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Emotional Motivators that Influence Teacher Activism: Chicago Public School System  
Strike and School Closings

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## Abstract (100 words)

Recent education reform efforts have encouraged teachers to mobilize in protest. Various emotions motivate activism, accompany activism, and evolve during the activism itself. Michalinos Zembylas' (2006) theory on the *politics of emotions* describes how emotions influence the "power relations, resistance, and transformation" of education. Zembylas' (2010) theory of *spaces for coping* aimed to "identify the spatiality and politics of emotional relations and understanding of teachers' responses to educational reform." This qualitative study seeks to examine the emotional influences that shape how teachers from the Chicago Public School (CPS) district define, become involved in, and respond to activist efforts.

Keywords: Emotions, Teacher Activism, Teachers Unions

## Abstract (250 words)

\_\_\_\_\_Recent education reform efforts, such as school closings, have encouraged teachers to mobilize in protest. Various emotions will motivate activism, accompany activism, and evolve during the activism itself. Michalinos Zembylas' (2006) theory on the *politics of emotions* describes how emotions influence the "power relations, resistance, and transformation" of education. Zembylas' (2010) theory of *spaces for coping* aimed to "identify the spatiality and politics of emotional relations and understanding of teachers' responses to educational reform." This qualitative study seeks to examine the emotional influences that shape how teachers from the Chicago Public School (CPS) district define, become involved in, and respond to activist efforts. The sample consists of four teachers, ranging in age from 28-54 years old, who participated in voluntary in-depth interviews. The interview questions focused on their personal definitions of activism, their involvement with activism efforts in Chicago, and the emotions that motivated and changed their activism in response to the CPS teachers' union's strike and school closings. Preliminary results support Zembylas' theories on the *politics of emotions* and *spaces for coping*, further indicating that emotions are not only essential to the evolution of activism among teachers but they are socially and politically charged. Three main themes emerged from the collected data: (1) Anger & Fear, (2) Joy & Unity, (3) Hopelessness & Resignation. This study is not generalizable to all CPS teachers; however, it identifies some emotional motivators that may be key to understanding the mobilization of and educational reform efforts of teacher activists.

*Keywords:* Emotions, Teacher Activism, Teachers Unions, School Closings

## Introduction

The city of Chicago's Public School system has been perceived as a failing school system that services the city's poorest and most dangerous students. That stigma, along with the perception of the city as a dangerous place to live, may have affected the general public's views of the inhabitants as well as their willingness to admit the need for education reform for its students. While this stigma exists in other cities and socioeconomic statuses, it has ultimately affected the wellbeing of the students of Chicago who continue to receive subpar educational resources. On June 30th, 2012 the current contract the unionized teachers had would expire and the Chicago Teachers Union was working with the School Board to negotiate more conducive working conditions for the teachers, adequate resources for the students, and the promised 4% increase in pay for the teachers (to name a few). Once it became clear to the Union representatives that the new contract demands would not be met and the teachers and their students would be receiving even less than they were already provided, the union members voted to strike.

During the Chicago Public School Teachers Union strike in late 2012, the teachers were fighting against their current contract conditions and the conditions of the CPS schools where they taught. The strike brought together unionized and nonunion teachers, retired teachers, other unionized workers within the city of Chicago, parents, and students. The strike ended with some of their demands being met, although the CPS school board would not allow the teachers to receive their 4% raise, were cutting their sick-leave as well as some other resources. But the major crippling factor revealed during the strike was the listing of over 60 inner city CPS schools that would be forced to close its doors.

The impending school closings was the school board's response to the schools under-enrollment, a reported lack of educational resources, and a misrepresentation of having less than

superior teachers in the schools. The closing of schools would not only be detrimental to the students who attend there but also would leave over 1,500 teachers unemployed (not including educational personnel service workers). This qualitative study seeks to examine the emotions that influence teachers within CPS to participate in activism efforts surrounding the strike and school closings. This study is not generalizable to all teachers within CPS. However, it identifies some emotional motivators that may be key to understanding how emotions affect activism within educational reforms and movements.

### Literature Review

Collective action within social movement organizations (SMOs) details that the intentional actions of each individual benefit the group in an effort to improve the influence, power, or status of the group (Louis 2009; Zomeren & Iyer, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam 1990). Participation in SMOs can take the form of voting, picketing, or rioting, along with other activities, as long as they are in accordance with the overall goals of the SMOs. King (2007) argues that the mobilization of collective action can only take place when the organizers find a motivational technique to encourage individual participation. These motivational techniques are important for encouraging people to act within SMOs.

Mobilizing structures are essential motivators to the success of collective action. Mobilization structures “pool individual inputs,” combining people who share the same collective interest, beliefs, and opinions (King 2007:26). Mobilization structures are not enough to secure participation in SMOs. Therefore, framing processes which use shared meanings or “common stories of cultural interpretations” to help create a collective identity, are needed to

help facilitate collective action (King 2007:31). These motivators help to change the beliefs and norms of the individuals so they are reflective of the SMOs.

Previous research indicates that emotions help to motivate activism efforts and behaviors within social movements. Jasper (1998) argues that, "Without them, [emotions] there might be no social action at all" (398). The mobilization of social movement organizations is therefore dependent on the emotions expressed by its participants. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) used emotions like anger, outrage, shame, and pride to propel the movement and encourage activism (Gould 2002; Gould 2009). Other theorist such as Reger (2004) believe that external factors, such as the action or inaction of political leaders surrounding social reform issues, affect emotions and the path of social movement organizations.

Education reform and emotions theorist, Michalinos Zembylas' (2006) theory on the *politics of emotions* describes how emotions influence the "power relations, resistance, and transformation" of education within schools. His theory describes the relationship between teachers' and students' emotions within schools both politically and socially. Instead of looking at emotions as singular private entities, Zembylas' theory calls for a reconstruction of the way emotions within schools are looked at, requiring an understanding of emotions as socially and politically charged entities that are tied to the identities of teachers.

However, there are external factors that still affect emotions and the path of social movements (Reger 2004). This can be seen in Zembylas' (2010) theory of *spaces for coping*, which aimed to "identify the spatiality and politics of emotional relations and understanding of teachers' responses to educational reform." This theory looks at the emotional wellbeing of teachers involved in education reform efforts as well as their need for an environment or space to provide emotional support during the reformation periods. Zembylas posits that emotions help to

create a reciprocal action where emotions form, produce, and create external structures; and then those structures in turn creates emotions.

### Methodology

This study used a snowball sampling of four subjects: of the four subject interviews, two of the teachers have taught for seven years and the other two have taught for 20 plus years. The subjects ranged in age between 28-54 years old. All of the subjects are teachers within the Chicago Public School district, although none of the participants teach within the same subject content area. The teaching content areas range between mathematics, music, literacy, and science education. The subject interviews were conducted over the phone. The phone interviews ranged from eleven minutes to thirty-four minutes per interview.

The length of each interview was also determined by the interviewees' willingness to expand upon ideas or topics that were mentioned during their respective interviews; no identifiable markers were used. All interview participants were presented with the same questions to generate a base line and then probing questions were presented based on the individual responses during the interviews. Each interview was taped using a digital recorder and the audio files were then uploaded to a computer as well. Once uploaded, the interviews were transcribed and coded for themes that each interview presented. Those themes were then broken into sub themes which were then compiled with all of the interviews to find the major themes presented within the research.

The subjects were asked 9 baseline questions and additional probing questions were asked as the interviews permitted. It is important to note that this study is not generalizable to the entire population of teachers within the CPS school district who do or do not identify as activist.

Rather, it is a small look into the emotional motivators and implications that a small demographic associate with the CPS school closing and strike.

### Findings

After conduction and coding the interviews, three main themes emerged. They were: (1) Anger & Fear, (2) Joy & Unity, (3) Hopelessness & Resignation. For the basis of this research, emotions were defined as an individuals' conscious or unconscious feeling(s) that are subsequent reactions to a situation, relationship, and/or mood (Jasper 2011). Each of the emotions presented were identifiable before the strike took place, during the strike itself, following the revealing of the school closings, and at the end of the strike. The most salient emotion that encouraged or motivated the teachers to become involved in the activist efforts was fear. Fear not only motivated the teachers to become involved in the activism efforts but it eventually evolved and helped them to unite and motivate parents and other non-teachers to join them. During the course of the activist efforts, however, each emotion acted as a motivator and could be seen reacquiring in a cyclical fashion. Preliminary results support Zembylas' theories on the *politics of emotions* (2006) and *spaces for coping* (2010), further indicating that emotions are not only essential to the evolution of activism among teachers but they are socially and politically charged and encourage others while motivating teachers.

### Anger & Fear

In many social movement organizations the participants or activists have been motivated to act by their emotional disposition; many times that emotional response is anger. This was seen in social movement organizations such as the ACT UP AIDS coalition whose members were angered by the government's response to the AIDS epidemic and lack of available treatment

options (Gould 2002; 2009). The same emotion coupled with fear helped to motivate teachers like Mr. Sanders into voting yes to the teachers union strike of 2012.

Mr. Sanders is 32 years old, and has been teaching literacy in the Chicago Public School district for 7 years. During Mr. Sanders interview he states that he was led to join the strike because he felt, “...*upset with some of the decisions that were being made*” by the school board and Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Although he did state that anger was not the leading emotion that encouraged his activism, he described the overwhelming need to “*defend my job, my living conditions, then my students within the school, my salary, my benefits, my survival really.*”

Mr. Slaughter is 54 years old and has been teaching science in the CPS school district for 15 years and has been a teacher for over 20 years. During Mr. Slaughter’s interview he stated that initially he was motivated to participate in the strike because “*it was something that needed to be done.*” He later stated that his activism was not lead by anger: “*it’s about standing up for your rights. You have to keep the emotional parts in line as much as possible and just work towards the end goal.*”

The political climate that was affecting the education system in Chicago was producing the emotional responses of the teachers within the school district and forcing them to join in the mobilization and reform efforts such as the strike (Zembylas 2006; 2010). It also helped to spread joy and to unify the teachers during the strike itself as was later discussed by Mr. Slaughter and other teachers.

### Joy & Unity

Previous theorists note that in order to maintain activist efforts or movement within social mobilization organizations emotions cannot be the only motivators (Reger 2004). Zembylas’

(2010) calls for *spaces for coping*, which would allow teachers and students an area to congregate with likeminded individuals to support them. This was created by the Chicago's Teachers Union during the strike. During the teachers' strike, rallies, town-hall meetings, picketing, and protesting that was done by the teachers created a sense of "Euphoria", "joy", and "unity." Mr. Slaughter stated, "*When you saw the support of others rallying around you for the same cause, it gave you more strength and conviction that, 'yes', I am doing the right thing.*"

Mrs. Applegate is 47 years old and has been teaching mathematics in the CPS school district for over 20 years. She stated that, "*Simply being able to bring together teachers who are a part of the union and those who are not was really encouraging. It helped to keep you motivated and gave us all a sense of belonging and joy being around one another and helping to uplift one another.*" The establishment of a sense of community and having a safe space to belong where others shared similar emotions was essential to the continued motivation of the teachers' activism efforts once the school closings were announced.

### Hopelessness & Resignation

During the strike, the school board announced that there would be a massive school closing, one of the largest in educational history. This revelation sent a shockwave of feelings of fear and hopelessness throughout the union and activist. Mr. Concord is 28 years old and has been a music teacher in CPS for the past 7 years; he said at the announcement of the school closings he felt "*an immense wave of gut wrenching fear and anxiety, but an overwhelming sense of hopelessness.*" Mr. Concord's feeling of hopelessness stemmed from,

*“...gathering together all the teachers, parents, and other union workers but not changing anything. It made a lot of us feel like what was the point if the school board got what they wanted in the end anyway. If our schools are still on the chopping block, what was the point?”*

These same emotions were shared by the other teachers as well, as they awaited the finalized list of the schools that were closing. While others felt hopelessness, veteran teachers like Mrs. Applegate and Mr. Slaughter felt feelings of resignation. Mrs. Applegate and Mr. Slaughter both have been teaching for more than 20 years and regarded the school closings as “inevitable.” Both explained that there will always be schools that will close, be it for under-enrollment, loss of resources, or lack of resources or available funds; regardless of the reason, schools will always close. Although there were feelings of hopelessness and resignation about the school closings, the strike’s resolutions, and the fear of losing their jobs, the teachers continued their activism efforts to keep their individual schools open. Both Mr. Slaughter and Mrs. Applegate’s school were on the list for schools that were supposed to close their doors, but through the work of the teachers’ continued activism, their picketing, protesting, mobilization of the parents, and the students, their school remained open for another year. When asked what encouraged them to keep going, to help mobilize the parents after everything that happened Mr. Slaughter stated,

*“Knowing that education is being sold out to private corporations, knowing that schools are closing, knowing there are not a lot of jobs out there, knowing all of these things it is imperative to fight. You don’t give up. So if you have a job at a school you try your very best to keep them open. You start with the grassroots projects, it started with the union going on strike, then with us picketing, contacting and making phone calls, getting the parents involved. So the motivation is to keep your head above water and to keep your job.”*

## Discussion

Zembylas' theories of the *politics of emotions* (2006) and *spaces for coping* (2010) indicate that emotions are both motivators and creators of activism within spaces of physical and mental collective action. Emotions help to create actions which lead to the creation of social mobilization organizations. These actions and other organizations as well as other external forces then create new emotions. For example, the actions of the school board created fear within the teachers, which lead to the mobilization of the union to strike. This created a space for coping for the teachers, producing joy and unity within their social grouping. Once the teachers unified and pushed back against the school board, the board continued their reform efforts that initially frightened the teachers by informing them of the school closings and denying their contract requests. This action created feelings of hopelessness and resignation among the teachers. These feelings did not discourage the teachers' activism efforts entirely; instead, the board's actions helped the teachers to localize their efforts to stop the closings of their individual schools and lead to the mobilization of the parents and students. The subsequent emotions of the parents and students was not included within this study, but it can be reasonably assumed that the same emotional mobilization that was seen with the teachers could be seen with the parents and students.

### Conclusion

Further research should explore the connections between emotions and activism as a political and social entity. Research specifically geared towards teacher activism should include Zembylas' theories on the *politics of emotions* (2006) and *spaces for coping* (2010), understanding that teacher activism and education reform spans beyond the realm of the classroom and student interactions. A practical implication of this study is that teachers' emotions and expertise should be regarded as such. In order for successful education reform to

take place, teachers need to be the representatives and initiators of the reforms, recognizing them as leaders within their field. When that recognition is acknowledged the emotions expressed by teachers would be beneficial to the districts they represent.

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