

The Framing of the Aftermath of the Chicago Teacher's Strike

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Abstract: The study explores the framing of the Chicago teachers strike in the media. The study uses content analysis of text from major media sources to find major themes in frames, theorize their purpose, and explore the reaction to them of teachers as public intellectuals.

Teachers can learn many things through teacher unions in many different ways (Moe, 2001). Teacher unions can have values that support or hinder teachers (Poole, 2000). However teachers can learn from critical events, past histories, and role models about the value involved in joining and participating in a union. Being in a union is a highly political act (Bascia, 1998).

Educators have to be politically savvy in debates with other educational stakeholders outside the classroom to have political victories (Itkonen, 2009). Teachers are public intellectuals who find themselves increasingly attacked by conservative forces (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). There is usually a lot of data and information in a political event. A frame takes out information and lets some information in so that a story could be told that is understandable (Armoudian, 2012). Framing refers to the process through which people develop a certain conceptualization about an idea or reorient their thinking as it pertains to an issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Recently, teachers in Chicago went on strike. The teacher's union hoped to get its members a pay raise and to negotiate several other points with the school district including merit pay programs. The strike was widely publicized and eventually ended with a new contract for the teachers (Rossi, Esposito, & Fitzpatrick, 2012; Spielman, 2012). There is a lot of information and data about the strike. The problem is that the framing of the teacher strike in Chicago has not been explored in depth.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the framing of the Chicago teacher's strike in order to understand what can be learned from it. This study answers the following research questions: How was the end of the Chicago teachers strike framed into larger themes through the headlines of the texts used by major media sources reporting on the strike? What can be theorized about the purposes of these frames by looking at what information is imparted or hidden by these frames? How can teachers as public intellectuals react to these frames?

This study is important because unions and their members affect all stakeholders in education whether or not they are in the union and frames in the media affect how problems are viewed and resolved. This study begins with an exploration of teacher unions. Then the Chicago teacher strike is described. Then the teacher is explored as a public intellectual. Then framing theory is discussed as well as the methodology, discussion of finding, and implications.

Teacher Unions

Teacher unions have an immense amount of power and influence in the United States through broad collective bargaining activities that work to affect every aspect of school. Teacher unions also have a broad influence through political activities (Moe, 2001). Unions push incremental reforms and often fear short term market oriented attacks on teacher unions and public education (Poole, 2001). Unions play out in a context where teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders hold varying degrees of trust for each other and their programs (Currall, 1992). Unions can be considered a major barrier to the dismissal of an incompetent teacher because firing

a teacher is a long process (Painter, 2000). Because of their day to day power of operations, however, superintendents of schools cause more damage to the rank and file of teachers than what the teacher union can do to the superintendent (Currall, 1992).

No one national union exists in the United States like in other countries (Johnson et al., 2007). In the past there were only a few major unions and some of them were more centered on other stakeholders such as administrators. In many states, teachers were not allowed to strike. The advent of collective bargaining laws in the 1960s and 1970s made it possible for teacher unions to grow. Some unions could amass huge amounts of power because they were made the only union recognized as representing teachers in a district. Many unions are affiliated to a few major unions recognized nationally like the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Teacher unions differ from public sector unions. They focus entirely on the teacher and not everything else in education. Unions are often against merit pay because homogeneity in the teacher ranks makes everyone an equal. The way they promote standardization sets the stage for a defacto lobbying for national laws. Unions get into political causes outside of education because of power they get through networking with other groups. Employees doing collective bargaining create a lack of competition (Moe, 2001). Teacher unions and their members can be caught up in paradoxical issues. Balancing long term and short term interests such as professional development, economic welfare, quality of education, and social justice issues can lead to conflicts (Poole, 2000). Teacher unions promote fewer and larger school districts in order to maintain power (Kenny & Schmidt, 1994). Teacher unions across the world arguably have helped the government maintain its power (Govender, 2004). Mexico and Argentina are decentralizing education unions. Unions cooperate by making concessions to keep power and help the national economy (Murillo, 1999).

Unions around the world face unique issues including their demographics. Women have had a growing influence on unions. Identity issues and bias make women unionize (Bascia, 1998). Issues such as disease can affect teacher union gender ratios especially in places like Africa (Govender, 2004). Florida union presidents are leading two main generations of teachers. One generation is the new people who may see no future in education or are not concerned about retirement. These new teachers maybe out of the profession in 3 to 5 years. The other generation of teachers is older veterans who are in the school system for the long term and have incentives like pensions to protect (Johnson et al., 2007). What usually makes a teacher join a union is a critical incident, a family history with unions, a personal sense of entitlement or empowerment, or a history of leadership activities. There is a lot of formal and informal learning in unions through conferences, workshops, and a socialization process that sets up the norms that governs a teacher's day, gives them respect, legitimacy, expectations, and a desire to take on issues. Unions contribute discourses of teaching. Unions concern themselves with matters beyond their district (Bascia, 2001). Many unions in Florida used professional development program based on the AFT (Johnson et al., 2007). Committee groups in unions can have different expertise within the unions (Bascia, 2001). Unions have subcommittees to help in the bargaining process for example (Johnson et al., 2007).

Chicago Teacher's Strike

The Chicago teacher's strike was the first teachers strike in Chicago in 25 years. It started in mid-September 2012 and lasted about seven days. It was a highly watched event in Chicago and nationally and caused a national discussion about how teachers are treated. Various issues caused the strike including several years of salary cuts and animosity amongst the negotiating parties. Chicago Public Schools, the Mayor of Chicago Rahm Emanuel, and various stakeholders

including charter school promoters were hoping to get teachers to sign up for a contract that would have substantially put their jobs and salaries on a merit system based on evaluations substantially tied to standardized test scores. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) was able to keep lane and step salaries in check meaning that teachers could expect raises based on the level of their degrees and their seniority in the school system. CTU was also able to keep the merit system as a small part of salary and teacher evaluation. The CTU was not able to get the salary increases it wanted, but over the course of several years teachers could expect a substantial increase in salary under the new contract. Teachers were also allowed to use their own lesson plans and not be obligated to use a strict lesson plan format used by the system. The contract would mean that several low performing schools would be shut down and students bused elsewhere (Rossi et al., 2012; Spielman, 2012).

Teachers as Public Intellectuals

Educators have to be politically savvy in debates with other educational stakeholders outside the classroom to have political victories (Itkonen, 2009). This is important today as teachers find themselves increasingly attacked by conservative forces (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Language can help support hegemonic structures that hinder democracy and it is up to public intellectuals to help the masses resist it (Gramsci, Hoare, & Nowell-Smith, 1971). Intellectuals, for example, have exposed how narratives in the press can help manufacture consent (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). The teacher can also maintain power relations through curriculum and pedagogy with languages and codes that oppress students (Freire, 1970). Teachers can fight power with language and discourse in the classroom and outside the classroom to help liberate students (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Power is manifested in the elements of discourses. Through their expression, they display power relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Education stakeholders face many real and manufactured crises in speaking truth to power (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

Framing Theory

Framing refers to the process through which people develop a certain conceptualization about an idea or reorient their thinking as it pertains to an issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Framing theory explains that an issue can be viewed from more than one perspective based on its presentation, thus multiple inferences can be drawn from a single issue. Many definitions of framing exist (Kohring & Matthes, 2008), but Entman (1993) provides one that is more widely accepted “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). There is a lot of data and information in an event. A frame takes out information and lets some information in so that a story could be told and made understandable (Armoudian, 2012). Armoudian (2012) argues that in order to tell a story a frame uses some information and eliminates other information. This study uses the perspective that the Chicago teacher’s strike was framed in the media and something could be learned from the data left in and out in order to tell the story through the frame.

Method

This qualitative study uses content analysis of several online and print newspaper and news media articles in order to explore how the Chicago teacher’s strike was framed. Content analysis is any “technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1969, p. 14). Content analysis was used because it is a

practical way of sifting through a lot of data to examine trends and patterns in the documents. It is also a commonly accepted way of exploring texts in the media that may shape public opinion.

Sample

This study focused on major print and online newspapers, online news blogs, and online news sites that addressed the strike in articles in the immediate aftermath of the conclusion of the strike. The end of the strike was chosen because that was the point national attention would shift away from the strike and the framing of the end of the strike would have long lasting power. Major newspapers, blogs, and sites meant media sources that served large metropolitan areas or were known nationally, thus having an impact on other major public school districts. Over 40 of these sites were explored. The newspapers and sites explored included the Chicago Sun Times, The Miami Herald, The Washington Post, The Daily Nexus, The New York Times, The Huffington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Associated Press, Foxnews.com, CNN.com, and The Sacramento Bee. Newscasts, Tweets, and other sources of media were not explored because their work is already highly influenced by the work of the major sources explored in this study. Many local papers in fact reprinted articles from the Associated Press and many local stations cited larger newspapers, for example. The sources used in the study also had to have printed text of the story (as opposed to audio or video only). This was also done in order to keep the scope of the study to a manageable area.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected by using several search engines including Yahoo, Bing, and Google to look for news articles. The search terms used were Chicago teacher's strike, strike ends, and resolution. Only articles written during the end of the strike and a two week aftermath were used. Online articles were cut and pasted in a Microsoft word document or printed into a hard copy or printed out from the computer when print versions were not available. All articles were read and note taking and coding was used to isolate headline and subheadings in the texts. The data from the headlines and subheadings was analyzed for themes using note taking in order to answer the first research question: How was the end of the Chicago teachers strike framed into larger themes through the headlines of the texts used by major media sources reporting on the strike? Five main themes developed.

The second research question was: What can be theorized about the purposes of these frames by looking at what information is imparted or hidden by these frames? In order to answer this question, the articles with headlines that fit each of the five themes that developed was analyzed thematically to see what was enforced by the headlines and what was rendered invisible. The themes developed by comparing the articles to the headlines and the five main themes of frames were used to theorize an answer to the second research question.

The third research question was: How can teachers as public intellectuals react to these frames? In order to answer this question, the researcher used note taking and theorized ways to counter these frames using the data available in the articles that revealed what was being obscured by the frame.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are presented in accordance to the three research questions. Five main themes were developed: the individual, winners and losers, children return to school, what now?, and it could happen here. Each theme is briefly described and a few examples show what is happening.

Research Question 1

The question asked, How was the end of the Chicago teachers strike framed into larger themes through the headlines of the texts used by major media sources reporting on the strike?

The individual. This theme reduced the story of the strike into a focus on one individual or a personification of the event into the form of one individual. Rahm Emanuel as the main political figure fighting the strike, for example, was mentioned in many headlines. *The Chicago Sun Times*, for example, declared that Rahm Emanuel is both the winners and losers of the strike (Spielman, 2012). Another way the importance of the individual was magnified over the event or masses of people in the event was to have the individual make pronouncements about the issue. In the headline of another *Chicago Sun Times* article, for example, Emanuel judges that the deal is an honest compromise with no mention of the union, schools, or even what the deal is all about (Rossi et al., 2012). The individual was also emphasized by another individual proxy and by making the opposition an anonymous group. In *The Chicago Tribune*, Stone (2012) mentions Emanuel's (the individual) adviser Bruce Rauner (the individual proxy) fighting the Chicago Teachers Union leadership (the anonymous group).

Winners and losers. This theme reduced a negotiation process and important event into a contest where there is absolute victory and absolute defeat and nothing in between. The *Washington Post*, for example, had a headline that asked who won the strike (Strauss, 2012) while the aforementioned *Chicago Sun Times* had put Rahm Emanuel in both camps (Spielman, 2012).

Children return to school theme. This theme focused on the students returning to class, including how it affects them as human beings and how very little is actually discussed about the event that created their absence from school. In the *Chicago Sun Times*, for example, we are told that students will be able to make up for lost school days (Rossi, 2012).

What now. This is a theme that acknowledges the end of the strike but makes the future and the consequences seem mysterious and uncertain. *The Huffington Post*, for example, had the headline: "Chicago Teachers Strike Implications? After Strike's End, Questions Remain" (Webber & Tareen, 2012).

It could happen here. This theme was a way to tie what was happening in Chicago to what is happening in the local community a media source targets. In the *Miami Herald*, for example, the head of the local teacher's union offered lessons from strike to the community of Miami Dade county (Aronowitz, 2012). A headline from *Quad Cities Online* offers an explanation about why the end of the strike mattered downstate from Chicago (Reeder, 2012). Another reporter declared in another headline that Chicago issues are local issues (Hobbs, 2012).

Research Question 2

The questions asked, What can be theorized about the purposes of these frames by looking at what information is imparted or hidden by these headlines?

The individual. This theme refers to the idea that the individual stands out in comparison to a group. This made the teachers union invisible. Putting Rahm Emanuel as the main political figure fighting the strike, for example, was mentioned in many headlines, making the story a personal issue and making the story national because he is well known, and also linking him to the White House because he was previously a cabinet member allowing for a larger discussion to be had about education and union reform.

Winners and losers. This theme reduced a negotiation process and important event into a contest where there is absolute victory and absolute defeat and nothing in between. A compromise is the best solution in a negotiation and in a compromise all parties give up something to gain something. The purpose of this was to render the event a competitive almost militaristic battle and not an incremental move toward education reform.

Children return to school. The purpose of this frame was to appeal to families of children and to in a sense paint them as victims of a strike. While an argument could be made that the strike would improve conditions for them at school in the long run, the frame makes it look like they are being hurt in the short term.

What now theme. This is a theme that acknowledges the end of the strike but makes the future and the consequences seem mysterious and uncertain. This is a needless mystification of the political process because in a negotiation and a contract everything is made clear and all arguments are made. Any one closely following the strike understands what could happen before a deal is even made.

It could happen here. The purpose of this theme frame is to scare people in their local communities into avoiding what happened in Chicago. It makes a strike and a negotiation seem like something to avoid when it is just a tool in the political process. It also makes the strike seem like a quagmire when it could be argued that in some communities a strike might be the best way to get reform. In many communities, teachers cannot strike. Also many industries with few strikes are industries where unionization has been stifled, so in a sense this theme brings out a fear of unionization to readers.

Research Question 3

This question asked, How can teachers as public intellectuals react to these frames?

The individual. One approach is to counter an individual frame with the making of another individual frame. A Rahm Emanuel can be countered by the individual union leader. The problem is that the individuals do not get equal attention or have equal power. While the union leader may be a local celebrity, the mayor is a national figure, for example. Creating a villain is another approach as a straw man to deal with. What public intellectuals have to do is challenge these individual figure public while also showing the importance of collective action. Union members have to become faces people know and not an anonymous crowd.

Winners and losers. Public intellectuals have to assert what bargaining is and how compromise is about fairness. They also have to show that teaching is a constant struggle and does not end or begin with the signing of a contract.

Children return to school. This theme focused on the students returning to class as human beings victimized by being absent from school. What public intellectuals have to do is describe how the students' school environment is improved by the strike and how the students were victimized by the status quo of the environment before the strike. This may mean explaining what a teacher being treated fairly by the district as a professional does for the teacher as a role model and leader of students and how that manifests itself in teaching and as a life lesson.

What now. Public intellectuals should make everyone aware of all the implications of a strike. They should highlight what changes and what does not.

It could happen here. The public intellectual has to highlight what changes and stays the same about the struggle in the context of the local community. Importantly, teachers need to demonstrate why a union exists and how circumstances would be different without one for students and parents. Many people were not around when injustices were done to teachers by district leaders and administrators that spurred the need for teachers to unite in a union and protect themselves. For example, many people are not aware of teachers in the past who fought racist bosses for desegregated classrooms and the struggles they deal with today.

Implications

Herman and Chomsky (2002) argue that the stories the press make into public spectacles feed narratives that distract people from larger structural issues. Arguably, the themes revealed in

this study that seem to promote fear, competition, and individualization may play into the larger structural issues promoted by neoliberalism. Headlines are important because they grab attention and commonly frame the content of read and unread stories. The focus of this study was primarily on the strike aftermath and certain resources. Future studies should look at frame development over a larger stretch of time and through various mediums and its impact on other strikes. More in depth research is needed which includes qualitative and quantitative data from participants.

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