

Teacher Unions in the Public Sphere:
Strategies Intended to Influence Public Opinion

By

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Abstract

This study explores how teacher unions in British Columbia and Ontario attempted to influence public opinion during periods of labour conflict between 2001 and 2016. A comparative case analysis was conducted based on eight interviews with members of the British Columbia Teachers Federation, six interviews with members of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, as well as documents from each union. In addition, newspaper items published in each province during the conflict period were collected. The unions' efforts were analyzed through the framework of Habermas' concepts of the public sphere and validity claims. Findings indicate that both unions had active public relations strategies designed to influence media coverage and discourse in the public sphere. However, most of their efforts were focused on influencing the public sphere indirectly, by using tactics that are not traditionally considered part of public relations strategies. While the unions' efforts were similar in nature, the impact that these efforts had on influencing public opinion and producing policy change varied substantially. I argue that a combination of historical and political differences, mediated through a validity claims framework, helps explain this variation.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

BC	British Columbia
BCTF	British Columbia Teachers' Federation
ETFO	Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario
FWTAO	Federation of Women Teachers' Association of Ontario
NDP	New Democratic Party
OECTA	Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association
OPSEU	Ontario Public Service Employees Union
OPSMTF	Ontario Public School Men's Teachers' Federation
OPSTF	Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation
OSSTF	Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation
PDT	Provincial Discussion Table

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Whether the public realizes it or not, the important thing to remember is that everything we do, we do to protect public education.” These words, spoken by the president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation during the 2014 annual meeting, were in response to a question from a union member about how a potential strike would be perceived by the public. During this meeting, the union leadership had decided to discontinue their previous job action measures (which included cancelling teachers’ extracurricular activities and refraining from filling out student report cards) because they had lost them considerable support among the public. During that previous job action, teacher unions had come under scathing criticism in the media. As one columnist in *The Globe and Mail* newspaper put it “The unions’ job is to act in the interest of their members, which is inevitably contrary to the broader interests of the public” (Wente, 2013, p. F9).

Here we have two competing public narratives about teacher unions. One portrays them as the protectors of public education, and the other as self-serving organizations that benefit their members at the expense of the rest of society. In many ways, these competing narratives mirror the current academic debate about teacher unions. Some researchers argue that teacher unions play an important role in shaping educational policy, for example by negotiating collective agreements with school districts, generating policy ideas, creating professional development for their members, and providing feedback to educational decision makers about educational conditions (Bascia, 2015; Bascia & Osmond, 2013; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Naylor, 2005). However, others have argued that teacher unions represent “special interests” that benefit their members at the expense of the public and block the reforms that are necessary to improve schools (Loveless, 2000; Mangu-Ward, 2011; Moe, 2011; Peterson, Henderson & West, 2014).

For the teacher unions, whichever narrative attains dominance is of vital importance, as the influence of unions is in part a function of their reputation or status in society (Truman, 1971; Key, 1964). And as the collective bargaining power of teacher unions is dependent on the continued existence of supporting legislation, the strength of teacher unions depends on continued public support. This is why around the world, more and more teacher unions are taking on active public relations efforts. As Bascia (2008) notes,

In recent years, as the dominant discourse has become increasingly anti-education, however, many teachers' organizations have become convinced...that they are uniquely situated to persuade the public to greater respect and support for education...Public relations, or "communications", is a common and increasingly active organizational function in teachers' organizations of any size. (p.181)

But while its importance is becoming increasingly clear, not much is actually known about the public perception of teacher unions, and the influences on that perception. This is especially true in Canada, where public polling on the topic of teacher unions' is virtually nonexistent. This study aims to fill this void, by examining the unions own public relations efforts.

Research Question

- How do Canadian teacher unions attempt to influence public opinion?

Rationale

The degree to which teacher unions influence educational decision-making is determined almost entirely by provincial governments, who possess sole constitutional authority over educational policy in Canada. Thus, depending on the provincial government that happens to be in power and their perceived mandate from the public, the role that teacher unions play can be

redefined at any time (Bascia, 2008). The status of teacher unions in the educational landscape is therefore inherently unstable and may change depending on shifts in public opinion.

Significance of the Research

This research contributes to a more complete understanding of teacher unions, by exploring an aspect of their behaviour that has not previously been studied. While teacher unions themselves are often the subject of much public debate, many “have been slow to recognize their power to contribute to public discourse about teachers, schools, and unions themselves” (Bascia, 2015, p. 4). Engaging in sustained media strategies and public relations efforts is a relatively recent phenomenon for many teacher unions, which is part of the reason there has been virtually no research on this topic. This study will be a first of its kind in helping us understand how teacher unions attempt to influence their depiction in the public sphere.

The next chapter reviews the literature on teacher unions, which includes a discussion of their history in Canada, the roles they have assumed, and their interface with education journalism. Chapter 3 presents the conceptual framework which centers around Habermas’ notion of the public sphere (1974) and concept of validity claims (1984). Chapter 4 outlines the research design for this study which includes an explanation and justification of methodology, data selection, ethical considerations, and data analysis. Chapters 5 presents the case of British Columbia and the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation. Chapter 6 presents the Ontario case and the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario. Each of the case chapters provides a detailed history of the labour conflict in each province, as well as an examination of the strategies used by each teacher union to influence public opinion. Chapter 7 presents a cross-case analysis where the cases are compared and analyzed through the framework of Habermas’ (1984) validity claims. Chapter 8 discusses the study findings in relation to the conceptual

framework and the broader research literature on teacher unions. Chapter 9 reviews the dissertation and its findings, summarizes its scholarly and practical significance, outlines its limitations, provides suggestions for future areas of research, and concludes with some personal reflections on teacher unions and public opinion.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with an exploration of the history of teacher unions in Canada. It tracks their development and the various roles they have adopted within public education systems and broader society. This allows for a deeper understanding of why teacher unions have increasingly started to position themselves as defenders of public education. As this study explores how teacher unions attempt to influence public opinion, it is important to consider the role of the news media in shaping that opinion. The chapter thus proceeds to look at the role education journalism plays in informing the public about teacher unions and other education issues.

Canadian Teacher Unions – History

Teacher unions in Canada have evolved quite considerably from their relatively simple beginnings to the multifaceted organizations with public relations strategies that exist today. The first educational organizations in Canada, such as the Teachers' Association of Canada West (1861) and the Educational Association of Nova Scotia (1863), were largely the creation of provincial departments of education. They existed primarily to provide training for teachers and to allow departments of education to communicate with those in the growing education sector (Smaller, 1988). The membership of these organizations typically included education department officials, school trustees, school administrators, normal school (teacher training) instructors, and teachers themselves (Paton, 1962). As they were organized and administered by provincial authorities, and contained such a diverse membership, they were not organizations of teachers that strictly represented teachers' interests. In fact, the role that teachers played in these educational organizations was often minor (Paton, 1962). Far from being independent, these educational organizations worked in concert with the provincial government's agenda, which

was often to the detriment of the concerns of teachers in the classroom (Johnson, 1964; Smaller, 1988).

Not long after their creation, teachers began to feel that these educational organizations were not able to adequately address their occupational needs. Furthermore, they felt that they could not openly discuss their grievances during association meetings, as the eyes of education department and school board officials were constantly upon them. Thus, eventually teachers decided that they needed organizations that would act solely on their behalf, to protect themselves and improve the conditions of their employment. In 1889, the Newfoundland Teachers' Association was established which aimed to establish, along with increased salaries, a pension plan for its members. In 1896, the Teachers' Protective Union of Nova Scotia was created to improve salaries and to protect teachers from mistreatment by unscrupulous school board trustees (Parker, 1963). In short order, similar organizations were created across the country as teachers attempted to assert greater control over the conditions of their employment (Bascia, 1994; Smaller, 1995).

Henceforth, teacher unions started making various demands of government in order to improve the conditions of the teaching profession. In the early 1900s the Alberta Teachers' Alliance began organizing around teachers' material concerns like tenure, sick leave and pensions, as well as a push for collective bargaining and teacher representation on committees that decided working conditions in schools (Chalmers, 1968; Paton, 1962). During this same period, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Alliance also presented the minister of education with demands around tenure and pensions, as well as increased salaries. When these demands were rejected, Saskatchewan teachers went on strike in 1919; this is considered to be the first teacher strike in Canada (Paton, 1962; Tyre, 1968). Later that year, the Victoria Teachers' Association

also went on strike and obtained the implicit right to collectively bargain (Lawton, Bedard, MacLellan & Li, 1999). Collective bargaining rights for teachers in other provinces would follow in the decades to come: BC (1937), Alberta (1941), Ontario (1944), Manitoba (1948), Nova Scotia (1953), Quebec (1965), and New Brunswick (1967) (Chafe, 1970; Grant, 1993; Johnson, 1964; Lawton, Bedard, MacLellan & Li, 1999; Manzer, 1994; Muir, 1969; Parker, 1962).

Industrial Unionism

With these examples, we see the beginnings of the “industrial” model of unionism associated with teacher unions. This traditional, and many would argue, foremost role, is for the unions to act as teachers’ agents. In this capacity, teacher unions act on behalf of teachers in order to negotiate salaries, benefits and working conditions, and to help resolve any problems with their employment that may occur. Here the unions’ role is similar to the agents that represent authors, entertainers, and athletes that negotiate contracts and book events on their clients’ behalf. In this agent role, teacher unions aim to get the best possible deal for the clients (teachers) they represent. As it is the government that controls teachers’ contracts, building support among the public, to whom the government is ultimately answerable, helps unions to successfully fulfill this role.

Professional Unionism

During the 1950’s, schools in Canada experienced massive growth due to the post-war “baby boom.” The ever-increasing student population produced a large increase in the hiring of teachers, which in turn substantially swelled the membership of Canada’s teacher unions. With increasing membership and resources, teacher unions began to position themselves as the official

voice of teachers when it came to public debates about education (Flower & Stewart, 1958). This included issues that extended beyond the immediate economic concerns of teachers. For example, the Alberta Teachers' Association supported the creation of subject associations related to English and mathematics. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation commissioned a study to improve the teaching of a new mathematics curriculum (Paton, 1962). And although they were not yet regarded as legitimate participants in educational policy-making, teacher unions began to offer advice and exert influence on education policy-makers, including both elected officials and bureaucrats within education departments (Flower & Stewart, 1958; Manzer, 1994).

The idea of teachers speaking out about their working conditions and trying to insert themselves more directly into education policymaking has often proved contentious. To this day, debates about the proper role of teachers and their unions' continue. For example, writing in the *National Post*, in an op-ed titled "Should unions have the right to dictate public policy?" leaders of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation recently decried teacher unions influence on education policy in British Columbia (Bateman & Wudrick, 2016). This follows a long history of the technical-rational approach to education policy making (Datnow & Park, 2009), where policy is seen as the sole purview of legislators and other policy elites within education departments. By contrast, teachers are seen as mere passive implementers of policies created without their input (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012).

The origins of this sharp divide between teachers and policymakers are both historical and sexist. For a large part of the reason that teachers have had a limited voice in education policymaking is that historically teachers have been predominantly women. And back when female employment outside of the home was relatively uncommon, it was viewed as especially

inappropriate for women to comment on or seek to change the conditions of that employment.

As Smaller (2015) notes about the state of teaching in Toronto in the late 1800's:

Women's opinions were neither asked for nor heeded. Even on occasion when a deputation of men and women went before the Board, the Board members said they would hear from the men – and mark you, it was women's salaries which were under discussion. (p. 19).

However, despite this history, teacher unions have become increasingly more proactive about inserting themselves as legitimate policy actors. This has been achieved by expanding their agenda outside the traditional agent model. And while not all teacher unions have made the same strategic shifts, several have broadened their scope by taking on the provision of professional development for teachers (Bascia, 2000; Naylor, 2005; Osmond-Johnson, 2015), aiding in the creation of teacher-developed curriculum (Hamill, 2011), engaging teachers in action research projects to help solve local educational issues (Hargreaves et al., 2009), providing opportunities for leadership development within the teaching profession (Murray, 2004; Osmond-Johnson, 2015), as well as generating policy ideas and providing feedback about educational conditions (Bascia, 2009).

Social Unionism

Any examination of the behaviour of teacher unions in many parts of Canada is likely to conclude that they have also taken up broader social agendas. For example, during a labour dispute in 2012, the head of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario publicly denounced the Ontario government's actions as "an attack on women, unions, and public sector workers"

(Jenkins, 2012). This type of behaviour does not make sense in the traditional agent view of unions. After all, as Lawton, Bedard, MacLellan, and Li (1999) point out,

Do the agents for the stars publicly slander the producers who employ the performers? This pattern of behavior on the part of the unions does not make sense in terms of normal economic relationships between buyers, sellers, and agents, who have continuing relationships. (p. 9)

By engaging in broader political debate, teacher unions aim to have a longer term social and political agenda that they are looking to advance. This approach has been termed *social unionism*, which combines collective bargaining with “community-based action for broader, even radical, social change” (Shantz, 2009, p. 113). Under this orientation, unions do not just collectively bargain for their members, but also engage “in political action to change public policy or effect social economic change” (Kumar & Murray, 2006, p. 82). In doing so, they attempt to change the opinions of the public so as to spur collective action in order to solve pressing societal problems (Robinson, 1993).

There are several examples of Canadian teacher unions taking up the social unionism agenda. In the 1990s, Canadian teacher unions joined the Canadian Labour Congress to fight against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). At the 1998 annual meeting of the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, its president called Canadians’ attention to the increased “subservience of labour to economic growth, the unfettered movement of capital and...the divine right of the marketplace and of free enterprise” (Lawton, Bedard, MacLellan & Li, 2009, p. 80). And it is not just economic, but also social issues in which teacher unions have engaged in advocacy work. For example, in the late 1990s, the BCTF launched a campaign to counter homophobia and heterosexism in schools. In doing so, it supported a case that went before the

British Columbia Supreme Court that overturned a school board's ban on children's books that mentioned same-sex parents (Benson & Miller, 1999). More recently, the president of the OSSTF wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, calling on the federal government to end discrimination against First Nations children in the delivery of child welfare services on reserves (Elliott, 2016).

Defenders of Public Education

In recent years there has been a global trend of attacks on public education which have included privatization efforts like school vouchers and charter schools (Apple, 2006; Carter, Stevenson & Passy, 2010). Teacher unions tend to be the most active opponents to privatization as it can lead to deteriorating working conditions and rights of their members, as well as undermine the status of the teaching profession (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016). Furthermore, privatization along with other neoliberal education reforms like decentralization, often work to fragment the teaching profession and weaken the organizational power of teacher unions (Suleiman & Waterbury, 1990). It is therefore not surprising that teacher unions have increasingly taken on defending public education as one of their core functions (Bascia, 2008).

However, when teacher unions take a forceful stand against neoliberal reforms, they run the risk of being marginalized by governments, as was the case in Chile under Pinochet and Britain under Thatcher (Fourcade-Gourinchas & Babb, 2002). Later in Britain under New Labour, government consultation became a privilege reserved only for those teacher unions with a "cooperative attitude" (Exley, 2012). The threat of marginalization is compounded when teacher unions suffer from a poor public image and are viewed as illegitimate policy actors, as is the case in many parts of the world (Bascia & Osmond, 2013; Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016). For example, during neoliberal reforms in 1980's New Zealand, teacher unions were seen

as “motivated by self-interest” (Codd, 2005, p. 195) and in Britain were portrayed as vested interests that obstructed necessary education reforms (Exley, 2012). This image works to weaken the influence that teacher unions can have on educational policy. As put by Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo (2016) in their summary of teacher union research,

Being pervasively perceived as an antagonistic actor affects the legitimacy and popularity of TUs [teacher unions] in the general public and, therefore, their influence in education policy processes...a positive public image is one of the key conditions for ensuring that governments hear their voices. (p. 175)

Perhaps no event has brought this point home more forcefully than the results of the 2016 American election and the installation of Betsy DeVos as secretary of education. DeVos has been described by the media as “the most ideological, anti-public education nominee” (Strauss, 2016, para. 3) in the history of the role as she has devoted most of her adult life to expanding vouchers for private schools and privately-run charter schools, as well as stripping teacher unions of their influence (Zernike, 2016). Indeed, DeVos recently remarked that teacher unions are “the only thing standing in the way” of increased school choice in America (Klein, 2019, para. 2).

It is perhaps no coincidence that shortly after the nomination of DeVos, McKinsey & Company, one of the world’s largest management consulting companies, published an article stating that the American education system was now ripe for increased private investment. In the article, the authors lament that “much of this market has historically been difficult to access. K-12 and higher education are largely seen as public goods for the government to provide” (Bryant & Sarakatsannis, 2016, para. 1) However, the authors note that due to shifts in the educational landscape, the way schools operate are increasingly being reassessed, thus “opening the door for private investors and for-profit education providers” (para. 2). Given this context, teacher

unions' public relations efforts become increasingly important not just for their own sake, but arguably also for the continued existence of education as a public good.

Education Journalism & Teacher Unions

Despite dramatic changes to the industry, the news media continue to be important sources of information for the public about education issues. Yettick (2015) begins her feature article published in *Educational Researcher*, by saying "Most members of the American public will never read this article. Instead, they will obtain much of their information about education from the news media" (p. 173). There is good reason for such a statement. In a national survey of American adults, daily newspapers ranked second only to family and friends as the most common source of education information (West, Whitehurst & Dionne, 2011).

Studies on educational journalism are a small but growing subfield within academic disciplines like communications, media studies and education. An increasing number of researchers within these fields have turned their attention to how the media shapes and is in turn shaped by public perception (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Examining the role that the media plays in shaping public perception has become especially important as the media has become more politicized (Glassner, 1999; Kellner, 1995). And as has been noted by Herman and Chomsky (1988), it is important to remember that media outlets are not non-profit organizations that aim to impartially serve the public good. Rather, they are businesses that are in the business of producing news in order to make a profit. The choice of what articles to publish (or not), the accompanying headlines, and placement decisions are not random acts. Rather these decisions are made in regard to their impact on profits, as well as the ideological and political positions of the owners and editors within the organization (McChesney, 2004)

The effect of the news media on public opinion and educational policy making has been documented by several researchers. In their study of the news media and education policy in Australia, Lingard and Rawolle (2004) found that the media representation of teachers and schools played a large role in how the public determined the success or failure of government education initiatives. Furthermore, they found that “In some educational domains where there is a policy vacuum, media coverage of the potential policy area can serve almost as *de facto* policy” (p. 363). In a Canadian study, Stack (2010) interviewed 17 former premiers, ministers of education, senior bureaucrats, and journalists in a large Canadian province. When discussing factors that drive changes to policy, a former premier noted:

some of my worst days were Mondays, because the MLAs would come back from their constituencies, and they would not only have, perhaps, talked to constituents, or received telephone calls, but they would have time to go through their local papers ... they’d come back and they’d be so concerned and upset and worried. And they’d be asking for changes or things to be done[D]efinitely the media was always the greatest influence in that. So, the media has a direct effect on policy making. (p. 107)

In the Stack (2010) study, we also see the way media portrayal of teacher unions can impact government decisions. Referring to a former education minister, Stack notes “She and her government believed they had support to be tough on the teachers’ union, given negative media representations of the union” (p. 113). Here we see a government using media portrayals of teacher unions as a direct proxy for public opinion. If the media portrayal of teacher unions is negative, public opinion is assumed to also be negative, therefore the government has public support to be “tough” on the unions.

Despite its impact, the quality of education journalism can be problematic. Studies that have examined American education journalism have found that journalists generally lack the ability to properly understand education issues, have little experience in judging the validity of the policies and research about which they report, and fail to make distinctions in their sources between publications from partisan think-tanks and peer-reviewed academic research (Haas, 2007; Henig, 2008; Rotherman, 2008; Shaker & Heilman, 2004; Yettick, 2015). This can explain why the media often defaults to a conflict-oriented frame when discussing teacher unions (Bascia, 1998), as it is easy to understand and is a relatively easy way to generate interest (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996). This is in line with reporting on teachers, who have generally been portrayed as obstructionist and unprofessional (Alhamdan et al., 2014, Thomas, 2004), and the reporting on schools which are often portrayed as being in crisis (Cohen, 2010). As Keogh and Garrick (2011) note, media portrayals like these “influence public opinion regarding declining teacher quality and standards, and views of public schools as being in crisis, creating moral panic” (p. 419).

More recently, Yettick (2015) examined education coverage at 650 American daily newspapers, 86 education related websites, and the periodical *Education Week*. After examining 227,095 items that were published in a typical week, she found that only 45 (0.02%) were based on research published in peer-reviewed journals. When education journalists were interviewed in order to investigate the reasons for this, they reported finding academic journals too difficult to understand. As one experienced reporter put it:

I don't have enough personal expertise to know what I'm looking at... I don't know whether this is credible research or not...I don't know if it's groundbreaking or

something that says what another study says. I found it to be diminishing returns.
(p. 178)

Time was also cited as a limiting factor by journalists when writing about education issues. Due to industry-wide cuts, journalists faced increasing pressure to produce more articles in a shorter period of time. Thus, wading through journal articles was often seen as too inefficient. Instead, journalists often relied on news releases put out by governments and think-tanks. And of those think-tanks, most (87%) tended to be advocacy-oriented. In the rare instances when education reporting was based on academic journal articles, Yettick found “virtually no overlap between the education journals mentioned by the news media and the educational journals with the highest impact factors” (p. 176). In other words, the publications taken most seriously within academia held virtually no sway in the media.

In recent years, governments have started devoting more resources into influencing how the media covers education issues (Lewis, 2004). This effort has produced a significant effect. When examining education coverage at *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Yettick (2009) found that these two major American newspapers most often utilized information from the government. It should be noted though that this was consistent with Weiss and Singer’s (1988) study of media coverage of social science research in general.

The media reliance on government information when discussing education issues presents a potential problem for teacher unions. For example, if an anti-union government is in power, they have a direct route to mold public opinion against teacher unions through the information they put out or statements they make, which is then rebroadcast to the general public through the media. Indeed as Bascia and Osmond (2013) report, both governments and the media in many countries portray teacher unions as inherently selfish and illegitimate. This was

the case in Chile where the country's two main conservative newspapers portrayed the teacher unions as acting against the public interest (Santa Cruz & Olmedo, 2012).

Probably the most jarring example of this in recent times is from 2004 when then Secretary of Education Rob Paige called the National Education Association, America's largest teacher union, "a terrorist organization". This comment sparked days of coverage in American media outlets. After a backlash, Paige apologized for "an inappropriate choice of words" but doubled-down on the spirit of the initial comment by saying "the NEA's high-priced Washington lobbyists have made no secret that they will fight against bringing real, rock-solid improvements in the way we educate all our children regardless of skin color, accent or where they live" (Pear, 2004)

The "terrorist" comment came amidst a general backdrop of negative media portrayals of teacher unions in the U.S. Examining reporting in *The New York Times* and *Time Magazine* during this time, Goldstein (2011) found that over half of all the items that mentioned teacher unions portrayed them in a negative manner with terms like "selfish", "self-centered", "special-interest" and "obstructionist" commonly attached. In the few items (less than 5%) where teacher unions were portrayed positively, it was when they were willing to go along with school reform initiatives like high-stakes testing and increased accountability. Goldstein concludes that this reporting "frames school reform (and justice) as a process that must occur outside the realm of teachers and unions. The media suggests that they cannot be trusted to do what is just and right." (p. 557).

While the landscape has changed significantly in recent years, the media's power to affect public opinion and public policy remains substantial. For example, The Globe and Mail recently published a series on sexual assault (Doolittle, 2017) that has caused police forces

across the country to re-examine over 10,000 cases they had previously dismissed. In Ontario, reporting in recent years by the Toronto Star (Rushowy & Javed, 2017; Rushowy & Brown, 2014) led to the Ontario Ministry of Education investigating both the York Region District School Board and the Toronto District School Board which has led to leadership and policy changes in both boards. The power of the media to shape perception and policy, combined with the generally negative portrayals of teacher unions in the media, present a significant obstacle to teacher unions as they attempt to influence public opinion and position themselves as the defenders of public education.

CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Public Sphere

The conceptual framework of this study centers around Habermas' (1974) concept of "the public sphere," which is the "realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (p. 49). The public sphere is the discursive process where citizens deliberate important matters of common interest. It is when people come together in public spaces to learn about and discuss public issues. In this idealized space, citizens develop their own opinions free from coercion from the state or other powerful institutions. It thus allows citizens to be critical of the state and hold it accountable to public opinion. Public opinion is important because in the absence of violence or coercion, it is how members of society can exert control over the state power structures that are supposed to operate in their interest. This is done informally through public discussion and criticism, as well as formally through advocacy, activism and participation in elections. The public sphere thus mediates between society and the state.

Criticisms of the Public Sphere

In Habermas' conception of the public sphere, citizens can participate in public debate as social equals, free from distinctions based on social status. Habermas postulated the public sphere as a level discursive playing field where all members of society had the ability to participate. This vision of an egalitarian, inclusive forum for public debate has come under criticism for ignoring the reality of unequal power dynamics and social stratification. Feminist scholars like Fraser (1990) and critical race scholars like Dawson (1995) have argued that there has never been a unitary public sphere in which everyone is included. Rather, the modern

European society upon which Habermas traced the development of the public sphere often excluded large segments of the population (e.g. women, racial/ethnic minorities, working class men) from participating in public debate. By example of women's associations, Ryan (1990) has argued that these excluded groups often go on to form their own discursive forums that work to contest and challenge dominant narratives. In discussing discursive arenas that operate in parallel to the official public sphere, Fraser (1990) coined the term "subaltern counterpublics" to describe a place where "members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses" (p. 67).

The concept of subaltern counterpublics has importance for teacher unions, which enjoy varying degrees of social status and are often marginalized by the news media. According to Habermas, the news media play an important role in the public sphere as "a mediator and intensifier of public discussion" (p. 53). News media provide the public with equal access to information from which public debate can emerge. However, what the news media chooses to report and how they choose to report it work to influence and shape public discussion and opinion. This is especially true when it comes to public policy as media discourses are often the means through which governmental policies are interpreted by the public (Falk, 1994).

The fact that almost all media outlets are run by private corporations is a potential problem for labour unions, including those that represent teachers. Brantlinger (2006) has argued that corporate control of the media tends to result in educational issues being reported through a free-market lens, where increased government spending is the problem, and business-oriented measures are the solution. The *raison d'être* of private corporations is maximizing profits, traditionally through low taxes and having access to a large supply of low-paid labour (Hicks, Friedland & Johnson, 1978). Those who resist such a *laissez-faire* capitalist system, such

as labour unions, tend to be excluded or negatively portrayed in the media, almost all of which is corporately controlled (Glasser & Bowers, 1999).

However, just because a group is subjected to a particular discourse does not mean that they will passively accept it (Hall, 1997), for there is space in the public sphere for dominant discourses to be challenged (Sachs, 2003). This is because, “despite their power to frame the world, discourses are not invincible” (Bleiker, 2003, p.29). As Osmond-Johnson (2015) has argued, “while discourse may indeed produce subjects, subjects may also navigate discursive cracks, fissures, and weak spots to create counter-discourse that transcend dominate ideologies that serve to control their conduct in repressive ways” (p. 54). It is in this space that teacher unions can work to create counter-discourses about themselves and the work that they do.

Validity Claims

Habermas (1984) further proposed that “processes of reaching understanding are aimed at a consensus that depends on the intersubjective recognition of validity claims” (p. 136). That is to say that speech acts in the public sphere are assessed through a set of criteria termed “validity claims.” For an argument to be accepted, it must pass tests of *clarity*, *truth*, *normative rightfulness*, and *sincerity*. *Clarity* reflects whether the argument is viewed as clear, well-formed, and intelligible. *Truth* is whether the proposition or explanation being asserted reflects reality. It is concerned with whether what is being said is factually correct. *Normative rightfulness* refers to commonly accepted norms. It reflects whether the speech or argument is in accordance with currently accepted values and standards. *Sincerity* is the degree to which the expressed meaning of the argument is congruent with the true intentions of the speaker’s agenda. It is concerned with whether the speaker is being forthright and honest.

Under Habermas' construction, when a speaker raises a validity claim, the recipient has three options: "accepting or rejecting the validity claim or leaving it undecided for the time being. The permissible reactions are taking a 'yes' or 'no' position or abstaining" (p. 38). However, agreement is only achieved if a "yes" response is received across all four dimensions of the validity claim.

Validity claims offer a useful analytic framework to assess the degree to which particular strategies and arguments influence the public sphere. As put by Habermas (1984),

The "strength" of an argument is measured in a given context by the soundness of the reasons; that can be seen in, among other things, whether or not an argument is able to convince the participants in a discourse, that is, to motivate them to accept the validity claim in question. (p. 18)

An example of the use of validity claims as an analytic framework comes from Pappas' (2016) examination of public hearings held by the New York City Department of Education regarding the closing of "failing" schools. By asserting that schools were not actually failing, members of the public rejected the Department of Education's validity claim based on the criteria of *truth*. In disputing whether school closures were truly intended to improve school performance (as opposed to increasing privatization of the system), the *sincerity* of the Department's proposals was rejected. The *clarity* of school closure plans was challenged by arguing that they would lead to the displacement of large swaths of vulnerable students who were then likely to drop out of school. Finally, members of the public that attended the hearings rejected the *normative rightfulness* of the Department of Education's authority. The Department's legitimacy was called into question as they viewed the body as unaccountable to

the public they served. Furthermore, the public hearing process was criticized as lacking both transparency and opportunities to genuinely influence decision-making.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents a visual depiction of the conceptual framework for this study.

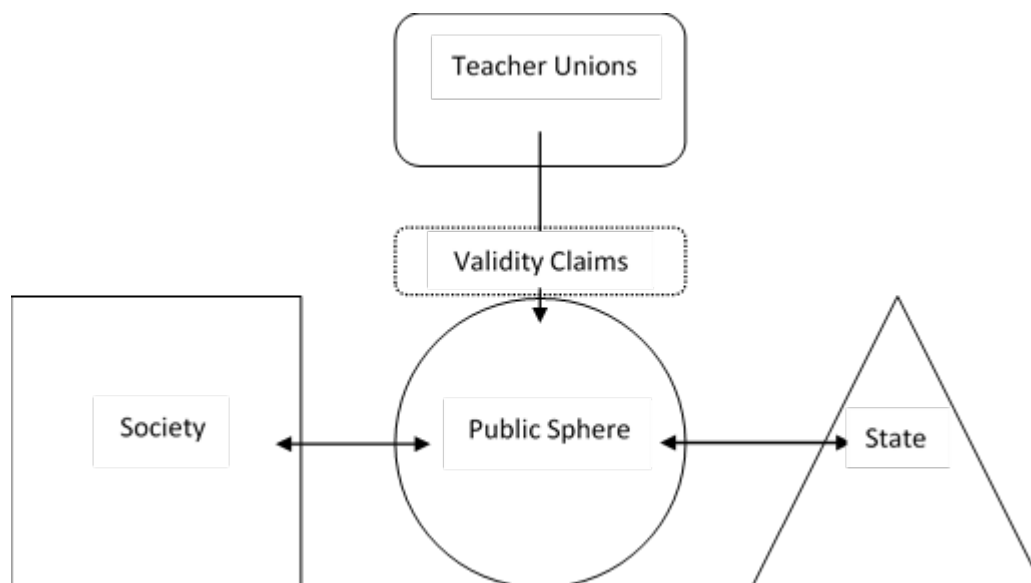


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Society consists of common citizens, without state power, who have varied and sometimes divergent interests. When citizens come together to engage in public debate, the process of the public sphere begins. Through this process of debate, public opinion about matters of civic importance is formed. Once public opinion emerges, citizens can then organize and exert influence on the state through advocacy, activism, and participation in elections.

In a democratic country, the state is both influenced by and attempts to influence the public sphere. The state is concerned with public opinion as it has a direct bearing on its ability to stay in power and its prospects for future electoral success. The state also works to influence

the public sphere through providing society with information on government activities (e.g., budgets, reports from public agencies) as well as through its own public relations strategies (e.g., press conferences, media interviews).

This conceptual framework will be used to analyze teacher unions' attempts to influence public opinion. Under this framework, the degree to which a teacher union influences public opinion will depend on its ability to employ public relations strategies and craft arguments that are in accordance with the validity claim dimensions. If a teacher union can advance propositions and strategies that pass the tests of *clarity*, *truth*, *normative rightfulness*, and *sincerity*, then its arguments will be accepted in the public sphere. Conversely, failure to convince citizens in the public sphere will likely result from a violation of one or more of the dimensions. Validity claims thus represent a mediating filter through which the public relations efforts of teacher unions will be interpreted in the public sphere.

Clear and effective public communication on the part of teacher unions is thus vital to their efforts to frame themselves and their actions positively in the public sphere. The result of successful public relations strategies should be increased comprehension, knowledge, and trust between a teacher union and the public. However, failed public relations could produce confusion, distrust, and claims of illegitimacy.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter outlines the design of the study. It begins with an explanation of the choice of case study methods. The chapter then proceeds with a justification for the selection of each case, as well as a delineation of case boundaries. Next, a discussion of data selection is provided, followed by a section on ethical considerations and how they were addressed in this study. The chapter concludes with a look at how the data were analyzed.

Comparative Case Studies

This study utilized the case study method to focus on teacher unions public relations efforts during periods of conflict in two different Canadian provinces. Creswell (2013) states that case study research is “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g. observations, interviews, audiovisual material, documents and reports)” (p. 97). More specifically, this study utilized a comparative case methodology, whose findings are often considered more robust than single case designs (Herriot & Firestone, 1983). This study examined the public relations efforts of teacher unions across two different contexts, and thus provides for a broader interpretation of this element of the Canadian public sphere than could be provided by a single case alone (Yin, 2014).

Site Selection and Boundaries

The units of analysis (i.e., cases) for this study were two Canadian provinces: British Columbia and Ontario. These provinces were selected as their large size makes them more likely to have teacher unions with enough resources to engage in active public relations efforts. These provinces were also selected because each has been the location of vigorous public debates in

recent years as to the proper role of teacher unions. For each case, it is the teacher unions in the province that were examined. The two specific teacher unions under study are the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) and the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO). As the BCTF is the only teacher union in its province, its inclusion in the study is straightforward. By contrast, ETFO is only one of four teacher unions in Ontario. However, they were selected for the study as they are the largest of those unions.

The two periods of conflict that were explored are: the 2002 to 2016 dispute between the BCTF and BC government regarding the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act's* effect on class size and composition; and the 2012 to 2016 conflict around the passage of the *Putting Students First Act* by the Ontario government, which imposed contracts on teachers and removed their right to strike. The period of conflict served as the time bound for each case.

Data Selection

Case studies involve combining a set of research methods in order to obtain a more complete picture of the phenomenon under investigation in its proper context (Merriam, 2009). The two main methods utilized were in-depth interviews and document analysis. In this study, I was interested in assessing how teacher unions attempt to influence public opinion, behaviour that may not be readily apparent to outside observers. Therefore, the most efficient way to address my research question is to directly ask people working inside teacher unions about their public relations activities.

Interviewees included both active and retired staff with knowledge of the union's public relations efforts during the conflict period under investigation. This included staff that worked in communications or public relations, as well as political leaders that represented the union's

public face. A total of eight people were interviewed from the BCTF: four presidents (one current and three former), the former executive director, the director of research, and two members of the media relations department. Six people were interviewed from ETFO: the president, two local (district) presidents, and three staff members that worked in collective bargaining communications, government relations/communications, and media relations. Interviews focused on understanding the background of the conflict in the province, how the union attempted to influence media coverage and public opinion during this period, and the outcomes of those public relations efforts (see Appendix D).

Once the interviews were complete, I supplemented them by analyzing documents related to the unions' public relations efforts. Doing so allowed for a more complete and accurate representation of the phenomenon under investigation than just interviews alone. This is because documents maintain fidelity over time and are not artefacts of the research process itself as is the case with interviews (Merriam, 2009). The types of documents analyzed included ads, press releases, and articles in union publications.

The second phase of the study involved collecting and analyzing newspaper items that were published about the BCTF and ETFO during their respective conflict periods. As media coverage of teacher unions tends to center around conflict (Bascia, 1998), it was likely that the unions were the subject of significant media reporting during these times. Analyzing newspaper coverage of the teacher unions and conflict periods under study served several purposes. First, I utilized newspapers in much the same way as a historian might examine newspapers of record. Indeed, in a mixed-methods study of 1,500 historians at American and British universities, newspapers were cited as both the "most often used" and "most important" primary source of information when conducting historical research (Tibbo, 2003). This is because the newspapers

provide a contemporaneous account of what happened at a given time and place. In this study, analysis of newspaper items provided a historical source to both corroborate and fill in the gaps of the accounts given by union staff in their interviews. This allowed for increased detail in the case construction as well as increased accuracy around specifics that were difficult for interviewees to remember years after the conflict had taken place. Second, analysis of newspaper coverage allowed me to track public discourse and gauge public perception about the teacher unions during the conflict period under study. Mass communication mediums like newspapers, through which public perception is filtered, not only provide an account of what happened at a given time and place, but also what people *thought* was happening (Knudson, 1993). Newspaper items also provided an account of how the public responded to the strategies utilized by the teacher unions through reporting on public opinion polls and parent/public reactions. Newspapers thus provided a window into public perception at the time.

For this study, I decided to focus specifically on newspapers as traditionally they have had the largest newsrooms, employing the most journalists, and have historically produced more original educational journalism than other media such as radio and television news (Pew Research Center, 2013; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007). Newspapers were also selected as they are more readily searchable than other forms of news media. The specific newspapers that were analyzed were the three largest papers in each of the provinces under study. I focused on papers with the largest readerships, as they were likely to have both the most coverage as well as the most influence on public opinion. This determination was made by examining the average weekday circulation figures provided by the industry trade association (Newspapers Canada, 2016). Table 1 outlines each of the newspapers that were selected for this phase of the study.

Table 1

Newspapers Under Study

<u>Market</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Average Weekday Circulation</u>
British Columbia	The Vancouver Sun	133,329
	The Province	112,115
	Times Colonist	58,335
Ontario	Toronto Star	308,881
	Toronto Sun	119,048
	Ottawa Citizen	93,277

(adapted from Newspapers Canada, 2016)

The specific news items collected were news articles, editorials, commentaries, and letters to the editor. Items were accessed through the *Factiva* database. For the British Columbia case, news items were collected that contained the terms “BCTF” and “class size,” between the years 2001 and 2016. For the Ontario case, items were collected that contained the terms “ETFO” and “Bill 115”, between the years 2012 and 2016. These search parameters yielded a total of 468 news items for the BCTF and 386 for ETFO.

Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure that any ethical issues had been considered and properly addressed, this study was reviewed by the University of Toronto’s Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB). The REB granted approval for the study on August 31, 2017 (see Appendix A).

Participation in the study was completely voluntary; all participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time or not answer any question they were not comfortable with without any penalty. Administrative consent was obtained from each teacher union before their staff members were approached about possible participation (see Appendix B). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of their interview (see Appendix C). Union staff were guaranteed complete confidentiality and were informed that the cases would be written in a way that reflected the overall picture as opposed to perspectives of individual participants. Any individual quotes used for illustration purposes were attributed to a nameless “staff member” or “leader.”

All raw data including interview transcripts and audio recordings were kept on my own password protected computer. Besides myself, the only other person to have access to any of the raw data was my supervisor Dr. Nina Bascia. All of the data will be destroyed after five years.

Data Analysis

Newspaper items, interviews with union staff, and union documents were analyzed and coded in three cycles. In the first cycle, newspaper items, interview transcripts, and documents were coded in NVivo 12 using an open coding framework (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This broke down the data into manageable pieces and allowed for possible themes or categories to emerge. It allowed for concepts to be “in a continuous dialogue with empirical data. Since concepts are ways of summarizing data, it’s important that they be adapted to the data you are going to summarize” (Becker, 1998, p. 109).

In the second cycle, axial codes were developed in NVivo 12, first within each case, and then across cases. Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommend axial coding around three categories:

conditions, actions-interactions, and consequences. Conditions refer to the reasons given for why things happen. Actions-interactions refer to the responses of people or groups to the events or situations they face. Consequences refer to the anticipated or actual outcomes of those responses. For this study, the interviews (see Appendix D) and document analysis centered around the context of the conflict in the particular province, how the union responded with public relations strategies, and the anticipated and actual outcomes of those public relations efforts. Axial codes that emerged around actions-interactions focused on how the union responded to the conflict such as industrial action (e.g. strikes), protests, media strategies, advocacy, member engagement and social media.

In the third cycle, the newspaper items, interviews, and documents were coded in NVivo 12 using my conceptual framework. Specifically, codes were developed relating to each of Habermas' (1984) four validity claims criteria: *clarity*, *truth*, *normative rightfulness*, and *sincerity*. *Clarity* reflects whether the argument is easy to understand. *Truth* is whether the proposition or explanation being asserted is accurate. *Normative rightfulness* refers to whether the what is being said or how it is said is in line with commonly accepted norms in society. *Sincerity* is the degree to which the speaker is being honest about their intentions. Using this framework allowed for an analysis and comparison of how the unions' strategies were perceived in the public sphere. The results of the analyses that occurred in all three cycles are presented in the case and cross-case analysis chapters that follow.

CHAPTER 5: BRITISH COLUMBIA TEACHERS' FEDERATION

The purpose of the two cases that follow is to explore the efforts of teacher unions to influence public opinion, first in British Columbia, then in Ontario. The chapters provide descriptive cases that outline in detail the conflicts between the provincial governments and teacher unions in both provinces. This chapter begins in British Columbia with a brief history of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation. It proceeds to describe the policy context for the union's conflict with the BC Liberals. The rest of the chapter documents the over 15-year campaign (from 2001 to 2016) waged by the BCTF to mobilize public opinion against the Liberal's *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*. It examines the tactics of the union in response to government actions, as well as an account of how the conflict played out on the pages of the province's newspapers. I made the decision to provide this account chronologically with as much detail and context as possible in order to understand the BCTF's public relations strategies. However, the detailed chronological account sacrificed a clear focus on those strategies as they appear scattered throughout the chapter. Efforts were thus made to provide headings to draw attention to the union's efforts to influence public opinion as they appear throughout the case.

History

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) was formed in 1917 at King Edward High School in Vancouver, British Columbia. At this founding convention, its three core objectives were established:

- to foster and promote the cause of education;
- to raise the status of the teaching profession in BC;

- and to promote the welfare of teachers in BC. (BCTF, 2018, p. 167)

Membership was open to all teachers regardless of race, religion or sex. By the 1940's over 90% of all teachers in the province were BCTF members. In 1947, the government made membership in the BCTF compulsory for all teachers in the province. Over the next few decades the BCTF helped improve conditions for teachers by successfully negotiating for a sick leave plan, advocating for salary scales based on objective criteria like qualifications and years of experience, and advocating for smaller class sizes. Recognizing a greater role for teachers in shaping education policy, in 1961 the conservative Social Credit government granted the BCTF representation on provincial elementary and secondary curriculum committees (BCTF, 2018).

The first province-wide teacher strike occurred in 1971 in protest of the government's refusal to improve teacher pensions. During the 1972 provincial election, the BCTF launched its first major political action initiative in response to the Social Credit government's cap on education spending and teacher salaries. In the 1980s, the BCTF began a major campaign to expand the scope of collective bargaining to include all conditions of teachers' employment. The campaign met with success as several locals were able to bargain these "expanded scope" elements into their contracts (BCTF, 2018).

In the mid 1980's, the BCTF launched its first court challenge under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which argued that denying teachers full collective bargaining rights was a violation of their right to freedom of association. While the court case was unsuccessful, full collective bargaining rights, including the right to strike, were given to BC teachers by the Social Credit government in 1987. However, the government also established a College of Teachers which took over the professional functions of the BCTF while also rescinding compulsory membership. The effect of these reforms was to separate the professional concerns of BC

teachers from their economic concerns and thus narrow the scope of union activity (Ungerleider, 1994).

In 1994, the progressive New Democratic Party (NDP) government implemented two consecutive reforms. The first removed local property taxation as the primary means of funding education and instead centralized funding at the provincial level. According to the government this was done primarily to reduce the inequities between schools in different parts of the province. The second reform shifted bargaining away from the local to the provincial level, the rationale being that it did not make sense for districts to continue to bargain contracts for which they were no longer responsible financially. However, in the first round of provincial bargaining that took place in 1996, the provincial agreement allowed all the terms and conditions of the previous local agreements (which included provisions related to class size and composition) to continue. The second round of collective bargaining in 1998 resulted in significant reductions in K-3 class sizes as well as the establishment of guaranteed staffing ratios for specialist teachers. However, this contract was imposed by legislation over the objections of the BC Public Schools Employers' Association.

Policy Context

In 2001, the BC Liberals achieved a landslide victory winning 77 of the 79 seats in the provincial legislature. On their first day in office, the government reduced personal income taxes by 25% across all income brackets. This was followed by an 18% reduction in corporate tax rates. The challenge then became how to compensate for these deep tax cuts. With health care and education together comprising more than 2/3 of the entire provincial budget (British Columbia Ministry of Finance and Corporate Relations, 2001), these sectors became the primary target for spending cuts. However, collective agreements in both sectors were seen as a barrier

to achieving cuts of the magnitude required. In 2002, the Liberals unilaterally amended health care workers' contracts, which led to the contracting out of over 8,000 jobs (CBC News, 2007). After health care workers went on strike in protest of these changes, the Liberals passed back-to-work legislation that imposed an across the board 15 per cent pay cut (Armstrong & Hume, 2004).

The Liberals had campaigned promising to “restore education as an essential service under the Labour Code, to ensure that no child’s right to an education is denied during school strikes and lockouts,” “support more flexibility and choice in public schooling” and to “give local school boards more autonomy and control” (Ungerleider & Krieger, 2008, p. 277). Once in power, the Liberals introduced essential services legislation for teachers, which limited their right to strike, and followed through on their school choice philosophy by passing legislation that gave students the right to attend any public school in the province, subject to capacity constraints. In response to the essential services legislation, the BCTF filed a complaint with the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO ultimately ruled in the BCTF’s favour, but as ILO rulings are only advisory, the ruling was ignored by the Liberals.

In 2002, the Liberals introduced the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*, which removed the class size and composition provisions of teachers’ contracts and stated that these elements could no longer be collectively bargained in the future. The requirement for schools to hire a certain number of librarians, ESL teachers, counsellors and special-education specialists based on the number of students in the school was completely removed. Instead, class size guidelines were placed in the *BC School Act* and were increased by about 10% in the primary grades compared to the previous limits in the collective agreement (Steffenhagen, 2002).

The changes were welcomed by the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, the BC Principals and Vice-Principals Association, and the BC School Trustees Association. The groups complained that the firm class size limits often resulted in classes being cancelled and students not being able to attend their local schools. Stu Dale, president of the BC Principals and Vice-Principals Association, remarked that the collective agreements had “handcuffed” his members from adequately meeting school needs. Gordon Comeau, president of the BC School Trustees Association similarly remarked, “The government committed that they were going to give flexibility and autonomy to the school boards...schools should be managed by school boards, principals and superintendents and not by collective agreements” (Steffenhagen, 2002, p. A1). The public discourse around teachers’ collective agreements acting like “handcuffs” and not providing schools with enough “flexibility” to meet student needs is one that the BCTF would need to work hard to counter. One BCTF leader remarked, “All of that was baloney. There was plenty of flexibility in the provisions...they created these urban myths, they were successful.”

For the BCTF, the attack on collective agreements was a complete shock. During the election campaign, Liberal leader Gordon Campbell had met with the BCTF and promised to honour their contracts if elected. But it was not just that Campbell had broken his promise, it was that in one fell swoop, the Liberals had erased from their contracts the working conditions related to class size and composition that teachers had spent years trying to achieve, often at their own financial expense. Indeed, in the most recent teacher contract in 1998 under the previous New Democratic government, the BCTF had received a zero, zero, and two per cent wage increase over three years in exchange for enshrining provisions on class size limits, special needs support, and specialist teacher ratios in their collective agreement. As a BCTF publication put it,

For years, BC teachers had consciously sacrificed their own financial gains in contract bargaining in order to improve learning conditions in the classroom...It was not always an easy tradeoff, but no one ever imagined the advances would simply be wiped out, leaving them with neither pay increases nor improved classroom conditions. (Dobbin, 2005, p. 4)

Mobilizing Public Opinion

Immediately after the passage of the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*, the BCTF launched an illegal one-day walkout of its members across the province. Schools were closed and thousands of teachers from across British Columbia attended rallies organized by the BCTF. The largest took place in Vancouver at the Pacific Coliseum where 12,000 teachers gathered together in protest of the government's actions. According to an internal memo, the goals of the walkout were:

- a) To provide members with an opportunity to protest a political action of government that attacks their democratic right to free collective bargaining, and
- b) As part of a long-term plan to mobilize public opinion in opposition to government action that will adversely affect quality public education.

The fact that the walkout was illegal and the protests so visible gave it added resonance as the BC Liberals had just recently won the provincial election in a landslide. Such a large public protest was the first time anyone in the province had stood up to the Liberals. This had the effect of drawing considerable public attention to the education issues the BCTF were advocating for as it became the biggest news media story in the province.

The key messaging that the BCTF was putting out towards the news media outlets during this time was that the legislation passed by the BC Liberals was going to have three consequences: fewer teachers, larger classes, and less support for students with special needs. They also explicitly positioned the BCTF as the defenders of public education in the province. For example, in an interview with the *Vancouver Sun* (BC's largest newspaper), BCTF President David Chudnovsky remarked, "We will not stand for the kind of attacks and sacrifices to public education that have been introduced this weekend" (Steffenhagen, 2002b, p. A1).

This sentiment was contrasted in the very same article by Premier Gordon Campbell, who countered while the union claims to care about protecting education, "really they are concerned about their own special interests" (Steffenhagen, 2002b, p. A1). Here we see Campbell using much the same terminology being used in the media and academia (e.g. Moe, 2011) when the actions of teacher unions are challenged. Campbell also decried what he described as the explicit political nature of the BCTF action, suggesting that the BCTF had not responded so aggressively when past NDP governments had imposed settlements on teachers. This aligned with newspaper portrayals of the BCTF at the time. With the NDP reduced to just two seats and no longer having official party status, the BCTF became widely viewed as "the principal opposition to the Liberals" (Willcocks, 2002, p. A14).

Premier Campbell turned out to be correct in his assessment of the situation. The BCTF decided to allocate \$5 million of its budget towards a long-term campaign to mobilize public opinion against the Campbell government. This funded two efforts: 1) mobilizing locals across the province; and 2) an extensive advertising campaign against the Campbell government. The goal was to bring about the defeat of the BC Liberals in the 2005 election.

Media Strategies (1)

As part of this effort, the BCTF organized a rapid response “letter to the editor” team where both active and retired members with good writing skills would write letters to print outlets across the province whenever a story about schools, teachers, or the BCTF was published. An example of this occurred in 2005 when the *Vancouver Sun* published a front-page report stating that despite BCTF claims, class sizes had not significantly increased since the Liberals’ legislation had been implemented (Steffenhagen, 2005a). The article, based on a report by the BC Ministry of Education, stated that the average size of elementary school classes in the province increased by only 0.6 students between 2000-01 and 2004-05. The article then quoted the head of the BC School Trustees’ Association, who remarked that the BCTF complaints about increasing class sizes “are more about politics than reality” (Steffenhagen, 2005a, p. A1). In response to this article, a BCTF member wrote a letter to the editor emphatically refuting the claim:

Like most teachers at my school, I almost fell off my chair when I saw *The Sun's* headline informing me that class sizes have increased only slightly under the Campbell regime. How could I square this apparently confident statement with reality? Who are all those extra bodies in my classroom -- a mirage?...The Liberals insist on expressing class size limits by district averages rather than by a firm maximum. The result is that, if your 10-year-old gets shoved into a class of 35, that's okay -- as long as there's a smaller class somewhere in the same city. The issue of class size should be debated on the facts. My students have to walk sideways to squeeze their way through to their desks. The Liberals have cut services to school children and increased class size, dramatically so in many cases. (Truelove, 2005, p. A10)

At the time, Premier Campbell and Education Minister Christy Clark claimed that the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* would improve conditions in schools, and so included in the Act was a requirement for the collection of province-wide data on class size and composition. The BCTF decided to use this data to issue annual public report cards to the Campbell government detailing how learning conditions in schools were impacted by its legislation. As one BCTF staff member remarked,

We actually started to have numbers to put out and we had big advertising buys that used these numbers that talked about the number of schools that closed, that talked about the record number of oversized and overcrowded classrooms and the lack of support for children with special needs.

Much as the BCTF predicted, after the legislation was implemented thousands of classrooms across the province were larger than the class size and composition guidelines set by the Campbell government, a number that increased year over year. The BCTF broadcast this message of deteriorating learning conditions widely through large print and television advertising campaigns. One of the print ads read “2,500 fewer teachers. 113 schools closed. Our students. Your kids. Worth speaking out for.” The ad closed by stating that it was from “BC’s teachers” along with the BCTF’s web address. This worked to position the BCTF as both the voice of British Columbia’s teachers and the defenders of public education.

However, in 2004, when the BCTF tried to run this very same ad on transit buses, it was rejected by both the Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority and British Columbia Transit. Both transportation agencies argued that the advertisement violated their policies prohibiting political advertising. The BCTF challenged this decision in court, arguing that the refusal to run the ad violated its freedom of expression under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. In 2009,

the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in favour of the BCTF concluding that “the policies amount to a blanket exclusion of a highly valued form of expression in a public location that serves as an important place for public discourse” (Ling, 2009, A8).

Speaking Directly to Parents

This would not be the only time the BCTF would take to the courts to protect the right of itself and its members to speak out about educational policy issues. In 2002, in response to the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*, the BCTF sent materials, including a “Report to Parents,” to all schools summarizing the legislation and including cards with a section for teachers to fill out showing their class size before and after the legislation. Teachers were directed to post the materials in their schools and give the class size cards to parents during parent-teacher meetings. When 12 school boards prevented its teachers from posting these materials and discussing the issues with parents, the BCTF filed a grievance arguing that the school boards’ actions violated both the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *BC Labour Relations Code*. The editorial board of the *Vancouver Sun* came out forcefully on the side of the school boards, warning that because of the BCTF, “parents might learn more about the association's political views than about their children's scholastic performances during upcoming parent-teacher interviews” and that the union “is trying to turn meetings with parents into political debates” (“Parent-teacher talks should focus on the child”, 2004, p. A14). The case ultimately ended up before the BC Court of Appeal. In August of 2005, the Court of Appeal ruled in favour of the BCTF, concluding:

teachers cannot be ‘silent members of society’ in light of the importance of a ‘free and robust public discussion of public issues’ to democratic society. The School Boards cannot prevent teachers from expressing opinions just because they step

onto school grounds. School grounds are public property where political expression must be valued and given its place...it is difficult to see how discussion about class size and composition in relation to the needs of a particular child by an informed and articulate teacher could do anything but enhance confidence in the school system. (British Columbia Public School Employers' Association v. British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 2005)

The BCTF faced an almost identical situation in 2008 when they launched a similar campaign ahead of that year's school board elections which continued into the provincial election the following year. The union again produced materials regarding class sizes and on school closures that teachers posted in their schools. When teachers in one school district were directed by school board administration to remove the posters, the BCTF local filed a grievance which again ended up before the courts. Relying on the precedent set by the 2005 case (referred to as *Munroe*), in May of 2013, the BC Court of Appeal ruled in favour of the BCTF stating:

Canadian jurisprudence, including *Munroe*, stands for the principle that open communication and debate about public, political issues is a hallmark of the free and democratic society the Charter is designed to protect...The law supports the exercise by teachers of their right of free expression in schools. (British Columbia Teachers' Federation v. British Columbia Public School Employers' Association, 2013)

Engaging directly with parents was an explicit part of the BCTF strategy to influence public opinion. As part of its Public Education Advocacy Plan, the BCTF organized annual conferences for parents and parent groups (along with members and other grassroots organizations) around issues of mutual concern. The aim of these conferences was not just to

raise awareness of educational issues, but for participants to craft advocacy plans for use when they returned to their local communities. In addition to these efforts, the BCTF also invested heavily in building capacity for locals to engage with school Parent Advisory Councils (PACs), and more importantly from the BCTF's point of view, for individual teachers to engage directly with parents and the public. In a 2002 memo to its members, the BCTF wrote,

Teachers are the most credible source of information about schools and it is important that we inform parents and the public about the effects of the Liberal government actions on our students. We can inform parents through the parent advisory councils, school planning councils and during parent-teacher interviews. We can tell our stories by writing letters to newspapers, talking to service groups and contacting our MLAs.

Discourse of Division

Getting its members to take the lead in its public advocacy was always part of the BCTF's strategic planning. While messages from the union might be viewed skeptically by members of the public, the same message coming from a classroom teacher might be viewed as more authentic. As one BCTF leader put it,

We know consistently from all the polling that we do that the most credible voice on education issues isn't the BCTF. It's not the Minister of Education. It's not the provincial government or school board, it's the individual classroom teacher that every parent knows.

While this quote perhaps displays astute awareness of political realities, embedded in its words appears to be a tacit acceptance of the narrative that teachers are separate entities from

their union. Recall that the BCTF has made efforts to position itself as the official voice of teachers, as evidenced by the “BC’s teachers” byline on their advertising. By stating that teachers, not the BCTF, are the most trustworthy voice when it comes to education, it appears that union leaders acknowledge and accept the perception that there is a divide between the union and its members.

The division narrative held much currency among the newspapers during this prolonged conflict. In this framing, the conflict is between the BC Liberals and the BCTF, with teachers and everybody else caught in the middle. For example, in 2004, the *Vancouver Sun* published a front-page story about a teacher who was disciplined by her BCTF local for not joining an anti-government protest. The teacher is quoted as saying that a lot of teachers (which she estimates at 20%) are afraid to speak out against the BCTF’s “radical-left NDP politics” and that “They [the BCTF] want no teacher left in the district who doesn't either adhere to their particular personal beliefs or meekly submit and pretend they do” (Steffenhagen, 2004, p. A1). In 2005, a member of the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils wrote in the *Sun*, “Parents and teachers work hard to build positive relationships to benefit our students. We will not play Henny Penny to pacify the BCTF and to bring their politics directly into our classrooms.” (Abraham, 2005, p. A18). In a 2014 op-ed, a school board trustee of one district wrote of the prolonged conflict,

This battle carries on at the provincial level, with the combination of the BCTF and the provincial government holding students, parents and teachers hostage...These same teachers sympathize with the position boards are in...Right now, we are at the mercy of the BCTF and the provincial powers that be. (Palis, 2014, p. 1)

However, the union would counter this discourse during a two-week long strike in October of 2005, when reporters went to the picket lines to find teachers who disagreed with the strike action. One television reporter asked a young teacher whether the BCTF was forcing her to picket. The response of the teacher was, “I am the BCTF.” The phrase, which emphasizes the union as the democratic voice of its members and not an institution imposed upon teachers, quickly went viral. The BCTF had buttons, t-shirts and signs made for teachers emblazoned with the “I am the BCTF” slogan. “I am the BCTF” would become the rallying cry for British Columbia teachers during the decade and a half conflict.

At its 2002 Annual General Meeting, the BCTF voted to establish a Public Education Defence Fund. The stated purpose of the fund was: “to ensure adequate resources are available to effectively respond to the attack upon public education launched by government including reductions in education funding, deterioration of learning conditions in the schools, the removal of full bargaining rights for teachers” (BCTF, 2018, p. 73). In practice, the fund paid for “advertising and campaigning to ensure the public hears (and supports) teacher concerns” (Steffenhagen, 2009b). As such, this was yet another initiative by the BCTF to influence public opinion.

Resources for the Public Education Defence Fund have often come from other areas of the BCTF budget, including the money it has traditionally allocated for collective bargaining. For example, in 2008 the BCTF transferred \$3,000,000 from its Collective Bargaining Defence Fund to the Public Education Defence Fund. The Collective Bargaining Defence Fund is what pays costs related to strikes and lockouts (i.e. strike pay), as well as contract enforcement. This shift in priorities lead some BCTF members to question whether the union should be so focused

on attempting to shape public opinion, as opposed to its traditional functions. As one delegate to the 2009 BCTF AGM remarked, “We are a union, not a PR machine” (Steffenhagen, 2009b).

Another key aspect to the BCTF strategy was the adoption of what it called its Public Education Advocacy Plan – a five-year plan to strengthen the union and build public support for its vision of education in British Columbia. The BCTF strengthened its affiliations with other labour bodies by joining the BC Federation of Labour and the Canadian Labour Congress, in addition to increasing its support for the Canadian Teachers’ Federation. The BCTF would later call on the support of these partners in 2005 during a prolonged strike action.

Strengthening Locals

The Public Education Advocacy Plan also involved changing the orientation of the union towards building greater capacity at the local level. The union’s bargaining division was changed to the field services division, which was given more resources to strengthen public relations and political action in locals across the province. Locals were given public relations training which included “talking to parents, talking to the public, de-jargoning their arguments, how to stand in front of a camera, how to compress complicated nuanced education policy ideas into clear sound bites that you could use on the radio.”

The BCTF also pledged that any plan implemented by the union would be based on as much input and have as much support from teachers and locals across the province as possible. According to a BCTF leader,

We spent more resources on school-based meetings than we did in the previous 50 years combined. Talking to members, constantly talking to members, getting feedback, saying what our options were and what we hoped to achieve. The

members were always there to support our actions because they were making the decisions. (Dobbin, 2005, p. 5)

Engaging Communities (1)

The BCTF launched a province-wide consultation process in its drafting of a Charter for Public Education. This involved the creation of a panel chaired by an Anglican priest, and comprised of a former district superintendent, a special needs parent, an Indigenous leader, and a past president of the BCTF. The panel travelled to 42 communities across the province and heard thousands of people as well as reviewing over 600 written submissions. The Charter characterized public education as “a sacred trust” and committed the entire community to

prepare learners for a socially responsible life in a free and democratic society, to participate in a world which each generation will shape and build. We promise a public education system which provides learners with knowledge and wisdom, protects and nurtures their natural joy of learning, encourages them to become persons of character, strength and integrity, infuses them with hope and with spirit, and guides them to resolute and thoughtful action.

The Charter also stated that the public education system “guarantee each First Nations learner the right to an education respectful of their history, language and culture. Furthermore, it called on the government “to be responsible for fully funding all aspects of a quality education.” The BCTF viewed this process as both a way to energize and inspire its membership, as well as act as a major catalyst towards building public support for its vision of a strong public education system.

In May 2003, Education Minister Christy Clark introduced legislation to reduce the influence of the BCTF on the BC College of Teachers. Traditionally, the College of Teachers' governing council was made up of 15 members elected by teachers and five members appointed by the government. While the BCTF did not formally control the college, the teachers it endorsed usually ended up winning the 15 elected positions. Clark moved to dismiss the current council and replace it with a transitional council of 20 appointed members. Eventually the plan was to "rebalance" the College and move towards a council with eight elected positions, 11 appointments, and one person representing the deans of BC's faculties of education. The change was welcomed by the editorial board of the *Vancouver Sun*, which decried the BCTF's "significant amount of control over the college," remarked that the changes were "overdue and welcome," and that they would "enhance the efficiency and increase the public accountability of the BC College of Teachers and its members across the province" ("Changes to teaching act increase public's power," 2003, p. A16).

The move was viewed by the BCTF as a further attack on teachers. As BCTF President Neil Worboys remarked "Our profession will no longer be a democratically elected, self-regulating profession. It will be controlled by the minister. That's unheard of" (Steffenhagen, 2003a, p. B7). In response, the BCTF directed members to shun the new College and debated whether to direct teachers to withhold their college fees. Furthering the narrative of teachers being separate from their union, Clark remarked "This is a real clear example of where the union's interest and teachers' interest diverge" (Steffenhagen, 2003b, p. B4).

In June of 2003, after holding a vote, the BCTF directed its members to stop paying fees to the BC College of Teachers. This directive came with significant potential costs to any members that complied, as it meant they were technically no longer allowed to teach in BC

public schools. Indeed, in September of that year, the new College of Teachers sent a fax to all schools warning teachers that they risked being fired if they did not pay their annual membership fees. However, 89 per cent of teachers across the province voted to withhold their college fees and instead donate them to the newly created BC Teachers' Federation Democratic College Fund. Money in the Fund would be held in trust until teachers regained democratic control of the college. In response, the BC College of Teachers suspended all 24,000 teachers that refused to pay their fees, stating that they would lose their teaching certification (and thus their ability to teach) if their dues were not paid by the end of the calendar year. However, on December 31st, faced with the prospect of directing school boards to fire a majority of their teachers, Education Minister Christy Clark announced that the government would pay the \$2 million in dues owed to the college. Clark also announced that she would introduce a legislative amendment to restore democratic control of the College to teachers by increasing the number of elected seats on the 20-seat council from eight to 12 (Rud, 2003).

This was a significant victory for the BCTF on many levels. It was the first time the union directly confronted the BC Liberals and won a decisive political victory. But more importantly, the fact that almost 90 percent of its members were willing to stand with the union, despite the threat and risk of losing their jobs, signaled that its efforts at member engagement and outreach were paying dividends.

Engaging Communities (2)

The BCTF decided to build on this momentum by organizing a "Caravan Against the Cuts," comprised of five school buses that drove across British Columbia collecting evidence of the effects of the government's reductions to education funding. In each community, teachers, students, parents and other community members were encouraged to contribute their own

artefacts, documents and messages. The evidence accumulated from all over the province was unloaded on the steps of the provincial legislature in Victoria. The Caravan was designed to send a message to the government, build public opposition to the education funding cuts, as well as strengthen solidarity amongst BCTF members. BCTF President Neil Worboys remarked,

The role the Caravan played was to bring our members out of their classrooms and also involve parents. The materials collected were not just from teachers but from parents, students, and community members. When we started unloading it all in front of the legislature, it actually rattled the government but most importantly it boosted the solidarity of teachers amongst themselves. (Dobbin, 2005, p. 10)

Media Strategies (2)

By 2005, the primary goal of the BCTF became the defeat of the Liberal government in the May provincial elections. At the previous year's Annual General Meeting, the union allocated \$5 million towards this effort. The BCTF released a series of TV ads aimed at the Liberal government. The first, which aired during the Academy Awards, featured Premier Gordon Campbell winning the Oscar for "most devastating performance" in closing 113 schools and creating larger class sizes. Another featured six students talking about how the education cutbacks affected them. One talked about losing his special needs support, another talked about being in a class of 35, and a primary student talked about having to ride the bus after her neighbourhood school was closed.

In April, one month before the election, the BCTF released a report stating that close to 43,000 secondary school students were in overcrowded classes. Based on data acquired through

a Freedom-of-Information request, the BCTF calculated class sizes in high school English, science and social studies classes and compared them to what it considered to be a reasonable limit in order for effective teaching and learning to occur (30 for English and social studies, 26 for science). The release of the report garnered front page coverage in the *Vancouver Sun* where BCTF president Jinny Sims remarked, “It’s quite a shocking figure. In such large classes, it becomes practically impossible to give students the attention they need to succeed” (Steffenhagen, 2005b). By focusing maximum public attention on the effects of the Liberal funding cuts, the BCTF hoped to make education the defining issue of the election.

All these efforts did not go unnoticed by the BC Liberals, who in turn made the BCTF an election issue. The party’s election platform vowed that, if re-elected, the Liberals would “Legislate a ban on inappropriate partisan political activities in our public schools” and “Give the government the ability to directly communicate with all teachers in BC” (Palmer, 2005a, p. A3). The Liberals accused the BCTF of colluding with, and forcing teachers to campaign for, the opposition New Democrats, while turning schools into “political campaign offices” (Lee, 2005, p. A5). On the campaign trail, Premier Gordon Campbell warned voters against “electing an NDP government that will do the BCTF’s bidding” (Carmichael, 2005). Campbell also accused the NDP and BCTF of colluding on a “hidden agenda” (Ward, 2005, p. A1).

Despite all the BCTF’s efforts, the BC Liberals were re-elected, albeit with a significantly reduced majority. The Liberals went from 77 to 46 seats while the opposition NDP went from 2 to 33 seats. While this was not the outcome the BCTF had hoped for, the reduced support for the Liberals was taken as an indication that the union’s efforts at mobilizing public opinion against the party had produced tangible results. There was now a significant opposition presence in the provincial legislature (with status as the official opposition party) to hold the

government accountable for their actions. As the NDP and Opposition leader Carole James remarked, “It’s going to be a very different legislature” (Palmer, 2005b, p. A3). Thus, from the point of view of the BCTF (as put by one staff member), “There’s no question in our view that we had a significant impact. The Liberals still won the 2005 election, but it was more of a balanced House after that.”

However, with a majority government still in hand, the reality was that the BC Liberals still had the ability to pass any legislation they desired. And after specifically campaigning against each other, it did not appear that relations between the government and the union were on a conciliatory trajectory. Shortly after the election, the BCTF filed a lawsuit against Gordon Campbell, claiming that he had defamed its members by accusing teachers during the campaign of planning to strike after the election. After four years of battles, relations between the BCTF and the provincial government were characterized as being “at a record low” (Mason, 2005, S1).

This would make the upcoming round of collective bargaining particularly acrimonious. An internal poll by the BCTF of its members found that 98 per cent of teachers wanted learning conditions returned to their collective agreement, a higher proportion than wanted a salary increase (Steffenhagen, 2005c). However, the Liberals pledged that there would be absolutely no wage increases for teachers and that class sizes would not be part of any agreement (Cernetig, 2005). After school boards and the BCTF failed to reach an agreement under these conditions, on October 3rd the Campbell government introduced legislation to impose another two-year contract on teachers which provided no salary increases or improvement in working conditions. The BCTF responded to the legislation by holding a strike vote two days later, with the president publicly remarking, “Teachers cannot live any longer with having their working conditions unchanged, for year after year after year...It does absolutely nothing to address the learning

conditions of our students” (Mickleburgh, 2005, p. S1). 90.5% of teachers voted in favour of strike action.

Changing Minds

In 2005, after three years of a combination of advocacy, public relations, protests and strikes, the BCTF campaign to influence public opinion appeared to be working. As put in the *Vancouver Sun*, “After years of talking, they [the BCTF] have finally convinced almost everyone – including government – that something needs to be done about the challenges many face in teaching large classes with growing numbers of students who have special needs affecting learning and behaviour.” (Steffenhagen, 2005d, p. A4). The BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, the BC Principals and Vice-Principals Association, and the BC School Trustees Association, all groups who had originally welcomed the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* back in 2002, now publicly acknowledged that class sizes, class composition, and special-needs education were issues that needed urgent attention from the province. Even the government now publicly conceded that these were issues of concern as it announced an infusion of \$150 million into the education system to address class sizes, special needs, and for other school resources. The concerns of the “special interests” were now seen to be in the public interest.

Industrial Action (1)

Despite the government’s concessions, the BCTF leadership was determined to proceed with strike action until a new collective agreement was reached that restored learning conditions to 2002 levels. On October 7th 2005, all public schools in British Columbia were closed as teachers began an indefinite province-wide strike. Efforts years earlier at strengthening ties with

the broader labour movement came into play as the BC Federation of Labour announced that, in a show of solidarity, other unionized members working in the school system would not cross teachers' picket lines. Education Minister Shirley Bond responded by announcing the creation of an education round table where class sizes and special needs education would be discussed, remarking, "We understand that class sizes and situations for teachers are important. In fact, we are prepared to have that discussion. I invite the BC Teachers' Federation to join us at that table" (Steffenhagen & Cernetig, 2005, p. A1).

Yet the strike continued, even after it was declared illegal and the BC Supreme Court found the BCTF in contempt of a cease order by the Labour Relations Board. The Court put a 30-day freeze on the union's collective-bargaining fund and thus prohibited it from providing strike pay to its members. Many in the government and the news media thought this would demoralize teachers and force them back to work. But on the contrary, it appeared to only strengthen the resolve of the BCTF and its supporters. The Federation of Post-Secondary Educators visited picket lines and handed out \$50 food vouchers. The Canadian Teachers' Federation created a \$1 million Hardship Fund to assist BC teachers for whom a lack of income posed an imminent threat. Teacher unions across the country also contributed large sums to the BCTF.

Unions representing public sector workers in the capital of Victoria staged walkouts in support of the BCTF and joined teachers in a protest of 12,000 people in front of the BC legislature. There were even threats of a general strike from some public and private sector union leaders unless the government agreed to talks with the BCTF (Ward & Cernetig, 2005). Public opinion appeared to be on the side of teachers; a poll by Ipsos Reid (2005) found that a majority of BC residents supported teachers in the contract dispute while only about one-third

supported the provincial government. BCTF members reported feeling this support on the picket lines as parents and other community members came up to them bringing food, coffee and donuts, and donating money to the striking teachers. There was also a shift in news media coverage toward greater support for teachers. A prominent nightly news program did a 20-minute segment comparing teacher salaries over the past 10 years. “For the public, that news item was a turning point. We weren’t even keeping up to the cost of living” remarked Jinny Sims, the BCTF president at the time (Dobbin, 2005, p. 19).

On October 20th, the government brought in well-respected mediator Vince Ready to put an end to the strike. Originally given a mandate to look at fixing the collective bargaining process, he was given the additional task of determining what it would take to end the walkout by teachers. Ready ended up recommending that the government commit to spending \$40 million to improve teacher salaries along with another \$40 million for the BCTF’s long-term disability fund. He also recommended the government increase its payout to school boards for special needs students and class size reductions by a further \$20 million, and to amend the *School Act* to include class size limits for Grades 4 to 12 (in addition to the primary class size limits already in place). Finally, Ready stated that the government proposed round table to discuss educational issues should have increased teacher representation.

The government accepted all of Ready’s recommendations. The BCTF conditionally endorsed the agreement but said that its members would need to vote on whether to accept the deal and return to work. Despite strong opposition from some locals, 78% of teachers voted in favour of accepting the deal. Teachers returned to work on Monday, October 24th 2005. While it is hard to claim “victory” when over \$160 million in teachers’ salaries were lost and the BCTF was hit with an unprecedented \$500,000 fine, the media’s general perception was that the union

had prevailed in its campaign to win over public opinion. As put in an editorial by the *Vancouver Sun*, “they [the BCTF] have succeeded in raising public awareness about class size and assistance for children with special needs to the point where the negotiations required under Ready's recommended settlement will probably bear fruit” (“Teachers should seize this opportunity”, 2005, p. C6).

This turned out to be the case as in May 2006, through the Learning Roundtable on which the BCTF had double the representation of any other stakeholder group, the government added class size and composition provisions into the *BC School Act*. Two months later, the BCTF negotiated a collective agreement which brought a 16% salary increase for teachers over five years. The contract was ratified when 93.4% of teachers voted to accept it. The substantial salary increase was widely seen a direct result of the campaign teachers had waged over the previous years. “They [teachers] took a very brave stand and stood up for their rights and for the learning conditions of our students...this is a win for public education,” remarked BCTF president Jinny Sims (Hansen, 2006, p. B12).

Advertising Restrictions

However, the government appeared to realize the effectiveness of the BCTF's campaign. In May 2008 the province passed Bill 42, the *Election Amendment Act*, which restricted unions and other third-parties from political advertising in the three-month period before an election. The BCTF had spent heavily trying to defeat the Liberals in past elections and had budgeted over \$1.5 million for advertising during the upcoming 2009 election. Hence the legislation was plausibly seen as an attempt to neutralize the BCTF ahead of the upcoming election. “The government wants us not to be able to say what's happening in classrooms. That's the purpose of

this legislation -- to stop teachers' voices from getting out there,” remarked BCTF president Irene Lanzinger (Hall, 2008, p. A12).

In March 2009, the BCTF voted at its annual general meeting to withdraw from the Learning Roundtable as it felt that the government was not doing enough to address class size and composition issues. Government data showed that while class size had decreased over the last three years, over 3,000 classes in Grades 4-12 still had over the required limit of 30 students, and the number of classes with four or more special-needs students had increased (Steffenhagen, 2009a). The move to withdraw from the roundtable was also seen by some delegates as a way to send a powerful public message about the state of learning conditions in schools at time when the government had restricted the union’s ability to advertise leading up to the May election.

Avoiding a ‘Crisis’ Message

This is not to say that the BCTF did not advertise at all during this time. Within the spending restrictions, the BCTF launched a “When Will They Learn” campaign that focused on school closures, overcrowded classes and students with unmet special needs. However, the campaign featured a sad, negative portrayal of teachers and students that many people found off-putting. Reflecting on the campaign, a staff member remarked,

We always had to strike that balance between calling it as it is, standing up for the rights of the members, trying to make it better without driving this crisis message that our schools are failing, which the Fraser Institute [an influential conservative think tank based in Vancouver] likes to drive. So, there were times when we didn’t get that balance right... [in this campaign] the kids were looking sad and the slogan was ‘When will they learn.’ ‘When will government learn that they’re

hurting us, these cuts are hurting our kids'. And members did not like that campaign, the public didn't either...It was a numbers-based campaign, so it did actually help get the numbers into the public narrative. 12,000 oversized classes. But the sadness belied what teachers actually do in the classes...the members weren't very positive about that...They want us to be tough and hard on government and make positive change, but they still want to be proud of the work they do.

Apart from its effects on teacher morale, defending public education while avoiding "a crisis message" also has potential implications for the ongoing viability of BC public education itself. British Columbia has long had one of the highest proportions of private school enrolment in the country, a trend that increased during the BCTF's conflict with the Liberal government. Indeed, from 2001-02 to 2008-09, private school enrolments in British Columbia increased every year and grew as a proportion of overall school enrolment from 8.6% to 10.6% (Van Pelt, Clemens, Brown & Palacios, 2015).

The BCTF has claimed that increasing private school enrolment was a feature, not a bug, of the Liberals' education agenda. This was evidenced by the fact that the Liberals increased funding for private schools during their tenure. "They are wrecking our schools. They're closing our schools. They're firing teachers. They're cutting, cutting, cutting...We truly believe that was part of the Liberal strategy, they were driving to privatize," said a staff member. A BCTF publication further expanded the point: "The undermining of conditions in the classroom was seen by many as paving the way for privatization, when the public system would be so damaged that parents would turn to private alternatives for their children's education." (Dobbin, 2005, p. A6).

Despite the unpopularity of the “When Will They Learn” campaign, the BCTF’s advocacy and public relations efforts built up a significant constituency among the public that backed its education agenda. A month before the 2009 election, the opposition NDP released an election platform that pledged to fully restore bargaining rights for teachers if elected. Specifically, the platform vowed to restore the BCTF’s ability to collectively bargain class size and composition caps, with the party’s education critic expecting “broad support” for the move from the public (Steffenhagen, 2009c, p. A9). However, the union’s political activity would not yet lead to significant changes at the ballot box. The 2009 provincial election would see the return of Gordon Campbell and the Liberals to government, with the distribution of seats in the legislature virtually unchanged.

The BCTF would go on to file tens of thousands of grievances against school boards over class size and composition violations of the *School Act*. An arbitrator’s review of grievances from seven school districts found 21 classrooms where learning conditions may have been compromised due to class size and composition. School boards were ordered to compensate the teachers of these classes with paid days off, ranging from one to nine days. In response to the ruling, BCTF President Susan Lambert remarked, “This is a win for teachers, but it's more a win for students and the learning conditions in classrooms" (Keating, 2010).

The Return of Christy Clark

In 2011, former education minister Christy Clark returned to provincial politics and replaced Gordon Campbell as leader of the BC Liberals, thus becoming the new premier of British Columbia. Clark was arguably the progenitor of the now decade-long conflict between Liberals and teachers, as she was the education minister that introduced the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* and removed teachers’ ability to collectively bargain class size and

composition. In a testament to the effectiveness of the BCTF's strategy, as well as a portent of what was to come, a newspaper profile of premier-designate Clark framed her upcoming challenge managing the education file this way:

Clark, serving as education minister in her previous stint in government, took on the union on several issues. She did not emerge the victor, in the view of most independent observers of those exchanges. Today, seeking to turn the page on a contentious year and-a-half in the life of the BC Liberal government, she can't be welcoming the prospect of another go-round with the famously scrappy teachers' union. (Palmer, 2011, p. A5)

The early days of the Clark government offered hope to the BCTF's leaders, as she appointed George Abbott, a former teacher, as education minister. Abbot became the first education minister to attend the BCTF's annual general meeting since the Liberals had to come to power in 2001, and he received a standing ovation when he remarked to delegates "My door as a minister of education will always be open to Susan [BCTF President Susan Lambert] and it will always be open to you" [Steffenhagen, 2011a, p. A4].

The goodwill would be short lived, however. That September, teachers began another job action over salaries and the failure of the government to adequately address class size and composition issues. The BCTF committed to a "Year of Joyful Teaching," coined by BCTF President Susan Lambert, which meant that teachers, "were concentrating on teaching...and we weren't encumbered by doing any kind of supervision, meeting with administrators, official report cards, all the other minutiae that we do as teachers...So our focus became, again, just the students." In a *Vancouver Sun* article publicly outlining the rationale for the job action, Lambert stated,

Collective agreements were stripped of class size and student support provisions in 2002. Since then conditions for BC students, and especially students with special needs, have deteriorated to a point that teachers are not prepared to see continue. Teachers are determined to improve services so that each student in the public school has the support she or he needs. Restoring provisions for class size, provisions for teachers who support students with special needs, and for other learning specialists such as English-as-a-second-language teachers and teacher librarians is a priority for teachers in this round of bargaining. (Lambert, 2011, p. A15)

Policy Redux

In November 2011, the government broke off talks with the BCTF. In response to a court ruling that found the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* unconstitutional, in February 2012 the government introduced the *Education Improvement Act*, which repealed parts of the 2002 *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* and immediately reintroduced them in an almost identical fashion. The logic from the province appeared to be that unlike with the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*, it had engaged in talks with the BCTF prior to the passage of the *Education Improvement Act*. The legislation was also designed to end the “Year of Joyful Teaching” by suspending teachers’ ability to strike or engage in any job action for 6 months while both parties would undergo mediation. Any teacher engaging in a strike or job action after the bill became law would face fines of \$475 per day, while the BCTF would be fined \$1.3 million per day (Fowlie & Steffenhagen, 2012). In a testament to the BCTF’s continued advocacy, the *Education Improvement Act* would restore teachers’ ability to collectively bargain class size and composition, but not until 2013.

Industrial Action (2)

The BCTF stated that a delay of two years to regain their stripped collective bargaining rights was both unnecessary and unacceptable. In response to the legislation, but before it became law and with the approval of the BC Labour Relations Board, in March 2012 the BCTF engaged in a province-wide three-day strike. This round of walkouts did not engender the same level of public support as had been the case with previous strike actions. While recognizing the legitimacy of the BCTF's goals, commentary by academics and members of the news media concluded that the constant conflict between the union and the government had eroded confidence in the public education system while diverting more and more families into private schools (e.g., "A new approach to teacher talks," 2011; Steffenhagen, 2011b). An editorial in the *Vancouver Province* stated that while the BCTF and Liberals battled each other, "Once again, it's students and parents who are paying the price of their combined intransigence" ("New method needed for teacher talks," 2012). A reader responded to the *Province* editorial saying, "What idiots would send their kids to the political cesspool that is called 'public education' in BC if they could afford to send their kids to a [private] institution?" ("Back chat," 2012). The BC Federation of Independent School Associations stated that after the 2011 job action, enrolment in the federation's schools rose over 4%, with federation head Peter Froese commenting, "We saw the impact of job action, with the lack of report cards and lack of extra-curriculars" (O'Connor, 2013). Remarked a University of British Columbia professor, "why is confrontation the norm for education when other parties are able to settle their differences?" (Thompson, 2012).

The strike officially ended when the government passed the *Education Improvement Act* into law. No longer legally entitled to strike or engage in any job action, the BCTF instructed

teachers to stop doing extracurricular activities. BCTF leaders estimate that about 75% of teacher complied. Newspaper coverage at this time tended to focus on the minority of teachers who continued coaching, to again create a discourse of division within the union. An article in the *Victoria Times Colonist* reported “disillusioned teachers at all grade levels...uncomfortably, and, to some, distastefully stuck in the middle” of the BCTF-Liberal conflict (Johnson, 2012). The discourse of division persisted despite the fact that 87% of BC teachers had voted in favour of the most recent strike action. While the withdrawal of extra-curriculars appeared to put further pressure on the government, it was taking its toll on parents and teachers as well. Remarkd a BCTF leader, “My perception was the public was fatigued with all these job actions. Our members were also fatigued in terms of how long it went on.”

In June 2012, the BCTF reached a mediated settlement with the government that provided modest improvements to benefits but contained no changes to class size and composition rules. Many teachers were unsatisfied with the agreement, feeling that it did not address the issues they had spent years fighting for. Several local presidents recommended that their members vote to reject the deal. The president of the Greater Victoria Teachers’ Association said about the agreement,

It doesn't have anything on class size and composition, nothing on salary and preparation time...I'm concerned that we send the message that if the government wants to win, all it has to do is pass draconian legislation that terrifies people. If the response to that is, 'We're too afraid. We'll just accept a rollover,' how do you ever get ahead in terms of objectives like improving class size? (Kines, 2012).

In the end, teachers voted 75.3% in favour of accepting the settlement. But with a turnout rate of just 52%, it was clear that many teachers were not particularly happy with the deal (McCulloch, 2012).

The following year would bring both a provincial election and another round of bargaining with British Columbia's teachers. During the 2013 election, Premier Christy Clark campaigned on bringing peace to British Columbia schools by promising to negotiate an unprecedented 10-year agreement with the BCTF. In exchange for agreeing to a 10-year deal, Clark proposed restoring teachers' unfettered right to strike by removing teaching's essential services designation while tying salary increases to those of other public sector employees. The government would also create a \$100 million fund to deal with class size and other issues, while setting up a council on which teachers would have a say on how that money is spent.

However, this was immediately dismissed by the BCTF as it would involve giving up their ability to negotiate salaries. It would also entail relinquishing their right to negotiate class size and composition, a right which had just been restored to teachers under the *Education Improvement Act* for this round of bargaining. In a vote of its members, 96 per cent of teachers supported the BCTF's position of rejecting Clark's proposal (The Canadian Press, 2013a). The proposal was viewed by many as nothing more than a political tactic. "It was dismissed by the public, by the media, this is Clark grandstanding...nobody took that seriously," said a BCTF leader.

During this round of bargaining, the BCTF decided to take a different tack and keep details of the negotiations private. Due to public fatigue with over a decade of conflicts, the union felt that previous tactics, such as bargaining in the media, would no longer be effective. BCTF members would be informed of any developments by logging into secure portals to

receive updates. “It went pretty well for quite a while... Not much went to the media about our bargaining at all” according to the BCTF leader.

Industrial Action (3)

But the talks went on for months without much progress on wages, class size, or class composition. The private nature of the negotiations ended in March of 2014 when teachers voted 89 per cent in favour of initiating job action (“BC teachers support job action”, 2014). What began as a low-level job action that involved refusing to participate in student supervision or attend meetings, escalated in May into rotating strikes across the province. The goal was to project the appearance of province wide labour unrest while minimizing the actual impact on students and parents as each school would be closed for only one day. The BCTF felt this would give the union the best shot of winning over public opinion and pressuring the government to agree to its demands. The government responded by locking teachers out of school during lunch hours and deducting 10% of their pay. The thinking behind the Liberal strategy was that the combination of lost wages due to the rotating strikes, combined with the 10% pay cut would demoralize teachers and cause BCTF support among its members to wilt.

This was not the case. After three weeks of rotating one-day strikes and partial lockouts, teachers voted 86 per cent in favour of launching a full-scale, province-wide strike, which began on June 17th and continued into September (Keller, 2014). Part of the reason for proceeding with the walkout was the relatively high level of public support given to teachers. A poll from Angus Reid Global (2014) found that 41 per cent of British Columbians supported the BCTF compared to 34 per cent that supported the government. Among parents, the level of support for the union (49 per cent) was almost double that of the province (25 per cent). The poll also found that 62

per cent of the public thought that the government should restore previous requirements for class size and composition back into teachers' contracts.

Utilizing New Communication Technologies

A contributor to the high level of public support may have been new communications strategies utilized by the BCTF. Instead of relying solely on the news media to get their message out, the union began to utilize new technologies to speak directly to the public. One of these technologies was live streaming. President Jim Iker began holding regular press conferences from the BCTF building that would be live streamed over the Internet. This allowed teachers and the public to receive real-time messaging from the union that had not been spun or altered by the media. As one BCTF staff member remarked,

They didn't have to wait for a radio version of what Jim had said. They didn't have wait for the next day for print. They didn't have to wait until 6:00 p.m. to see the *Global News Hour*. They could watch Jim in his own words make his statement and then take the questions from the media. And we never pulled him out early. We just put Jim there and he would happily answer questions until the media ran out of questions. We never pulled him out early. We never had that adversarial approach and the members appreciated it. They got their news as it was happening and they felt informed.

The press conferences became so popular that would be watched online by between 30,000 to 40,000 people. TV networks also began broadcasting the live, uncut press conferences to their viewers. BCTF President Iker also made it a point to be very open with members of the

media. This helped make the BCTF more relatable as it showed them that the president was “an everyday person and an everyday teacher.” Said one staff member of Iker:

He took the time to get to know the reporters. He’d chat with them, he’d ask about their kids, he’d shake their hands, he’d high five them. He was very open. He also kind of had this folksy-ness where he would make hockey jokes before every news conference. He actually charmed the journalists.

It was not clear whether this influenced the nature of the news media coverage that the BCTF received. However, off the air, many of the newscasters and camera people indicated to Iker that he had their support.

Social Media

2014 also marked the first time that the BCTF engaged in a sustained social media campaign to try to influence public opinion. In 2012 the BCTF hired its first ever full-time social media coordinator. This was “a total game changer” as social media quickly became “an integral part of all Federation communications.” Twitter allowed the union to rapidly respond to events as they unfolded. It helped with media messaging as more of the traditional news media began turning to Twitter to source their news. Facebook allowed the BCTF to speak directly with parents as well as other members of the public and answer their questions. Both social media platforms also allowed the BCTF to engage much more directly with its members across the province. Teachers in British Columbia had traditionally been hesitant to speak publicly about education issues, for fear of reprisal. However, with the BCTF’s social media coordinator providing social media training to local presidents and members, large numbers of teachers

“came out of the shadows” and became engaged with their union and the public fight for the first time.

While the government had an estimated 200 people working in communications, the BCTF was able to put together a team of 100 members from across the province that worked with the social media coordinator to spread messages out into the online public sphere. The fact that they were members, not paid staff, made their impact that more powerful. “These are members, all members. That’s what’s critical for us is that our members were so active on social media. It was unreal,” said a BCTF leader. Members on the picket line would often respond to narratives from the news media or the government in ways that were sincere and often more creative than messaging that came out of the central BCTF office. As one teacher remarked on Twitter, “the bcgov had no idea of the creative forces they were unleashing when they cut back our hours” (Marchiori, 2014). An example was when one teacher responded to the narrative about the BCTF pitting the interests of teachers against those of parents by writing on Facebook:

Let’s start dispelling the myth that this is about parents vs. teachers, shall we?

Many teachers ARE parents and are in this fight as much for their own children’s future as anything else. Why would we vote 86% to strike without pay if we didn’t have cause to believe this is right? This is my pay. Her name is Sweet Pea and I want a better education system in place before she starts kindergarten.

Teachers: consider sharing this please. Teacher parents: please consider posting a picture of your own child/children with the caption “THIS is my strike pay ” and the date they will start/started/graduate from school. It’s the next side of the “human face” of this movement and no one else is going to get it out there but us.

Solidarity, sisters and brothers. And solidarity to our children, too. (“This Is My Strike Pay”, 2014)

He ended the post with an image of his daughter with the caption “THIS IS MY STRIKE PAY. KINDERGARTEN 2018.” The post and image went viral on social media and soon the hashtag “#thisismystrikepay” was trending throughout the province, with teachers posting heartfelt messages about their families and why they were taking to the picket lines. “It brought out a side of teachers. The kind of caring they had, why they were on strike,” said a BCTF staff member. “That really was a factor that wouldn’t have been in previous times because of social media.” In many ways, social media allowed rank-and-file members to take on a leading role in the public relations battle.

As the strike stretched on into the summer, the government announced that they would be giving parents \$40 a day to offset child care costs if schools were still closed in September. The subsidies would be paid from the cost savings of the strike. The BCTF framed it as a “a blatant and divisive attempt to prolong disruption in BC schools” (Kines & Bell, 2014, p. A1). While covering child care costs could in theory have the effect of reducing public pressure on the government to come to a settlement with teachers, ultimately the plan backfired on the Liberals. “Ninety per cent of parents have rejected the idea of \$40 a day,” said the president of the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils. “Our clear message is we want school back...and we want negotiations to go on behind closed doors” (Shaw, 2014, p. 19). As further testament to how poorly received the \$40/day idea was, several parent groups with thousands of followers organized on social media to donate the money they received to the BCTF.

When no agreement was reached by September, the BCTF proposed that teachers would return to the classroom if the government agreed to binding arbitration. When this was rejected

by the government, the newspapers appeared to turn on the Liberals. “The government understands, but will not admit, that if its behaviour toward teachers and public education is yet again examined through an independent arbitrator's lens, the government would stand a good chance of being publicly excoriated,” remarked one columnist (Johnson, 2014, p. A10). “It has become clear the dispute is no longer just about terms and conditions of work. Premier Christy Clark and her cabinet mean to beat down the BC Teachers' Federation, once and for all,” said an editorial in the *Victoria Times Colonist* (“Clark gunning to defeat BCTF”, 2014). Similar commentary was published in other outlets (e.g. Donnelly, 2014; Tyler, 2014).

The strike officially ended on September 18th, when over 86 per cent of teachers accepted a tentative agreement with the government that included a \$400 million fund to hire specialist teachers and \$105 million to settle class size and composition grievances. However, as with the previous agreement, many teachers remained unsatisfied. “I don't think it will make a significant difference in classrooms. The sense I got is that people were not happy with the agreement but didn't see an alternative” remarked an executive of the Greater Victoria Teachers’ Association (Petrescu & Bell, 2014). “I hope parents and the public don't confuse 86% yes vote with happy teachers. We're still pissed off and things still need to change #bced” tweeted one teacher (Feenstra, 2014). A return to the class size and composition provisions that existed before 2002 *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* remained elusive. For all the BCTF’s efforts over a decade to plead their case in the court of public opinion, it would be the judicial courts that would ultimately deliver their salvation.

Court Rulings

As part of its multi-pronged strategy to reverse the stripping of their collective bargaining rights, the BCTF decided very early in the conflict that, in addition to trying to mobilize public

opinion, it would concurrently launch a legal challenge against the BC Liberal government. On May 30th of 2002, four months after the passage of the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*, the BCTF filed a petition in the BC Supreme Court arguing that the Act violated the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, specifically teachers' right to freedom of association. But as the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU) had recently filed a similar suit against the Liberals, eventually the decision was made by the BCTF to put its legal challenge in abeyance pending the outcome of the HEU case (in which it acted as an intervener).

In 2007, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in favour of the HEU, finding that the *Charter's* freedom of association provision guarantees the right of employees to join together to negotiate with employers regarding workplace issues or terms of employment, effectively protecting the collective bargaining process. It argued that collective bargaining is "a fundamental aspect of Canadian society" and "a fundamental Canadian right." Furthermore, it found that the Liberals' health care legislation,

was quickly passed and there was no meaningful consultation with unions before it became law...It gave health care employers greater flexibility to organize their relations with their employees as they see fit, and in some cases, to do so in ways that would not have been permissible under existing collective agreements and without adhering to requirements of consultation and notice that would otherwise obtain. It invalidated important provisions of collective agreements then in force, and effectively precluded meaningful collective bargaining. (Health Services and Support – Facilities Subsector Bargaining Assn. v. British Columbia, 2007)

Buoyed by the HEU legal victory and seeing many similarities with their own case, the BCTF resurrected their own lawsuit. "Right after their victory, we started our own preparations

and we started getting ready to go back into court” said a BCTF leader. On November 15, 2010 the BCTF re-launched its legal challenge against the Liberal government in the BC Supreme Court. Building off the precedent set in the 2007 HEU ruling, the BCTF’s claim rested on whether the government violated teachers’ collective bargaining rights by engaging in bad faith bargaining and failing in their duty to adequately consult with teachers before making changes to their working conditions.

On April 13, 2011, Justice Susan Griffin of the BC Supreme Court ruled in favour of the BCTF, finding that the 2002 *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* unduly violated teachers’ *Charter* right to freedom of association. Citing the HEU case, Griffin stated:

The legislation was enacted without any prior consultation with the teachers’ union... The government consulted fully with BCPSEA [school boards] prior to passing the legislation, over at least a seven or eight-month period during the ongoing collective bargaining between BCPSEA and BCTF. Internal government documents indicate that at least some government officials expected that the teachers’ union would be very opposed to the legislation. The government has not offered any explanation as to why, if it could consult with BCPSEA, it could not also have consulted with BCTF about the intended legislation...By passing this legislation without so much as consulting with BCTF, the government did not preserve the essential underpinning of collective bargaining, namely, good faith negotiation and consultation. (*British Columbia Teachers’ Federation v. British Columbia*, 2011, paras. 8, 307, 365)

Recall that prior to the passage of the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*, school boards and administrators had previously complained about teachers’ collective

agreements acting like “handcuffs” and not providing enough “flexibility” to meet school needs. The BCTF had claimed all along that these tales of hardship were nothing more than myths designed to undermine the teachers’ collective agreements. Griffin agreed with the union, writing, “The evidence that the government relied on in the hearing before me, to support its assertion that class size limits were causing hardships to students and parents, was anecdotal hearsay” (para. 146). In a country with an independent judiciary, the courts are seen by many as impartial arbiters. Thus, Griffin’s ruling gave the BCTF added legitimacy in its fight with the government. The BCTF was now able to confidently say, “We were right all along and Christy Clark and Gordon Campbell were wrong.”

After Justice Griffin gave the government one year to remedy the situation, the Liberals engaged the BCTF in talks specifically about class size and composition. However, it quickly became clear that the government had no intention of repealing the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* and restoring teachers’ ability to collectively bargain these elements of their working conditions. Rather, the government’s position was that the court ruling simply required it to consult with the BCTF to resolve issues regarding large classes and special needs students, which it was doing by holding the talks.

However, as previously stated, in November 2011 the government broke off talks with the BCTF and in March 2012 it passed the *Education Improvement Act* which repealed the class size and composition provisions of the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* and immediately reintroduced them. The logic from the province appeared to be that unlike with the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*, it had engaged in talks with the BCTF prior to the passage of the *Education Improvement Act*. In addition, the new legislation required principals to consult with teachers on all classroom organization matters, including the placement of special

needs students (Steffenhagen, 2012). Furthermore, it would restore to teachers the ability to collectively bargain class size and composition, albeit not until the next round of bargaining.

By September 2013, the BCTF was back before Justice Susan Griffin and the BC Supreme Court, arguing that in defiance of the 2011 ruling, by passing the 2012 *Education Improvement Act* the government had engaged in a “sham repeal” of the 2002 *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* that was found to have violated teachers’ Charter rights (The Canadian Press, 2013b, p. A5). Furthermore, after gaining access by court order to cabinet documents, the BCTF argued that the government tried to provoke a full-scale strike in order to gain public support for its legislation.

In January 2014, Justice Griffin again ruled in favour of the BCTF, finding that the *Education Improvement Act* was “virtually identical” (British Columbia Teachers’ Federation v. British Columbia, 2014, para. 92) to the 2002 legislation found to be unconstitutional and was therefore itself unconstitutional. Griffin further agreed with the BCTF by finding that “the government was trying to provoke a strike so as to have public support for imposing legislation that might otherwise seem heavy-handed” (para. 548). As if to remove any doubt as to the implications of the ruling, the conclusion stated,

The outcome of this case means that teachers have once again had their right to collectively bargain over their working conditions restored. They have had certain language returned to their collective agreement retroactively. This does not guarantee that the language is clad in stone, as it can and likely will need to be the subject of ongoing collective bargaining. (para. 679)

In addition to retroactively restoring the class size and composition language that was removed from teachers' contracts in 2002, the court ordered the provincial government to pay the BCTF \$2 million in damages. BCTF President Jim Iker framed the ruling as a victory for democracy, stating, "It shows the government can't just break the law. They can't just violate the rights of working people through legislation" (Kines, 2014a, p. A1). Framing it also as a victory for students, Iker noted that there were students in grade 12 who were in kindergarten back in 2002 when the Liberals legislation was first brought into place lamenting "Their entire education – 12 full years – has been in an era of cutbacks, reduced services and underfunding" (Kines, 2014a, p. A1).

A second court ruling in favour of the BCTF, described in the *Victoria Times Colonist* as "one of the most severe findings a court has issued about government conduct in years" (Leyne, 2014, p. A8), added further credibility to the union's claims. Among teachers, it "gave people permission to really take on the government" in their ongoing public fight. Yet the government countered by stating that it would cost \$1 billion to restore teachers' 2002 contracts. It deemed this to be "completely unaffordable for taxpayers" (Kines, 2014b, p. A1) and therefore announced it would appeal the ruling to the BC Court of Appeal.

In a major setback for the BCTF, in April 2015 the Court of Appeal ruled 4-1 in favour of the government, arguing that "the legislation was constitutional. Between the consultations and the collective bargaining leading up to the legislation, teachers were afforded a meaningful process in which to advance their collective aspirations. Their freedom of association was respected" (*British Columbia Teachers' Federation v. British Columbia*, 2015, para. 6). Furthermore, the majority argued that matters of class size and composition were not just

elements of teachers' working conditions but also matters of education policy over which the government is held publicly accountable and therefore may legitimately exercise control.

For teachers, the one ray of hope in the Court of Appeal ruling was the dissenting opinion of Justice Ian Donald, a former labour lawyer and arbitrator. Donald argued that his colleagues had erred in substituting their own opinions of the facts for the findings of the trial judge who had the full benefit of hearing 29 days of evidence and submissions. With regards to the majority's concern over the government's ability to craft education policy, Donald wrote, "Granting broad protections to Charter rights is not incompatible with the government's obligations to compose and pursue policy goals" (*British Columbia Teachers' Federation v. British Columbia*, 2015, para. 294). As to whether teachers' collective bargaining rights were respected, Donald stated, "Of great concern is the notion that government can unilaterally delete provisions in a collective agreement, or temporarily prohibit collective bargaining, and 'cure' such unconstitutional behaviour through the notion of 'consultation'" (para. 298). He continued, "This case is the culmination of at least 13 years of systemic and institutionalized negation of the BCTF's right to associate collectively to achieve important workplace goals" (para. 313). Donald suggested that an appropriate remedy would be to reinstate class size and composition provisions back in to teachers' contracts going forward, as opposed to retroactively from 2002 as the trial judge had ordered.

Despite the dissenting opinion, the Court of Appeal ruling was a major setback for the BCTF. With such a large majority of the court ruling in favour of the government, it was declared a "decisive win" (Palmer, 2015, p. A19) for the Liberals, with many in the news media urging the BCTF to drop the issue (e.g. Johnson, 2015). There was also a sense of defeat among teachers. "For sure we were demoralized by that...some of our members were like, 'okay, how

many more millions do we want to spend fighting this case?” remarked a BCTF leader. “But we weren’t going to let it go.”

In July 2015 the BCTF appealed the Court of Appeal ruling to Canada’s highest court, the Supreme Court of Canada. In January of 2016, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case. BCTF President Jim Iker welcomed the news, remarking,

It's been 14 years since the original unconstitutional legislation that stripped our collective agreements, but BC teachers are still very committed to our efforts to win back those important working conditions for teachers, which are also our students' learning conditions. (Sherlock, 2015, p. A1).

The case was heard on November 10, 2016, with 15 other parties acting as intervenors, including the attorneys general of Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, as well as the Canadian Labour Congress and several labour associations. The decision was expected to take around six months. But in a rare move, the Supreme Court ruled on the case immediately from the bench, taking only 20 minutes to render its verdict. In a 7-2 decision delivered orally, Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin stated that the majority on the court agreed with the dissenting Court of Appeal opinion of Justice Donald, and therefore ruled in favour of the BCTF (British Columbia Teachers’ Federation v. British Columbia, 2016).

Following Justice Donald’s opinion, the Supreme Court ordered the BC government to restore the class size and composition provisions of teachers’ contracts on a go forward basis. It is hard to understate the magnitude of this victory for the BCTF. “It was a huge watershed moment, what we call a landmark victory” said a staff member. “We’re elated, this has been a long journey,” BCTF President Glen Hansman said at the time of the ruling (Sherlock & O’Neil,

2016). Finally, after close to 15 years of struggle, the union had been vindicated. Not only did the Supreme Court rule in favour of the BCTF, they restored the findings of fact from the original trial, which found that the government fabricated myths about teachers' collective agreements being too restrictive when really the motivation all along had been to gut the collective agreement in order to save money. Remarkd a BCTF leader, "It was justification for our members and for every president who had gone on for all these years saying this is going to make things worse."

As soon as they received the unexpected news, staff from the BCTF scrambled to get the word out. "We weren't prepared for that at all," one person remarked. On both Facebook and Twitter, they posted a picture of the current and past BCTF presidents on the steps of the Supreme Court of Canada along with the caption, "We won!" Then the media requests came flying in. "Boom! Glen's over at the Ottawa offices of CBC, CTV and Global doing all these interviews." The decision swayed any lingering anti-union sentiment in the media, which now called the BCTF's case "overwhelming" (Leyne, 2016, p. A8). Commentators instead turned to criticizing the government for engaging in bad faith bargaining (Palmer, 2016a) and wasting millions of taxpayer dollars fighting teachers all these years (e.g. Smyth, 2016). "It was a fight the provincial government should never have begun, and one it should have stopped years ago," said an editorial in the *Victoria Times Colonist* ("Move now on class-size fixes", 2016).

According to a BCTF leader:

Even the haters out there that weren't on our side on these issues, it was a big vindication of us in terms of them finally acknowledging, 'No, we were right, and the Liberal government was in the wrong.' They were doing this in a way to eliminate jobs. A whole generation of kids went through their entire K-12

experience without having those services in place and the government was to blame for that’.

All the positive news media coverage gave BCTF President Glen Hansman instant name recognition among members of the public. It led to Hansman being named in 2017 to *Vancouver Magazine*’s “Power 50,” a ranking of the 50 most influential people in British Columbia. Coming in at number 38, it was the first time a BCTF president had made the list. “It’s good that as an organization we got to the point that we have such credibility with the public that we would be recognized in that way”, said a BCTF leader.

The court decision settled the issue even among the Liberals, forcing their messaging to turn on a dime. When asked about the financial implications of the ruling, in remarks that days earlier would have sounded like they were coming from the BCTF, Premier Christy Clark said, “If it costs more money, that’s a good thing in lots of ways because it’s a good investment to put money into classrooms and our kids” (Shaw, 2016). Deputy Premier Rich Coleman conceded the Liberals had made a mistake in the way they had treated teachers (Palmer, 2016b). The public appeared to concur. A poll commissioned by the BCTF found that over 80 per cent of British Columbians wanted class size and composition rules restored, with over two-thirds wanting the changes immediately (Sherlock, 2016).

With an estimated annual price tag of \$300 million, the Clark government eventually agreed to restore all the previously stripped language back into teachers’ contracts. This would involve hiring more than 3,000 new teachers across the province. In March 2017, teachers voted 98.4 per cent to accept the government proposal, seeming to put an end to the conflict between the BCTF and Liberals for good.

Effects on the 2017 Election

But in just a few short months was the next provincial election. During the election campaign, teachers protested Clark wherever she went. After a period of Liberal rule which saw school closures, the province's longest teacher strike, and a decisive ruling in favour of the BCTF (and against the Liberals) from the nation's top court, the Liberal's education record became one of the top issues leading up to the May 2017 vote. Finance Minister Mike de Jong pledged that a Liberal government would commit an additional \$740 million to school funding over three years while stating that education was the most important service that the government provides (Sherlock, 2017). Unlike previous attempts to unseat the Liberals, the BCTF now had the backing of segments of the news media and public that had usually been dismissive or unreceptive to their campaigning efforts. And even though the Liberals had restored the class size and composition provisions to teachers' contracts, many felt that this was all too little too late. As one reader of the *Vancouver Sun* remarked,

If Christy Clark knew that class size and composition were critical to quality education, as she recently asserted, why did she wait until the Supreme Court of Canada obliged her to negotiate these conditions? How much taxpayer money did her government waste fighting BC teachers these past 14 years? (Hanson, 2016, p. E4)

On May 9th, 2017, the Liberals were held to less than half the seats of the provincial legislature, giving them a minority government. The results were widely seen as a rebuke of Clark and the way she and her party had treated teachers. A *Victoria Times Colonist* reader wrote of Clark:

She was the minister of education in 2002 when she started the process of starving public education in BC for funds to the point where we now spend the second lowest amount on our children's schooling of any province. Our schools and our children lost teachers, counsellors, special-needs assistants and "frills" such as music and arts instruction, and gained larger classes. Clark continued on this path when she became premier, spending millions of our precious tax dollars fighting a losing battle in the courts. All of us who are parents and grandparents surely will not forget the recent past, where our public schools were closed for five long weeks of the new school year and we were left scrambling for child care and, more importantly, our kids were deprived of their right to education. A well-funded public education system is indeed the key to our future. There is no better investment in terms of jobs, economic prosperity, personal fulfilment and quality of life. Clark never did get it and still doesn't. (Wood, 2017, p. A15)

A few weeks after the election, the opposition NDP and Green parties announced an accord to bring down the Liberals on a non-confidence vote in the legislature and form an NDP-led coalition government. There were many calls for Clark to resign, which she rebuffed. In June of 2017, the Liberals were toppled and an NDP government, supported by the Green party, was installed in its place. Christy Clark resigned her leadership of the Liberal party shortly afterwards.

Reflecting Back

While the BCTF eventually emerged victorious over the Liberals, it has not necessarily been a cause for celebration. The lengthy 15-year battle took its toll on the union, its members, and BC's public education system. In the wake of the Supreme Court of Canada ruling, the

province has faced a massive teacher shortage that it has been struggling to fill. There has also been questioning inside the union as to the actual effectiveness of the BCTF's strategy given that it took over a decade and a half to succeed. Specifically, there are some in the union who felt that had the union adopted a stronger stance early on, a lot of misery probably could have been avoided. Reflecting back on the conflict, one BCTF leader lamented,

I'm one of the people that thinks that in 2002 when this happened, we should have gone out and stayed out. Having to go through almost 15 years worth of court processes isn't a satisfactory process, not for members. The 3,500 people who were laid off or lost their jobs, many of them never came back to teaching in this province. Obviously, it's not great for them. All of our members new and old that continued to work in the system during that 15 years with worse working conditions than they had prior to the legislation, that's a long, long wait for them. But, most importantly, the children, youth and adult learners that came and went through the system. There was that one point where we were able to say, 'okay, a kid that was in kindergarten in 2002, they're now in grade 8, and they've gone through the first 9 years of their school career without the services' and then it got to the point where that same kid was going to be graduating if they made it that far. And then we passed that too. We were on to the next generation of kids. That's a long haul to go through without front line services being in the education system...had we taken direct action back in 2002 and stayed out then, perhaps we would have had a resolution a lot sooner. Who knows?

Summary

From 2002 to 2016 the British Columbia Teachers' Federation engaged in a "a long-term plan to mobilize public opinion in opposition" to the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*. The BCTF utilized a variety of media strategies to including TV ads and getting members to write letters to newspapers. Industrial action like strikes and other forms of job action were utilized to help keep the issues front and center in the public mind. However, most of its efforts were focused on engaging directly with members of the public. This included getting members to speak directly to parents during parent-teacher interviews and to post materials regarding class sizes in school hallways. It consisted of province-wide outreach efforts like the "Caravan Against the Cuts" and the drafting of a Charter of Public Education. The union also used new communication technologies like live streaming as well as social media to bypass the news media and get its message out directly to the public.

Through this sustained, multifaceted campaign, the BCTF was eventually able to convince a majority of the public of the deleterious effects of the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* and its almost identical replacement the *Education Improvement Act*. However, this did not ultimately lead to policy change. Attempts by the BCTF to influence public opinion did not produce the repeal of the legislation that it had been fighting against for almost 15 years. It was a series of court decisions that ultimately achieved this. That is why in 2017, to commemorate their 100th anniversary, the BCTF commissioned a mural that, in addition to elements like children learning and teachers protesting, contained a prominent depiction of a judge.

CHAPTER 6: ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' FEDERATION OF ONTARIO

This chapter begins with a history of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario from its predecessor organizations to the amalgamation and creation of the current organization under the Harris government of Ontario. It then describes the policy context for the case by discussing union-government relations under the McGuinty government and how those relations changed after the 2008 economic downturn. The rest of the chapter documents how ETFO attempted to influence public opinion against the Liberal government's *Putting Students First Act* between 2012 and 2016. This includes accounts of the union's strategies, government responses, as well as an account of how the episode was reported by the province's newspapers. As with the previous case, this chapter is presented chronologically to provide a fully contextualized account of the union's public relations strategies as they unfolded. Although this is an accurate account of the inception and utilization of those strategies, this makes it more difficult for those strategies to stand out. To help remedy this shortcoming, efforts were made to call attention to the union's strategies using headings as the strategies appear throughout the case.

Early History

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) is one of four teacher unions in that province. The others are the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), and the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO). ETFO was formed in 1998 by the merger of the Federation of Women Teachers' Association of Ontario (FWTAO) and the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation (OPSTF). Just as the FWTAO has been the elementary teacher organization for women in Ontario since 1918, the OPSTF had been the organization for men

since 1920 under the original name Ontario Public School Men's Teachers' Federation (OPSMTF) (Richter, 2006b). Many teachers at the time, especially in rural areas, negotiated individual salaries and were under the constant fear that they could at anytime lose their jobs to anyone willing to work for less. While women teachers were paid considerably less than their male counterparts, every teacher was working for near poverty level wages; thus, a major priority for both the FWTAO and OPSMTF was to attain higher salaries and greater job security for their members. While there were gains on both these fronts, they were always susceptible to reversal, especially during economic downturns. For example, during the depression of the 1930's, the Hamilton Board of Education fired 33 of its teachers and closed kindergartens (French, 1968). Between 1930 and 1936 teacher salaries across the province for men were cut by an average of 38 per cent while salaries for women were reduced by 55 per cent (Staton & Light, 1987).

In 1928, the federations began lobbying the government for a model teacher contract that would provide greater job protections and make employment terms for teachers consistent across the province. In 1931, the provincial government adopted the model contract and encouraged its use among school boards (Richter, 2006b). Through successful lobbying, the federations were further able to get the government to pass legislation requiring boards to give teachers reasons for their dismissal in writing, as well as the ability to challenge their dismissal in court. As part of this effort, the FWTAO hired a lawyer to assist members with their legal disputes. In the 1940s, during World War II, poverty level teacher salaries coupled with more lucrative pay in war industries led to a massive exodus of teachers from the profession. This created a severe teacher shortage to which the federal government responded by declaring teaching an essential service and requiring teachers to remain in the classroom (Richter, 2006b). However, the 1940s would also see the passage of the *Teaching Profession Act*, which made membership in teacher

federations mandatory and gave the federations the legal authority to represent teachers, protect their rights, and lobby school boards for increased salaries and improved working conditions (Richter, 2006b).

The passage of the *Teaching Profession Act* more than doubled the memberships of the FWTAO and OPSMTF, thus providing considerable resources for the unions to publicly advocate for teachers with the aim of raising the status of the profession (Gaskell, 1989; Hopkins, 1969). To address pay disparities between men and women, as well as urban and rural teachers, the federations pushed to establish salary schedules based on qualifications, years of experience, and additional responsibilities (Richter, 2007a). This worked to eliminate individual bargaining and undercutting, as well as pay disparities based on gender. From 1945 to 1955, average teacher salaries increased by 90 per cent for men and 130 per cent for women (Gaskell, 1989).

In the 1970s, in response to measures by the provincial government which increased class sizes and imposed curriculum changes without sufficient training or supports, teachers began to demand greater control over their working conditions. In 1973, 80,000 of Ontario's 105,000 teachers left their classrooms with 30,000 attending a rally at Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto before marching to the provincial legislature in Queen's Park (Richter, 2007a). In 1975, the passage of the *School Boards' and Teachers' Negotiations Act* gave Ontario teachers the statutory right to collectively bargain all terms of employment as well as the right to strike. In the 1980s, teachers in Toronto used the right to strike to get preparation time inserted in their collective agreements, a right that would be granted to almost all teachers across the province by the end of the decade (Richter, 2007b).

In 1990, the Bob Rae and the Ontario New Democratic Party were elected into office. While they initially pursued a course of increased government spending in order to fight off economic recession, rising unemployment and reduced tax revenues eventually produced a marked shift in the government's course (Gidney, 1999). In 1993 the Rae government imposed a "Social Contract," a series of cost cutting measures designed to reduce government spending and lower the provincial deficit. Education spending was slated to be reduced by \$520 million and teachers faced the prospect of layoffs and the imposition of up to 12 unpaid leave days. Through intensive government lobbying however, the teacher unions were able to achieve most of the staffing reductions through attrition while substantially reducing the number of unpaid days (Richter, 2007b).

Harris Government

In 1995, the Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris was elected into office on a platform to cut taxes, substantially reduce government spending, and eliminate the provincial deficit. Known as the "Common Sense Revolution," Harris asserted that the policies were not just about cutting spending, but about making the public sector more effective and efficient, promising the people of Ontario "better for less" (Gidney, 1999, p. 235). Harris appointed a total outsider to education as his education minister, John Snobelen, who was infamously a high school dropout who became a wealthy entrepreneur. Snobelen speculated about the need to "invent a crisis" (p. 236) in the education system as a means of pushing through rapid change.

To this end, the Harris government proclaimed that the educational bureaucracy had become too bloated while producing only mediocre results (Gidney, 1999). Under this justification, the Harris government reduced funding to schools by over 22 per cent. While

vowing to protect “classroom spending,” the cuts resulted in reduced special education and English as a Second Language services, curtailed music and physical education programs, closed school libraries, and increased class sizes (Richter, 2007b).

Harris also aimed to discredit Ontario’s teacher federations in the eyes of the public. The Harris government spent over \$4 million on advertising that negatively portrayed the province’s teachers and their federations. And Harris made it a point to continually refer to federation presidents as “union bosses” (Lennon, 2017, p. 3).

In response, the unions launched extensive advocacy campaigns to educate the public about the impact of the Harris cuts on students. Local union leaders lobbied members of provincial parliament and demonstrated outside their constituency offices. There were large public protests in Hamilton and Toronto in which hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in opposition to the Harris cuts. However, they were dismissed by the government as “special interest groups” who did not represent the views of the broader public (Richter, 2007b).

In the fall of 1997, the Harris government introduced the *Education Quality Improvement Act*, which removed administrators (i.e. principals, vice-principals, supervisory officers) from their unions. For administrators, this represented “a major change in their traditional affiliations and loyalties” (Gidney, 1999, p. 248). The Act also centralized considerable power in the hands of the province. Issues of concern to teachers, like preparation time, which had traditionally been the subject of negotiations between local school boards and teacher unions, were now the sole domain of the provincial government.

After discussions with the government failed to produce any amendments to the *Education Quality Improvement Act*, the unions launched a teacher walkout that closed schools

for 10 days. The walkout had the effect of raising public consciousness around the *Education Quality Improvement Act* and the issues for which the unions had been fighting. It helped to alter the news media discourse around the Harris education agenda and led to the emergence of parent groups that took up the fight against funding cuts (Richter, 2007b). In the end, the government made a series of amendments to the Act that lessened the depth and scope of the planned cuts to education.

Amalgamation – The Birth of ETFO

Since its inception, the founders of the OPSMTF wished to establish a single unified federation for elementary teachers. However, given the immense disparities in pay and job opportunities, it is easy to see why the FWTAO wished to maintain its independence and focus on addressing issues that were specific to women. In 1972, the OPSMTF membership voted to accept women into the union as voluntary members. In 1982 it dropped the word “Men” from its name and became the Ontario Public School Teachers’ Federation (OPSTF). After the FWATO continued to rebuff its offers for amalgamation, the OPSTF launched legal challenges arguing that the OTF by-law that assigned teachers to specific teacher unions on the basis of gender violated both the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Ontario Human Rights Code*. While the Charter challenge was dismissed, in April of 1994 a board of inquiry ruled that the OTF by-law violated the Ontario Human Rights Code. The ruling, along with the prospect of facing the Harris government, prompted the FWTAO to enter into negotiations with the OPSTF to create a new teacher federation. In 1998, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario was created (Richter, 2007b).

Early Public Relations Efforts

Delegates to ETFO's first annual general meeting voted unanimously to work to defeat the Harris government and to elect candidates that shared their vision of high-quality public education. During the 1999 provincial election campaign, ETFO attempted to raise the profile of education issues by launching an advertising blitz that included billboards, leaflets, radio ads and TV advertising (Richter, 2006a). Many locals released members to work on the campaigns of the opposition parties. But the Harris government was re-elected, albeit with a significantly reduced majority.

The following year the government introduced the *Education Accountability Act* which made extra-curricular activities mandatory for all teachers while denying teachers the ability to withdraw such activities while bargaining. In response, ETFO launched a public relations campaign to fight the legislation. Titled *No More Bullying*, the campaign included radio and newspapers ads and a special website that allowed members to fax their MPPs a letter of their opposition to the legislation. In response, the government launched a \$200,000 radio advertising campaign. One of the ads featured a woman telling listeners, "Unfortunately, once again, our kids are facing the threat of having these activities cancelled. We don't believe children should be used as bargaining chips by teachers' unions" (Mallan, 2000a, p. NE14).

ETFO received support from its teacher union allies across the country as the Canadian Teachers' Federation began taking out newspaper ads discouraging teachers from seeking jobs in Ontario. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation spent \$50,000 of its own advertising budget on similar ads (Mallan, 2000b, p. NE20). As part of a more direct public outreach effort, ETFO and the OSSTF partnered with the Peel District School Board to distribute 215,000 brochures to parents and members of the public urging them to fight the *Education Accountability Act* (Calleja, 2000).

The unions' campaign proved effective; on June 13 Education Minister Janet Ecker announced she would be amending the legislation and would not proclaim the part of the bill that dealt with extracurricular activities (Mallan, 2000c). Seeing the effectiveness of such strategies, delegates to the annual general meeting that summer voted to establish a permanent public relations fund to better engage with parents and the public, and support activities to reclaim the education agenda (Richter, 2006a).

McGuinty Liberals

The goal of Ontario's teacher unions during 2003 was to bring down the Progressive Conservative government in that year's provincial election, with one federation president declaring that it was her "number one priority" (Morrison, 2003, p. D1). ETFO released its *Fair Funding for Public Education* public relations campaign which centered around the messages "Restore funding. Restore programs. Restore democracy," as well as a plea to the public to "Help us help your kids" (Richter, 2006a, p. 26).

During the election campaign, ETFO worked closely with the opposition Liberals and New Democratic Party (NDP). Both parties had provided written pledges to reverse the parts of the Harris education reforms that were of greatest concern to the union. Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty made education a centrepiece of his campaign platform vowing to "bring peace, stability and respect to our public schools" (McGuinty, 2003, p. A15). McGuinty vowed, if elected, to substantially increase education funding and reduce class sizes, while working collaboratively with teachers.

On October 2nd, Dalton McGuinty's Liberals were elected into government with an overwhelming majority, while the Progressive Conservatives were reduced to less than half of

the seats they had previously held. After assuming office, McGuinty reiterated his pledge that as premier his number one priority was improving the province's publicly funded school system. This defeat of the Conservatives and the election of McGuinty brought a sense of relief to Ontario's teacher unions. As a local ETFO leader remarked,

We were extremely happy to have gotten rid of Mike Harris and the turmoil and the cuts that he had inflicted upon education. And then came along Dalton McGuinty, he wanted to be known as the education premier...it was easy for things to be good from where you came from with the PCs and Mike Harris.

There were reasons for union staff and leaders to be optimistic. In a sharp break with the Harris years, the McGuinty government, as promised, began to work with the teacher unions on various matters related to education policy. A long-time ETFO staff member recounted,

When Mike Harris was here, Queen's Park was closed to us. They did not want to hear us, talk to us, see us in the doorway. They wanted nothing to do with us. We could not get arrested at Queen's Park. There was a huge change when Dalton McGuinty was elected premier. All of a sudden we were working with them on Ministry work groups, on curriculum. They were seeking our advice. It was a very different relationship.

The Liberals committed over \$3.7 billion to increased education funding over the next four years which reduced class sizes and increased supports for students. The government partnered with ETFO around new curricular reforms and the development of Ontario's full-day kindergarten program. The partnership proved beneficial for both groups as the combination of investments and reforms, known as the Ontario "Student Success" strategy, resulted in

substantial increases in student achievement and graduation rates (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). On the strength of its track record in education, and in opposition to a Progressive Conservative plan to fund religious schools, the McGuinty Liberals were re-elected to a majority government in October 2007.

Economic Downturn

The collaborative relationship between the government and ETFO would change after the 2008 financial crisis. Ontario was hit hard, losing over 200,000 manufacturing jobs (many of them unionized) (Usalcas, 2010). Unemployment rates increased from 7.4 per cent in 2008 to 9.4 per cent in 2009 and tax revenues plummeted (Usalcas, 2010). Instead of being viewed as a benchmark for all workers to strive for, the public increasingly began to object to paying for the salary and benefits enjoyed by unionized workers. According to an ETFO publication, “This economic backdrop and the changing attitudes towards unions set the table for the Liberal government’s austerity agenda and attack on education sector collective agreements” (“It’s Elementary”, 2018, p. 6).

In 2011, Premier McGuinty appointed economist Don Drummond to chair a commission to investigate ways to reduce government spending. With respect to education, the 2012 Drummond Report recommended increasing class sizes and either cancelling or reforming the full-day kindergarten program. The report specifically recommended against imposing a wage freeze on teachers and other public sector workers because such wage restraints “damage labour relations and are often followed by wage catch-ups” (Drummond, Giroux, Pigott, & Stephenson, 2012, p. 52). However, the government rejected the report’s recommendations regarding class size and full-day kindergarten as it would reverse two of the Liberal’s signature education

reforms. Furthermore, it ignored the report's warning regarding the imposition of wage freezes and decided to chart a course of public sector wage restraint.

Media Strategies (1) and Member Engagement

In response to the Drummond Report, ETFO began to provide to the news media and its members its ideas on addressing the deficit through a series of factsheets titled "Austerity, unions and our future." One fact sheet pointed out the fact that both the Drummond Report and the Ontario government have focused exclusively on what the province was spending, as opposed to how much revenue it was generating. Under the headline "Ontario has a Revenue Problem, Not a Spending Problem," the factsheet quoted the Drummond Report's own admission that Ontario already had one of the lowest-cost provincial governments in Canada. It then pointed out that increased corporate tax cuts had been costing the province billions of dollars per year. Another fact sheet noted that the financial crisis was caused by speculative financial institutions, and thus cutting public sector jobs and salaries in response was both unfair and had the potential to damage the economy even further. Armed with these fact sheets, ETFO's members were urged to discuss the issues with friends and colleagues.

2012 Negotiations

In preparation for the next round of collective bargaining, in February of 2012 the government commenced its provincial discussion table (PDT), a set of voluntary discussions that Ontario's teacher unions had been participating in since 2004. The reason ETFO had chosen to participate in these voluntary discussions was because the Liberals had instituted many reforms (e.g. increasing preparation time for teachers) that the union felt was positive for both its members and the education system.

In 2004, Education Minister Gerrard Kennedy and his staff were at the discussion table right from the beginning until a deal was reached. In 2008, while not as present as her predecessor, Education Minister Kathleen Wynne and staff from the Ministry of Education were also significantly involved. But in 2012, the provincial discussion table was quite different. Instead of sitting across the table from Ministry of Education staff, ETFO was met by two corporate lawyers and a retired judge with no background in education who the government had appointed as their chief negotiators. According to union staff and leaders, it was clear from the outset that the intent of this meeting was not to have a discussion at all. Without any introductions, the judge began the meeting by stating that he was there on behalf of the government to tell the union what was going to happen, and that it was his job to get it done within the next month. Remarked an ETFO leader,

The table was stacked. The table wasn't a table of good will. This was very different from the voluntary central tables of the past where our groups, the government and us have come together to have a discussion to try to have informal negotiations. There was a give and take. This was a take it or leave it moment. We were told to take it or leave it.

Insulted, ETFO leaders responded by telling the judge that this was not a courtroom over which he was presiding, and that ETFO would not continue the voluntary discussions unless people with experience in education were involved and parameters were set for genuine negotiations. When no reforms occurred to the PDT, ETFO left the discussions and decided to return its attention to local bargaining, which was its legal right.

Government Framing (1)

Education Minister Laurel Broten would seize upon this to state to the public that ETFO was being obstinate. She claimed to the news media that the ETFO had “walked away” from negotiations after only an hour (e.g. Greenberg, 2012a; Rushowy, 2012). The message carried resonance in the public sphere as at the time the three other teacher unions (OSSTF, OECTA, and AEFO) were still engaging in talks with government representatives. This created a serious public relations problem for ETFO:

I think initially how the media and perhaps the public was perceiving it was we weren't playing ball, we weren't playing by the rules. We walked away from the table. Why wouldn't we just stay at that table and bargain?... the public was thinking 'What the hell is the teachers' union doing? Why aren't they at the table? They need to be talking. They need to be solving problems.'

It also created internal problems for ETFO; members started contacting the union questioning the decision to leave the talks. Managing external pressures from the news media and the public as well as internal pressure from members was “extremely difficult.” But ETFO's leaders were convinced that they needed to stay the course:

Our position was within that hour that we just knew that it was an absolute waste of time. It was so far from what should be happening at that table in a productive way. It was going nowhere. And it was voluntary... We knew that the position that we had taken, the principled position that we had taken based on what should be happening, based on past practice, and all that sort of stuff, that it was the right decision.

Social Media (1)

To combat the internal pressure, ETFO began using social media to directly connect with their members and assuage their concerns. This marked the beginning of deliberate social media use by the union to counter misinformation put out in the media. The communications department stressed to ETFO members that the provincial negotiations were completely voluntary and that the government was not negotiating in good faith. In the eyes of union staff, this led to a gradual change in member attitudes.

External pressure subsided within a few weeks for two reasons. First, Education Minister Broten threatened ETFO with the spectre of 10,000 layoffs if they did not accept a wage freeze. With statements like “I’m not willing to let that [the layoffs] happen. I’m surprised ETFO is.” (Ferguson, Talaga, & Rushowy, 2012, p. A1), the threat seemed to confirm ETFO’s claim that the government was trying to bully them instead of bargaining in good faith. The second event that altered public perception was when the OSSTF also abandoned the PDT. This further corroborated ETFO’s claim about bad faith bargaining on the part of the government, especially after a wage freeze proposal from the OSSTF was flatly rejected. As put in an article in the right-leaning *Toronto Sun*,

It was one thing for the provincial Liberal government to deal with one recalcitrant teachers' union, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), which walked away from provincially-held contract discussions in late February. But now it's got a fight with the province's public high school teachers on its hands too. The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) left provincial teacher talks Monday, claiming a counter-offer they made last week was rejected. Together, the two groups represent a majority of Ontario's teachers. (Macdonald, 2012a, p. 23)

Government Framing (2)

Despite representing a majority of Ontario's teachers, the government's narrative of union recalcitrance on the part of ETFO and OSSTF would gain significant currency in the public sphere when, in July of 2012, OECTA agreed to a contract that, according to the government, amounted to a 1.5 per cent pay cut for teachers while reducing their number of sick days by half and losing the privilege of banking any unused days. "This is a historic and transformational agreement...we remain willing to work with our other education partners at the provincial level," remarked Broten (Artuso, 2012a, p. 8). Furthermore, Broten stated that the terms of the agreement with OECTA would be used as the template for contracts with the other unions. When the terms were immediately panned by both OSSTF and ETFO, Broten continued to frame the unions in terms of obstinacy, stating she was "disappointed" by their reaction and was hopeful the unions would "do the right thing and return to discussions" (Greenberg, 2012b, p. A6).

Media Strategies (2)

ETFO attempted to counter the government narrative by framing its actions as an attack on teachers and Ontario's public education system that had the potential to undo the improvements made over the last decade. In a press conference, ETFO President Sam Hammond stated that the Liberals' approach was very similar to that of Mike Harris, while turning the government's own language against them:

This deal does not put students first. It's demoralizing for educators and leaves an uncertain future for younger teachers. It removes hundreds of millions of dollars from a public education system that is internationally renowned for its success.

Who really believes that you can take that kind of money out of education without jeopardizing the future of student success? (Rushowy & Benzie, 2012, p. A4)

The use of terms like “student success” was a deliberate use of language on the part of ETFO to frame the government’s actions as harming the very educational agenda on which much of their own political capital had been built. However, the use of the phrase “put students first” is one that would come back to haunt ETFO, especially after Broten threatened to impose contracts on teachers by legislation if the unions did not come to an agreement with the government before the start of the school year.

Within ETFO, the government’s move to negotiate a contract with OECTA that was then imposed on ETFO and the other unions was seen as a betrayal of the partnership between the union and the government that had existed for the past decade. In the eyes of ETFO leaders, it marked a move towards Harris-era tactics on the part of the government. Remarked a local leader:

They had this “divide and conquer” mentality. We’re going to try to separate the different affiliates like OECTA. It was like ETFO’s gotten too big, so we’re just going to try to put them on the back burner and get all these negotiations done maybe with the less militant, for lack of a better word, organizations and then we just end up picking up the leftovers.

It was also seen as an almost unforgivable blow to union solidarity with the Catholic teachers’ union. In August the AEFO agreed to a contract with the government that was nearly identical to the one signed by OECTA. With two of the four teacher unions now agreeing to the

province's demands, the recalcitrance narrative put out by the government with regards to ETFO became even more credible.

ETFO had anticipated this divide and conquer strategy on the part of the government, which is why after the first 2012 PDT, ETFO reached out to the leaders of the other teacher unions to attempt to present a united front. But the other union leaders were not interested.

Remarked one ETFO leader:

When push came to shove, as one of them [other union leaders] said, "we are going to look after our members," which I thought was disappointing because it was a much bigger picture in terms of what we were up against. Or in other words, it's not just about your members, it's not just about my members, it's about all of our members and about process and about Charter Rights.

In public, the Liberal government continued insisting that it would use its authority to legislate teacher contracts if the holdout unions did not agree to its demands. "Should we arrive at a point in time where we are unable to have those agreements in place, we will of course take the necessary measures in government to legislate that kind of an agreement" said Premier Dalton McGuinty on August 10th (Jenkins, 2012b). However, the Liberals' heavy-handed actions did receive blowback from some school boards that did not appreciate being dictated to by the government. "When we are told that it is one agreement only, take it or leave it, it is hard to do anything...How do you negotiate where there's no flexibility? I don't know where this goes from here" remarked one Ottawa school board trustee (Adam & Zilio, 2012, p. E1). "I am seen as a fiscal hawk on the board and I am all for protecting the public purse, but I don't understand the provincial government's tactics on this" said another (Adam & Zilio, 2012, p. E1). Premier

McGuinty responded to school board concerns with the remark, “I say to boards, ‘Don’t tell me it can’t be done’” (Adam & Zilio, 2012, p. E1).

Union Framing (1): Defending Charter Rights

At an address given at ETFO’s Annual General Meeting in the summer of 2012, President Sam Hammond framed the Liberals actions as an unprecedented attack, not just on teachers but on the entire public sector. “Never have we seen such an insidious assault of this magnitude. No government in Ontario, of any political stripe, has ever, ever made this kind of blunt force strike at the heart of any of its public sector workers,” he said (Talaga & Aulakh, 2012, p. A6). This marked the beginning of a turn towards framing the conflict in broader terms that ETFO believed would resonate with the public.

The evolution of ETFO’s messaging started in early June of 2012. When the union first began holding press conferences on this issue, they were met with pointed questions from the press about why this was important to the broader public. Reporters would continually ask, “Why should people care?” Given that the province had recently recovered from a recession and teachers were relatively well-paid compared to many other occupations, ETFO struggled to answer this question effectively which caused considerable soul searching within the organization. As one columnist put it, “I don’t think the average parent understands or much cares about teachers’ trampled bargaining rights, as good a case as they might have” (Macdonald, 2012b, p. 21). After much debate, the decision was made that summer to frame the conflict not as one over teacher entitlements, but as one over Charter rights. As one staff member recounted,

We made it about the idea that if a government feels it’s above the law and basically can take away your bargaining rights at the stroke of a pen, that’s a

problem for everybody...So the message got re-framed over that summer into it being about Charter Rights, it being about everybody's rights, and about teachers having to stand up for their rights, because as educators, they educate the next generation and if this is what they can do to this generation, we're telling governments that they can do this to future generations. It was really about getting the messaging right, and once we hit on that messaging, and once we started pumping that out there, that was really an important change for us as ETFO.

Protests (1) – Putting Students First Act

On August 27th of 2012, the Liberals introduced Bill 115, the *Putting Students First Act*, which gave the government the power to impose agreements on teachers and school boards while restricting teachers' ability to strike. The next day, ETFO took the lead in organizing a rally of over 15,000 union members in front of the Ontario legislature to protest the bill. However, on September 11th, the Liberals joined forces with the Progressive Conservative party to pass the *Putting Students First Act*, with Premier McGuinty stating that he was asking teachers to "hit the pause button" on salary increases (Artuso, 2012b).

Industrial Action (1)

Taking square aim at the premier, ETFO responded by saying their members would take a pause on extracurricular activities and would engage in "McGuinty Mondays", during which teachers would refrain from taking part in meetings and other administrative activities. Framing McGuinty's actions as a betrayal of his legacy, ETFO President Sam Hammond proclaimed, "There is no education premier" (Artuso & Jenkins, 2012, p. 10).

Media Strategies (3)

ETFO also released a television ad which replayed excerpts from McGuinty's speech at the 2011 ETFO annual meeting in which he stated, "We respect the bargaining process and the results of that process... We don't tear up collective agreements." These statements were then contrasted with news media headlines about McGuinty and the Liberals imposing contracts on teachers.

Newspaper coverage of the conflict, while conceding that teachers had justifiable reasons to be upset, tended to portray ETFO's actions as not being in the public interest. In particular, the cancelling of extracurricular activities was framed as teachers "taking their frustrations out on students" ("Dire times," 2012, p. A12). Teachers were accused of using students "as pawns" (Hassan, 2012, p. 21) and engaging in tactics that would do nothing but cause "undue harm to students" ("A blow to students," 2012, p. A12).

By all accounts, the cancelling of extracurriculars did come as a blow to many students across the province. In the week following the passage of the *Putting Students First Act*, student protests took place in several Greater Toronto Area schools. Students raised concerns about cancelled sports teams and lost opportunities for athletic scholarships, the inability of arts students to perform or showcase their work, and the loss of cherished social events such as the senior prom. "We agree with the teachers' right to strike, but we shouldn't be punished," stated one student protestor (Yuen & Artuso, 2012, p. 12). However, many other student protestors came out in support of teachers. "The teachers cancelled things to show the province a message, just like what we're doing here to send a message. It's a positive result" said one student (Yuen, 2012, p. 12). In Ottawa, over 250 students gathered outside of Premier Dalton McGuinty's

constituency office in protest over both the government's actions and the unions' response (Chen, 2012).

Within ETFO, the move to cancel extracurricular activities is not one that is ever taken lightly. "The one thing that the public never supports, no matter what the issue, is taking away extracurricular activities," remarked an ETFO leader. This is especially true in rural parts of the province. While the loss of sports teams, arts performance, clubs, and social events is a blow to any school, this effect is amplified in rural communities where student enrichment opportunities outside school can be sparse. However, the purpose of stopping extracurricular activities is to draw public attention to the issues and to place pressure on the government. And it appeared to accomplish this goal. Both Premier McGuinty and Education Minister Broten repeatedly faced news media questioning about the disruption in schools (e.g. Artuso, 2012c). And after weeks with no extracurriculars across the province, the head of the Ontario Public School Boards Association' stated:

We want the minister to recognize the issue that has been created by the enactment of Bill 115 and what it means to each board. We didn't create this and now we're the ones, again, facing the prospect of trying to resolve this. (Winsa, 2012, p. GT2)

Social Media (2) and Member Engagement (2)

During this time, ETFO encouraged members to take a prominent role in the battle against the Liberal government through social media. The use of this technology was a "game changer" for the union's public relations efforts. ETFO had members who had not been particularly active within the union in the past but had built large social media platforms with

thousands of followers. These tended to be very articulate, tech savvy teachers who had crafted an online presence through their creative use of technology in the classroom, innovative pedagogical skills, or through their opinion leadership on educational issues.

After the passage of Bill 115, ETFO connected with a number of these teachers to help coordinate messaging that could be disseminated through their social networks. In some cases, ETFO would initiate the contact with the member and provide suggested messaging. In other cases, it was a teacher who was upset over the government's actions that initiated the contact and asked ETFO for advice as to what they could do. "For some of us strategically we thought, 'This is the future. This is the way it's going to be'. And we can either get on board or our members are just going to do it anyway" said an ETFO staff member.

One particularly irate teacher contacted the union to ask whether she could create a Facebook page to discuss the issues with members of the public. The union responded, "You can do whatever you want, you're a free human being. Go ahead." The teacher frequently consulted ETFO staff members for advice on set up and messaging. The Facebook page, which was called "We Are the Front Lines in Education," explained the issues to parents and members of the public from the perspective of a regular teacher. Within a few weeks, it had over 6,000 followers.

This is when the idea of the "member-leader", the informal leader outside of the union structure, became prominent. "Introducing the teacher-activist was something very new," remarked an ETFO staff member. Many of these leaders positioned themselves as "the voice of teachers," which had the potential to crowd out the union's own framing of itself. The union could have faced an internal struggle regarding what to do about the emergence of this new cohort of de facto leaders, who often had more social media followers and thus more online

influence than the ETFO president. However, in the battle against the *Putting Students First Act*, ETFO felt it was “fighting for our lives” and could use any help it could get. The decision was made to support these member-leaders in any way possible. Remarkd an ETFO staff member:

They have a strength. Use that strength. We’re trying to reach the public directly.

These members are reaching members of the public. We know that teachers are held in higher esteem than union leaders. Why would we not use members who already have platforms and who are willing to use those platforms to get the message out. Why not work with them? So that was the idea at the time.

Due to their enhanced public credibility, ETFO would also encourage member-leaders to speak with the traditional news media when issues regarding the *Putting Students First Act* were being debated. For example, when contacted by TVO, Ontario’s public broadcaster, in addition to sending its president, ETFO provided a list of members to appear on an episode of the flagship news program *The Agenda*.

Media Strategies (4)

As the conflict continued, ETFO released a 30-second radio ad warning the public of the dire consequences the *Putting Students First Act*, not just for teachers, but for the future of the entire province. Reflecting ETFO’s public relations strategy, the ad eschewed mentioning teacher entitlements like pay or sick leave, and instead framed the government’s actions as a dangerous first step in undermining Ontario’s democratic norms. Titled “Stop Bill 115”, the radio ad petitioned listeners thus:

Have you read Bill 115? It’s really scary. The bill strips teachers of their democratic right to collective bargaining. It puts the government above the reach

of Ontario's Human Rights Code, Labour Relations Act, and the courts. Sounds like a dangerous precedent and a slippery slope for everyone. How can our children learn about fairness and democracy when their teachers face such an undemocratic law?

ETFO's messaging that the *Putting Students First Act* represented an unprecedented attack on worker's rights met with success in winning over members of the public. The lead organizer of a student rally in front of the Ontario legislature remarked, "We have nothing. No sports, no arts, no clubs. It's frustrating. But we're against Bill 115. We feel it's undemocratic and unconstitutional" (Flavelle, 2012). A reader of the *Ottawa Citizen* asked:

What kind of emergency, life-threatening event or wartime disaster are Ontarians facing that would justify the extraordinary measures in Bill 115? Are our teachers armed and dangerous, threatening extreme measures?...Sounds more like a war-measures bill than a fair and sincere effort to reach agreements with the teacher unions...Where are the safeguards against such undemocratic, unconstitutional and extreme measures? Scary. (Hill, 2012)

McGuinty Resigns

On October 15, 2012, Dalton McGuinty announced his resignation as premier and leader of the Liberal party. According to an *Ottawa Citizen's* front page story, while the Liberals had been under mounting criticism on several fronts, "perhaps most damaging to the Liberals has been the government's handling of Ontario's teachers" (Sibley, 2012, p. A1). ETFO saw McGuinty's resignation as just desserts for his betrayal of teachers, as well as a vindication of the union's public relations strategy. In an interview with the *Toronto Star* a few weeks later,

McGuinty regretted the heavy-handed tactics his government had taken towards Ontario's teacher unions:

I will admit it's regrettable...We came out of the gates probably pretty strong and, hindsight being 20/20, probably should have taken a bit more time to reach out, develop a level of understanding...If I had to do it over again I would have made more of an effort to reach out. (Benzie, 2012a, p. A14)

Media Strategies (5) and Union Framing (2)

Despite McGuinty's resignation, nothing had materially changed with respect to teachers' bargaining rights. Thus, the fight against the *Putting Students First Act* continued. In the *Toronto Star*, ETFO President Sam Hammond proclaimed:

This fight with the government's Bill 115 is about the loss of democratic rights. Not only does this bill strip teachers of the right to collectively bargain, it places this government above the reach of the Ontario Human Rights Code, Ontario Labour Relations Act, and the courts. That sets a dangerous precedent and is wrong by anyone's books. With Bill 115 and the proroguing of our legislature, Ontarians need to be concerned. We teach children to stand up for their principles. We believe standing up for democracy is at the top of the list. (Hammond, 2012a)

With a race about to begin for the leadership of the Liberal party (and thus the premiership of Ontario), attention also turned to influencing who would occupy the premier's office. Many within ETFO suspected that Education Minister Laurel Broten might run for the leadership, which they regarded as the worst possible outcome. This was a sentiment that was solidified after calls by ETFO President Sam Hammond to repeal the *Putting Students First Act*

were flatly rejected by Broten (Pearson, 2012). When McGuinty ordered any sitting minister who wished to run for the leadership to resign from cabinet, Broten ultimately decided to stay at the helm of the education portfolio.

However, the public unpopularity of the *Putting Students First Act*, due in part to ETFO's actions, did appear to influence other leadership contenders. Former education minister Gerrard Kennedy entered the leadership race, calling the *Putting Students First Act* a mistake, stating, "I do not need legislation to get a good arrangement for teachers, students, parents and the public. I wasn't at those tables, I didn't vote for those things" (Benzie, 2012b, p.A1). He vowed, if elected, to repeal the *Act* and negotiate new contracts with teachers. Similarly, Kathleen Wynne, who was part of the cabinet that approved the *Putting Students First Act*, began to immediately distance herself from the legislation once she entered the leadership race (Blizzard, 2012).

The untenable nature of expecting teacher unions and school boards to negotiate collective agreements under predetermined conditions opposed by both parties began to register in the media. As a columnist for the *Ottawa Citizen* remarked regarding the local negotiations in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board:

The union does not support Bill 115, the diabolically named Putting Students First Act. The school board does not support Bill 115. Yet the two sides, which do not support Bill 115, are sent merrily along to negotiate a contract – in good faith – that adheres to Bill 115. (Egan, 2012, p. D1)

Industrial Action (2) - Rotating Strikes

After months with no progress in negotiations, ETFO announced plans to commence one-day, rotating strikes beginning the first week of December. In the pages of the *Ottawa Citizen*,

ETFO President Sam Hammond explained the decision as an unpleasant but necessary stand that the union was forced to take in order to stand up for the democratic rights of its members and all Ontarians:

This week, public elementary teachers and education professionals are taking a stand in response to the Ontario education minister's wilful attempt to take away their rights through the imposition of Bill 115...The education sector's response to Bill 115 is not about a wage freeze or "pause" in salaries. ETFO members understand that we all have to do our part to help ease Ontario's deficit. This action is about the government's unprecedented interference in the right to collectively bargain, a legal right provided for all people under Ontario law...As difficult, inconvenient, and stressful as strike action is for parents, students, and educators, ETFO members have an obligation to challenge this legislation, both to protect their rights, and the rights of students who will follow them into the workforce. If educators don't stand up for democratic values in Ontario, then who will? And who might be next to lose their rights? (Hammond, 2012b, P. A15)

"Disrupting learning time for students is not in the best interest of students" responded Education Minister Laurel Broten (Rushowy & Ferguson, 2012, p. A1). News of the impending strikes was not treated kindly in the pages of Ontario's major newspapers. A *Toronto Star* story on the strike featured irate parents stating that the strike action would only serve to hurt them and their children (Ferguson & Benzie, 2012). An editorial in the *Toronto Sun* stated that ETFO was using children "as punching bags" and "cannon fodder" in its battle with the Liberals ("ETFO uses kids as cannon fodder", 2012). The editorial board of the left-leaning *Toronto Star* addressed ETFO directly, stating "it is unconscionable to involve young students in your fight,"

and that such strike action “diminishes public sympathy for your cause” (“Keep fights out of school”, 2012).

One-day rotating strikes began on December 10, 2012 in two rural school districts, Avon Maitland and Ontario North East District. It was the first lost school day due to labour conflict since the Liberals had taken office in 2003. When Premier McGuinty stated that ETFO had disrupted nine years of labour peace because the union wanted higher teacher salaries, ETFO President Sam Hammond, staying on the union’s message, responded, “Bill 115 threatens the very democratic values and institutions like public education that have built Ontario. How unfortunate that the premier of this province has today trivialized this most important fight against Bill 115 as a disagreement over pay” (Artuso, 2012d, p. 7).

Despite news media warnings to the contrary, ETFO’s strategy of striking for just one day in each district and providing 72 hours notice to parents appeared to accomplish its goals of sending a message to the government and keeping the issues top of mind in the public discourse, while maintaining high levels of public support. One week after the rotating strikes commenced, a poll was conducted by Forum Research (2012) that found half of Ontarians supported teachers in the current conflict, while only one third supported the government. Furthermore, the poll found that almost 60 per cent of the public agreed that the conflict was primarily about collective bargaining rights as opposed to wages. “The teachers have done a really great job of positioning this as a collective bargaining issue. The teachers are getting their message out” said Forum Research president Lorne Bozinoff (Benzie & Rushowy, 2012, p. A6). This provided clear vindication to those within ETFO who had crafted its public relations strategy. Remarkd an ETFO leader:

Our one-day rotating strikes, we had enormous support from the public and parents because of the way that we implemented those, and we didn't take everybody out from day one and keep them out, particularly at that time of the year for an extended period of time. A big part of that was making a statement both to the public and to the Liberal government and those running for the leadership: "We're not going away and this is just the beginning."

Rotating strikes continued into the 2012-2013 winter break. But before classes resumed in January of 2013, Education Minister Laurel Broten used her powers under Bill 115 to impose contracts on public elementary and high school teachers, stating, "I've been left with no other reasonable option but to exercise my authority under the Putting Students First Act to put in place fair and balanced local collective agreements across the province" (Artuso, 2013, p. 6). "This impasse was never about pay increases. It's about the democratic right of people in this province to collectively and freely bargain under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Canada*," responded ETFO President Sam Hammond (Artuso, 2013, p. 6).

In a move that was difficult to comprehend, Broten also announced that the Liberal government would repeal Bill 115. "Minister Broten will not erase the stain of Bill 115 simply by removing it after it is used," said ETFO President Sam Hammond (Artuso, 2013, p. 6). "It's not going to change anything – it still doesn't resolve any fundamental issues or concerns that both school boards and certain bargaining units would have," said the president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (Rushowy, 2013, p. A2). The newspapers agreed. "It makes no sense. Bill 115 is so awful, apparently, the government needs to repeal it. Wipe it off the books. But not before using that awful, awful law just this once!" remarked one columnist (Egan, 2013, p. D1). "It's as if the government expects that so long as the law is off the books, nobody

will remember how it was used,” stated an editorial in the *Ottawa Citizen* (“Broten’s wishful thinking”, 2013, p. A10).

Industrial Action (3)

By imposing contracts on teachers, Broten now made strike action illegal. However, it was unclear whether this prohibition applied to extracurricular activities, which teachers do voluntarily. “ETFO members should continue to push the pause button on voluntary activities. Given the actions of the government, members will continue to focus only on the direct instruction of students and ensure student safety,” stated a memo sent out to teachers across the province (Brown, 2013, p. A6). While it was unclear how many members would follow the directive, union leaders felt it was one of the only remaining options available to keep pressing the issue. Remarkd an ETFO staff member:

We came up with a second strategy, “okay, if you’re not going to allow us to go out on the streets, we are going to ask our members to voluntarily not do extracurricular activities, to continue their pause.” And so we sent something out and we asked our members to do that and that was definitely a strategy to keep the government off balance, to keep them upset...That gave the government some incentive to come back to the bargaining table, because otherwise what’s the incentive? You have to keep the pressure out there.

While the intention was to pressure the government, the continued suspension of extracurriculars may have started to erode the public support ETFO had enjoyed just one month earlier. A January poll commissioned by Ipsos Reid and Postmedia found that only 33 per cent of the public now supported the teacher unions while 28 per cent supported the government

(Yogaretnam, 2013). "It's very difficult to accomplish anything if you don't have public support, and I'm concerned that they're losing it because of the withdrawal of extracurricular activities" said Buzz Hargrove, former president of the Canadian Auto Workers union and one of the country's best-known labour leaders (Kane & Rushowy, 2013, p. GT1).

Protests (2) – Liberal Leadership Race

The main purpose of the extracurricular strategy was to influence the Liberal leadership race. "I think [stopping extracurriculars] were very effective at moving the needle in the direction we wanted it to go and getting the attention of the candidates who were running for the leadership of the Liberal Party at the time," said an ETFO leader. At a leadership debate at which over 200 teachers protested outside, frontrunner Kathleen Wynne stated she never wanted contracts imposed on teachers in the first place. Gerrard Kennedy said he would remove the imposed contracts and negotiate new ones (Babbage, 2013). "We need teachers on the inside, not on the outside like they are tonight. We need to rebuild that relationship," said former Minister of Children and Youth Services Eric Hoskins (Jenkins, 2013, p. 14). Outside of the Liberal leadership convention, tens of thousands of people, mostly teachers, protested. ETFO President Sam Hammond addressed the crowd, saying:

I hope the message being received by the Liberal leadership candidates inside is that we're not going away. You cannot just trample democratic rights in this province and think things will be back to normal when you repeal the bill that did that. (Jeffords, 2013, p. 5)

On January 26, Kathleen Wynne was selected as the new leader of the Liberal party and premier of Ontario. One of the first moves made by Wynne was to meet with Ontario's teacher

unions. “It was the first meeting I’ve had with government representatives in over a year that was positive. It was a pleasant change” said ETFO president Sam Hammond (Rushowy, 2013b, p. A6). As talks continued, OSSTF made the decision to resume extracurricular activities. But not ETFO, which took the position that while the tenor of talks with the government had been positive, nothing concrete had changed for its members. The 2012-2013 school year would end without extracurricular activities in Ontario’s public elementary schools.

Holding out appeared to eventually produce gains for ETFO members. On June 23, 2013, 91 per cent of ETFO members voted to accept a new contract with the provincial government that increased wages by two per cent and substantially improved the sick leave terms given to teachers. Extracurricular activities would return to schools in the fall. Given the circumstances, the agreement was viewed as a major coup for ETFO. Within the union, it was felt that the prolonged battle helped to undo some of the concessions agreed to by Ontario’s other teacher federations. Remarkd an ETFO leader:

They [the government] already had agreements with other unions. We spent a lot of time in that process getting rid of what we thought were really negative pieces on a go forward basis for our members. They had, for example, you could only get 60% of your salary around use of sick leave and we managed to bump that up to 90% minimal...we felt we had done the absolute best we could to mitigate what others had agreed to that we didn’t agree with, if that makes sense.

Courts

On October 10, 2012, ETFO along with OSSTF and two other unions representing school staff launched a court case against the provincial government, claiming that the *Putting Students*

First Act violated the freedom of association provisions of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

One of the main purposes of the court challenge was to further imprint ETFO's framing of the issue in the public consciousness. "That really solidified the stakes publicly," remarked an ETFO staff member. An ETFO leader said the court case allowed the union to emphatically say to the public:

You should be really worried in Ontario, that if they can do this to us, they can do it to you, and we don't want that to happen, and that's why we're filing this Charter challenge. This is not just about teachers. This is not just about our problem over here. This is about a much bigger picture in the future.

On the steps of the Ontario Superior Court of Justice, behind a billboard that read "CHARTER RIGHTS ARE FOR EVERYONE," ETFO President Sam Hammond remarked:

We want all Ontarians to understand that the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* exists to protect the rights of individuals, even when governments seek to override them. That is the strength and backbone of democracy in Canada. Ontarians, and indeed all Canadians, need to be assured that no government will be permitted to attempt to drastically undermine employee democratic rights without facing the strongest possible challenge...This is a right we will fight for all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. The Charter also guarantees the right not to be deprived of fundamental rights. It protects employees from being forced to work under terms and conditions which are coerced, dictated, or imposed by the state. Certainly Bill 115 violates these rights on many counts.

(ETFO, 2012, paras. 3, 5-7)

In arguments before Justice Thomas Lederer of the Ontario Superior Court, the unions cited the precedent set by the 2007 Hospital Employees' Union ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada. ETFO's written submission stated that "Bill 115 stripped away key benefits that were the product of collective bargaining over many years ... and eventually eliminated altogether the right to strike, which is an essential component of the 'freedom of association' guarantee" (Brown, 2015, p. GT1).

On April 20, 2016, Justice Lederer released his decision, finding that the *Putting Students First Act* "substantially interfered with meaningful collective bargaining" (OPSEU v. Ontario, 2016, para. 172). While the government claimed the legislation was necessary in order to achieve its goal of fiscal restraint, Justice Lederer noted, "It is telling that although all sectors were experiencing the same fiscal concerns, Ontario allowed for free negotiations and did not interfere with collective bargaining in any other sector" (para. 267). Using the opportunity to drive home the union's framing of the issue, ETFO President Sam Hammond remarked, "This is a total vindication of our pursuit of democratic rights on behalf of our members" ("Teachers' Union Wins Charter Challenge," 2016, p. A16).

The court victory did not generate much commentary in Ontario's major newspapers. Any reporting on the ruling itself was relegated to the back pages (e.g. Rushowy, Ferguson, & Benzie, 2016). This is likely explained by the fact that since the *Putting Students First Act* was originally enacted, the premier had resigned, the legislation had been repealed, a new premier and education minister had taken office, and the unions had negotiated new contracts. Thus, by 2016, there was not much that was immediately at stake pending the outcome of the case. For many in the news media and the public, the issue was long resolved.

When questioned by the newspapers about the ruling, both Premier Kathleen Wynne and Education Minister Liz Sandals distanced themselves from the *Putting Students First Act*, casting it as the actions of a previous government. “Those were the circumstances at the time and that's part of the public record. That's not news,” remarked Sandals (Jeffords, 2016, p. A22). However, ETFO still viewed the court case as important, if for nothing else than to set a precedent and deter future governments from engaging in similar tactics. “Without a legal challenge, the next time they can do the exact same thing,” remarked an ETFO leader.

Reflection

While relations between ETFO and new Wynne government were positive at first, the honeymoon soon ended. The fruitful relationship that had existed between the Liberals and teachers since 2003 appeared to be irreparably broken. “I think that relationship, because of Bill 115, because of what the Liberal government did, that it was never, ever going to be the same way that it was,” stated an ETFO leader. “We would never forget. Never forget what we had been through. We would never forget that they violated our Charter rights, turned their backs on us and our members.”

By the time of this study, it was unclear whether the climate in schools ever returned to its pre-Bill 115 state. “We still have some members who won't do extracurriculars because of what happened,” said an ETFO staff member. The conflict also appeared to strain relations between many ETFO locals and their respective school boards, making it difficult for both parties to work collaboratively. Remarked a local ETFO leader,

I had great relationships with previous Directors and then it just started. We couldn't solve anything now locally. It was like the board seemed to move away

from seeing us as, we can work together and solve problems and come up with solutions and compromises...I would say a large number of our locals are feeling that way. Boards are just saying “no” and so now we’re filing central grievances, we’re filing local grievances. The tension with the government has led to tensions locally.

In hindsight, some within ETFO wondered whether taking a harder line early in the conflict would have deterred the government from moving forward with the *Putting Students First Act*. But there was always the risk that more militant action would backfire and reduce the union’s public standing. Recounted an ETFO leader:

There’s always a piece of me that wonders whether we should have called the strike before that legislation hit, two days before, or whether we should have tried to shut down the province and bring more attention to it and put more pressure on the Liberals. I always wonder whether it would have given them pause in any way, or whether it would have just shifted the whole focus even more to us as the problem.

Summary

In its attempts to turn public opinion against the *Putting Students First Act*, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario utilized a variety of strategies. This included holding press conference, giving media interviews, issuing factsheets to counter government narratives, holding press conferences, as well creating ads that aired on television and radio. The union utilized a series of industrial actions like rotating strikes and refusing to participate in extracurricular activities which, along with protests, were intended to draw maximum attention

to their cause. During this period, ETFO also utilized social media to both engage with members and speak directly to members of the public.

The turning point came when ETFO leaders and staff made the decision to frame the conflict as one over government attempts to erode constitutional democratic rights. After this shift in strategy, it appeared ETFO was effective in influencing public opinion. Polls showed strong support for the teacher unions, with most Ontarians convinced that the fight over the *Putting Students First Act* was primarily about collective bargaining rights rather than teacher entitlements. And union efforts did lead to the repeal of the offending legislation and the negotiation of new contracts.

At the time this research was conducted, there was also the belief within ETFO that the conflict strengthened the union internally and helped it refine its public relations strategy. As a result, there was confidence that the union was well positioned to fight future battles on behalf of its members and public education. As a staff member put it,

I think this process did contribute to the broadening of their messaging both to members and the public...From a union point of view, we strengthened our support among our members. I think they were proud that their union was up front fighting for what they felt was important and in the public interest, not just theirs.

CHAPTER 7: CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Based on the two descriptive case studies presented in the preceding chapters, this chapter presents a cross-case analysis organized around the conceptual framework of Habermas' public sphere (1974) and validity claims (1984). Recall that the public sphere is the discursive space where citizens deliberate matters of civic importance and from which public opinion emerges. Once public opinion has been formed, citizens can then organize and influence the state through advocacy, activism, and participation in elections. Validity claims are the criteria through which speech acts are assessed in the public sphere, which include *clarity*, *truth*, *normative rightfulness*, and *sincerity*. *Clarity* reflects whether the argument is well-formed and intelligible. *Truth* is whether the proposition or explanation being asserted is factually correct. *Normative rightfulness* refers to commonly accepted norms. *Sincerity* is the degree to which the speaker is viewed as being forthright and honest. This chapter presents the seven significant findings of this study:

- Teacher unions had active public relations strategies
- However, most teacher union efforts were focused on influencing the public sphere by engaging directly with society
- Social media is becoming increasingly important in influencing public discourse
- Court challenges can enhance the *truth* of unions' arguments
- Intense political activity can lead to questioning of unions' *sincerity*
- The broader the framing, the greater the union's perceived *sincerity*

- The greater their influence over policy, the more *normative righteousness* can become a problem for unions

Teacher Unions Had Active Public Relations Strategies

Of the two unions, the BCTF had a more multifaceted approach to influencing the news media coverage that they received. Both BCTF and ETFO staff felt that the news media in their respective provinces tended to be receptive to government framing while taking an antagonistic stance towards their coverage of the unions. An ETFO staff member remarked that certain prominent voices in the news media (primarily from conservative outlets) regularly used the union as “a punching bag”. Many within the unions felt this had a lot to do with the ownership structure of the major news media outlets. Remarked a BCTF leader,

First of all, it’s a corporate media and it’s always going to be on the side of the corporate party, which is the BC Liberals, but more than that they vilified us.

“The teachers are trying to run the schools” and “they’ve taking over the schools, and the government should be in charge of the schools.” The media was all over us.

Industrial actions of any kind (e.g., walkouts, cancelling extracurriculars) were often portrayed in the newspapers as the teacher unions using students “as pawns.” In response to this negative tenor, the BCTF organized a rapid response “letter to the editor” team whereby active and retired members responded to stories published about schools, teachers, or the union. While some letter writers identified themselves as BCTF members, others chose to simply identify as teachers. Given the greater credibility enjoyed by teachers compared to the union, the latter identification strategy was likely more effective at influencing discourse in the public sphere.

The fact that teachers enjoy more credibility than that of their union is a tribute to the power of another common feature of the news media coverage of teacher unions – the “discourse of division.” Prominent during industrial actions and often disseminated by the government, the discourse of division is the idea that teachers are separate entities from their unions. This narrative portrays teachers not as active participants, but as innocent bystanders caught in the middle of conflicts between the government and their union.

During their respective conflicts, both the BCTF and ETFO conducted advertising campaigns through traditional media channels (i.e. newspapers, radio and television). In its advertising, the BCTF attempted to counter the discourse of division by framing itself as the official voice of teachers as evidenced by signing ads with the byline “BC’s teachers.” The discourse of division was dealt a further blow by the union’s “I am the BCTF” campaign, sparked by a remark made by a young teacher on the picket line. In contrast, ETFO did not appear to have engaged in any explicit strategies designed to counter this narrative.

The key strategy that proved effective for ETFO in terms of changing the nature of the news media coverage it received was when it made the decision to frame the conflict as one over democratic rights. “I think this Charter stuff made them realize the import of this fight, how important this fight was for democratic rights,” said an ETFO staff member. This was considered a major turning point for the union’s public relations efforts. With laser-like focus, ETFO President Sam Hammond stayed on message about the conflict being over democratic rights in news media interviews and press conferences. This framing was also reinforced through ETFO’s advertising, such as a radio ad which ended with “How can our children learn about fairness and democracy when their teachers face such an undemocratic law?” ETFO thus positioned itself not only as a defender of public education, but as a bulwark against the erosion

of democratic values. This broad framing worked towards building a greater perception of *sincerity* in the public sphere.

However, Most Teacher Union Efforts Were Focused on Influencing the Public Sphere by Engaging Directly with Society

The most surprising finding of this study was that while both teacher unions had traditional public relations strategies, most of their efforts focused on strategies designed to influence public discourse and opinion by engaging directly with elements of society. These efforts, while not traditionally considered part of public relations, contained a clear public relations intent. These strategies included industrial action, protests, advocacy and outreach, and member engagement.

Industrial action.

Probably the most traditional of the union strategies is that of going on strike or engaging in job action. In labour disputes, strikes are often a last resort attempt to place pressure on the employer due to the loss of production and service it entails. However, in the cases profiled in this study, both the BCTF and ETFO also used strikes and job actions to call public attention to the issues at hand. Whether it was the suspension of extracurricular activities or full-scale walkouts, industrial actions by both unions generated significant coverage in the media. Industrial action of this kind signalled to the public in the most dramatic way possible that something was not right in the education system, while drawing attention to the union's position on the issues.

When engaged in full-scale walkouts, both unions were cognizant of the fact that such strikes can result in lost public support as they cause major disruptions to the learning of students

and lives of parents. This is the reason both the BCTF and ETFO employed rotating strikes as part of their strategy. Each successive wave of the strike helped to generate a steady stream of media coverage as it involved a new area of the province. However, no area faced the prospect of closed schools for any substantial period. This helped to maximize the effect of “making a statement to both the public and government” as one ETFO leader put it, while minimizing the impact on any one set of students.

The exception was in 2005 when the BCTF engaged in a two-week province-wide strike. While the strike was ruled an illegal walkout according to the BC Labour Relations Board, the union felt they had significant public support as gauged by letters to the editor and callers to talk radio shows. A province-wide walkout was something that had been considered by ETFO but was eventually dropped in favour of rotating strikes. As an ETFO leader recounted, “People pulled me back and rightfully so. Those one-day strikes did an amazing job”.

Protests.

Both unions utilized protests to capture public attention. Immediately following the introduction of the *Putting Students First Act*, ETFO organized a large demonstration in front of the Ontario legislature with over 15,000 teachers and union members protesting the legislation. According to an ETFO leader, this main purpose of this mass demonstration was to “highlight the issues” to the public. After the resignation of Premier Dalton McGuinty, ETFO, along with the Ontario Federation of Labour, staged a rally of over 35,000 people outside the Liberal leadership convention. Again, this was done to “keep the issues on the table.” Within ETFO, it was believed that this mass demonstration had a significant impact on platforms of the leadership candidates.

Similarly, the BCTF utilized the strategy of the mass protest, albeit in conjunction with industrial action. In response to the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*, the union launched an illegal one-day walkout where teachers attended mass demonstrations across the province. The two largest took place in Victoria, where thousands marched to the provincial legislature, and in Vancouver, where 12,000 teachers gathered at a stadium in protest of the government's actions. According to internal documents, one of the main goals of the protests was to "mobilize public opinion in opposition to government action that will adversely affect quality public education." According to a BCTF leader, while the public "did not react negatively to our protest," the union was not successful at that time in communicating to the public the full implications that the government's actions would have on the education system.

Advocacy and outreach.

Likely due to the prolonged nature of the conflict in that province, the BCTF engaged in much more of a sustained strategy of advocacy and outreach in order to influence public opinion. The provincial union launched a Public Education Advocacy Plan and reorganized itself with the purpose of better communicating directly with the public. At the start of every school year it put out information on the impact that the *Public Flexibility and Choice Act* had on class sizes and special needs students. It encouraged and supported parent and school advocacy organizations across the province that opposed the provincial government's education agenda. To this end, the BCTF organized an annual conference for these parent groups and school advocacy groups in order to raise awareness of educational issues and craft advocacy plans that attendees could utilize in their local communities. However, the union was careful not to compromise the independence of these third-party groups that would erode the credibility of both the union and the groups themselves. "We tried to encourage them where we could. But you also have to be

careful not to be seen to, or in fact, be manipulating those groups. We do what we can to encourage them, but they're their own groups," remarked a BCTF leader.

The union also invested heavily in equipping locals to speak effectively to school parent advisory councils in their districts. Having teachers at the local level talk to parents was seen to give the union's messaging added credibility and thus enhance the validity claim dimension of *truth*. As put by a BCTF leader,

There's a connection there, and so when that person talks about what their classroom conditions are like, and that person talks about kids that are wait-listed to get assessed for an education designation or maybe they had that designation, but the support that they are supposed to have hasn't come through yet, the public accepts that, in a way that they might not from me speaking on the radio or at least not in the same way. So we invested heavily in building capacity in our locals in that regard and trying to boost our members' confidence in having those conversations.

Member engagement.

Both the BCTF and ETFO pursued strategies to get their members out in front of their battles with their respective governments. A staff member at ETFO called it "pushing our members out into the public." ETFO would find and recruit members with compelling stories (e.g., "a kindergarten teacher with 30 kids in the classroom who's trying to do her best and who's just trying to explain what this means to her") and provide them with media training and speaking points to incorporate into their message. Other members would simply be encouraged to engage the public sphere by a multitude of means including writing letters to the editor and

engaging the debate on social media. “I think if you’ve got a small minority of dedicated people who can reach out to the public, they can change enough of the public’s mind,” remarked an ETFO staff member. In the eyes of ETFO staff, it was easier to get regular members engaged in this conflict because it was not framed as being about teacher entitlements. A lot of teachers, particularly in small towns and rural areas where they are among the most highly compensated members of society, had been hesitant in the past to engage the public over issues like wages and benefits. However, in taking on the *Putting Students First Act*, “we were talking about bigger issues...this fight was about democracy” said an ETFO staff member.

The BCTF decided to take a more direct route in having teachers talk directly to the parents of their own students. The union provided members with cards designed to document the changes in class sizes and members were encouraged to discuss the issues with parents during parent-teacher interviews. This type of action did not seem to be within the realm of possibilities when it came to ETFO. When asked about the possibility of teachers talking directly to parents, one local leader remarked:

I think in many cases teachers are reluctant to bring that kind of thing into conversations with parents, unless they are political minded activist types. Most members that I worked with didn’t want to bring that into the class. They didn’t even feel comfortable having conversations around some of those aspects in their community. Like at the hockey rink, for example. They really felt uncomfortable doing that.

By contrast, with the BCTF, this type of strategy was viewed as so integral that when several school boards prevented teachers from engaging in such activity, the union filed grievances in both 2005 and 2008 that ended up before the courts (where it won both cases).

Social Media is Becoming Increasingly Important in Influencing Public Discourse

Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have increasingly become integral components of the public sphere (Tufekci & Freelon, 2013). Along with being placed to post pictures of children, videos of animals, and other lighthearted fare, social media platforms have also become arenas where serious political discussions take place. Citizens use social media to share news, express political opinions and organize offline political activity (Valenzuela, 2013). While social media use, especially among governments and the media, has now become ubiquitous, use among teacher unions was nascent during the periods covered by this study.

For most of the period of their conflict with the BC Liberals, the BCTF had little to no strategic social media presence. This changed in 2012 when the union hired its first ever full-time social media coordinator. “Everything is different from 2012. There’s almost two eras” stated a BCTF staff member. “There’s pre-2012 and then there’s 2012 onwards, because everything changed when we actually really invested time and money into social media.” The union used Twitter to connect with members across the province and respond in real time to events as they unfolded. Facebook was used to speak directly to and address the concerns of parents and members alike. The BCTF also used social media as a member engagement tool in responding to news media and government narratives about the union (e.g., “This Is My Strike Pay”). This brought many teachers “out of the shadows” and engaged in the public sphere in a way that had not previously been possible.

Similarly described as a “game changer,” ETFO encouraged its members to use social media to take on a leading role in its battle against the Ontario Liberals. Facebook pages were created by members to disseminate teacher narratives about the conflict over the *Putting Students*

First Act (e.g. “We Are the Front Lines in Education”). Members engaged journalists and government officials on Twitter whenever they felt misinformation was being disseminated.

The growth of social media use among society in general and teachers in particular has led to emergence of the “member-leader,” a term that refers to classroom teachers who, while not occupying a formal leadership position within the union, can speak credibly as “the voice of teachers.” This phenomenon was most prominent in the ETFO case.

The rise of member-leaders presents both immense opportunity and potential risks for teacher unions. Member-leaders can be an invaluable asset to a teacher union in terms of influencing public opinion. They can inject new energy and ideas into the union’s own public relations efforts. Messaging can be coordinated. The reach and effects can be amplified. But this depends on the willingness of both union leadership and individual members to work cooperatively and collaboratively with each other. A disgruntled or maverick member-leader, especially one that has achieved credibility as “the voice of teachers,” has the potential to undermine the union’s own messaging in the public sphere. Should these member-leaders be encouraged or silenced? Different unions operating in different contexts will likely come to different conclusions. As put by an ETFO staff member,

There is this kind of internal struggle that unions are facing where we have this informal leadership developing out there where we have ETFO members who have more Twitter followers than our President. So they are de facto leaders. What do you do with those de facto leaders? There’s differences of opinions as to how you handle that.

Court Challenges Can Enhance the *Truth* of Unions’ Arguments

A deliberate strategy of both unions, the filing of court challenges gave their claims added credibility. The judiciary is seen by many in the public sphere as neutral, dispassionate, impartial arbiters of the law. Filing a court challenge demonstrated to the public that both unions were serious and confident enough in their claims to hold them up to legal scrutiny. As an ETFO leader remarked, taking the government to court “really solidified the stakes publicly.” When the BCTF began winning its court cases, it was able to confidently claim “We were right all along.” The court rulings helped turn the tide of news media and public opinion in the union’s favour. When the BCTF won its case before the Supreme Court of Canada, a BCTF leader noted, “Even the haters out there that weren’t on our side on these issues, it was a big vindication of us in terms of them finally acknowledging ‘No, we were right.’”

Intense Political Activity Can Lead to Questioning of *Sincerity*

Of the two unions in this study, the BCTF had a more difficult time convincing the public of its stated motivations for fighting against the provincial government’s *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*. Part of this is due to the fact that other education stakeholder groups (i.e. school boards, administrators) initially supported the legislation. However, a large part of the skepticism can also be explained by the BCTF’s political history. The BCTF had long been politically active. Indeed, there was a commonly held belief in the province that the BCTF was primarily responsible for getting the NDP elected into government in the 1990s. However, in the wake of the 2001 British Columbia election, the BC Liberals held 77 seats, while the NDP were reduced to just two. Having publicly campaigned against the BC Liberals, and with the NDP no longer possessing official party status, the BCTF “widely became viewed as the official opposition party.” The Liberal government played its part in contributing to this view in its campaigning and public statements (e.g. when it warned about the perils of “electing an NDP

government that will do the BCTF's bidding"). Thus, the BCTF's actions in response to the BC Liberals' legislation was often viewed skeptically by the public. The claims that the union made about the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* and the impact it would have on the education system tended to be viewed by the news media and members of the public as similar in nature to the routine statements from opposition political parties that condemn any government legislation; the dire warnings that the BCTF made to the public were summarily dismissed for many years.

In comparison, ETFO had a less difficult time overcoming the initial skepticism regarding its motivations. By the time it commenced rotating strikes in December of 2012, the union had swayed public opinion in its favour. Evidence of this comes from a poll conducted one week into the strikes by Forum Research (2012), which found that close to 60 per cent of the public agreed that the conflict was about collective bargaining rights as opposed to wages. The credibility given to ETFO can also be explained by its own political history. As ETFO and the ruling Ontario Liberals had enjoyed a very close working relationship for much of the previous decade, although ETFO had long been engaged in political action, it was seen by the public as less of an automatic oppositional force to the government in power. Hence ETFO's statements that its opposition to the *Putting Students First Act* was motivated by a concern to protect public education were more readily accepted by the public.

The Broader the Framing, the Greater the Union's Perceived *Sincerity*

Another difference in public perception of *sincerity* had to do with framing. While the BCTF characterized the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* as an attack on public education, ETFO's framing was even broader. In their messaging, ETFO characterized the *Putting Students First Act* not just as an attack on public education, but on democracy itself.

Characterizing themselves as a bulwark against the erosion of democratic values thus positioned ETFO less like a “special interest” group and more like an important institutional counterweight to government power in the political ecosystem. The lesson to be drawn is that the wider the lens that teacher unions use to frame their actions, the less likely it will be that their motivations will be characterized as “selfish” and the more likely it will be that their arguments will be accepted in the public sphere.

The Greater Their influence over Policy, the More *Normative Rightfulness* Can Become a Problem for Unions

Normative rightfulness refers to the legitimacy of the speaker and the appropriateness of what is being said. For teacher unions, the criterion of *normative rightfulness* becomes especially salient as they adopt orientations beyond the traditional industrial model. While most citizens in the public sphere accept the legitimacy of teacher unions fighting to obtain better salaries, benefits, and working conditions for their members, seeking to influence broader educational policy is sometimes questioned.

While ETFO faced some skepticism in this regard, it was relatively small in comparison to the BCTF. As the only teacher union in Canada with the ability to bargain class size and composition, the legitimacy of the BCTF’s efforts to defend this collective agreement provision was called into question. For example, the BCTF’s legal challenge against the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* was framed by the newspapers as an attempt by unions and the courts to usurp the policymaking authority of elected officials (e.g. Bateman & Wudrick, 2016). Some of the BCTF’s strategies were also viewed by the public as outside the boundaries of acceptable labour relations tactics. When the BCTF instructed its members to post materials in their schools that spoke out against the legislation and to discuss the issue of class sizes in parent-teacher

interviews, the newspapers portrayed the union's actions as an inappropriate politicization of schools (e.g., "Parent-teacher talks should focus on the child", 2004).

Despite this criticism, polls taken during the prolonged conflict (e.g. Ipsos Reid, 2005) indicate that the BCTF's multifaced strategy managed to convince large segments of the public of the legitimacy of its fight. Particularly telling was the Angus Reid (2014) poll which found that 62 per cent of the public thought that the government should restore previous requirements for class size and composition back into teachers' contracts. This figure would grow to 80 per cent two years later (Sherlock, 2016).

Summary

Compared to the ETFO, the BCTF faced a more difficult time having its arguments accepted in the public sphere, such that it took a ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada to reverse the legislation it had been fighting against. We can explain this difficulty by analyzing the BCTF's public relations efforts through Habermas' (1984) validity claims framework. While the BCTF was able to craft *clear* messages that appeared *truthful*, ultimately the *normative rightfulness* and *sincerity* of their actions was called into question. *Normative rightfulness* posed a barrier due to both the unique aspect of their collective agreement that they were seeking to defend, as well as some of the tactics used in their conflict with the provincial government. The BCTF's *sincerity* was questioned due to its perception as a partisan political entity.

By contrast, ETFO had an easier time achieving its goals, as evidenced by the repeal of the *Putting Students First Act*, and the installation of a new premier and education minister. While, like the BCTF, ETFO crafted *clear* messages that appeared *truthful*, the *normative rightfulness* of its tactics and arguments, and the *sincerity* of its motivations were not barriers to

getting its messages accepted in the public sphere. This is largely due to its own political history as well as the framing it used to characterize its efforts.

The most surprising finding of this study is that, during the period covered in this study (2001 to 2016), while both teacher unions had traditional public relations strategies, most of their efforts were directed towards initiatives designed to influence public discourse and opinion by engaging society. It thus appears that in attempting to influence public opinion teacher unions do not just interact with the public sphere but seek to do so by way of engaging directly with the public. This poses a challenge to the conceptual framework of this study. The full implications of the study findings on both the conceptual framework and broader research literature will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

This chapter further discusses the findings of the study in relation to the conceptual framework and to the research literature on teacher unions. The first section examines how the findings of the study challenge the conceptual framework, specifically its assumption that teacher unions attempt to influence public opinion by engaging with the public sphere directly. Subsequent sections situate the study's findings in the broader literature on teacher unions including neoliberal education reforms, union-government relationships, as well as union discourse and framing.

Teacher Unions, the Public Sphere, and Public Opinion

The conceptual framework of this study centers around Habermas' (1974) conception of the public sphere. The public sphere is the social space that exists between society and the state, where citizens gather and discuss matters of civic importance. Validity claims represent Habermas' (1984) depiction of the criteria by which propositions, arguments, and other speech acts are evaluated in the public sphere.

The intent of the study was to examine how teacher unions attempt to influence public opinion. The assumption was that this was done primarily through a validity claim mediated interaction with the public sphere (see Figure 1). The study's findings indicate that this assumption was incorrect. For while both the BCTF and ETFO had explicit public relations strategies, most of their efforts were focused on influencing the public sphere and public opinion by engaging directly with society.

Many of these strategies were comprised of what might be considered traditional labour relations tactics, including industrial action and protests. However, both the teacher unions

utilized these strategies in non-traditional ways. Rather than being mechanisms to directly pressure the government, the BCTF and ETFO engaged in protests, job actions, and full-scale walkouts in order to capture the attention of society and direct it towards the educational policies they were fighting against.

The unions' strategies also included reaching out to targeted elements of civil society through supporting the advocacy work of parent and school advocacy organizations that could be recruited as allies in their fight against the provincial government's education agenda. This was taken a step further by having regular classroom teachers speak directly to the media, parent councils, and the parents of their own students (i.e., in parent-teacher interviews).

Thus, it appears that the teacher unions in this study created "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser, 1990), which is where "members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses" (p. 67). While attempts were made to influence discourses coming from the government and the news media, the teacher unions in this study put most of their effort towards engaging directly with elements of society to create new narratives that could be injected back into the public sphere.

While perhaps not apparent on the surface, the unions' strategies were meant to advance their propositions and arguments among elements of society towards the end goal of influencing the broader public discourse. Due to these similarities, it is likely that these indirect efforts were similarly mediated through the criteria of validity claims. Figure 2 provides a revised conceptual framework that more accurately captures how the teacher unions in this study worked to influence public opinion.

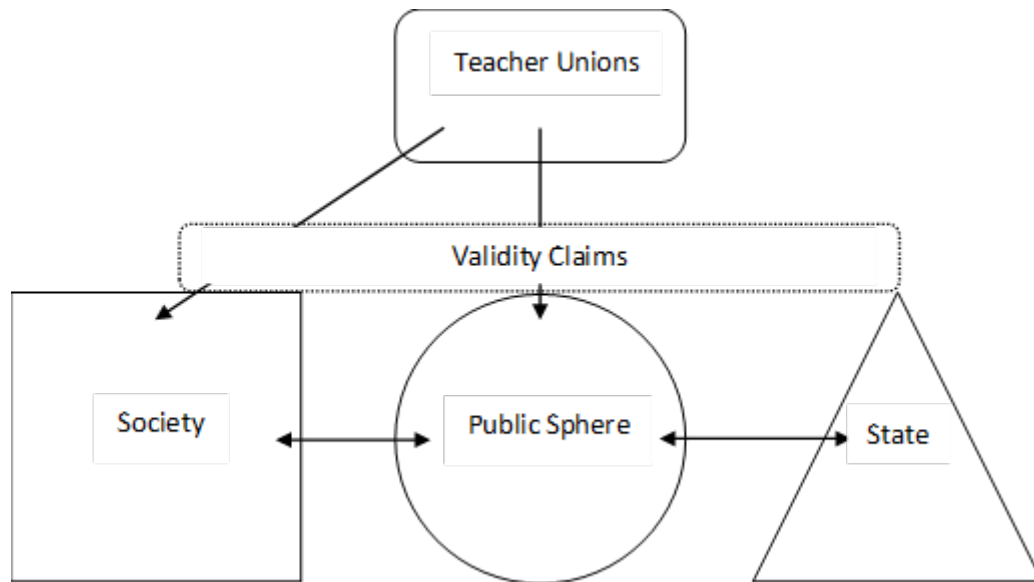


Figure 2. Revised Conceptual Framework

One contextual factor that helps to explain this finding is the antagonistic stance towards teacher unions by the mainstream news media. Both the BCTF and ETFO felt that the news media readily accepted government framing of the unions as self-interested entities that lacked concern for the broader public. An example is when the BC news media reported Premier Gordon Campbell's statement that the BCTF was only concerned about "their own special interests" (Steffenhagen, 2002b, p. A1). This is consistent with research that has examined government and media framing of teacher unions in other jurisdictions including Chile (Santa Cruz & Olmedo, 2012), New Zealand (Codd, 2005), and the United Kingdom (Exley, 2012). Given this "paralysis perspective" (Johnson, 2004), where teacher unions are portrayed as an obstacle to education reform, the unions in this study decided that if they were to be effective at shifting public discourse, they needed to engage directly with the public. This type of strategy is likely to become even more necessary in the future as the traditional news media continues to contract and the prominence of social media and other forms of "new media" grows.

Neoliberal Education Reforms

Both the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* in British Columbia and the *Putting Students First Act* in Ontario are best understood as part of a global trend of neoliberal education reforms where teacher unions tend to provide the most active opposition. It is education systems that often bear the brunt of austerity measures that are imposed in times of economic recession (Ball, 1990). It is also the case that governments often use economic constraints as justification to impose policies that would otherwise be unpopular with the public (Quiggin, 2006). Furthermore, an increasingly globalized economy has created a “regulatory race to the bottom” (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016, p. 21) whereby jurisdictions attempt to attract investment by cutting taxes and creating a more business-friendly environment.

All these trends appeared in the provinces profiled in this study. In Ontario, the provincial government cited the economic downturn caused by the 2008 financial crisis as the reason for imposing cost cutting measures on to teachers. In British Columbia, dramatic reductions in corporate and personal income tax rates (paid for by deep cuts to education) were instituted to make the province more economically competitive.

It was also apparent that both provincial governments attempted to weaken the collective power of the teacher unions, which is often an ancillary goal of neoliberal education reforms (Suleiman & Waterbury, 1990). In Ontario, the provincial government exhibited a “divide and conquer mentality” that attempted to play the different teacher unions off each other to undermine those unions that provided the strongest opposition. In British Columbia, between its declaration of education as an essential service which limited teachers’ right to strike and its removal of key components of teachers’ collective agreements, a commonly held perception was

that the provincial government's actions were not just intended to reduce education spending, but to break the BCTF entirely.

Of the two provincial governments, the BC Liberals appeared to possess the strongest ideological convictions behind their policies. Choice and competition in public services is a key component of neoliberal ideology (Fitz & Hafid, 2007) that guided the BC Liberals' education agenda. Liberal policy that allowed students to attend any public school in the province and to decentralize authority down towards local school boards bears significant resemblance to the neoliberal education reforms of Pinochet's Chile and Thatcher/Blair's United Kingdom (see Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016).

Union-government Relationships

Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo (2016) outline a spectrum of union-government relationships with the negotiation model on one end of the continuum and the confrontational model on the other end. The negotiation model is characterized by regular discussions between government and teacher unions that lead to the adoption of consensual reforms. By contrast, the confrontational model is characterized by a lack of dialogue and overt conflict. The confrontational model tends to persist when teacher unions are excluded from educational policymaking and education reforms are unilaterally imposed by governments. This has been the case in Australia (Connell, 2013), several Latin American countries (Gindin & Finger, 2013), as well as some Canadian provinces (Maroy & Vaillancourt, 2013; Poole, 2001). In line with the research in these other jurisdictions, this study provides evidence of this type of union-government dynamic in British Columbia and Ontario. This is most evident in the case of Ontario where ETFO went from having a negotiation model to a confrontational model with the

same government as that government turned towards a more dictatorial approach to educational policymaking.

Union Discourse

According to Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo (2016), “One of the most common demonization strategies by policymakers, academics, and the media against TUs [teacher unions] is the dissociation of unions from the teachers themselves” (p. 173). These strategies attempt to undermine the legitimacy of teacher unions by insinuating that they do not represent the majority of teachers and instead work to exploit teachers to advance their own political interests. As Poole (2007) writes, “Typically, teachers’ unions are viewed by neo-liberals as third parties, separate from teachers, interfering in the relationship between teachers and their employers. Often, teachers are characterized as victims who are simply being used by unions” (unnumbered).

This strategy, which I have termed the “discourse of division,” was used by government and the news media against the two teacher unions in this study. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that both unions appeared to tacitly accept the discourse of division. “The most credible voice on education issues isn’t the BCTF. It’s not the Minister of Education. It’s not the provincial government or school board, it’s the individual classroom teacher that every parent knows,” said a BCTF leader. “The only people who are trusted less than union leaders are used car salesmen... Whenever you do a public opinion poll, the average classroom teacher has the highest rating in terms of believability,” concurred an ETFO staff member.

An acceptance of the discourse of division explains why both unions pursued strategies to get their members out in front of their battles with their respective governments. While this may be an effective short-term strategy, teacher unions would be wise to engage in long-term efforts to narrow the gap in public perception between themselves and “regular” teachers. The BCTF’s “I am the BCTF” campaign was a good step in this direction. It is a necessary first step for teacher unions to be considered the rightful voice of teachers if they are to obtain public legitimacy as defenders of public education.

Union Framing

One of the findings of this study was that, compared to the BCTF, the broader framing utilized by ETFO increased the union’s perceived *sincerity* and thus its arguments were more readily accepted in the public sphere. This is consistent with Johnston’s (2014) research of teacher union resistance to charter schools in Washington and Kentucky. It also aligns with Poole’s (2001) research on teacher unions in Nova Scotia and Connecticut. In Poole’s study, the unions launched public relations campaigns in the 1990s that went beyond the economic concerns of teachers and instead focused on defending the institution of public education. This shift in focus proved successful in building public support for the unions’ efforts. In discussing the increased level of public support enjoyed by the Nova Scotia Teachers Union during their 1995 strike action compared to their 1994 strike action, Poole (2001) notes:

Significant issues in 1994 pertained to teachers’ economic welfare, and the public was nonsympathetic. In 1995, however, the issues included governance of the education system, equity in education, and union security. The public supported

the teachers' cause in 1995, participants believed, because the issues went beyond teachers' economic welfare. (p. 185)

In the face of global neoliberal reforms that have “generated a new common sense” (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016, p. 38) about how education systems should be organized, public relations campaigns by teacher unions that focus exclusively on teacher entitlements are no longer tenable. As teacher unions increasingly position themselves as the defenders of public education, they must clearly demonstrate to the public, through both their tactics and messaging, how what they are fighting for will produce a stronger public education system.

Summary

The findings of this study challenge both the original conceptual framework and the traditional understanding of the strategies that teacher unions employ in countering neoliberal education reforms. While industrial actions and protests are often conceived as being fundamentally distinct in nature from public relations strategies, the teacher unions in this study used both as methods of influencing public discourse and opinion.

The unions in this study fought to counter government legislation that is best understood as part of a wider global trend of neoliberal education reforms. These reforms seek to marginalize the influence of teacher unions while attempting to reduce spending and introduce market logic into the education system. Like their counterparts in other jurisdictions where union influence had been curtailed, the teacher unions in this study had confrontational relationships with their respective governments.

A common tactic used against unions by governments and the news media is what I have termed the “discourse of division,” which is a narrative that seeks to undermine the legitimacy of teacher unions by characterizing them as distinct entities from the teachers they represent. While the unions in this study appeared to tacitly accept this framing and craft strategies of member engagement in response, it is in the long-term interest of teacher unions to work to counter this discourse.

If teacher unions are to successfully position themselves in the public sphere as defenders of public education, they must orient their functioning around this image. This requires thinking through how the union’s tactics and arguments publicly demonstrate a concern that goes beyond teachers’ economic welfare towards protecting and strengthening public education.

An American example of how this can be done is provided by the St. Paul (Minnesota) Federation of Teachers (SPFT), which in 2014 adopted a new approach to collective bargaining that became known as “bargaining for the common good” (see Bascia & Stevenson, 2017). It began with SPFT president asking, “What if, before we even put together a bargaining team, we actually asked parents and the community what they want to see in our contract first” (Fought, 2015, p.18). An “open bargaining” process thus began with the union asking parents, students, teachers, and the broader community about what they wanted to see in their public schools. The result was a co-constructed document stating that St. Paul students deserved whole child education, authentic family engagement, smaller class sizes, more teaching and less testing, culturally relevant pedagogy, high-quality professional development for teachers, and better access to preschool. Heading into contract negotiations with the school district

armed with the document, this approach provided the SPFT with a mandate not just from teachers, but from the entire community. With the community engaged and ready to fight on their behalf, the SPFT was thus able to negotiate a range of issues that were not traditionally considered subject to collective bargaining including class size, standardized testing, and the hiring of school nurses and social workers.

Since its inception in St. Paul, bargaining for the common good has been successfully utilized by teacher unions in Los Angeles and Chicago (Will, 2019). This approach represents both an innovative process and a shift in philosophical orientation that teacher unions may want to consider adopting as they seek to demonstrate that far from being a “special interest” group, they represent the voice of the professionals that teach in schools and the concerns of the broader community that those schools serve.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

This chapter begins by reviewing the dissertation and its main findings. It presents the scholarly significance of the findings and explores the practical implications for teacher unions. It then proceeds with a discussion of the limitations of the study as well as opportunities for future research in this area. The chapter concludes with some final thoughts on teacher unions and public opinion.

Summary of the Thesis

The purpose of this study was to examine how teacher unions attempt to influence public opinion in order to explore an aspect of their behaviour that had not previously been studied. As teachers around the world increasingly contend with reforms that undermine public education and the teaching profession, their unions have increasingly taken to influencing public discourse as a counteractive measure. The stakes are high for both teacher unions and public education systems. As the example of the United States has shown, whether in the courts or through legislation mediated through the court of public opinion, teacher unions can be marginalized at any time. As global education privatization efforts increase, the concept of education as a public good is increasingly at risk. That is why teacher unions have increasingly taken on concerted efforts to influence public opinion about themselves and their visions of public education.

This study attempted to answer the following research question:

- How do Canadian teacher unions attempt to influence public opinion?

The study explored the public relations efforts of teacher unions by constructing case studies during periods of conflict (from 2001 to 2016) between the unions and provincial governments in two Canadian provinces: British Columbia and Ontario. The case studies were constructed

through a combination of in-depth interviews with union leaders and staff, document analysis, as well as an analysis of newspaper items that were published during the conflict period. The unions' efforts were analyzed through the framework of Habermas' public sphere (1974) and validity claims (1984). The unions in this study, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation and the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, employed a variety of traditional (e.g., industrial action) and emerging (e.g., social media) strategies to influence discourse and opinion in the public sphere. The main finding of the study was that while both unions had active public relations strategies that were meant to influence the news media coverage they received, most of their efforts were focused on influencing public opinion by engaging directly with members of society. While many of these strategies (e.g. industrial action, protests, advocacy) are not traditionally considered part of public relations, the unions in this study utilized them with a clear public relations intent.

Scholarly Significance

This research contributes to a more complete understanding of teacher unions by providing insight into a relatively new and growing aspect of teacher union activity. By examining their public relations strategies, it extends the literature on teacher unions into an area that had not previously been studied. This study also extends the application of Habermas' theory of validity claims and the public sphere to new contexts, specifically teacher unions attempting to influence public discourse and opinion. The key finding from this study was that most of the teacher unions' efforts were focused on influencing the public sphere and public opinion indirectly. This was done by engaging with elements of society to create new narratives that could be injected back into the dominant discourse. This study thus offers an appraisal of both the utility and limitations of Habermasian theory when applied to real-world cases of groups

attempting to influence the public sphere. Furthermore, in applying Habermas's theory of validity claims, this study offers future union researchers a way to better understand how the activities of teacher unions might be perceived or misperceived by the public.

Practical Significance

This study offers several insights for teacher unions. The concept of validity claims offers a useful framework that teacher unions can utilize in seeking to craft messages and strategies that are likely to be accepted in the public sphere. Arguments made by teacher unions must be clear, easy to understand, and free of educational jargon in order to meet the criteria of clarity. In order to pass the criteria of truth, those arguments should be based on facts that can be corroborated. The demands made by teacher unions and the tactics used to attain those demands must appear to be within acceptable societal norms and values for the criteria of normative rightfulness to be met. Regarding sincerity, if teacher unions are positioning themselves as the defenders of public education, the arguments and tactics used by teacher unions need to appear to be motivated by more than just teachers' economic concerns.

The cases in this study offer other insights that teacher unions might want to consider. The first is that the broader the framing that teacher unions utilize to characterize themselves and their actions, the greater public credibility and legitimacy they are likely to be granted. Second is that the relationship that teacher unions have with the government has the power to shape how their opposition to government policy is perceived in the public sphere. While being close with government carries its own potential perils, a union that is too oppositional to the government might be at risk of having their messages summarily dismissed by the public. Teacher unions also need to be thoughtful in determining how to address the discourse of division and the credibility gap that exists between themselves and "regular" teachers. If teacher unions are the

democratically elected representatives of teachers, there is little reason for this gap to exist.

While it may be expedient to take the credibility gap as a given and therefore focus energies on member engagement, there should also be a long-term focus on countering the discourse of division that is often propagated by governments and the news media.

Limitations & Future Research

This study, being qualitative in nature, did not produce findings that are generalizable. However, in qualitative research generalizability is not the purpose. Rather, as Yin (2014) states, “In qualitative research, researchers are not so much interested in how representative their participants are of the larger population. The concern is more about representativeness of concepts and looking for incidents that further develop them” (p. 183). This study examines teacher unions’ public relations efforts in two large Canadian provinces in two specific time periods. While a comparative case study allows for the investigation of phenomenon across multiple contexts, the findings may not apply to other contexts (Yin, 2014).

It is also worth noting that the conflict under investigation and resulting context in each of the provinces in this study are significantly different from each other. Thus, the findings from this study may not apply to the other Canadian provinces and territories, let alone teacher unions in other parts of the world. Future research could be conducted in other jurisdictions to see the similarities and differences in the strategies used by the teacher unions in this study. A major reason why British Columbia and Ontario were selected is because they contained teacher unions with enough resources to make it likely that they engaged in significant public relations efforts. Future research in this area could thus also examine what public relations strategies look like for teacher unions in smaller provinces or jurisdictions around the world.

It should also be said that because the case studies were time-bound around periods of conflict, they do not present an exhaustive history of the provinces included in this study. Hence, the findings of this study may not even be representative of these provinces during other time periods. Research could thus also examine the ways in which teacher unions attempt to influence public discourse and opinion in more peaceful time periods.

This study examined how teacher unions attempt to influence public opinion, without directly examining public opinion itself. While polls conducted in the provinces under investigation were helpful in assessing the effectiveness of teacher union strategies, a possible follow up study could poll public opinion about teacher unions across all 10 Canadian provinces. This would provide baseline information across the country as well as an opportunity for interprovincial comparison and analysis.

Final Thoughts

“Why should people care?” This is the question reporters continually asked the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario when the union attempted to raise alarms bells regarding the provincial government’s actions. It is a question that unions that represent teachers in publicly funded schools need to keep in sharp focus whenever they are engaged in a conflict with a school district, provincial/state or federal government.

As a teacher myself, I have a vested interest in a teaching profession where teachers are well-paid and are given wide latitude to exercise professional judgement in best meeting the needs of their students. It is also my desire to see teachers play a greater role in the shaping of educational policy, something that is often left to “experts” outside of the classroom. But none

of this is likely to happen unless the public has a high level of confidence in its teachers and are supportive of their unions.

It is important to note that some teachers take issue with this idea. An example of this came from the British Columbia case when a delegate at the 2009 BCTF AGM remarked “We are a union, not a PR machine”. Similarly, in response to a 2012 article I wrote for the *Toronto Star* regarding the public perception of teacher unions (Maharaj, 2012), a colleague of mine remarked, “Who cares what the public thinks? We don’t negotiate with the public. We negotiate with the government.” I believe this is a misunderstanding of the ecology of publicly funded education.

It is the public who sends their children to our schools, pays our salaries, and elects the policymakers that shape our working lives. And just as teacher unions are the voice of teachers, governments in democratic countries represent the collective will of the public. To my colleague’s point, it is possible in some circumstances for teacher unions to make gains by applying direct pressure to or perhaps having a close political relationship with a government in power. But if these gains, whether they be increased salaries or class size limits, are not supported by the broader public, they are inherently fragile and may prove ephemeral come the next election cycle. In their fights for anything from better pay to increased preparation time, it is crucial for teacher unions to continually answer the question “Why should people care?”

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APPENDIX A: RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT,
RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 34870

August 31, 2017

Dr. Nina Bascia
OISE/UT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT
EDUCATION
OISE/UT

Mr. Sachin Maharaj
OISE/UT: LEADERSHIP, HIGHER AND ADULT
EDUCATION
OISE/UT

Dear Dr. Bascia and Mr. Sachin Maharaj,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "Teacher unions in the public sphere: What are they fighting for?"

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: August 31, 2017

Expiry Date: August 30, 2018

Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB's delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of **one year** and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Research Oversight and Compliance Office - Human Research Ethics Program as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Ethics Renewal Form or a Study Completion/Closure Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that ethics renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Please note, all approved research studies are eligible for a routine Post-Approval Review (PAR) site visit. If chosen, you will receive a notification letter from our office. For information on PAR, please see <http://www.research.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/documents/2014/09/PAR-Program-Description-1.pdf>.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew Brower, Ph.D.
REB Chair

APPENDIX B: ADMINISTRATIVE CONSENT LETTER

OISE

ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Dear (Union President),

I am a PhD candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto and am planning a research project that will involve the members of your organization. In order to begin the project, I require your written consent.

The purpose of this study is to improve our understanding of how teacher unions attempt to influence public opinion and how those efforts are influenced by the coverage they receive in the news media. This will be done by constructing case studies that examine the public relations efforts of teacher unions during recent conflict periods (between the union and the government) in their province and how those efforts were influenced by the news media reporting at the time. Union staff (active or retired) with knowledge of the union's public relations efforts during a recent conflict period in three provinces (B.C., Alberta, and Ontario) are being invited to participate in phone interviews that will be recorded. Recordings will be deleted immediately after the interview is transcribed and participants will have the opportunity to vet the transcript prior to data aggregation. Participants may benefit by being involved in a process that allows them to reflect upon their professional practice. Participants will be well informed about the nature of the study and their participation, including assurance that they may withdraw at any time. If a participant decides to withdraw, their input will be deleted as long as the withdrawal occurs prior to the data aggregation phase of the study. Participants will at no time be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk of harm.

All participation in the study will be kept strictly confidential. The cases in this study will be written in a way that reflects the overall picture as opposed to that of individual participants. It is intended that the results of this study will be published in traditional academic venues however at no time will any participant be identified. Only I will have access to the data which will be kept in a secure server environment at the University of Toronto and in a locked cabinet in my home. The University of Toronto Research Ethics Office may also have confidential access to the data to help ensure that proper participation protection procedures are being followed. If you agree, please sign the letter below and return it to me. In order to recruit participants, I would request that you send a description of the study to your staff. Interested participants can then contact me to set up an interview. I would also like to analyze any documents related to your union's public efforts (e.g. press releases, articles in union publications, memos, meeting minutes) that you are willing to provide.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 647-388-5284 or at sachin.maharaj@mail.utoronto.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Nina Bascia at 416-978-1515 or at nina.bascia@utoronto.ca. Finally, you may also contact the University of Toronto Office of Ethics Research for questions about rights as a research participant at 416-946-3273 or at ethics.review@utoronto.ca. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support. In return, I will send you a summary of the results.

Sincerely,

Sachin Maharaj

Administrator's signature

Date

Please keep a copy of this letter for your records



Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
252 Bloor Street West, 6th Floor
Toronto, ON, Canada M5S 1V6
www.oise.utoronto.ca/tps

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

OISE

ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Dear participant,

This is a study at the University of Toronto and is being supervised by Dr. Nina Bascia. The purpose of this study is to improve our understanding of how teacher unions attempt to influence public opinion and how those efforts are influenced by the coverage they receive in the news media. This will be done by constructing case studies, in BC, Alberta, and Ontario, that examine the public relations efforts of teacher unions during recent conflict periods (between the union and the government) in their province and how those efforts were influenced by the news media reporting at the time. Union staff (active or retired) with knowledge of the union's public relations efforts during a recent conflict period in your province are being invited to participate. Participants may benefit by being involved in a process that allows them to reflect upon their professional practice.

The interview will be conducted by phone and should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Participation is entirely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study without any negative consequences. If you decide to withdraw from the study, your input will be deleted as long as the withdrawal occurs prior to the data aggregation phase of the study. To withdraw from the study, please email me at sachin.maharaj@mail.utoronto.ca. At no time will you be judged or evaluated and at no time will you be at risk of harm. If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto at:

McMurrich Building, 2nd floor
12 Queen's Park Crescent West
Toronto, ON M5S 1S8
Tel: 416-946-3273 Fax: 416-946-5763
Email: ethics.review@utoronto.ca

By participating in the interview, you acknowledge your willingness to have the information you have provided to be recorded and included in this research project. Recordings will be deleted immediately after the interview is transcribed and you will have the opportunity to vet the transcript prior to data aggregation. We will ensure that your participation in the study would be kept strictly confidential. The cases in this study will be written in a way that reflects the overall picture as opposed to that of individual participants. It is intended that the results of this study will be published in traditional academic venues however at no time will any participant be identified. Only the researcher will have access to the data which will be kept in a secure server environment at the University of Toronto and in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. The University of Toronto Research Ethics Office may also have confidential access to the data to help ensure that proper participation protection procedures are being followed. All data will be destroyed five years after completion of the study. A summary of the research results will be sent to your union. If you have any further questions, please contact me or Dr. Bascia using the contact information below. Thank you in advance for your participation. If you agree, please sign the letter below and return it to me by email.

Sincerely,

Sachin Maharaj
PhD Candidate, Leadership, Higher & Adult Education
OISE, University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON M5S 1V6
Tel: 647-388-5284
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Dr. Nina Bascia
Professor, Leadership, Higher & Adult Education
OISE, University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON M5S 1V6
Tel: 416-978-1159
Email: nina.bascia@utoronto.ca

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.



Department of Leadership, Higher & Adult Education
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APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR UNION STAFF/LEADERS

1. Tell me about your union. Describe its relationship with the provincial government in recent years. What are the biggest challenges it has faced in recent years?
2. How has the union been generally represented by the media in this province? Why do you believe this to be the case?
3. How is it generally perceived by the people of this province? Why do you believe this to be the case?
4. How would you describe your role in the union during this particular period of conflict? How long had you been in this role? What other roles did you have prior to this one? What roles have you had since?
5. Describe the details of this particular period of conflict between the union and the government. Why/how did this happen?
6. How was the union portrayed in the media during this time? What efforts were made to influence media coverage of the union? What other public relations strategies were utilized?
7. What were the anticipated effects of these media and public relations strategies? What were the actual effects of these strategies? What do you think explains the difference (if any) between the anticipated and actual outcomes?
8. What was learned from this experience? What, if anything, would you do differently in the future? Why?