The 2019 Chicago Teachers' Union Strike: meeting student needs analysed through Nancy Fraser's 'politics of need interpretation'

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Abstract

This article analyses the narratives and counter-narratives which characterised the struggle between the Chicago Public School Board (CPS) and the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) preceding the 2019 Chicago teachers' strike. This was an extraordinary event which has received little scholarly attention. The paper explores the types and uses of the discourses put forward in the struggle through the lens of Nancy Fraser's 'politics of needs interpretation'. Fraser's framework was conceived and is typically applied to social welfare policy, so this paper provides a new perspective and understanding of its theoretical application in its examination of competing educational claims. Analysing key CPS and CTU texts which are in the public domain, I argue that different actors in the struggle competed for ownership of an expert discourse on student need in Chicago. The paper draws attention to the way a teachers' union consciously used social movement framing to foreground an inclusive view of the working class. The CTU's refusal to accept the dominant conceptualisation of education as performativity was an assertion of teacher professionalism. Placing the social reproductive needs of their students and families at the centre of their demands for better education provision in Chicago was a radical reimagining of education. In conclusion, Fraser's theory is found to be a helpful tool when considering who has the legitimate authority to determine education needs.

Keywords: *Chicago Teachers' Union; Nancy Fraser; needs talk; social movement; teacher professionalism; teacher strike*

Introduction

Resistance to reforms in the public schools of Chicago erupted in October 2019 in an extraordinary strike, which saw 25,000 teachers and support staff walk out of their schools for 11 consecutive days. The action arose because of conflicts between the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) (https://www.ctulocal1.org/about/) and the Chicago Public School Board (CPS) about the legitimacy of their competing interpretations of the educational needs of the city's students. Whilst a shorter action in 2012 by the CTU has attracted scholarly attention (Brewer, 2012; Brogan, 2013; Tocci and Barton, 2013; Brogan, 2014; Shuffleton; 2014; Uetricht, 2014; Steudeman, 2015), to date there has been little academic focus on what led to the CTU's October 2019 action, which preceded the global crisis caused by the Coronavirus pandemic by several months. Discourses found in contemporaneous texts by the CPS, the CTU and its supporters are analysed using Nancy Fraser's (1989) politics of needs interpretation framework. The paper provides a new perspective on how this theory can be applied in educational settings, arguing the ownership of an expert discourse on educational need can be successfully entwined with a discourse of resistance to austerity policy.

The Chicago 2019 struggle is worthy of scholarly consideration. The 2012 CTU strike drew the attention of teaching unions across the US who studied how a radical caucus within the CTU was able to organise and invigorate teacher activism. In 2018, teaching unions in West Virginia and Arizona mobilised their rank-and-file members who defied repressive labour laws and took illegal strike action (Blanc, 2020). In 2019, the CTU showed that despite an Illinois state law and the best efforts of the board of third largest school district in the country, their

activism would not be restricted to wages, benefits and working hours. The union would not agree to a contract which was not only unfavourable to education workers, but also to their students and their families. In bringing the community's issues to the negotiating table, the union was 'bargaining for the common good' (Davis, 2019; Jaffe, 2019b). The 2019 Chicago strike therefore matters because it shows teaching unions can win over wide public support by striking. Public alienation is not an inevitable consequence of strikes in schools. The CTU insisted schooling in the city be reimagined and the union redefined the working class (Bhattacharya, 2017). Moreover, this strike serves as a powerful example of how a form of trade unionism which is based in social justice can confront and face down free market-based educational reform.

Scholars of activism have overlooked teaching unions, according to Steudeman (2015), because educational labour cannot easily be grafted onto traditional notions of working-class labour and trade unionism. I argue that the CTU succeeded in building a social movement by deliberately expanding the 'trade-union secretary' (Bhattacharya, 2017: 89) vision of the white, male working class. Fraser (2019) argues that a radical form of unionism which envisions the working class intersectionally should play a central role in future challenges to neoliberal capitalism. This form of unionism, known as social justice unionism (Davis, 2019; Hagopian, 2019) can be summed up in the CTU's demands which addressed not just workers' contracts but crucially the social injustices of homelessness, poor public housing and structural racism suffered by the Black and Latinx working class of Chicago (Caref, 2018). This paper examines how the CTU countered the CPS's interpretation of educational need and framed the demands of its members and a wider constituency in the period leading up to the 2019 strike.

Here I revive the feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser's (1989) model of the politics of need interpretation and aim to widen understanding of its theoretical application beyond social welfare policy (e.g. Nixon, 2010; Cools, Leggio, Matras, and Oosterlynk, 2018) with an analysis of competing educational claims. The paper is also underscored by the critical perspectives on education of Apple (2017). Such work informs a critical understanding of education reforms which aim to remodel schooling by adopting the values of corporate business. The belief that privatisation, audit and competition will improve school effectiveness is termed 'neoliberal'. These concepts will be used to understand how the CTU argued against this conceptualisation of education and for an alternative, authoritative notion of what constitute legitimate educational needs.

The paper begins by outlining Fraser's 'needs talk' (1989: 161) framework. I then discuss the background context of education reforms in the US, the creation of the Caucus of Rank-and-File educators (CORE) within the CTU and the 2012 strike. The second part of the paper examines the CPS website, and CTU texts such as a podcast, strike speeches and a report, available on their website, *The Schools Chicago Students Deserve 2.0* (Caref, 2018). These texts are chosen for analysis as they typify two different approaches to defining students' educational needs: growth and performance versus social needs. Particular attention is paid to the vocabularies which are used to interpret and communicate needs. I argue that two contrasting discourses are discernible: the reprivatising discourse of the CPS and the oppositional discourse sustained by the CTU; however, within these discourses, I trace the contested claims for ownership of an expert hegemonic discourse on education in the city.

I aim to complicate Fraser's (1989) ideal-typical discourses to show how competition for the ownership of an expert discourse animates the politics of

need interpretation. I conclude that whilst Fraser's framework can be used to focus on the politics of educational needs interpretation, her conceptualisation of expert discourses operates differently in a sphere where the contestants both represent the state. The paper offers a new contribution to scholarship on educational social movements (Brogan, 2013; Brogan, 2014; Shuffleton, 2014: Suissa, 2016; Castillo-Montoya, Abreu and Abad, 2019) by showing how a needs talk analysis can help us develop a fuller understanding of how educational needs are recognised and addressed in modern societies.

Fraser's politics of needs interpretation

This paper is concerned with Fraser's early work on the 'politics of needs interpretation' (1989: 163) in capitalist, welfare state societies. She argues that the politics of needs is an important area for analysis as it throws into high relief who determines social needs, and whose interests are served by socially authorised forms of public discourse about needs.

Fraser (1989) identifies three ideal-typical forms of discourse which operate in the politics of needs interpretation. The first is an oppositional discourse which breaks out of the confines of domestic or economic institutions. The family and market economy privilege certain groups, such as the head of the male-dominated family, or the managerial class of worker. However, resistant discourses sometimes escape these domains and insist that social needs are political. Typical examples of politicised 'runaway needs' (Fraser, 1989: 169) include domestic abuse or workplace sexual harassment. Oppositional discourse always originates within subaltern groups for Fraser; however, this conceptualisation may be too narrow for a consideration of the CTU's demands because such challenges 'can and must come not just from outside the dominant institutional structure of state schooling, from marginalized groups, but from within' (Suissa 2016: 780).

The second type of discourse involves reprivatisation and it works to depoliticise needs claims that have broken out of the domestic or economic spheres. The task reprivatisers face is to construct a discourse which delegitimises social needs by redefining them as private matters (Apple, 1999; Nixon, 2010). A danger here is that reprivatising discourses can unwittingly mobilise social movements and unite disadvantaged groups into a coalition (Fraser, 1989). This perspective is of particular interest to my discussion of the CTU's framing of their struggle before the 2019 strike.

The third type is an expert needs discourse which is often linked to institutions of the state, such as social services. These discourses understand the newly politicised needs and are often critical of hegemonic interpretations (Nixon, 2010). However, expert discourses recast needs into professional jargon to render them administrable by the state. Fraser is somewhat scathing of the way expert discourses interpret oppositional needs, arguing they decontextualise needs from their politicised origins. However, I think it is important to note the transformation of a resistant discourse into an expert one is an important step in the wider legitimation of 'runaway needs' (Fraser, 1989:169). An oppositional discourse may be unpalatable to the general public, whereas an expert discourse may be acceptable. My argument will show that the CTU understood the power of an expert discourse in pressing their claims about what could constitute an educational need.

Fraser (1989) contends there are two distinct axes of confrontation for social movements in the politics of needs interpretation: first the reprivatisers and then the experts. This is because both blocs of interest seek to contain and depoliticise oppositional discourses. I claim that the lead-up to the CTU's 2019 strike was indeed a struggle between oppositional and reprivatising discourses, but that the second axis of struggle differed from Fraser's ideal-typical framework. The contest between the oppositional and reprivatising discourses

acknowledged the importance and status of an expert discourse on education because as a depoliticised and professional discourse, it had the potential to achieve hegemonic status. Therefore, the CTU and the CPS, who both have a claim to represent the state, fought to determine the authoritative narrative on education in the city.

The background: neoliberalism in US public education, CORE and the 2012 strike

Two major trends in US education reform form the backdrop to the discussion of the conflict leading to the 2019 CTU strike in this paper. The first development is the closure of public schools with a concomitant expansion of Charter schools in Black communities, and the second important tendency involves the vigorous attempts to destroy the power of teacher unions and deprofessionalise teachers. I will discuss these developments, how they were resisted by the Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE) and the 2012 CTU strike.

Apple (2017) argues that the assumption that public schooling is best delivered by private companies is a hallmark of neoliberal education reform in the US. Faith in the ability of markets and competition to deliver US children from poverty was enshrined by the educational reforms demanded at a national level, first by Bush's 2002 *No Child Left Behind Act* and then Obama's 2009 *Race to The Top* competitive education grants. National policy led to large-scale public school closures in many school districts, including Chicago's impoverished South and West Sides, and the expansion of privately-run Charter schools (Brewer, 2012: Brogan, 2013). In 2013, CPS shut down 50 public schools, the largest round of closures in US history; meanwhile the number of Charter schools doubled to 110 in less than a decade (Uetricht, 2014). The justifications

for these closures varied from underutilised buildings to poor standardised tests scores (Eidelson and Jaffe, 2013; Tocci and Barton, 2013).

Critics of neoliberal educational reform claim that privately-run Charter schools are part of a 'process of fiscalization' (McCarthy, Pitton, Kim and Monje, 2009: 46). This model prioritises economic efficiency, yet despite the fact Charter schools receive public funding, there is little requirement to disclose details of their expenditure (Uetricht, 2014; Lipman, 2017). Proponents of privatisation argue that moving Chicago students into Charter schools raises the achievement of students from low-income families and reduces inequality (Illinois Network of Charter Schools, 2020), but there is little robust evidence to support claims that allowing private corporations to take over public education delivers better outcomes for any student (Joravsky, 2011; Tocci and Barton, 2013; Uetricht, 2014; Apple, 2017; Lipman, 2017).

Disinvestment in US public schooling has not been indiscriminate as the impact of austerity lands disproportionately on low-income neighbourhoods (Paraskeva, 2007; Katz, 2008). In highly segregated US cities, such as Chicago, these areas are majority Black and Brown (Younge, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2017). As impoverished Black neighbourhoods have low rates of homeownership, and education funding is determined by local property taxation, public schools there are under-resourced (Dancy II, Edwards and Davis, 2018). A worrying and racialised picture had begun to emerge in Chicago by 2012: public school closures in the West and South Sides appeared to be part of a calculated policy of public neglect. Several scholars have concluded that public service disinvestment deliberately displaces low-income, Black and Latinx communities leaving room in American cities for capital to amass public goods (Katz, 2008; Means, 2008; Brewer, 2012; Meshulam and Apple, 2014; Lipman, 2017). The accumulation of public assets by private companies seemed nowhere clearer than in Chicago in 2012, where the pace and number of Charter school

openings and public school closures outstripped those in other US cities (Means, 2008; Uetricht, 2014; Lipman, 2017). North American scholars (Brogan, 2013; Castillo-Montoya, Abreu and Abad, 2019) argue structural racism, or White Supremacy, lies at the heart of public spending cuts which disproportionately affect African American communities.

The second major trend which laid the ground for the 2019 CTU dispute was the CPS's ongoing assault on teachers, which took two forms. The first was an attempt to neutralise unionised teachers' capacity to threaten the reforms sought by the CPS. Brogan (2013) notes that teachers' unions are singled out for attack because they represent the single biggest sector of unionised labour in the US: the National Education Association (NEA, 2020) has 3 million members with a further 1.7 million in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT, 2020). This strength gives teacher unions the potential to build solidarity with other workers to fight austerity politics (Brogan, 2014). Therefore declawing potential opposition was important if the public school closures and Charter schools expansion were to advance, as CPS well understood. Attempts to destroy CTU's strike capacity were made by the Illinois State with Senate Bill 7 (SB7) legislating for a 75% positive vote threshold of all CTU members before action could take place (Uetricht, 2014).

The state's attempt to hamstring the union's capacity to strike was defeated by the collective action and leadership of CORE. This caucus, set up in 2008, began as loose group of rank-and-file CTU members who opposed the acquiescence of the then CTU leadership to school closures and teacher redundancies. The caucus forged strong relationships with community organisations who also opposed school closures. They held study groups, for example reading *The Shock Doctrine* (Klein, 2008). Members were able to contextualise educational reform in Chicago as part of a wider neoliberal project to seize public goods for private profit (Uetricht, 2014). Influenced by aspects

of thinking on social justice and Marxism, integral to the development of this radical caucus was a conceptualisation of education workers as part of the working class. Hill (2022) argues that such class-consciousness does not follow automatically from one's economic position; however, it is a prerequisite if educators are to challenge dominant neoliberal ideology.

By 2010, CORE had grown sufficiently that it fielded its own charismatic candidate in the CTU leadership election. Karen Lewis won, and the union was set 'to put business in its place: out of our schools' (Lewis, 2010 in Uetricht, 2014: 37). CORE firmly set the CTU on a new path: away from business unionism towards social justice unionism. Following the CORE takeover, the CTU began to restructure, expanding participation in the House of Delegates and its responsibilities. This distinctive democratic body meets monthly to hear the concerns of elected representatives from over 700 schools (Davis, 2019; CTU, 2022). Activist training programmes were set up and committees of both delegates and teacher activists in each school were encouraged to engage with the community to fight school closures (Uetricht, 2014). In its wake a nationwide group, the United Caucuses of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE) began to hold conferences in 2013 (Russom and Winslow, 2017). Other US teaching unions were taking note of CORE's pioneering organising strategies:

> It's an approach adopted by other reformers around the country, in places like Los Angeles, where the United Teachers Los Angeles successfully won its strike earlier this year. It's an approach that has rooted the union in neighborhoods around the city, with rank-and-file members working with the parents and students to make demands. (Jaffe, 2019b)

In June 2012, the Illinois state strategy to hamper education workers' strike action with SP7 failed spectacularly as 90% of the CTU members voted, exceeding the 75% threshold set by the bill. Moreover, 98% of votes cast were in favour of a strike (Brogan, 2014; Uetricht, 2014). The CORE takeover of the

CTU was crucial in beating back efforts to quell teacher resistance to the privatisation of Chicago's public schools.

The second strategy of undermining teacher professionalism works in tandem with the destruction of union power. Charter schools employ cheaper, less experienced teachers who tend not to be unionised (Katz, 2008; Uetricht, 2014). Deprofessionalisation is recognised as a feature of Charter school employment by the former leader of the CTU, Karen Lewis:

> The billionaire boys' club [the CPS and its backers] is saying, "We don't need professionals. We could just train somebody for five weeks and throw them in there and let them do it," like in the army. (Eidelson and Jaffe, 2013: 79)

Attacks on teacher professionalism tacitly recognise that education is part of Althusser's (1971) ideological state apparatus. Whilst the state sees education as a means to reproduce consent for the dominant group's values, teachers can also undermine this with ideological labour which has transformative, democratic potential (Brogan, 2013; Shuffleton, 2014; Steudeman, 2015). Empowering students to question the dominant ideology is inherently threatening to reformers who embrace neoliberal values (Brookfield, 2017), so critics posit that one reason an irresistible culture of measurability and performativity is instituted in public education is to compress the space for critical thinking and opposition (McCarthy, Pitton, Kim and Monje, 2009; Eidelson and Jaffe, 2013). Hegemonic market values become so embedded in education that it becomes difficult to imagine schooling in any other terms (Ball, 2016; Suissa, 2016; Brookfield, 2017). What made the CTU struggle with the CPS so significant in both 2012, and later in 2019, was that they created a collective social movement that allowed teachers and their allies a space and a voice to challenge these hegemonic notions underpinning educational policy which benefited Chicago corporations, rather than students and their families (Eidelson and Jaffe, 2013).

As Althusser (1971:81) observes: 'Ideological State Apparatuses may not only be the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle'.

The following sections turn to published texts which animated and produced the 2019 CTU strike. The discussion is structured around the two competing interpretations of need: student performance as growth and social needs. Both are deliberately posited in the public domain by the actors. However, within each section, I will systematically expose and untangle the assumptions underlying the reprivatising and oppositional discourses. I will also show how the two opponents attempted to create an expert discourse which they owned.

CPS and evaluation: a reprivatising discourse

Fraser's (1989) framework suggests the politics of needs interpretation centre on a series of analytically distinct moments, where an oppositional discourse first breaks out into the public sphere and then an attempt is made to reseal it into the economy or family domain. However, the period after the 2012 strike could be better characterised as one of ebb and flow as the reprivatisers' narrative resurged and the CTU's resistant discourse responded. The discussion below analyses the CPS position presented on the REACH teacher performance evaluation scheme website (CPS, 2015) and the way in which CTU presented this as a neoliberal vision of public education. This position had to be established to enable the union to present a counter-narrative on the community's needs. Although the CTU won several concessions in their 2012 strike, the CPS continued to implement school reform and cut back spending on staffing. The school board attempted to depoliticise the narrative about the education problems in the city which the CTU had publicised in the 2012 strike by reasserting a common sense discourse on teacher and school responsibility, resealing the CTU claims into the economic domain.

The CPS ramped up rhetoric on teacher evaluation following the September 2012 action by the CTU. Testing regimes instituted by the *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* national initiatives opened the door for the CPS to introduce a new teacher performance evaluation scheme (CPS, 2015). REACH uses students' standardised test scores and professional observations to deliver judgments about teachers' effectiveness. Meshulam and Apple (2014) argue that standardised testing is a conduit for the ideology of the market to enter public education. The CTU clearly attribute REACH to the private economy's influence on the CPS:

> Teacher evaluation mandates were developed by corporate funders like the Gates Foundation…who claimed that the main problem in education was most teachers had inflated evaluation scores. (Caref, 2018: 12)

This scheme condenses complex educational and social problems into a common sense discourse which persuasively suggests there is a simple solution to them: more accountability for teachers and schools will raise student achievement. Noun phrases borrowed from business such as 'growth', 'impact' and 'performance' feature heavily on the REACH website. Shuffleton (2014) argues such evaluative tools give the impression that teacher professionalism is a quasi-mathematical process which will guarantee improvement by measurement:

> Student Growth compares the impact of a school and/or teacher on the academic growth of his or her students from one year to the next. Looking at a teacher's impact on student learning provides helpful information on his or her performance. (CPS, 2015)

The act of learning is decomplicated here as knowledge is presented as a commodity which can be transferred from teacher to student (Freire, 1996; Apple, 1999; Meshulam and Apple, 2014). The REACH website (CPS, 2015)

suggests teacher influence can be isolated and is the decisive factor in student learning:

> If all students in a teacher's class perform better than expected, the Value-Added result is positive. Value-Added helps us to focus on the school or teacher's impact on student learning, setting aside factors outside of the teacher's control.

The noun 'control', with its pseudo-scientific connotations, indirectly evokes the sense that in REACH measurements, the teacher is the independent variable whilst other variables can be minimised. The current CTU president, Jesse Sharkey, explains that student disadvantage is effectively ignored:

> The district labels schools according to those tests via the School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP), the so-called standard of school comparisons that is the basis for principal evaluations and is two-thirds based on test scores in elementary schools. Poverty isn't included. (Ravitch, 2019)

However, the CPS (2015) claims REACH takes note of student background and school climate, appearing to accept that is a political issue. Using Fraser's framework helps to clarify the sleight of hand which characterises this reprivatisation discourse. As such discourses respond to oppositional discourses, 'they are internally dialogized, incorporating references to the alternatives they resist' (Fraser, 1989: 172). Whilst seeming to accept that poverty and racism affect student outcomes, the CPS modifies and depoliticises their impact in the REACH programme. Discussion of the effect of these factors is foreshortened and teacher evaluations replace action to challenge student disadvantage:

> Value-added models… allow us to set aside any things beyond the educator's ability to change. Some examples include characteristics like race, gender, homelessness, mobility and disability. (CPS, 2015)

REACH therefore allows the School Board to acknowledge that disadvantage plays some part in underachievement, whilst simultaneously asserting that teacher performance can give each student the same chance of success.

Vocabulary synonymous in the public imagination with 'equality' is used on the REACH website (CPS, 2015), for example '*a fair comparison* to similar students across the district'; 'value-added methods *level the playing field'.* The concept of equality is taken up, modified and imbued with a new meaning in this version of educational needs talk. The claim that REACH equalises is repudiated by the CTU (Caref, 2018) which cites academic research by the University of Chicago Consortium which found the lowest teacher results were consistently found in disadvantaged areas. Deliberately loosening the notion of 'equality' from its social justice moorings and using language which suggests disadvantage is redressed via REACH means this programme is presented as a means of 'guaranteeing individual choice under the conditions of a free market' (Apple, 2000: 145) in which students are able to flourish. Mechanisms of evaluation transform teaching into a technical problem and measurements of its effectiveness become the solution. Fraser's (1989) framework encourages us to focus on how a reprivatising educational discourse reconstructs student needs as student performance.

Increased pressure on teachers to prepare students for high stakes tests reduces the space to question the imposed technology of performance indicators borrowed from the market economy. The logic of measurement and audit is presented as inevitable and trust in the professionalism of educators is replaced by a deficit view in which skills and competencies must be checked (Ball, 2016). The CTU recognises and resists this: 'the vast majority of teachers do not need to be continuously evaluated… Students deserve teachers who are treated as professionals' (Caref, 2018:12). The CPS testing regime is also compared to teacher-proof curricula which 'aim to minimize teachers' control

through scripted curricula and other resources that give educators little room to deviate' (Caref, 2018: 12). The CTU here typify the notion of 'critically reflective teachers' (Brookfield, 2017:14) who perceive the reprivatisers' discourse is rooted in the dominant ideology of the market. Several scholars (e.g. McCarthy, Pitton, Kim and Monje, 2009; Brookfield, 2017) contend that a centralised curriculum required by standardised tests curtails teachers' ability to develop students' critical thinking. REACH can be seen as an attempt to smother classroom dialogue which might 'develop [people's] power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves' (Freire, 1996: 64).

Fraser identifies the third discourse of the politics of interpretation of need as a professional discourse which seeks to translate 'runaway needs' (Fraser, 1989:169) into administrable interpretations of social needs. The promise of responsive evaluation which will ensure student needs are met allows the CPS to present their interpretation as that of the expert:

> All teachers are supported by a common vision for effectiveness, yet resources and professional development are tailored based on each school's unique needs (CPS, 2015).

The verbs 'to support' and 'to tailor', coupled with the phrase 'unique needs' suggest the provision of a caring, personalised service for schools. The passive voice in the verb phrases has the neutrality of an expert discourse, but interestingly the support is not provided by professionals. An abstract notion - 'a common vision for effectiveness'- provides this support. The claim to an expert discourse shores up the CPS against CTU accusations that it is operating on behalf of Chicago's corporate business interests (Caref, 2018, Parker and Staros, 2019b) despite the hegemonic insistence this is a vision shared by all. It is an example of a reprivatising discourse recognising the strength of an expert

discourse, attempting to step across the gap and claim ownership of an apparently neutral interpretation of student need. Here the reprivatisers compete with a social movement to claim expertise, and the axis of confrontation envisaged by Fraser (1989) is absent.

CTU and schools as sites of social reproduction: an oppositional discourse

The way that the CTU framed the social and education issues of its members, students and the working class of Chicago was characteristic of a social movement (Taylor and Van Dyke, 2008; Ince, Rojas and Davis, 2017). It was important to frame the demands leading up the 2019 strike in terms of the wider working class, rather than solely focusing on teachers' conditions of service and wages. As Hill (2022: 95) notes of his Marxist Manifesto for Education, it is when a raft of transformative educational demands are taken together that they offer a sustained challenge to neoliberalism in schools and beyond. The CTU's use of the slogan 'bargaining for the common good', typifies an approach which transcends traditional union-employer relations and brings into view the private financial entities which control resource allocation in communities (McCartin, 2016). Lazare (2019) notes that although the slogan may be new, its underpinning principle is not: building relationships with oppressed communities is a key task for social justice unionism. Although three of the four CTU main aims could be thought of as typical teaching union demands involving class size reduction, pay increases and increased staffing levels, the union extended these calls to other workers in Chicago schools - counsellors, psychologists and social workers, paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs), such as office clerks and librarians (CTU, 2020). A union with fewer members, SEIU Local 73 (https://seiu73.org/about/), which represents bus aides, school custodians and classroom assistants joined the CTU on the 11-day strike. This then was an education workers strike. The strike framed the working class differently to traditional US trade unions as

Bhattacharya notes approvingly. She explains that the CTU deliberately construct their demands as the 'social needs of the working class that are essential for its social reproduction' (Bhattacharya 2017: 92).

Social movement theorists (Carroll and Ratner, 2001; Ferree and Mueller, 2008) highlight the way in which oppositional discourses are socially constructed. Snow's (2008) concept of collective framing is helpful when considering the role of this discourse, as frames are not merely individual cognitive structures, but are properties of organisations and can be located in their texts. For example, the CTU website (2019) displays supporter-produced banners that valorised the family and working-class solidarity in art-build workshops:

CTU texts frame a counter-narrative which places the lived experiences of the school community centre stage. Their resistant discourse highlights the way in which defunding undermines the sensate work of social reproduction which school workers undertake:

> In my third year, I had 6 schools…It stressed me out the work that wasn't done… the same lack of healthcare, the same issues of poverty, racism and homelessness that I saw in the ER, I was seeing in the schools except more tragically it was in the bodies of children [CTU striker Denis Kosuth, CPS school nurse]. (Parker and Staros, 2019b)

Embodiment and subjectivity characterise this oppositional discourse:

> A Local School Council member from Nixon School said this…One of the most egregious things is the 3-5 grade bathroom on the second floor where 400 students use those. The underlayment and waterproofing have degraded. Once the school year

> starts, fecal matter and pee gets in there, and it’s overwhelmingly pungent. (Caref, 2018: 17)

Counter-hegemonic narratives have value not simply in their articulation of a normative vision of public education, but also because they invite thinking about ‘what it *does* look like for different people positioned differently within a structurally unjust system’ (Suissa, 2016: 778). This is ‘flipping the script’ (Parker and Staros, 2019c). In framing their demands as a class struggle over social reproduction, the CTU’s resistant discourse created a new expansive definition of legitimate educational needs.

The CTU reconceived the notion of educational needs in its fourth demand for ‘justice for students and families’ (CTU, 2020). In a video of a strike rally, the CTU and SEIU Local 73 unions invite their students to speak out:

> Housing is critical in Chicago. We have a terrible legacy of segregation and disinvestment. Many of our communities rent has gotten too expensive. Too many of my classmates don’t have stable homes. What are we doing for them? We want to plan in a written commitment to help these students. [Jonathan Williams, senior at Kenwood] (People’s World, 2019)

As many as 16,000 students in Chicago were without permanent housing in the 2018-19 school year (Provenzano, 2019), yet the School Board contended affordable housing was outside its jurisdiction. This was endorsed in the legally required *Fact-Finder Report* (Bierig, 2019). But by making a demand about the city’s housing crisis, the union deliberately used the ‘bargaining for the common good’ strategy to extend potential wins beyond its own membership to the wider working class of Chicago (Provenzano, 2019). The CTU podcast uses the idiom of needs to forcibly challenges the CPS refusal to negotiate on the housing crisis:

> The affordable housing issue is an educational issue… Housing is a basic need, our children need shelter, they need homes, they need to feel and be in a safe environment so they can focus on the academics [CTU striker Andrea Parker, teacher]. (Parker and Staros, 2019b)

A more academic idiom emerges at times in the report, *The Schools Chicago Students Deserve 2.0* (Caref, 2018). Here educational research and census data are cited to critique the city administration's policies on housing vouchers, homelessness and public housing quality in the South and West sides. Nonetheless, Caref's (2018: 23) assertion that 'what happens outside of schools is actually more influential than what happens inside' is in Fraser's (1989) terms a leaky discourse which is transgressing its limits. In later work, Fraser clarifies how feminist social reproduction theory helps us see how social movements challenge the dichotomy between the public and domestic realms: 'Social actors struggle over the boundaries delimiting economy from society, production from reproduction, and work from family' (Fraser, 2017: 25). Other feminist social reproduction theorists (Katz, 2008; Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2017) argue for schools to be understood as key sites of social reproduction which are able to create time and space to attend to the more expansive social needs of the students and their communities. The 'needs talk' (Fraser, 1989: 16) of the CTU report (Caref, 2018), and the podcast *CTU Speaks!* (Parker and Staros, 2019b), and strike supporters' speeches place public schools at the centre of a web which weaves together community housing needs, physical and mental health service provision. This is an attempt to legitimise these social justice demands as ones which pertain to education. The CTU's oppositional discourse intentionally punctures the artificial barrier erected by the CPS between education, care and the home.

The impact of violence on a school population, where as many as 30% of have witnessed a shooting (Younge, 2016), is acknowledged in their texts' calls for

more clinical staff to attend to students' psychological needs: 'There is so much trauma going on in these kids' lives. We need people that are professionals, trained to do this. [CTU striker Jim Staros, teacher]. (Parker and Staros, 2019b). At a filmed CTU and SEIU Local 73 rally near City Hall Miracle Boyd, a 12th grade CPS student, speaks with controlled intensity about the distressing lack of safety faced by young people in Chicago:

> A number of CPS students did not return to school because they were killed over the summer. How is it the CPS spends a third of its budget on safety meanwhile the youth are dying? Yet still none of us are guaranteed public safety without the support of nurses, social workers and support staff in schools. It's such an irony. (People's World, 2019)

At the core of the CTU's challenge to the reprivatising discourse of the CPS is an emphasis on the lived experience of working-class life in Chicago:

> Omar Ramirez Atilano sat across from one of his freshman students and attempted to help him find permanent housing. Their deadline was Friday, when the student, his siblings, and grandmother would be forced to vacate their property, Atilano explained. He works as a youth intervention specialist at Richards Career Academy, a high school wedged between Chicago's Back of the Yards and Englewood neighborhoods in an area he described as 'a hotbed for rival gang activity' and 'ground zero for the things we're fighting and striking for.' (Provenzano, 2019)

Although the demands can be conceptualised using feminist social reproduction theory, the influence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement and its epistemology (Castillo-Montoya, Abreu and Abad, 2019) is also evident in the CTU's oppositional texts. Slogans like 'Class Size Matters' were a deliberate call back to this influential social movement. This has resonance in a city where 'student enrollment is 47% Latino and 37% African American with high rates of poverty' (Batchell, 2019). The CTU's vice president, Stacy Davis Gates, makes the link to BLM quite explicit:

> 'We are in a fight against White supremacy,' Davis Gates said. 'White supremacy in CPS manifests with 40 Black kindergartners in one classroom; it manifests when they close 50 Black schools; it manifests when we are begging for school nurses to be in schools every day, but instead taxpayers are subsidizing wealthy playgrounds in Lincoln Park.' (Provezano, 2019)

(Perez/ Chicago Tribune, 2019)

The suppleness of social movements' frame articulation is recognised by Snow (2008: 404) who argues that for them 'imputed or constructed meanings are not fixed or static but are subject to change as the social context changes'. In the period after BLM became a social movement in 2014, the union is able to borrow from its framing to illustrate how the Chicago City Administration's policies perpetuate disadvantage in schooling, housing, employment and the criminal justice system and deny epistemic justice for Black people (Ince, Rojas and Davis, 2017; Hailu and Sarubbi, 2019).

The intersectionality perspective underpinning BLM has advanced understanding of multiple forms of oppression. *The Schools Chicago Students Deserve* 2.0 (Caref, 2018) highlights the historic racial and economic

segregation in public schools and calls attention to the displacement of Black, working-class families by policies of gentrification (Brogan, 2013). The educational needs of the community are therefore tightly wedded to their context, asserting a relationship between oppression, social class and ethnicity which reprivatising narratives seek to occlude. There is a degree of ideological flexibility in the CTU stance, but there is a consistent emphasis on the situated knowledge which arises from working and living in Black, working-class neighbourhoods. Gender oppression is also a prominent theme:

> Our profession is mostly ran by women. We do not get the respect we deserve as being professionals OK. We don't get the respect. In my position as a para, we don't even get the living wage and most of us are Black or Brown, single parents OK. So we live in this city. We know the cost of living and we know as educators [CTU striker Lashawn Wallace, PSRP]. (Parker and Staros, 2019a)

The feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins argues that it is important to find common themes and points of synthesis between what appear to be different ways of knowing because in the face of oppression: 'group-based experience, especially that of race and/or social class, continues to matter' (Collins, 2004: 249).

The ideological framing of the CTU's oppositional discourse is intentional. CORE reading groups studied and debated structural racism, urban development and neoliberal educational reform in Chicago (Brogan, 2014; Uetricht, 2014; Steudeman, 2015). A sustained critique of neoliberalism surfaces repeatedly in their texts:

> They [Chicago City Administration] might be able to afford it [increased public school spending] if the city wasn't spending $2.4 billion on Lincoln Yards and the 78, giving all their TIF money away and 53% of this money is supposed to be coming to CPS [CTU striker Jim Staros, teacher]. (Parker and Staros, 2019b)

The oppositional discourse offers a demystifying frame linking underfunding to racism:

> Budgets, taxes and subsidies are questions of priorities, and clearly City Hall does not prioritize the education of Black and Brown children as highly as profits for wealthy downtowners. (Caref, 2018: 34)

CTU framing can be understood as a deliberate broadening of the notion of the working class. When CTU and SEIU Local 73 members took their industrial action in 2019 onto the streets of Chicago, contemporary accounts claim their ranks were swelled with parents, students and other supporters (Davis, 2019; Kampf-Lassin and Uetricht, 2019). The CTU's oppositional discourse was effective because it built on the subjectivities of students and education workers (Marginson, 2006; Shuffleton, 2014), rejecting the capitalist positioning of schools outside society. The CTU defined schools as sites of social reproduction and care.

Although an oppositional discourse is clearly discernible in CTU's texts, there are also traces of the third expert discourse identified in Fraser's (1989) framework of the politics of needs interpretation. The CTU's discourse occupies an interstitial space between an oppositional discourse and a professional one. Establishing that teachers hold the authoritative claim for expertise in order to interpret students' educational needs is an important strand of the CTU's oppositional discourse. As Wagner (2020) claims of the 2019 Polish teachers' strike, teacher professionalism is grounded in activism. In resisting a conception of teaching which is based on performance and standardised testing, the CTU assert the affective nature of teachers' work. This discourse is particularly notable in the podcast, *CTU Speaks!* Union members appeal to listeners to see teaching as 'that which cannot be captured by capital' (Steudeman, 2015: 517). Lived experiences of planning, grading, parent calls and dealing with

traumatised students who witness violence and live in poverty are aired. However, there are dangers in recasting a social justice interpretation of needs into an expert discourse which emphasises the technical aspects of teaching and highlights the indefinability of school labour. The dedication of school workers is emphasised in accounts of the effects of cuts on PRSP staff, whose long hours and low pay render them 'unsung heroes' (Caref, 2018:13). This inadvertently reinforces the idea that teachers and their aides are 'selfless servants' (Brookfield, 2017:17) and reifies the conception of school labour as sacrifice (Steudeman, 2015). This is a tightrope which the CTU had to tread carefully in 2019, for whilst the union claimed expert professional status, too much emphasis on the concept of a vocation served the interests of the CPS who wanted to run schools efficiently, spending the least amount of money on PRSP staffing.

The ownership of an expert discourse on students' educational needs is important for the CTU as it establishes teachers as the authoritative voice, but it has the potential to compromise the CTU's oppositional discourse and lead their social movement in contradictory directions. The CTU's commitment to the wider social needs of their students encompasses a critique of capitalism as the source of their poverty. This is humane, but the emphasis on caring risks an interpretation that schoolwork is 'more than a job'. This plays into the hands of reprivatisers because, as Steudeman (2015) and Brookfield (2017), argue teachers' surplus labour is then rewarded by feeling good, rather than being paid more. Therefore, as social activists, CTU members entwine a resistant discourse which resolutely rejects the privatising impulses of the CPS with an expert professional discourse on public education which insists the school is recognised as a site of social reproduction.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the competing interpretations of the educational needs of Chicago's students by focusing on the reprivatising discourse of the CPS and the oppositional discourse of the CTU which led up to the 2019 CTU strike. Fraser's framework of the politics of 'needs talk' (1989: 161) enabled me to explore how the CPS used its REACH evaluation framework to reinforce a neoliberal discourse on privatisation. This was an attempt to foreshorten debates about poverty and racism in Chicago by seemingly addressing them. Although this necessarily involved an admission that these needs are politicised, the CPS sealed them into a hegemonic narrative on testing and evaluation. The CTU's response demonstrated REACH was a specious solution to 'runaway needs' (Fraser, 1989: 169), such as student trauma and homelessness. The oppositional discourse they employed drew on feminist social reproduction theory and the BLM social movement to insist on the centrality and subjectivity of the Black, working-class experience in recognising educational needs. They provided a 'revived understanding of class' (Bhattacharya, 2017: 93) which drew Chicagoans' support in 2019.

I suggested that Nancy Fraser's (1989) concept of an expert discourse as an axis for conflict is useful, but my analysis of this in an educational context differs from hers and aligns more closely with Cools, Leggio, Matras and Oosterlynk's (2018) social policy research findings. I outlined the way in which the CPS claimed to translate the community's needs into an authoritative discourse rendering these administrable. The CTU membership understood schools could be a site of resistance and challenge. Their professional status allowed the CTU to assert their educational needs talk was the expert discourse. This discourse entwined with a resistant discourse to insist on the school as a site of social reproduction and an expansive framing of the working class.

In conclusion, it is clear from this analysis that Fraser's (1989) framework can be extended beyond struggles which relate to the modern welfare state and applied to the politics of educational needs interpretation. However, the lessons from this paper are not only theoretical, because in insisting on a counter-hegemonic vision of education, the CTU emphasised the importance of reimagining schools. Internationally, teachers' unions can learn from the CTU's framing of the city's education needs as it refused to accept the dominant conceptualisation of education as improved performance in standardised test scores. They succeeded in gaining a nurse and counsellor for each school plus extra resources for homeless students. They also achieved a 16% pay rise over 5 years and hard caps on class sizes (Jaffe, 2019a). The CTU widened the lens on educational social justice by placing the social reproductive needs of their students and families at the centre of their demands for better education provision in Chicago.

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