Title

Towards a Teacher Political Fluency: Unionized Urban Teachers' Perceptions of the Political Dimensions of Teaching in an Imperiled Urban Intensive School District

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Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Towards a Teacher Political Fluency:
Unionized Urban Teachers' Perceptions of the Political Dimensions of Teaching in an Imperiled Urban Intensive School District

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Cicely Roxanne Bingener

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Towards a Teacher Political Fluency:

Unionized Urban Teachers' Perceptions of the Political Dimensions of Teaching in an Imperiled Urban Intensive School District

by

Cicely Roxanne Bingener

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor John S. Rogers, Chair

Teachers' work is inherently political at both the interpersonal and structural levels. Yet, now, many teachers are under state-sanctioned and local pressure to be apolitical. Moreover, many teachers are citing feelings of political attack as a significant driver in their decisions to stay or leave the teaching profession, even as the US faces growing teacher shortages. Historically, the impact of teacher shortages fall most negatively upon urban intensive schools which already find themselves at the center of harsh political critique and relative political disadvantage. However, little appears in the current body of academic scholarship around teachers' political development. Against this backdrop, I conducted interviews with 15 current unionized TK-12

teachers serving in a financially imperiled urban school district to better understand urban intensive teachers' own conceptions of the political dimensions of their profession in terms of both constraints and opportunities. Of particular interest was discerning if and/or how the teachers' varying degrees of involvement in their teachers union impacts their expression of "teacher political fluency" or the skills and knowledge teachers employ to navigate the political lay of their work. The results of this five-month qualitative study offer valuable preliminary insights into the political dimensions affecting urban intensive teachers' work, teachers' strategies for navigating work-related political challenges, and how these relate to teachers' involvement in teacher unionism. Further research is recommended to build our understanding on the topic of teacher political fluency development with implications for a variety of education stakeholders including educational researchers, teacher education programs, teachers unions, and educational policymakers.

The dissertation of Cicely Roxanne Bingener is approved.

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2024

DEDICATION

"So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love."-
1 Corinthians 13:7 - The Message

For Josephine, Joan, David and Mark, By your lives, you have taught me and remind me daily that if it is not for love, then it is for naught.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The achievement of this doctoral milestone is the culmination of a decades old dream of my own and the manifestation of countless untold dreams carefully planted in my heart by the will of my many ancestors. Their "hope for the things they could not see" is now coming to fruition in me. My gratitude goes first to them and to my almighty Creator who endowed them with an indomitable spirit so that even enslavement and torture could not extinguish their prayers and intentions for me. This degree is for you, me, and those who will come after me.

In its most concrete sense, the journey to this degree has spanned over more than two decades at UCLA School of Education & Information studies and has included a host of encouraging teachers, mentors, and supportive colleagues that have guided my way. I am grateful to each and every one. None has proved a more faithful and constant champion for my growth and success than my doctoral advisor, Dr. John S. Rogers. You have been there all of those 20+ years teaching me, inspiring me, pushing me, and believing in me even when I am certain that my ambitions may have seemed far-fetched or naïve. You have allowed me to be who I am as both a teacher and a scholar. You are generous to a fault and it has been an honor to be your advisee.

To the amazing women of my dissertation committee. Dr. Karen Hunter Quartz, you have also been there for the lion's share of my UCLA journey with an open heart and an open mind so willing to share precious gems of your scholarly and practical wisdom. You have never failed to go out of your way to make a place for me and it has made all the difference. Dr. Marjorie Orellana you possess a passion, depth of critical thought, and introspection that is so infectious. The powerful lessons I have learned from the way you move in academia and in building humanizing community are ones I shall never forget. Dr. Veronica Terriquez, you exemplify my

ideal of a scholar who is also a foot soldier for nurturing and empowering young people on the frontlines as they aspire to take their rightful place in our democracy, while holding the door open for others. I feel utterly humbled to have had you to guide my thinking and writing over these past two years.

I cannot overlook that fact that the past two years also were clouded in the uncertainty of a cancer diagnosis and treatment. I thank my entire UCLA Medical team and especially my amazing doctors Monica Mead, Ritu Salani, Ahn Thu Kieu, and Lisa Nicholas who always made a point to ask me about my studies at every check-up and supported my requests to adjust surgery and treatments in deference to my PhD pursuit timeline. Your compassion and support were truly the best medicine.

Molly, Jaleel, Menelik, Sam, and Christine, we started this program together and we will all finish this race. Thank you for the grace and acceptance you have shown me throughout. You have been and will always be my "treasure chest" and your collective impact on this field will be so phenomenal.

To those amazing Gladdingham teachers who generously shared your stories and insights for this study. You confirmed what I already suspected, that you are the everyday "angels among us" and the hope and stay for the countless students who are lucky enough to be in your classes. You till the good soil of our young with your time, talents, and sometimes your tears, but it produces a rich harvest of which you can all be proud.

To my amazing Payne STEAM colleagues, you have consistently supported me and cheered for me this entire way. Sandra Arita, you know that you have been my collegial "rock" on this journey. Your partnership made it possible from day one. To my many students, past and

present. Watching your learning unfold year after year, makes me long to always sharpen my own. You will always be my reason.

To my many “sisters” and friends. Your love for me has steadied my path and sprinkled it with laughter, insight, compassion, inspiration, and so much needed joy!

Finally, a debt of gratitude must be paid to my parents Joan and David Morris, two amazing souls that met as students at UCLA in the 1960’s and put everything they had into raising me and my three outstanding siblings, Camille, David, and Christina for whom I am also grateful. By extension, I honor my entire Woods, Morris, Hanson, and Bingener family. Most importantly, I thank my precious husband Mark and my four beloved children Josef, Nyala, Eliot, and David. You have tolerated my crazy schedules, given me space, shared the load, and cheered me on to this goal. The thought of you gave me such strength when the hill seemed impossible to climb. Thank you for your patience and I hope to make you proud.

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PUBLICATIONS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There is a well-worn piece of handed-down folk wisdom that advises that, in order to maintain pleasant relations with one's dinner guests, it is always important to *avoid* discussions of religion and politics. The idea that either of these topics is bound to unleash a cacophony of conflict and controversy is at the heart of this advice. Religion, notwithstanding, some observers of the recent happenings in the US educational realm, might equally suggest that discussions pertaining to politics and *teachers* have become just as fraught and explosive. This is witnessed by a cascade of debates and hundreds of pieces of legislation aimed squarely at defining and "managing" the relationship between teachers and politics (Pollock, Rogers,et. al. 2022; West 2021, Natanson, Morse, et. al. 2022). Teachers are being accused of being "too political" and acting as agents of "indoctrination" in the nation's public schools (PEN America 2022). Examples of the crackdown on teachers and politics include restrictions on curriculum content and lesson plans, book bans, and new rules which trigger harsh discipline including the revoking of teachers' credentials in instances in which they may be deemed out of compliance with local restrictions on political content (Natanson, Morse, et. al. 2022; PEN America 2022; Giroux 2022). Simultaneously, there is ongoing critique of teacher political action vis-à-vis the instrument of teacher unionism and whether teachers unions' influence during the COVID-19 Pandemic should bear the blame for the fallout of the schooling disruptions students faced over the past several years (Flanders 2020; DeAngelis 2021; Dean et. al. 2021; Marianno et. al 2022; McAlevey 2020). Politics is clearly in the forefront of teachers' experiences at present.

Against this backdrop of intensified scrutiny of teachers and their politics, teachers are reporting stress and burnout levels at an all-time high (Steiner & Woo 2021; Ginet et. al 2022; Kotowski et. al. 2022; Walker 2022). This raises particular alarm when considering an already growing threat of massive teacher shortages, fueled in part by beleaguered teachers who are exiting the profession sooner than they had planned (Walker 2022). Moreover, a recent study among over 4000 California teachers reported "political attacks" on teachers as the second biggest factor contributing to these teachers' desire to leave the profession (Voices 2022) while a separate report from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE 2020) suggests that fear of political attacks may be dissuading prospective teachers from even entering the profession at all (White 2022). From the vantage point of those concerned about the future of US education, the outlook concerning teachers and politics could easily be described as bleak.

Nonetheless, across the US, teachers find themselves having to confront what exactly politics is and how it figures into their lives as teachers, even as they are being asked, by many, to simply avoid it. In this current environment of politicized attacks on teachers, it might seem counterintuitive to dive into a study of teachers and politics rather than back away from it. However, I aim to advance towards the metaphorical "burning building" through my research, seeing it as an opportunity to draw upon the oft overlooked experience and expertise of the teachers who find themselves at the center of the fray (Lawn & Grace 2011). As this uncomfortable process unfolds, it invites educational researchers to explore, document, explain, and increase our understanding of the relationship between teachers and politics. Of particular interest is learning more about how teachers perceive the impact of politics on their work as teachers and how they go about acquiring the skills and knowledge they must employ to navigate

the terrain of politics impacting their work. At a time when nationwide teacher shortages are reaching critical levels (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas 2016) *and* politics is being cited as an important reason for both teacher attrition and as a deterrent to attracting new teachers, this study yields valuable insights which may help to inform solutions that are needed in this moment of urgency.

Defining "Politics" in the Study of Teachers & Politics

For both the teachers who are being forced to confront the relationship between their work of teaching and politics as well as the researcher who would seek to study the relationship between teachers and politics, a major challenge is honing in on a single understanding of what is meant by the term "politics." Even a survey of leading dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary, Cambridge, and Merriam Webster's list no fewer than five definitions of the term ranging from the literal "treatise written by Aristotle" to the more abstract "theory or practice of government or administration" to the more personal "actions concerned with the acquisition or exercise of power, status, or authority" (Oxford English Dictionary 2022). In the context of popular parlance, "politics" is often confused with "partisanship" which conjures up the bitter divisions along our nation's two dominant political party lines. While "partisanship" and many of the other uses of the term "politics" have relevance in the lives and work of teachers, I am most interested in the "everyday politics" of teaching (micropolitics) as well the more general structural politics (mesopolitics & macropolitics) that play out in the work of most teachers.

In clarifying the meaning of politics for my research purposes, it is instructive to return to the origin of the term "politics" which is derived from Aristotle's *Politika,* literally translating to "affairs of the cities." Aristotelian scholars such as Simpson (2000) and Hansen (2013) emphasize that Aristotle conceived of politics as inherent in all human relations, referring to

humans as "political animals" who engage in social decision-making that is shaped by power relations between individuals and the dynamics of how these relationships influence things such as the distribution of resources and status within a society. At its core, then, politics initially describes those dynamics of human power and influence that shape outputs within a community or society (Laswell 2018). Over the centuries, expanded meanings began to emerge and evolve that include the specific elements of electoral politics, political partisanship, and more formalized political mechanisms embodied in state governments (Finnis 2021) that often occlude the more simplistic definition. Still, drawing from its earliest recorded origins, it is easy to see how the core meaning of "politics" justifies thinking of politics as germane and normal to every human relationship (Lasswell 2018; Leftwich 2015) as opposed to some lofty set of happenings that occurs outside of the reach of ordinary individuals.

"Teaching is a political act" is an oft-heard slogan that is defiantly proclaimed in answer to the highly publicized notion that teachers should eschew all things political, aspiring to exist and operate in a manner that is neutral and apolitical (Natanson, Morse, et. al. 2021; West 2021; Gray 2021). However, the slogan essentially states that teaching is *inherently* political and therefore cannot escape its own nature, mirroring the original Aristotelian conception. Insofar as teachers must manage relationships of power, influence, and the distribution of resources in educational spaces, they are involved in "politics" daily. But the assertion also alludes to a larger politics that involves teachers' relationships with and subjectness to structures or entities that wield power and influence at the district, state and policy level (McAlevey 2020; Rosenthal & Campbell 1969).

The slogan that teaching is political traces its roots to the work of Freire. In his 1968 seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, educator and philosopher Paolo Freire made the bold

assertion that “all education is political; teaching is never a neutral act" (1968, p.19). In doing so, Freire advanced a revolutionary-at-the-time notion that teachers, the act of teaching, and that which is being taught are all inextricably tied to and influenced by political contexts. More explicitly, political contexts encompassed both the larger structural politics of the state that came to dictate what and how teaching could be as well as the interpersonal politics of power and status that defined relationships between students, teachers, and administrators in ways that either moved them towards or away from human liberation (Freire 1968). For this reason, teaching is seen as an inherently political enterprise and, much like Aristotle’s conception, not necessarily negative or nefarious merely by virtue of being political. In other words, politics exists whenever there are two or more persons, but *how* the politics is enacted and *to what end* is where it can become either humanizing and liberating or oppressive.

In a later work that addressed teachers directly, Freire again emphasized, “As educators we are politicians; we engage in politics when we educate” (2018, p. 68). Here, Freire makes more explicit the idea that not only is politics a fact in the work of teaching, but that it is *also* a *responsibility* that teachers must consciously and readily take up if the furthering of democracy is a central aim. Freire urges teachers to dispatch a humanizing politics from matters as small as how they relate to their students and families to how they organize en masse to challenge oppressive curricula or other harmful policies implemented by the state (2018). Here, teacher politics does not merely exist in a vacuum but as a force of agency to achieve a specific ideological end such as authoritarianism vs. democracy, for example. Echoing Freire, Reid et. al. note that, simply by the act of teaching, teachers are constantly functioning as willful or passive political agents by either adopting, adapting, or subverting the curricular and practical mandates imposed by those in authority over them (1998). And while teachers have the capacity

to make individual decisions regarding the use of their political agency, Freire also posits that teacher political agency is most effective when dispatched collectively (2018). This hints at the idea of collective agency (Mills et. al. 2010; Spicer 2011) as a feature of teacher politics. Collective agency is often noted as an inherent feature of teacher unionism (Bangs & McBeath 2012; Cooper 2015), which will be discussed more thoroughly in subsequent sections.

Taken together, the Aristotelian view of basic interpersonal politics and Freire's conception of a structural politics that involves teachers engaging a more complex interplay of state-level policy (i.e. governmental oversight of teaching via legislation, regulation, funding, etc.) (Berube 1988) *and* the interpersonal relationships within which teachers must constantly operate and negotiate in the service of a particular ideological aim, it becomes easy to see that the slogan of "teaching as a political act" has considerable merit. The presence of politics in teaching is normalized and understood to be both a description of an inherent reality of human relationships as well as a mechanism which human agents can and do employ in ways that exercise influence in promoting a given set of ideologically-informed aims. That is to say that teachers cannot and, perhaps *should* not, completely escape all that is political (Picower 2013; Westheimer & Kahne 2004; Reid et. al. 1998).

While there are multiple definitions and connotations surrounding the term "politics," my investigation situates politics most closely to the Aristotelian view, with its emphasis on the dynamics of power and influence between and among teachers and other entities, and the Freirean view which includes elements of how politics is employed towards ideological ends in the work of teaching. My intent was to collect data about how teachers recognize and experience politics including *micropolitical* (interpersonal), *mesopolitical* (local institutional, such as teachers' relationship to district-level policies and practices), and *macropolitical* (state and

federal level policies and practices) dimensions of teaching in ways that impact their work and their ideological aims within it. I was also interested in learning about how the impact of teacher unionism, as one mechanism through which collective teacher political agency is often enacted, is perceived by teachers in terms of developing their political preparedness to further their ideological aims.

Teacher Political Aims & Political Fluency in an "Urban Intensive" Context

As with all human beings, teachers vary widely in their political motivations, experiences, and aims. For the purposes of my study, I was particularly interested in the experiences and aims of teachers working in schools which fall into a category that Milner (2012) describes as "urban intensive." Such schools are characterized by what the US National Center for Education Statistics classifies as "high minority" (at least 75% minority student population) and "high poverty" (at least 75% of students qualify for government Free and Reduced Lunch) student populations (NCES 2007). These are schools and districts where "the infrastructure and large numbers of people can make it difficult to provide necessary and adequate resources to the large numbers of people who need them" (Milner & Lamotey 2014, p. 2014). Such schools are often dubbed "disadvantaged", "high-need" and "under-resourced."

In urban intensive school contexts, teachers' ideological aims often have to contend with a different set of political obstacles than the recent spate of loud clashing school board meetings or flurry of politically restrictive legislation that have dominated current education headlines. While subtler, these obstacles are arguably even more persistent and damaging to students, families, and educators, such as state and local policies which reinforce residential segregation along racial and economic lines and cement chronic inequitable funding for such schools (Baker 2014). In one of the most dire manifestations of inadequate financial resources, urban intensive

districts find themselves in the throes of state receivership which carries its own set of power-draining political constraints (Lyon Bleiberg and Schueler 2024). Political disadvantages like these exacerbate disparities these schools already face (Hess 2011; Warren 2011) even as urban intensive teachers exhibit a desire to work against inequity and disadvantage.

In terms of teachers' ideological aims, research from metastudies demonstrate that a majority of US teachers choose teaching for altruistic reasons (Fray & Gore 2018; Heinz 2015; Campbell 2013), often expressing a deep desire to make a positive and sometimes transformative impact on the lives of students. An expressed intent to work for social justice turns up often, especially among teachers of color (Su 1997; King 1993; Nieto 2006), perhaps reflecting a conscious or unconscious sense of "linked fate" (Dawson 1994) with the students of color they often teach. Nevertheless, recent research documents a disproportionately higher rate of turnover among teachers of color (Ingersoll, May, & Collins 2017) as well as overall teacher turnover in schools serving largely Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color (BIPOC) and low income populations (Ingersoll 2001; Payne 2008; Garcia & Weiss 2018; Santoro 2018; Esdal 2019). In an ironic way, this may also reflect a type of *actualized* linked fate that exposes urban intensive teachers to similar repressive conditions and policies that exist for the poor and minority communities in which they work (Bellmont 2019; Frank, et. al. 2021). And, in turn, this exposure functions to create a pushout effect for the otherwise altruistic teacher (Stanley 2022) further impacting urban intensive school students' access to a stable, caring teaching force.

Additionally, the historical research has demonstrated that urban intensive schools pay the heaviest cost in both the struggle to retain qualified teachers and the inability to attract highly sought new fully credentialed teachers in times when the competition for well-prepared teachers steepens due to overall scarcity in the pool of teachers (Garcia & Weiss 2019). Poorer districts,

such the district at the center of my study, whose limited funds depress teacher salaries often cannot compete with higher salaries offered in more affluent districts (Adamson & Darling-Hammond 2012). The net effect is that many urban intensive schools are perpetually caught in what Ingersoll's (2001) research nicknamed the "revolving door" of teacher attrition and its attendant negative impacts (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007) such as lower student achievement, engagement, and graduation rates (Fuller 2018).

Even so, there is evidence to suggest that much of the teacher attrition that is dubbed "burnout" is actually a form of "demoralization" that teachers experience when their altruistic and/or social justice ideological aims are constrained by policy mandates and political power imbalances that seem insurmountable to teachers (Ingersoll 2001; Santoro 2018). There is also evidence to suggest that social justice-oriented urban intensive teachers may have to shoulder a heavier political burden by "standing in the gap" for poorer communities which often lack political clout and influence to effect their own desired outcomes (Warren 2011; Henig et. al. 2001; Rogers 2006). So important is their fidelity to an ideology of altruism and/or social justice, that many teachers would rather exit the profession than remain and be forced to betray their ideals (Dunn et. al. 2017; Parsons et. al. 2017). Still, research documents other teachers who experience the same constraining political contexts and stubbornly hang on in active resistance (Quartz & TEP Research Group 2003; Francois & Quartz 2021). An emerging question for researchers is "What accounts for these differences?" Are there differences in the ways that teachers perceive the political aspects of their jobs? Are there resources or cultivated attributes that enable some teachers to see over and around the asymmetrical power and influence "obstacles" to navigate in ways that allow them to teach while still holding fast to their own political aims?

Some have posited that the qualities of political awareness and political fluency are important factors which may impact the ease with which teachers are able to negotiate the politics inherent in their work (Kelchtermans & Ballet 2002; Blase 1997). As described by Zaller, *political awareness* describes a more intrapersonal cognitive attentiveness to politics and an intellectual understanding of the politics one observes or encounters (1992). Though the term "political fluency" has not yet been firmly encoded in academic research (Morgan 2022), it is theorized to marry political awareness with a set of competencies and actionable skills that individuals can deploy in order to navigate their political terrain. It appears in several lines of research including business organizational politics (Butcher & Clarke 1999) and as a theoretical descriptor of the continuum of political identity development among college students (Morgan 2022). A related version referred to as "micro-political literacy" has been used in education research to describe a set of skills and understandings that equip a teacher to read the interpersonal political dynamics of their classrooms and schools in ways that enable them to *maneuver through* and feel *empowered to* influence outcomes (Malen 1994, Klettermans & Ballet 2002; Picower 2013). In her seminal work *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks describes becoming politically aware as a precursor to transformation stating "this is the important initial stage of transformation–that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstance."(1994, p.47) Implied is that there is something in becoming politically aware that lays a critical foundation upon which teachers can build a bridge from the imperfect "what is" towards a brighter "what could be." There is growing evidence that political fluency may be a crucial component of that bridge. Moreover, more recent scholarship suggests that teacher political fluency is strongly implicated as a prerequisite for enabling teachers to persist in teaching in spite of working conditions and policy enactments that

are hostile to their altruistic aims (Picower 2013; Katsarou, Picower & Stovall 2010; Kelchtermans 2005). Hence, it is possible that teacher political fluency may also play some role in teacher retention. Given the importance of political fluency, how do researchers identify *core means* by which teachers come to develop political fluency?

Political Fluency & Teacher Unionism

One logical step in searching for sources of teacher political fluency is looking at the structures or organizations through which teacher power and influence is most obviously made manifest. In the US context, research consistently finds teacher unionsto be the most prominent vehicle through which teachers collectively enact political power and influence (Berube 1988; Cowan & Strunk 2015; Cooper 2015; Bascia 2015; Moe 2011; Lieberman 2000; Loveless 2000; Peterson & Charney 1999). Despite broad scholarly agreement on this point, there remain persistent gaps in the academic research on teachers unions. There is relatively little known about them from the perspective of academic research (Bascia 2005), although US teachers' unions represent over 4 million public school educators. Kerchner points out, "it will be immediately apparent that the body of research is not large, for teacher unionism is in many ways a neglected corner in education research" (2004). The dearth of research is all the more astonishing, given that nearly 70% of all US teachers are union members (NCES NTPS 2017-18) and teacher unionshave existed for over 150 years in this country (Maitland 2007; Bascia 2015). There is a richly documented history of teachers unionism in the US and its earliest origins are tied squarely to the history of schools in the nation's urban centers (Lieberman 2000). However, very little of this history has been sufficiently mined or theorized in academic research with reference to teacher development nor teacher *political* development, more specifically. Understanding whether a relationship exists between teacher unionism and the

development of individual or collective teacher political fluency requires further scholarly inquiry.

My research attempts to begin to fill in some of the gaps by offering insight on how teachers working in an imperiled urban intensive school district described the impact of teacher unionism on the development of their own political skills and understanding. Given the current convergence of heightened political stressors bearing down on teachers, the extant teacher attrition and retention issues specific to urban intensive schools, and the fact that the overall demographic makeup of US school-age student populations is trending towards higher minority and higher poverty (NCES NTPS 2017-18) in ways that add urgency to supporting teachers in their altruistic ideological aims, the moment seemed right to dive into this research.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Teachers' work is inherently political at both the interpersonal and structural levels. Yet, now, many teachers are under state-sanctioned and local pressure to be apolitical. Moreover, many teachers are citing feelings of political attack as a significant driver in their decisions to stay or leave the teaching profession, even as the US faces growing teacher shortages. Historically, the impact of teacher shortages fall most negatively upon urban intensive schools which already find themselves at the center of harsh political critique and relative political disadvantage. Against this backdrop, how do researchers better understand urban intensive teachers' own conceptions of the political dimensions of their profession in terms of both constraints and opportunities?

Many teachers are largely motivated by an ideology of altruism and, often social justice, that must be negotiated through the political dynamics they encounter in the course of their work. Given the evidence that the political fluency of teachers matters as one precursor to

transformative altruistic and social justice work in "urban intensive" contexts, how do researchers better understand the sources that impact teachers' development of political fluency in ways that can inform and support teachers' political agency? For the purposes of honing my particular research on this topic, I developed several research questions which I explored

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q1: How do unionized teachers employed in "urban intensive" public schools describe the structural and interpersonal political dimensions affecting their work as teachers?

Q2: How do these teachers see such politics constraining and/or enhancing their work as teachers?

Q3: What role does teacher unionism play in shaping teachers' understanding of the political dimensions of teaching and the political skills and sense of political agency necessary to navigate the political factors affecting their work?

ABOUT THE STUDY

I was seeking to understand how unionized teachers working in urban intensive schools describe the political dimensions of their work at both the interpersonal and structural levels and learn to what extent their involvement with teacher unionism impacts their development of their political fluency in navigating these dimensions. More specifically, I wanted to know how they perceive the micropolitical aspects of their work such as the building-level dynamics of power and influence between themselves and their teaching peers, students, students' parents, site administrators, and other staff on site (Hoyle 1986). I was also interested in learning their perceptions of mesopolitical dynamics at play in their work lives. These included their relationship to regional district-level personnel, policies, practices and local interest groups (Allen 1989). Further, I was interested in these teachers' perceptions of the macropolitical forces influencing their work which include state and federal level policies, mandates, evaluations, state

or national interest groups, and the media (Kelchtermans 2007). I was also interested in learning how they see the impacts of these various levels of politics constraining or enhancing their work as teachers. Finally, I sought to learn how these teachers view the impact of teacher unionism on the development of the skills, understandings, and agency they feel they must employ to navigate the political dynamics they describe.

The intent of the study was to learn about, describe, and compare how urban intensive teachers who differ in their degree of engagement with teacher unionism perceive the political lay of their work, the strength of their political agency, and the degree to which teacher unionism contributes to their overall political fluency. Ultimately, I hoped to learn whether or not teachers find that teacher unionism contributes to their political awareness and efficacy in meaningful ways and, if so, to begin to grasp and describe how this happens, particularly in urban intensive contexts. At the inception of the study, I had not fully considered the role of state fiscal receivership as factoring so prominently in the study participants' experience of politics in their urban intensive district. However, as the study unfolded, the acute impact of the district's unique state of financial receivership became a salient feature contributing nuance to what shaped both the teachers' political perceptions and the ways in which their union involvement intersected with their political context. It yielded surprising yet important emergent findings about how the overlay of fiscal receivership in an urban intensive district also shapes teachers' political fluency development.

A phenomenological qualitative research approach with a strong emphasis on narrative inquiry was employed for this study. For the purpose of this study semi-structured interview was the primary approach, supported by secondary methods including survey questionnaires and solicited document analysis over a period of approximately five months (July 2023-November

2023). The study focused on TK-12 teachers serving in a single mid-sized urban intensive school district in California that was currently in a status of state fiscal receivership.

SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Before setting about on any research study endeavor, the researcher must be confronted with the blunt force trauma of the question "So what?" Why does any of what I am proposing to investigate even matter? How might this knowledge be useful and/or applied? It is my hope that the findings from this proposed research will contribute in the following ways:

- Illuminate understudied aspects of urban intensive teachers' experiences & understandings of the political nature of their work.
- Contribute to the academic body of knowledge on how teacher unionism impacts teacher political development and agency.
- Give voice to the lived experiences & derived expertise of teachers working in "urban intensive" schools.
- Begin to describe and invite critical analysis of the unique political challenges faced by teachers in urban intensive schools in districts that are in state fiscal receivership
- Begin to identify useful approaches or practices within teacher unionism that may be leveraged in expanding the scope of teacher professional development and teacher education to include attention to how **"political fluency"** can be cultivated and/or enhanced for teachers serving in urban intensive contexts.
- Inspire future research on the intersection of teacher political development, teacher unionism, and teacher retention in urban school contexts.

WHAT BRINGS ME TO THIS PROJECT

As a teacher who has spent the entirety of my 27-year career working in urban intensive schools, I have witnessed and experienced so much of what has been described in educational research as "the problems with urban schools." Everything from underfunding, understaffing, administrative corruption, low test scores, low morale, shrinking enrollment, charter school proliferation, high teacher turnover, pandemic inequities, to state takeover have been a part of my firsthand reality over the decades. In the same period, I have also seen myriad prescriptions, policies, leadership changes, punitive measures and "fixes" aimed at remedying these problems, often described as "research-based." The majority have been conceived and imposed in a top-down fashion and few have seriously engaged local teachers in the design and implementation. My experience has been that teachers often feel voiceless, powerless and invisible under such conditions. Many lose heart and give up. A consistent frustration I hear echoing among fellow teachers is that "they never ask teachers." Academic research talks alot *about* teachers, but less often *with* teachers. My qualitative research aims to do the latter. I purposely sought to craft a qualitative study that centered the voices and experiences of urban intensive classroom teachers regarding the broad political realities of their teaching as a vital component in building the body of academic scholarship pertaining to education precisely because it continues to be sorely lacking.

Similarly lacking are in depth discussions of the impact of teacher unionism on individual teacher political development and even less on its particular manifestations in urban intensive contexts. In the US, teacher unionism was largely forged among educators working in what today's terms would be described as "urban intensive" contexts in response to the political realities of their era. Time has since obscured their voices and the *human* story of teacher

unionism remains an under-researched facet of education. My own decades-long journey as an urban intensive classroom teacher has been deeply impacted by the intimate political knowledge, history, and strategies I have obtained in the context of my involvement in teacher unionism. Attending union-sponsored conferences, serving as a union site rep, participating in union actions and demonstrations shaped my thinking but also exposed me to a pathway of previously "hidden" options and strategies for resisting everything from teacher burnout to oppressive policies. These experiences lend to my curiosity about how unionism impacts other teachers who are similarly situated.

Insofar as teacher unionism represents one of the primary vehicles through which teachers' voices and political interests are purportedly enjoined and represented, it *also* deserves the attention of scholarly inquiry. In carrying out this qualitative investigation, my hope was to build out our academic understanding of urban intensive teachers' conceptions of the unique political lay of their work and its intersections with teacher unionism while honoring their authentic voices and unique expertise.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW & INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Overview of Chapter 2

Locating the body of research that specifically addresses my topic of the political development of unionized urban intensive teachers proved challenging as nearly every aspect of my particular inquiry receives only marginal attention in the current corpus of educational research. However, there are certainly key concepts that are addressed in research that offer useful illumination to my topic. The following sections delineate **three** distinct threads of extant literature that helped to inform my research questions. Given that my research seeks to specifically understand how teachers working in *urban intensive* schools perceive the political dimensions of their work, I discuss the research related to **the unique politically-laden challenges confronting teachers serving in urban intensive contexts**. Because I am interested in learning about the ways these teachers see teacher unionism shaping their political understanding and development of their political skills and agency, I also highlight academic research which addresses the **history and nature of teacher unionism as it has functioned as a vehicle for teachers' political voice and agency.** Finally, in seeking to understand how urban intensive teachers name and describe the skills and understandings they employ in navigating the political dimensions of their work, I turn to the literature from which I derive my concept of **teacher political fluency.**

In the absence of a single unifying theory that overlays all three, I turn to the concept of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) which posits a building up of theory "from intensive involvement with the phenomenon under study" (Wells 1995, p.35) Since the more specific topic

of teacher political development as related to teacher unionism is not extensively addressed in the existing research to date, I approached it with the understanding that, the literature review is a "living document" and likely to expand and shift in response to the data collection, analysis and final synthesis that emerges. This is in keeping with some of the core features of a grounded theory approach (Wells 1995; Dunne 2011). A more thorough discussion of grounded theory will be laid out in the Methods Chapter 3.

I. Teachers & Political Challenges in Urban Intensive Contexts

As a student and an aspiring researcher of Urban Schooling in California, I have a particular interest in expanding our understanding of the specific issues and challenges pertaining to teachers serving in urban school contexts in this state. This is not to dismiss or diminish the importance of teachers serving rural communities, but rather to address the demographic reality that, regardless of the actual physical urbanicity or ruralness of location, much of the California public school population typifies the characteristics (i.e. high-poverty, high-minority) of what Milner (2012) refers to as "urban intensive" school environments. Given that nearly 1 in 8 students in the United States attends a California public school (Johnson & Tanner 2018), it stands to reason that California provides the perfect microcosm in which to examine the dynamics of teachers and politics in urban intensive contexts. According to data from the 2021 California Dashboard (California 2021), over 78% of California's roughly 6 million public schoolchildren are non-white. Over 60% of these students are classified as "socioeconomically disadvantaged." The 2021 data for nation's 2nd largest school district, Los Angeles Unified, alone shows a 92.3% non-white student population with some 85.3% of its nearly half a million students classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged (California 2021) which places it

squarely at the upper end of what the US Department of Education classifies as a high-poverty, high-minority district (NCES 2007). Moreover, a recent analysis by researchers from The Century Foundation found that California is one of the most inequitably funded public school systems in the country (Ayu, et. al. 2020). These disparities may seem perplexing given California's current reputation as both a "progressive" and wealthy state, but the current realities speak to an amalgam of historically documented racial, socioeconomic, and political moves that set the stage for the stark realities facing urban intensive schools today. These include California's resistance to school desegregation and decades of financial divestment in public education embodied in legislation such as Proposition 1 and Proposition 13 of the 1970's that also coincided with a steady rise in minority and low-income student populations within the state (Willis 2018; Orfield & Ee 2014; Learning Matters, 2004; Russ-Eft 1980). What has been seen in California mirrors a wider phenomenon characterizing school systems serving racially and economically marginalized students that scholar Ladson-Billings famously characterized as the "education debt" (2006).

My interest in studying teachers in urban intensive schools does not stem solely from the reality that a growing number of California's public school students attend such schools. It also is attached to the notion that urban intensive schools are key sites of ongoing political struggles (Hess 2008; Lipman 2013; Fabricant & Fine 2012; Howell & Peterson 2006; Shirley 1997) which challenge teachers in particularly salient ways. The academic literature I encountered addresses the impacts of the unique politically-laden circumstances of urban school teachers in two different but related ways. I utilize the loose analogy of "fight or flight" in delineating each.

The first line of research surveyed below demonstrates that the unique political challenges encountered in urban intensive schools often exact a toll on teachers in ways that can

accelerate their exodus from teaching in urban intensive schools, sometimes as an act of political protest against educational policies and practices they deem unjust or unethical (Santoro 2018; Dunn, et. al. 2017; Love 2019). To some extent, this literature highlights a type of "Flight" reaction among urban intensive teachers when confronted with unique political challenges converging around their work, through solidarity and resistance. This body of scholarship primarily focuses on the importance of urban teachers in narrowing the achievement gap among urban intensive students, while also demonstrating the difficulty of retaining such teachers in these schools. This phenomenon, in and of itself, speaks to how the particular structural politics of racism, classism, and neglect have been acutely felt in urban intensive school contexts, thus creating conditions which are adverse to teacher empowerment and persistence (Santoro 2018; Bosser, 2011; Achenstein & Ogawa 2010; Imazeki 2002). I examine this body of literature using Job Demands-Resources Theory (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) as a helpful analytic lens.

The second body of scholarship surveyed looks at how and why there is a growing movement among some urban teachers to align themselves with the concerns of the marginalized populations of the schools and communities in which they work (Katsorou et. al. 2010; Love 2019). I characterize this alignment and the subsequent actions of advocacy and allyship on the part of teachers as a "fight" response. Given the current ethno-racial and socio-economic makeup of the majority of the urban intensive teacher force and its contrast with the majority ethno-racial and socioeconomic makeup of urban intensive public school students, Political Race Theory (Guinier & Torres, 2002) is employed as a helpful analytic lens for understanding some of the potential motivating factors driving teachers to align their interests with those of their

students. Connections between Political Race Theory and the solidarity principles inherent in teacher unionism are also touched upon.

A. FLIGHT: Job Demands-Resources Theory & Urban Intensive Teacher Importance/Retention Literature

Job Demands-Resources Theory is a general occupational model which asserts that workers experience strain when the physical and/or mental requirements of a given job are incommensurate with the physical, mental, and/or socio- emotional resources that are accessible by the worker to successfully carry out the job (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). It essentially states that workers perform their jobs and feel better about their jobs when they are equipped with the proper tangible and intangible resources to do the tasks they have been given. According to the theory, when there aren't sufficient resources to meet the demands of the job, the typical result is eventual employee burnout. The theory has recently been explored in literature related to teacher resilience and well-being (Graziera et. al. 2021), with a push to locate those "resources" that might enable teachers to better persist in their work. The theory serves as a useful overlay in looking at the extant literature around the importance of urban teachers and the struggles regarding their retention from both the *demands,* which are often exacerbated by political challenges and the *resources* urban intensive teachers do or *do not* have at their disposal. Research reveals that many urban teachers are under particularly "straining" job demands with relatively low resources upon which to draw in meeting them. A visible consequence has been the higher rate of teacher attrition in urban intensive schools. An underlying question in my research is to what extent, if any, **teacher political fluency** functions

as a *resource* which urban teachers employ to meet the political demands of their specific context?

It has been well-established in education research that teachers comprise the strongest influence on student achievement outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Engel, Jacob, & Curran, 2014; Louis et al., 2010; Milner, 2010; Rockoff, 2004; Sanders & Horn, 1998; Stronge & Hindman, 2003). However, to the detriment of numerous poor and mostly nonwhite students across the United States, the most qualified teachers are in significantly shorter supply in many of our nation's most economically and academically struggling schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Payne, 2008; Zeichner, 2010). A large part of this disparity is tied to higher teacher attrition in high-need schools with some figures showing upwards of 70% attrition within five years of teaching (Papay et. al., 2017). Fuller et. al. (2018) point out that high teacher turnover is associated with harmful effects:

> Teacher turnover disrupts curricular cohesiveness, interrupts teacher-student relationships, interferes with the adoption of a common school vision, and leads to an increase in the number of inexperienced teachers. These issues negatively affect student outcomes such as achievement, engagement, and graduation. (p.1)

The consequences of this tendency are real for the students attending high-poverty, high minority schools manifesting in both academic and opportunity gaps (Milner, 2010). Without high quality teachers, the entire educational project falls apart. Or as Nguyen nicely sums up, "teachers represent a critical part of public education and there is compelling interest in retaining quality teachers, particularly for disadvantaged schools" (2021, p.1).

Confusingly, it appears that teachers are both the cause and the "cure" to the problems which plague urban intensive schools. An unintended consequence of this hyperfocus on teachers as the ultimate cause and cure is that it places a tremendous psychological burden on teachers in urban intensive contexts. Since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

legislation over two decades ago, U.S. educational policy has continuously endorsed the requirement that public school students be taught by "well-qualified teachers" (Partee, 2014) and yet, for teachers in struggling urban schools, their degree of "quality" is sometimes judged on such narrow factors as the standardized test scores of their students year-to-year, often utilizing unreliable "value added methods" (Newton et. al. 2010; Darling-Hammond et. al. 2011; Ingersoll et. al. 2016). Moreover, researchers have decried the fact that teachers are "being told to fix the lives of children born into poverty" (David C. Berliner in Santoro 2018) while current education policy "continues to negate the larger context in which schools, teachers, students, and school leaders are situated" (Tefera et. al. 2014). Nevertheless, urban intensive teachers are closely scrutinized in both the eyes of the state and, as in the controversial case of the Los Angeles Times' Teacher Ratings of 2010, in the court of public opinion. With regard to urban teachers in particular, Weiner & Jerome offer a powerful summation that illustrates how Job Demand-Resources Theory plays out in the lives of a good number of teachers:

> The fact that teachers are being blamed in the media for schools' limitations and students' difficulties has exacerbated teachers' demoralization and tendency to blame students and families. Teachers feel unsupported and disempowered, with good reason: Their professional autonomy and their ability to help students are undercut by policies that are often not within their immediate controls. (p.25)

Some of these unsupportive policies are summarized in Lipman's (2015) discussion of the steady rise of neoliberalism directed at urban education following the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report. According to Lipman, "there has been an evolving shift in federal education policy from a focus on equity to economic competitiveness, markets, standards, and top-down accountability" (p.57). For urban intensive schools, this shift is evidenced in ways such as government sanctioned for-profit charter proliferation, private school vouchers, "failing school" closures accompanied by mass firings of their school personnel, and competitive funding incentive

schemes such as the Race to the Top (RTT) grants of the Obama era (Fabricant & Fine 2012; Karp 2010; Lipman 2015). These common political realities faced by teachers in urban intensive schools paint a picture of the tensions and contradictions that both thwart and buttress these teachers' social justice aims. Clearly, many urban intensive teachers feel the impacts of the high demands and expectations placed on them from both within and without. At the same time, they often feel lacking in the material and political resources to render even meaningful, much less transformational, service to their students (Santoro 2018).

The research of Ingersoll more than two decades ago began to unpack some of the complexity of urban teachers' attrition. It sent shockwaves through the educational community with findings that nearly half of all new teachers were leaving the profession within the first five years, thus coining the term "the revolving door" as a descriptor of the state of the US teaching profession. Ingersoll further showed that many high-poverty and higher minority schools lose about 20% of their teachers annually and although the reasons for leaving incorporate problems such as student behavior and low salary, more often it is attributed to things like feelings of isolation, lack of support from the administration, and lack of empowerment over decisions (2001). These findings speak to the layered demoralizing aspects–beyond mere salary–which drive teachers away from the profession, and the acuteness with which they are encountered in high-need schools (Redding & Nguyen, 2020). Santoro's research posits that much teacher attrition is "rooted in discouragement and despair borne out of ongoing value conflicts with pedagogical policies, reform mandates, and school practices" (2018, p.3). It is no wonder, then, that urban intensive schools struggle with teacher retention. Yet, the evidence accumulated in research thus far indicates that ensuring skilled, committed and politically empowered teachers in urban intensive schools matters (Payne, 2008; Zeichner, 2010; Carver-Thomas & Darling-

Hammond, 2017). The lens of Job Demands-Resources Theory invites the researcher to investigate what resources are needed to reverse the trend of urban intensive teacher loss and to discern whether **political fluency** may be one of those resources.

B. FIGHT: Political Race Theory & Urban Intensive Teachers' Interest Alignment

The second line of extant research I survey is concerned with urban intensive teachers aligning themselves with the causes and concerns of the populations they teach, namely high-poverty and BIPOC students. To some extent, this literature highlights a type of "fight" reaction among urban intensive teachers when confronted with unique political challenges converging around their work through solidarity and resistance.

Dr. Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres' (2002) concept of Political Race Theory is useful in illuminating the particular ways in which politics, awareness, and agency converge for teachers working in urban intensive contexts in ways that echo the solidarity movements teachers have historically built amongst themselves in the context of teacher unionism. The theory points out that higher status and relative power in the US has historically been tied to "Whiteness" as an ethno-racial identity. In their analysis, persons of varying backgrounds can be said to be "raced" politically based on their relative power and status within a given system. For example, a *middle-class* Black person and a *poor* White person in the same community might fare similarly in terms of political clout and influence and could be said to be part of the same "political *race*" of disenfranchised people despite their outward racial differences. However, failure to recognize the similar political positions in which marginalized groups find themselves effectively shuts down the possibility for unified and effective mobilization for change. The implications of whether teachers see themselves as politically linked with their student populations is of

significance given the persistent gap between the ethno-racial makeup of the US teaching force and the ethno-racial makeup of the US student population (Albert Shanker Institute 2015; Boser 2011). In essence, can an 80% White teaching force perceive the needs and interests of a national public student population that is more than 50% students of color as married to their own needs and interests?

Several recent studies on the state of teacher diversity point out that across all states the overall teacher population is disproportionately White relative to the student population. In California, a 71% White teaching force teaches a student population that is only 22% White (Boser 2014; Wysienska-DiCarlo et. al. 2017; California Dashboard 2021**)**. At the same time, teachers of color tend to be concentrated in urban intensive schools (Boser 2011; Wysienska-DiCarlo et. al. 2017) in patterns that mirror the broader residential segregation patterns which were fueled by decades of "white flight" out of the central cities. In the case of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the nation's 2nd largest school district, recent decades have seen a steady climb in the percentage of teachers of color such that fewer than a third of classroom teachers are now White, and Hispanic teachers now make up the largest percentage (LAUSD 2021). A good body of research suggests that teachers of color are more likely than White teachers to identify social justice as a motivation for teaching (Su 1997; King 1993; Nieto 2006) and research contends that these teachers benefit BIPOC students by bringing greater motivation, higher expectations, role modeling, and cultural sensitivity to school contexts (Albert Shanker Institute 2015; Boser 2011; Roberts & Irvine 2009). Still, the rate at which the teacher force is diversifying lags woefully behind the demographic shifts in the student population (Ingersoll & May 2011) and, in the meantime, students in urban intensive schools have to contend with the teachers they have in front of them.

Political Race Theory offers a hopeful lens for urban intensive teachers of all ethno-racial backgrounds. Politically speaking, in terms of prestige, protection, and privilege, many teachers working in urban intensive schools "are who they teach," regardless of their own individual ethno-racial identity. To a large degree, whether they recognize it or not, teachers' political lots are thrown in with those of the students they teach. The learning conditions of poor, nonwhite students who are not highly regarded by the dominant power structure become the teaching and working conditions of their teachers (Weiner & Jerome 2016). Even a smartly dressed White affluent teacher with pop-singer Paul Simon's fabled "diamonds on the soles of her shoes" still has to tread on the same neglected, underfunded, overcrowded, understaffed paths as her students during the hours she teaches in an urban intensive school. According to theory on Compassion Organizing, it becomes increasingly difficult for the teacher to completely divorce her experiences from those of her students (Dutton et. al. 2006) when so much of her daily experiences run parallel to theirs. This is not to say that all urban intensive teachers automatically feel compassionately towards their students, but that these shared conditions may create the possibility for a recognition that there exists between them a basic level of common cause.

This notion of a common cause between diverse individuals is not completely foreign to unionized teachers when considered in light of the solidarity principles embedded in teacher unionism. For all intents and purposes, teacher unionsrely on organizing a confederation of diverse strangers, marginally "connected" by the fact that they work in education, into a united front by encouraging them to see themselves as a "race" of teachers with a shared purpose, common cause, and common political standing in relationship to administrators, politicians, and educational policies to which teachers are beholden.

Examining how the historical "racing" of teachers as marginal to the governance of the educational sphere and its attendant aspects, i.e. curriculum, assessment, methods, learning conditions, etc. (Dewey 1903) sheds some light on why there is an emergent rise of a type of "interest convergence" (Bell 1980) with similarly marginalized groups such as poor and minority students which are increasingly represented in the US and in California school populations in particular (NCES 2021). This is reflected in the recent tide of public school teacher activism toward sweeping and inclusive educational change, embodied in the Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG) and the #RedforEd mobilizations of 2018 of many US teacher unions(Charney, et. al. 2021; Blanc 2022; Givan & Lang 2020 McCartin et. al. 2020). In both instances, teachers have made the wider concerns of the communities in which they teach salient talking points alongside of more traditional teacher-centered demands such as wages and benefits. Whether tactical, sincere, or some combination of the two, many teachers serving in urban intensive contexts are recognizing a type of linked fate (Dawson 1994) with their marginalized students and employing their political agency in the service of both their students and themselves. As Guinier and Torres aptly state:

> Race becomes political in the sense of generating collective action only when it motivates people to connect their individual experiences to the experiences of others and then to act collectively in response to those experiences. (Guinier & Torres, 2002, p.17)

To the extent that urban intensive teachers are coming to recognize their interests as intertwined with those of their students, a possible path to empowerment may be opening up. Meier notes:

> In a society where the income differential is steadily widening, the clamor about decreasing academic gaps...won't be serious until there is an organized and "interested" power bloc whose members stand to gain, in the here and now, from greater equity (2004, pp.54-55).

There is some evidence to suggest that many teachers working and/or preparing to work in urban intensive schools are becoming increasingly "interested" in social justice and equity for marginalized students and themselves (Kumashiro 2004; Cochran-Smith et.al. 2009; Enslin 2006; Nkoane 2012; McCartin 2020; Francois & Quartz 2021; Blanc 2022; Givan & Lang 2020). Further research is needed to understand this current trend among urban intensive teachers and locate the likely factors that may sustain it.

II. Teacher Unionism: History of Political Agency

In surveying the extant literature pertaining to teachers and politics, one cannot escape teacher unionism. In fact, in searching for the combination of terms "teachers" and "politics," the researcher is almost always led to some literature around teacher unions. At the same time the overall body of academic research focused on studies of teacher unionism is relatively small, despite the fact that US teachers' unions represent over 4 million public school educators. Kerchner points out, "it will be immediately apparent that the body of research is not large, for teacher unionism is in many ways a neglected corner in education research" (2004). Where teacher unionism is discussed in the literature, it is predominantly done in ways that focus on its history and actions of teachers taken in aggregate. While this is appropriate given that a "union of one" is a paradox, it leaves a gap in our understanding of the individuals who make up the union and how they relate to, shape, and are *shaped by* it.

My research is highly interested in ways in which teacher unionism influences individual teachers' political development. Existing teacher unionism research has favored the *collective* state of teachers' political power and influence and done little to examine the *individual* experiences of teachers as they come into political awareness, agency and even union involvement. Cooper asserts that there is scant research on the process by which teachers gain

awareness of or become socialized into teacher unionism (2015). Pogodzinski's (2012) research on the topic of how teachers become socialized into teachers unionism reveals that the knowledge and support of unions comes through the channel of "informal relationships with colleagues." However, Cooper points out:

> Pogodzinski determined that these teacher interactions were few, informal, and not very effective in building a strong union culture so that unionism could grow and survive in the teaching profession. (2015, p. 345)

Despite the lack of research on the processes by which teachers' individual political identities and agency are shaped or impacted by teacher unionism, the existing research does have much to say about the historical development of teacher unionism in the US and how it has grown to be a powerful conduit of *collective* teacher political agency especially at the mesopolitical and macropolitical levels. Moreover, teacher unionism has its roots in some of the urban centers of its day and was most substantively forged in the politically fraught contexts of urban teacher experiences in cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York City during the middle of the 20th century (Rosenthal 1969). Though not comprehensive enough for my particular study focus, it is still relevant as contextual information which I build upon through the research process. The following section summarizes these major contributions as well as contemporary criticisms of teacher unionism as relates to teacher politics.

Teacher unionism as a vehicle for teacher political agency is by no means a "new thing." Notwithstanding, the pervasive and highly visible spike in teacher union activity embodied in the #RedforEd movements that have manifested throughout the United States beginning with West Virginia teachers in 2018 up to the recent Los Angeles and Chicago Teachers' strikes, unionism and the political agency of teachers has been a fact dating back to the 1800's. With the founding of the National Education Association (NEA) in 1857, the Chicago

Teachers Federation (CTF) in 1897, and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in 1916, educators recognized the need to unite collectively to advocate for students, families, and themselves as paramount to the larger goal of American democracy (Bascia 2015; Shelton 2018). In fact, the idea of teachers organizing collectively grew up nearly in tandem with the idea that our nation, in order to preserve its, then, new and "fragile" system of democracy, needed to commit itself to establish a common system of public schools. In essence, these early educators organized as "agents" in promoting the expansion of publicly funded schools.

National Federation of Teachers president Margaret Haley, in her 1904 address to the NEA cautioned that a citizenry so new to democratic rule, as was the U.S. at that time, was especially in peril of "schemes" that would "destroy in a people the capacity for self-government" (1904, p. 145). Public education via public schools was key to preventing this. She continued, "If the American people cannot be made to realize and meet their responsibility to the public school, no self appointed custodians of the public conscience can do it for them" (1904, p. 145). Early educators viewed schools as essential to protecting and furthering democracy by making sure that students were prepared to take up their civic duties. Education advocates from Horace Mann in Massachusetts to John Swett in California worked for, argued and succeeded in establishing free and universal public schools across the country throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

California's establishment of a free public school system by virtue of the 1866 *Act to Provide a System of Common Schools*[1], was preceded and shaped by teacher union activity and advocacy. In 1863, John Swett founded the "California Educational Society" which pushed for the law's passage. Today, Swett's group is known as the California Teachers Association (CTA),

[1] This act amended the 1850 constitution that established the system of common schools

the largest state level teachers union in the country representing some 325,000 educators (CTA History 2021). In essence, the establishment and proliferation of public schools themselves owe a great deal to the work of the early teacher union activists. Further, early teacher unions held themselves accountable as co-laborers in democracy stating, "The methods as well as the objects of teachers' organizations must be in harmony with the fundamental object of the public school in a democracy, to preserve and develop the democratic ideal." (Haley, 1904 p.145)

The early teachers' unions were eerily correct in their assessment of the fragility of democracy in that they were routinely met with suspicion and contempt by the legal and social powers of their time. Kerchner and Mitchell document:

> Up until the mid-nineteenth century, unions of all types were considered to be *illegal conspiracies*, and as late as the second decade of the 20th century, they were prosecuted as violations of antitrust laws. Combinations of teachers were even more suspect...they (teachers) were women for who work propriety was not forwarded in active voice. (1983, p.5)

Moreover, the research of Abowitz and Rousmaniere (2007) traces how the feminization of the teaching force in the latter half of the 19th century was intended to thwart teachers' political agency, lower teacher salaries, and maximize teacher compliance with male-dominated administrations. It rocked the system when early female teacher organizers such as Margaret Haley, Catherine Goggin, and Mary Herrick formed teacher unions to successfully advocate for basics like pensions and increased wages. This was astonishing given that collective bargaining as a legally protected practice in the US would not come into existence until 1935 and even then, did not apply to teacher unions.

Indeed, up until the late 1960's through the1970's, with the large-scale passage of so-called PERA's (Public Employment Relations Acts) by state legislatures, teacher unions had no legally protected power to engage in traditional "union" practices such as collective bargaining

around salary, benefits, and working conditions (Berube 1988). Accordingly, much of the early work of teacher unions was limited to advocacy around issues like curriculum, materials, teaching methods, and class sizes and other factors that were seen as directly impacting student academic outcomes. Even so, their advocacy had no legal "teeth." Famed educational reformer and founding member of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), John Dewey pointed out:

> If there is a single public school system in the United States where there is official and constitutional provision made for submitting questions of methods of discipline and teaching, and the questions of the curriculum, text-books, etc., to the discussion of those actually engaged in the work of teaching, that fact has escaped my notice. (Dewey, 1903)

From the earliest days, marginalization of the teacher in even the most basic controls of her profession set the conditions of her fate to be linked with that of her students. Haley asserts, "There is no possible conflict between the interest of the child and the interest of the teacher. The same things which restrict her powers restrict his powers also" (Haley, 1904). Organizing came to be seen as the surest way for teachers to assert and amplify their voices on behalf of themselves, students, and the overall teaching profession (Loveless 2011).

A number of scholars of teacher unionism note that while teacher unions have exercised some degree of political agency throughout their existence, they did not truly evolve into the politically influential giants they are today until after the passage of the legislation which cemented their collective bargaining rights, including the right to strike (Loveless 2011; Berube 1998; Moscow 1966). Suddenly, teachers had a powerful new tool within their possession that allowed them to address a wide range of needs and demands and have a nearly equal hand in negotiating local policies and practices pertaining to their schools (Rosenthal 1969). In describing the "new militancy" of teachers following their enfranchisement via collective bargaining rights, Rosenthal observes:

> Likewise, teachers have not been placated by initial gains, but only set their sights higher...Seeing and experiencing the benefits of some democracy, teachers do not rest content. They aspire to and work toward greater democracy in the public schools. (1969, p.15)

A taste of "democracy" had apparently sparked an unprecedented revolution in the ways in which teachers could envision increasing their power and influence in the American educational landscape, such that by the late 1980's and early 1990's, teacher unions were being spoken of in research as "the most powerful political constituency in education" (Berube 1998).

Contemporarily, teachers' unions continue to be cited in research as playing a major role in educational policy, shaping professional standards, and advocating for broader issues which touch the lives of students, teachers, and families connected to public schools. Researcher Bruce S. Cooper points out:

> At the local level, teachers and their unions are the largest, best-organized political voice. In many communities--turning out in large numbers for local school board elections--and in tracking the issues in education that affect their members. (2015, p. 345)

This power is in no small way contingent upon the fact that the over 4 million unionized public school teachers are now the single largest group of unionized workers in the US. Hence, they comprise a potentially formidable power bloc that some find threatening.

Despite many of the gains described in the academic literature regarding teacher unions, not all scholars agree that teacher unions create more benefit than harm. The opposition to teacher unions varies but some of the strongest criticisms leveled at teacher unions are that they advance the interests of teachers in opposition to what is best for students and that they shut down educational innovation by stubbornly blocking educational reforms (Becker in Berlatsky 2013; Burke in Berlatsky 2013; Greene in Berlatsky 2013 Jacoby in Berlatsky 2013; Lieberman 2000; Moe 2017; Paige 2009). It is posited that because of their huge numbers and resultant ability to raise money in support of lobbying efforts, teacher unions exert an outsized influence

in US politics which some critics characterize as a coercive monopoly (Jacoby in Berlatsky 2013). Whether the criticism is justified or not, some speculate that the negative image has resulted in a public "backlash" against teachers and their unions (Bascia, 2005).

Opponents of teacher unions have successfully dismantled certain aspects of union financial strength through enactment of "right to work" laws in several states and the 2018 *Janus* Supreme Court decision which eliminated compulsory "agency fee" dues for non-union members who work in unionized sectors as a matter of Constitutional right. Early indications of the impact of this decision on teacher unions indicate that it resulted in some decline in membership and agency fee payer revenue in some corners, but that teacher unions also saw membership boosts in others. This mixed result has been partially attributed to teacher unions taking proactive steps to do anticipatory outreach and organizing among their members to stave off membership declines (DiSalvo 2019).

In documenting criticism of teacher unionism, it is also important to note that much of the criticism and contention comes from within the unions themselves by virtue of their democratic structure. Teacher union membership spans communities with diverse interests and diverse ideological beliefs. Further, unions have developed and shifted across their history in response to social context and the evolving priorities and preferences of their membership at various times, including but not limited to stances on segregation, racism, sexism, immigrant rights, endorsements of political candidates, LGBTQ+ issues, professionalism, and masking during the recent COVID-19 global pandemic (Abowitz & Rousmaniere 2007; Bascia 1998; Charney et. al. 2021; Rousmaniere 2001; Shelton 2018; Strasfield and Strasfield 2020). Caucusing of interest subgroups and leadership changes are natural facts in the history of teacher unionism and for this reason, teacher unions are somewhat pliable and shaped by their members.

Currently, some of the largest and most influential teacher unions are centering the needs of teachers and students in a holistic way in response to internal caucusing which has been advocating for unions to embrace "social justice unionism" (Charney, et. al. 2021; McCartin et. al. 2020). An example is seen in the current mission statement of the nation's largest state-level teachers union, the California Teachers Association:

> The California Teachers Association exists to protect and promote the well-being of its members; to improve the conditions of teaching and learning; to advance the cause of free, universal, and quality public education for all students; to ensure that the human dignity and civil rights of all children and youth are protected; and to secure a more just, equitable, and democratic society. (CTA Mission, 2021).

The point is to illustrate that teacher unionism is not static and it adapts to the external and internal pressures exerted on it over time.

Regardless of whether teacher unionism is praised or scorned, there is broad scholarly agreement that teacher unions represent the most prominent vehicle through which teachers *collectively* enact political power and influence (Berube 1988; Cowan & Strunk 2015; Cooper 2015; Bascia 2015; Moe 2011; Lieberman 2000; Loveless 2000; Peterson & Charney 1999). The existing scholarship, though relatively limited, offers an ample base from which to begin to explore teacher unionism's relationship to and influence upon *individual* teachers' political fluency development.

Teacher Political Fluency

My research strives to contribute to an understanding of the political dimensions of teaching and the political skills and sense of political agency necessary to navigate these dimensions. I refer to these in aggregate as "teacher political fluency." In tracing the literature related to "teacher political fluency" it is important to clarify that it is not a term that I have encountered in the current academic literature as such. Rather, I draw from scholarship on related

ideas which I am building upon to construct my own conceptualization of this term. For the purpose of my research, I am defining teacher political fluency as a set of skills and understandings that equip a teacher to read the political dynamics of their classrooms, schools, districts, as well as education-related policies at the local, state, and federal levels in ways that enable them to *maneuver through* and feel *empowered to* influence outcomes for students and themselves. I theorize that urban intensive teachers who are able to acquire this type of fluency are able to integrate political knowledge (cognitive), political efficacy (affective), and political agency (behavioral) in ways that allow them to navigate the political demands of their work in ways that may delay burnout and even deepen their capacity to persist and, perhaps, effect change.

In this section I examine **four** bodies of literature that inform the development of my concept of teacher political fluency. Namely, I survey the extant literature around the **general concept of fluency** as it pertains to learning, the related terms **"political competence"** and "**political capital,"** studies around the concept of **"micro-political literacy" and teachers,** and a brief discussion of **recent scholarship around teacher learning** that may be useful in illuminating the conditions under which teachers can begin to acquire political fluency.

I. What is Fluency and How does it Inform My Research?

At its most basic level, fluency is a noun that is defined as "the state or quality of being fluent" (Oxford English Dictionary 2022). The dictionary goes on to explain that the term is derived from the Latin verb "fluere," which means "to flow." The term fluency is applied across many contexts and disciplines, but generally is used to describe a high level of mastery around a skill or behavior that enables a person to seemingly "flow" through it without great difficulty or

obstruction, such as in second language fluency or reading fluency for example. My conception of teacher political fluency is interested in similar ideas of how urban intensive teachers "flow" through the political demands of their contexts, but also in the process by which that mastery is built and how it is meaningfully deployed in their work (i.e. agency). Unfortunately for my purposes, fluency studies within the education discipline tend to focus on student fluency as it pertains to hard skills such as reading, math facts, and language. In terms of scholarship related to my use of the term fluency, the fields of behavioral analysis, sociology, political science, and psychology offer the most applicable understandings.

From the research of behavioral analysis, Johnson & Layng (1996) describe fluency as "behavior that is flowing, effortless, well practiced, and accurate" (p.281). A key component in this conception of fluency is the notion of "practice" as a builder of fluency. In thinking about potential links between the development of teachers' political fluency and teacher unionism, further exploration of how unions may serve as sites of political "practice'' for their members becomes an important consideration. Scholarship from the discipline of political science looks extensively at how participation in voluntary associations such as unions can provide a type of cultivation through democratic rehearsal that has been noted to increase civic participation in other arenas (Ayala, 2000; Alexander et. al. 2012; Terriquez 2011), hinting at a type of fluency built through members' practical application of the skills and procedural norms of such organizations. Social constructivist perspectives in sociology also equate this type of fluency as expertise that comes through "successful socialisation within a particular community" (Evans 2008). Importantly, these understandings of fluency point to its development through *practice* in a *social context.* This idea figures prominently in my own conception of teacher political fluency as it potentially relates to teacher unionism. Scholarship from the discipline of psychology

informs the "efficacy" and "agency" aspects of my construct of teacher political fluency. Namely, it posits that fluency generally produces a positive attitude towards the object about which one is fluent, making an individual more likely to engage with the object (Claypool et. al. 2015). In other words, fluency builds a sense of efficacy and promotes agency through increasing engagement.

II. Political Competence and Political Capital

The two related concepts of **"political competence"** and **"political capital"** that further inform my construct of teacher political fluency are found in the disciplines of political science and adult education research. The term political competence appears in the literature of political science as "political skills plus the sense of efficacy necessary for effective political action" (Barnes, 1967). Building on the earlier scholarship of Barnes (1967) and Easton & Davis (1967), Muller (1970) offers a fleshed out description of the core dimensions of political competence as follows:

> (1) a general belief that government is responsive to citizen influence;
> (2) skills necessary for effective political behavior; and
> (3) a psychological disposition or feeling of confidence in one's personal ability to influence salient government decisions.

Like my own conception of teacher political fluency, political competence centers the components of a skill set and a mindset that prefigures political agency. It differs from my idea in that it does not speak to the aspects of prerequisite political knowledge, nor does it speak directly to the micropolitical dimensions incorporated in my teacher political fluency construct.

Writing in the discipline of adult educational research, Schugurensky (2000) offers the concept of "political capital" based on his re-conception of Bordieu's (1981) construct. Whereas,

Bordieu's construct confined this type of capital to political elites, Shugurensky introduces a more egalitarian vision:

> I understand "political capital" as the capacity to influence political decisions. This is a capacity (actualized or potential) that all citizens (not only politicians) have to a lesser or larger extent.

His definition mirrors the aspect of exerting *influence* that is contained in my construct of teacher political fluency. Moreover, he goes on to delineate five related factors which he deems crucial to the "development and activation" of political capital; these being: knowledge, skills, attitudes, closeness to power, and resources (Schugurensky 2000). In this regard, he comes even closer to my conception and introduces additional insights through his inclusion of the concepts of proximity to power and resources. However, like the example of political competence, Schugurensky focuses exclusively on mesopolitical and macropolitical dimensions of politics and does not attend to micropolitical dimensions.

III. Micropolitical Literacy

The final area of scholarship that informs my construct of teacher political fluency rests squarely in the discipline of educational research and is centered on the concept of "micro-political literacy." This concept emerges from the broader scholarly field of the micro-politics of education. Malen & Cochran (2014) delves deeply into micro school-level politics, highlighting the ways in which teachers, administrators, students and other constituents within a school, use relationships of power and influence to further their interests and aims, through conflict, collaboration, and cooperation. Building on the research of Blase (1991), Hoyle (1986), Smeed et. al. (2009), & Johnson (2001), Magudu & Gumbo define micro-political literacy as:

> formal and informal power in organisations and power strategies that are employed by

> individuals and groups to accomplish their goals to influence others and to further and protect their goals and interests and to influence decisions that allocate scarce but valued resources within organisations. (p.2, 2017)

The assertion put forward by Magudu & Gumbo is that a lack of awareness of the micro-political dimensions extant in schools wreaks a type of havoc on newly inducted teachers in ways that harm their chances of retention (2017).

It is no wonder that many teachers enter the profession suddenly overcome by the complex web of social relationships and historical micropolitics for which they feel inadequately prepared. In truth, teachers enter the profession *in medias res*, reminiscent of Bakhtin's (1981) lens of dialogism which likens life and professional contexts to an ongoing "conversation" or dialogue into which each person is born and must learn to navigate, often uneasily. Farmer (1998) in drawing on Baktin's theory, eloquently describes "dialogue precedes us and, hence, is a condition we are born into—swaddling us as it were, long before we utter our individual first word and long after we utter our individual last."(p.xiv) In this sense, teachers entering the profession land in the midst of an ongoing historical "drama" that includes students, parents, administrators, politicians, colleagues, and teacher unions without a complete script or even the equivalent of "stage notes" upon which they might draw for meaningful improvisation. The extent to which teachers are able to "cobble" together the myriad pieces successfully has profound implications for their ability to last in the profession as well as pursue higher aims of socially just transformative practice. To empower teachers within the school political context, Klettermans & Ballet (2002) posit a theory of micro-political literacy as a skill that may be developed in new teachers through intentional professional development. They argue that it is a necessary part of teacher induction if the aim is to sustain them in the profession.

The concept of micro-political literacy lends powerfully to my overall conception of teacher political fluency in the ways that it addresses the interpersonal nature of politics at the school level which urban intensive teachers must daily navigate. However, it does not go far enough in addressing the myriad political hurdles that these teachers must also negotiate at the district, state, and federal levels in the course of their work. For this reason, I advance a new and comprehensive construct of teacher political fluency which encompasses political knowledge, beliefs, skills, and agency at the micropolitical, mesopolitical, and macropolitical levels.

IV. Teacher Learning and Political Fluency Acquisition

It is fairly safe to say that no teacher is born politically fluent. For this reason, my research also seeks to examine the potential means by which political fluency is developed in urban intensive teachers. Only through continued research can we come to better understand whether teacher political fluency is a quality that can be taught, "caught," or some combination of the two. A clue to building this understanding lies in extant research about teacher learning. Whereas theories of cognitivism (Anderson, 1983; Wenger, 1987; Hutchins, 1995) used to predominate the research around how teachers learn, Kelly (2006) asserts that most theorists now look to socio-cultural theory (Lave & Wenger 1991) as a more accurate lens through which teacher learning can be better understood. According to Kelly, key features of the socio-cultural model of teacher learning are that knowledge is constructed in the context of dynamic social interactions which are also influenced by context and teacher identity. It posits that teachers' expertise is crafted by a shift in their participation from the periphery (novice level) to full participation in a given content knowledge and/or knowledge practice activity (Lave & Wenger 1991). In other words, teacher training is more than a simple exercise of dumping information

into a teacher's brain and expecting them to immediately harness the information and act on it in some predetermined intended way across novel situations. The implication for teacher political fluency is that simply telling teachers about the concept does not mean they will automatically become politically fluent. Recent research by Korthagen (2017) adds that teacher learning must be considered in light of the strong influences of teachers' thinking, emotions, and motivations if professional development wishes to succeed in shaping or reshaping teachers' behaviors.

Teacher unions represent a social site in which learning occurs. Such foundational concepts with regard to teacher learning will help to inform my research particularly as it pertains to my questions about how or whether urban intensive teachers' varying degrees of engagement with teacher unionism impacts their development of political fluency in differential ways.

Bridging the Research Gap

With regard to the extant literature directly addressing my research topic, much of what I would like to know has yet to be written. However, there is a promising basis for my proposed research in existing academic research threads addressing: 1) the unique political circumstances encountered by urban intensive teachers, 2) the history and nature of teachers unionism as a conduit of teachers' collective political agency, and 3) the concepts which form the foundation of my conception of teacher political fluency. In keeping with the tenets of grounded theory, I remain open and flexible to the new insights and theoretical connections which are likely to emerge as the research process is undertaken. As such, I understand that the literature review is subject to shift and expand in response to that process in iterative ways. Daring to explore the unexplored involves uncertainty and risk for the researcher. For the sake of contributing to the building of new knowledge, I am ready and willing to go there.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

"...We co-produce knowledge with people who know too much about structural violence and exclusion, who carry histories of silenced knowledge, who understand the footprints of U.S. 'progress'--from below." - Michelle Fine, *Just Research in Contentious Times: Widening the Methodological Imagination*

The following sections outline the research methods I used in pursuit of answering my three research questions. While the technical details of my research most certainly matter, I feel it is also important to ground my pursuit beyond the functional goal of meeting the doctoral requirements. I undertake this work in honor of the countless unsung urban school teachers who show up with passion, purpose, and dedication to the schools that many would like to forget. Thank you for teaching more with your heart than your head and for loving what you do in spite of lack. Thank you for staying in the fight. I see you.

Purpose of the Study

The intent of the study was to learn about, describe, and compare how urban intensive teachers who differ in their degree of engagement with teacher unionism perceive the political lay of their work, the strength of their political agency, and the degree to which teacher unionism contributes to their overall political fluency. Ultimately, I hoped to learn whether or not teachers' level of engagement in teacher unionism contributes to their political awareness and efficacy in meaningful ways and, if so, to begin to grasp and describe how this happens. Using a qualitative approach, the study focused on TK-12 teachers serving in a single mid-sized urban intensive school district in California.

Research Questions

Q1: How do unionized teachers employed in "urban intensive" public schools describe the structural and interpersonal political dimensions affecting their work as teachers?

Q2: How do these teachers see such politics constraining and/or enhancing their work as teachers?

Q3: What role does teacher unionism play in shaping teachers' understanding of the political dimensions of teaching and the political skills and sense of political agency necessary to navigate the political factors affecting their work?

Methodology

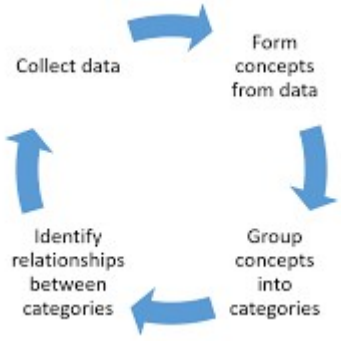
My research employed a qualitative approach. Based on the nature of my research questions, this study took a somewhat unique approach in that it combined elements of both the Grounded Theory model and the Phenomenological approach. Embedded in my research questions are both a desire to lift up teacher voices around a phenomenon *and* develop theoretical ideas which speak to an under-researched area of study. At its core, my research study attempts to examine the *phenomenon* of teachers' political perceptions pertaining to their work and the development of the knowledge and strategies they utilize to navigate the political aspects they encounter from *their* point of view. I was also interested in learning about how teachers who vary in their degree of union engagement perceive the political aspects of their jobs and, then, noting whether differences exist that mirror given levels of engagement. Secondly, I sought to understand how or if unionism shapes the teachers' political understanding and the skills (i.e. political fluency) they employ in navigating the political aspects they describe, while also noting any differences by degree of teachers' union engagement. Based on the ongoing analysis of the data I collected, I attempted to arrive at a "grounded theory" of the variations (or lack of variations) in the way teachers at different levels of union engagement perceive the: a)

political aspects and b) their views of the impact of unionism on their political understandings and skills.

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the topic of teacher political development and the topic of teacher unionism's impact on that development are undertheorized in existing academic research. As a result, I leaned into the methodology of Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory is a qualitative methodological approach developed in the 1960's which centers on the idea that theory can be developed from the data, observations, and/or field experiences collected in the research process (Glaser & Strauss 1967). As such, it is an inductive approach which relies on a rigorous iterative procedure that involves continuous data analysis throughout the data collection phase to discern patterns, similarities, differences, and relationships (Schwandt 2015) relative to the phenomenon under study. Through these iterative cycles known as the "constant comparative" method, theory is honed and formed (Wells 1995). A simplified visual representation is shown in **Figure 1** below.

Figure 1- Grounded Theory Iterative Process*

Figure 1



*Source: LibGuides at Deakin University

Although Grounded Theory originated to illuminate sociological phenomena, it is widely applied across disciplines (Bryant & Charmaz 2007) and is highly valued as a means of facilitating the constructing of theory and development of novel concepts (Charmaz 2017). These

benefits seem to align well with the nature of my research. At the same time, it does not capture the whole of my intent in this study which also hinged heavily on drawing participants in as co-constructors in deriving the explanations, implications and potential applications of what was learned about the phenomenon under study. For this, I turned to Phenomenology with a strong emphasis on Narrative Inquiry methods.

Phenomenology traces its roots to the early 20th century ideas of German philosopher Edmund Hessurl. Simply defined, "Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first-person point of view" (Smith 2013). Following from this idea, phenomenological research concerns itself with studying individuals' "lived experiences" of a given phenomenon. Following the phenomenological approach, the researcher seeks to understand meaning in events and in human interactions (Ravitch & Carl 2019) from the point of view of the research participants. According to Gearing (2004), key to this approach, is that the researcher consciously and continuously confront her own experiences, biases, and interpretations throughout the study through a process known as "phenomenological reduction" wherein the researcher separates or brackets their personal thoughts during data collection in order to truly focus on, hear, and see the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. Because personal interviews are a common method used in phenomenological research, this methodology often pairs with Narrative Inquiry approaches as well; the central feature of Narrative Inquiry being that it focuses on the meaning-making that participants derive as they recount their own stories relative to the phenomenon of study (Lichtman 2014). Since my research was concerned with teachers' describing their own perceptions and experiences with both politics and teacher unionism, phenomenology with narrative inquiry was also fitting.

The study investigated how differently engaged unionized teachers in urban intensive schools perceive the political dimensions of their work as well as their perceptions of how teacher unionism impacts the understandings and skills they employ in navigating these political dimensions. As Seidman points out:

> The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the "others" who make up the organization or carry out the process. (2019, p. 9)

Therefore, the focus was on unionized public school teachers currently working in urban intensive schools in a California school district. For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interview was the primary approach, supported by secondary methods including survey questionnaires, and solicited document analysis over a period of approximately five months (July 2023-November 2023).

In my selection of these methods, I acknowledge that quantitative methods such as large scale surveys also have great merit and have the potential to contribute rich data in broad brush strokes that lend powerfully to some of the characteristics and patterns at work in urban teachers' experiences with politics and political development. However, equally important are the intimate and nuanced strokes that are captured only through in-depth qualitative studies that drill down into the lived experiences of the teachers on the ground. This is in keeping with the importance of qualitative study and analysis as a critical overlay in fleshing out the explanatory facets of data-driven studies (Erickson & Gutierrez 2002).

Study Participants & Selection Process

As with much qualitative research, I located my study participants through the use of purposive sampling. I limited my study to unionized teachers working in a single mid-sized

urban intensive school district in California pseudonymously referred to as Gladdingham Unified School District (GUSD). According to the 2021 California Dashboard statistics, GUSD meets the federal description of a high-poverty, high-minority school district with 86.6% of students identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged and a 99.4% BIPOC student population. All of its schools are classified as Title 1.

Out of necessity, I pursued my participants largely using opportunistic or convenience sampling (Ravitch & Carl 2016) in that they are employed in a district where the researcher has prior professional contact and familiarity. The selected district is also one that was geographically accessible to the researcher for the duration of the five-month study period. Although the nature of the study did not aspire to produce a representative sample, limiting recruitment to a single school district reduced variability factors in local context such as district leadership, neighborhood demographics, district policies, and local bargaining unit (teacher union chapter).

Following IRB approval, I began recruitment of study participants through a mix of in-person district visits, posting on the private Gladdingham Teachers Association (GTA) social media platform, and subsequent snowball sampling techniques as needed. To participate in the study, teachers were asked to complete a brief online screener survey which gathered basic demographic information, ascertained union membership status, length of time in teaching, and several questions which were used to categorize respondents into high, medium, or low levels of union engagement based on specific criteria as summarized in Table 1 below. The online screener also allowed respondents to indicate if they were willing to be contacted for a 1-hour follow up interview. The screener was made available to all teachers in the Gladdingham district through the use of a QR-coded flier which was posted on the GTA social media platform as well

as brought to any in person recruitment visits. The goal was to recruit 4-6 teachers representing each level of union engagement (i.e. high, medium, and low), for a total of 12-18 interview participants. There were 24 teachers who completed the initial intake screener, and 20 indicated a willingness to be interviewed. The 20 teachers were contacted to schedule interviews. The final criteria was simply the availability of the teacher participants to schedule the interview within the prescribed data collection period from July 2023 to November 2023 which resulted in the 15 teachers selected. Teachers' length of time in teaching in GUSD did not play a central role in the study recruitment, but I provide the information here because teachers who have worked in the district longest have experienced more of the periodic political "pendulum swings" than their peers. Table 1 below summarizes the actual recruitment breakdown.

Table 1- Recruitment Description

Table 1

Levels of Union Engagement (with criteria for categorization)	**Early Career Teachers** (0-5 years in teaching)	**Mid-Career Teachers** (6-15 years in teaching)	**Veteran Teachers** (16+ years in teaching)
High Engagement -teachers currently serving on GTA Representative Council or higher position	1 participant		5 participants
Medium Engagement -teachers who have attended at least one union sponsored activity in the past 2 years (2021-2023)			5 participants
Low Engagement -teachers who have not participated in any union sponsored activities in the past 2 years	1 participant	2 participants	1 participant

Researcher Positionality

In undertaking my study, it was important for me to reflect on the critical question: "Who am I as a researcher?" I bring a plethora of identities which impact how I inhabit the researcher role. I am African American, cisgender female, middle-age, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian, a public school teacher, labor union member, school district employee, parent of school-aged children, liberal, Democratic Party member, child advocate, early childhood educator, historically Black college graduate, member of an interracial family, Los Angeles native, international traveler, and property owner. My life is filled with abundant intersections, all of which influence my way of seeing the world, understanding what goes on it, and my interactions with my fellow human beings with whom I gratefully share it. Yet, any one of these identities or various combinations of them had to be regularly examined and interrogated as I undertook this study and interacted with the participants and the data. I humbly acknowledge this and relinquish any claim to neutrality. By being honest with myself and honest with my research participants, my goal was to learn from them and represent their experiences and insights with accuracy, clarity, integrity, and humility.

Ethical Considerations

The primary ethical concern for this study was the maintenance of participant confidentiality and anonymity. All participants were given a written description as well as a brief verbal explanation in advance of participation in the study. Participant rights and potential risks and benefits were also explained. Participant identity has been kept confidential as well as any other identifying information (i.e., grade level, work site, district, etc.) and pseudonyms are used throughout. All participants confirmed their consent prior to participation. Participants were offered the chance to read and comment on the preliminary final report. Use of

pseudonyms for participants, schools, and other organizations have been utilized in the final reports and will continue to be used in any subsequent publications.

A secondary ethical concern regards researcher positionality in terms of insider vs. outsider status. There has been a decades-long debate regarding the advantages of qualitative researchers being either "insiders" (i.e. members of the community under study) or "outsiders" (i.e. non-members who are often very dissimilar from the community of study). At the core of the debate lies the issue of bias and whether insider researchers can prevent it from clouding the interpretation of the data and whether both insiders and outsiders can collect data that is not clouded by the participants' bias based on their familiarity or relative comfort level with the researcher (Kerstetter 2012). Although not fully settled, some in the research community are leaning into the view that researchers are seldom wholly insider or outsider (Dwyer & Buckle 2009) and that bias cannot be fully eliminated, but rather consciously managed. Scholars Ravitch & Carl (2016, p. 13) assert that "bias exists in all research" such that "understanding and confronting the values and beliefs underlying decisions and approaches is vital and at the heart of the inquiry itself." Since this researcher has personal experience as a current unionized classroom teacher in an urban intensive public school and familiarity with participants from the district of study, careful attention was paid to avoid the egregious interference of bias in the processes and interpretation of the data. Emerson et. al. (2011) advises that "field researchers should move beyond their personal reactions to attend explicitly to what those in the setting experience and react to as 'significant' or 'important.'" (p.25) Phenomenological reduction techniques such as bracketing, dialogic engagement, and member checking have been some of the primary means by which this researcher sought to employ checks and balances on such biases.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interview was the primary approach, supported by secondary methods including survey questionnaires, and solicited document analysis over a period of approximately five months (June 2023-November 2023). The following section summarizes the method of data collection and the general purpose for which it has been employed in the study.

I. **Semi-Structured Interview-** Semi-structured interviews with teachers form the core of the data collected. Interviews were conducted one on one with the researcher via Zoom. Following participant consent, all interviews were audio recorded for the purposes of transcription, note-taking, coding and analysis. All recordings have been stored in password protected files on the researcher's personal computer. Recordings have been made available for review by the participant upon request.

II. **Survey/Questionnaires-** To initiate recruitment, interested teachers were invited to complete an online intake survey which included basic demographic information, questions pertinent to determining union membership and level of engagement, length of time in teaching and an option to be contacted for a follow-up interview. Once selected, interview participants were provided a secondary survey with preliminary questions pertaining to political dimensions of their work. The responses from the preliminary survey were used to help inform the semi-structured interview.

III. **Solicited Document Analysis-** During the course of interviews and/or focus groups, the researcher asked participants to produce electronic artifacts utilizing a

Google Jamboard such as a sketch of power relations in their school site, a ranking of perceived and ideal influence of various district stakeholders, and a satisfaction rating of their local, state, and national teacher union affiliates.

Data Analysis Techniques

Ongoing data analysis took place throughout the study including the use of memoing, iterative coding and dialogic engagement with the study participants. My particular research questions are epistemological in nature. Since "epistemological questions address theories of knowing and an understanding of the phenomenon of interest," (Saldana 2016, p. 70), a combination of descriptive and theming coding strategies was particularly helpful. Connections between larger categories and various sub-themes occurred through the cycles of iteration. In addition, member checking through the use of transcript sharing and conversational follow-up were utilized to ensure transparency and fidelity to the participants' responses in keeping with Saldana's (2016) admonishment that "talking with the people you observed and interviewed about your analytic reflections can also provide a 'reality check' for you and possibly stimulate additional insights."(p.232) Further, as a matter of recognizing the social construction of knowledge inherent in this project's theoretical standpoint, it was deemed important that participants be engaged in the process of analysis and the overall extraction of assertions being put forth in the findings. In seeking to avoid making the researcher's voice the final authority, it was helpful to keep in mind Bakhtin's assertion that such "monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and responsibilities" (1984, p.292). Therefore, there was an aim to treat participants as partners in both the process and product of this study.

About the Teacher Participants in the Study

To better understand and contextualize the findings of the study, it is helpful to provide a snapshot of the 15 teachers whose voices illuminated the aforementioned Research Questions. As mentioned in the prior section of this chapter, participants were selected primarily based on having the status of being unionized teachers actively employed in GUSD at the time of the study and having indicated a willingness to be interviewed for the study following an initial screening intake. During this same intake, teachers were asked a series of questions which allowed the researcher to categorize them into levels of high, medium, or low union engagement based on pre-set criteria (See table 1 above). There were 24 teachers who completed the intake, and 20 indicated a willingness to be interviewed. The 20 teachers were contacted to schedule interviews. The final criteria was simply the availability of the teacher participants to schedule the interview within the prescribed data collection period from July 2023 to November 2023 which resulted in the 15 teachers selected. Even with reliance on a convenience sampling approach, the resultant participant group comprised a desirable distribution along dimensions of race, grade span, gender, and level of union engagement. **Table 2 below** provides a basic demographic breakdown of the 15 teacher participants.

Table 2 Teacher Participant Demographic Summary

Table 2

Participant ID	Union Engagement Level	Gender ID	Years Teaching in GUSD	Racial Ethnic ID	Level Taught	Prior Teaching Experience outside of GUSD
Tim De Jesus	low	M	2	Hisp Am	Elem	Yes
Gerald Ang	low	M	25	Asian Am	Elem	
Rosa Arnaz	low	F	9	Hisp Am	Elem	
Alice Carter	low	F	16	Black Am	Elem-SPED	Yes
Walter Jost	medium	M	30	White Am	MS	Yes
Fawn Lichter	medium	F	25	White Am	Elem	
Laura Santos	medium	F	23	Hisp Am	Elem	
Mabel Sherod	medium*	F	25	Black Am	HS	Yes
Wendy Sims	medium*	M	16	Hisp Am	MS	
Marvin Wayne Johnson	high	M	26	Black Am	Elem	
Hope Martin	high	F	5	Black Am	MS-SPED	
Dahlia Vince	high	F	28	White Am	MS	
Vivian McMoore	high	F	22	Black Am	Elem-TOSA	

Betina Green	high	F	30	Black Am	MS	Yes
Juana Rubio	high	F	23	Hisp Am	Elem	

*Denotes self-reported prior union engagement at the high level.

With the exception of three, these teachers are all veterans of the Gladdingham District with over 16 years of teaching experience therein. The majority have over 20 years of experience. The distribution of years of experience is consistent with the overall picture of recent data on teacher seniority within Gladdingham District as seen in **Table 3** below.

Table 3

Table 3

Teacher Seniority 2020-2021 Data for Gladdingham USD	Total number of teachers n=370	
Teachers w/ 20+ years	Teachers w/11-19 years	Teachers w/ 10 or fewer years
n=177 or 47.8%	n=107 or 29%	n=86 or 23.2%

*Source: GUSD Certificated Seniority List 2020-2021

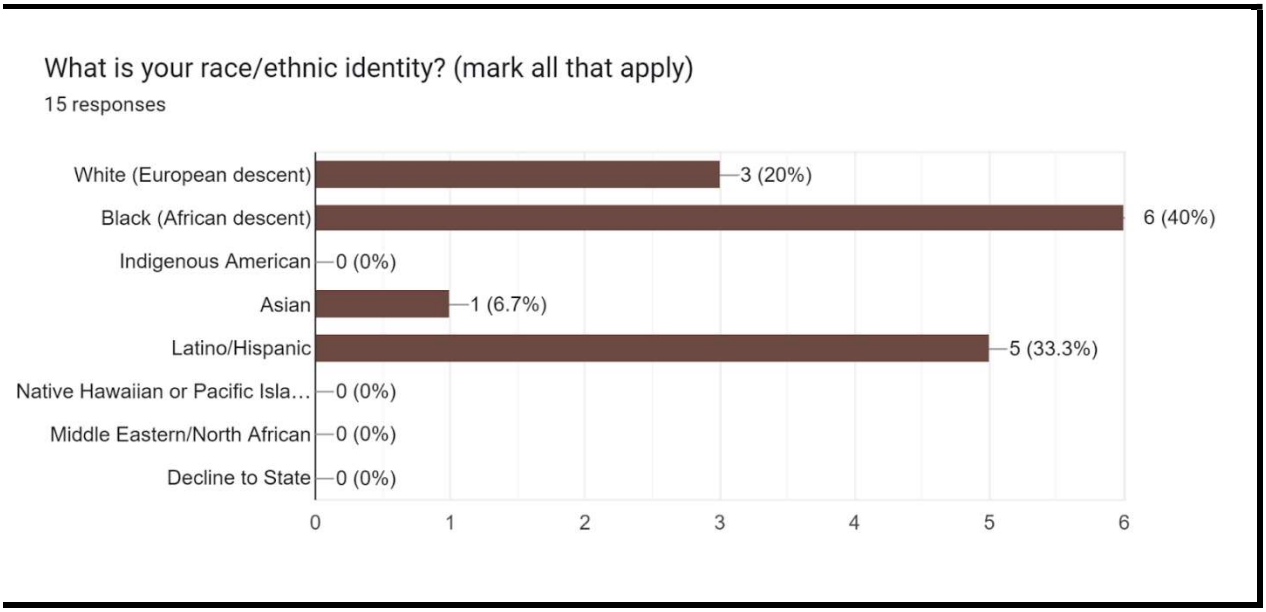
Teachers in Gladdingham are overwhelmingly veterans at present, which largely reflects the mix of large-scale layoffs and hiring freezes in the years following the economic downturn of 2008-2011 (*Teachers in California* 2023) and the district's continuous declining student enrollment leading to a shrinking teacher force wherein jobs are maintained through a system of seniority. Thus, GUSD skews towards a more senior teaching staff. The longevity of these teachers is worth bearing in mind as one considers that many of them have lived through various political pendulum swings across their years in the district, rendering unique perspectives.

Similar to how overall longevity of the teacher participants in the study reflects overall GUSD teacher longevity demographics, the ethno-racial profile of the teacher participants

(**Figure 2** below) in this study reflects the somewhat unique ethno-racial profile of the district's teaching force as a whole.

Figure 2 Racial Demographics of GUSD Teacher Participants

Figure 2



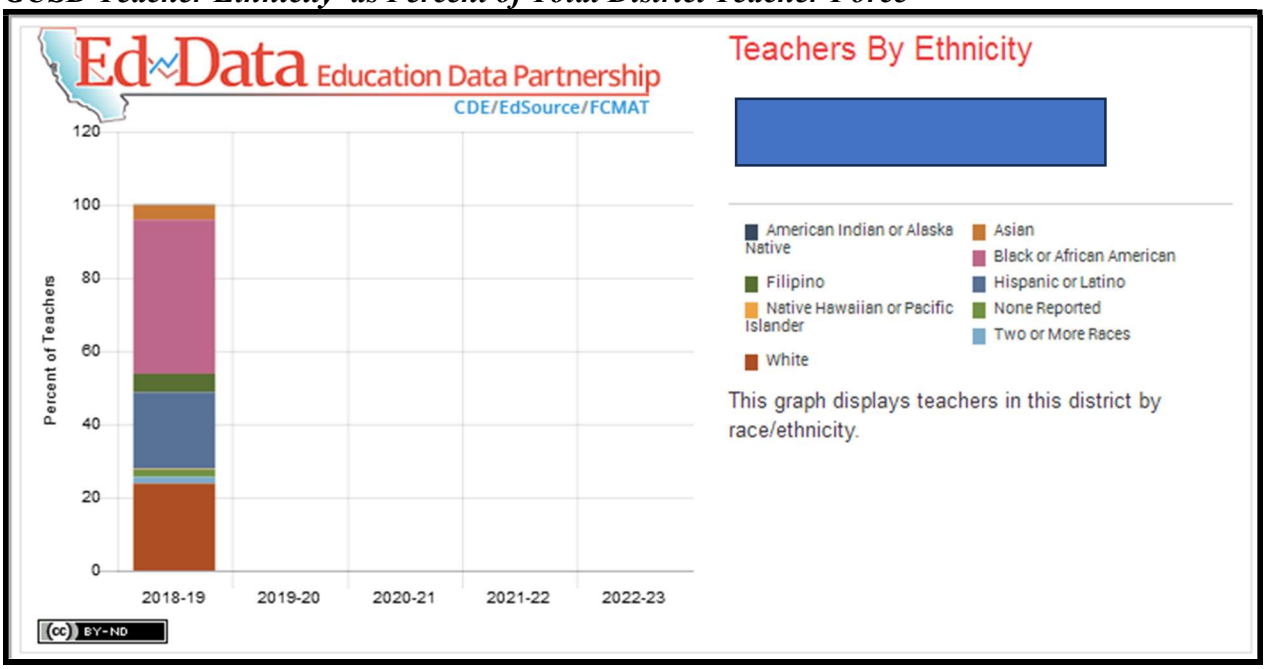
*Source: Bingener, C. UTS Pre-Interview Questionnaire

The ethno-racial composition of the 15 teacher sample tracks closely with the composition of GUSD's teaching force as a whole, with a majority of Black teachers, followed by Hispanic/Latinx, White, and Asian-American respectively. Unlike many school districts in California, GUSD has a majority non-white teacher force that is largely Black and/or Hispanic. The particular racial composition of GUSD stands in sharp contrast to the California County of which it is a part. This is due to the atypically high percentage of Black teachers in GUSD, as shown in **Figure 3** below.

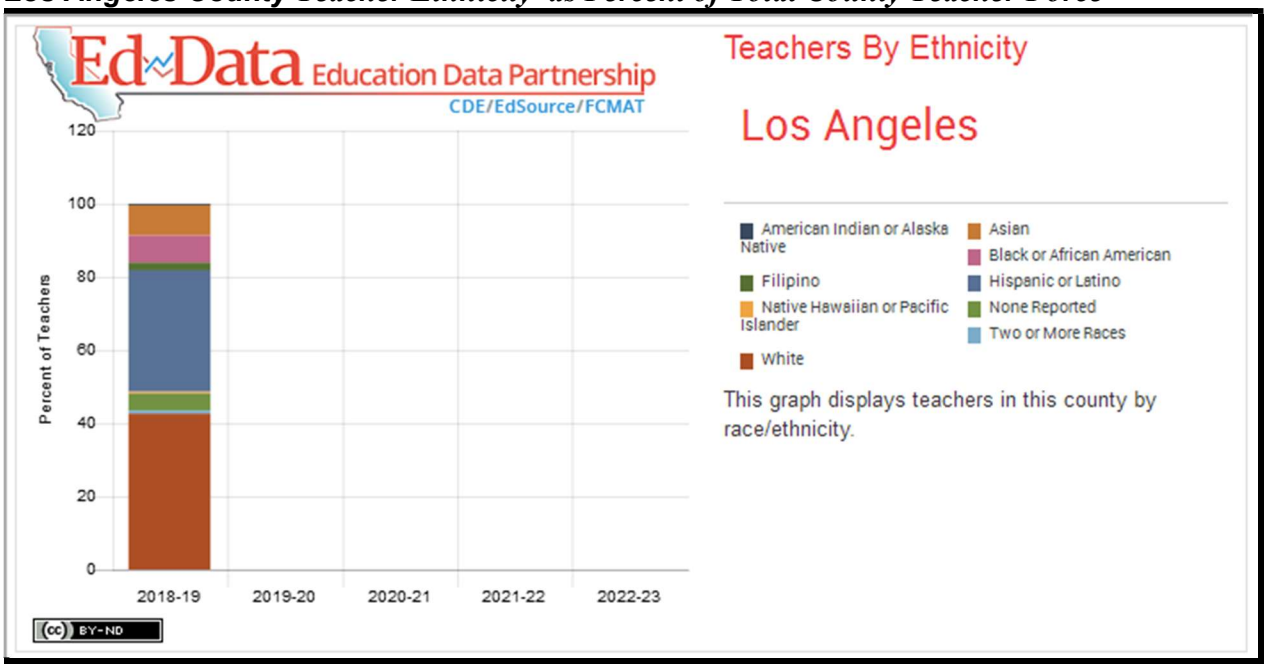
Figure 3 Racial Demographics of GUSD Teachers from 2018-2019 Compared to Racial Demographics of Teachers in Surrounding County as a Whole

Figure 3

GUSD Teacher Ethnicity as Percent of Total District Teacher Force



Los Angeles County Teacher Ethnicity as Percent of Total County Teacher Force



*Source: https://www.ed-data.org/

In GUSD, Black teachers make up over 40% of the teaching staff, with white and Hispanic teachers making up about 23% and 20%, respectively. Asian-American Pacific Islander teachers account for about 9% of GUSD teachers. The overall County teacher demographics of which GUSD is a part shows a much lower percentage of Black teachers that tracks closely with the County's overall Black population of 9% as noted in recent census data (US Census Bureau, n.d.).

However, the figure is not completely surprising when looking against the overall ethno-racial demographics of Gladdingham City, which recorded about a 42% Black population and 45% Hispanic/Latino population during the span of 2017-2021(Index. (n.d.). Research demonstrates that teachers of color tend to be concentrated in urban intensive schools (Boser 2011; Wysienska-DiCarlo et. al. 2017) in patterns that mirror the broader residential segregation patterns which were fueled by decades of "white flight" out of the central cities.

The overall demographic numbers speak powerfully not only to the historic patterns of residential racial segregation in Gladdingham City, but also reveal local teacher hiring patterns steeped in decades of racial politics that linger into the present day. The high concentration of Black teachers in GUSD as well as the high percentage of Blacks in Gladdingham City is likely related to the dramatic exodus of white inhabitants between 1970 and 1980 that shrunk the city's white population percentage by nearly 70% to just 20% with a jump in the city's Black population from just over 11% to 56% over the same period (Usowski, K.; Bureau, U. C. 2021, October 8; NBCUniversal News Group, 2022). By the year 2000, the white population in Gladdingham City was down to only 4.1%.

Anecdotally, several older Black Gladdingham teachers speak of how GUSD was one of the few local districts that was willing to hire Black and Brown teachers in the late 1980's and

beyond. This is certainly plausible given that, by 1983, GUSD already boasted its first Black superintendent, several Black school board members, and a host of Black school principals (Waddingham 1994). By comparison, the five neighboring districts closest to GUSD bear a stark witness to such stories of exclusive hiring patterns, revealing statistics of only 11%, 9.2%, 4.9%, 2.2%, and .06% Black teachers among their employees today (*Teachers in California* 2023). It is a quiet testament to the racially inclusive hiring practices of GUSD in the decades since the 1980's, when one considers that the racial makeup of the current teaching force is far more integrated than both the schools and the city in which they teach. GUSD's teacher diversity far surpasses the national average, where less than one in five educators are people of color (de Brey et al., 2019).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS: POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF TEACHING IN GUSD

Introduction to the Findings

"For the last few years, teachers have reported high levels of burnout and disillusionment—borne initially from the hardships of teaching in a pandemic and exacerbated by the escalating academic, social, and mental health needs of students. And for some teachers, the stress of landing in the white-hot center of divisive politics has taken a toll."- *Kurtz, H., Lloyd, S. C., & Solis, V. (2024, April 3). Introducing the teacher morale index. Education Week.*

The quote above from a recent major study examining morale among U.S. teachers echoes the reality of both the daily interpersonal and larger structural political milieu in which today's teachers are struggling to successfully navigate. Without naming it as such, the quote alludes to the "everyday politics" of interpersonal relations, academic mandates, structural hurdles of inequity, and external pressures that classroom teachers inevitably contend with as part and parcel of their work. Recent research on what drives teacher attrition among experienced teachers asserts that these pressures often lead to career-curtailing "demoralization," which "is rooted in discouragement and despair borne out of ongoing value conflicts with pedagogical policies, reform mandates, and school practices" (Santoro 2018, p. 3). To persist in the wake of such overwhelming forces, teachers must draw on their own individual and, often, collective reservoirs of knowledge, discernment, and agency in ways that find them actively or passively relying on the practice of various types of politics.

Few teachers would readily describe themselves as "politicians," and yet, like it or not, they find themselves wading in politics daily by virtue of their jobs. Against the current backdrop of highly charged political battles raging around teachers, teaching, and content at state and local government levels across the nation, it seems that even fewer teachers are willing to touch

anything “political" for fear of actual or perceived reprisal (Woo, A., Diliberti, M. K., & Steiner, E. D. 2024). However, it is important to keep in mind that, for the purpose of my study, “politics” refers to the ongoing negotiation and enactments of power and influence in shaping outcomes, procedures, resource allocation, and “the way things get done” (or fail to get done) in schools (Godwin, K., Boyle, M. A., & Higgs, M. A. 2021). The teachers examined in my study are no exception to the rule of having to engage with politics. However, politics can look different when speaking about certain teachers in particular places.

Far from the spotlight of the nightly news, Gladdingham teachers are largely untouched by the more highly publicized current instances of book banning, restrictive laws aimed at Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI), and so-called “divisive concepts” tearing at the fabric of many public schools across the nation (PEN America. 2023, August 28). Instead, Gladdingham teachers experience a quieter, pervasive set of political realities that manifest with an impact that is arguably just as troubling to the well-being of teachers and students as the policy moves unfolding in today’s headlines. Gladdingham teachers are “urban intensive” teachers. By definition, “urban intensive” teachers work in environments characterized by de facto racial and economic segregation as well as a chronic inability to fully meet the complex needs of the students they serve (Milner 2012). I argue that teachers working in urban intensive districts experience the political aspects of their work in a particular way due to a history of structural racism that often goes unnamed and unnoticed in current academic research around the “origins” of urban intensive schools. Thus, teachers working in districts where they are fairly well immersed in longstanding undifferentiated inequity may experience things like power imbalances, resource inadequacy, and other challenges associated with working in urban intensive districts as normal and uncontroversial.

In Gladdingham, these everyday politics are couched in an overarching structural environment shaped by decades of disinvestment (Hahnel 2020) and salient neglect that corresponds neatly with the shift of the district away from a white student majority in the 1960's towards a near 100% Black and Brown population today (Bonacich & Goodman 1972; Usowski, n.d.; California Dashboard 2023). Moreover, according to a 2021 study, the City of Gladdingham ranked as the 2nd most racially segregated city in the U.S. (Menendian, Gailes, & Gambhir 2021) given its over 94% non-white population. Decades of relative isolation from the white mainstream and the financial investments that have historically been associated with it, have yielded predictably calamitous results for Gladdingham's public schools. This prognosis was eerily anticipated in Bonacich & Goodman's 1972 case study on the district's desegregation struggles when explaining the dangers "inherent" to an increasing Black presence:

> Of central importance is the fact that almost none of the white families in *Gladdingham want to live in an all-black or predominantly black neighborhood...Most important seem to be fear that property values will decline drastically if a neighborhood becomes all-black (and people are unwilling to risk such a major investment) and fear that the quality of the schools will decline drastically if a neighborhood becomes all-black (and people are unwilling to "sacrifice" their children)...Once it is evident that a neighborhood will indeed become almost all black, the chances of maintaining services decline, in part because all-black neighborhoods tend to be poorer, hence provide less of a tax base to support quality services.

Bonacich & Goodman's analysis posited that the presence of too many Blacks and too few whites *automatically* would result in infrastructural disinvestment and decline in the city and its schools, as a foregone conclusion. Indeed, by 1975, the *New York Times* reported that GUSD enrolled an 80% minority student population and was experiencing a type of disinvestment resulting from withdrawal of the, still, largely white electorate's financial support:

> In five years, *Gladdingham's schools have deteriorated badly. The police report that crime and vandalism have increased, the school Superintendent has just resigned and the school district is seriously short of funds—a result of what is still a predominantly white community's failure to pass two tax overrides and a bond issue (1975, June 18).

This response of economic divestment from GUSD by the majority white electorate was not isolated. Across California, this pattern of disinvestment as a response to either thwart or "punish" minority encroachment in previously white neighborhoods and schools, was further manifested in policies such as Proposition 14 (1964)[2], Proposition 13 (1978)[3], and the defeat of Proposition 1(1978)[4]. In essence, policies such as these reflected the position, of those loath to integrate, that "if we can't defeat desegregation, we'll simply defund it" by decreasing the flow of public dollars to public schools. Historical analysis reveals that the fears of degraded schools and neighborhoods were made manifest less by some inherent minority social "pathology," and more by intentional withdrawals of financial support motivated by entrenched anti-Blackness. A blunt excerpt from a 1967 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report summarizes:

> Integrationists and segregationists alike implicitly agree that the proportion of Negroes in a school defines the quality of a school. Whether negative characteristics are seen as a consequence of discrimination or bigotry, or whether the ethos of the school is believed to be affected by the predominance of presumably ill-motivated and academically retarded youths, color stigmatizes the institution as well as the individual (p. 182).

As GUSD's student population became increasingly Black and Hispanic from the mid-1970's-through the 2000's, the district continued to experience the untoward effects of racial

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[2] Proposition 14 was an earlier attempt to legalize housing discrimination, presumably to prevent minorities from "overtaking" white neighborhoods and, by extension, previously all-white neighborhood public schools.

[3] Enacted a constitutional amendment to:
* require that properties be taxed at no more than 1 percent of their full cash value shown on the 1975-1976 assessment rolls and limit annual increases of assessed (taxable) value to the inflation rate or 2 percent, whichever was less.
* upon the transfer of properties, allow them to be reassessed at one percent of their sale price and reset the limit on annual increases of assessed value.
* prohibit the state legislature from enacting new taxes on the value or sale of properties.
* require a two-thirds vote of the state legislature to increase non-property taxes.
* require local governments to refer special taxes to the ballot and require a two-thirds vote of electors.
* make the state government responsible for distributing property tax revenue among local governments.

[4] STATE SCHOOL BUILDING AID BOND LAW OF 1978. This act provides for a bond issue of three hundred fifty million dollars ($350,000,000) to provide capital outlay for construction or improvement of public schools.

stigma and a "bad reputation" amidst the coupled effects of the siege of coffer-draining legislation and economic decline in the surrounding city. The decline of financial support for GUSD schools mirrored the pattern of growing contempt for the funding of those public services (including public schools) utilized primarily by non-white and/or poor people, as described in sociologist Matthew Desmond's (2023) *Poverty by America*. Desmond (2023) traces a predictable pattern in which more well-off white Americans "cede" public services to minorities and poor Americans as they retreat to privatized options and, then, balk at paying taxes for public services, which, then, fall into decay. This type of financial abandonment of the public sector is evidenced in GUSD's crumbling educational facilities and, further, by its lingering state of fiscal receivership (Dryden 2014).

The legacy of espousing foregone conclusions about the perils of a school district becoming majority minority is evident in GUSD's precarious financial position today. "Separate" is still unequal and must not be ignored when examining how politics uniquely unfolds for Gladdingham teachers. The teacher participants in this study work within a district hewn out of racial segregation, eventual white flight, and a protracted period of state-sanctioned disinvestment. Yet none of them articulated their perceptions of the political lay of their jobs with reference to this exact historical context. This might be as expected, given that the bulk of the participants' historical understanding of Gladdingham begins with their own employment journey within the district. The once brazen and caustic politics of the 1970's that forged the current iteration of GUSD have long since quieted into the unremarkable "normalcy" of a typical struggling high-poverty and high-minority urban school district. Teacher participants immersed in this reality reveal nuanced political understandings, navigational strategies, and approaches to agency as demonstrated in the sections that follow.

At the time of this writing, the Gladdingham Unified School District has spent over a decade in a State Receivership which was initially triggered when years of financial mismanagement and poor fiscal decisions by local district leaders rendered the district teetering on insolvency. It is one of only 9 districts in the state of California that has landed in receivership. It is important to note that ***every*** district that the state of California has placed in receivership enrolls predominantly students of color from low-income families (California Department of Education 2024). The fact that leadership in these districts did not manage their finances well is inextricably linked to broader inequalities in tax revenue and the unfair concentration of acute social needs tied to historical patterns of racial and social injustice.

At the time Gladdingham was taken over, a $29 million loan was granted by the State of California to the district with a set of stringent requirements, which included stripping the local school board of its traditional powers, eliminating the district superintendent position, and consolidating ultimate decision-making authority under a single state-appointed head. Since entering into State receivership, Gladdingham has experienced an almost two-thirds decline in student enrollment, stagnant salaries, cuts to district programs and personnel, plummeting test scores, continuing school closures, and a district leadership churn that has seen seven different state-appointed district heads (County Administrator, District Memo dated 1/19/2024). Against this sobering backdrop, Gladdingham teachers are tasked with doing "more with less" as they endeavor to educate a district-wide student body that is 83% Socioeconomically Disadvantaged, 29% English Learners, and 1% homeless. Further, Gladdingham serves a hyper-segregated 95.5% percent non-white population, virtually all Hispanic and Black (California Dashboard, 2023).

The “extra” funding Gladdingham receives for its high numbers of English learners, low-income students, and foster youth as stipulated under California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) barely makes an impact because of the district’s heavy indebtedness. For example, Gladdingham is forced to pay down the state loan with annual interest payments and the mandatory Fiscal Crisis Management & Assistance Team fees totaling $2.2 million annually. Further, GUSD still owes an outstanding $21 million loan principal and, to reduce its costs, plans to close five of its 16 schools at the end of the 2024-25 school year (County Administrator, District Memo dated 3/20/2024). As such, Gladdingham represents a nearly textbook perfect example of Milner’s (2012) “urban intensive” district descriptor, where a district's high needs *perpetually* exceed its resources to meet them.

The intensity of the morale toll specific to the teachers working in an urban intensive context is corroborated by recent findings in the Kurtz et al. study, which demonstrated teacher morale to be lowest among teachers in urban settings as compared to suburban, town, and rural teacher cohorts (2024). This echoes decades of scholarship that document the disparate tolls of teacher attrition, inadequate funding, and punitive policies that seem to typify urban intensive schools (Ingersoll 2001; Fabricant & Fine 2012; teacher Karp 2010; Lipman 2015; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Payne, 2008; Zeichner, 2010; Santoro 2018.) As such, a significant motivation for this study was to shed light on how teachers working in the particular context of an *imperiled* urban intensive public school district perceive the day to day interpersonal and structural challenges they face. The study also sought to begin to identify how teachers’ level of teacher union engagement may influence the individual and collective political acumen these urban intensive teachers employ as they power through the work of their teaching within this acutely troubled urban intensive context.

In undertaking the present study, I sought to better understand how teachers working in one of the most demoralizing urban intensive contexts describe the political facets of their jobs as well as how they describe the ways they maneuver within their context through either individual and/or collective agency. Recognizing teachers' unions as historically powerful conduits of teacher political education, organizing, and agency, I wanted to simultaneously explore how varying levels of union engagement might modulate how these teachers view, respond, and react to the political elements of their work. Would there be appreciable differences between teachers engaged in the union at different levels? And, although not initially centered in my original study aims, ongoing data collection and analysis raised additional questions about how the particular context of state receivership was simultaneously impacting teachers' political perceptions and resultant development of teacher political fluency.

Summary Review of the Gathering & Organization of the Findings

This qualitative study of GUSD teachers utilized a multiple-choice questionnaire in conjunction with individual semi-structured follow-up interviews with 15 unionized teachers employed at different schools throughout the district. Based on self-reported union involvement gathered during an initial screener questionnaire, participants were categorized as either high, medium or low engagement based on a set of criteria as delineated in Chapter 3. The questionnaires and follow-up interviews were conducted over a five-month period from July 2023 to November 2023. During the interview sessions, teachers generated several visual map documents in response to interview prompts.

Ongoing analysis throughout and beyond the data collection period revealed broad similarities as well as nuanced differences in how these teacher participants viewed the context

of their jobs, the political dynamics encountered in their work, the larger structural politics influencing their lived professional experiences, and their own sense of efficacy and empowerment to enact influence in their district, whether individually or collectively. And while the study's findings cannot be interpreted as broadly representative of all urban intensive teachers' experiences, the study offers valuable insights into an understudied facet of urban teachers' lives. It is hoped that this study will lay a small but important brick in building a path of greater understanding of how urban intensive teachers develop the *political fluency* (i.e. awareness + skills + agency) needed to resist, repair, and reshape the broken and neglected systems in which they work.

To this end, the following **Research Questions** were explored:

Q1: How do unionized teachers employed in "urban intensive" public schools describe the structural and interpersonal political dimensions affecting their work as teachers?

Q2: How do these teachers see such politics constraining and/or enhancing their work as teachers?

Q3: What role does teacher unionism play in shaping teachers' understanding of the political dimensions of teaching and the political skills and sense of political agency necessary to navigate the political factors affecting their work?

The following sections of this chapter report and discuss the findings pertaining to Research Questions #1 and #2. These questions are both grounded in the gathering of teachers' *descriptions* of the political lay of their jobs and their *perceptions* of how these aspects affect their work in the context of an urban intensive school district. Their descriptions are further analyzed alongside their differing levels of teacher union engagement to discern any emerging patterns of note in terms of their overall perceptions (awareness) and/or responses (agency) to the political dimensions they experience in their jobs.

Chapter 5 presents and discusses findings pertaining to Research Question #3. Research Question #3 is grounded in an extended analysis of how teachers' engagement with teacher unionism may impact their *understanding* of the political lay of their jobs in the urban intensive context as well as the *skills* and *responses* they develop to navigate therein.

Taken together, the information gathered provides emerging insights into the nature of *political fluency* among urban intensive teachers and its potential implications. To the degree that GUSD's particular *racial* political history has influenced its present circumstances, it further offers a provocative preliminary probe into how teachers' political fluency is uniquely shaped within the context of a financially *imperiled* urban intensive context whose troubles reflect a legacy of racialized disinvestment. As such, it invites future critical scholarly investigation into the nature and origins of the political realities that exist in many troubled urban intensive schools and the ways in which teachers' repertoires of political survival and resistance become modulated and, often, artificially constrained.

Unpacking the Political Dimensions of Teaching in Gladdingham

"...working in an office, I had to deal with a lot of office politics and politics with administration, and within co-workers, and I thought, 'well I'm gonna be working with young kids, so that's not something I have to worry about at all'...But I guess I've come to the realization now that politics exists, regardless of what profession you're in..that was kind of a shocking thing." ***- Gerald Ang, low union-engaged teacher***

Twenty-five year veteran GUSD teacher Gerald Ang reflects on what surprised him most about becoming a classroom teacher in Gladdingham after leaving a more lucrative career in corporate America. According to Ang, he was eager to leave the politics of the corporate world behind and escape to the comfortably *apolitical* world of classroom teaching where "it's just us and the kids." As he and other teacher participants quickly learned, teaching carries just as much,

if not more political baggage than many other occupations. Thus, Ang and his fellow teacher participants have a lot to say about both the structural and interpersonal political dimensions of teaching in Gladdingham.

Weaving together information gathered from the 15 participants' pre-interview surveys, one on one interviews, and the visual maps they produced during the interview sessions provides the basis for understanding how the teachers view the political lay of their jobs in the urban intensive context of GUSD as well as how they see these political dimensions constraining and/or enhancing their work. Analyzing their descriptions at both the awareness and action levels informs what I am conceptualizing as teachers' "political fluency;" the ease with which teachers are able to enjoin interpersonal and/or structural political awareness with skills to enact agency. In assessing how these teachers describe the structural and interpersonal political dimensions affecting their work and the constraints and enhancements these political dimensions trigger, several prominent themes emerge. These themes can be broadly categorized as follows:

1. **Receivership and Funding Woes**
2. **Reduction of Democratic Governance and Hindered Access to Decision-Making**
3. **Available Avenues for Teacher Influence and Empowerment**

Unsurprisingly, these three themes mirror conditions and concerns commonly associated with urban intensive schools, such as perpetual financial constraints, limited resources, and loss of teacher autonomy often related to punitive high-stakes accountability systems (Milner 2012), Teachers across all union engagement levels spoke to these themes in remarkably similar as well as nuanced ways within their questionnaire responses and during their interviews. The key findings derived from the investigation of Research Questions #1 and #2 are discussed, in turn,

along the three themes. To clarify, the first two themes discussed speak primarily to RQ#1 and reflect those elements of RQ#2 which center on the political *constraints* felt by the teacher participants. The third, and final theme, also speaks to RQ#1 but uplifts those elements of RQ#2 that center the ways teachers are able to *enhance* their influence and agency within their political reality.

I. Receivership and Funding Woes

> *"So my school district is a struggling district. It has always been a struggling district from the day I entered. Like everyone, I had to buy everything. The office managers don't want to give you supplies that are in the supply cabinet, because there might be a day where there's none left"*
> ***-Vivian McMoore, high union-engaged teacher***

> *"It was surprising to see how underfunded we were. Even though the school was in _____[middle class neighborhood], we didn't get _____ type funds at all…we were probably the least funded school in Gladdingham."*
> ***-Marvin Wayne Johnson, high union-engaged teacher***

> *"I think the first thing was how limited supplies were. My first year was like you only get a pencil and crayons and we're fighting over paper…my first thing was like 'Oh my God, there's nothing that can help me help them, I have to supply it myself."*
> ***-Rosa Arnaz, low union-engaged teacher***

> *"Because of the school that I had gone to [in my childhood], I don't ever remember thinking that I would have had to have paid for anything. I mean I walked in, it was like 'Where's this? Well, I need this.' and it was like 'Oh? Sorry!'...so when I started, just the lack of supplies and things were really surprising to me. I've since understood that not everybody does this. But inner-city Los Angeles area schools do!"*
> ***-Fawn Lichter, medium union-engaged teacher***

A key political dimension that is noted across teacher participants is the district's condition of historical and current financial lack. Teachers in GUSD are well aware that they work in a district that struggles to meet the needs of all its students largely due to financial constraints. They are also aware that they work in a district where most of their students come from low-income families and that most of their students are either Black, Hispanic, or both. And

while the teacher participants did not speak directly as to why or if these two conditions of financial constraint and specific demographics are related to each other, it is clear that their perceptions reflect *researched* reality concerning urban intensive districts. Recent studies continue to affirm that districts serving large numbers of poor and non-white students remain grossly underfunded. A central assertion is that, when looked at nationally, "districts in high-poverty areas, which serve larger shares of students of color, get less funding per student than districts in low-poverty areas, which predominantly serve white students, highlighting the system's inequity"(Allegretto, S., García, E., & Weiss, E. 2022). Teachers in GUSD find themselves subject to the myriad common effects of historically inequitable funding including material resource precarity, lower relative salaries, high rates of leadership churn, unwieldy class sizes, and limited availability of supportive services for students who need them. However, GUSD teachers experience such "common" urban intensive problems even more acutely due to the *added* burden of being in state fiscal receivership.

As the teachers describe the political dimensions of their work in the urban intensive context of GUSD, much of what they have to say is directly related to their current status as a district in state fiscal receivership. Dahlia Vince, a high union-engaged teacher describes the state's outsized influence due to the district's indebtedness:

> *So the state government, I think, has a lot of influence. Because, we've been taken over by the state and we owe them money, unfortunately, which I think is wrong.*

Teachers often speak of receivership as a type of overarching obstacle to increased resources, increased compensation, and increased influence within their district. Essentially, in their perceptions, the burden of having to pay off the multimillion-dollar debt to the state stands in the way of spending in these areas of needed improvement because paying off the debt

becomes the district leadership's immediate priority. A low union-engaged teacher, Alice Carter, describes the problem:

> *I think the school district administrators are making those poor decisions for our school district, and I don't think they have the buy-in as much as you have your individual teachers like myself, who's been here for 20 years…So they're running the district as they see fit. It's a business. It's a business. And they're running it as a business. The school board doesn't have power, because we're in receivership. So they can't be told anything.*

Ms. Carter's analysis critiques what she and others feel is a disconnect between the goals of the state (i.e. repayment of debt) and those goals of teachers and others in the local district (i.e. meeting the unique needs of their school communities). Similarly, Rosa Arnaz, a low union-engaged teacher describes how overemphasis on debt repayment translates into resources for students' pressing needs being deemphasized:

> *The other thing that really surprised me was children who needed extra support, just how long it will take them to get that support. I mean I had children that needed an SST[5].the response I got in 1st grade was "Oh, yeah that child has been on the list since Kindergarten and it takes two years to do an SST meeting" and I was just shocked! Like how are you letting the kid go two years without any support? That was mind blowing.*

Ms. Arnaz and others note that delays in support services are often related to staffing shortage issues and high rates of turnover with existing staff in their cash-strapped district. Indeed, a recent report on California teacher salaries reports that the average teacher salary in California is $95,160 but the highest possible teacher salary in GUSD tops out at just over $89,000. (NEA 2024). Thus, it is not surprising that GUSD struggles to attract and retain teachers and other certificated support staff.

[5] SST is an acronym for "Student Study Team" which is a process involving the formation of a team meeting between teachers, administrators, parents, counselors, service providers, etc. that is triggered when a student is observed to need more intensive intervention for academic, emotional, and/or behavioral issues. SST teams often determine and design beneficial intervention steps which may include assessments, modifications, and/or referrals for Special Education services.

Similarly, the frequent churn of staff and administrators is a common symptom in urban intensive districts where high job demands and low resources make it hard to remunerate and retain staff in competitive ways. Walter Jost, a medium union-engaged teacher notes how surprised he was at the problem when he first joined GUSD and how he still sees it manifesting today:

> *I was kind of concerned about, I guess it's not the same in all districts, but there was a constant turnover of district officials. They would even work there a couple of years and build a resume and then go on to something else. It seemed like a merry go round of superintendents and that still goes on today. We see that regularly.*

Mr. Jost's observation is borne out by the fact that, during its twelve years in receivership, GUSD has been headed by seven different state appointed heads and countless rotating hosts of supporting district level personnel. New leaders bring new approaches, visions, and policies that get modified or simply abandoned with each new rotation. This often spells confusion and frustration among GUSD teachers. Juana Rubio, a high union-engaged teacher describes the impact:

> *You feel sad or bad for things that are happening. You wonder why we have so many people, they leave, and then we have to start all over again…You have a lot of people you connect with at the district level, and then you don't know if they're staying or not. That's always the first question when someone gets hired at the district level. You ask them, "Are you staying or not?" and to think that the most veteran person at district level has been in our district only for three years.*

Regardless of who occupies the district leadership positions, receivership status remains in place for the foreseeable future as a political reality shaping how things do and don't get done in GUSD. Teachers have to cope and navigate this reality the best that they can with no real assurances of when and how their financial woes will abate.

II. Reduction of Democratic Governance and Access to Decision-Making

Closely related to the financial constraints that have been worsened by receivership, teachers describe the reduction of democratic governance and access to decision-making as a salient political reality that they must negotiate within the receivership context. Teachers describe this "thinning out" of democracy at both the larger structural and more site-based interpersonal levels. This is frequently noted in the participant interviews across differing levels of union engagement. Teachers recognize that the governance structure imposed as a condition of receivership diminishes traditional pockets of potential influence within the district's constellation of stakeholders (i.e. school board, parents, teacher unions, etc.). For example, in the receivership model, the state appoints a top state or county administrator in place of a superintendent who would typically be hired by the local school board.

In the receivership model, the local school board is still elected by local voters, but they are reduced to an advisory-only function. In recent years, it has been a struggle to get candidates to run for GUSD school board and when they do, candidates typically run unopposed. As such, they can choose whether or not to appeal to the local teacher union without consequence. Teacher unions still have collective bargaining rights in receivership, but negotiate only with a single "all powerful" state administrator and cannot leverage past strategies such as appealing to voters, endorsing or not endorsing school board candidates, or sitting on hiring panels for superintendents.

In explaining how he orders his perception of the hierarchy of influence in GUSD, Marvin Wayne Johnson, a high union-engaged teacher, describes receivership's impact on local control that has the effect of reducing power among other traditional district stakeholders to merely symbolic:

> *I put district level administrators at the top because since Gladdingham is in receivership, that's where everything happens. As well as the school board went way down low, because they don't really have any power outside of a situation where they can make suggestions, but they have no real power…Registered voters, since they don't really vote for anybody on the school board that has any real power. It's only advisory, so I put them at the bottom.*

Mr. Johnson observes that the receivership concentrates ultimate authority in the hands of a single state appointed administrator, rendering all others as mere "advisors." Similarly, Alice Carter, a low union-engaged teacher comments:

> *The district runs everything, but they also have to consider the state and local government in their decisions. And then they pass that down because we are in receivership. Our school board I feel does not have control of the district. I think they're doing what they're told to do.*

Teachers like Johnson and Carter have little faith that robust deliberation and consensus-based collaboration is currently occurring around district level decisions in any meaningful way. This structural deficit is perceived to also impact site-based interpersonal politics.

Vivian McMoore, a high union-engaged teacher describes the tight control of such concentrated authority as rendering local site administrators (i.e. principals) also as relatively powerless and mere "pass throughs" for district level mandates. In explaining how she ranks power and influence among district stakeholders she states:

> *So for the very first one, I have district leadership and directors because I feel like they dictate what our admin does and does not have control over. So a lot of times we [teachers] go to the admin, but their hand is tied because either they're not allowed to do certain things, or they're told to do things in a certain way. So we never know what the principal has to do. And yet they, the administrator, doesn't explain why, because they're in a catch 22. They're not supposed to say: "Well, this person told me I had to do it this way." They have to take ownership for it, even if it isn't their own decision.*

Juana Rubio, a high union-engaged teacher concurs describing her "scrambling" local site administrator thus:

> *I feel that admin you know, they're just running like, like they tell them what to do at the district office and they're just running for it, trying their best to figure it out. And they're*

> *just running and are looking behind them to see if everyone else is following them. I guess everything's like last minute sometimes at the district. They [principal] want everyone to be equal and they want to work together. But it's not necessarily true. They don't really mean it when they say that you're equal…It's all about whatever the district wants them to do.*

The need for local principals to bend to the will of the state appointed administrator is more acute in the context of receivership because failure to comply threatens the high-stakes goal of moving the district out of receivership. Every GUSD principal is expected to do everything to help the district meet the over 100 required benchmarks imposed by the state's Fiscal Crisis & Management Assistance Team, so there is inordinate pressure to conform. This lack of autonomy among GUSD's administrators contributes to high principal turnover and is seen by some teachers as "trickling down," further muting teachers' voices in terms of influence. Walt Jost, a medium-union engaged teacher describes:

> *It's top down with little say so from teachers. Now, this is my sixth principal. So I've been through quite a number of them so I would just say top down with little say so from teachers.*

Wendy Sims, a medium union-engaged teacher, goes so far as to refer to GUSD teachers as "bottom dwellers" in terms of placement within the hierarchy of power and influence within GUSD. She concurs that receivership places particularly unique restraints on access to power and influence that would not normally be experienced in a non-receivership situation:

> *I think our government really affects a lot only because we're under state receivership…our school board is kind of out of the picture right now. I mean we have one. And how much power do they really have? I'm sure I want to say, not very much.*

Ms. Sims' comments hint at an awareness that receivership produces a political dynamic that is, at the very least, abnormal. Sims, like other teachers in the study, expresses an unfolding awareness that the political lay of their jobs in GUSD is atypical, even for an urban intensive school district. The struggles and desire to do well for the disadvantaged students that they

intentionally serve is complicated by the loss of traditional levers of influence and weakened opportunities for political allyship due to the receivership-imposed reduction of the local school board's authority— to an elected body with no vote and no authority.

Teacher participants with prior experience teaching in more affluent communities were most likely to note the "abnormal" concentration of power in GUSD. Betina Green, a high union-engaged teacher describes how she marvels at how different she would order her perceived ranking of stakeholders' power and influence if she was doing it for the wealthy public school in which she taught at the beginning of her career:

> *If I were doing this exact same pyramid, from my very first position in _____Unified, it would be completely different. Specifically, in Gladdingham, I don't see the input so much for the parents and the students. Actually, I don't see a lot from the teachers. It's just we're kind of told what to do. And it's our responsibility just to do it. We're not really involved in the decision making process.*

While most of the teachers interviewed are able to name the fact that receivership has a deleterious impact on democratic processes within their own district, few expressed an explicit awareness that receivership is disproportionately applied to districts serving low income and high minority districts nationwide. Still, the findings of a recently publicized national research study on the effectiveness of state receiverships point out this very fact and additionally suggest that receiverships have almost no positive impact on districts serving larger percentages of Black students (Lyon Bleiberg and Schueler 2024) and may reduce the political power of local school leaders of color (Lieberman 2024). This can certainly be seen with regard to the local school board in GUSD which is completely comprised of people of color.

Teachers in the study do not explicitly link the heavily minority demographic makeup of their district's students, teachers, and school board to GUSD's receivership status. However, there is an emerging awareness that what they are experiencing is related to larger social and

economic injustices that plague poor communities like those wherein they serve. It appears that the teachers in this study are moving towards a sense of "linked fate" that, when fully developed, will inspire more potent forms of agency and mobilization (Guinier & Torres 2009) against the undemocratic constraints that affect teachers, students, students' families, and their local leaders alike.

In the meantime, the fact remains that GUSD teachers find themselves in a political position marked by reduced access to democratic mechanisms and access traditionally available in the governing of non-receivership districts, whether they like it or not. The teachers in this study recognize and balk at the situation, but they also continue to work in GUSD. But why? And perhaps, equally of interest, how? In this political terrain shaped by receivership, how do teachers describe the ways in which they may empower themselves and enact influence in GUSD? Even as teachers described reduced access to power, their interviews reveal several strategies for enacting agency within a distressed financial and political context. The strategies which I refer to as "avenues of influence" form a core component of these educators' emerging teacher political fluency.

III. Available Avenues for Teacher Influence and Empowerment

"I was given this gift of people really holding onto me and saying, you know, 'Don't give up.' And I feel like, that's how I reciprocate.. This is why I'm here is to be able to do that for as much and for as long as I can. And just keeping my mind focused. As much as I can, I dwell on that."
-Tim De Jesus, low union-engaged teacher

"I take a look at the fact that the majority of people who are constantly negatively impacting and influencing public education, for sure, are non-educators. And they're people who, for lack of a better way of phrasing it, they're not even qualified to do the job. But they seem to believe they know how to do it better than those of us who are qualified and actually doing the work. And it's unfortunate because they seem to have the loudest voice."
-Vivian McMoore, high union-engaged teacher

The quotes above reflect a third prominent theme that emerged as the teacher participants described the political dimensions of their work in the urban intensive context of GUSD. This theme centered around the motivations and mechanisms by which they are able to exert influence within a teaching environment constrained by the negative impacts of receivership. It reflects the scholarship around Job Demands-Resources Theory which posits that workers perform their jobs and feel better about their jobs when they are equipped with the proper tangible and intangible resources to do the tasks they have been given (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Moreover, it speaks to the circumscribed sense of political competence that these GUSD teachers feel because such competence hinges on a belief that the resources teachers have available enable them to effect results (Muller 1970).

For the GUSD teacher participants, the belief that they can exert influence appears to function as a "resource" employed to meet the "demands" of teaching in their urban intensive context. I characterize these resources as the **"available avenues"** teachers in GUSD perceive as pathways to empowerment and influence. These pathways comprise a type of *enhancement* to the teachers' work in their urban intensive context. In the case of the teacher participants in this study, two commonly invoked available avenues were identified as: **1) the practice of individual altruism** and **2) the practice of teacher collective agency**. Teachers across the varied levels of union engagement richly describe how a combination of their individual desire to positively impact students' lives and experiences of enjoining their power with other teaching colleagues allows them to feel influential despite their current district context.

1. The Practice of Individual Altruism

Based on the teacher participant interviews, the "resource" of individual altruism toward students surfaces as one means by which urban intensive teachers perceive that they can still

enact meaningful influence. Research from metastudies demonstrates that a majority of US teachers choose teaching for altruistic reasons (Fray & Gore 2018; Heinz 2015; Campbell 2013), often expressing a deep desire to make a positive and sometimes transformative impact on the lives of students. Further, an expressed intent to work for social justice turns up often, especially among teachers of color (Su 1997; King 1993; Nieto 2006). Both of these patterns are evidenced among the GUSD teacher participants. To the extent that their altruism impacts student well-being and learning, it represents an avenue for teachers to enact influence in their urban intensive district.

The GUSD teachers in this study repeatedly cited altruism as a main driver of why they were attracted to teaching as well as what keeps them in the profession despite its challenges. In terms of seeing altruism as a key avenue for their influence as teachers, there were no significant differences that stand out based on teachers' varying levels of union engagement. While similar in their ideas around altruism, it is worth noting that the teachers speak of altruism in terms of primarily *individual* actions on their part, unconnected from any collectively shared guiding philosophy, either as teachers or as union members[6]. When asked what keeps them working in GUSD, a common refrain across teachers from all levels of union-engagement is that "it's for the kids." The line of thinking, for many, seems to be that even when they don't feel as empowered in terms of the larger governing and policy structures shaping their work, they believe they still have a great deal of influence within the spheres of their classrooms and the impact that they can have by being there for their students. Mabel Sherod, a medium union-engaged teacher describes:

[6] Although not mentioned by any of the interviewed teachers, Gladdingham Teachers Association motto is "Giving Every Child, Everyday, Every Chance to Succeed." The organizational motto invokes student-centered altruism that mirrors the study participants' responses.

> *It's still about the kids, my students. A lot of people say: "Oh, it must be rough teaching high school, especially in Gladdingham High School!' ... Well, within my four walls, life is great. lt's that eagerness to see growth in my students–learning about them outside of the classroom, supporting them outside of the classroom. Things like that is why I continue to do this job.*

For Ms. Sherod, there is a type of gratification and sense of empowerment that comes from knowing she is being helpful to her students that tempers the other district-related disappointments over which she has less control. Walter Jost, a medium union-engaged teacher also reconciles the challenges similarly, drawing a type of "strength" from serving his students even when other aspects of his work become more chaotic:

> *As long as I was fulfilling my obligation to them [students], I felt that I could handle just about anything that came along…It's always rewarding to work with young people… It was always kind of a privilege to be able to help young people along in some way.*

Wendy Sims, another medium union-engaged teacher simply quips: *"What keeps me in it is the kids. That's it! Everything else I can do away with [laughter]."* Feeling largely stripped of meaningful power in other areas, she and other teachers focus their good intentions on the direct rewards of the personal interactions with their students. Gerald Ang, a low union-engaged teacher comments:

> *What keeps me are the kids. I do make a difference, regardless of how large or small that might be, I feel like I'm there and I'm able to make that difference. And that's probably my top reason.*

Another low union engaged teacher, Rosa Arnaz echoes Ang's sentiments:

> *I still love what I do, I still like helping the children. I still like being with them and trying to help them read and write and do the math and have routines. I still do like very much this aspect of it. And I think that's— so far—what's really keeping me here.*

Both Ang and Arnaz admit that they were not particularly drawn to work in Gladdingham based on any foreknowledge that the district served a particularly disadvantaged population. Both teachers transitioned from enriched settings, a corporate job and working in a wealthy private

preschool, respectively. However, both enjoy seeing the impact they can have in GUSD's challenging context.

Other teachers, several of whom attended schools in GUSD as children, intentionally elected to work in an urban intensive environment because of their desire to be able to bring about positive outcomes for underserved students and/or feeling like they see themselves in their students. This sense of altruism rooted in shared identity is corroborated in academic research examining the impact and importance of teacher-student identity matching on pupils' ability perceptions and achievement (Dee 2004; Dee 2005; Eble & Hu 2020). To the extent that teacher-student identity matching positively affects student self-esteem and academic performance, GUSD teachers of color may experience a sense of empowerment and influence as they see their altruistic intentions manifested in actual gains for their students.

Vivian McMoore, a high union-engaged teacher, recounts how she pivoted towards teaching after she began exploring a career in the California Youth Authority. Seeing such very young kids already caught up in the system motivated her:

> *I took a step back and said: "Why don't I go into teaching to get to know what happens with these children this early in age to where they end up in a system like Youth Authority." And so that's what brought me to doing it. And then I was a product of Gladdingham, so I went to the human resources department where I had lots of former teachers.*

Ms. McMoore is buttressed by the influence she is able to enact through her altruistic practices:

> *I didn't always enjoy school. So to be a part of encouraging students to enjoy school and knowing that they have someone there for them, no matter what they come from. When they come to school, it is a safe place. So I'm creating that environment for kids.*

Alice Carter, a low union-engaged teacher also came to understand the urban intensive context of GUSD as an ideal place in which her altruistic influence could be deeply felt. She perceived that her presence as a Black teacher could inspire her students. Ms. Carter describes a

shift from teaching as just a "j-o-b" before coming to work for GUSD and what GUSD, specifically, inspired in her:

> *I came back to education because I was qualified to be a teacher and I needed a job. When I went to Gladdingham, I saw that I could save a student's life. I could shape someone else's life. So the shift went from me to the students where I started thinking, " Well, you know, I'll figure it out, but I gotta help these kids. And so now I'm just an advocate…my passion went more to them. I liked the diversity of the population in Gladdingham and I felt that the kids needed to see somebody that looked like them. And I needed to see somebody that looked like me. So there was a connection there right away. I understood them. They understood me and I just loved it. And I still love it to this day.*

A sense of "linked fate" that also functions as mutual benefit between her students of color and herself as a teacher of color is evident in Ms. Carter's responses. Her altruism provides an avenue of *reciprocal* influence in which she finds value and professional sustenance while positively impacting her students.

Marvin Wayne Johnson, a high union-engaged teacher also sees his altruistic influence as connected to the unique effects of his identity on students:

> *The big picture will be I do it because every year that I teach, I always get the kids that tell me: "You're my first male teacher. And you're my first male Black teacher!"... That kind of tells me that there's a need for what I do.… I become like that other male figure for some of the boys and so that's what keeps me going.*

Some teachers go so far as to see altruism as a way to heal the past injustices they themselves have experienced and influence students towards new possibilities. Tim De Jesus describes how his teaching is a path to influence excellence and inspire hope in his students, drawing on positive and negative ways his own experience, as an inner-city student, shapes his practice:

> *I had teachers where they said, "I'm done with these kids! You're from Watts. You're not going to amount to anything." I had a lot of teachers that told me that. And then I had teachers who said, "No, keep going … this is something you're strong at. Don't let anything change your mind." It's the fact that no one gave up on me. … For now, I just feel like it's definitely something that I want to work with and that the main thing is the kids.*

Laura Santos, a medium union-engaged teacher, attended GUSD after immigrating from Central America during the period of civil war in the 1980's. She began volunteering in GUSD schools right out of high school, was later hired as an aide, and eventually earned her teacher credential. She looks back with fondness over those GUSD teachers and staff who eased her transition as a young newcomer student. She is motivated similarly:

> *I think the top reason is because I love what I do. To me, it's important, you know, to be able to make an impact in the life of the students. I see, like, I'm sharing my life with them for 10 months. And I want to create a good memory for them, and I want to be able to be there for them 100%. And just the love of the profession, I think keeps me going.*

It is clear that the teacher participants' altruism is a main driver of why they teach, but it is also seen as an available avenue by which they can exercise influence within the challenging context of their urban intensive district. In this way, teachers view altruism as a means of *enhancing* their power by augmenting their influence in the face of the constraints on other avenues of power that are imposed by receivership. Altruism, then, serves as one means by which these urban intensive teachers navigate the political lay of their jobs.

2. The Practice of Teacher Collective Agency

Whereas GUSD teachers tended to describe the resource of altruism as an avenue to enact i*ndividual* influence, they also described avenues for *collective* influence. Another avenue of influence that the teacher participants describe is comprised of various *collegial* relationships and collective strategies that I group together under the category of "teacher collective agency." In the academic literature, teacher collective agency centers on the ability of teachers to affect and influence educational structures and practices in partnership with one another. A teacher union is one important example of a formalized structure for teacher collective agency, but teacher collective agency happens outside of unions as well. Teacher collective agency

is conceptualized as resulting from "the complex interrelations of teachers' individual and collective sense of purpose, competence, scope of autonomy and reflexivity, including meaning making of their present structures (roles and resources) and cultures (relational and ideational contexts)" (Pantic 2015). To a large measure, teacher collective agency relies on a shared sense of efficacy or belief that desired results are achievable when pursued in partnership (Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy 2000; Pantic 2015). It also is seen as depending largely on the quality of relationships between the teachers themselves. Scholars posit that teachers must trust in each other and feel good about working together as a prerequisite to engaging collective agency (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Pantic 2015). To capture a preliminary understanding of the GUSD teachers' sense of trust and collective efficacy, I employed a pre-interview questionnaire that *included* items querying teachers' perceptions of the quality of their relationships with various subgroups including administrators, parents, students, and fellow teachers.

The GUSD teacher participants hold their fellow teachers in high regard. In the pre-interview questionnaire, across a number of items about the political dynamics impacting their work, teacher participants' responses expressed most favor or sympathy towards teachers as a subgroup. See Table 4 below:

Table 4

Table 4

GUSD Teachers' Perceptions of GUSD Political Dynamics Impacting Their Work
• Just over half of teacher participants perceive teachers to be sufficiently respected by administrators • Just over half of teacher participants perceive teachers to be sufficiently respected by parents • A majority of teacher participants perceive teachers to be respected too little by students • **A majority of teacher participants perceive teachers to be sufficiently respected by other teachers**

- **A majority of teacher participants perceive teachers to have too little influence in their district**
- **A majority of teacher participants perceive teachers to have too little pay in their district**
- **A majority of teacher participants perceive that the daily demands of their jobs exceed the amount of support they receive from their district to fulfill the demands of their jobs**
- Just over half of teacher participants perceive that their district provides sufficient material resources to do the work of teaching
- **A majority of teacher participants perceive that their district does too little to retain teachers**
- A majority of teacher participants perceive that their district does too little to recruit new teachers
- **A majority of teacher participants perceive that teachers are given too little time to collaborate with teaching colleagues on a weekly basis**
- A majority of teacher participants perceive that class sizes are too large in their district
- A majority of teacher participants perceive that there are too few qualified teachers in their district
- A majority of teacher participants perceive the socioeconomic diversity of GUSD students to be too little
- Just over half of teacher participants perceive the level of racial diversity of GUSD students to be just about right
- Just over half of teacher participants perceive the level of ethnic diversity of GUSD students to be too little
- Just over half of teacher participants perceive the level of GUSD student families' political/ideological diversity as too little
- **A majority of teacher participants perceive the level of GUSD teachers' political/ideological diversity as just about right**

According to the questionnaire results, the GUSD teacher participants clearly perceive themselves as being subject to less-than-optimal working conditions, yet they hold each other in high respect even as they perceive that other district stakeholders do not. Teachers' high regard for one another also is repeatedly evidenced in the individual interviews wherein participants were asked to verbally rate how frequently they experienced conflict with other stakeholders at their school sites (i.e. principals, parents, students, classified staff and other teachers), how prepared they felt to handle such conflicts, and how often such conflicts interfered with their motivation to teach. Teachers unanimously reported having very few if any conflicts with teaching colleagues and feeling "very prepared" to handle those conflicts should they arise. All

teacher participants stated that conflicts with teachers "never" interfere with their motivation to teach, although they report that conflicts with administrators and parents sometimes do.

Teachers in the study demonstrated an overriding respect and positive esteem towards other teachers in their district. Walter Jost, a medium union-engaged teacher, who had previously worked in the aerospace industry describes his pleasant surprise at the collegiality he encountered when he began teaching in GUSD:

> *The teachers were together, you know, they worked very well together. Even though I said I was a loner, we still socialized at work, as so on…I don't have much experience at other schools in Gladdingham because I was at Pine Elementary the whole time. But I got along with most of the teachers. We were a pretty good group. We kind of all had the same goals to help students as best as we could.*

Several teacher participants describe the intense bonds they experience with other teacher colleagues and how these bonds often soften the unpleasant "blows" of district financial woes and policies, giving them a sense of being empowered. Mabel Sherod, a medium union-engaged teacher describes:

> *Getting past the challenges of not having everything that you thought you should have as a teacher as far as supplies and the curriculum to meet student needs. I would say, because I was in an environment, a work environment that was more family oriented, that I didn't lack support. We all looked out for each other. And we did things outside of work together. We went to baby showers and weddings and birthday parties and celebrations like that. So it's more of a family unit than an actual work environment.*

For Ms. Sherod, the sense of relating to her teacher colleagues as family helps her to thrive in spite of the challenges. Similarly, Fawn Lichter, a medium union-engaged teacher who expresses frustration with the day-to-day struggles of her overcrowded classroom and administrators who seem indifferent to what her students truly need, describes collegial relations as a mainstay in keeping her motivated in her job:

> *I have really good friends. You know, I love my co-workers. And I love the routine of getting up and going to work every day. Just that camaraderie with my co-workers and the idea of just getting up and coming to work to see somebody.*

For Ms. Lichter and Ms. Sherod, positive collegial feeling acts like a buffer against the negative constraints of their jobs and functions to *enhance* their morale in an otherwise demoralizing context. That morale boost functions to create a sense of empowerment. At times, the sense of empowerment opens the way for teachers to enact power and influence outwardly against the political constraints of their jobs.

In recounting one of her early career encounters with barriers to accessing needed supplies for her students, Vivian McMoore, a high union-engaged teacher, describes how she and teacher colleagues at her site banded together to create a "work-around" to bypass an office manager who acted as a gatekeeper. The office manager operated from a "scarcity" mindset, afraid to relinquish supplies to teachers for fear of not knowing whether funds would be available to replenish supplies year after year (an arguably reasonable fear given the financial precarity urban intensive schools often face). McMoore describes how the teachers' shared mindset led to collective agency:

> *It's not benefiting students, if you're not letting people use it with students. So it was just amazing to me. ... I found teachers that told me how to get around the not so happy, not so friendly office manager. What they did was, we would stay late, and the office manager would leave. And then we would get the custodian, who was so nice, to unlock the supply cabinet. And we were just raiding it. So that was a surprise to know that the supplies were really there. ... But it was just being hoarded.*

Positive collegial relationships and congruent goals serve as important precursors to teacher collective agency. In Ms. McMoore's case, the shared goal was accessing needed supplies, which when combined with trusting relationships with colleagues and a bit of strategic savvy, resulted in collective teacher action towards a solution (i.e. raiding the supply cabinet after hours with the help of a friendly janitor).

This type of "savvy" is described in the academic literature as "teachers' broader political awareness as well as a micro-political competence of finding allies to change their schools to better meet their commitments" (Pantic 2015 p 767.; Blase 1991; Bondy & Ross 1992). Ms. McMoore's anecdote provides rudimentary evidence of this important dynamic made manifest; a dynamic I am conceptualizing as "teacher political fluency." In essence, teachers' ability to accurately see the nature and constraints of their political situation (political awareness) coupled with a sense of the available avenues by which they can still enact*/enhance* influence and power within and/or over their context (agency & action) forms the core of "political fluency."

Beyond the site-based anecdotes of teacher collegiality and instances of collective agency, several teacher participants describe the practice of teacher collective agency in terms of the activities of their local teacher union, expressing a belief that it is one of the most effective means for teachers to augment their influence and empowerment in GUSD. Laura Santos, a medium union-engaged teacher describes:

> *I think it's the individual teachers coming together with the one ideal tha they want to accomplish. And I believe that when more people come together with that one goal, it's more powerful than one individual. So that's why I put it [the Union]. We hear it all the time at our school- "**We** are the Union." But if we're together, I think we're more powerful than just one individual.*

Wendy Sims, a currently medium-engaged teacher who had served years ago as a union site rep[7], describes the feeling of empowerment through the sense of collective agency engendered by her past participation in the monthly union Rep Council meetings:

> *It's invigorating to be sitting in those meetings with people from all over the district and all over the different school sites and to hear them have all the same issues and concerns*

[7] A nickname for Site Representative. In GUSD, site reps act as an embedded site-based liaison between the union's executive board and the teachers/bargaining unit members at their specific school or district work location. Site reps meet monthly with the Executive board in what are termed "Rep Council" meetings.

> *and problems that we have at our school site. Slight variations, but everybody. As a district, we have the same problem and we have a cause to unite and fight together.*

For both, Ms. Santos and Ms. Sims, the practice of teacher collective agency vis a vis their local union represents an available avenue by which teachers can access greater influence and empowerment in their challenging work context.

Whether it is through individual altruism, teacher collective agency, or some combination of the two, teacher participants are able to access these avenues as a means to more influence and empowerment in their urban intensive context.

Differences by Levels of Union Engagement: A Comparison Across the Three Themes

While gathering the GUSD teachers' descriptions of the political dimensions of their work and their perceptions of the constraining and enhancing effects of politics, I was also keen to uncover any patterns that might emerge related to the teachers' varying levels of union engagement. For example, might the more highly engaged union teachers feel less constrained by the political circumstances in GUSD? Did greater union engagement coincide with participants perceiving a wider range of available avenues for enacting influence within their district's political context? Before answering these questions, it is important to acknowledge that the criteria upon which levels of engagement in this study were determined were broad and also did not account for participants' fluidity between categories within the course of their careers. For example, several participants classed at the medium level of engagement had actually been more highly engaged at earlier points in their careers, but reported that they had pulled back in more recent times.

In general, I did not find many pronounced differences that sharply distinguish teachers from one level of union engagement from those teachers grouped in another. Still, a few nuanced differences by level of union engagement were noted. For clarity and consistency, I locate any differences I note within the context of the three themes that were discussed in the prior sections. The general findings within each theme are discussed below.

1. Receivership and Funding Woes

When it comes to awareness of their districts financial state, there was not a discernible difference among teachers at different levels of union engagement. All participants had experience with the historical financial precarity of the district as well as its current state of fiscal receivership. In the interviews, receivership is most often spoken of in terms of a shared, universal pain affecting all teachers. For the most part, teachers' comments reflected a somewhat underdeveloped awareness of the larger politics surrounding the district's current financial state.

Teachers across all levels of union engagement describe the phenomena of financial precarity and district receivership as primarily resultant from prior mismanagement by former district leaders, loss of ADA funding fueled by diminishing enrollment, and over a decade of local charter school proliferation that drained off students and resources. During their interviews, the teachers did not display any awareness of the "long ago" politics of Gladdingham's responses to racial integration that functioned to lay the groundwork for the district's present troubled financial reality. This is not surprising, given that the teachers' historical sense of the district begins with their own presence within it. The fact that three of the fifteen teachers attended GUSD schools as children means that they possess a longer historical view of the district, but

from the vantage point of students who have never been in a different setting to perceive the disparities. As such, the initial "shock" teachers experienced early in their careers around lack of access to supplies and other resources, evolved, over time, into an unhappy but accepted reality among the teachers interviewed. This dynamic speaks to a muting of the teachers' political competence insofar as the teachers have awareness but do not feel efficacious to substantially alter their reality in this regard (Barnes 1967; Mueller 1970; Pantic 2015). The teachers do not like the way things are financially but perceive themselves to be not well positioned to impact the overall fiscal health of the district in the looming shadow of receivership status.

2. Reduction of Democratic Governance and Hindered Access to Decision-Making

The sense of a reduction of democratic governance and hindered access to decision-making is noted among participants across all levels of union engagement with variations seen primarily among the high union-engaged teachers. Largely as a function of their district's receivership status, teachers of all levels display an awareness that the leadership hierarchy is significantly altered, vesting ultimate authoritative power in the hands of a single state-appointed administrator. Teachers at all levels of union engagement described individual teachers as being at or near the bottom of stakeholder influence within the receivership paradigm.

It is of interest that high union-engaged teachers name some *unique* forms of power enhancing strategies that they employ to influence decision-making within the receivership paradigm that were not discussed by teachers at the other levels of engagement. Their responses hint at a different level of political competence that they engage while navigating the restrictive terrain of their urban intensive receivership district.

Dahlia Vince, a high union-engaged teacher speaks of how she employs diplomacy to push back on district leadership mandates she feels are wrong-headed:

> *I do not like conflict, so I do not court it. I like to be diplomatic…that's a very important skill… If the district or the principal or whoever's above me wants something that doesn't make sense to me, or some kind of curriculum thing, or what have you, I play the game and I make it look good. And I still do what they might not particularly like, but then they never find out about it. So it's more important for me to follow myself than to follow them. I feel like, in my heart, I know they don't get it. They're not right.*

Knowing the current structural limitations of her power, Ms. Vince dons and removes her mask of compliance strategically to maintain her professional autonomy.

Marvin Wayne Johnson, a high union-engaged teacher, no longer feels the need to wear a mask when contending with administrators and describes the source of his confidence:

> *I feel confident, both my age and my experience, and the fact that I've also worked outside of education has given me the ability to communicate effectively. They have my utmost respect. But if there's a conflict that needs to be addressed, I feel very confident in approaching them and trying to come up with a solution…I'm getting close to that mindset that as long as I'm not hurting somebody's feelings as long as I'm being honest and truthful, I don't necessarily have to worry about what I'm saying.*

Juana Rubio, another high union-engaged teacher finesses relationships with other stakeholders to continue to have influence in the more tightly controlled receivership environment. She describes how cultivating relationships with school board members, even in their "advisory" capacity, can increase decision-making influence:

> *I also think that if you build relationships with school board members and you have access to them, and they make themselves available to teachers, to the school, then you also have a little help. Reach out to board members and see if they can help with whatever it is.*

Ms. Rubio goes on to describe an instance in which a needed bathroom repair at her site languished in the work order pile for months until a teacher's chance encounter with the wife of a school board member, while walking her dog in the surrounding neighborhood, led to a

conversation about the long-missing door at the school's bathroom. Ms. Rubio laughs in recounting that the repair of the door was completed the very next day! She continues:

> *Silly things like that sometimes happen, like district administrators who will say "We're trying our best. We're doing what we can with the resources we have are limited" and maybe they don't have the personnel, but then someone like a board member can talk to someone and fix something in one day. That's where you see that, unfortunately, it's the connections you make with others that help fix whatever it is that's going on.*

Ms. Rubio's, Mr. Johnson's, and Ms. Vince's nuanced strategies to maneuver within the democratically constrained context of receivership demonstrate what the academic literature refers to as "micro-political literacy" (Klettermans & Ballet 2002; Malen & Cochran 2014; Magudu & Gumbo 2017). With this skill, they are able to *read* the dynamics of power and employ appropriate strategies for successful navigation within that power structure.

Other high union engaged teachers described similar nuanced strategies. Both Vivian McMoore and Hope Martin describe leveraging their *known* positions as union leaders to parlay influence and avert district resistance. Ms. Mc Moore describes:

> *Because of my union work, they've [district leadership] gotten to know me, I've gotten to know them. So we try to resolve things instead of having conflict because neither of us want to deal with that type of conflict that can come from disagreeing. … So again, I don't have those conflicts.*

Hope Martin describes a more delicate dance in which her union affiliation engenders undue attention from her site administrator that is at once "prying," but somewhat deferential to her role as a "gatekeeper" of sensitive union information. Ms. Martin describes:

> *The admin just kind of watching you a little more closely. I noticed that and lots of questions and maybe they try to pry without prying, but it's like, "Oh, hey, how's your day? How's it going? Is anything going on? Anything we need to know?" And they're trying to get information out of me about what's going on or with the union that will be done with them.*

Ms. Martin and Ms. McMoore are able to lean into their known status as "union people" as a way to signal a different level of power and influence than their non-union leader teaching peers when dealing with district and site level administrators.

Collectively, the high union-engaged teachers in this study appear more adept at coupling the *awareness* of the constraints of reduced democratic governance and their hindered access to decision-making with the *enactment* of strategies that enable them to augment their sense of power and influence. In doing so, these teachers evidence a level of political fluency. This is not to suggest that their high union engagement is the *cause* of their ability to tap into their nuanced strategies. It might be equally plausible that their nuanced responses to democratic and decision-making constraints stem from inherent personality traits, or non-union related experiences that, in turn, increase their likelihood of being attracted to union involvement. A third possibility is that the relationship is purely coincidental. Teasing out that level of detail is beyond the scope of this descriptive study. Still, it is interesting to note the differences as a potential topic for future extended research.

3. Avenues for Teacher Influence and Empowerment

Teachers participants across all levels of union engagement described accessing various available avenues by which they can exert influence and enhance their work within their urban intensive context. Two prominent avenues that show up repeatedly are the avenues of influence via **1) altruism** and **2) teacher collective agency**. Every teacher in the study makes direct reference to altruistic motivations as undergirding their continuing to teach in GUSD, despite its challenges. There was little discernible difference in their altruism along lines of union engagement. However, there was variation among teachers at differing levels of union engagement with regards to the depth and complexity of teacher collective agency.

The first notable difference was evidenced in the area of positive collegial feeling that is seen as prerequisite for teacher collective agency. Medium and high union engaged teachers referenced positive collegial feeling as a buffer to various challenges in their district. Interestingly, the idea of positive collegial feeling was not commented upon by any of the teachers in the low union-engaged category. It is not that they express negative collegial feelings, but they just make no mention of collegial feelings at all in their interviews. There is no obvious explanation for this, but it is worth noting for the purpose of possible expanded study. One interesting finding is that, in their survey responses to the questions asking them to rate the level of respect accorded to teachers by the various stakeholders, low union-engaged teachers reported higher levels of feeling respected than was generally reported by their more union-engaged peers. See **Figure 4** below.

Figure 4 Perceptions of Respect for Teachers Survey Analysis by Level of Union Engagement

Figure 4

High Engaged Low Engaged Medium Engaged ()=Participant Initials

5. The level of respect from parents accorded to teachers in my district is..	7. The level of respect from teachers accorded to teachers in my district is..	6. The level of respect from students accorded to teachers in my district is..	4. The level of respect from administrators accorded to teachers in my district is..
Just about right (DV)	Just about right (DV)	Too little (DV)	Too little (DV)
Too little (JR)	Too little (JR)	Too little (JR)	Just about right (JR)
Too little (VM)	Just about right (VM)	Too little (VM)	Just about right (VM)
Too little (HM)	Just about right (HM)	Too little (HM)	Just about right (HM)
Too little (BG)	Too little (BG)	Too little (BG)	Too little (BG)
Just about right (MWJ)	Just about right(MWJ)	Too little (MWJ)	Just about right (MWJ)
Just about right (GA)	Just about right (GA)	Just about right (GA)	Too much (GA)
Just about right (TDJ)	Just about right (TDJ)	Just about right (TDJ)	Just about right (TDJ)
Just about right (AC)	Just about right (AC)	Too little (AC)	Just about right (AC)
Just about right (RA)	Just about right (RA)	Just about right (RA)	Too little (RA)
Just about right (WS)	Just about right (WS)	Too little (WS)	Too little (WS)
Too little (LS)	Just about right (LS)	Too little (LS)	Too little (LS)
Just about right (WJ)	Just about right (WJ)	Too little (WJ)	Too little (WJ)
Too little (MS)	Just about right (MS)	Just about right (MS)	Too little (MS)
Too little (FL)	Just about right (FL)	Too little (FL)	Just about right (FL)

One possibility is that because the low union-engaged teachers feel more respected, it may also lessen their perceived need for a buffer from negative district constraints. It could also signal a type of quiet resignation to things as they are. However, there are also myriad other possibilities which are beyond the scope of the present study. Given the small participant sample, it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions about why the low engaged teachers reported higher feelings of respect. Still, it is interesting to note and explore through expanded research.

Another difference between levels of engagement is noted in that both high and medium union-engaged teachers evidenced a movement from positive collegial feeling to collective

action. These teachers spoke particularly of instances of collective action when describing positive memories of collective union activity. They describe their collective participation in union activity as functioning as a "support network," providing opportunities to be"hands on in helping support new policies," and working to protect each other in ways so that "everyone feels safe, supported and treated well within their job." It is likely that because members at these levels *choose* to plug into union activity, they have greater exposure to the supportive aspects of unionism. Again, this is just one plausible explanation and not a definitive one. The succeeding chapter expands the discussion of how teacher unionism figures into the political perceptions and responses of the teacher participants in this study, sharing the findings specifically related to Research Question #3: **What role does teacher unionism play in shaping teachers' understanding of the political dimensions of teaching and the political skills and sense of political agency necessary to navigate the political factors affecting their work?**

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Closing Summary

In summary, teacher participants describe the political lay of their jobs in rich and varied ways. Additionally, their interviews speak to the constraints and enhancements their specific political context places upon their work. What unites many of their descriptions is the overarching reality of being in an urban intensive district that is further impacted by state receivership. Teachers' descriptions touch on three prominent themes: 1) Financial Woes & Receivership; 2) Reduction of Democratic Governance & Hindered Access to Decision-Making and 3) Available Avenues for Teacher Influence and Empowerment. The findings around these themes illuminate much about how these teachers perceive the impacts of the challenges of working in an urban intensive context that was hewn out of troubling racialized politics from

prior decades. It also spotlights strategies these teachers employ to navigate the challenges. Teachers at all levels of union engagement spoke to these themes, with *limited* but interesting variations in the areas of the second and third themes. These subtle variations only hint at possible ways teachers' levels of political fluency may be impacted by differences in their degree of engagement with unions. Further research with a larger participant pool and improved criteria for delineating the levels of union engagement will likely provide a useful springboard to future research that can expand our understanding of the nature of such variations.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: TEACHER UNIONISM AND POLITICAL FLUENCY

Introduction to the Findings

Role of Teacher Unionism in Teacher Political Understanding & Skill Development

Teachers interviewed for this study were not told that the study was about teacher unionism or that a central focus of the study was understanding how they see politics in the course of their work as being somehow connected to teacher unionism. Instead, they were simply told that the study was about documenting "the experiences of teachers working in urban schools." The purpose of this approach was not to deceive the teacher participants about the study's goals, but to avoid biasing their answers and allowing space for their authentic thoughts to be shared whether or not their responses related directly to the topic of my particular research interest.

During the in-depth interviews, teachers were asked a series of questions on broad topics including how they would address professional conflict, what they saw as the purpose of teacher unions, where they locate individual teachers and teacher unions in the hierarchy of influence within their district, what involvement they currently have with their union, and how they might rate the current performance of their local, state, and national teacher union affiliates. Their responses were analyzed to discern how their thoughts on unionism related to their overall conceptions of the political lay of their work in their urban intensive context. The results of this analyses revealed the following themes:

I. Conceptions of Union Purpose

II. Conceptions of Union Power

III. Personal Impacts of Union Engagement

I. Conceptions of Union Purpose

Regardless of their levels of current union engagement, the GUSD teacher participants reveal closely linked understandings around the purpose of unionism. Capturing a sense of what the teacher participants believe about the purpose of unions helps inform how their engagement with unionism may or may not influence how they understand and respond to the political conditions they identify as impacting their work. For example, if individual teachers describe themselves as having the political condition of low access to influence in their district, yet also believe that unions serve the purpose of being very influential in their district, it might suggest that teachers who desire more influence might also seek to engage more deeply with their teacher union,

The teachers in this study generally describe teacher unions in a positive light, believing that the existence of teacher unions is important to their work. There are nuanced variations in how the study participants characterize teacher unions and several teachers expressed hesitancy about whether their *local* union is currently operating according to what they, conceptually, identify as the union's purpose. (This will be discussed further in subsequent sections.) However, on the whole, the GUSD teacher participants articulate teacher unions as a mechanism for **A) supporting**, **B) protecting**, and **C) empowering** teachers.

A. Unions as Supporting

Teacher interviewees across the spectrum of union engagement describe teacher unions as sources of support. Research has demonstrated that teacher-led organizations centering solidarity can serve as important disruptors of teacher alienation and burnout particularly in

urban intensive contexts (Martinez,Valdez, & Cariaga 2016). Several teachers noted that the union undergirds the individual teacher by reducing feelings of isolation and being a site for teachers to forge collegial relationships. Marvin Wayne Johnson, a high union engaged teacher summarizes his local union's purpose as providing a critical **supportive** "cushion" for teachers:

> *The purpose is just to ensure that teachers are compensated properly, have legal rights that aren't being violated. It's almost like a comfortable pillow, a soft place to land for teachers who may have some difficulty, because things happen. And if you're by yourself, you may need an attorney, but if you have a union that you can turn to for guidance, you will never feel alone…I think the greatest thing that the union can do for teachers is just be another layer of support that you can lean on, in case of times that you need it.*

Mr. Johnson sees the value of unions providing moral support and guidance for teachers in ways that combat the isolation characteristic of many teachers' experiences. Support against isolation is especially crucial early in their teaching careers to combat attrition (Ingersoll 2000). This feature of moral support may have unique added value in urban intensive contexts like GUSD where teacher turnover tends to be higher.

Similarly, Wendy Sims, a medium union engaged teacher with prior experience at a high level of union engagement, describes the union's purpose as primarily one of moral support that is personalized. In her view, the small size of her local union should enable this level of support:

> *They should really be there for the members on a more intimate level, meaning a support. If the teachers are having struggles. I think a district of our size especially can get personal. And they can know their members…some way for them to get to know their members more personally so that I could, say, call up our union president and say, "I could really use help with this." And they would send support or meet with me. I think there's personal relationships to maintain there as well.*

Although Ms. Sims believes her local union is not currently providing adequate support, she still sees support as a critical union function. Low union-engaged teacher, Alice Carter expresses similar frustration at the current lack of adequate support and guidance by her *local* union, while still recognizing support as the union's chief function:

> *I think the teachers union, their priorities should be teachers, their workplace, their resources, negotiating their pay, their working sites, their safety. It should be anything that has to do with teachers. That's what teachers look for their union to do. To take care of that and to research what the teachers need answers to in order to give us advice about what they think we should do.*

Gerald Ang, a low union-engaged teacher with an admitted limited knowledge of unions, also describes unions chiefly as a mechanism for support:

> *Just collective support. When I think of unions, and again, I'm not fully familiar with what they can or cannot do. But, I imagine it's basically a collection of like minded people in the same field, and there to support one another. I would think that they're there to support us, if there's unfair treatment of some sort, within the membership. They're there as a collective unit to face those conflicts together and support one another.*

Clearly, support is an important purpose of the union recognized by teacher participants across engagement levels. Even when interviewees expressed frustration that their *local* union was not currently providing a desirable level of support, they continued to hold fast to the belief that support is a key purpose and benefit of teacher unionism.

B. Unions as Protecting

Other teachers describe their union's purpose as providing **protection**. In the participants' view, protection encompasses being shielded from harm in the form of unfair treatment, breaches in contractual agreements with their district, and unequal access to district resources. Teachers across various levels of union engagement invoke protection as a meaningful function of their local teachers union. As these teachers simultaneously recognize that their current receivership status has reduced democratic governance and hindered access to decision-making, they seem keenly aware of the heightened need for the union's protection.

High union-engaged teachers often reference the more technical aspects such as "bargaining" and "the contract" as they describe the protective functions of their teacher union. For example, Betina Green, a high union-engaged teacher, describes the protective purpose thus:

> *I think the main function is to make sure that people are held accountable and to make that we are not being taken advantage of. To make sure we have the right working conditions, that we adhere to the contract and that the district adheres to the contract. It makes sure that everybody and that everyone is being held accountable to what we have mutually agreed upon. Because it's a mutual agreement. It's not just the teachers, it's a mutual agreement.*

High union-engaged teacher Vivian McMoore describes the protective function with similar technical detail:

> *The main function of a teachers union is to ensure that the collective bargaining agreement is being followed by all parties…It has the priority of making sure that its members–all bargaining unit members receive the same protections regardless of that person's personality, everything else is out of the equation, but everything is done fairly and equitably. Everyone feels safe, supported, and treated well within their job.*

Juana Rubio, another high union-engaged teacher, echoes the nuanced view on protection, describing:

> *Teacher unions are making sure that the rights in the contract of individual teachers are not being violated. So, in a sense, it means that there's equity, there's union, everyone's together as one. Like they say "an injury to one is an injury to all." So, I really believe that.*

Mabel Sherod, a medium union-engaged teacher with prior experience at the high level, also articulates an understanding of the protective function relative to the language of "the contract." She describes the union functioning as:

> *Making sure that the rights of teachers, classroom teachers, educators are being met. That we have those safe work environments, that we are also doing what we're supposed to be doing as teachers as well. But also being that support when our profession is under attack, or someone does something outside of our contract.*

Laura Santos, another medium-union engaged teacher, offers a description that is less "technical" than her higher engaged peers. Still, she clearly sees the union's value as a protective agent within her district:

> *[Unions] also help protect the rights of the student and the teacher. They help so that things can be more equal amongst the schools, the resources. I don't know, maybe that's more of a district thing? But it's part of making sure, like checks and balances, you know. The union helps make sure that the teachers in this school have the same resources as teachers in another school.*

Ms. Santos sees the union as protecting against unequal distribution of the scarce resources of her urban intensive school district. In her view, the union acts as a sort of fairness "watchdog" which is of particular value given her district's receivership status and prior history of mismanagement.

The protective purpose of unions is another facet of unionism that is recognized and valued by the teacher participants across levels of union engagement. Within their district's current political context of centralized authority imposed by state receivership, it is not surprising that teachers would deem the protective function of unionism as of great importance.

C. Unions as Empowering

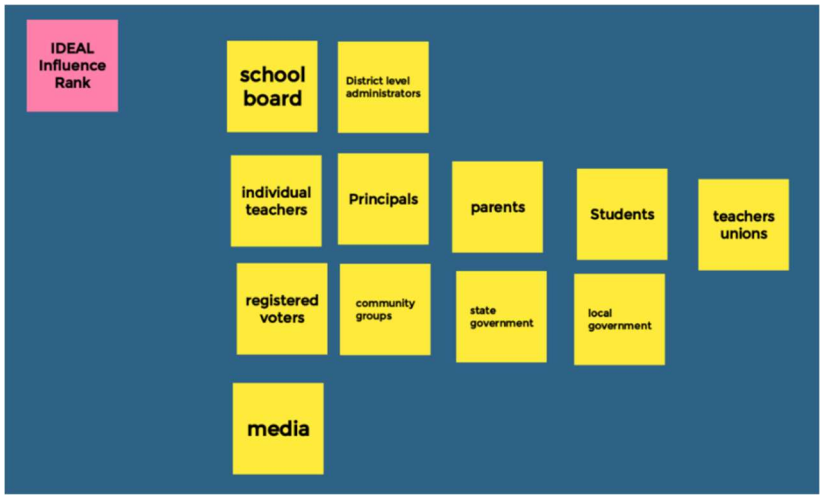
The reader may recall from the Chapter 4 findings, that the GUSD teachers perceive the power of individual teachers within their district to be relatively low. When teacher participants were given the opportunity to rank both individual and teacher union influence within the constellation of their local district's 12 key stakeholders, they similarly ranked them lower in relative power. However, an interesting pattern emerged when the teacher participants were given the opportunity to rank the same stakeholders according to an ideal scenario of what power configuration would be most beneficial to their district as a whole. In nearly every instance, teachers reordered stakeholders to invest greater power and influence in teachers and their

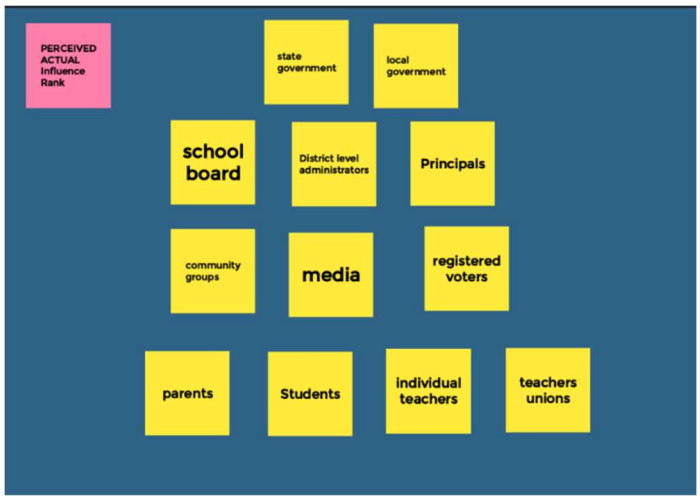
unions. (See full set of participants' visual map responses in Appendix). An example of this reordering of influence created by high union-engaged teacher Betina Green can be seen in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5 Perceived Actual vs. Ideal Ordering of Key GUSD Stakeholder Influence

Figure 5

Note: Betina Green ranks influence from top to bottom with highest influence at the top and lowest influence at the bottom





This evidence of the teachers' desire for greater power and influence as they repeatedly reordered the influence rank to increase the standings of individual teachers and unions is also reflected in their descriptions of the teacher union's purpose as a means to teacher empowerment.

In describing the empowering purpose of teacher unions, high union-engaged teacher Dahlia Vince remarks:

> *They [teachers unions] exist because power is mainly in the hands of the district people, or even the local government or the state government. They have the money and usually the power. So to negotiate with them as an individual teacher isn't really going to do it. So you need to group together.*

Walter Jost, a medium union-engaged teacher, similarly describes the union as the primary channel through which teachers are empowered:

> *The top function is to act as an intermediary between the district and the teachers…They're kind of like a mediator between the power and they talk to power to help the teachers and so that has good effects. Because that means that you have happier teachers. You have teachers getting the equipment and the supplies they need, the proper curriculum and so on. And then the teachers can produce better students as a consequence.*

Like Ms. Vince, Mr. Jost's response implies that individual teacher power is insufficient to move the needle on the important issues facing GUSD. In his view, the union represents a more powerful alternative to individual action that he believes, ultimately, ends up benefiting teachers and their students.

Rosa Arnaz, a low union-engaged teacher, also recognizes the teacher union as a means for greater empowerment:

> *What I see is they are working for the teachers, trying to solve what's going on in teaching and with the teachers and just helping resolve the issues and working with the next levels of power. Making sure that we as educators we're, we're not being taken advantage of, that we have a voice, so we have a vote. So that's why I feel that I need to do my part. I feel like I just come to this room [classroom] and just do my teaching and I need to be a little bit more involved with the union. I feel that it's a good thing, It's just my involvement with them, I need to be more into what they're doing.*

Ms. Arnaz admits that her lack of involvement with her local union hampers her ability to speak on unionism with greater authority, but stands by her assertion that unions are an effective conduit for amplifying teachers' voices in solving problems in GUSD.

Tim De Jesus, another low union-engaged teacher that is newer to Gladdingham, admits that he is still becoming familiar with Gladdingham's teacher union. In his prior district of employment, he notes that the teacher union exercised immense power and that has shaped his conceptions of unions as a viable means of teacher empowerment:

> *The way that the union is in *Big City, they are so powerful. It's incredibly powerful. I mean I learned that whatever it is, the conflict, the union was always there. It was just kind of this watchdog in a way. It just hones in on whatever it is that is affecting the teachers. So I feel that's how a union should be–that powerful. It's always good and it's working for the teachers. It was amazing to see that. Unfortunately, I'm not sure of the influence of the teacher union at Gladdingham, where I'm teaching now. I would like to see that but I haven't seen that yet.*

Just as with unions being seen as a mechanism for teacher support and teacher protection, it is clear that many GUSD teachers across the spectrum of union engagement view unions as a mechanism for teacher empowerment. The teacher empowerment offered by unionism becomes a reliable conduit for expanded *political influence* within their district. Their view of unionism as a source of empowerment stands out as a viable means for teachers to continue to hold influence even in the midst of the particular constraints of receivership.

II. Conceptions of Union Power

Another important aspect of discerning what role, if any, teacher unionism plays in shaping participants' political understandings and political agency within their urban intensive contexts is related to the teachers' conceptions of their local union's power. For example, if teachers conceive of their union as being powerful and proactive on the issues that concern them, they might be more likely to align themselves with union suggestions, viewpoints, and actions than if they believe their union is impotent and/or indifferent. The visual maps that each participant created depicting stakeholder influence along with commentary in the teacher

interviews provide rich data to illuminate how the teachers conceive of their local union's level of power and the ways it may be impacting their own political fluency development.

Although GUSD teachers generally believe that teacher unions possess power, the maps and interviews shine a light on the fact that the GUSD teacher participants feel that their local union currently lacks strength and influence. Some of the teachers further believe that their union lacks fidelity to the primary purposes underlying why unions exist. At the same time, the data clearly demonstrates that the teacher participants believe that a more empowered union will ultimately benefit their district. Teachers unsatisfied with the current "version" of their local union do not view the solution as abandoning or rejecting unionism wholesale. On the contrary, teachers across engagement levels aspire to see their teacher union and the individual teachers in their district increase their power and influence. I frame the discussion of teachers' conceptions of union power under the theme "**Union Reality vs. Union Aspiration.**

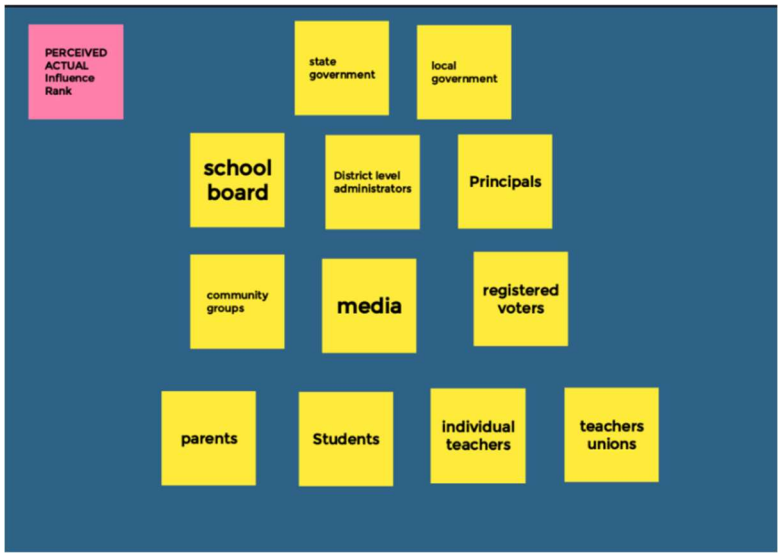
A. Union Reality vs. Union Aspiration

A key finding that emerged from the data analysis regarding teacher participants' conceptions of union power is that there is a gap in what the teachers aspire to in terms of the local union's power and the current reality they are experiencing with what they deem as a weakened state of their union. Not only does this gap affect the teachers' political understanding and sense of agency, the disparity actually functions as a political dimension of its own. The shared perception that their union is not completely viable becomes an *added* constraint to teachers already under the heavy duress of those political constraints imposed by receivership. To foreground the discussion, it is helpful to consider data that was culled from a portion of each participant's in-depth interview wherein they created two visual maps tracing their perceptions of

the hierarchy of influence in their local district. (See full list of participant visual maps in Appendix). Analyzing the results of this activity allowed me to determine how, on average, teachers at different levels of union engagement ranked the **"perceived influence"** and **"desired influence"** of teachers unions. Using an online Google Jamboard, each participant was given a board with 12 tiles, each labeled with a different stakeholder in their district (i.e. teachers, district administrators, school board, students, state government, etc.) The participants were asked to arrange the tiles in a manner that reflects how they currently perceive the rank of the influence of the different stakeholders. Participants were asked to order the tiles from greatest influence to least influence in their local district. They were also told that they could place multiple stakeholders on the same level to show a belief that they are roughly equal in influence. There are from 1 *(i.e. all stakeholders being seen as equal in influence)* up to 12 unique *(i.e. all stakeholders are believed to occupy a unique level of influence in a descending fashion)* possible ranking positions, as well as many permutations in between the two extremes. I apply a coding scheme that assigns a 1 to any stakeholders at the top level. Stakeholders on subsequent levels are assigned a number based on how many *total* stakeholders precede them in influence level. **Figure 6** below serves as an example of the ranking of the 12 stakeholders. The two tiles at the top are equally ranked as being in the 1st position of influence. The bottom 4 tiles are equally ranked in 9th position because they have a total of 8 other stakeholders that are positioned above them.

Figure 6 - Ranking of Perceived Influence of 12 GUSD Stakeholders (In descending order)

Figure 6



Using the aforementioned coding scheme, I analyzed each participant's visual map rankings. I looked at each participant's ranking of *teacher unions* specifically. The numeric rankings of *teacher unions* were grouped according to the participants' identified level of union engagement and, then, averaged. The organization of the data by teachers' level of union engagement (i.e. high, medium, and low) and allows for comparison of how differently engaged teachers view their current union's level of influence and how those same teacher groups would ideally rank their union's level of influence if they could alter reality. Those average rankings are listed in Tables 5 & 6 below. Tables 5 & 6 below show the average rankings across the three levels of union engagement. For the purpose of interpretation, a lower number represents a higher perceived level of influence (i.e. a score of 1=1st place) whereas a higher number represents a lower perceived level of influence (i.e. a score of 10=10th place).

Table 5 Average Ranking Position of Union Influence among 12 GUSD District Stakeholders

Table 5

Level of Union Engagement	Average Ranked Position of "Perceived" Local Teacher Union Influence on a level of 1-12 (1 being **most** influential)
High Engaged	**5.5**
Medium Engaged	**6.6**
Low Engaged	**6.25**

Table 6 Average Ranking Position of "Desired" Union Influence among 12 GUSD District Stakeholders

Table 6

Level of Union Engagement	Average Ranked Position of "Desired" Local Teacher Union Influence on a Level of 1-12 (1 being **most** influential)
High Engaged	**1.16**
Medium Engaged	**2.6**
Low Engaged	**1.25**

Comparing the two above tables, it is interesting to note that High Union-Engaged teachers tended to perceive their teacher union to be more influential than teachers at the other levels of engagement and also desired a slightly higher influence rank than the teachers at other engagement levels. Low Union-Engaged teachers perceived their union to be less influential than their higher engaged peers, but also desired a level of union influence *similar* to the High Union-Engaged teachers. Medium Union-Engaged teachers had the most intriguing data in that they ranked union influence the *lowest* of all three groups and they also did not desire as high of an influence ranking for their teacher union than their differently engaged peers. Given the small

number of participants, it is inappropriate to make any broad assertions as to why the data shows what it does. Future research, on a larger scale, might help shed light on possible explanations. However, it may be stated that, across union engagement levels in this study, there was clearly a perception that the current influence of the local teacher union was not particularly strong and that *all* wished to see it move to a higher level of influence.

That the teacher participants in this study generally perceive that their local union is **not** very influential in the present moment is important to note when considering the impact that perception may have in shaping the teachers' sense of political agency. Scholarship on teacher collective agency generally agrees that teachers' confidence and sense of efficacy in aggregate plays a major role in whether teachers are moved to agency (Pantic 2015; Archer 2000; Priestley, Biesta, et al., 2012; Bandura 1989). In other words, if teachers don't believe that their *best* and most durable channel for influence is operating at a level that is *truly* influential, they are not likely to feel confident nor efficacious in being able to impact the political realities they experience in their work. A potential consequence is that a poorly perceived local union drives down members' confidence and engagement. This gap between teachers' union aspirations and union reality can actually serve to dampen teacher political fluency.

The effect of the gap between union aspiration and reality also shows up in how teachers score their satisfaction with their national, state, and local unions. GUSD teachers across all engagement levels cited the importance of having unions and commented on the noble purposes that they believe that teacher unions serve. At the same time, they were also not shy about sharing their critical views on the state of their local union. During another visual mapping jamboard exercise, teachers were asked to rate their satisfaction with their local, state, and national union affiliates on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 representing the highest level of

satisfaction. Their responses were grouped and averaged according to union engagement level and can be viewed in Table 7 below.

Table 7 GUSD Teacher Participants' Average Satisfaction Ratings of Local, State, and National Union Affiliates (Scale of 1 to 10, 10 = highest satisfaction)

Table 7

Level of Union Engagement	Local Union	State Union	National Union
High Engaged	**8.1**	**8.5**	**7.0**
Medium Engaged	**5.6**	**7.8**	**6.6**
Low Engaged	**5.8**	**4.5**	**4.5**

The ratings demonstrate that the High Union-Engaged teacher participants rate their satisfaction with all unions more favorably than their lower engaged peers, even as they rate their *local* union's current level of influence (as seen in the previous Table 5) as only near the middle range. It speaks to the notion that higher engaged teachers may feel positively about their local union while still perceiving that their union lacks sufficient influence. Medium engaged teachers averaged the lowest satisfaction with their local union, but also gave above average satisfaction ratings to their state and national union affiliates. This may speak to how more favorable perceptions of these parent organizations may modulate some teachers' dissatisfaction with their local union chapters. The low-engaged teachers expressed both modest satisfaction and mild dissatisfaction with all unions. This seems reasonable in that these participants cited that they were not sufficiently plugged into the union at any level enough to give an informed rating. Given the small dataset, it is premature to make any broad claims about the data, but it is interesting to note the differences that surface among the participant groups. Further study on a larger scale might yield more about the phenomena.

For the purpose of this qualitative and primarily *descriptive* study, more about the differences is revealed through the interviews. During the interviews, individual participants often commented that features such as whether or not they had personal contact with the union, whether they felt familiar with the work of the union, and whether they felt they had a voice in the given union were being factored into their scores. (Their individual score maps can be viewed in Appendix).

Teacher participants at all levels report that they are not fully satisfied with their union's current reality, most often referring to problems like limited strength, member apathy, and poor communication to the union membership. In giving her satisfaction rating to the local union, Vivian McMoore, a high union-engaged teacher describes:

> *I was saying I'm a nine just for mainly one reason. And that's because the local leadership is so tired. It's been the ones doing the job for so many years, just tired, no one is interested in necessarily doing the work. There's a lot of criticism of the local executive board, without support in making it better. People usually come to the executive board of the local union for complaints. Like they feel their membership is like a AAA type of membership. "I pay my dues, when I call you, you fix it." versus a gym membership. "I pay my dues, and I only get out of it what I put into it."*

Similarly, Dahlia Vince, another high union-engaged teacher is critical of member apathy while also saying that she views her local union as weak:

> *But when you want to get people involved, like when we were almost going to go on strike. That's difficult. And hearing this one person complain about the union made me almost want to go crazy, and I had to tell somebody else, "You have to deal with this person! Because I've said it enough, and they don't get that they're the union!" So that's the most difficult thing I've had to deal with.*

In describing her low rating of the local union, Ms. Vince comments:

> *It just seems like our local union is kind of weak. So that's why I gave it a three.*

Fawn Lichter, a medium-engaged teacher offers a robust critique in her assessment of her current local union:

> *This is going to be a very low score. We're not very strong. We don't have very good leadership. We don't have members that are participating. But that's been a breakdown over many years that I've watched. I've rallied, I've gone to things in the beginning. I'm tired. I've been beaten down. And over time, when you see that this isn't working anymore, and then you're not getting what the majority of the members want, then, yeah, you just don't support. I don't go to rallies anymore.*

Ms. Lichter's stated withdrawal from union activity is a vivid example of the way dysfunctional unionism may work to reduce teacher agency. Ms. Lichter cites her retreat from local union activism due to the perceived weakness in her local union leadership. The fact that this perception undermines her confidence that collective action will produce any meaningful results highlights the fluidity (and fragility) of teachers' level of union engagement. The strong influence of both "weak" and "strong" unionism on members' sense of political efficacy seems to have importance.

Alice Carter, a low union engaged teacher adds her own nuanced discussion of the problems with her local union that have reduced her confidence:

> *I gave the local union a five and I would really love to give them a ten. And that's probably my fault, too, because maybe if I were more involved, I would be able to give them a ten. But the way the union is today, I just don't feel like they're 100%. I feel like they are "sleeping with the enemy," with the district administration and then, in that turnover there's so many secretive things that appear to be happening, that the individual teachers and the school sites are not being privy to. We don't know what's going on.*

Ms. Carter's commentary belies her longing or aspiration for the local union to be something better than it currently is and she owns part of the responsibility in bringing about the change. Her comments also speak to her view that there has been a shift of her teacher union as representative of teacher political interests to an independent political operative that teachers must monitor in ways similar to how they must monitor the district's leadership. Such a view has important implications as the sense of "linked fate" is diminished and there is a narrowing of the possibility of increasing political potency from shared interests (Guinier & Torres 2009).

The data corroborates the finding that the current union *reality* is not what the participants *aspire* to in terms of their conceptions of their local union's power and influence and may be negatively influencing teacher's political understandings and agency. It exposes the complexity of teacher unions' immense potential to empower teachers while being vulnerable to internal dysfunction that can just as easily cause teachers to feel that they are being drained of power and influence.

III. Personal Impacts of Union Engagement

A final theme that emerges from the data around the role of teacher unionism in urban intensive teacher political understanding and skill development is the aspect of the *personal* impacts of union engagement (and disengagement) among the teacher participants. The data in this area shows similarities as well as some dramatic differences between higher union-engaged teacher participants and their lower union-engaged participant peers. Most notably, teachers at higher engagement levels note that their union involvement led to 1) increased confidence in dealing with conflict at the site and district level; 2) an expanded awareness of pathways to grow their own leadership capabilities; 3) broader awareness of how connections to their state and national union affiliates might be engaged for local support; and 4) expanded knowledge of educational policies and procedures as required by their union roles. Low engaged peers express greater uncertainty in scenarios of district conflict and little or no awareness of how union involvement might enhance their personal, professional or political knowledge development. The findings speak to how teachers' personal encounters (or lack thereof) with local union engagement help shape their political fluency.

Despite the general sense of disillusionment with the current state of their local teacher union, participants described positive beliefs about how teacher unionism contributes to their security within their profession. For example, when it comes to the question of administrative conflicts, teacher participants across all levels almost always cite contacting their union as their first line of defense. Still, teachers also acknowledge how their lack of involvement with their local union may contribute to lower feelings of preparedness and knowledge that would help them in navigating challenging situations within the context of their urban intensive district.

One area of notable difference was in how teachers at varying levels of union engagement view potential conflicts with administrators and district leadership. Teachers at the high and medium union-engaged levels articulated more refined descriptions of how they would go about employing union knowledge and strategies to aid in such conflicts. For example, when confronted with a sudden controversial district mandate [as often happens in the less democratic receivership context], Hope Martin, a high union-engaged teacher describes how she might try to navigate:

> *I usually comply first. I'll say "this is what they want. This is what we'll do." However, I do feel that having the support of other teachers and the union, that we need to come together and talk to them [the district leaders]to show them what works and what doesn't work. I do kind of serve in the union, so that's why I can talk about it. Sometimes they tell us to do certain things without as much research behind it. … So it is first to comply. After that, keeping the data on it and showing whether what was mandated works for the students in that community or in that school.*

Her sophisticated approach speaks of the confidence she has in the acumen she has developed through her high level of engagement in her union. In her own words, she "can talk about it" because she serves in the union. Implicit in her comments is the idea that union involvement has provided her with some type of "edge" in responding to the sudden district policy shifts that can accompany working in a receivership context. The advantages she attributes to her union

involvement speaks to the idea of how teachers' political fluency may buttress the confidence that allows Martin to envision a clear path of response to navigate a less than ideal set of political circumstances.

Similarly, teacher political fluency is attributed to the ways in which union participation at higher levels provides teachers with an "insider" lens that allows them greater awareness and understanding of their district's policies and processes of decision-making. Medium union-engaged teacher, Mabel Sherod, recounts having *previously* served as a Site Rep for her school and the positive knowledge she acquired in that role:

> *The most positive thing is being able to see certain things that go on behind the scenes, on a district level kind of thing, decisions that are being made for school sites, for individual teachers. Being able to have that lens. Being able to see the beginning stages of bringing new ideas and programs into the district. Being able to see some of the camaraderie in between teachers across the district… seeing how we celebrate each other when those things happen.*

Even though Ms. Sherod has stepped back from her union involvement, she continues to invoke the insider knowledge and understanding she acquired from those experiences and expresses continued confidence in her abilities to navigate issues today. Ms. Sherod's experience of having developed and *retained* a degree of political acumen through her prior union work echoes scholarship finding that union participation builds a type of democratic "muscle" that has been seen to transfer into novel situations, including greater civic engagement (Ayala, 2000; Alexander et. al. 2012; Terriquez 2011; Bryson et. al. 2013). This type of spillover effect is seen not only in Ms. Sherod's personal acumen, but also in her expressed intent that her district become more democratic and her personal attempts to uplift student voice. She describes her ideal structuring of district hierarchy of power and influence:

> *Teachers unions, individual teachers, principals and district level administrators should be working together and have that same level of influence. And I put students at the corner because it's about them. They should have some say so.*

Sherod credits her union involvement with shaping her perspective and her sense that she has a pathway for being heard by her district leaders even when facing potential conflicts. When asked how she might respond to a hypothetical district policy or mandate with which she disagreed, she expresses:

> *Being a former union rep, and also being a member of their Restructure & Reform Committee from my school site, and working directly with the district, I would say for the first time in 20 years, I feel that they're [district leaders] actually listening now. And they're hearing our concerns and actually implementing some ideas that we've had for the last couple of decades. I think just letting the powers that be understand what their new policy is and how it is affecting what happens in the classroom. Just making sure they hear from me and my teacher group and sometimes my students. I let my students know when things are coming down the pike and when things are going to be changing…reminding them of their own voice, to speak out when things that are happening within their school site or their district that will affect them…just voicing my concern, voicing my opinions, and giving my students the opportunity to do the same.*

Like Ms. Martin, Ms. Sherod sees the value of her personal experiences with union involvement as preparing and positioning her to navigate the political lay of her job with a certain degree of confidence and fluency. Moreover, Ms. Sherod seems to "pay forward" her political fluency by cultivating the same attributes in her students.

Conversely, low union-engaged teachers describe having a great deal of fear about how they would be able to cope in a situation of conflict with higher level district administration. These teachers expressed an overriding sentiment that they lacked both knowledge about their power in relationship to the district leaders and legitimate pathways to pursue in the face of conflict. Low union-engaged teacher Gerald Ang describes:

> *I've never had conflict with the district, but if I did, I would be very unprepared, I would be terrified, I would need some extra support in that manner. Because, to be honest, I don't really know the full extent of what their authority or power is. I know it's above mine. So I would feel very unprepared for that.*

Tim De Jesus, another low union-engaged teacher expresses similar apprehension at the thought of potential high-level conflict:

> *When it's at district level or administrative, state level, I've just never seen that before. I've never experienced having to deal with any conflict in that direction. … At the top levels, like state and district, I think I would definitely need help if I ever had conflict, because I just don't know how to navigate that.*

For low union-engaged teacher Rosa Arnaz, limited knowledge of how to successfully navigate administrative conflicts leaves her feeling powerless and more apt to acquiesce in such situations. She describes:

> *I feel like we're very powerless here. … I feel because sometimes, it's just "What I say!" And there's not a lot of time for dialogue or even your opinion. You still are not taken very well into consideration. I feel like in our particular situation, it's a little hard sometimes. Not all the time, but sometimes it's just like "Oh well, it is what it is."*

For Ang, De Jesus, and Arnaz, quiet resignation to policies they disagree with has become the default modus operandi. For low union-engaged teachers, the lack of contact and involvement with their local union translated into a sense of missing out on key knowledge and skills that they feel more involvement might help remedy. Ms. Arnaz acknowledges:

> *I feel like I haven't done my part to really get to know everything that they're [local union] doing or not doing. So I feel like it could be me, you know, that I might need to be more involved with them.*

It is clear that Ms. Arnaz feels that her lack of involvement has constrained her in some way. She is not able to articulate exactly what it is she thinks she is missing out on by not engaging more with her union, only that she knows she *is* missing out.

Differences in teachers' level of engagement also appears to affect their awareness of tapping into vehicles for their own leadership and professional development that are made available to union members. High union engaged teachers comment on state union opportunities for enhanced political learning, including trainings and conferences they have attended. High

union-engaged teacher Vivian McMoore describes how much joy she derives from becoming more knowledgeable on union matters through their training opportunities and being able to assist colleagues in GUSD:

> *The most positive I would say is just actually bringing more people, giving more people information. Like being the information hub for others so that they feel comfortable and confident in coming to you with their needs. And getting more people to sign up and be a part of the union. And just coming together when I go to State Council or anything. But my favorite thing that I ever did was when I was in the EMEID [Ethnic Minority Identification Early Identification & Development] program and it taught me a lot about the different roles each individual can play within the union and how we can build a network.*

In her case, the ongoing union engagement has led to ever increasing union roles, expanding her knowledge, skills, and agency. She describes:

> *I am all the way involved. I serve in my local union as one of four executive board members. I am on the bargaining team. I am the organizing team chair. I am an AFL-CIO delegate. I am also at the state level. I am a lobbyist, as well as an elected.*

There is no question that teacher unionism has and continues to shape Ms. McMoore's political understanding and skills, hence, her "political fluency." The opportunities for political learning provided through union offerings not only enhance the political fluency of teachers but, often, open gateways to expanded political learning opportunities by which fluency continues to be exercised, strengthened and enhanced.

Conversely, among the low union-engaged teachers, knowledge of these opportunities for development through union training and programs did not surface at all in their interviews. It could be that they have no awareness that the opportunities exist or that their lack of engagement causes them to gloss over dissemination of this type of information. Ms. Arnaz certainly places the onus on herself for not being more involved. However, Laura Santos, a medium engaged teacher offers a helpful critique on how her local union might close such gaps in awareness among less engaged members:

> *I think that if maybe more teachers spoke favorably of the union. Let's say a new teacher comes from the university and is starting to teach, I think it could be more of a positive impact if they hear how much of an influence the union can have. When I first heard about the union I felt like, oh yeah, we're part of something bigger, like we're protected. If I need help, I know where to go. I felt like, 'oh this is good, I want to be a part of the union!' I think it should be the union rep, but it could actually be any teacher, you know, like advocating for the union.*

In Ms. Santos' estimation, union members who are already engaged have a shared responsibility to orient other members towards deeper awareness and engagement. Failure to do so is a missed opportunity to support her peers' growth as well the strength of her local union.

A final difference noted among teachers of varying engagement levels is that higher engaged teachers describe expanded knowledge of educational policies and procedures as required by their union roles. High union engaged teachers cited that their leadership duties in their local union *required* them to gain more familiarity with educational codes, legislation, and rules in order to assist fellow union members. They recognize how this added knowledge gives them an advantage over fellow teachers who are at lower engagement levels. For example, Marvin Wayne Johnson, a high union-engaged teacher describes a detailed pathway by which his local union can enlist help from the state and national affiliates when challenging situations arise:

> *Fortunately, we do have a union that has connections with the state and national unions. We can have consultants give us advice on certain areas, on any area, technically. My first response would be to have someone, maybe at the CTA level, look at the situation. … As long as we can consult with the other powers in the business, I mean their CTA attorneys, we can call their policy people. We can call different branches, even the National Education Association, to find out if certain things are the way it should be or not.*

Hope Martin, another high union-engaged teacher, evidences similar enhanced understanding of wider union tools at her disposal. She describes how she would act in a situation that requires assistance beyond the scope of her local union:

> *I do know that the California Teachers Association is a good place to start at least. We have some local chapters here, but then those are the ones that help and support us to*

> *reach the state level for any concerns or problems or things as they arise. I will contact my local representative for the entire state versus, through my district.*

Once again, the close-up and hands-on nature of involvement by those teachers directly involved with their locals via formal assignments appears to position them for more intimate knowledge of the union's inner workings and outer union connections. They appear more "fluent" in the language of unionism which *may* also lend to overall enhanced political fluency. However, further study is required to flesh out explanations and understandings of whether this or any of the differences noted among the participants in this very limited study bear out on a larger scale.

Closing Summary

In summary, teacher participants describe the role of teacher unionism on the development of their political understanding, skills, and sense of agency in ways that are underscored along three major themes: **1) Conceptions of Union Purpose**; **2) Conceptions of Union Power**; and **3) Personal Impacts of Union Engagement**. Findings within these three themes reveal a complex relationship between unionism and the teacher participants' political development that is characterized by elements of both constraint and enhancement, discouraging current reality and hopeful aspiration. It highlights how the vast potential of teacher unions as historical vehicles of teacher voice and empowerment is also subject to the vulnerabilities of internal dysfunction that can mute that potential for teachers on the ground. Still, for the teachers who have chosen a path of deeper engagement with teacher unions, there is evidence that doing so provides some practical enhancements to their political knowledge, skills and confidence to act in situations of conflict at the district level. There is similar evidence that teachers with the least amount of union engagement feel less prepared to face conflict at the district level, while also acknowledging that their lack of engagement may be a root cause of their feelings of low

preparedness. Further study is required to fully understand whether union engagement has a significant impact on enhancing teacher political fluency writ large but small studies such as this assist in pushing the conversation and potential investigation forward.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Politics pervades the life and work of nearly all public teachers today. At its most basic level, politics describes the dynamics of power and influence teachers experience and enact in their daily work. In some cases, it manifests in headline-grabbing controversy, such as when sudden local and state policy shifts muzzle teacher autonomy in making curricular and instructional content decisions. In other cases, it hovers below the radar of the nightly news and shapes the work of teachers in other quiet, yet salient ways, such as when teachers and students in poorly funded schools languish year upon year without access to a school library, fully credentialed teachers, or properly maintained facilities. Such routine deficits are not charged to political controversy but rather exist and persist in the quiet status quo of being a typical "urban school." But, as an old proverbial saying suggests, "Still waters run deep." The fraught political forces that shaped the landscape of many urban intensive schools have been submerged into the depths of time and little fuss is made about the politics teachers are having to navigate in these urban intensive contexts. That teachers in such situations will experience some degree of struggle in suboptimal educational conditions is largely taken for granted. My investigation was a preliminary attempt to plumb the hidden depths of urban intensive teachers' political contexts for answers about how they are perceived, responded to, and acted upon in one struggling California school district.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how unionized teachers working in an urban intensive school district view the political dimensions of their work. It sought, further, to understand what role teacher unionism plays in shaping how these teachers understand and navigate the political dimensions of their work; a construct I refer to as "teacher political

fluency." Finally, it sought to delineate any notable differences in the descriptions, understandings, and agency between teachers who engage with their teacher unions at different levels of intensity.

The findings of this qualitative study of 15 unionized teachers working in the Gladdingham Unified School District produced fascinating insights into how some urban intensive teachers view and experience political facets of their work. Most notably, these teachers provided critical insight into the unique ways state receivership status modulates the political dimensions of their work and their available avenues for exerting their own power and influence within these dimensions. The manner in which unionism affected these teachers' perceptions and responses to the political dimensions of their work was evidenced in nuanced ways that were not sufficient to draw any broad claims about unionism as either a strong predictor nor necessary precursor to teacher political fluency. Similarly, teachers' level of union involvement was not clearly associated with their overall perceptions, skills, and agency. Yet, teachers with higher levels of union engagement used greater sophistication and nuance in describing how they might handle potential district conflicts and their overall sense of how union experiences played a role in their sense of efficacy. The teachers' descriptions about teacher unionism and its impact in their contexts invite continued inquiry and study to better understand unionism's potential influence on teachers' political development on a broader scale.

Summary Discussion

Teachers working in the context of an urban intensive context that is further constrained by its state of receivership status are at the center of a quiet but turbulent political storm that has been decades in the making. Hewn out of a history of marked state and local disinvestment in response to school and neighborhood desegregation in the early 1970's that brought increasing

numbers of students of color into the previously all white district, Gladdingham Unified School District is a district in financial and structural peril. GUSD finds itself part of a small but select "club" of California districts that followed a similar pattern of shifting from majority white to majority minority, to diminished public investment, to fiscal insolvency, to state receivership. Even in receivership, GUSD continues to struggle with declining student enrollment, high teacher vacancies, low academic and college read[8]iness scores, high poverty, increasing school closures[9], and comparatively low personnel salaries. In many ways, GUSD typifies the experience of other highly segregated urban intensive school districts that have been quietly left abandoned to their own decay. Moreover, recent scholarship suggests that receivership is disproportionately applied to high minority districts and has been implicated in hampering local democratic structures that have particularly harmful impacts in areas that have larger Black populations (Lyon, Bleiberg, & Schueler 2024). As a political issue, it may not make for sensational headlines but its impacts are real and worthy of scholarly attention, especially as the nation's shifting school demographics and growing income inequality signal a likelihood that more and more public schools will mirror many of the qualities of urban intensive environments (Silva-Laya et. al. 2020; Duncan & Murnane 2016)

Research has firmly established that urban intensive districts face multiple challenges including diminished capacity and resources to meet the needs of their students (Milner 2012; Hess 2011; Warren 2011; Milner & Lamotey 2014). Urban intensive districts, in a receivership context, face additional hurdles, often embedded within punitive high stakes mandates as a

[8] As reported in 2023 CA Dashboard https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/19646340000000/2023
[9] As reported in 2022-2023 LA County District Salary Survey https://www.lacoe.edu/content/dam/lacoeedu/documents/businessservices/bas/bas/2022-23%20LA%20County%20District%20Salary%20Survey%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf

condition of a district's release from debt and centralized external control (Lyon, Bleiberg, & Schueler 2024; Lieberman 2024). Politically speaking, teachers working in such districts often find themselves with severely limited power and influence as traditional channels for democratic influence (i.e. school board elections, voter appeals, local superintendent hiring, etc.) are subverted or constricted in the receivership governance structure. Still, teachers develop and draw upon various knowledge, skills, and strategies to navigate these unique challenges. The political understanding, skills, and agency teachers possess is conceptualized as "teacher political fluency." It is theorized that teacher political fluency is a necessary component required for teachers as they navigate challenged urban intensive contexts in ways that preserve their altruistic aims, morale and persistence.

The development of teacher political fluency can be shaped by a variety of factors, including but not limited to, teachers' involvement with teacher unionism. In districts that allow for unionism, teacher unions often comprise one of the few potent vehicles for teachers to exercise collective agency as a means of exerting influence on district policies and practices (Berube 1988; Cowan & Strunk 2015; Cooper 2015; Bascia 2015; Moe 2011; Lieberman 2000; Loveless 2000; Peterson & Charney 1999). The strength of teacher unions derives most obviously from their relative size, but unionism has also been noted to imbue members with political knowledge and democratic procedural skills which have been demonstrated to increase members' confidence and participation both in and out of union contexts (Ayala, 2000; Alexander et. al. 2012; Terriquez 2011; Bryson et. al. 2013). As such, teachers' degree of involvement with their local teachers' union was an important consideration in looking at how the GUSD teachers perceive, describe, and respond to the political lay of their work. Could teachers' varying degrees of union involvement show up in differences in how they navigate

within their political context? Understanding more about how unionized teachers perceive the political dimensions of their work and employ knowledge, skills, and action to navigate them in urban intensive contexts across the state and nation is an important topic for further research.

Within the small sample of teachers from Gladdingham, it was found that there were shared perceptions of the political dimensions surrounding teachers' work in the district. These common perceptions centered on the financial and material resource constraints of being a district in state receivership as well as a perception of reduced access to democratic governance and decision-making channels that were available prior to coming into receivership. Teachers also evidenced shared perceptions around the utility of certain "avenues" of potential influence within their district because the unique challenges often necessitate them. These avenues were altruism and teacher collective agency. Teachers recognized that working with high needs students in a high needs district provided a teaching landscape in which their individual altruism could be deeply impactful and influential. Similarly, the teachers' shared encounters of common challenges in terms of resource constraint, limited voice, and autonomy were recognized to create a climate of solidarity through which teachers could enjoin agency. Again, there was little difference across levels of union engagement in terms of individual altruism. Teacher collective agency showed mild differences between the low union-engaged teachers and the teachers at the higher levels of engagement (medium and high) where these teachers articulated more sophisticated examples of collective agency, often citing union-related activity.

The findings regarding the role that teacher unionism plays in shaping the teachers' political understandings yielded both expected and unexpected findings summarized as follows. There was general agreement among teachers across all levels of engagement that teacher unions serve the general purposes of supporting, protecting and empowering teachers.

Teachers' political understanding was also shaped by their conceptions of their local union's power as measured in degree of perceived influence and the degree to which they were satisfied with the current performance of their union. Teachers across levels of engagement showed varying degrees of satisfaction with their union as well as clear demarcations of what they deemed to be their union's current reality and the aspirational goals they have for the union they would like to see. On average, teachers at the high union-engaged levels evidenced higher levels of satisfaction, higher perceptions of current union influence, and higher aspirations for union influence than the teachers at the two lower levels of engagement. Finally, it was found that teachers' personal experiences with union engagement had some influence on how prepared they felt to handle potential conflict at the district level, with low-engaged teachers feeling less confident and high union-engaged teachers feeling more prepared and confident due to the acquisition of skills they attributed to training and experiences afforded them in the course of their union work.

Far from being highly generalizable, the findings of this study provide a small window into the political perceptions of teachers working in an urban intensive district in a way that begins to shed light on an understudied area of education research. The chief value lies in laying beginning groundwork that may invite further scholarship on the topic.

Limitations

This concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations. (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137)

Biesta & Tedder's quote is a potent reminder of the power of context and the way agency, and by extension, any attempt to *study* agency, must recognize that it does not conform neatly to any given rigid standard or fully predictable outcome. Put another way, "results may vary." A small-scale study such as this has inherent limitations in terms of generalizability and drawing any conclusions related to causality. Fifteen teachers interviewed in one school district are not fully representative of all teachers in that district, let alone all the teachers in the state. Their experiences offer limited insight into how unionized urban teachers writ large perceive the political dimensions of their work and whether their level of union engagement has any role in shaping their perceptions and responses to those political features. However, in a research landscape in which these questions have rarely if ever been explored, the small qualitative study has relevance and value as an initial foray into the topic of interest.

There is no denying that a large-scale study of unionized teachers working in a single urban intensive district or one that covers teachers across multiple urban intensive districts would yield a more powerful and complete picture to build an understanding of teacher political perceptions and political development across levels of union engagement. For example, controlling for variables such as length of time in teaching, grade levels taught, teaching sites, specific union roles, and a tighter categorization scheme for what constitutes each level of union engagement would all help to hone in on the impact of union engagement on teacher political fluency. Adding a quantitative layer to the analysis is also facilitated by conducting a larger-scale study. Use of these expanded methods provide rich data in broad brush strokes that are invaluable in piecing together more meaningful claims. However, equally important are the intimate and nuanced strokes that are captured only through in-depth qualitative studies that drill down into the lived experiences of the teachers on the ground. An ideal scenario is one in which

a mixed methods approach can be employed. This is in keeping with the importance of qualitative study and analysis as a critical overlay in fleshing out the explanatory facets of large-scale data-driven studies (Erickson & Gutierrez 2002).

My research seeks to add to the repertoire of small-scale primary source research around urban intensive teachers' experiences with a particular focus on the intersection of teachers' political development and teacher unionism. Researchers have noted the scant research around teacher unionism as a whole within the academic discipline. Even less has been explored around the individual teacher's experience of unionism on their political perceptions and development. Further, specific research on how unionized teachers working in urban intensive districts understand and navigate the political constraints surrounding their work is also minimal. But it does not have to continue to be the case. Further research is needed to construct a more complete picture around this topic and to flesh out the nature of how political fluency is developed in teachers working in the urban intensive context and unpacking the potential impact of teacher unionism on that development.

Implications

Scholarly efforts to study the nature of unionized teachers' political understanding, skills, and agency in the context of urban intensive schools, touches strands of both academic and practical importance for various education stakeholders, including **education researchers, teacher educators**, **teacher union leaders**, **education policy makers**, and **current and prospective urban intensive teachers**. Specific implications for each of these categories are discussed below.

Education Researchers

On the academic side, further research on the topic opens the door on an understudied aspect of educational research that may shed light on other important questions of interest such as urban teacher retention, urban teacher burnout, and the historical roles teacher unionism has played in shaping or resisting the problems that seem to plague urban intensive schools (Katz, 1976; Larabee, 2018; Reese, 2011; Swett, 1911). Knowing more about how current teachers perceive the constraints and enhancements of working in urban intensive environments and how they develop the political knowledge and skills to maneuver through them provides critical information that may aid in fleshing out academic understanding of what can drive or slow down teacher attrition and burnout in these types of schools. It may also help in identifying whether teacher political fluency functions as a significant "resource" in aiding urban intensive teachers to meet the demands of their work.

Teacher Educators & Teachers Unions

Academic studies such as this also have implications relevant to teacher unions and teacher educators. With teacher shortages[10], teacher burnout, and teacher attrition on the rise on a national level, teacher educators and teacher unions have a vested interest in working to recruit, train, and sustain educators. Still, these two parties continue to be largely siloed from each other in the ways they seek to support educators. All of the participants interviewed for this study stated that they learned nothing about teacher unions in their formal teacher preparation studies. What they did learn about unionism primarily came by happenstance in the course of their teaching jobs over the years. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that

[10] Projections of education statistics to 2030. (n.d.). https://nces.ed.gov/programs/PES/section-2.asp

nearly 70% of teachers in the US are unionized[11] and California boasts the largest state teachers union membership in the nation with over 420,000 members. With unionism such a certain part of teachers' lives, it seems odd that it would be virtually non-existent as a core topic within teacher education coursework. Teachers in this study were quick to cite the important role unionism plays in the lives of teachers in their interviews as sources of support and empowerment. Expanded study might prove helpful in pushing teacher education programs to attend to teacher unionism more intentionally.

Further academic research on the nature of possible union impact on the development of teachers' political knowledge and skills could also provide union leaders with critical empirical feedback about how their organizations may be contributing to and/or helping to guard against urban teacher turnover. For example, if in future studies, union engagement was shown to have a positive impact on teacher political fluency in urban intensive contexts, teacher unions might seek to actively engage with teacher education programs that have a particular interest in building teacher candidates' capacity for agency in beleaguered urban school environments. Teacher unions could use such information to advocate for greater cooperation between teacher preparation programs and unions in exposing preservice teachers to some of the fundamental micropolitical and macropolitical dynamics that have historically played out in public schools and providing more explicit details of how teacher unions commonly factor into teachers' work in school. as part teachers' foundational coursework. A partnership might result in things like the co-design of a teacher prep course centered on methods for political awareness, understanding and agency in schools. This echoes Horn's (2017) insistence that teacher

[11] *National teacher and principal survey (NTPS)*. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a part of the U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables/ntps1718_20111202_t1n.asp

education programs take up the charge of infusing political awareness and a functional understanding of unionism as essential to preparing teachers more fully for the teaching reality in which many will find themselves once employed. Findings from studies like the present one contribute by nudging both teacher education and teacher unions to think and move beyond silos for the greater good of supporting and sustaining teachers.

Education Policymakers & Urban Intensive Teachers

Perhaps even more critical are the practical implications of expanding this type of study as California's public schools continue to evolve towards the characteristics of an urban intensive statewide system. Studies such as this contribute to the conversation about how state policy may continue to adapt in ways that affirm the dignity and worth of all of California's students. It also may be instructive for current and prospective urban intensive teachers in reading the political lay of their work and making visible their "linked fates" and interest convergence with the students they serve. Such awareness is likely to prove critical in how or whether teachers will advocate for their students and work to influence educational policy.

If student academic success and the cultivation of the state's future workforce is of importance to California, it would follow that our state educational leaders would want to be intentional about not repeating patterns of defunding and neglect that have historically taken aim at high poverty and high minority situated schools (Task Force to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans, 2023). More equitable school financing reforms like those embodied in the 2014 implementation of the California Local Control Funding Formula show promise, but fall short of addressing root causes of California's overall subpar funding of public

schools[12] nor does it address the ways in which funding penalties tied to chronic absenteeism fall most heavily on schools serving the most vulnerable students. In these instances, it is as if the state "gives with one hand and takes with the other." Educational researchers interested in furthering scholar activism for social justice and equity in schools have an important role to play in producing the empirical work that can inform political decisions and education policies that will best serve the coming generations of California public school students (Apple 2016).

In California today, it is true that nearly 80% of the state's public school students are non-white and over 60% of the state's students are from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (California Dashboard 2023). Although the state has recently put up historic TK-12 investments (California Department of Education, 2021), it is also true that the political will to continue to invest in marginalized populations has *not* been historically secure. Leaving the matter to the sole purview of the state has not proven sufficiently productive (Dixson et. al., 2014; Malen & Cochran, 2015; Wong, 2015) because politicians tend to be motivated more by self-interest as Dixson, Royal & Henry contend:

> Politicians have cranked out education reforms to advance their political careers or based on the political climate, without ever having the intention of truly improving students' achievement, and ultimately, never doing so. (2014, p.479)

While sobering, it is not completely surprising when viewed in light of the historical precedents about the overall lack of political will regarding movement on behalf of low income and minority students. Wong (2015) describes:

> Historically, state and local governments paid limited attention to the educational needs of disadvantaged students whose parents were often not well organized and whose neighborhoods were less likely to be economically vibrant. States and districts tended to marginalize schooling opportunities for segments of at-risk populations. (p.211)

[12] Bureau, U. C. (2024, April 23). *2022 public elementary-secondary education finance data*. Census.gov. https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2022/econ/school-finances/secondary-education-finance.html

Relying on career politicians alone to right the ship of historical inequity and disinvestment in schools serving racial minority and low-income students has not proven effective. At its worst, state financial "rescue" via receivership in under-resourced districts like GUSD has stifled the political potency of teachers and other local stakeholders.

Researchers have a role to play in contributing to scholarship that reveals these historical (and often, racialized) patterns in ways that disrupt the cycles of disinvestment and decline typified in districts like Gladdingham (Chapman & Crawford 2021). Educational researchers intentionally enlisting teacher voice and testimony is an important part of telling the story of what has led to imperiled urban intensive districts like Gladdingham and also crafting solutions towards repair and prevention of future systemic harm. For example, in Gladdingham's case, such research conducted in partnership with district teachers might form a basis for arguing for a cancellation of the district's debt and restoration of local control as part of California's wider conversation around reparations for decades of de jure policies and de facto practices that created systemic harm to Black Californians (Task Force to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans, 2023).

Turn of the century teacher union leader Margaret Haley (1904) asserted that "there is no possible conflict between the interest of the child and the interest of the teacher" to illustrate the common cause of teachers and their students. Engaging urban intensive teachers' political fluency towards transformative action such as this could be extraordinary for both teachers and students in districts like GUSD leading to recovery of shared resources, shared dignity, and shared hope for a prosperous future. Wouldn't that make for a surprising political headline?

Recommendations for Future Research

As delineated in the prior section, expanding on studies around urban teachers' political development and the role unionism may or may not play in shaping it hold great promise and potential, on academic and practical levels, for various educational stakeholders. Some of the ideas for expanded research opportunities follow.

To better capture and compare the broad political experiences and repertoires of teachers working in Gladdingham and/or similar school districts, it would be recommended to conduct research with a larger pool of participants over a longer period of time. As mentioned earlier in the limitations section discussion, honing in on a more representative sample as well as a more defined set of criteria by which to gauge participants' types and levels of union engagement would be helpful in arriving at data, analyses, and findings that yield a basis for more substantive claims. Such studies might also be buttressed by a mixed methodological approach to develop and measure various markers of teachers' political engagement, fluency, and the like which might assist in making studies replicable in other contexts.

Studies on the role and impact of receivership on political dynamics in urban intensive districts would also be a recommended line of future research. The current study merely tugs at the thread of state receivership and both its political origins and consequences in Gladdingham. Future research might do a deeper dive into the history of Gladdingham, tracing key historical and policy moments on the way to receivership. Future studies might also enjoin comparative research on other California school districts that have experienced receivership to better understand commonalities and differences. Employing Critical Race Theory (CRT) as an analytical lens might also prove useful and revealing in unpacking the disparate application of receivership to districts serving not only majority students of color but also to those districts

being disproportionately led by teachers and administrators of color. Identifying the racialized policies and practices that accompanied desegregation and subsequent school and residential shifts from white majorities to non-white over time are important considerations in identifying past harm and guiding redress for affected schools and communities. As California broadens its conversation around reparations, such research might assist in helping the state to reckon out its past methods of intervention via receivership and help inform whether there are other forms of assistance that might produce less political constraint and harm.

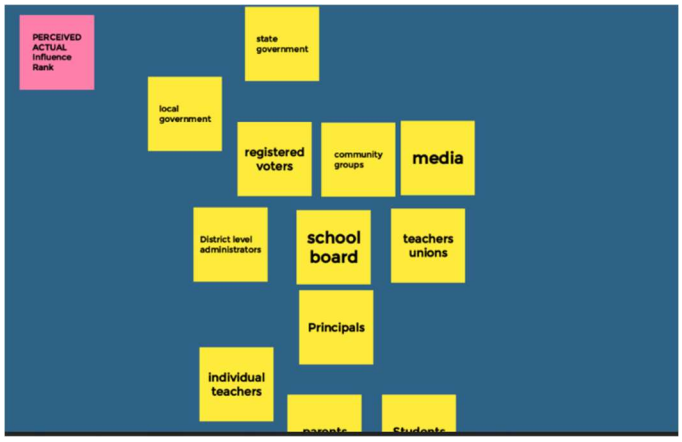
For scholars interested in how urban teachers' union engagement may or may not relate to their retention in the teaching profession, future studies might employ case studies on teachers at higher and lower engagement levels to track their persistence and retention over time. Researchers might also construct a research framework tracking "before and after effects" of union specific "interventions" on teachers within the first five years. For example, the California Teachers Association conducts a program called EMEID (Ethnic Minority Early Identification and Development Program) which targets and trains minority teachers from various districts in a year-long cohort model that equips them for leadership within their local unions. A study might include interviews and comparisons of teachers who do and do not participate in the program.

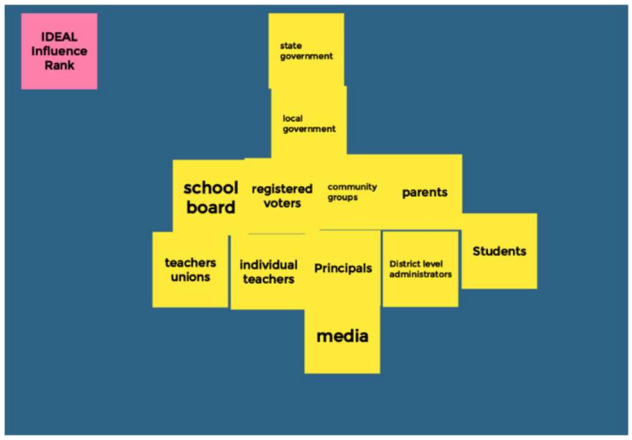
These represent but a few of the opportunities for expanded research that might spin off from this study. The important fact is that there is so much more to learn and explore on this topic and that it can be used for broad purposes and across many stakeholders. The ultimate hope is that this research will provoke discussion and motivate continued inquiry among education scholars, practitioners, and policymakers around the role and nature of teacher political fluency for urban intensive teachers and the students they are committed to serve. As the state of

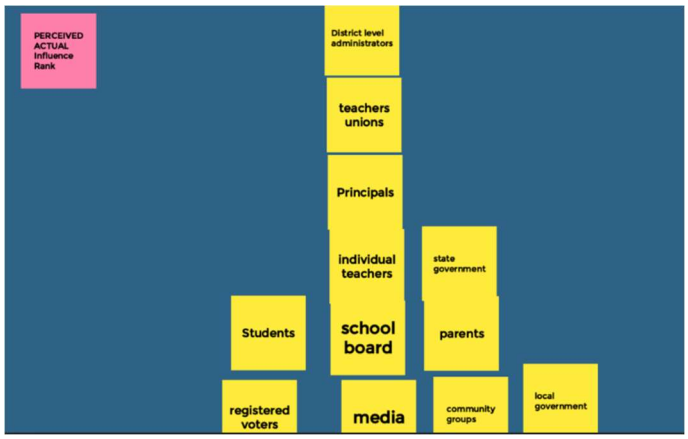
California's demographics continue to shift toward a populace of color, widening wealth and income gaps, and constant threats to adequate funding, public schools are positioned to increasingly reflect many of the obstacles that had previously been confined to the "urban intensive" school subset. Teachers will need strong political fluency to survive and thrive amidst such obstacles, especially those teachers who are motivated by a vision of altruism and building equity "for the kids." Teaching *is* a political act. It has the power to move society toward (and away) from a more just and democratic state. Political fluency portends the power to influence positive change. Academia, teacher unions, and policymakers have an opportunity to commit the time, energy, inquiry, and expertise to support urban intensive teachers in realizing their own influence as shapers of education for the public good. The future will thank us for it.

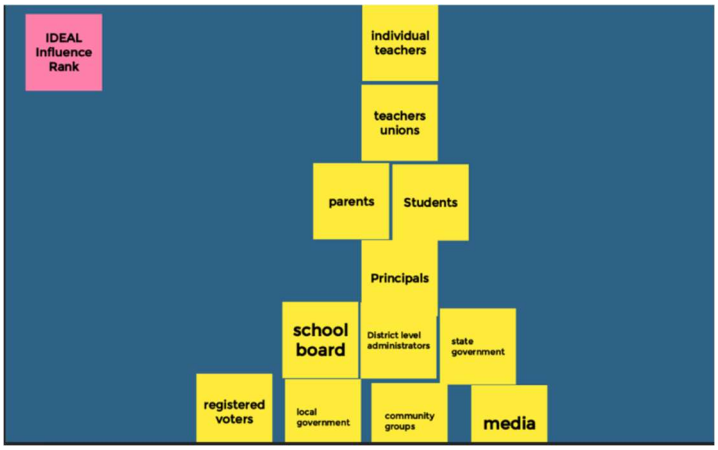
APPENDICES

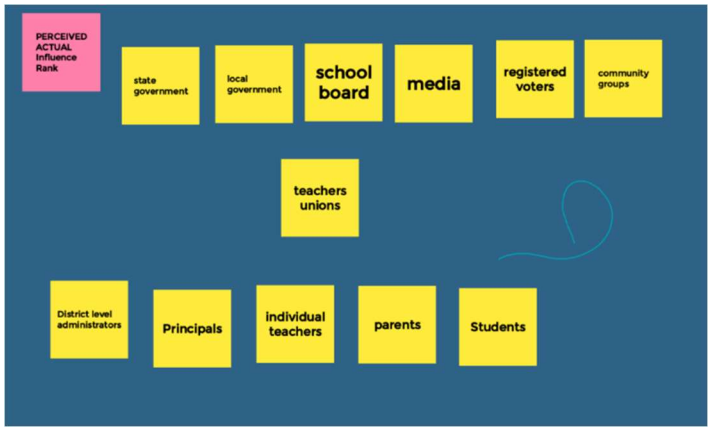
Appendix A- Participant Perceived Actual Influence Rank vs. Ideal Influence Rank Visual Maps

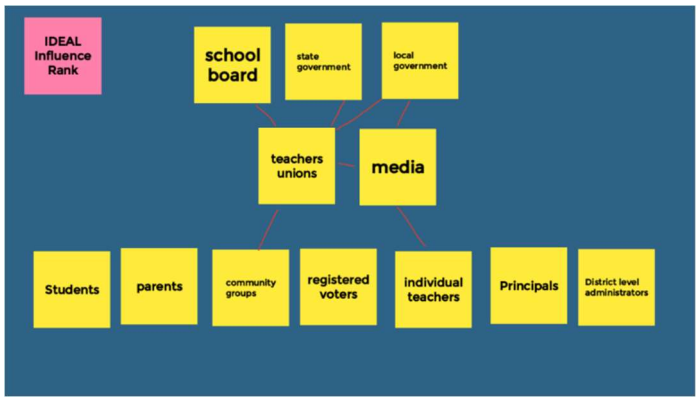


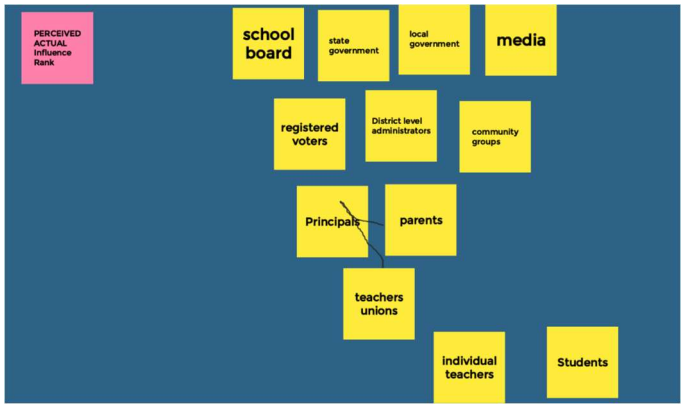








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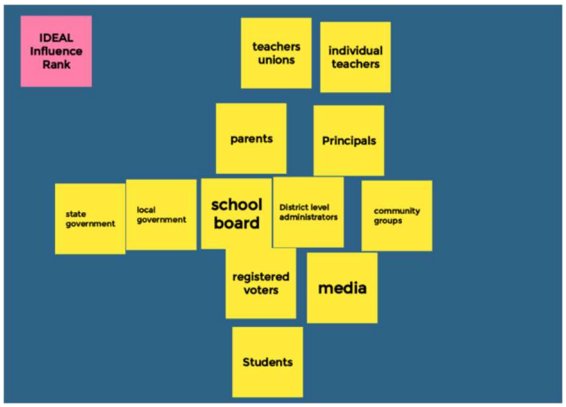
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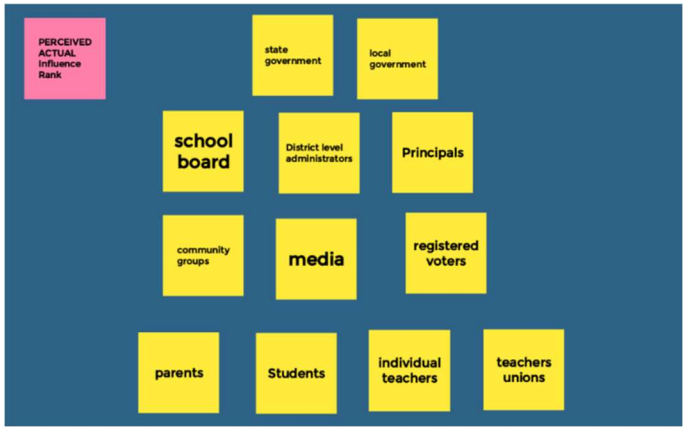
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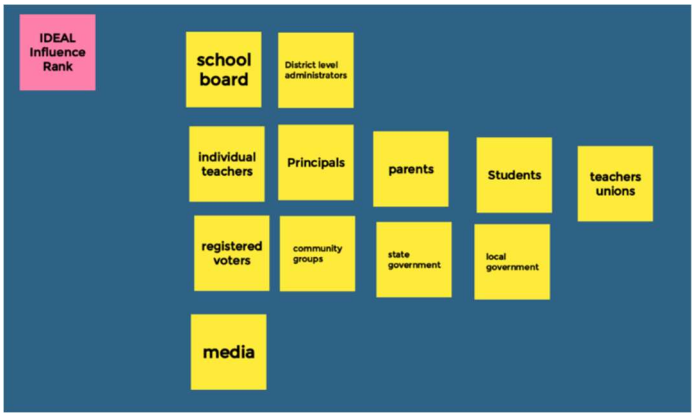
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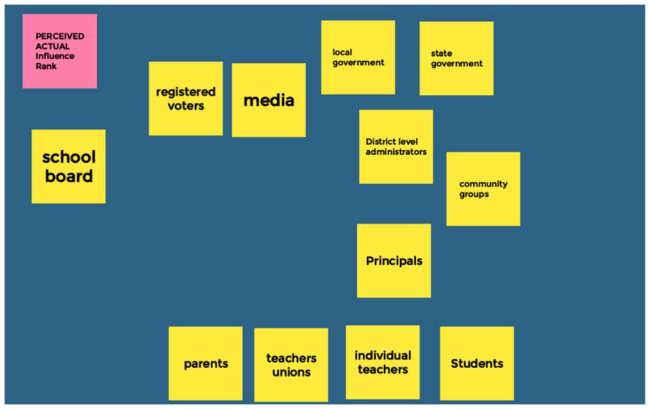
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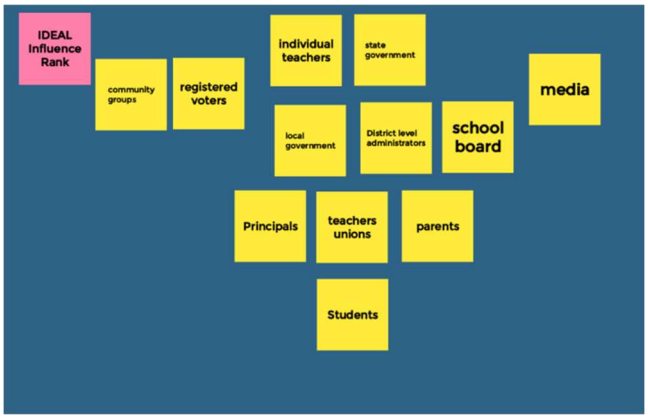
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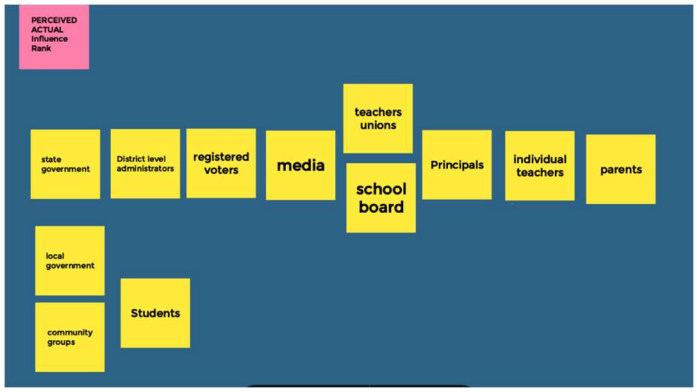
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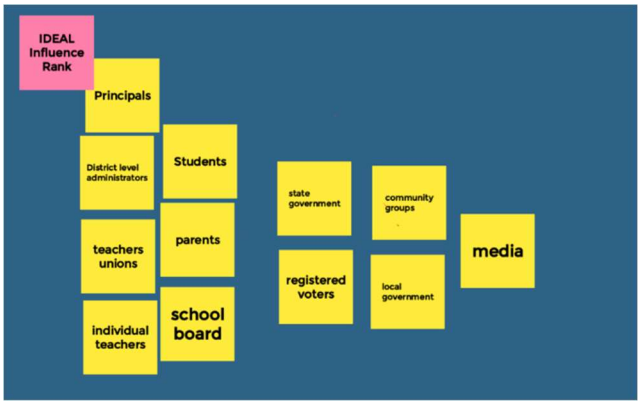
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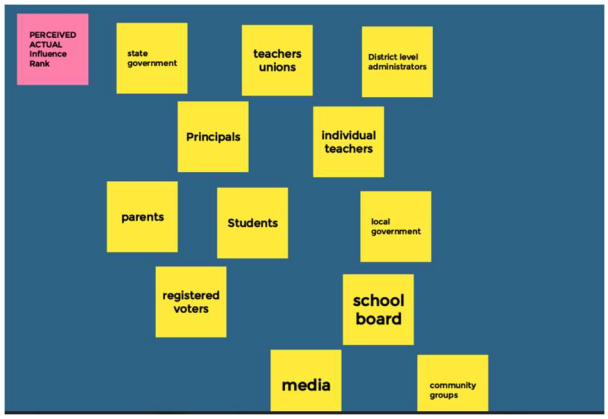
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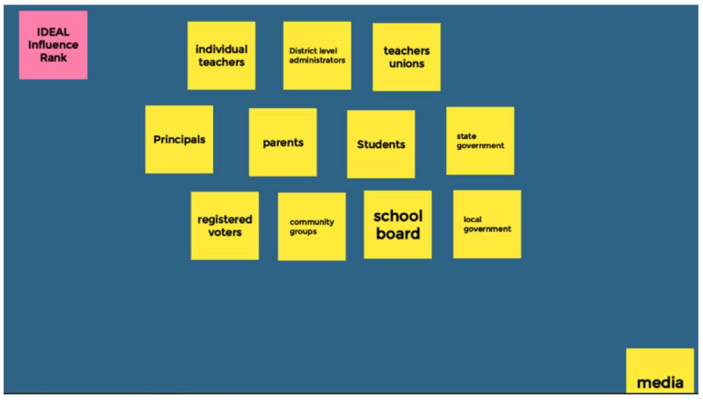
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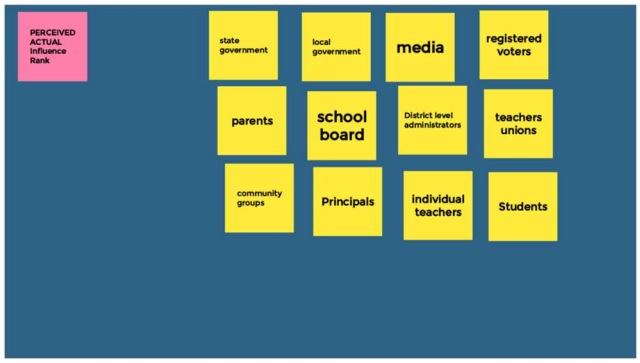
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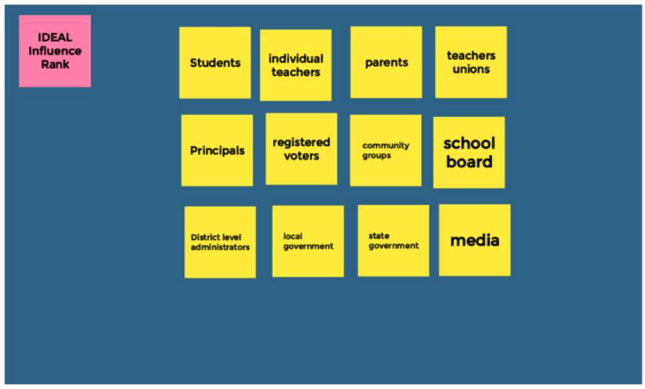
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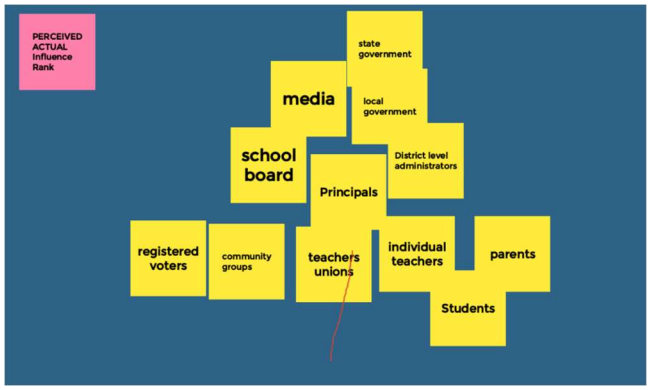
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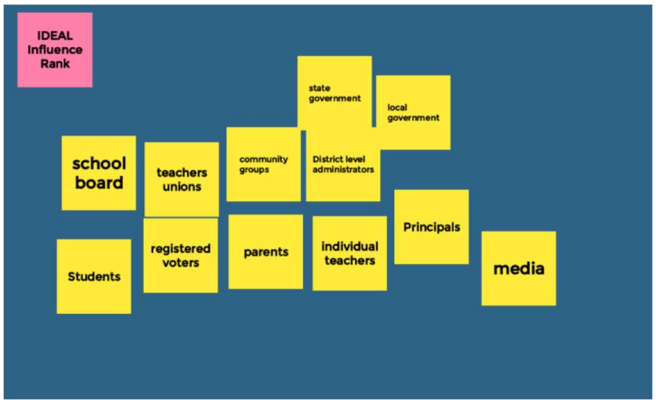
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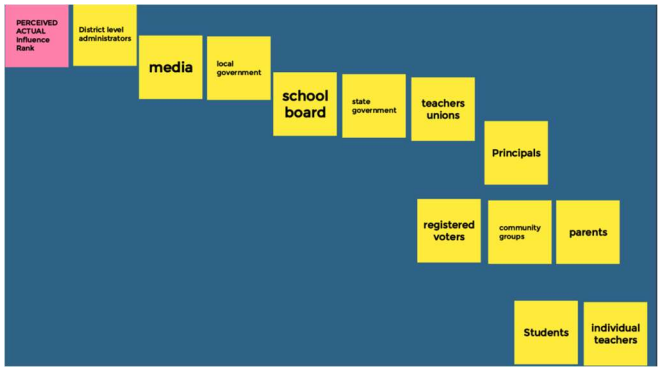
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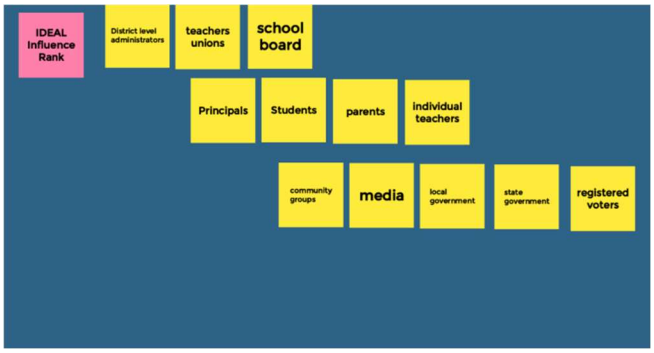
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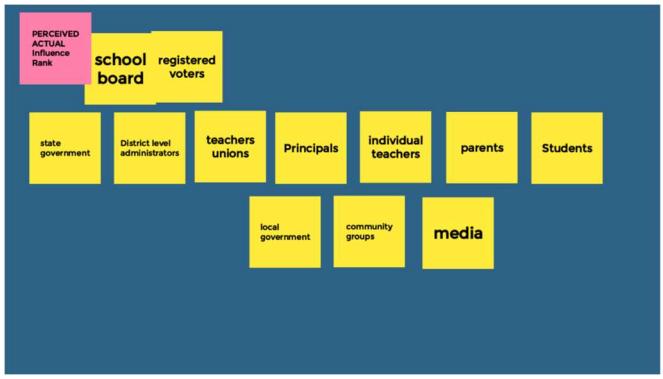
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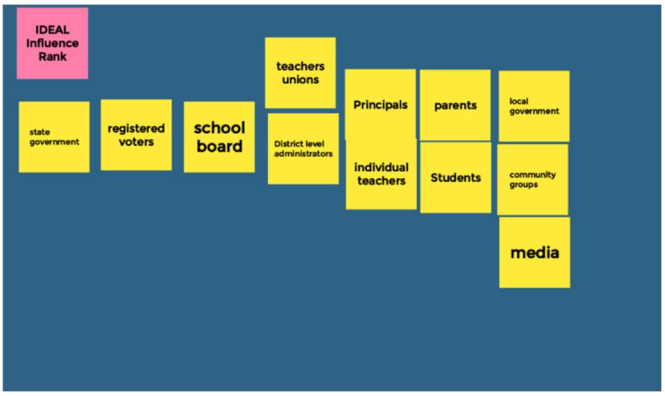
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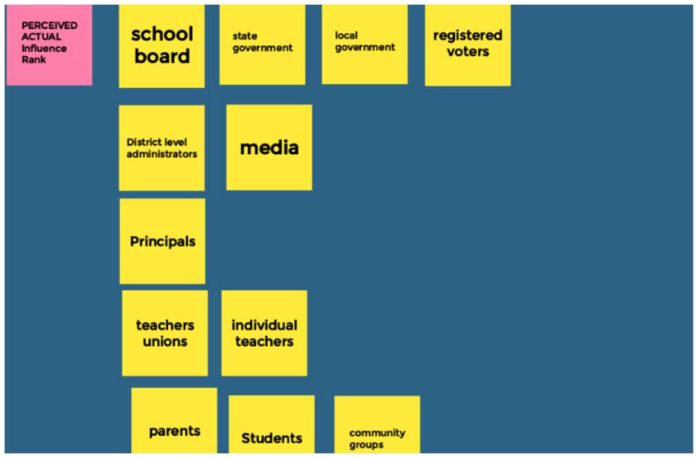
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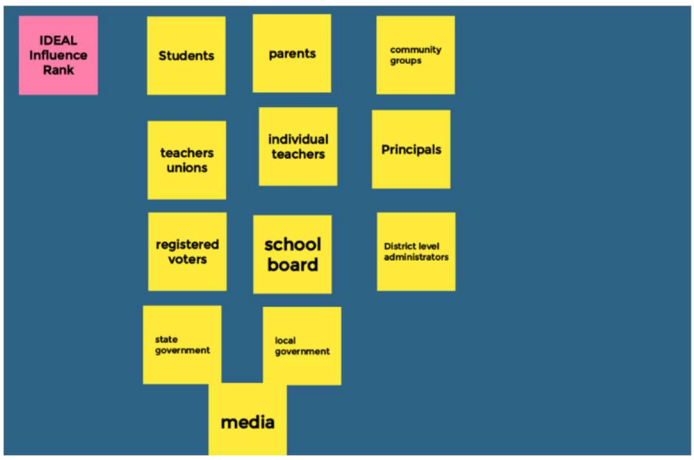
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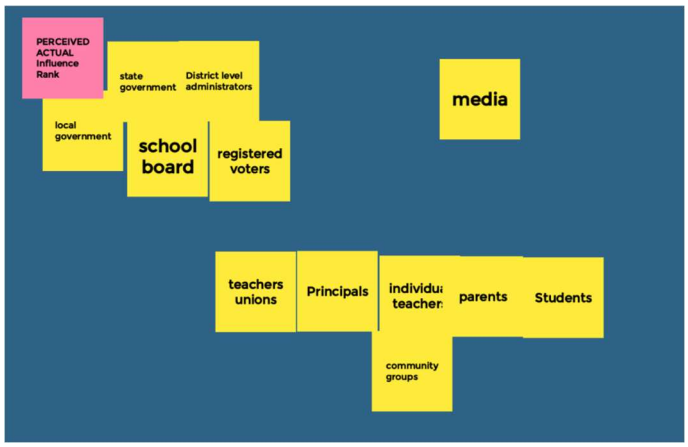
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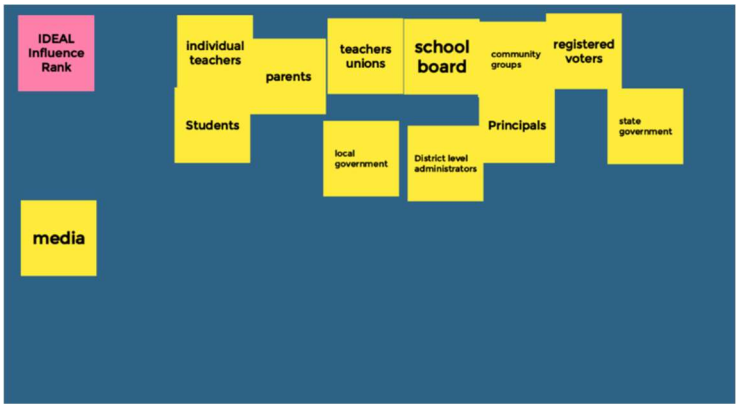
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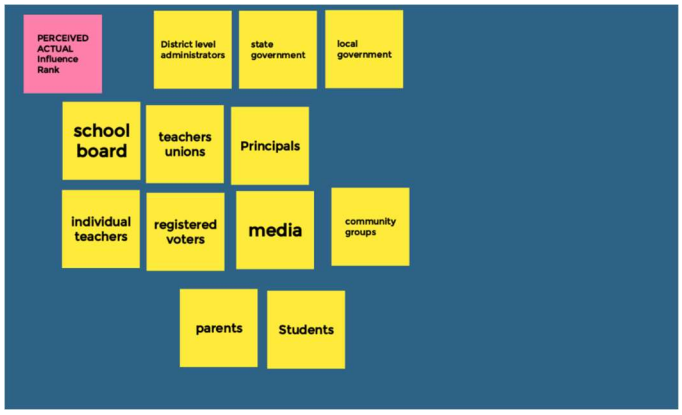
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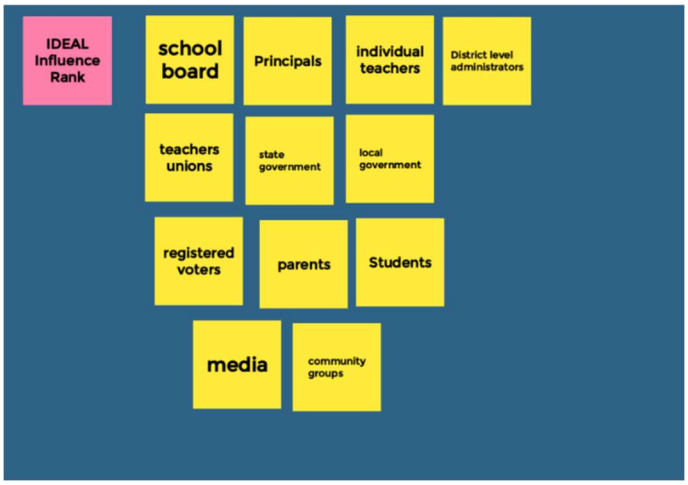
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