate that
they plan to continue building this support base until they can eventually wrest
control of the teacher union from the current elected officers.
Methodology and Methods

This article brings together data from three studies that I ran over a four-year period, and that were situated within the Caucus of Working Educators. The three studies employ different data collection tools, but hold a common commitment to conducting critical research on learning in an educator-led activist organization. Methodologically, the studies emerged from my simultaneous commitments to feminist ethnographic and practitioner inquiry approaches.

Feminist ethnographic methodological approaches focus on placing identity-based relations at the centre of inquiry while working to achieve emancipatory aims. Feminist ethnographers have increasingly advanced a critical understanding of how race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and other experiences and identities intersect to shape social relations and trajectories (see Abu-Lughod, 2001; Anzaldua, 1987; Bannerji, 1995; Bernal, 1998; Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984; Mahmood, 2012; Mohanty, 2003). Scholars like Mohanty (2003) and Bernal (1998) highlight the necessity of critically interrogating the role of research in decolonizing and politicizing knowledge through “rethinking self and community through the practice of emancipatory education” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 10). Thus, researcher self-reflection and critical theorizing alongside participants are considered central to feminist ethnographic research. Such efforts allow for the identification of cultural patterns and processes through deep community involvement, while simultaneously working together toward emancipatory activist ideals.

Practitioner inquiry methodology centres practitioners as the intellectual heart of research. Through the use of inquiry groups – which are formal and organized spaces in which professional practice might be investigated through engaging in private and group sense-making processes – practitioners may identify problems in their practice and come to develop new frameworks and practice-based approaches and solutions (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Weinbaum, Allen, Blythe, Simon, Seidel & Rubin, 2004). Social justice ideals and efforts often lie at the heart of such initiatives, and drive practitioners to better understand the experiences and needs of their colleagues and students, and to more clearly articulate – or even redefine – the goals of their organization (Campano, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Waff, 2009). Practitioner inquiry approaches tend to encompass both philosophical approaches to positioning practitioners as agents of knowledge-production processes as well as specific identified methodological tools (i.e. inquiry groups).

Data Collection and Analysis

This article brings together three studies that were run between 2014 and 2018. Each study emerged from a combination of the researcher’s interests and questions, and the particular needs and thrusts of the Caucus and its members. First, I draw on a pilot study run from 2014 to 2015. This study began shortly after the emergence of the Caucus, and in it I sought to better understand how Caucus members engaged in individual and collective learning processes through their activist organizational work. Data collection involved over 150 h of participant observation at Caucus events and meetings, and interviews with eight members. In an article published on the results of
this study (see Maton, 2016a), I found that a significant number of Caucus members were concerned about issues of racial justice but felt that the organization tended to overlook and undertheorize this topic.

Second, I draw upon my (2016b) dissertation study, for which data were collected in 2015. This study was designed to address both the expressed need for a centring of issues of racial justice and injustice in the Caucus’ analysis and problem framing which emerged from the first study, and my interest in the collaborative learning practices of activist teachers. Data collection included an inquiry group (composed of nine members: five members who identified as people of colour and four who identified as white), 27 interviews (three with each member at various stages of the study), and ongoing participant observation at inquiry group-organized events (also see Maton, 2016b). Participants were invited to take part in the inquiry group based on snowball sampling, wherein several organizational leaders were asked to recommend participants who might be interested in thinking through the relationship between structural racism and the Caucus’ organizing work. I also advertised the study within the Caucus to attract a broader base of interested participants.

Third, I draw upon an ongoing four-year study that examines how Caucus members make sense of broader political discourses and processes. This study examines publicly-available documents published by the Caucus and its members between 2014 and 2018, including blog posts, promotional brochures, public social media posts, and its public website.

Data analysis occurred in two stages. Stage one involved gathering data from across the three studies in order to build a longitudinal perspective on the organization through examining a mix of both published documents and in-depth qualitative data. Through this longitudinal reflection, I realized that Caucus members had undergone significant shifts in their problem framings over time, and I identified two emergent problem framing themes from the data: one that engaged a primarily neoliberalist problem framing, and a second that focused on structural racism. I next developed a list of key terms and concepts associated with racial justice (terms included: race, racism, structural racism, power, oppression, etc.) and neoliberalism (terms included: efficiency, accountability, standards, testing, charter schools, etc.), and I coded data in relation to the terms. Stage two involved identifying overarching themes in the data in light of the literature. Here, I returned to the social movement theory literature and connected it with my data. Through this process, I identified strategy and values as emergent themes that aligned with the literature. Next, I coded the data in relation to how participants identified neoliberalism and racial justice framings, and how these framings sought to advance a particular ethical framework or strategic focus and approach.

Feminist ethnographic and practitioner inquiry approaches have informed all phases of research, including study design, data collection and analysis, and subsequent writing. Feminist ethnographic approaches have influenced me to engage deeply with the organization through consistent attendance at Caucus meetings and events (particularly during its first two years); shaping my research to meet organizational needs; and integrating participants into data analysis and member checking processes. I have consistently paid close attention to identity-based dynamics around
gender, race, sexuality, language, and class background, and sought Caucus members’ feedback on my analysis of identity-based patterns, including those around race. I have also felt a strong sense of responsibility to my participants and connection with them and their work (for more on the embrace of emotion and connection in educational research, see Guthrie, 2016), and sought to reflect the full depth of intellectual commitment and power that they bring to their activist work.

I have engaged practitioner inquiry at both a philosophical and practical level, through viewing organizational members as vital sense-makers who construct and refine their own practice, and also through purposefully designing inquiry group learning spaces (see Maton, 2016b) to invite practitioners into more formal processes of praxis (see Freire, 2004). Throughout all practitioner inquiry processes, I have asked teachers to take a central role in defining the meaning and significance of their work together, and have asked them to identify and achieve specific activist goals that benefit the Caucus through the research process.

**Researcher Positionality**

I have sought to maintain critical self-reflexive awareness about my own identity and how it shapes my research. I am a white middle-class woman who grew up in suburban Canada. My identity-based experiences influence how I understand structural racism, and I readily acknowledge the inherent challenges and flaws in writing about race as a white person who has experienced racial and class-based privilege. I have also found that my experiences of growing up in Canada mean that sometimes I have critical understandings of racialization that diverge from a purely American upbringing, education, and experience. I have sought to address this through soliciting critical feedback from American colleagues and educators of colour, and through engaging in ongoing critical self-reflexivity about how my identity shapes what questions I ask in my research and my relationships with participating educators.

I straddle roles as researcher, activist, and educator. I ally with the Caucus in its political work to resist and protest market-based reform; counter negative stereotypes about teachers and teachers’ work; push the teacher union into taking a stronger stand in resisting negative trends toward structural racism and neoliberalism; and its efforts to bring teachers closer together with each other, the public, and local parents and communities. As a researcher and activist practitioner, I am a registered dues-paying member of the Caucus and have contributed significant amounts of time, energy, and resources to its organizing efforts. I have engaged in ongoing activist organizing activities through: organizing, attending, and sometimes hosting book club meetings; co-leading a Preservice Teacher Campaign where we led workshops with future teachers about the value of teacher unions; involvement and leadership in the Caucus membership committee; organizing and participating in social events and happy hours; attending and participating in conferences, meetings and workshops; and other activities. I have also integrated activist concerns into my research through asking specific questions of interest and concern to Caucus members; striving to make my research useful through writing up short findings papers for organizational use; and helping to publicize the Caucus’ work. I am highly cognizant of the ways in which this
involvement has allowed me to connect closely with my participants and to identify significant patterns for analysis, even as at times it may also obscure a more distant (or “objective”) view of the data.

**Findings**

This section contextualizes the discussion of how Caucus members engaged diverse problem frames by first providing a deeper view into how the neoliberalist and structural racism problem frames have shaped the Caucus and its work. Next, I discuss how members identify and engage specific strategic and values-related concerns in their problem-framing efforts.

**Neoliberalist and Structural Racism Frames in the Caucus**

Like other American social justice caucuses (see Bradbury, Brenner, Brown, Slaughter, & Winslow, 2014; Peterson, 2014; Uetricht, 2014), the Caucus views itself as fighting to save public education through revitalizing its teacher union. This principal has remained consistent throughout the first four years of the Caucus’ organizational life. However, over time, some members have increasingly pushed for transformation in the public problem framing of the Caucus’ work, from one centred on market-based reform as the primary issue facing public education, and toward a position that situates structural racism as directing the logics and effects of market-based reform. This shift in the Caucus’ problem framing has occurred as a result of the long-term work and dedication of a particular subset of Caucus members, and in order to show how this shift has come about I track the various ways neoliberalist and structural racism frames have been engaged over time.

**Organizational Emergence and the Neoliberalist Frame**

In the Caucus’ first year, neoliberalist frames were primarily adopted by Caucus members as an explanation for the inequitable distribution of resources in Philadelphia public education. In February 2015 I spoke with Kathy1, who has served on the steering committee, identifies as white, and is in her early 40s. I asked her to tell me about what had led up to the emergence of the Caucus the previous year. Kathy reported to me that the Caucus had initially emerged out of the intellectual work of a social justice union-focused book group2 that was organized in the spring of 2014 by TAG Philly. Based on my participation in this book group, I knew that it met for several months on an approximate biweekly basis and focused on reading and talking about different chapters of Lois Weiner’s (2012) book, *The Future of our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice*. Weiner’s (2012) book was a popular read among social justice unionist caucuses at this time, and in it she adopts a strongly neoliberalist framework. Throughout, she critiques the “global project of wealthy, powerful elites” (p. 5) who seek to transform education through a “framework of ‘free market’ policies … called neoliberalism” (p. 7). Weiner (2012) asserts that the antidote to such neoliberalist approaches is the mobilization of teacher unions, which she argues are based...
on “principles of collective action and solidarity” and thus “contradict neoliberalism’s key premises – individual initiative and competition” (p. 9). Kathy recounted that this book group simultaneously served as an intellectual hub for developing the Caucus’ initial framing as well as a mobilizing space from which to recruit new members. In this sense, the neoliberalist frame may be understood as the primary problem frame adopted by the Caucus upon its emergence.

The neoliberalist framing advanced by Weiner’s text were simultaneously reinforced by discussions happening in the broader network of social justice caucuses across the US, including those found in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Newark, New Jersey. Indeed, the neoliberalist framing took the primary role in explaining why social justice unionist work was necessary at the summer 2014 United Caucuses of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE) conference, an annual event which brings together caucus leaders from across the US and sometimes Canada (see Russom & Winslow, 2017). At this conference many of the workshops advanced a neoliberalist framing of current issues in education: that school closures are part of an intentional effort to privatize public education in order to enhance corporate profit, and that policies supporting standardization of curriculum, instruction, and assessment seek to diminish the agency of teachers, students, and community members and increase the political and economic power of wealthy elites. There were occasional discussions about how a critical race framing might reshape this discussion to account for the disproportionate impacts of standardization, school closures, and privatization on families and communities of colour. However, these discussions were sometimes inflammatory and divisive within UCORE. In general, a critical structural racism framing was sidelined in relation to the more pervasive neoliberalist framing advanced by various social justice unionists from across the country. It is not insignificant to note that the Caucus relies heavily on the expertise of social justice caucus leaders from across UCORE for shaping its strategic concerns and tactical approaches (see also Stark & Maton, in press). Thus, in its first year, the Caucus tended to primarily subscribe to a neoliberalist framing of current education policy trends and practices.

This neoliberalist framing was reflected in the thinking of individual Caucus members. For example, in September 2014, I interviewed Michael, who had recently attended UCORE with me and several other Caucus members. He is a white man in his late 20s who has consistently been active in the Caucus’ intellectual work. Michael described the Caucus in the following way:

For me, Working Educators represents … a response to this anti-teacher rhetoric or anti-public sphere rhetoric, or the more egg-headed way of putting it, is a response to neoliberal education reform … It’s a response to the rebranding of schools as competitive, individualized, charterized little pockets of success, and this free-market competition that is very, very popular, that is the prevailing reform narrative.

As one of the core intellectual strategists for the organization, Michael’s framing of the Caucus’ work echoes the thinking of Caucus members more broadly. He posits that free-market neoliberalist competition and the individualization and privatization of public schools are the primary culprits facing public education today, meanwhile situating the Caucus as responsible for resisting and protesting such trends.
Simultaneously, in these early days of the Caucus, there was a tendency to advance the notion that the organization should partner more closely with local communities and with the broader teaching force. I consistently attended the initial Caucus meetings throughout the late spring, summer, and fall of 2014, and found that members thought there was a need for the organization to partner more closely both with local communities and families, as well as with the broader teaching force – and particularly communities and teachers of colour – in order to resist the trends that Michael previously highlighted. In one early Caucus meeting in the fall of 2014, during a discussion about how to grow the Caucus’ membership, one member expressed that they felt that the reason why partnerships with teachers and communities of colour were difficult was that there are broader systemic and interpersonal trends of racism that inhibit their involvement in the Caucus. Several side-conversations quickly ensued across the room in response to this assertion, as some members discussed the salience of race in organizing marginalized groups. And, while the meeting facilitator verbally noted the significance of this comment, they then proceeded to shift the discussion back to a discussion of specific tactics for partnering with teachers and communities of colour. This momentary acknowledgment but quick sidelining of a conversation about the effects of structural racism on the Caucus’ organizing work represents a recurring pattern in the organization at the time. While there was acknowledgment of the existence and impact of racism on the organization, the theoretical discussions of racism’s impact on mobilizing was considered of secondary importance to more immediate tactical and material concerns (see also Maton, 2016a).

Constructing a Structural Racism Frame

As the Caucus’ first year progressed, there was an increasing shift toward centering conversations about racism in both sense-making and strategic organizing spaces. One of the first places in which this pushback had been nurtured was within a book club series run in the summer of 2014 (see Riley, 2015). While eight of the nine books in the series tended to focus on centering neoliberalist problem framings of public education, one book focused on the history of the civil rights movement in Philadelphia – Countryman’s (2006) *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia*. This book club was initiated and organized by Caucus member Penelope, a woman of colour in her mid-30s who was consistently part of the effort to centre racial justice concerns in the Caucus in its first two years. She saw the Countryman (2006) book club as a way to better understand the historical experiences of Philadelphia communities of colour. In a March 2015 interview, she reflected why she decided to organize the Countryman book club: “Majority of the Caucus members that I know, we’re not Philadelphia natives. We didn’t grow up in the system, some of us did, but most of us grew up around the area or outside of Philadelphia. So, I think there’s a lot more history that needs to be learned.” Penelope saw the book club as an opportunity to learn about the historical experiences of local students, families, and communities of colour in Philadelphia. She believed that Caucus members needed to build such knowledge in order to more effectively partner with local communities and engage in political protest and resistance.
The Countryman book club organized by Penelope was one of the most popular and well-attended book groups that summer. In these bi-weekly book group meetings, many of which I attended, members talked passionately about how racial injustice and oppression have consistently influenced the educational opportunities of people of colour throughout the city’s history. Attendees expressed feeling similarly to Penelope: that effective teacher activist work requires a deep understanding of the racialized histories and experiences of local Philadelphians.

Zak, an African American man in his 30s, was among those who attended the Countryman (2006) book club. Prior to his participation in the group, Zak had long been active in critical race reading, theorizing, and activism. He became involved with the Caucus in 2014 and expressed some initial wariness about its focus on neoliberalism and labour without a deep analysis of race. In a September 2014 interview, he argued, “I think when you leave out race, you’re neglecting the whole problem of why these neoliberal policies are being directed in certain areas.” Zak continued:

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

He articulates that while neoliberalism accounts for some of the effects of market-based reform, such as charter schools, that a structural racism framing provides insight into why particular policies are imposed on specific geographic regions and groups of people. Zak believes that a neoliberalist frame must be merged with a structural racism frame in order to truly understand how public education reproduces dominant patterns of inequity in America. As a core intellectual leader in the Caucus, Zak has increasingly advocated for a critical race-based analysis of education reform trends.

Zak’s articulation of the interaction between structural racism and neoliberalism aligns with how a subset of Caucus members push the organization to better account for structural racism. Part of this initial movement to centralize race took place in an inquiry group which I organized and facilitated in the spring of 2015. This nine-member inquiry group sought to develop a working definition of structural racism, and to think through how structural racism shapes the work of the Caucus – and how such trends might be resisted. In the inquiry group, Zak took on a central role in developing a definition for structural racism. The definition was critiqued, slightly modified, and then adopted as the guiding definition for theorizing structural racism broadly:

Structural racism is the normalization and legitimization of an array of entrenched dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal that advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of colour which reinforce existent racially developed societal structures. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with “whiteness” and disadvantages associated with “colour” that reflect the distribution of material and symbolic advantage and disadvantage along racial lines while acknowledging the realignment of socio-
political institutions developed throughout time to maintain continuity of racialized power systems.

Through this definition, combined with their knowledge-building in general, inquiry group members advanced the notion that systems of racial inequity are the primary explanation for the inequitable distribution of educational resources and materials across students, families, and school districts.

In the fall of 2015, inquiry group participants partnered with other Caucus members to spearhead a number of initiatives that would strengthen and better publicize the organization’s emerging analysis of structural racism. As a first step, a formal racial justice statement was published with the intention of publicly clarifying the organization’s position on race and acting as a grounding point for internal discussion about structural racism and its relationship to Caucus organizing. Next, Caucus members formed a racial justice committee that has proceeded to sponsor numerous events, conferences, and actions, and has also sought to push the organization to account for structural racism in its vision, strategy, and tactics.

Of particular note is the racial justice committee’s leadership in co-organizing and -sponsoring the Philadelphia-wide Black Lives Matter Week of Action in early 2017 and then again in 2018, which features: elementary and secondary curriculum resources for each day of the week focused on the 13 Black Lives Matter guiding principles; daily talks and workshops; a closing panel that includes leading thinkers in critical race studies; and a t-shirt campaign that contains a logo of a broken Liberty Bell and the slogan, “Philly Educators – Black Lives Matter” (Anderson & Cohen, 2017; BLM Calendar of Events, 2017). In a 5 January 2018 article posted by the Caucus, organizers describe the rationale for the Black Lives Matter week:

As 2018 begins, our schools continue to manifest structural inequality created by racial injustices at all levels of the education system. From the impact of zero tolerance policies that criminalize Black and Brown students and the exclusion of voices of people of colour from curriculum, to the persistent loss of teachers of colour from urban schools, the movement for Black Lives has never mattered more in the fight for the schools our students deserve (Caucus of Working Educators, 2018).

Here, the Caucus provides a rationale for its week of action that links structural racism to specific educational policies and effects that target and exclude students, teachers, and communities of colour from schools. The statement gestures toward the need to protect and enhance public education systems in order to better serve the needs of Philadelphians of colour. In this sense, the rationale incorporates some aspects of a neoliberalist framing (i.e. the need to protect public education), while arguing that neoliberal effects tend to specifically target communities of colour.

**Strategic Concerns**

Snow and Soule (2010) define strategy as “a broad, organizing plan for accomplishing or attaining a particular goal, such as winning a war” (p. 166). Thus, strategy refers to the general approach to achieving a goal, rather than the specific means or tactics through which the goal is realized.
Problem frames are intimately tied up with strategy because how a problem is articulated and understood will impact either what constitutes the desired end goal, or the means through which this goal is achieved. In other words, the adopted problem frame implies the desired solution as well as the means through which this solution is realized. Problem frames thus hold significant implication for the strategic development and capacity of social movement organizations.

Throughout the four-year history of the Caucus, members have consistently articulated a common goal or overarching strategy: to wrest control of the teacher union from more conservative facets in order to heighten the power of educators to exert control in broader political and economic arenas. However, I argue that the general approach to achieving this goal has shifted in relation to the problem frame adopted by members. When members adopted a neoliberalist frame, they sought to realize this goal through building alliances with communities, students, and local organizations, and through attracting new membership among educators in order to win power in union elections. However, as they increasingly took on a structural racism frame, Caucus members realized that they were limited in these alliance-building endeavors by the organization’s failure to understand the experiences of people of colour and thus attract and retain their organizational membership, involvement, alliances, and support.

Caucus members who embraced the structural racism frame felt that good leadership and movement-building relies on strong and critical self-analysis. Kathy believed that the Caucus should provide explicit time and resources geared toward building individual members’ understanding of race in order to maximize their leadership efficacy. She argued:

I think part of democratic leadership is being able to look at your own “-isms,” whatever they are, so you’re not a true leader in a true democratic sense until you are as aware of self as you can be and how that self either intentionally or unintentionally does or doesn’t develop other leaders around you. So, I think it’s that fundamental when it comes to movement building.

Kathy articulates that a viable social movement organization requires that members are aware of their own assumptions, how they interact, and what they project in their interactions with others. Like Esmonde, Brodie, Dookie, and Takeuchi (2009), she expresses that even though groups might explicitly articulate antiracist or anti-oppressive perspectives, overarching systems of oppression continue to shape how politicized members think about and treat those holding marginalized identities. Thus, Kathy advocates for a strategic approach that builds Caucus capacity through educating individual members into a more critical analysis of race and thus stronger leadership dispositions. Learning-oriented actions like the Black Lives Matter week, the inquiry group work, and book clubs are thus positioned as helping individual members to undergo personal analysis and learning about the role of race in their personal and institutional lives.

Those Caucus members who advanced a structural racism frame tended to be driven by a desire to strengthen organizational capacity. They tended to believe that in order to be effective, the Caucus needed to build a better understanding of the demands of communities of colour and that it should provide some cushioning from
the oppression and harm caused by broader racist systems and structures. Zak articulated: “One thing about organizations, I mean, people get crushed under the weight of when they challenge these [broader] structures unless there is a solid foundation … some way of shielding you from the outside world when you’re negotiating that space.” Here, Zak argues that an activist organization should guard for the safety of its members and be responsive to their identity-based needs. In this sense, Zak believes that organizations act simultaneously as a foundation for activists as well as a strategic platform from which to advocate for change. Actions like the construction of an explicit mission statement addressing racial justice, the Black Lives Matter week, and the inquiry and book groups allow the Caucus to build stronger personal and organizational analyses of structural racism and its effects, and thus provide a more responsive safe space for members of colour.

Caucus members voiced that alliances and membership are more effectively built and maintained through centring organizational conversations about race. Caucus members have shifted organizational problem framing from an analysis focused on neoliberalism to one that incorporated structural racism, in part, in order to build the strategic capacity of the organization. They saw learning-oriented actions such as Black Lives Matter week and the book and inquiry groups as a means to strengthen organizational analysis and responsiveness to local community members and educators. In this sense, the strategic capacity of the organization hinges, in part, on the incorporation of a critical problem framing that centres issues of race and racism.

A Focus on Values

In common language, values refers to the core and lasting beliefs and ethical principles that identify what is thought to be important and desirable, and that tend to govern behaviour. Castro Samayoa and Nicolazzo (2017) argue that educators have some responsibility to translate their values-laden affective reactions into tangible educative political action. One means of translating values into action is through engaging in collaborative processes of organizational decision-making. Such processes of “developing shared images of the future” may help organizations and their members to “seek and create the principles and guiding practices” by which they might achieve this imagined future (Senge, 2000, p. 7). People may thus participate in processes of manipulating and collaboratively constructing organizational values. Further, Snow and Soule (2010) argue that values tend to drive an SMO’s areas of focus and how it goes about seeking to achieve its goals. Values inform which problem-frames are identified, and how they are identified, understood and adopted. In other words, values underlie the kind of work in which an organization engages and determine how members go about this work.

The shift from a neoliberalist analysis to one that centres race reflects a shift in the broader organizational values of the Caucus. This perspectival shift has been led by a core group of educators who have sought to align the Caucus’ structure and work with their personal values. They have struggled to achieve ethical coherence because, at core, they are motivated to do social justice unionist work out of their values-
related principles, and they wish for the organization to explicitly reflect such principles. Margaret – a white educator in her 50s – identified that a strong moral frame drives her organizing work. She said, “You do it not because you think you’re going to win in a minute, you do it because it’s the right thing. And then you let it unfold, without knowing what’s going to come out of this.” Like other Caucus members, Margaret asserts that her involvement in the Caucus is driven by her values, rather than a sense of reliance on outcomes. She seeks ethical coherence across her personal values and those of her activist organization – the Caucus.

Caucus members tended to position explicit racial justice statements as necessary for ensuring consistency and coherence in ethical stance and action. Camille, a Black woman in her mid-30s, argued in favour of publishing a statement about structural racism as a means of communicating a clear vision, set of values, and stance: “For me, [our discussions about an antiracist statement are] helping me to see what our vision or what our path would be. So that makes me feel good. It makes me feel really good to say that we stand – this is what we still stand for and what we will do. That it’s a work in progress.” Camille points out that a published values statement promotes transparency and allows new members to better understand the work of the organization in their assessment of whether and how to join. In her statement that “it’s a work in progress,” Camille also implies that while core racial justice values might remain consistent, that the process of translating such values into action may transform over time, as the organization learns how to create more and better opportunities to advocate for racial justice.

The Caucus required a shift toward racial justice values in order to boost its mobilizing power, in the view of some members. Actions such as the Black Lives Matter week, book and inquiry groups, and construction of a values statement on racial justice were viewed as vital for communicating values and helping the Caucus to achieve some of its strategic goals, such as attracting and retaining members of colour. In this sense, values transformation was positioned by members as aligned with strategic concerns. Corey, an African American man in his mid-20s, described how transparent, cohesive organizational values are necessary for achieving racial justice-oriented strategic goals – such as attracting new and more diverse membership. He said:

If people recognize that where we stand as individuals in the [racial justice] work that we’re doing in the world that we’re in search of, then it becomes easier to vow with us on the work that we’re doing because they see where we’re headed, and not in the search of this one institution, but of a new vision.

Here, Corey gestures at the need to think across issues, and to create a cohesive organizational stand on issues of racism and racial oppression. He articulates that such values need to be applied to all work across the organization and asserts that this approach will draw in and retain new members because they will witness consistency in organizational racial justice values. Corey thus asserts that processes of values articulation help reinforce racial justice-oriented perspectives and assist inthreading such perspectives throughout the organization.

As racial justice values were more deeply incorporated into the neoliberalist problem frame, members expressed that they felt the organization was gaining greater skill in understanding and responding to the needs of educators and communities of
colour. Members strove to transform explicit statements of organizational values regarding racial justice in order to more accurately represent members’ beliefs and values, while also transforming which strategies and tactics were employed and how. As Corey points out, values transformation holds potential for assisting the development of organizational strategic capacity, and thus values transformation was seen by members as allowing for the construction of more responsive approaches to building organizational mobilization and power.

**Conclusion**

Early in this article, I argued that agentive problem-framing transformation efforts are important because problems imply solutions – how one presents a problem also implies what solutions are deemed appropriate and desirable. Thus, it is important to consider how organizations might manipulate problem frames in ways that allow for a tighter coherence across their core values and long-term strategic aspirations.

As American public education systems face continued funding inequities across class- and racial-lines; school closures and district shrinkage, especially in racially and economically marginalized communities; and the disproportionate testing, policing, and suspensions of students of colour; it is vital that we, as education scholars and activists, continue to track how activist educators understand and resist education policy patterns and trends. This study has examined how members of one leftist teacher-led activist organization, the Caucus of Working Educators, engaged a range of approaches in their effort to trigger broader system change. They ran book clubs and inquiry groups as a means of theorizing structural racism and their own personal roles in broader systemic processes of oppression. They organized weeks of action that aligned with the Black Lives Matter movement. They published and distributed statements and articles about their stance on racial justice. And, they have worked to align more tightly with local communities through nurturing critical personal and organizational perspectives on structural racism. Throughout this educative and political organizational work, Caucus members have increasingly identified clear antiracist values to inform and strengthen their strategic mobilizing efforts.

I have shown that values and strategy are deeply entwined in the organizational perspective change process. Caucus members frequently voiced that it was important to them that their strategic approaches aligned with their values, and *vice versa*. They wanted to do work that felt ethical but that also had strategic capacity for effecting real and tangible political change. Their participation in problem framing processes allowed members to manipulate the construction of perspectives on what problems face public education, and to increasingly insert a critique of structural racism into conversations about why certain policies were put into place in particular locations.

This study holds implications for understanding the change-making efforts of activist educators through their grassroots organizations. Through examining how one organization underwent processes of perspective transformation, we can begin to more clearly articulate how radical and critical theories and approaches inform how teacher organizations across the country and beyond engage in activist resistance to racist and neoliberal education policies and practices.
Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been used in order to keep the identities of Caucus members confidential.

2. I was an active participant in this social justice union-focused book group. I was not running a research study at that time, and had participated out of a personal interest in learning more about what Philadelphia activist-oriented teachers were reading, thinking and talking about. The connection between this book group and the Caucus’ emergence was unknown to me until my conversation with Kathy.

3. I was one of a small number of Caucus members who represented the Caucus at UCORE in Chicago in August 2014. Caucus member Kathy had invited me to attend, and I was in the early stages of a research study examining the role of learning in the Caucus at the time.

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Notes on Contributor

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