

“No ifs, no buts, no education cuts”: Analyzing teacher experiences and participation in the 2018
Oklahoma teachers’ strike

by

Karly D. Eden

B.A., University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, 2018

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Anthropology, Sociology, and Social Work
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2020

Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Nadia Shapkina

Copyright

© Karly Eden 2020

Abstract

Thousands of teachers walked out of their classrooms in the spring of 2018 to protest inadequate school funding, overcrowded classrooms, and low teacher pay. This was the first teachers' strike in Oklahoma since 1990 and teachers in the state had felt silenced and ignored for two decades, which ultimately led to their mobilization and striking efforts. To analyze this strike, I explored the experiences of these teachers before, during, and after the strike. This study utilizes qualitative methods to analyze what took place in the spring of 2018 through in-depth interviews with public school teachers who participated in the nine-day walkout. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the experiences and amplify the voices of public-school teachers to discover why and how they mobilized, and to investigate whether or not those who participated believe the strike was a success. Ten interviews were collected, analyzed, and coded in an effort to pull out major themes regarding teachers' striking efforts. Interview questions were centered around motivations for going on strike, individual experiences while striking, and perceptions of the strike's success and its effects. Major findings include that due to teachers feeling silenced and the state teachers' union lacking enough collective bargaining power to create change, teachers were forced to mobilize through innovative strategies, such as using social media platforms to make their voices heard. The constraints that neoliberal policies have on education, and the ability for rank-and-file workers to produce meaningful change affect the ways in which workers choose to strike.

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|------|
| List of Figures | vi |
| List of Tables | vii |
| List of Abbreviations | viii |
| Acknowledgements..... | ix |
| Chapter 1 - Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter 2 - Background and Context of the Strike..... | 6 |
| History of Teacher Strikes | 6 |
| Neoliberal Advances in Education..... | 10 |
| State of Public Education in Oklahoma | 12 |
| Teachers' Unions in Oklahoma..... | 15 |
| Organization..... | 16 |
| Spring 2018 Strike | 18 |
| Chapter 3 - Research Design..... | 20 |
| Research Questions | 22 |
| Methodology | 23 |
| Interviews..... | 24 |
| Participants..... | 24 |
| Procedures..... | 28 |
| Data Analysis | 29 |
| Positionality, Confidentiality, and other Considerations | 31 |
| Chapter 4 - Motivations for Going on Strike | 35 |
| Teacher Pay..... | 35 |
| Teacher Shortage Crisis | 38 |
| Class Size | 40 |
| Funding | 42 |
| Charter Schools | 44 |
| Value of Teachers | 46 |
| Mobilization | 48 |
| Summary | 51 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 5 - Experiences during the Strike | 54 |
| Social Media | 55 |
| Support and Pushback for the Walkout..... | 57 |
| The State Capitol Rallies..... | 60 |
| Conflicts with State Representatives..... | 64 |
| End of the Strike | 69 |
| Summary | 77 |
| Chapter 6 - Perceptions of the Strike | 81 |
| Power of Numbers | 82 |
| Power of Disruption..... | 84 |
| Demanding to be Heard | 87 |
| A Polite Social Movement | 89 |
| Politicization of Teachers..... | 93 |
| Summary | 98 |
| Chapter 7 - Discussion and Conclusion | 101 |
| Discussion..... | 101 |
| Limitations | 112 |
| Future Research..... | 112 |
| References..... | 115 |
| Appendix A - Interview Guide | 122 |

List of Figures

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1 Oklahoma teachers rally outside the state capitol. | 62 |
| Figure 2 Aerial view of the teachers protesting. | 62 |
| Figure 3 Picture of teacher’s sign during a rally at the capitol. | 63 |
| Figure 4 Aerial view of teachers inside the state capitol building. | 66 |
| Figure 5 Teachers inside the state capitol building. | 66 |
| Figure 6 Remember to vote sign. Credit: Alamy. | 95 |

List of Tables

| | |
|--|----|
| Table 1 Description of Participants..... | 27 |
|--|----|

List of Abbreviations

| | |
|------|------------------------------------|
| AFT | American Federation of Teachers |
| NEA | National Education Association |
| OEA | Oklahoma Education Association |
| OTU | Oklahoma Teachers' United |
| OTTN | Oklahoma Teachers—The Time is Now! |

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my sincerest thanks to the participants of this study. Without you all, this project would not have been possible. Thank you for opening up to me and allowing me to understand this important topic through each of your unique perspectives. It is extremely rewarding, yet humbling, to have learned so much from all of your wisdom, knowledge, and insight. I also want to thank you all for being passionate educators and contributing to the growth and development of our society. I would also like to thank my Major Professor, Dr. Nadia Shapkina for standing by my side throughout this entire project and always being a helpful, yet honest, shoulder to lean on. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Alisa Garni and Dr. L. Frank Weyher for all of their support, guidance, and expertise throughout the duration of this project. Lastly, I would like to thank my family and my friends for supporting me unfailingly through the highs and lows of my scholastic journey.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

When I began my undergraduate studies in the fall of 2015, I started out as an elementary education major. I did this because I loved working with children, I wanted to make an impact on people's lives, and being a teacher seemed *fun*. I took an interest in education because I always loved school growing up and I wanted to be a reason that other children enjoyed going to school. I entered the education program at my small, liberal arts university wide eyed and naïve about the reality of teaching in Oklahoma. During my first semester in the program, classroom discussions quickly shifted from curriculum and pedagogy to the perpetual underfunding of public-school education and the under-valuing of teachers in Oklahoma. I always knew elementary school teachers were not millionaires, but I was unaware of how broken the education system in Oklahoma really is. Constant talk of budget cuts and out-of-pocket classroom costs quickly deterred me from the teaching profession and led me to deciding to switch my major. I did not want to stay on the trajectory of entering a profession whose future seemed so bleak and downright depressing. The problems of education, however, did spark an interest in me to study social problems and social justice. Now that I am a graduate student in the field of sociology, it is important for me to shed light on the problems that exist in education through the lens of actual teacher experiences. I firmly believe that teachers are the backbone of society and each teacher impacts hundreds, maybe even thousands, of children throughout their careers, and current government policies do not have the interests of teachers as a priority.

Over the last few decades, what have become known as “neoliberal policies” have overtaken almost every single facet of American life and have begun to decimate public education. Neoliberalism can be defined as the school of thought that advocates for free market capitalism and the deregulation of government. Part of taking away power from big government

includes minimizing spending on public services. The budgets for services that could be argued as inherent human rights such as healthcare, welfare, and public education are being slashed each year at the national and state levels due to neoliberal goals regarding reduced state spending and interference. In conservative states, especially, school budgets are consistently on the chopping block each year. The state and districts simply say their hands are tied and that they do not have any more money to give. Public schools have been forced to cut extracurricular programs, lay off support staff, and survive without proper supplies and materials for over a decade now. In Oklahoma specifically, teachers had not seen a pay raise in over 10 years before the spring 2018 strike even as the cost of living rose (Felder, 2018). Many public-school teachers have admitted to spending their own funds on classroom supplies due to schools not being able to afford basic necessities. Teachers have also reported working long hours after school, during holiday breaks, and in the summer without being compensated. Teachers, when compared to other professions with similar levels of schooling, make 20-30 percent less money per year (Blanc, 2019). Teacher turnover is also a pressing issue with 40-50 percent of new teachers quitting within five years (Blanc, 2019). It should also be noted that teachers who retire or quit are largely not being replaced, leading to larger class sizes and understaffed schools. Student enrollment has risen by 1.5 million since 2008, but there are 135,000 fewer public-school employees (Blanc, 2019). Also, due to shrinking budgets and understaffing, 18 percent of public schools in Oklahoma have reduced their school weeks to four days instead of five (Blanc, 2019).

A handful of states participated in teachers' strikes in the spring of 2018 to protest against inadequate funding, low salaries, and overcrowded classrooms. In West Virginia, Arizona, and Oklahoma, public sector strikes are prohibited because all of these states are "right-to-work" states. Right-to-work means public employees are not required to join labor unions and they have

little to no job protection in the event of a strike (White, 2018). Because of this, the term “walkout” has been widely used to define what teachers did in 2018. The idea behind a teacher walkout is that if enough teachers do not show up to school, or “walkout”, then schools and maybe even entire districts will be forced to close (White, 2018). Most of the teachers and schools who participated in the walkouts had administrative and local support, therefore the superintendents are the ones who closed the schools, which makes the event of a walkout a legal *work action* rather than a strike. These differences in terminology, even though similar, are what allowed teachers to be able to “strike” within their rights. According to a news article written by Kalia White with *The Republic* (2018):

“A walkout is when a group of employees leave their workplace in protest. It can last as little as a few minutes or an hour, or it can last a day or longer according to Kent Wong, director of the UCLA Labor Center and vice president of the California Federation of Teachers. A strike usually lasts much longer, is focused on specific goals, and involves a vote of the employees on whether or not they want to stop working in order to provoke the employer to negotiate, he said. “Although strikes usually do involve a walkout where people leave their jobs, walkouts are not always strikes,” Wong told *The Arizona Republic*.”

According to this definition, what the teachers in Oklahoma did in 2018 *is* a strike, however teachers choose to refer to what they did as a “walkout” to avoid the legal ramifications that exist for strikes in right-to-work states. Because of this, I use the terms “walkout” and “strike” interchangeably throughout this paper.

In the spring of 2018, multiple red states across the country participated in teacher walkouts. West Virginia kicked off the movement, with Oklahoma and Arizona not far behind. The movement in West Virginia primarily came about due to concerns about proposed changes to the state’s public health insurance plan (Blanc, 2019). Like Oklahoma and Arizona, West Virginia was also fighting for increased salaries and school funding. During the time of the 2018

strike, Oklahoma was ranked 49th in the U.S. for teacher pay. In April, just a few weeks after the successes in West Virginia, teachers, support staff, parents, and other community members in Oklahoma participated in a nine-day walkout where teachers left their classrooms and rallied at the capitol building to demand increased educational funding and salaries (Sullivan, 2018; Hess, 2018). Many seemed to believe the strike was primarily about a pay raise, but even more important was increasing funding for schools and increasing public and media attention regarding the widespread issues that exist within American public schools.

Teachers play a unique role in society that has an interesting impact on the way they are able to strike. For many, teaching isn't just a career—it's a "calling" (Blanc, 2019). The main priority of many teachers is their students, so when teachers walk out on their own classrooms and students, it is a strong statement that cannot be ignored (Lieberman, 1965). Teachers would not put their students' well-being at risk unless it is for an important reason that will ultimately benefit their students in the end (Lieberman, 1965). Many teachers did not *want* to walk out in 2018. This is why teacher strikes are so fascinating. Teachers are well-respected leaders of communities, and their protests directly affect their students and their students' families. Many teachers were absent from their classrooms for nine days, which is an act that demanded attention and media coverage. Many of them were fighting for their respect and for their own basic human dignity (Blanc, 2019). Public opinion of this walkout was varied—some agreed with their efforts and others thought it was an unreasonable and selfish way to protest (Hess, 2018).

The aftermath of this strike left me with many questions such as: *Why did teachers feel the need to strike? What factors and events led to the strike? How did these teachers come together from all over the state to organize and participate in this strike? Was the strike a*

success or a failure? More importantly, I wanted to know how *actual* teachers would answer these questions. Speculation about these events are endless, but to get to the root of the strike, it would be most fruitful to get the answers from teachers themselves. This project has the potential to advance the overall understanding of social movements by amplifying the voices of those on the ground who participated in this teachers' strike. Studying this social movement provides the unique account of how financial deprivation can lead workers who typically are not political to radicalize and mobilize in an effort to improve their own working conditions and overall quality of life. This movement is also unique in the sense that teachers were not only striking for themselves, rather they were largely striking and advocating for the well-being of their students who are arguably most affected by the funding pitfalls of public education.

In the following sections I explore the public education system in Oklahoma, the 2018 Oklahoma teachers' strike, and analyze the experiences uncovered through interviewing public-school teachers who participated in the walkout. In Chapter 2, I provide the background information necessary about the public education system in Oklahoma to properly contextualize the 2018 teachers' strike. In Chapter 3, I lay out my research design, research question, and present my methods of data collection and analysis that were used in this study. In Chapters 4-6, I report the findings that were gathered through interviews broken up into several major themes grouped by motivations, experiences, and perceptions of the strike. Lastly, in Chapter 7, I conclude this study with a discussion of the key findings and comparisons to other theories and similar social movements, a description of the significance of this study, limitations, and potential for future research.

Chapter 2 - Background and Context of the Strike

To understand what took place in Oklahoma in the spring of 2018, it is imperative that I provide context and background of the situation and conditions that led to the strike. I begin this section with an overview of the history of teacher strikes in the United States and Oklahoma. Next, I discuss how neoliberalism has affected public education. Neoliberal policies that serve to squeeze funding out of public services has hit education hard in the last few decades. Funding for public schools has decreased while teacher salaries have stagnated. Teachers and school districts have struggled to provide enough materials and supplies for every student. Schools have also struggled to hire and retain enough teachers necessary to successfully operate public schools. The state teachers' union lacked the bargaining power needed to keep funding and working conditions satisfactory. These conditions ultimately resulted in a broken and failing public school system in Oklahoma which led teachers to mobilize in an attempt to improve conditions.

History of Teacher Strikes

The 1960s in the United States can be characterized by the radicalization of public employees and wildcat strikes. Before the late 1960s, public employee strikes were illegal in every jurisdiction in the United States and unions did not have much political power (Burns, 2014). Public workers, however, decided to organize themselves and start breaking these laws in order to demand better pay and working conditions. Even though their striking was technically illegal, their efforts were largely successful, and this led to laws regarding strikes to be changed. Public workers realized they had the power of numbers and that striking, or walking out, was impossible for bosses to ignore. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of strong teachers' unions in the United States. In the 1960s, the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) and the NEA

(National Education Association) won collective bargaining rights which improved teachers' working conditions. In 1960, teachers in New York City participated in a one-day strike which became the leading example for other teachers' strikes in the 1960s. By 1968, teachers had struck 112 times, whereas this number was zero the decade prior (Burns, 2014).

In order to analyze the most recent strike, it is important to look at the greater history of teachers strikes in Oklahoma. On August 22nd, 1979 more than 1,000 out of 2,150 Oklahoma City public school teachers refused to show up for the first day of the school year (New York Times, 1979). This was the first teachers' strike to take place in Oklahoma's history (Felder, 2018; New York Times, 1979). The teachers' concerns included salaries, overtime pay for coaches, planning time for elementary teachers, lack of education materials, poor building conditions, and demeaning treatment (Brawley, 1989; New York Times, 1979). On the day before the strike, August 21st, around 1,500 teachers met in the downtown Civic Center Music Hall to discuss their grievances (Brawley, 1989). Teachers were frustrated and emotional, and this meeting led to the decision to strike. All but 100 out of 1,500 teachers present at the meeting voted in favor of striking (Brawley, 1989). The strike was backed by two teachers' unions: the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) and the AFT (New York Times, 1979; Brawley, 1989). On the first day of the strike, 1,367 teachers were in attendance, armed with signs and tenacity (Brawley, 1989). The strike included demands a 12 percent pay increase, but the school board would only offer a nine percent increase (New York Times, 1979). The teachers chose this method of striking, refusing to come to work, because they claimed it gave them the largest amount of publicity and bargaining power (New York Times, 1979). The superintendent at the time, Tom Payzant, said the teachers would be docked pay for every workday they missed (New

York Times, 1979). The strike lasted 12 days and it was somewhat successful (Felder, 2018). Teacher pay increased each year for the next three years (Brawley, 1989).

Another teachers' strike happened in Oklahoma in 1990. This was the last teachers' strike that occurred in Oklahoma until 2018. Teachers' grievances included a desperate need for an increase in funding and salaries. In 1990, Oklahoma ranked 46th in the nation for public-school funding and 49th in teacher pay (Cameron, 2018). The strike, led by teachers and the OEA, began on April 17th and more than half of Oklahoma's 36,000 teachers went on strike which resulted in closing nearly a quarter of the state's school districts. (New York Times, 1990). The walk-out lasted five days and resulted in the Senate passing the Education Reform Act of 1990 which included an emergency clause which made the bill go into effect immediately. This act increased corporate and personal income taxes by 1 percent and sales tax by 0.5 percent which added an additional \$250 million dollars to public schools (Felder, 2016). Over the next couple years, teachers noticed smaller class sizes and a salary increase (Felder, 2016). Some class sizes even reduced from 40-something children to 20 children (Felder, 2016). However, after a few years of progress, many of the new standards were repealed and funding fell behind once again (Felder, 2016).

A few decades later in 2012, a teachers' strike took place in Chicago. In the wake of many education reforms, courtesy of former Chicago Mayor and former chief of staff under the Obama Administration, Rahm Emanuel, teachers in Chicago were at their wits end. These reforms ultimately closed down dozens of schools and increased teacher accountability, which in turn made it easier for teachers to be fired (Pearson, 2012). This was the first teachers' strike in a major city since Detroit in 2006 (Scott, 2019). Chicago teachers walked out of their classrooms with demands of higher pay, better funding, and less emphasis on standardized tests (Scott, 2019;

Pearson, 2012). They also walked out to raise awareness and attention concerning the philosophical problems that exist within public education. These problems include, but are not limited to defunding the arts and humanities, putting extreme emphasis on standardized tests, placing blame and punishment on the teachers of underperforming students, and closing down schools that mainly serve poor, minority populations. This walkout lasted eight days and led to a teacher pay raise of 17.6 percent over four years, less emphasis of tests scores on the evaluations of teacher performance (from 45 percent to 30 percent), and increasing the employment opportunities of laid-off teachers (Pearson, 2012). Overall, the teachers in Chicago did not get everything they asked for during the strike, but their small successes paved the way for many more teacher strikes to come.

Examining previous teachers' strikes has highlighted the similarities between previous strikes and the recent strike of 2018. Overall, strikes *work*. Even if the changes are not long lasting, teachers' strikes have shown to produce change. Oklahoma teachers were striking for better funding and resources 40 years ago and the same problems still exist today. A pattern has been exposed by exploring these previous strikes: teachers participate in a walkout, they have a partial success because they get some of what they demanded (but not all of it), conditions improve the few years that follow the strike, and then progress is repealed, and funding falls behind once again. It seems like the state legislature is just putting short term Band-Aids on the problems teachers are striking about instead of creating and implementing real, long-standing educational reform.

Neoliberal Advances in Education

Neoliberalism has been the dominant approach to governance in the United States since the Reagan presidency. Neoliberalism can be defined as the economic and social policies that emerged in the 1980s and continue to shape the United States economy to this day (Benería, 2016; Turner, 2015). A more specific definition comes from Alessandro Bonanno, “Neoliberalism is defined as a social, political, and economic regime that is based on a set of original ideas, a discourse with roots in intellectual and popular cultures and a set of policies and political measures that support free-market capitalism and global corporate actors” (2017). These neoliberal policies focus on the deregulation and freedom of markets, the privatization of institutions, and the hands-off approach of the government concerning the economy (Benería, 2016; Turner, 2015). It stems from the idea that was born during the ages of classical liberalism that people should be able to live their lives without excessive interference from the government. Now, neoliberalism is used to benefit large corporations and the wealthy by limiting how much oversight and regulation the government has over them. The deregulation of the economy and markets has allowed the wealthy to make an exorbitant amount of money and income inequality has since then widely increased (Benería, 2016). The goal of the implementation of these policies was to “improve the economy” by decreasing government spending (Benería, 2016). Politically, this means that the government has shrunk its involvement in civic concerns (Turner, 2015). As a result of these policies, government spending toward social services and welfare programs has decreased, which includes the funding for public schools.

Historically, education and public schooling was seen as a crucial institution of the welfare state (Turner, 2015). Neoliberalism advocates for the deregulation of labor laws and has targeted public schools and labor unions as enemies of capitalist freedom (Baltodano, 2012).

Under neoliberal policies, funding for public schools has plummeted and rates of teacher turnover have skyrocketed. Charter schools have emerged from the privatization of education which has led to the disruption of teachers' unions and the segregation of students by race and class (Turner, 2015). Whereas education used to be more equal for all, charter schools have allowed for the inequality of education to grow. Charter schools are privately ran, but publicly funded schools that boast the option of "school choice" (Blanc, 2019). In Oklahoma, there are 28 charter school districts and 58 charter schools (Blanc, 2019). Another policy that has allowed for inequality among education to grow is unequal funding. Funding for public schools is not provided equally by the federal government but is rather based on district funding which is highly dependent on whether or not the area in which a school resides is wealthy (Crampton, 2010). These property taxes account for approximately half of school revenue (Blanc, 2019). Teacher pay is also not a set amount, but varies from state to state, where the wealthier states with better funding for social services boast competitive teacher pay opposed to poorer states. Along with neoliberalism, the decentralization of the federal government has allowed for states and individual districts to decide funding amounts and teacher pay, rather than the federal government imposing a more equal strategy for all.

In the classroom, neoliberalism has affected *who* teaches and *how* they teach. Teacher accreditation and preparation programs were once focused on extensive content knowledge, democratic schooling, and social justice, but now they have been "distorted and appropriated by the corporate goals of education" (Baltodano, 2012, p. 487). Teacher shortages have resulted in an extensive number of emergency certified teachers (i.e. teachers who do not have a college degree in an education program). Allowing individuals who have no formal training in teaching to become teachers really shows how little the government thinks of qualified teachers and also

how little they care about the quality of the education children receive. The teaching profession is ultimately becoming deskilled. Arts, humanities, and extracurricular programs in schools have been largely cut due to dwindling budgets. Standardized testing has become the single most important indicator of teacher and school success, which has stifled teacher creativity and has put extreme pressure on teachers to teach to the test, so their students get satisfactory scores (Baltodano, 2012). Evaluation of teacher performance is largely dependent upon test scores, which fails to consider the other important roles of teachers and disregards alternate forms of measuring success. Over the years, neoliberal policies have completely transformed what teachers can teach and how they can teach it, and many argue that this change is for the worse.

State of Public Education in Oklahoma

There is not just one end-all-be-all reason for why the state of funding in Oklahoma is inadequate. School funding and teacher pay has been an issue for decades and the strike of 2018 was not the first time teachers have walked out of their classrooms to advocate for better funding. Education has been and still is an undervalued and underfunded sector of society. Critics have blamed these bleak economic conditions present in education on reductions in state income taxes for top earners (Perry, 2016). Continuous tax cuts for Oklahoma's richest has resulted in low and middle-income Oklahomans paying the highest state and local taxes (Cullison, 2018). It is argued that increased taxes for Oklahoma's richest could provide a needed increase in funding for education. Oklahoma has also been notorious for providing huge tax breaks to oil companies and other large corporations in an attempt to attract their business (Nicks, 2016). Before the walkout, Oklahoma had the lowest tax rate on oil in the United States (Blanc, 2019). As a result of these tax breaks, from 2008 to 2014, there was a 24 percent

decrease in per-pupil funding (Nicks, 2016). Oklahoma has also cut funding to public education by one billion dollars in the last decade due to the oil industry's economic downturn (Farmer, 2017). The justification for giving tax breaks to oil companies is that some of the profit made by the oil industry is given to public education. However, a recent downturn of the oil industry has resulted in a state-wide budget crisis that has hit Oklahoma public-schools hard. In 2014, Oklahoma passed a law that lowered taxes for oil and gas from 7 percent to 2 percent (Inola & Wagoner, 2018). This law made Oklahoma's oil and gas taxes the lowest of any oil-producing state in the country and state revenue plummeted. This tax break cost Oklahoma's state budget as much as \$470 million dollars in 2015 (Farmer, 2017). Tax cuts for the rich and tax breaks for oil and gas corporations have contributed to an economic environment that does not benefit the middle and lower classes or state-funded institutions such as public education.

The teacher walk-out of 2018 was not an overnight movement. This strike was a movement against over a decade of failed economic policies in regard to the funding of public schools (Cullison, 2018; McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Oklahoma school districts are asked each year to reduce their budgets (Franklin, 2018). These budget cuts affect school funding and also teacher pay. Since 2008, state funds for K-12 education has decreased by 28.2 percent, which is the largest cut in the country for that time frame (Inola & Wagoner, 2018). Year after year, districts are told to slash their budgets and cut extracurricular programs (Mills, 2016). The hardest hit programs include school lunch programs, AP teacher training, STEM programs, and elementary level music and art programs (Mills, 2016). Other results of decreased funding include implementing larger class sizes, eliminating teaching positions, shortening the school week, and consolidating districts (Mills, 2016; Yan, Valencia, & Park, 2018). In an interview done by an Oklahoma news source, KFOR, Jones Public Schools superintendent Carl Johnson

stated “We’re just down to the bone” when he was asked about the continuous budget cuts that are forced onto his district (Mills, 2016).

Teacher salaries are also negatively affected by these constant budget cuts. In 2016 and 2017, Oklahoma ranked 49th in the nation for average teacher salaries (Hess, 2018; Cullison, 2018; NEA, 2017). Before the salary increase that was passed in 2018, Oklahoma teachers had not seen a pay raise since 2008 (Felder, 2018). Teacher pay had declined by 2 percent from 1992 to 2014, once adjusted for inflation (Hess, 2018). Many teachers report working second jobs to make ends meet (Inola & Wagoner, 2018; Schaeffer, 2019). Schaeffer (2019) explained that one in six U.S. teachers work second jobs. Along with struggles related to low salaries, The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2008 that 92.2 percent of Oklahoma teachers spent their own unreimbursed money on classroom supplies and each teacher on average spent \$421 of their own money during the 2007-2008 school year (NCES, 2008). Strauss (2012) also reports that teachers work 53 hours per week on average, which far surpasses the usual 40-hour work week. Because of the bleak economic prospects for Oklahoma teachers, many teachers have opted to leave the state to teach elsewhere or to leave the profession altogether (U.S. News, 2017). Also, due to rising costs of college tuition, many college students are being deterred from majoring in education due to the fact that their salaries would never be great enough to pay off their student loans (Blanc, 2019). This has led to a massive teacher shortage in the state. Teacher turnover rates are extremely high in the United States as 40-50 percent of new teachers quit within five years (Blanc, 2019). As of August 2017, there were over 500 teaching vacancies and nearly 500 more eliminated teaching positions in Oklahoma (Marsh & Stein, 2018). This led to Oklahoma issuing a record number of emergency certifications in 2017, about 1,200-2,000 in order to fill the vast number of vacancies (U.S. News, 2017; Blanc, 2019).

Teachers' Unions in Oklahoma

A main theme throughout the literature is the effects neoliberalism has on education, which includes the effects on worker's unions (Winkler, Scull, & Zeehandelaar, 2012; Antonucci, 2017; Blanc, 2019). Neoliberalism, by nature, discourages workers' unions and advocates for the deregulation of businesses, which ultimately gives power to the owners, not the workers. In 2012, Oklahoma was ranked 43rd in a study done on the strength of teachers' unions in the United States (Winkler et al., 2012). Only 57.5 percent of teachers in Oklahoma are union members (Winkler et al., 2012). Oklahoma is a right-to-work state and union membership and dues are not mandated (Antonucci, 2017). This has resulted in a diminished number of dues-paying union members which has made unions weak compared to their strength in the past and their strength in other states (Antonucci, 2017). In fact, neither of the two biggest leaders of the Oklahoma teachers' strike were union members (Blanc, 2019). Some people who live in right-to-work states are under the impression that striking is *prohibited* in right-to-work states, but this is not true. Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act states that, "Employees shall have the right to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection" and strikes are included among concerted activities (National Labor Relations Board).

Because the unions in Oklahoma have experienced a loss of power, the teachers lack codified procedures for grieving issues such as low pay, which has resulted in teachers striking due to no other option (Antonucci, 2017). Unions are seen as a distant and ineffective third party that mostly deals with issues related to insurance and administration. Oklahoma unions also have limited freedom to bargain and minimal influence on legislative policy (Winkler et al., 2012).

Teacher laws in Oklahoma also are out of line with traditional teachers' union priorities. By law, student achievement is the main criterion for determining teacher evaluations and tenure decisions (Winkler et al., 2012). Teachers are also laid off due to poor performance at the fourth-highest rate in the country (Winkler et al., 2012). Because of the limited power and reduced influence of teachers' unions in Oklahoma, teachers needed to utilize new avenues of mobilization to make their voices heard.

Organization

There were two main viral Facebook groups in 2018 that disseminated information, gauged teacher interest to strike, and organized striking efforts: "Oklahoma Teachers' United" (OTU) and "Oklahoma Teachers—The Time is Now!" (OTTN). OTU was created in 2017 and currently has 13,000 members. OTTN was created in February of 2018 and membership to this page quite literally blew up overnight with 64,000 members. Both of these are still active groups. These viral Facebook pages had similar goals with different approaches. Based on my interpretations of reading through each Facebook page, OTU's style of advocacy is more aggressive and brash, whereas OTTN advocates more diplomatically and peacefully for the interests of teachers. Regardless of their differences in style, they both advocated for teachers to take a strong stand against the Oklahoma legislature and both demanded for a state-wide walkout.

Neither Facebook page administrator were union members nor had any organizational experience before the strike (Blanc, 2019). They relied on their close colleagues, other organizers, and viral Facebook pages to assist them in their organizational efforts. Both pages would regularly post polls for members to vote—typically to gauge interest in a proposed walkout plan or proposed date. They utilized these polls to see just how many teachers were on

board with their ideas and plans. The administrators were able to make posts to these pages sharing information about pieces of legislation, grievances, and ultimately the plans for a walkout. Members of the pages were able to “like” and “comment” in order to interact with the admins and other members of the groups. I personally looked through several OTTN posts that were made during the strike and discovered that a common talking point among the members of this Facebook group included criticism of the OEA. Many teachers in this group were unsatisfied, and some were even angry, about the way the OEA was handling the strike.

Before the strike, in March 2018, there was tension between the strike leaders and the state teachers’ union, the OEA. The OEA agreed to a teacher walkout but wanted to wait until May to do so. The Facebook page administrators and many of their followers, however, wanted to walkout on April 2nd. The OEA’s reasoning behind waiting until May was that they believed the union and its organizers needed more time to plan the walkout in order to best execute their efforts. The OEA also wanted to wait until after state testing, which is completed during April, was finished before walking out. West Virginia, however, was gaining momentum in their efforts and were winning, which made teachers in Oklahoma want to ride their wave of success and momentum before it had passed. Both OTU and OTTN page administrators had advertised to their followers that they wanted to walkout April 2nd, and this date created a lot of buzz and excitement among teachers and organizers. The teachers and organizers kept pushing for April 2nd and eventually the OEA realized that the teachers were going to walkout on April 2nd with or without the union. The OEA conceded and decided to abandon their plans of a May walkout to help Oklahoma teachers April 2nd.

Spring 2018 Strike

The year 2018 was an important year in regard to teachers in multiple states striking all over the United States. West Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Arizona, and Oklahoma all had state-wide teacher strikes and walk-outs in the spring of 2018. All of these states are “right-to-work” states which are states that have the least amount of unionization and collective bargaining and have seen the largest budget cuts. West Virginia kicked off the strikes in early spring 2018 which sparked similar strikes in other red states to follow (Hess, 2018). Plans of a teachers’ strike in Oklahoma had been brewing since early March (Cohen, 2018). Teachers left their classrooms, rallied at capitol buildings, and advocated for their needs on various social media outlets. Their main demands included an increase in school funding and an increase in pay.

Oklahoma was able to start two grassroots social media organization through Facebook: “Oklahoma Teachers’ United” and “Oklahoma Teachers—The Time is Now!”. This type of online organization helped in garnering over 30,000 people rallying at the state capitol during the nine-day walkout (Turner, Lombardo, & Logan, 2018). Before the walkout began, the state legislature had passed a bill that included a \$6,100 teacher pay raise, which is about a 15 percent increase, and a \$50 million increase in school funding (Turner et al., 2018; Hess, 2018; Cullison, 2018). These figures, however, are much lower than what the teachers wanted, especially what was offered for funding. Teachers, along with the OEA, were demanding a \$10,000 teacher pay raise over three years and a \$200 million increase in school funding (Franklin, 2018). Because the legislature did not approve what they wanted, they decided to follow through with the walkout and it began on April 2nd, 2018. The walkout lasted nine days and over this period of time, the state legislature did not approve of any more increases in pay or funding. Teachers’ union leaders were the ones who ended the nine-day strike due to lack of legislative action

(Sullivan, 2018; Turner et al., 2018). It is believed that the OEA failed to inform or ask the teachers whether or not they were ready to end the strike, and the OEA President, Alicia Priest, ended it on April 12th during a press conference. Even those who were union members stated that the union did not consult them before choosing to end the strike. Many teachers felt betrayed and disappointed at the abrupt ending of the strike, and many wanted to continue to walkout until more concessions were made. Many teachers who were union members even dropped their memberships over this decision. Ultimately, the bill that passed regarding an increase in teacher pay rose Oklahoma to 34th in the nation in teacher pay (Eger, 2019).

Even though the teachers did not get everything they wanted out of the strike, many remained hopeful of the progress they made and looked optimistically toward the future and looming election season. In the fall of 2018, about eight months after the strike, 16 Oklahoma educators were elected to the state House and Senate (Williams, 2018).

Chapter 3 - Research Design

The methodological approach that inspired this research project is grounded theory. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define *grounded theory* as, “theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process” (p. 12). By using grounded theory and inductive reasoning strategies, I aimed to carry out this research without working through any pre-existing theories or trying to provide evidence to support these existing theories. I wanted to solely let the data collected in this research speak for itself and drive the theory-construction process. What I learned throughout the course of this research, however, is that it is nearly impossible for one to go into a research project without any preconceptions about the topic. By spending months doing research on this topic as I developed a research plan, I consequently formed presuppositions about this research topic and was influenced by everything I read. It would be a misrepresentation to say I was able to completely carry out this research without theoretical preconceptions or without an idea of what I would find through my research. This realization is also echoed in some literature critiquing grounded theory. Timmermans and Tavory (2012) compare the attempt to develop theories without theoretical preconceptions to a “fairytale” (p. 168). Because of these reasons and realizations about grounded theory, I decided that an abductive analysis approach is much more fitting to describe my research goals and research strategy when carrying out this research project and constructing theory.

Timmermans and Tavory (2012) define *abduction* as, “a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence” (p. 168). They also explain abduction as a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning. The idea of abduction is to develop the best explanation of a phenomenon based on the data collected by constantly testing and retesting theories. After I developed a theory by analyzing my data, I

would test the theory against any disconfirming data or alternate scenarios. Then I would refine or change my theory based on what I found in the disconfirming cases, then retested my theory again. This process of generating, testing, refining, and retesting was carried out over and over again until there were no more exceptions or disconfirming data for my theory. This point of no new disconfirming data is called saturation.

The process of abductive analysis was a long and tedious process, but it was essential to do to know my theory is the most valid and accurate as possible. The goal of abductive analysis is to find or create a theory that is the tightest fit between the *explanandum* (what is trying to be explained) and the *explanans* (what explains it). I sought out disconfirming evidence in an attempt to refute my theory because this process ultimately led to an even stronger theory and more knowledge gathered through my research. The process I used shows that even if a qualitative study does not begin with a particular theory in mind, like this one, by the end of the project it is firmly grounded in a theory that has been continually tested and retested to show validity.

In order to collect data, I chose to conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews with teachers who participated in the strike. The process of abduction was also used throughout the interviewing process as I was regularly modifying and adding questions to my interview schedule. The transcriptions of these interviews are from what I drew out my themes, explanations, and theories. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define *theory construction* as, “theory denotes a set of well-developed categories (e.g. themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational, nursing, or other phenomenon” (p. 22). In the

discussion portion of this paper, I explain how my explanation or theory support some preexisting theories regarding legitimation crisis and contemporary social movements.

Research Questions

I propose that a qualitative study that examines the experiences of teachers who participated in the strike will highlight the challenges, successes, and nuances of the strike and of public education in Oklahoma as a whole. Largely, mass media has focused on hard facts, such as the dollar amount of pay and funding increases to measure whether or not a strike is successful. This study, however, seeks to uncover the teachers' perceptions of the strike. This is a topic that is not as easily found in documents and media articles concerning the strike. This study aims to understand why teachers in Oklahoma participated in a nine-day walk-out, how they made it happen, and what this strike meant to them. My research questions are as follows:

- I. What motivated the teachers to strike?
- II. What were the experiences of the teachers who participated in the 2018 Oklahoma teachers' strike?
- III. How do teachers who participated in the strike understand their participation and the strike's results?
- IV. How does studying this social movement contribute to a broader understanding of the conditions within public education, neoliberalism, and the politicization of workers, especially teachers?

When doing research on this strike, it is relatively easy to find what the media, what scholars, and what the organizers thought about the strike, but it is more difficult to find how

regular teachers, not organizers, participated in the strike and their feelings toward it. Through this project, I seek to understand the experiences and emotions of those rank-and-file participants. Brief interviews have been conducted with these teachers by various news outlets and by Eric Blanc in the book *Red State Revolt*. I decided to conduct in-depth interviews with teachers who participated in the strike to learn their experiences regarding the entire striking process, from the beginning stages of organization to the end of the walkout.

Methodology

I chose to explore my research questions through the qualitative method of interviews. Because my research question is centered around the perceptions and experiences of teachers who participated in the walkout, it was crucial to speak face-to-face with those who participated. It was important to this project to have conversations with these participants, instead of using a strategy such as a questionnaire, because the emotions and nuances in what the teachers had to say helped build the themes of this project. I wanted to get the detailed, unique, and personal stories of these teachers so I could fully understand what the entire striking process was like for the teachers. I also took jottings during my interviews to record body language, emotions, and expressions that could not be captured through the audio recordings of interviews. Through my interviews and jottings, I was able to record the personal accounts of experiences, emotions, and demeanors for each of my interviewees.

Interviews

Participants

When recruiting participants for this study, there were a few key criteria to consider. First, I only wanted to interview teachers from Oklahoma because Oklahoma is my strategic research site. A strategic research site one example of strategic research materials (SRMs) coined by Robert K. Merton which are, “the empirical material that exhibits the phenomena to be explained or interpreted..” (1987, p. 10). I chose Oklahoma as my strategic research site because it is a state that clearly displays the phenomenon I am studying because it was the location of a large teachers’ strike. Oklahoma is also a unique case as it was a state with one of the worst conditions for funding and teacher pay at the time of the various teacher strikes in the United States. In 2017, one year before the teachers’ strike in Oklahoma took place, Oklahoma was ranked 49th in the nation for teacher pay (Hess, 2018; Cullison, 2018; NEA, 2017). Oklahoma is also a strategic research site because it is a case that speaks to larger issues such as workers’ movements in right-to-work states and perceived weakness of teachers’ unions. Along with these reasons, Oklahoma is also a state that is very accessible to me in terms of geography and by conducting research close to where I live, I was able to meet almost all of these teachers face-to-face for our interviews. If I would have chosen a state farther away from where I live, I may have had to rely on virtual interviews which do not always allow for the same level of personal connection or the ability to pick up on body language and other subtle nuances.

Second, I only wanted to interview current public-school teachers or those who were public-school teachers during the time of the strike. This was important because this project is solely focused on public education, and teachers who have only ever worked for private schools

or charters would not have the experience necessary to contribute to the goals of this paper, which are based on experiences and perceptions of public-school teachers.

Third, I only wanted to interview teachers who are currently still teachers. This excludes teachers who have retired or changed professions since the strike. This was important to my project because part of my interviews were focused on what has changed in education in the two years since the strike, and someone who is no longer a teacher could not answer those questions. One clarification is that I did allow a teacher to participate who currently works for a charter school but worked in public schools at the time of the strike. This teacher is still in the same city and still involved with the public-school system, so they were still able to provide information about what has changed since the strike.

Lastly, I only wanted to interview teachers who actually participated in the walkout. This is key because some teachers in Oklahoma did not participate in the walkout due to personal reasons or due to not being allowed by their school administration. Even though I think conversations with these individuals would be interesting and fruitful for understanding the dynamics between teachers and activism, my project is solely focused on the experiences of teachers who partook in the striking activities. To meet this criterion, the teacher had to participate in the walkout in some capacity, whether that be participating in the walkout itself and/or participating in rallies at the state capitol building. Even just participating for one day was enough to be considered for this study. In the long run, I was able to execute 10 in-depth interviews with public school teachers who participated in the walkout.

One main consideration when recruiting participants was their location. For this project, I was interested in including interviewees from both small towns and large cities. This was important because throughout reading the literature about public education in Oklahoma, I found

that experiences differed depending on city and school district. For example, schools that are located in poorer, inner cities have more structural damage and financial issues than suburban or small-town schools. Because of these variations in working conditions among location, I wanted to ensure I got perspectives from both sides. I did not want all my interviewees to be from the same town or from similar areas. Because of this, I was able to best maximize the range experiences of teachers in Oklahoma. For the sake of my participant table, I use the words “small town” and “big city” to categorize my participants based on their location. Those who are recorded as “small town” are from areas with less than 35,000 people and “big city” represents those who live in one of the two major metropolitan cities in Oklahoma. Ultimately, four teachers resided in large cities and six resided in small towns.

In terms of personal demographics, I did my best to maximize variation among my participants, but some categories proved to be more difficult than others. First, I was able to achieve representative variation among the gender of my respondents. Three out of 10 of my participants identify as male and seven identify as female. This closely mirrors the statistic of male public-school teachers in the United States which is 24 percent (NCES, 2020). The positions of the teachers I interviewed also included a good amount of variation. One teacher taught at the elementary level, two taught at the middle school level, five taught at the high school level, and two taught students of all ages. This study also includes a teacher who previously worked as a principal, but since the strike now works as a teacher. One teacher also served in an important leadership role throughout the strike. Unfortunately, I was not able to maximize variation among the ages of my participants. I did reach out to younger teachers but failed to secure responses or interest from them. Nine out of 10 participants indicated that their age was between 50 and 60 years old. One participant indicated that they were between 40 and

50 years old. No interviewees were younger than 40 years old. I also was unable to gather a diversified sample in terms of race and ethnicity. Nine of my participants identified as white/Caucasian and one identified as Native American. It is also important to note that one participant is now a charter school teacher, but was a public-school teacher during the strike so they still fit the criteria to be a part of this study.

Table 1 Description of Participants

| Participant # | Age group (years old) | Gender | Race | Small town or big city | # of years teaching | # years at current school district | Teaching position |
|---------------|-----------------------|--------|-----------------|------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | 50-60 | F | White | Small town | 33 | 32 | High school English |
| 2 | 50-60 | M | White | Small town | 13 | 13 | High school career tech/IT instructor |
| 3 | 50-60 | F | White | Big city | 32 | 13 | Special education teacher/coordinator |
| 4 | 50-60 | F | White | Big city | 16 | 1 | Middle school ELA/social studies |
| 5 | 50-60 | M | Native American | Big city | 15 | 1 | High school English |
| 6 | 40-50 | F | White | Small town | 13 | 1 | All grades special ed/behavioral interventionist |
| 7 | 50-60 | M | White | Big city | 21 | 2 | Middle school science |
| 8 | 50-60 | F | White | Small town | 27 | 27 | High school English |
| 9 | 50-60 | F | White | Small town | 28 | 17 | Reading/tech coach |
| 10 | 50-60 | F | White | Small town | 15 | 7 | High school English |

Procedures

Recruitment of participants was first aided by my personal connections with a few teachers from Oklahoma. I reached out to the teachers I personally knew first, and then used snowball sampling to recruit more participants that my interviewees recommended to me. This strategy did not result in enough participants, so I also posted a recruitment advertisement on my personal Facebook page. I asked my Facebook “friends” to share my advertisement to their “friends” to maximize the number of people who saw the advertisement. I also asked my family and friends for suggestions of possible participants. I used multiple recruitment strategies because each on its own did not result in enough participants, so I was forced to utilize multiple methods of recruitment. In the end, I recruited three participants who I already knew personally, six participants through my social media advertisement, and one participant through the suggestion of a family member.

Prior to conducting interviews, all participants were provided an informed consent document to read and sign that outlined the details and purpose of this study, and the steps that would be taken to protect their confidentiality. They were informed that their transcriptions, audio recordings, and personal information would all be kept on a password-protected computer that only I can access. All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and then transferred to a password-protected computer. Once the recordings were transferred to the computer, they were deleted off the digital recorder. All email and cell phone correspondence took place on password-protected computers and cell phones that only I can access.

To ensure confidentiality, no names cities, schools, or individuals were used throughout the paper. Gender-specific pronouns were largely avoided throughout the paper as well, except during instances where gender was an important factor in the information being presented.

Leaving out personal identifiers was important to this study because some of my participants know one another and I was careful not to expose anyone's identity. The interviews lasted approximately one hour on average and were conducted over the course of two months in the spring of 2020. Nine interviews took place face-to-face and due to scheduling conflicts, one interview took place as a phone call. For the phone call interview, all contact information of the participant has been deleted off the cell phone and the interview was also audio recorded. For the face-to-face interviews, I let the interviewee choose the location of the interview to ensure their own comfort. Participants' choices in locations ranged from private offices, public libraries, their homes, and coffee shops. The length of the interviews was at the participants' discretion. I allowed the interviews to be as brief or as lengthy as the participant wanted.

Data Analysis

The first step in generating meaning from my data was to transcribe my audio-recorded interviews. The first transcription I completed was fully transcribed word-for-word without most vocal stammers such as, "uh", "um", or anything similar that did not make a major contribution to the sentence. Some stammers, laughter, and long pauses were left in the transcript when I deemed it especially relevant to do so. Fully transcribing the first interview word-for-word took a significant amount of time and after this my committee and I decided that full, word-for-word transcriptions were not necessary for my project. After this, I transcribed the rest of my interviews using an outlining method. To do this, I listened to the audio-recorded interviews and took quick notes as I listened. By doing this, I was able to outline interviews as quickly as I was able to listen to them in real-time. When doing this, I included time stamps of each topic discussed, and jotted down main ideas and important quotes. This method allowed me to create a

quick, but effective outline of each interview and allowed me to revisit the most important topics and discussions later down the road to transcribe further, if necessary. As I did with the first interview, I left in especially important stammers and expressions of emotions. With this method, I was also able to largely omit idle chit-chat that did not add any important substance to the interview. I would simply record, “minute x to minute y was a chit chat about ____”. Working with these rough transcriptions still allowed for me to look for negative cases, disconfirming evidence, and qualifications for my codes.

The first step of the coding process was open coding. Open coding was an important step in deciding what to look for when coding the following interview outlines. Emerson (2011) defines *open coding* as, “The ethnographer reads fieldnotes line by line to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate” (p. 143). I used the strategy of open coding for all of my interviews and interview outlines to formulate key ideas and themes. Next, I used focused coding to look for patterns and relationships among my codes. This was the step where I fully formed themes and decided what themes were most pertinent for my paper. These important themes were decided by what topics and ideas were most discussed and emphasized among my interviewees. During this process is when I also took notice of disconfirming cases and evidence. I made sure to take notice of and record ideas and experiences that stuck out and did not match those of my other interviewees. Lastly, I used Emerson’s (2011) concept of local integration to formulate one logical, cohesive story to develop an explanation for my data. In order to come up with a final explanation of the phenomenon, I used abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to find the explanation that best fit my data and observations. This process involves identifying and including disconfirming cases and reformulating my theory to account for these disconfirming cases. Using the process of abductive

analysis was crucial for coming up with the best explanation possible for my data. I coded all of the data myself and did not use any computer software programs. My coding process included many steps and revisions. I moved around codes and themes until I had a plan that best incorporated all my data and made the most sense.

Positionality, Confidentiality, and other Considerations

After taking a qualitative methods research class during my M.A. program, I was able to reflect on my interview strategies and what I could improve on in the future. One aspect of interviewing, or qualitative research in general, that I hadn't considered before this project is positionality and insider/outsider status. Bozzoli's (1993) writes about how she was able to receive valuable information from her research subjects due to her insider status. Duneier (1999) similarly discussed that researchers should be sensitive to the differences in social position between the researcher and the subjects of research (p. 353). My research subjects are public school teachers in Oklahoma, my home state, and I never thought to think about how my own demographics and characteristics shaped my rapport with my interviewees and how they viewed me. My interviewees and I have a lot in common. Seven out of 10 interviewees are women. All 10 are college educated. All 10 live in the same state as I lived for 21 years. Over half are even from the same part of the state as I am. I did not feel very intimidated or nervous to interview the seven women, and nothing about their behavior toward me showed any intimidation or uneasiness. I think my gender, race, education level, and location all made me have an insider-status with my interviewees. I also informed each of them at the beginning of their interviews that I was once an elementary education major and that I helped teach at the college level. This similarity in occupation was also likely to award me an insider-status with my research subjects.

The only times I felt an uncomfortable or noticeable power dynamic was when I interviewed the three men. At the time, I did not even realize I felt this way, but once I read Koivunen's (2010) article *Practicing Power and Gender in the Field: Learning from Interview Refusals*, I started thinking about my experience with interviewing men. Overall, I had a very pleasant experience interviewing the men and it was very similar to interviewing women. The main discrepancies I'll note are a difference in rapport and tendency for men to act more as storytellers than the women. Looking back at my field notes, interviews with two out of three of the men did not have much rapport or personal conversations between the interviewee and me. The men were more likely to only talk about the strike and were not as interested in knowing personal details about me. The atmosphere was more professional when interviewing men, whereas with interviewing women it felt more natural and laid-back. Building rapport with the female teachers was mostly easy and both of us seemed to be more comfortable. I also noticed that I was less likely to interrupt the male teachers when they were speaking, whereas a few times I would interject while a female teacher was speaking. Obviously, I do not want to ever interrupt or interject during an interview, but my interviews with the female teachers were very conversational and it felt natural to throw in my two cents or a verbal agreement every now and then.

I do think my willingness to let men have more room to speak comes from my socialization of being taught men have more power and authority when it comes to speaking and storytelling. After reading *Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analyses* (1998) where the authors, Anderson and Jack, discuss interviewing women and letting them have the space and opportunity to speak, I think I will be better equipped to interview without interrupting or interjecting. I think I struggled with making the setting too informal and conversational to the

point where I was possibly talking *too much*. Through reading articles about interviewing strategies, I have learned to let the interviewee do the majority of the talking and to not urgently fill any silence or pauses in conversation that may arise. Sometimes people need a moment to gather their thoughts and too often I took these pauses as a sign that I needed to change the subject, which could have kept me from collecting important information.

An obstacle I had not considered before this project is internal confidentiality (Tolich, 2004). According to Tolich (2004), respondents are vulnerable to breaches of internal confidentiality when private and sensitive information are included in a study, and other insiders can recognize whose information it is. I had always understood confidentiality as simply being the practice of using pseudonyms and not naming participants in research studies, however this is only external confidentiality. I had failed to consider the implications of protecting participants' identities from one another. This is especially important for my research because many of my interviewees know each other. I chose to take several precautions when writing up my analysis section in order to protect internal confidentiality. First, I did not include any names or personal identifiers throughout the analysis section and I only used gender-specific pronouns when it was necessary. Next, I did not include vulnerable information about my participants in the analysis write up. For example, some details provided in the interviews could have made some of my participants easily identifiable to other people in the study who are aware of their individual circumstances or experiences. I also did not include the actual names of any cities or school districts in my report. One good point that Tolich (2004) includes is participants being able to identify other participants' speech patterns or "turn of phrase" (p. 103). Tolich does not necessarily provide solutions to this problem but did my best to minimize the risk of a participant

recognizing someone else's turn of speech. I tried to omit any identifiable jargon or phrases from quotes to make them less identifiable to other participants in the study.

Chapter 4 - Motivations for Going on Strike

“For 10 years there was never any raise. For 10 years the budget every single year would get slashed and slashed. We’re down to bare bones. Less than bare bones. We were at our last straw.”

One of the main topics my interviewees wanted to discuss was their grievances with public education and why they wanted to strike. Each interviewee had their own personal struggles and gripes when it comes to being a teacher in Oklahoma, but many shared similar complaints. The nine-day walkout was not an overnight decision or movement. Years, and even decades, of budget cuts, stagnant salaries, and rampant disrespect were common gripes shared among teachers. The main purpose of the walkout was to demand more funding for public schools and a raise for teachers and their support staff. Teachers in Oklahoma had not seen a pay raise for 10 years and funding for public schools had been cut each year for a decade, as well. By the spring of 2018, teachers in Oklahoma were fed up with the state legislature ignoring their pleas for help and they were ready to go on strike, with or without the support of the union and district administrations.

Teacher Pay

The first main category that emerged in this study is the concern about the low salaries teachers receive. Teachers, on average, make less money per year than other professions with similar levels of education. Before the 2018 strike in Oklahoma, first-year teacher salaries began at \$31,600 and the average pay was \$46,300. For comparison purposes, in 2017 the average pay for a four-year nursing degree (BSN) in Oklahoma was \$71,370 (Nightingale College).

According to Wisconsin Education Association Council, the *teacher pay gap* is growing and

teachers are paid 18.7 percent less than comparable professions (Hurley, 2018). The teachers I interviewed spoke about these low salaries, and one even called their salary “unlivable”. One teacher from a metropolitan city in Oklahoma stated, “My take home pay was \$1,985 per month. That was my take home pay. I’m 54 years old and I’ve been teaching for 15 years. That is not a livable wage.” Other teachers I interviewed echoed this sentiment. Two teachers from small towns, each with almost 30 years of experience said in response to why they wanted to strike,

Was part of it the fact I had been a teacher and my daughter who just graduated with a bachelor’s in psychology was making just about the same amount as me? The fact that my husband, he works hard, but only has a two-year degree, he made more than I did for a really long time. And I have my masters. When you go into education, you don’t go into it thinking you’re going to make a million dollars, however you don’t go into thinking if you made just a little bit less you would qualify for free and reduced lunch for your kids.

Oklahoma is a state that economically, isn’t a very high paying state, people say sometimes ‘Well, that’s more money than I make’. It doesn’t matter that I have a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and have taught for 33 years and I take home less than \$4,000 a month. The pay is not on par with other professionals with the same education.

These quotes show just how underpaid and undervalued some teachers feel. Other teachers noted difficulties related to pay such as driving beaten up cars, not being able to put money back for their children’s college funds, and not being able to afford home repairs. One teacher I interviewed even told me his family was fearful of going bankrupt.

We couldn’t put anything back for our daughter’s college. We were driving two really old cars and we were at the point where we needed to move, or we were going to go bankrupt.

It should also be noted that the average years of experience of the interviewees was 21 years. These are not new teachers fresh out of college. To me, it was pretty shocking to learn the

financial hardships of experienced workers in a professional field that requires at least a four-year college degree.

One argument frequently used by those who oppose an increased salary for teachers is the that teachers only work nine months out of the year. Those I interviewed had a lot to say in response to this common misconception that they do not work full-time hours, year-round.

Most of us work well beyond what our contract time is during the week. Most of us work many hours in the summertime when we're off contract to get classrooms ready, go to trainings, do extra schooling..

First myth, that you get the summers off. Everybody thinks you get the summers off. A lot of teachers have second jobs mowing, doing construction, or something else. Almost all of us do. Sometimes I've held multiple jobs during the summer when it's gotten really bad.

Or they say, "You only work 9 months out of the year" and technically it's really 10 most of the time. They don't take into consideration the times you're at school until 6 pm or you take things home with you.

All of the teachers I interviewed reporting working well into the evening, on weekends, during holiday breaks, and/or in the summers. Those I interviewed shared a feeling that they were working more hours than they were getting paid, and even if they had time off in the summer, all of the after-hours work they did during the school year made up for any time off during summer break. Many teachers I interviewed also reporting working second or third jobs in the summer or knowing teachers who did.

Teacher Shortage Crisis

It can be argued that the worst side effect of low teacher pay has been the teacher shortage crisis that exists in Oklahoma. This shortage has resulted in an influx of emergency certified teachers. In August of 2017, there were over 500 teaching vacancies and nearly 500 more eliminated teaching positions in Oklahoma (Marsh & Stein, 2018). This led to a record number of emergency certified teachers in 2017 with nearly 2,000 (U.S. News, 2017; Blanc, 2019). Emergency certified means that someone can receive a temporary teaching certificate without having a degree in education, as long as they have a four-year degree in another field. In theory, this seems like a good idea to get bodies back in the classrooms, but the teachers I interviewed noted the vast problems associated with having so many emergency certified teachers. Teachers I interviewed noted that emergency certified teachers lack critical classroom management skills that are taught in university teaching programs. One teacher explained how she has to spend the majority of the fall semester reteaching skills that were supposed to be taught the year before, but the emergency certified teacher in the grade below her struggled to teach the concepts. One teacher who teaching in a low-income district in a metropolitan city explained how she feels about emergency certified teachers here,

They don't know what they're doing. People think they can come up here and read this book and do this and that's not what it's about. Especially with the kids we teach.

Another teacher from a small town shared a similar viewpoint,

Teaching is not something you can just walk in off the street and do. What other profession do you know of where you can get an emergency certification with no training and walk off the street and do it? There isn't one. For some reason, Oklahoma thinks you can do it in teaching.

These quotes show the frustration some teachers feel about their profession being deskilled and the opportunity to teach being granted to those without formal teaching education. Certified teachers go through four years of hands-on training, including many clinical hours and typically an entire semester of student teaching, just for the same job to be given to someone without any training. Not to mention, certified teachers feel the greatest brunt of the effects of emergency certified teachers when they have to spend a considerable amount of time helping out the emergency certified teachers or reteaching skills that were supposed to have been already taught by an emergency certified teacher.

Teacher turnover is also a major concern in Oklahoma, especially in economically disadvantaged districts. One teacher from one of these districts said,

It kind of makes me cry. I teach in a low socioeconomic district and it's not desirable place for teachers to go, so we have leftovers. Every year my school would have a 50% turnover rate. It's hard watching your coworkers leave. It's stressful because what are we going to be left with? There are no teachers to hire.

In Oklahoma, 40-50 percent of new teachers quit within five years (Blanc, 2019). Many teachers who retire are not replaced due to financial constraints or lack of applicants, then class sizes increase to make up for the shortage of teachers. One teacher I interviewed said, "When I started in the early 2000s, the funding was a lot better then and tanked after that. Here, when people retired, we just didn't fill their classrooms." Student enrollment has risen by 1.5 million since 2008, but there are 135,000 fewer public-school employees (Blanc, 2019). One teacher I interviewed from a metropolitan city explains this phenomenon here,

We knew things like the average turnover rate at one of the best high schools in the state was 70 percent in 5 years. Seventy percent of the faculty left every five years and 50 percent of the replacement teachers were emergency certified.

Low pay and inadequate funding have largely encouraged teachers to leave the state to teach elsewhere, typically in neighboring states like Texas and Kansas. One teacher I interviewed from a large city explained how she is currently considering moving to Texas to get a salary increase of over \$10,000. Another teacher, who is originally from Kansas, has constantly been encouraged to teach in Kansas instead of Oklahoma because of salary differences.

When I came to Oklahoma, I was flat out told “Go back to Kansas” because of the pay.

Kansas isn’t even that far ahead of Oklahoma in rankings. It makes me wonder what education looks like in Massachusetts and those other places that are at the top.

It makes sense that it is difficult for Oklahoma to keep and retain teachers when neighboring states pay teachers a better wage. A quick drive across the border can result in a better quality of life which is a tempting offer for many teachers.

Class Size

The main contributor to the teacher shortage crisis is funding for public schools in Oklahoma. For a decade, funding has been cut each year which makes teachers’ jobs harder and harder to do. Each year teachers either have to adjust to budget cuts which could include increasing their class sizes or learning to teach curriculum with less supplies and resources than the year before.

For 10 years there was never any raise. For 10 years the budget every single year would get slashed and slashed. We’re down to bare bones. Less than bare bones. We were at our last straw.

When it's a constant [budget cuts], you get pretty depressed about it and you feel like nobody cares.

Class size was the main funding concern for the teachers I interviewed. Increased class sizes are the most salient effect of teacher shortages and budget constraints. The teachers I interviewed explained how when teachers in their districts retire, their positions are usually not replaced. This has led to a dwindling number of teachers in schools compared to 10-15 years ago and class sizes have risen as a result. According to my interviewees, class size has a huge effect on how a classroom operates. The teachers I interviewed noted their class sizes increasing from around 20 students, to over 30 students in the last 10 years or so. Every single teacher I interviewed included class size as a main reason for participating in the walkout and it was the main area of concern for increased funding. One high school teacher stated, "I would say class size is the single most important thing in that room because it's hard to have effective classroom management when you've got 35 kids in the room."

Teachers I interviewed noted an increase in behavioral issues as class sizes grew. Many attributed this to teachers not being able to spend enough one-on-one time with students when they have over 30 in their classroom for 50-minute periods. One middle school teacher said, "There are so many effects [of large class sizes]. The amount of time spent one-on-one is less than 2 minutes. The opportunity for individualized attention wasn't there." Many teachers I interviewed expressed their concerns about not being able to give individualized attention. One high school teacher from a major city said,

We have 32-36 kids in one classroom and it's just impossible to help those that are struggling. So, students on the bottom, they can't concentrate. There's too

much talking. They're not getting the individualized attention that they really need.

Other teachers noted struggles related to quiet kids falling behind or being forgotten due to so much class time being taken up by disciplinary needs. Teachers who had been teaching for 20+ years noted that these issues were not as prominent when class sizes were lower. The teachers I interviewed reported demanding for more money during the strike in order to combat large class sizes so they could adequately teach and give more personalized instruction.

Funding

There are also funding issues that exist other than increased class sizes. The high school teachers I interviewed reported clubs, extracurriculars, and electives being cut regularly for the last 10-15 years. They expressed concern regarding students not having as many choices for creative outlets and minimized opportunities for experiencing unique courses and clubs. One teacher who grew up in the same district where she taught recalled,

There were things available to me as a kid that you don't see now: shop, we had debate, drama, they were classes, not just clubs. A variety of art classes. Psychology and sociology at the high school. There were a lot more options and those were the things that got cut because he had to get down to the basics.

Many of the teachers I interviewed included their disdain and disappointment about their students not having access to a diverse range of classes, clubs, and activities. They reported being upset that "core classes" hold the most priority while electives and activities are the first opportunities to be cut. A major reason for this can be attributed to extensive standardized testing

that is done over core subjects. This is yet another example of neoliberalism in public education. Money has been squeezed so tightly and standardized tests have been emphasized so much that public schools are completely constrained when it comes to what they can teach and how they can teach.

Other issues related to funding include lack of supplies, textbooks, and inadequate infrastructure. Through my interviews, I realized inner-city schools are more vulnerable to not having enough supplies such as textbooks and even having enough desks in a classroom to seat everyone. Teachers from smaller towns still struggled with funding issues related to materials, but rather than simply not having supplies or textbooks, many teachers reported having old and outdated textbooks or students having to share copies. One former principal from a low-income district reported,

In one of my chemistry classes, the teacher did labs by having the students watch YouTube videos of experiments because they didn't have the chemicals and we didn't have the money for supplies.

An important and wide-spread side effect of inadequate funding is teachers using their own money to buy materials and supplies for their classrooms. Teachers already are paid low salaries, and on top of this many have to dip into their own pockets to purchase items for their classrooms and students. One teacher explained, "Right now, there's no more pencils or paper, so that's all out of my pocket." Or, if a missing supply could not be bought easily, such as a textbook, teachers I interviewed reported spending their free time making materials themselves. One teacher explains the thought process behind this here,

We've been doing that for years. Not letting the money keep us from having what our kids needed. We would just make it ourselves. If we couldn't buy the

material, we would make it or try to get it free from somewhere. Or spend time retyping things so they could have their own text.

In this quote, this high school teacher was telling me about how she didn't have enough books for all of her students, so when she was at home in the evening, she would retype the sections or chapters and print them out herself. One teacher from a low-income district in a metropolitan city told me she even uses her own money to buy her students items that are not school-related.

It'll pull on your strings. I've paid kids' electric bills. I've bought all new basketballs. I've bought them shorts and t-shirts, so they'd have matching outfits to play.

This was not the only teacher to report spending money on things other than school supplies. Two high school teachers I interviewed reporting buying snacks to keep in their desks for low-income students to have if they come to school hungry. Another high school teacher reported even putting money in students' lunch accounts if they were empty.

I've bought poster paper, books, like novels. I've bought Kleenex. Teachers are soft-hearted people. I've put money in lunch accounts. I've paid for field trips.

The first section of this chapter presented quotes that demonstrate the financial hardships of public-school teachers, yet through interviews I found that many teachers often spend what little funds they do have on their students, so they do not have to go without.

Charter Schools

When it comes to the lack of funding for public schools, many teachers I interviewed noted charter schools as a main antagonist against the funding and prosperity of public schools.

When students leave public schools for charters, the per-pupil funds for that student is taken out of public schools and given to the charter school. Because of this, many teachers believe charter schools are wrongly recruiting students and taking funds that originally belonged to public schools. One teacher addressed this idea here,

I don't agree with the fact that you're going to take funding away from public education where kids can get a free education. That's what our country was built on. Taking that opportunity away. We don't have enough funding as it is. You're going to take some of that money and give it to charter schools?

Charter schools and their rising popularity are a direct product of neoliberalism and the effort to privatize education. In my interviewees, I interviewed teachers who rest on both sides of the charter school debate. One interviewee, who was strongly against the popularity of charter schools stated,

And here's the thing about a charter, a charter doesn't take everyone. They take the cream off the top and then leave the bottom and they call that a success. The research is out there. You go do the homework. I've done it, I'm telling you, charter schools are not out-performing public schools. They aren't.

Many of the teachers I interviewed believed charter schools are not fair because they get to pick and choose what students they have. Many public-school teachers worry that charter schools are a dangerous form of discrimination. One middle-school science teacher said,

There's a big movement going on right now and it's hitting Oklahoma, and especially my district really hard. The movement is to replace public education with private and charter schools... It's separating the [socioeconomic] classes.

On the other hand, one teacher I interviewed currently works for a publicly funded charter school and believes it is an important alternative to traditional public school. This teacher predominately works with children with behavioral or disciplinary issues. In this interview, this teacher explained to be how students who are seen as “problematic” are sometimes forced out of traditional public schools due to constant suspensions and expulsions. For many of the students this teacher works with, alternative forms of public education are absolutely necessary for students to graduate high school.

Given the nature of the kids I work with, in my opinion, there are kids that get pushed out of schools. Suspend, suspend, suspend, suspend. I do not have the same mindset on suspension that most people have. Then the kids stop going. This is an alternative to get the kids still educated.

Regardless of where one stands on the charter school debate, it can at least be understood and agreed upon that charter schools are a threat to public education if their enrollment numbers continue to expand. There is the possibility that the expansion of charter schools could lead to widespread privatization of public schools, of which many of my interviewees are fearful.

Value of Teachers

One challenge public-school teachers have faced in recent decades is legitimizing their value and defending their profession. Many teachers I interviewed reported feeling disrespected due to their profession. There is an overwhelming idea that exists in society that downplays the intelligence and importance of public-school teachers. One teacher reflected on this idea,

I got tired of being disrespected over my profession. It didn't really bother me when I was young. People would be like 'You were so smart, why did you become a teacher?' And I would think 'Don't you want your kids to have a smart teacher?'

One teacher, in particular, noted gender inequality as an explanation for teaching not being taken seriously as a legitimate profession. The majority of public-school teachers are women and it is an extremely feminized profession dependent on emotional labor, especially at the elementary level.

Years ago, when I started, I think it was less respected because it was a female job. Females are not respected as males are. They are more respected now, but especially then. I knew when I started teaching that I wasn't going to make a good salary. But I planned on having my husband provide for my family. And now, that's how a lot of people think, including constituents. Well, that's not the case anymore. Young girls going to college plan to support themselves and their families. It's a cultural shift. Young women now do not plan on relying on a husband.

Here, the interviewee explains the cultural shift in which young women are more independent than they were in the past. Teaching used to be seen as a supplemental income that women would make, but their husband's job was still the main source of income for the family. This is one explanation for why teachers' salaries are so low.

Education, a lot of times, gets put down on the lower levels. For one, this probably won't surprise you, but I'm a bit of a feminist. A majority of people who teach are women. A lot of people feel like it's just a second job for the family. The man is making the big money. They think, 'We don't really need to pay the teachers because they're just doing it for their 'play money'. Which is so far from the truth it isn't even funny.

It is hard for teaching to gain legitimacy when it is a female-dominated profession and when it used to only be seen as supplemental income. Times have changed, women are not getting

married as young or relying on husbands as often, but the value of teachers and how much they deserve to be paid has still not been recognized.

The teachers I interviewed stressed the importance of their job and their desire for others to recognize this importance. Two high school teachers stated, “Teachers are the lifeblood of a school. It lives or dies on whether or not you have good teachers” and “Public education is the foundation for everything else.” Public education is what turns children into successful members of society. Public education is the source of constant socialization and education of children, which directly impacts how the adults of a society turn out. This is why the quality of public education is crucial to the wellbeing of a society. One teacher noted that here, “In my opinion, a higher educated populous decreases crime and it’s better for everybody.”

In addition to being valuable, the teachers I interviewed believed their value to society is reason for receiving a pay raise. Teachers noted that they do not currently receive the salary or funding amounts required to do their job at the highest level. Some teachers also reported being shamed for asking for more money.

There’s this stigma against teachers asking for money for salaries. People say, ‘You’re not in it for the money. It’s a calling’. I get that. It is a calling. But there’s nothing shameful about saying ‘I’m worth more than this’. There’s nothing shameful about being fairly compensated for the work that you do.

Teachers believed they had experienced and documented enough grievances and difficulties to warrant a strike, so the next step was mobilizing a joint effort to strike across the state.

Mobilization

One main theme I discovered throughout researching this strike and conducting interviews is how teachers organized themselves outside of traditional means of mobilization.

Many of them organized themselves without going through the unions and many utilized technology to virtually assemble and chat secretly. In early 2018, before the walkout in April, teachers had been organizing sick-ins amongst themselves as a form of protesting. One high school teacher who helped organized these sick-ins explains it here,

What we did is secretly set up a private chat room and coordinate calling in sick at the exact same time, at midnight, so that the school couldn't open effectively the next day.

These sick-ins were not isolated events solely in one district. Two other teachers I interviewed from other parts of the state reported participating in calling in sick to work or knowing a colleague who had. Teachers also secretly organized other forms of protest, such as blocking the streets of their school.

We had schools that wouldn't close and so we would all agree to go to the school and we would block the streets making it impossible for the buses to drop the kids off. We'd all go down there and we would get there before school started, we would occupy all of the lanes, and then we would turn all our cars off. The police would come up to us and go, "What's going on?" I would say, "My car won't start."

The secretive organization amongst did not end here. Many of the teachers I interviewed reported utilizing private Facebook groups, group texts, and other private forms of communication to discuss the protests and to organize themselves accordingly. The use of social media sites lasted through the nine-day walkout, and a popular Facebook page created in March of 2018 is still used by teachers today.

The OEA, the most prominent teachers' union in the state, was also responsible for some of the organization and also served as a liaison between the teachers and the state government.

One small town had a teacher who was an active member of OEA and this teacher was the main

source of information for the teachers of that town leading up to the strike. A teacher from this district said, “We have a teacher who is involved with OEA and he communicates with us what is going on and what decisions are being made.” Other schools, however, were not this lucky and depended on social media, the news, and OEA itself to get their information. Some teachers I interviewed reported having no personal or professional ties with the union at all. Traditionally, it is expected to strike through a strong union, however in Oklahoma, many teachers are not union members and the union is not a strong influence on many teachers, especially teachers in disadvantaged or rural school districts.

Teachers had been putting pressure on the union, which in turn was putting pressure on the state legislature, to pass legislation regarding increasing teacher pay and school funding. Teachers were threatening to walkout of their classrooms unless their demands were met. This resulted in legislation being passed the week before the walkout that granted teachers a \$6,100 raise and a \$50 million increase in funding. This bill, however, only fulfilled part of the teachers’ demands. The teachers and the union wanted a \$10,000 pay increase over three years for every teacher, a \$5,000 increase for support staff, and \$200 million more in funding. After the teachers were essentially low-balled by the state government, the strike to demand more money was born. Teachers were threatening to strike with or without the support of the union. One teacher I interviewed who was a key organizer said,

We had been trying to convince the union to support a walk-out and the union just wasn’t having it, they just absolutely would not support the walk-out. We called in the meeting and said, “With or without the unions, with or without the superintendents, we will walk out.”

I interviewed one teacher, from a small town, who was the only teacher in her district to participate in the walkout.

I took it upon myself to send out an email to all the teachers in our district. I decided to be the one to talk about it and organize it.... Got no response whatsoever. Zero response. Not one person would speak up and say they want to participate. Never being one to back down from my beliefs. I was the only person from the entire district who participated and went down there by myself.

This teacher worked in a school district where the administration was completely against the walkout, which affected the willingness of other teachers to participate, due to fear of being disciplined or ostracized. Through my interviews, I learned that methods of organization varied on whether or not the administration of the district was on board with the walkout and whether or not the district had close ties with the OEA. Some teachers used more traditional means of protesting, and others were forced to do it secretly.

Summary

There were a lot of factors present that led to the decision for teachers to strike in the spring of 2018. Teachers had gone 10 years without a pay raise, and many were facing dire financial circumstances with the salary they were receiving. Many teachers reported having second or third jobs or knowing teachers who kept multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. The teachers reported working long hours outside of their traditional school-day schedules, such as evenings, weekends, and holiday breaks without pay. My interviewees expressed frustration toward not receiving the same compensation as similar career fields, especially the teachers who hold graduate degrees.

Similar to pay, the funding of public schools was a major concern for the teachers I interviewed, especially the teachers from low-income districts in metropolitan areas.

Interviewees noted the extreme teacher shortage crisis that exists in Oklahoma due to low

salaries and decreased funding. Because of this, Oklahoma has a vast number of emergency certified teachers and class sizes have increased over the past decade. All of the teachers reported increased class sizes as a main reason for the walkout. Also, in regard to funding, every teacher I interviewed reported using their own money to buy supplies or other necessities for their students that the school could not provide due to decreased funding. The teachers expressed anger and frustration toward the public education budget that seems to be cut year after year by the state legislature.

Many of my interviewees brought up charter schools as the main threat toward public education. The emergence and growth of charter schools have consequently taken per-pupil away from public schools because when a student switches to a charter school, that money goes with them. One of my interviewees, who currently works for a charter school, explained that she believes funding belongs to the student, not the school, and therefore it is fair for the money to be taken from the school if a student decides to leave. My interviewees were overall mixed in regard to their feelings and opinions toward charter schools, but it is important to note charter schools as a result of extreme neoliberal policies that have invaded public education. The privatization of public schools is being pushed more and more through charters and private schools, and many of my interviewees believe that the state would prefer to privatize education so they will not have to deal with it. Public schools have been being defunded for over a decade, and it cannot be ignored that public education is being threatened by the attractiveness of privatization.

The idea that the concerns related to teaching and public education were being ignored led many teachers to believe that they were being shortchanged when it comes to being valued and respected professionals. Some of my interviewees, especially the women, noted that their

profession is undervalued due to the fact that it is made up of mainly women. Some of my interviewees said they feel like their profession is still seen as supplemental income like it was when women used to solely rely on their husbands for money. Some teachers believe the salaries of teachers needs to be modernized and comparable to other professions that require a four-year college degree. Teachers wanted better pay and funding, but they also were striking to gain respect.

Due to all of the reasons stated above, in the spring of 2018, teachers began organizing themselves into what eventually ended up being a nine-day walkout. Some teachers I interviewed, however, had been participating in protests prior to the walkout, such as calling in sick en masse. Teachers largely used secret channels of communication such as private group chats and private Facebook groups to create and organize these protests. Teachers also utilized technology to receive information about what was going on in public education through the news and social media sites. The union was also involved in the organization process, but mainly only in districts where there were active OEA members who could disseminate information. Not all of the teachers I interviewed taught in districts that has strong union ties, and these were the teachers who heavily relied on the news and social media for their information and organization.

Chapter 5 - Experiences during the Strike

“The first day it was just, oh my gosh, there was so much excitement as just, I don’t want to say like a circus environment, everything was organized and put together. Everybody that was there was so pumped up and excited because it was actually happening. There had been so much talk about it and I don’t think anyone thought it would actually happen. We were there and people were going to have to listen to us.”

After threatening the union and the state government that they would go on strike if their demands were not met, many teachers in Oklahoma walked out of their classrooms on April 2nd, 2018 which is now known as the first day of the nine-day walkout. This date was selected by the teachers. The OEA wanted to wait until May to walkout, to avoid disrupting spring standardized testing, but teachers were tired of waiting and demanded an April walkout. Many believed they had the momentum and feared that waiting until May would be too late to bring about any change. The teachers wanted to essentially put their money where their mouths were and actually go on strike. During this time, social media, especially Facebook, was a key player in the dissemination of information and organization. Support for the walkout varied among teachers, parents, administrations, community members, and state representatives. The central hub of the walkout was the State Capitol building in Oklahoma City, where rallies were held on each of the days of the walkout. Teachers made their way to the city, pitched tents, carried signs, and demanded to speak with their representatives to advocate for themselves and for public education. The teachers were met with a lot of pushback inside the capitol building. Finally, on April 12th, the walkout ended with mixed emotions and feelings about whether or not the movement was successful.

Social Media

It is almost impossible to talk about the 2018 Oklahoma teachers' walkout without talking about Facebook. Private Facebook groups were utilized for teachers and supporters of the walkout to join to talk privately, share posts and opinions, and disseminate information regarding education bills and what was happening during the walkout. There are two main Facebook groups that were used, and are still used, by supporters of public education: "Oklahoma Teachers United" and "Oklahoma Teachers—The Time is Now!". OTU has 13,000 members and OTTN, which is now renamed "Oklahoma Edvocates", has over 65,000 members and was the most popular and frequently noted group by those I interviewed. I spoke with a teacher who was involved in the process of making the OTTN Facebook page, "The only thing that saved us was a clever millennial who figured out how to unionize us without paying dues." The teacher responsible for this massive Facebook page was a middle school teacher in his mid-twenties in 2018. The teacher I quoted attributed this teacher's young age as the main factor in why he was able to create such a successful Facebook group. The majority of my interviewees reported being a member of this Facebook page and noted its usefulness throughout their interviews:

I got most of my information about the strike from the Facebook page.

The first I heard about the strike was through the Facebook page, "The Time is Now", [the page admin] was posting about the strike and stuff.

The Facebook page, "The Time is Now", he has done a phenomenal job of updating people and keeping it going. Keeping it alive. Updating us on educational policies in the state.

What I remember the most is the biggest push came from [the page admin]. We all started joining that Facebook page. He really started a fire and helped all that go through a Facebook page.

The Facebook page was also a key player in disseminating information during the walkout. The administrator was regularly posting about what was going on at the state capitol.

One teacher I interviewed said:

That became the go-to page with anything to do related to the walkout. He had the information about pretty much everything. He would post information from the president of the union, information about the church and parking, anybody that had information—that's where they posted it. A huge resource.

An important part of this quote is at the end where the teacher explains how *anyone* could post to this Facebook group. This is an important distinction from other Facebook groups, such as Oklahoma Teachers United, where only the administrators of the page are allowed to make posts. OTTTIN allowed anyone and everyone to make posts to the page to either express their opinions about what was happening or to share information and resources related to the strike. This resulted in an extremely active Facebook page full of resources, ideas, and thoughtful engagement among its 65,000 members. By being a member of this group, teachers had unlimited information at their fingertips. Many teachers treated this online organization as an informal teachers union where they advocated for one another and planned their protests.

Apart from the enormous Facebook group of teachers, some of those I interviewed also noted using their own social media accounts to discuss the state of public education and the strike itself. Social media gives a platform to anyone who creates an account to express their thoughts and opinions. This is a unique form of power and being heard that did not exist before social media. A high school teacher told me a story about how they took to Facebook a couple weeks before the strike to make posts about how much overtime they were working. The teacher explained that they decided to do this as a way to inform their Facebook “friends” what many teachers are experiencing on a daily basis. This teacher explained that many of his acquaintances

simply were not aware of the problems and struggles that exist for public school teachers. Here, they explain their experience with using Facebook as a platform for activism:

That was crazy. I made a post and it was 8 am on a Saturday morning and we were here [at school] until 5 pm that night. I made a post at the end of the day and took a picture of me standing in front of the building with an empty parking lot. It was a few weeks before the strike and we kind of knew it was coming. I thought I needed to get ahead of this, at least in my social circle. That post had like 500 likes. It was something stupid. I had people hit me up that I didn't know. I don't like doing selfies, but I did them for those posts. Pictures carry a thousand words. My mindset was I need people and the public to know. They had no idea what we go through. They had no idea on a typical week I put in 70 hours and I'm not getting paid overtime.

Another one of my interviewees shared with me how they used their social media accounts, mainly Facebook and Twitter, to post about the strike and general and what she was seeing during the strike at the state capitol.

I'm a pot stirrer so I would retweet to get people fired up. I was pretty active with that kind of stuff. I let people who weren't involved, regular joe people, through Facebook, through Twitter, and just in general would let them know what was going on and what I was seeing.

Social media sites were home to overwhelming support for teachers and the strike, but there were also people who were vocal about their condemnation toward the strike. Support for the strike was mixed among online communities and real-life.

Support and Pushback for the Walkout

The majority of the teachers I interviewed indicated an overall feeling of support during the walkout. This was an interesting finding because during the walkout I remember seeing backlash on social media. For example, a quote from the governor of Oklahoma at the time of

the strike, Mary Fallin, was circulating throughout social media sites. Fallin compared teachers asking for more funding to “a teenage kid that wants a better car” (Sanchez, 2018). Multiple teachers I interviewed brought up this quote during their interviews and followed with an eye-roll or scoff. Other news articles that were written during the strike include Regardless of the instances of pushback on social media, most of the interviewees reported not experiencing any pushback personally. Most teachers were thankful, and some were even emotional, when discussing the abundance of support they received from their communities.

A few of my interviewees, however, experienced some extreme opposition during their striking efforts. For example, I had one interviewee from a small town who was the only person from her district to participate in the strike. This teacher was encouraged by her school and administration to not participate. I also had two interviewees who ended up quitting their jobs and changing districts as a result of conflict with their administration during the strike. These teachers were encouraged, and basically forced, to leave their school districts. They were met with threats of demotion, which prompted them to leave for another district. Another one of my interviewees had their vehicle vandalized due to their advocacy efforts.

Five of the teachers I interviewed were from the same district, and unsurprisingly, they all reported similar accounts of support from the administration and the community. They all described a high level of support from their administration, especially the superintendent. One teacher from this district stated:

Our superintendent was great. She was on our team. And that’s not how it usually feels as a teacher. To some extent, the superintendent and the administration is “them against us.”

Similarly, another teacher from the same district said:

The fact that they [the administration] were supportive of what we did. Even after we were called back to work, they provided opportunities to send teams down to the capitol for the rest of the year.

This a contrast from four of the teachers I interviewed who did not have the support of the administration, which affected their experiences during the walkout. Along with support from the administration, the five teachers from this district all described feelings of support from their community. Teachers from this district told me that some teachers would go to the state capitol and others would stay behind to protest in their hometown. They explained that some of them took turns doing both. During this time, picketing and protesting in their hometown, they were able to gauge community support:

The local support was overwhelmingly positive. When we were picketing [in their hometown] people would come by and give us gas cards. One guy brought us Starbucks. A couple of people brought cases of water... Boxes of donuts.. and they would say, "Hey we really support you!" It was really nice.

In addition to community support in their hometown, these teachers also felt supported when they were protesting at the state capitol building,

We got gift cards for gas. Teds brought lunch one day. Chick-fil-a sent out chicken breakfast sandwiches. And it was all free.

It was nice. It was awesome. A lot of people were there. We walked around the capitol and walked and walked. All the cars would honk. It was all unity. Everybody was all together. People were driving by and honking. A whole lot of support.

The State Capitol Rallies

One of the most interesting topics to hear my interviewees discuss was the atmosphere at the state capitol building in Oklahoma City during the walkout. All of the teachers I interviewed went to the capitol building at least once to participate in the rallies, but the majority went multiple days over the course of the nine-day walkout. The environment was overwhelmingly described as positive and even *fun*. At first, hearing that the walkout was fun threw me off guard. I had a difficult time understanding how a serious protest could be fun, but the teachers' explanations made it clear how it was a positive and enjoyable environment. Here are a few quotes from my interviewees that describe the environment at the capitol:

It was phenomenal. The amount of people there was amazing. And it wasn't just teachers.

The very first few days, it was hard to describe. Thinking about the number of people that were there. It was just amazing. It wasn't just teachers. There were parents, college kids, students, different groups that just wanted to support educators. You could not hardly move around the capitol. You can forget going inside, unless you got there way early and got in line.

There was a real atmosphere on the capitol grounds of not a family, but like Woodstock. There were signs, schools had tents set up, someone would bring an ice chest full of water bottles, people would have food. We would march around and picket for a while, and then we would sit down and rest, some of us would try to go inside the capitol building to talk to some of our senators and representatives. It was really crowded. There were thousands of people there.

The first day it was just, oh my gosh, there was so much excitement as just, I don't want to say like a circus environment, everything was organized and put together. Everybody that was there was so pumped up and excited because it was actually happening. There had been so much talk about it and I don't think anyone thought it would actually happen. We were there and people were going to have to listen to us.

There are a couple things that really stuck with me. One was that they were playing a Tom Petty song, "You can stand me up at the gates of hell and I won't back down." That was the spirit and it captured that spirit perfectly.

We enjoyed spending the time together and we felt like we were doing something important. We would take our folding lawn chairs like we were going to a soccer game.

We had canopies set up. It was like gameday. Schools went down early, we would mark off our territory, sent groups to walk around and groups to go inside, took buses together.

These quotes illustrate the pure excitement that teachers felt when they were rallying at the state capitol. Teachers compared the capitol grounds during the walkout to a sporting event, a circus, and even Woodstock. According to a KOCO 5 News YouTube video from April 3, 2018, some of the chants teachers shouted in union were:

We're not leaving!

Fund our schools!

No ifs, no buts, no education cuts!

Many of them expressed excitement about *finally doing something* instead of just talking about their problems. Teachers also reported feelings of comradery:

The signs were funny. They were hysterical. It was just the comradery. Some person brought her living room furniture, a chair, a table, a lamp, and just camped out there [outside the capitol building]. Sometimes you have to make light of things to get through them.

The comradery, the sense of a team, we're all in this together.



Figure 1 Oklahoma teachers rally outside the state capitol.

Credit: Nate Billings / The Oklahoman¹



Figure 2 Aerial view of the teachers protesting.

Credit: Sue Ogrocki / AP press²

¹ Billings, N. (2018). *Oklahoma teachers rally outside the state capitol* [Photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.ewa.org/ewa-radio/lessons-oklahoma-teachers-strike>

² Ogrocki, S. (2018). *Aerial view of the teachers protesting at the state capitol building* [Photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-teachers-spending-20180402-story.html>



Figure 3 Picture of teacher’s sign during a rally at the capitol.

Credit: Sue Ogrocki / AP Press³

All in all, every single teacher I interviewed reported an extremely positive atmosphere at the state capitol. Some informants even described it as “fun.” The teachers enjoyed spending time with one another, meeting teachers from different districts and cities, making signs, yelling chants, and experiencing the overwhelming feeling that they were “finally doing something.”

According to my interviewees, the days at the capitol were structured like this:

- Drive, carpool, or take a bus to the state capitol building in Oklahoma City
- Set up tents, canopies, awnings, chairs, and whatever else needed to “mark your territory”
- Walk around with your homemade sign, listen to speakers, have conversations with other teachers, participate in chants

³ Ogrocki, S. (2018). *Melissa Knight, who teaches art at an Ardmore, Oklahoma middle school, joins a teachers' rally at the state capitol in Oklahoma City to protest low school funding*

- Snack on free food provided by supporters of the walkout, or on whatever you brought yourself
- Wait in line to get inside of the capitol building, speak with representatives, get into debates/discussions with them, advocate for more money for funding, advocate for a more sustainable funding source

Conflicts with State Representatives

While teachers were rallying at the state capitol over the nine-day period, they also made a concerted effort to get inside of the capitol building to speak with their representatives. The teachers I interviewed all explained how change had to happen within politics and the government. This belief made it imperative to actually speak with those persons who represent their districts. Leading up to the walkout, many teachers I interviewed were unhappy with the way their representatives and senators were voting in regard to education bills. Some teachers felt like their representatives did not have their constituents', including teachers, best interests in mind when voting and addressing education bills. Because of this, hundreds of teachers packed inside of the capitol building to demand conversations with the politicians that represent them. As one middle school teacher said, "You're voted in to represent people. You've got to talk to people."

The first step was navigating the capitol building and figuring out which offices belonged to which representatives. One informant explains this experience here:

It wasn't arranged. You just went it. It's just open. We had lists of the representatives and where their offices were.

Teachers were aggressive and persistent when demanding to speak with their representatives and legislators. They wanted to physically be seen so they could not be ignored.

It became inconvenient for the legislators when we showed up on their doorstep and we camped out there for however many days it was. It was the only way we had. We had been doing everything else. We'd been writing emails and sending letters to our legislators. We had been doing that for years and it hadn't had any impact. I think when you push people to their limit, you get uncomfortable.

There was lots of lobbying [before the walkout]. As far as writing and contacting representatives about returning money to school funding and increasing teacher pay. It just got lip service. It just fell on deaf ears.

This teacher explained how the goal was to make the politicians uncomfortable. Activism from a distance had not been working for teachers.

Unfortunately, many representatives still found ways to ignore the teachers, even when they were knocking down their doors.

A lot of them hid from us or they wouldn't be in their office or they wouldn't come to work that day. They didn't want to deal with us. It was hundreds of people in the capitol building.

When the legislators refused to meet with constituents, they actually refused us access to their floor.

They'd make sure that they closed their doors, or they wouldn't show up for meetings. Some of them acted like children. That part was very frustrating.

Everybody just plopped on the floor [of the capitol building] so that they [legislators] couldn't get out. We were trying to send a message. The highway patrolman came out and said, "I'm going to arrest every one of you if you don't get up." So, we stayed sitting. We wanted them to know that we're not going away.



Figure 4 Aerial view of teachers inside the state capitol building.

Credit: Nick Oxford / Reuters⁴



Figure 5 Teachers inside the state capitol building.

Credit: Scott Heins / Getty Images⁵

⁴ Oxford, N. (2018). *Aerial view of teachers inside the state capitol building* [Photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/12/us/oklahoma-teachers-strike.html>

⁵ Heins, S. (2018). *Teachers inside the state capitol building* [Photo]. Retrieved from <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/oklahoma-teachers-strike-reject-lawmakers-proposal-7ac14db37edd/>

Almost every single teacher I interviewed reported instances of legislators refusing to open their doors, hiding from teachers, ignoring teachers, or simply not showing up to work that day to not be questioned. This was one of the more emotional topics throughout the interviews and one that incited the most anger. Conflict broke out multiple times throughout the course of the walkout between teachers and legislators. The teachers were fed up and on edge, and many of the legislators did not want to be put on the spot to answer questions.

As a human, I felt compassion for him [state representative of the district] because he was obviously uncomfortable with all of us standing there putting him on the spot. The oil business executives weren't standing there. The people with the money weren't standing there and that's how he had voted.

The teachers I interviewed repeatedly told me that they just wanted answers. They wanted to know why politicians were continuously voting against the interests of public education. Many of them felt like they had been lied to in the past and they wanted the opportunity to call out and address those who had lied.

Our representative lit a fire under me because he lied to our faces multiple times. He'd go in and vote the opposite of what he was telling the teachers. He would act like he was our friend, but he was not.

He [state legislator] stood there on the steps and promised we'd be taken care of and then we weren't.

These confrontations between teachers and state politicians escalated, in some cases, to throwing out insults and hostility. Here are a few accounts of some of the more problematic experiences teachers had when attempting to address state legislators:

Some of them closed their office doors. My senator walked away from us. Some of the senators were hostile toward the teachers. Like making derogatory remarks like, “How come your math scores are so low?”

There was a session that was caught on cell phone where our representative was just cussing out the teachers. Inside his office. He was dropping F-bombs.

It wasn't really the teachers. We had one senator, who is no longer there, he would get so frustrated and he was flinging papers and at one point cried. That's all I'm going to say.

Our representative got so angry several times. The way he talked to people was like, “Are you kidding me” It was no, NO surprise whatsoever that he didn't get reelected.

Those I interviewed expressed a lot of anger and frustration at the fact that some legislators were ignoring them, getting defensive, acting hostile, and overall undermining their striking efforts. This behavior did not allow for any constructive or useful conversations to take place, which was the whole point of speaking with legislators. Not all legislators, however, were completely dismissive of the teachers. But the insults and rude remarks by those who antagonized the teachers overshadowed those who were willing to listen.

We talked to senators and most of them, not all, most of them were polite. Some told us that we were greedy and somebody even said *whispering* “You don't take us out to eat steak for lunch like other lobbyists do” and we were like, “Because we can't afford it!

In this quote above, one interviewee explains that teachers do not have the funds and resources to buy the attention of legislators to successfully lobby their interests. This same interviewee reported the anger some legislators expressed when their decisions were being questioned by teachers:

There are a lot of people in this world that think if they say it, then it's true, and we should just believe it. They get very frustrated if someone says, "I don't think so."

The overall feeling of my interviewees toward speaking with state legislators was frustration. Even though some of my interviewees reported that many of the representatives were polite and willing to listen, the overall consensus is that their efforts were falling on deaf ears.

We didn't really feel like, even though we had been there en masse, and we had the support of the majority of the state behind us, in the end the legislators could still do whatever they wanted and they still didn't really support public education like we would hope.

End of the Strike

After nine days of many districts and schools being closed and daily rallies at the capitol building, the president of OEA, Alicia Priest, announced that the walkout was over on April 12th, 2018. The decision to end the strike came from the fact that state legislators had not made any more concessions to the teachers since the walkout began. Remember, the pay raise and funding increase was passed *before* the walkout began. The OEA decided they were not going to get any more money or funding, and that it was time to get back in the classroom. This decision to end the strike was met with mixed emotions from the teachers. Some believed it was indeed time to end the strike, but others were angry at the decision and wanted to keep going until more of their demands were met. My interviewees were similarly mixed in their opinions.

Those I interviewed provided a few different reasons they believe the walkout ended. The first reason was the same as what the OEA believed—the teachers had gotten all they were going to get out of the state government.

I think that it ended when it did simply because there had been some concessions. There had been some, “This is what we’re gonna get” and then people realized there isn’t any more money. I think that people felt we got the point across. And I think that’s the biggest thing.

Another teacher I interviewed expressed that they believed the state government and legislators were waiting out the teachers demands because they knew the teachers could not strike forever.

This became difficult to sustain, and I think this is what the opponents of the strike wanted. They knew at some point we would go back.

Due to the nature of teachers’ jobs, it does make sense that legislators would hold out for as long as they could without making any more concessions because they teachers would have to go back to work sooner than later.

Teachers, unlike strikers in other professions, faced unique circumstances while striking because their absence directly affected the livelihood and well-being of children. A few teachers I interviewed expressed concerns about being gone from school for too long and ultimately harming the students that depend on them most. One interviewee expresses these concerns here:

It’s not just about kids being out of the classroom. When kids aren’t at school, we have lots of kids who aren’t eating. For a lot of kids, breakfast and lunch are eaten at school. That may be the two best meals they have all day long. For some kids, school is the safe place in their life. This started to weigh on us.

Many teachers were worried about their students not getting enough to eat at home or spending a lot of time in an unsafe situation, instead of being at school. This was especially common for teachers who teach younger students and teachers who teach children from lower socio-

economic status backgrounds. Some of the teachers also worried about the effects the walkout was having on parents and families.

There were some that wanted to keep going, not any that I knew personally, but some I had seen on social media. I think we were worried too. Parents had been paying for daycare for two weeks and stuff like that. We were afraid we were going to lose some support.

This teacher, among others, indicated that they feared that if the strike continued past 12 days, that they would lose support from the parents and the community. As discussed earlier, the support of the communities was extremely important to the teachers and many of them were conscious of the effects their absence had on their communities and the families within it.

Teachers did not want to risk not having the community on their side.

I feel like the strike needed to be stopped because if we would have kept on, then we would have lost our public support. I think we stopped at the right time. We got a lot of very good press and if it would have continued, I think the media would have turned on us.

On the other hand, a few of my interviewees were not satisfied with the way the walkout ended and wished it would have gone on longer. They believed if they stayed out longer, then maybe more concessions would have been made. This teacher expressed disappointment with the union leadership and believe they did not push the state government as much as they should have:

I was kind of disappointed in how it ended. To me it kind of seemed like our union leadership kind of caved and didn't hold their ground for all of our demands. We didn't get the full amount of the pay raise and we didn't get as much funding. We didn't get all of those demands. I guess it's like some people said, you do have to compromise.

One high school teacher explained to me how during the time of the walkout, they agreed that it needed to end on April 12th. Looking back two years later, however, this teacher changed their mind.

Interviewer: If you could go back, is there anything you would do differently?

Interviewee: I would have stayed out longer.

This teacher told me that at first, they agreed that the walkout needed to end due to concerns about students and waning support from the public. Two years later, this teacher was able to confidently state that they would have fought harder for more funding if they had the opportunity to go back in time. Yes, concessions were made by the state which granted teachers a pay raise over half of what they wanted, but the amount of funding they received was only one-fourth of what they originally wanted. Regardless, most of the teachers I interviewed said they understood why the strike ended when it did and admitted the hands of the OEA and the teachers were tied.

I think it should have went on a little bit longer, but it was getting to where the legislators weren't listening to us or were shutting their doors.

One main question throughout the end of my interviews was whether or not the teachers believed the strike was successful. This was one of the questions I was most anxious to ask, due to the unique circumstances of the walkout. No new concessions were made by the state government over the course of the nine-day strike. Teachers had received a \$6,100 pay raise and schools had been granted a \$50 million funding increase *before* the walkout began. Essentially, the walkout yielded no more money for teachers and schools. It can be argued, however, that the

threat of a teacher strike is what pushed legislators to grant the salary and funding raise. I wanted to find out whether or not the strike was seen as successful from those who actually participated.

Many of my interviewees described the walkout as a “partial success.” The justification for this belief comes from the fact that teachers got *part* of what they were asking for, but not all of it. One middle school teacher said, “It [the walkout] was not a complete failure, but it [funding] is still not up to where it needs to be.” Similarly, when I asked an elementary school teacher from a lower-income district if they believed the strike was success they said, “A partial success. The teachers are still way overwhelmed.” Another teacher stated:

I think it was a short-term success. We’re better than we were, but still not where we need to be.

The idea that the concessions made in the spring of 2018 were not enough was echoed by another middle school teacher: “They still have not come up with a good sustainable funding source that will always be there.” This teacher spent a significant amount of time explaining to me their frustration with the fact that funding for education is so dependent on how the oil companies are doing. This teacher expressed the great desire to having funding for education come from a more dependable source, because the state of oil is so up-and-down in Oklahoma. This teacher believed public education would continue to have funding issues until a more sustainable source of funding is implemented.

A few teachers expressed to me that they believed the strike was a success, even though not all demands were met.

I feel good about what we got. We were pretty happy with what we got. I had several friends who said we should have stayed out on the strike longer, but I gotta say, the support for the strike started waning across the state. There

were fewer and fewer districts who were allowing their teachers to be at the capitol than at school.

I think the strike was very successful. And not just because teachers got a raise. Support staff got a raise—nobody thought it was enough. What the OEA was calling for, as far as the raises for teachers and support staff and to put funding back into schools, they didn't get all the numbers they wanted. You never do. I think there were some good negotiating going on. The pressure has got to stay on to continue that momentum to get funds back into schools.

In some ways, yes I would say it was a success. They did increase funding. They cut so deep that we still aren't back up to where funding was before the cuts. They've made a significant increase and it's better, but that's just to get the funding back where it was. But that doesn't even take into consideration the fact that enrollment has grown.

These quotes show that some teachers have an overall perception that the strike was successful, but there is still more to be done. Quite a few of those I interviewed discussed how they just wanted funding to go back to what it was before all of the cuts.

Education had hit rock bottom. I want to think we wouldn't let it get that bad again. If we hit rock bottom, then a walkout might be considered again.

This teacher described the state of education before the walkout as "rock bottom." Rock bottom is the result of over a decade of funding cuts and stagnant teacher salaries. The results yielded from the threats of a teacher strike gave *some* money back to the teachers and the schools, but many of my interviewees do not believe this was enough to result in permanent, positive changes in public education. Some teachers even expressed that they could foresee another teacher strike happening in the future if nothing more changes.

The last set of questions to wrap up my interviews were about what has changed since the walkout ended. My project is unique in the fact that I interviewed teachers almost two years after

the walkout. My interviews took place in January of 2020 and because of this the teachers were able to tell me what changes were made in their respective personal lives, schools, and districts due to the salary and funding increases.

A few teachers provided personal accounts of how their lives improved after receiving a pay raise. Two high school teachers told me how they were able to purchase new vehicles:

Now I'm driving a new car. I drove a shitbox. I did! Kids would laugh and go, "Oh my god, why do you drive that thing?"

We typically had at least one car that was on its last leg. For the first time in my life I bought a new car.

The same teacher from the second quote was also able to redo a bathroom in his house. Other teachers reported improved personal financial situations due to the pay raise.

The group of teachers I interviewed who were from the same district all reported positive changes within their district due to the increase in funding. This was a district that was not suffering financially as much as some teachers from other districts reported. Three teachers from the same district, but from three different schools all reported positive changes in their schools. When I asked one middle school teacher from this district what has changed since the strike they said:

Everybody has enough materials for all the kids in their class. They have desks. We had classes where they literally could not fit enough desks in their room, so kids were having to sit on an extra chair or stool. Everybody has a desk now. Everybody has a chair. We have textbooks for everybody.

Another teacher from this district, but from a different school reported:

We all got raises, but I think one of the main things I've seen is an increase in programs. We're adding things back in, new teams, new extracurricular stuff.

Then, a teacher from the high school in this district stated:

We were able to purchase ACT prep software. It was a chunk of money. Our superintendent bought it willingly. I was like "I don't have to create all this stuff?" I was like "Really? We can just buy it? Instead of me spending hours at home making it?" That was really nice.

These three quotes show how the funding increase was able to produce positive changes in different schools all throughout the district. Some teachers I interviewed from different districts, however, did not see the same improvements in their schools.

Throughout my interviews, I made the observation that teachers from more impoverished districts saw less improvements after the funding increase than the teachers I interviewed from the district that was not struggling as much before the strike. I interviewed a middle school teacher who teaches in an inner-city neighborhood and they reported witnessing little improvements in their school after the funding increase.

I got a little bit of a raise and we did get new readers. We still have the same social studies book though, with missing pages.

In the long run I don't think they gave us enough money to keep the teachers there and they didn't reduce class sizes.

I would have liked to have seen 20-21 kids to a classroom, desks that weren't broken, chairs that weren't wobbling, all the paper and pencils that we need.

According to this teacher, not many changes happened in her low-income school after the strike. Books were still missing pages, class sizes were still large, desks were still broken, and supplies were still scarce in January 2020.

Oklahoma teachers in the spring of 2018 accomplished all that they could through walking out. Unfortunately, the issues that exist in public education are deep-seated and rooted within the structure of neoliberalism and cannot be completely addressed through a teachers' strike. Teachers were limited in what they could accomplish through a nine-day walkout. Overall, the teachers believed the strike was successful, but it did not come close to solving all of the issues. Their goals in the strike were created based on necessity and immediacy. They were down to bare bones and needed an immediate pay and funding increase in order to be able to do their jobs. Their mobilization was largely out of desperation, and they did their best to achieve what they could, but the grips of neoliberalism are stronger than what can be solved through a single strike.

Summary

When teachers in Oklahoma decided to go on strike in the spring of 2018, they largely utilized social media in their mobilization efforts. Social media websites, especially Facebook, were used to disseminate important information regarding public education and the strike efforts. One private Facebook group, "Oklahoma Teachers—The Time is Now!", has garnered over 65,000 online members and was a pivotal platform used to mobilize teachers outside of traditional routes, such as mobilizing through a union. Teachers could request to join this Facebook page and then whoever was a member was able to make posts for thousands of teachers to see. This allowed for information and opinions to be shared quickly and effectively.

Teachers also used their own social media accounts such as Facebook and Twitter to share information about public education and the strike for their online “friends” to see. Teachers reported using social media as a tool for advocacy to gain support for the walkout.

Support of teachers during the walkout was mixed among administration and community members. My interviewees were almost evenly split when discussing whether or not they felt supported by the administration of their schools. Some teachers felt immensely supported by their principals, superintendents, and school boards which resulted in an overall positive striking experience for these teachers. On the other hand, some of the teachers I spoke with were forced to strike on much less cordial terms. One high school teacher I interviewed was the only teacher from her entire district to participate in the walkout. Two other interviewees experienced so much conflict with administrators that they took jobs in new districts once the walkout was over. When rallying at the state capitol building in Oklahoma City, every teacher I interviewed reported an overwhelming feeling of support from those who were also rallying at the capitol building and community members who passed through.

The atmosphere at the state capitol those nine days was described as *exciting*. Teachers from all over the state drove themselves, carpooled, or took school buses to Oklahoma City to rally at the state capitol building. Even though the reason they were striking was serious, the teachers reported having a good time rallying, participating in chants, carrying signs, meeting teachers from other districts, and making their voices heard. Teachers felt excited about the fact that they were *finally doing something* instead of just talking about the problems they faced. Supporters of the strike provided free food and water for the teachers, and sometimes even gift cards for gas. The only reports of negativity and frustration at the capitol comes from when teachers tried to speak with state legislators *inside* the capitol.

Teachers described many of their interactions inside the state capitol building with their representatives as hostile. One teacher explained that many of the politicians were polite and willing to listen to their concerns, but many also were rude and dismissive. The teachers wanted to talk to their representatives to make their grievances known in a way that could not be ignored. For months, and years, leading up to the strike, teachers had been making phone calls and writing letters to legislators to no avail. Their concerns were easily ignored. During the walkout, they demanded to be seen and heard. Some legislators locked their office doors, hid from teachers, refused to show up to work, threw papers around their office, and sometimes even resorted to using profanity and insults when confronted by teachers. Teachers described feeling frustrated and angry when met with these responses. At the end of the nine days, the state government had not made any more concessions to the teachers and the strike ended.

When the strike was ended by the president of the OEA after almost two weeks, teachers were mixed about how they felt. Some of those I interviewed agreed with the union and believed it was time for the strike to end. No new concessions or funding had been granted, and the strike was pushing the two-week mark which made some teachers uneasy. Teachers were beginning to worry about the wellbeing of their students. For example, a few teachers revealed that they were worried about the children who ate the majority of their meals at school or who lived in unstable home environments. Because of this, many teachers were ready to be back in the classroom. Other teachers, however, who were more focused on long-term benefits wanted to stay out and strike longer to hopefully receive more funding. These teachers wanted to keep wearing down the legislators to get more of what they wanted. Some felt like the union was giving in too soon to the state government. Regardless, they all were able to agree that the strike was only a partial success due to the fact that they did not receive the pay raise and funding amounts they originally

wanted. They also believed the concessions made were short-term fixes rather than long withstanding changes. Teachers reported that *more* needs to be done to fix the issues within public education.

At the end of my interviews I wanted to know what had changed in the two years since the strike. The five teachers I interviewed who were all from the same district reported a few positive changes. They had received salary increases which allowed for a more comfortable living, and one teacher even reported purchasing a new vehicle. They explained how some classes got new software, new books, and more desks. A few also reported smaller class sizes than before the strike. Not all of their struggles were alleviated, but they overall felt like change was moving in a positive direction. On the other hand, the few teachers I interviewed from poorer districts reported minimal improvements. One teacher from a metropolitan area reported that her classroom still has damaged and outdated books. They also said that class sizes have not been reduced and that overall not much has changed since the strike. Due to the fact that deep-seated issues related to the structure and funding of public education have not been addressed, it is argued that the concessions granted before the strike in 2018 were short-term fixes to teachers' immediate issues and many issues still currently exist within public education in Oklahoma. The teachers accomplished what they could with what they had at the time, but it was not enough to permanently fix the deep cuts that education has taken over the last couple of decades.

Chapter 6 - Perceptions of the Strike

“I wouldn’t say I was active in politics before. We certainly were during the strike.”

Chapter four of this paper largely focused on *why* the 2018 Oklahoma teachers strike happened and chapter five focused on *what* happened. Understanding the *why* and the *what* of this strike was important in my overall cognizance of the event. Before my 10 interviews with those who participated, my understanding of the strike was chiefly formed by news articles and social media posts about it. Now that I have formed a comprehensive understanding of the strike itself, I am able to more deeply analyze the major themes that were produced by my one-on-one interviews with strike participants. I can now examine what forces were at play in the ultimate partial success of the walkout and what themes are important when considering the future of public education and ongoing teacher unrest.

Teachers were able to successfully strike because they had the power of numbers on their side. In this context, “successful” is used to mean to attract attention of not only the state government but the attention of the entire country. As discussed throughout this paper, before the walkout teachers largely felt ignored by those in power. They had written letters, tried to speak with their legislators, and politely tried to advocate for themselves for years. They had to utilize the force of mass disruption to attract the attention of their state government, their communities, and their country. Disruption was used to force those who had previously ignored them to pay attention to their cries for help. Suspending their labor for nine workdays is what ultimately attracted the attention of the public. Teachers used their collective power (i.e. their collective labor) to be *heard* in an attempt to create change. Unfortunately, democracy has its limits. For those who are not wealthy or individually powerful, it is hard to institute real, long-lasting

change. Teaching is a feminized profession with infamously low salaries, and even though teachers have the power of numbers, that is the only real power they have. The power of numbers was only able to result in a partial victory. They received a little over half of what they asked for in a salary increase and only one-quarter of what they asked for in a funding increase. Due to the limits of what teachers can collectively achieve, many teachers explained how imperative it is to get teachers and those who support public education into powerful political positions so they can produce change from the inside of the political sphere.

Power of Numbers

Throughout my interviews, a feeling of power among the striking teachers was a common theme. There was a strong sentiment that teachers had felt powerless until they collectively walked out of their classrooms for nine days. This powerlessness likely came from the fact that their concerns and cries for help had been largely ignored in the months and years leading up to the strike. Teachers believed that their collective action was their source of power.

The walk-out was a way for the teachers to become really united and we felt somewhat powerful, whether we were really powerful or not. Which we were powerful because the overall trickle effect of the walk-out did have a big impact on our society to wake up and start looking at politics.

The main sources of power for the striking teachers were the fact that they had numbers on their side and that their jobs were essential. In regard to numbers, here is what a few interviewees had to say:

I learned, or remembered, that there is strength in numbers, that we do have a voice in politics and in our state governing.

Interviewer: Why a walkout?

Interviewee: Sheer numbers, for one. Just the sheer numbers of people that were at the capitol on a daily basis. We were in their sessions, we were watching them, every single step. We heard everything that they said, and it got picked apart.

I learned that mobilization and political involvement, you really can make a difference if it's organized and if it's done in numbers, large numbers of people can really make a difference. Your voice can be heard if it's done the right way.

These quotes demonstrate the feeling of power that came from teachers being able to outnumber government officials and those who did not support their cause. They were able to feel like there was a larger amount of those fighting *for* them than there was fighting *against* them. The problem here, however, is that those who were not on their side (i.e. many legislators and political figures) were the ones with the ultimate power to control the teachers' fate. This is just one smaller conflict that makes up the greater war between neoliberalism and funding of social services. Another potential source of power for the teachers is that their jobs are essential and due to the ongoing teacher shortage in Oklahoma, teachers are not expendable.

We weren't in jeopardy of losing our jobs. They couldn't pull our certificates because there wouldn't be anyone to teach.

One high school teacher understood that the power of numbers was the teachers' greatest weapon and full participation was necessary to be taken seriously:

Because if we didn't get full participation, we would have shown a weak spot and that would be how they began to leverage out control. We're an absolute influence. We have advocacy. We have the ability to change things. And to walk away would be a shame. It would be an absolute shame.

The power of numbers was also key when many teachers opted to mobilize outside of the state teachers' union (OEA). The power and size of the private Facebook groups was central to mobilizing outside of the union.

Because I wasn't working through the union anymore, our Facebook page truly has more power than the union does. Because in reality, I can touch nearly every single teacher in the state with one post to the Facebook group. We're way more powerful than they are.

Power of Disruption

Disruption is the central theme of why teachers chose to walkout as their form of protest. Causing disruption is key to many successful social movements because it forces those who are typically unaffected by protests to be directly impacted. It allows protestors to be seen and put pressure on those whom they want to make concessions. For the Oklahoma teachers in 2018, they had been quietly protesting for years by writing letters and making phone calls to state legislators, but to no avail.

There was lots of lobbying [before the walkout]. As far as writing and contacting representatives about returning money to school funding, increasing teacher pay, etc. It just got lip service. It just fell on deaf ears.

We had been asking nicely and quietly, doing what we were supposed to do, and nothing was working. They were ignoring us. Basically laughing at us. Thumbing their nose at us. Finally, somebody spoke up and said, "We've been playing nice and it's not working." That's when they [the teachers] decided to do something drastic and get people's attention.

Because earlier attempts at advocacy were so easily brushed to the side and ignored, teachers felt like they needed to do something more *extreme* to be taken seriously by the state government.

This is where the tactic of disruption is critical. To make politicians and the public listen to their

concerns, they needed to directly disrupt the lives of those who were ignoring them. In this case, disruption tactics included refusing to go to work and rallying outside of the workplace of state politicians. Here are the perspectives of two teachers:

Interviewer: Why a walkout?

Interviewee: That's how you get people's attention. People don't pay attention until it is uncomfortable or inconvenient for them.

Interviewer: Why a walkout?

Interviewee: Because they hadn't been listening otherwise. People had been down there to lobby, people had written letters, emails, phone calls, we started years ago. It just had not made the impression. People didn't really realize how severe things had gotten. Because it happened slowly.

The teacher walkout resulted in the majority of school districts in Oklahoma shutting down for nearly two weeks. Public schools closing for that long in the middle of the school year is virtually unheard of. Parents, students, and community members alike from all over Oklahoma depend on public schools to be a part of their daily routines. Parents expect them to always be open and to not have to think twice about dropping their children off there every morning, five days a week. These closures directly disrupted the daily lives of thousands of Oklahomans, which got the movement the attention it needed. One respondent stated, "As a professional, I think you try to do everything else but strike. But as a human, you have to see the big picture that sometimes that's the only way to get the attention." Multiple teachers indicated that they did not *want* to go on strike and that it was not their first choice, but rather it was the only option.

Disruption also took place at the state capitol building. Similarly to how teachers wanted to disrupt the daily lives of the public, they also wanted to disrupt the work lives of their state

legislators. Calling them on the phone and writing letters from a distance was not yielding the results they wanted. Over the course of the nine-day walkout, thousands of teachers packed themselves inside the state capitol building to try to speak face-to-face with state politicians. They found their offices, knocked on their doors, and sat in on their meetings in an attempt to truly be seen. These are the people they desperately needed on their side if any kind of positive change was going to come from the government. As one teacher said:

You have to make them uncomfortable. If we just sat in our classrooms and kept trying to talk to them [legislators] they would just say, “No.” But the purpose of the strike is to make them see what happens if they don’t do anything.

This quote mentions the idea that *where* teachers chose to strike made an impact. “If we just sat in our classrooms” is important because it goes along with the idea that teachers needed to get in the faces of legislators for what they said to have an influence. Another teacher echoed this point here, “If we waited until the summer, no one would have cared.” This directly fits into the theme of disruption. Some people who were critical of the strike argued that teachers should have waited until the summer to protest so it would have negatively affected the students and their families. This teacher believes that if the teachers chose that route of protest, no one would have cared or listened because it was not disruptive.

For the most part, the teachers I interviewed believe their efforts to annoy and disrupt state legislators were successful. A couple things my interviewees said about this include:

They just were ready to give us something so we would shut up and go away.

They were ready for us to be out of their hair.

This sentiment is interesting, however, considering that no new allowances were made to the teachers during the walkout. The only increases in funding and salaries were made *before* the walkout began. In the end, the teachers were successful in being disruptive and demanding to be heard, and many of those I interviewed stated that using their voices cannot stop just because the strike is over. As a group, they agree that teachers and those who support public education need to keep being vocal and keep being “annoying.” As one teacher put it perfectly, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease. If we don’t stay squeaky, we won’t get any grease.”

Demanding to be Heard

Even though teachers were not granted additional funding during or after the strike, their movement was still largely successful in their eyes due to the national attention their movement received. Some teachers I interviewed even admitted that they had a feeling they would not receive additional funding through a walkout. This immediately made me want to ask: Then why even walkout at all? Their motives for choosing to walkout were clear: they wanted to be heard. Even if they did not get any more money by walking out, they wanted to make a scene. One teacher describes this perfectly here: “It was clear we probably weren’t going to get more money, but we wanted it to hurt.” This quote shows how badly some teachers wanted their presence and grievances to be felt by those who stood in their way. Similarly, another teacher stated:

We were told after we got a pay raise to give up because we weren’t going to get anything else. Which is true, but we also got a lot of momentum and national attention which was very needed.

As mentioned in the previous section, teachers wanted to cause a disruption that would force people to pay attention after being silenced for so long. They were protesting not only for funding and salary increases, but also for respect. Teachers had overwhelmingly felt disrespected by the current public education system before the walkout began. The strike was about much more than money, they wanted to be respected and treated fairly. In the effort to gain enough attention to become respected, the walkout garnered national media attention. One teacher discusses this here:

I think it brought a lot of attention to what was going on and the really said state of education in Oklahoma. I know I read articles from the NY Times, the LA Times, just all over the country about the strike and about how terrible things were as far as our education system. I think all the attention we got was a plus. They wrote about the legislators that were saying the things they were saying, how they were so anti-education. I think that was a success.

This quote shows the feeling of success that came from national media outlets covering their strike. At the end, this teacher also showed fondness toward the fact that legislators that had been anti-education were being publicly exposed. In the section of this paper regarding conflict with state legislators, those I interviewed made it crystal clear that they were unhappy with a lot of their representatives.

In the eyes of those I interviewed, receiving national attention and making their voices heard was a big achievement. It can be argued that professionals, such as teachers, should not have to participate in a nine-day, state-wide walkout for their concerns to be taken seriously by the state government, but that is what happened. Teachers did not necessarily want to “resort” to striking, as the word “strike” can have a negative connotation in modern American culture, especially in conservative, right-to-work states such as Oklahoma. Many of those I interviewed felt like they were left with no other choice.

A Polite Social Movement

One interesting theme that kept popping up throughout my interviews was the suggestion that this social movement was extremely well mannered. Eight of my 10 interviewees mentioned, at least once, how polite, kind, and/or clean the striking teachers were during the rallies at the state capitol during the course of the walkout. Only two teachers I interviewed, both male, did not seem to be too concerned with portraying their participation as civil. All of the women I interviewed, seven in total, made a point to let me know that they did their best to be courteous while they were striking. The two main ways teachers portrayed this movement as civil include making sure to mention the teachers were polite when they spoke and that they did not “trash” the state capitol grounds while they were there.

First, the majority of the teachers I interviewed emphasized the fact that even though they were angry and frustrated when speaking with state legislators, they tried their best to be kind and polite. All of the female teachers emphasized this point, while two out of three of my male teachers reported that they were more aggressive with their language and expressions. Two of the teachers I interviewed provided a reasoning for why they took pride in their politeness while striking. They believed that by being civil, they were being good examples for their students.

One high school English teacher explained:

I also learned how frustrating and difficult it can be to disagree with someone in a polite way. You usually see disagreeing as name calling and slander and attacking people personally. My group and I really tried to speak in a way that was respectful, but at the same time clear. I wanted to practice what I was preaching. I’ve been telling my kids this for years. You don’t have to hate someone and degrade them, just disagree with them.

This teacher emphasized how important it was to practice what she preached to her students. She regularly dealt with conflicts between students and always taught them to be kind. She did not want to do the opposite of what she encourages her students to do, especially during a publicized and televised event like the walkout. The students could see the teachers' behavior through social media websites and on the news. The teachers knew their behavior was on display for the country to see. They wanted to strike "the right way." Similar to the quote above, one male teacher said:

There was no yelling, screaming, name-calling. They [the teachers] were very respectful. They were very nice and that's the best thing about it. You're practicing what you're telling your kids to do every day. Get your point across but be nice.

Apart from being polite while airing their grievances to state politicians, one teacher also reported a general politeness about the entire movement.

I think we handled it pretty well. Teachers were informed when they talked to people. Everyone I ran into were polite and kind.

Another way teachers demonstrated civility while striking was keeping their striking grounds clean. When some people think of a protest, they may think of trash strewn everywhere, vandalism, or other types of destruction and chaos. This was not the case with the teachers' walkout. Those whom I interviewed reported the striking grounds at the capitol building being kept clean and that there was no chaos or destruction. Those I interviewed seemed to take pride in this fact.

One middle school teacher stated:

Our point of being there wasn't to trash things. Our point of being there was to try to get our voices heard. They had not been listening. We had to make a bold statement for them to figure it out.

The same teacher also said later on:

I learned that teachers are just so similar. The comradery, the way everybody was treated. How can you have that many people in one place and it not look like a lot of people were there? People picked up their trash, they took care of their area.

In regard to picking up trash, one high school teacher even explained how the state troopers who were stationed at the capitol grounds made a comment about their cleanliness:

People were nice. Even the state troopers said, "You aren't causing us any problems. There's no trash to pick up."

As I mentioned previously, it was typically the female teachers who emphasized politeness and cleanliness. I did have one male interviewee, however, who also emphasized this point:

That was the cleanest protest they've had. Because it was a bunch of teachers and they cleaned up after themselves.

This teacher explained how it was the nature of the job of being a teacher that affected the way they decided to strike. Teachers are expected to be civil, kind, polite, and clean. These expectations could have definitely affected the way teachers behaved during their walkout.

There was one more story related to the comradery of the teachers, the teamwork of the teachers, and the overall positive atmosphere at the capitol grounds that I think is indicative of the character of those who were striking. One high school teacher told me a story of what

happened when a child went missing on the capitol grounds during one of the rallies. The teachers were able to stay calm and coordinate a quick effort to find the child. This could be a testament to how calm and professional the rallies were at the capitol because the child was able to be found so quickly:

On one of the first days, there was an incident when someone was speaking. A little boy had gotten away from his mother and he was autistic. The speaker announced what was going on and said we needed to look for him. Teachers automatically said, “OK, everybody sit down!” and there he was, the only one left standing there. We found him like that *snaps*.

Learning how important it was for the majority of those I interviewed to emphasize their politeness and civility while striking made me wonder why this was so important to them and their portrayal of the walkout. It is possible that those who participated had a strong moral compass, such as the teachers who emphasized “practice what you preach.” Or, teachers could have felt pressured to meet the expectations of how a teacher *should* act such as being respectful, kind, polite, and clean. They may have been maintaining these expectations in order to not be ridiculed by the media. This is an especially interesting point because currently in 2020 with Black Lives Matter and George Floyd protests, protestors are being criticized in the media for their protesting tactics. For example, one Fox News headline discussing the protestors in rioters in the wake of George Floyd’s murder is entitled, “George Floyd unrest: How riot groups come together to loot, destroy” (Fox News, 2020). For some, there has been no distinction between the terms “protest” and “riot” and many are using these terms interchangeably. Maintaining a level of respectfulness and cleanliness possibly gave the teachers’ movement more of a sense of legitimacy and credibility compared to social movements that are more aggressive and violent in nature. There is a possibility that these striking teachers did not want to be labeled as

“protestors” or “rioters”, therefore they were as calm and respectful as possible to avoid being dragged by the media.

Politicization of Teachers

An important result of the public education crisis in Oklahoma is the subsequent politicization of teachers or the increased involvement of teachers in politics. As discussed earlier, there is only so much the teachers could realistically achieve through a walkout. The walkout happened because the teachers needed immediate results in the form of increased funding and salaries. Their movement was mainly need-based and focused on immediate results rather than long-lasting systemic changes. To be fair, this was the most they could have accomplished solely through a nine-day walkout. Deep-seated, systemic changes do not happen overnight. The teachers I interviewed understood this. This idea is what led to another key theme that surfaced throughout my interviews: the politicization of teachers.

The politicization of teachers has two distinct forms. First, I discovered that some teachers became more individually political due to keeping up with the issues and politics surrounding the public education crisis. Some teachers that had ignored politics or been apolitical in the past were suddenly more active in politics. Two teachers describe this shift here:

Teachers have historically not been politically active, and I was not active. I couldn't tell you anything five years ago. The year before the strike is when I started paying attention to it.

I wouldn't say I was active in politics before. We certainly were during the strike.

Being individually active in politics for these teachers means keeping up with what is going on in relation to educational laws and policies, voting in elections, and staying informed about politicians and important issues. Two teachers explained:

I think people realized, “I need to be a little more informed when I’m making choices. I need to get out and vote because it does make a difference.”

The vote you have and the people you put into office makes a difference.

Second, I found out through my interviews that a salient effect of the strike in 2018 was that more teachers and supporters of public education ran for elected government positions than ever before. When the teachers realized during the strike that all of their demands would not be met and there was a limit on what they could accomplish through a walkout, many teachers decided that their difference would have to be made *inside* the political sphere instead of outside it. One high school teacher explains this collective idea here:

We were beating our heads against the wall at that point [at the end of the strike]. They weren’t going to move it anymore. I think a lot of us had come to the conclusion that where we were going to have to beat them was the ballot box.

In order to achieve this, teachers and supporters of public education needed to be elected into government positions. A common chant sung by striking teachers at the state capitol building was, “We will remember in November!” (Joyce, 2018). The words of this chant refer to teachers planning to vote out incumbents who they deemed to be against public education and voting in public education supporters during the November 2018 elections. Advocating for these

public education supporters and actually getting these people elected was a main goal of the upcoming elections.



Figure 6 Remember to vote sign. Credit: Alamy⁶

The teachers I interviewed along with news articles reported record numbers of educators being voted into elected positions. In a report by CNN in November 2018, 65 Oklahoma educators ran for office and 16 were voted into the State House and Senate (Williams, 2018). This was a bipartisan effort, with democratic and republican supporters of education being elected. This resulted in more educators in the state legislator than ever before.

One of the results from the strike was significant number of Oklahoma teachers running for office running on education platforms. They did well. And getting out the incumbents.

⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2018/05/05/behind-the-teacher-strikes-that-have-roiled-five-states>

Now, we definitely made a difference at the ballot box the next year. That was amazing. The number of teachers and the number of education supportive people that we were able to put into office.

One teacher I interviewed even reported that they were able to vote in a teacher from their own district:

As a result of the walkout, we had more people run for office that were either supporters of education or teachers themselves. We had a teacher from here run and be elected.

It was a huge achievement to get so many supporters of public education voted into office. Of course, this is not an end-all-be-all solution to fix the issues that exist, but it was an important step for the teachers. Holding prominent positions in government is a useful tool in getting teachers' voices heard and bringing concerns about public education to the forefront of policymaking. It will be interesting to see what effect, if any, these 16 legislators will have on educational policies in Oklahoma.

One concern voiced by those I interviewed was the longevity of the passion and urgency toward improving public education that existed in 2018 during the strike. A few teachers mentioned how education is no longer at the forefront of everyone's minds, which makes logical sense due to the strike taking place over two years ago. Teachers emphasized how important it is for them, and those who support them, to keep talking about and advocating for public education.

We need to keep that momentum going and keep that conversation going.

I think we got some people elected that have fresh perspective on education and other issues. I think it's something that's going to have to be maintained. We get too focused on ourselves and kind of forget what is going on.

Both of these quotes highlight the importance of keeping up the sense of urgency about public education. Some teachers fear that their voices and concerns will be forgotten again if people stop talking. One teacher stressed the importance of even just having conversations with those around you and your community:

If you're not talking in your own community about what's needed, then you can't change the conversation.

As mentioned before, these teachers know that issues with funding and respecting public education will not be fixed straight away. Ongoing conversations and advocacy are key for producing long-term changes. One teacher discussed how their district is still staying involved even two years after the strike:

Our school district has allowed representatives to go lobby at the capitol. I think people are still involved. Much more so than they used to be.

The Oklahoma teachers' strike of 2018 was an important event and social movement for public education in Oklahoma. It was important not only because of the salary raise and funding increase due to the immense pressure put on the state government before the strike, but also due to the platform it gave teachers in Oklahoma. They were able to garner national media attention, and the rallies at the state capitol building gave them a platform to share ideas and grievances and have face-to-face conversations with state legislators that directly impact public education.

Summary

There are multiple factors to consider when determining whether or not the 2018 Oklahoma teachers' strike was successful. The teachers were limited on what they could achieve, but regardless they came together to use their collective power to make their voices heard. Their threats to go on strike resulted in a salary and funding increase before the strike began, but no more money was offered during the course of the strike. Many of the teachers I interviewed felt angry that the state government only offered them part of what they were asking. Because of this, the teachers decided to carry out the strike they had been threatening in order to make their voices heard, demand policy changes, and advocate for sustainable funding.

A main theme that was formed through interviews is the idea of the power in numbers. All of the teachers I interviewed explained how they had the power of numbers on their side and that they used it to their advantage. They collectively walked out of their schools and assembled themselves at that state capitol grounds to send the strong message of, "We're not leaving." They packed themselves inside the capitol building and used their power to overwhelm their antagonists, which in this case were the state legislators. Teachers, and low-wage workers in general, are relatively powerless political figures when they stand on their own. When they came together, however, the teachers were a loud and annoying force that demanded attention. Their ability to show up in large numbers was their source of power. If only a few districts or a few teachers participated, their efforts would have been a lot easier to ignore. The fact that teachers from all over the state were able to mobilize in such big numbers is what ultimately led to disruption.

Because this walkout included so much participation from all over the state, state and national media attention was garnered. Many of the teachers I interviewed noted this as their

greatest success. After feeling silenced and ignored for so many years, it was a victory when social media and news outlets were reporting about public education and the teachers' striking efforts. It was a success to have their concerns pushed to the forefront of the media and politics.

When striking, many of my interviewees emphasized their intentions of being polite and civil while protesting. They stressed the point that they were polite with legislators and did their best to not act nasty or rude while speaking with them. The teachers I interviewed highlighted the importance of, "Practice what you preach" in regard to teaching their students to be kind and treat people with respect. Many of them were also concerned about not trashing the state capitol grounds where they were striking and making sure to pick up after themselves. They did not want to be seen as a nuisance or a problem in the eyes of the media or their communities. This could be attributed to concerns related to feeling the pressure to be civil due to the nature of their profession or concerns about how they would be portrayed in the media. They wanted to be seen in a favorable light even while they were protesting.

The politicization of teachers was a key theme that emerged during my interviews. Teachers reported that experiencing the pitfalls of public education firsthand and working to advocate for better conditions caused them to become more political than they were before their advocacy began. These teachers did not pay much attention to politics and/or voting before the strike but became more involved in political advocacy and voting after the strike. Because of the increased individual politicization during the strike, the elections the following fall of 2018 welcomed more teachers and supporters of public education than ever before. Sixteen teachers and supporters of public education were voted into the State House and Senate in November of 2018. This was a crucial victory for teachers and public education because during the strike, many people decided that change was going to have to be induced within the political system

rather than trying to change it from the outside. The teachers' strike was a partial success due to their efforts of mass disruption, but they did not receive everything they wanted. This led many teachers to becoming politically active and advocating for candidates that they wanted to elect in order to hopefully spur change within the state government in favor of the teachers. Their efforts to inspire change did not end at the conclusion of the strike, but rather efforts are still being made to improve public education in Oklahoma.

Chapter 7 - Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The 2018 Oklahoma teachers' strike was a multifaceted social movement that incorporated traditional and innovative strategies of mobilization. In the current neoliberal era, teachers do not have as much power in the labor market as some might think. Neoliberalism dominates the entire structure of education and those at the top of the structure, the wealthy and the politicians, work tirelessly to gatekeep the needs and demands of neoliberalism. Social services, such as public education, are at risk of being severely underfunded or completely eradicated due to efforts to privatize social services so the government can take a hands-off approach. The 2018 teachers' strike in Oklahoma was a direct result of the continuous underfunding of public education. Teachers were down to the bare bones and had to go on strike out of necessity. Some classrooms did not have enough desks, underpaid teachers had to buy their own supplies, some schools were completely shutting down, classroom sizes were rising, and there was a massive teacher shortage across the entire state. Teachers had been trying to advocate and lobby for themselves for years leading up to the strike, but their concerns largely fell on deaf ears. They needed a way to truly be heard, for they feared what would happen if they kept facing more funding cuts.

Teachers unions in Oklahoma are not very strong when it comes to their ability to influence politics and this led teachers to using new strategies of mobilization during the strike. Even though the union is not necessarily strong, the most prominent union, the OEA, is still the entity with the power to start and finish the strike. The OEA served as a liaison between the teachers and the legislators, and the teachers were pressuring the OEA to support a teachers' strike. In turn, the OEA put pressure on state legislators to make concessions to the teachers to

avoid a large-scale strike. This correspondence between the union and the state government is the more traditional route of expressing grievances and inducing change. These interactions, however, between the OEA and the state government were not yielding the results the teachers wanted. Lobbying efforts by the OEA resulted in policy creation that awarded teachers a raise and more school funding, but in the eyes of the teachers this was not enough. This forced teachers to take matters into their own hands and utilize neo-forms of mobilization, such as using social media to band themselves together. Because teachers were ultimately powerless when it came to being able to make direct changes at the government level, they used the power of mass disruption to make their voices heard. They did not mobilize completely outside of the union, but rather they utilized multiple modules of mobilization to maximize their efforts. The union was the figurehead of the walkout in the respect that they communicated with the media and the president of the OEA was ultimately the one to publicly announce the end of the strike. The rank-and-file teachers, however, were the heart of the movement. They were the ones carrying signs, participating in chants, posting to social media, and talking face-to-face with their legislators.

Because of the limited power of teachers in the labor market and in politics, the teachers' strike had limitations. There were limitations about what teachers could actually accomplish through a walkout. The teachers were successful in the respect that they caused mass disruption and got their movement the national attention it needed. Their achievements, however, were largely based on their pressing needs at that time. At the time of the walkout, April 2018, teachers were demanding salary and funding increases that would take effect as soon as possible. What they were able to accomplish were not long-term fixes. The \$6,100 salary increase, and \$50 million funding increase were not enough to eradicate the issues in public education. These

concessions were merely a small Band-Aid on the larger problem at hand. This is not to discredit the efforts of the teachers and their successful movement, but rather to show the limitations to what they could achieve.

Neoliberalism does not allow the working class, such as teachers, to have strong lobbying power in politics. The political system is centered around creating financial gain for those that control it. These entities do not profit off of giving more money to public education and teachers. The wealthy, businesses and corporations, and other organizations that dominate government would rather see public services, like education, become privatized and outsourced so they would not rely on government oversight. Because of these neoliberal strongholds, teachers simply did not have the power or the access to influence the dominating structures and people that have the power to create change. Politicians are swayed by those who have money and who are powerful in society, and teachers do not fit this template. Their voices of concern are mostly silenced, and their issues are generally push to the back burner.

I am now able to compare my findings in this paper to previous findings found in literature. Even though I utilized grounded theory methods and did not use any particular preexisting framework throughout this study, I believe it is fruitful to make comparisons of my findings to similar studies and social movements. Doing this shows how my analysis supports previous and similar theories, but also what my project adds to the discourse on the topics of neoliberalism within education and contemporary social movements. Throughout the rest of this discussion section I provide an overview of my main findings, themes, and theories and how they compare to previous literature.

One of the challenges that teachers have faced is the inability of legislators and other powerful entities to successfully make decisions that support the livelihood of teachers and

public education. I compare the findings of this study to the concept *legitimation crisis* which is a term coined by Jürgen Habermas (1975) that refers to a decline in trust and confidence of societal leadership. This ultimately means that I found teachers no longer believe that government officials, legislators, and other decision-makers have teachers' best interests in mind when passing legislation, determining budgets, and making other decisions related to public education. Similarly, my findings relate to the book *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, where the author, Castells, states, "Without trust, the social contract dissolves and people disappear as they transform into defensive individuals fighting for survival" (2016, p. 1). Ultimately, teachers were fighting for their own occupational survival to keep a job and be able to do it effectively. Elected leaders of society are supposed to act in a way that serves their constituents, yet many laws and pieces of legislation do not reflect this. As public education has become underfunded and underappreciated, teachers have become increasingly more aware of those in office who are working against their interests.

American politics are largely influenced by money, special interest groups, and big corporations, yet we sell the ideas of "freedom", "democracy", and "personal choice" in politics as inherent American rights. The reality is that there is not much freedom and personal choice regarding who Americans can vote into office and who receives power. In regard to public education, it is possible that teachers do not have a strong lobbying presence or influence due to time and money constraints. Castells (2016) states, "Politics in the United States is a profession dominated by money and focused on personal rewards of influence and access to resources with little room for dreams of change that are relegated outside the iron cage of the bipartisan system" (p. 285). Teachers do not have the same resources as big businesses or other special interest

groups, and therefore are not able to make as much of an impact on legislation—money talks and teachers do not have a lot of it.

For years and months leading up to the walkout, teachers and the OEA had been writing to, calling, and trying to get in contact with state representatives and other government officials to voice their opinions and grievances about public education. Many teachers have reported being ignored or silenced in these attempts at communicating and compromising. Because teachers do not have a lot of financial bargaining power to sway government, they had to use a different tactic for garnering the attention of state government officials. Teachers had the power of numbers on their side and they used this to cause mass disruption among public schools. I relate this major theme of my study to Piven and Cloward's (1977) argument that disruptiveness can lead to success and that disruptions can be mobilized without much formal organization. Powerless groups only have the choice to cause a disruption when they want to induce change because they do not have the social capital or resources to make change from inside the political system. Before the walkout, smaller and less formal disruptions had been taking place in the form of "sick-ins" where teachers would all call in sick on the same day. Mass disruption was caused by a state-wide teacher walkout that lasted almost two weeks. For nine schooldays, many teachers across the state did not show up to work and many districts completely shut down. Going to school every day is a steady routine for most children and their parents. Disrupting this steady routine of children, parents, administrators, and staff gave the teachers' movement the attention it needed to be taken seriously by the state government.

During the walkout, the state government was under immense pressure to bargain with the teachers and ultimately get everyone back in the classroom. This sense of power is what propelled the teachers to continue to walkout and show up at the state capitol building for two

weeks. When teachers “played nice” and used traditional routes of airing their grievances, they did not get the results they wanted. Representatives largely silenced the teachers’ concerns or made empty promises that they would fulfill their wishes. Many teachers in Oklahoma also lack trust toward the state teachers’ unions, which can possibly be attributed to the demonization of unions that exists in red states. Even the key leaders and organizers of the walkout were not union members themselves. The lack of strong ties to unions and the unsuccessfulness of formal channels of bargaining made teachers in 2018 ultimately a powerless group in politics. A powerless group, however, if large enough, has the power of disruption. It was only when teachers banded together to create mass disruption that they were finally taken seriously, but even then, they were not granted everything they asked. This strike was not an end-all-be-all success, but it was an important step in creating long-lasting change within public education if teachers and supporters keep up the pressure.

What I found as key categories from my research adds to existing literature about public education and social movements in terms of worsening conditions for schools and teachers, teachers finding ways to become powerful, and social movements organizing in online spaces. The findings of this study support some of what Castells (2016) finds in his book *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. First, social movements are defined as people coming together, with common grievances and common goals, to spark social change (Castells, 2016). Another definition comes from Tilly and Tarrow in *Contentious Politics*, they define a social movement as, “a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities” (2015). The claims made by actors within the teacher strike include schools being underfunded and teachers being underpaid. More broad claims

include that the state government simply does not care about teachers and public education. These claims during the strike were performed by public-school teachers and directed at government officials, which is why the strike took place at the state capitol building. The striking teachers, however, were not only performing in-person, but they also took to social media, more specifically Facebook, to spread their claims and mobilize.

Castells argues that the internet has provided an accessible space for the quick and widespread sharing and diffusion of images and ideas, which allows people to find others who share similar ideas and beliefs to ultimately come together to spark social change (Castells, 2016). The internet allows ordinary people to bypass powerful entities and share their ideas with the click of a button. Social media has the ability to foster quick assembly and coalition around causes and concerns in a way that used to not exist (Shirky, 2011). The internet provides a safe space for potential advocates to reach out to others, in a way that is less risky and easier than sharing ideas and approaching people face-to-face (Shirky, 2011). Before the internet, a person needed to have some sort of power or status in order to spread their ideas, but the internet allows for anyone and everyone with an internet connection to have a platform for sharing ideas. On page 2 of *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2016), Castells states:

“It began on the Internet social networks, as these are spaces of autonomy, largely beyond the control of governments and corporations that had monopolized the channels of communication as the foundation of their power, throughout history. By sharing sorrow and hope in the free public space of the internet, by connecting to each other, and by envisioning projects from multiple sources of being, individuals formed networks, regardless of their personal views or organizational attachments. They came together. And their togetherness helped them to overcome fear...”

In this quote, Castells is discussing how contemporary social movements used the Internet and social media sites to organize and mobilize their efforts, which is exactly what happened during the teachers' movement. The internet allowed for an online coalition of teachers to emerge by using the popular social media website, Facebook. In his book, Castells states that, "Networks of power exercise their power by influencing the human mind predominately (but not solely) through multimedia networks of mass communication. Thus, communication networks are decisive sources of power-making" (2016). This quote shows how multimedia communication, specifically in the form of social media networks, provides protestors with the power they needed to bargain and reason with their employers and government representatives to induce change.

Social media and other online forms of communication (e.g. private group chats) allowed for the teachers' strike to largely be a grassroots movement. There was some top-down organization and mobilization led by the OEA, but much of the mobilization can be described as bottom-up. Rank-and-file teachers were at the heart of the movement because they were the ones causing the mass disruption, the ones making clever and colorful signs, and the ones crowding the state capitol building demanding to be heard. Teachers without prior strike leadership experience were suddenly making viral posts to Facebook and organizing secret channels of communication. A middle school teacher in his mid-twenties who was not a union member and had no other formal background in striking leadership was the mastermind behind the viral Facebook group that has amassed over 65,000 members. This Facebook page was used, and is still used, to disseminate information about anything and everything related to public education in Oklahoma. It is a centralized source of information regarding house and senate bills, how each representative has voted on education bills, current issues in education, and other related events

and news stories. Anyone who is a member of this group can make a post to it which allows for anyone and everyone to have their voice heard.

One contemporary social movement that is used as a basis for comparison when it comes to online advocacy and mobilization is “Occupy Wall Street”. This movement took place in 2011 and it was a social movement in the US where people were protesting the form of democracy that exists in the United States. People were fed up with the economic inequality and the government funded bail outs of major corporations while everyday people were financially struggling. The Occupy movement was centered in New York City’s Wall Street, but the movement spread all over the country and protests were happening in dozens of cities across the US. There are some similarities and key differences between the Occupy movement and the teachers’ strike that are worth analyzing. First, the similarities include online coordination and decision-making regarding where to strike, how to do it, and who was going to participate. This is exactly what went down on the OTTN private Facebook page. Castells states in his book, “Occupy Wall Street was born digital” (2016, p. 174). It can be debated whether or not the Oklahoma teachers’ movement was actually born digital or not, due to the fact that conversations and meetings had been happening face-to-face among teachers for years leading up to the strike. Digitally, however, is how the strike was able to gain momentum, legitimacy, and support from around the country. A key difference between these two movements is that Occupy did not have any formal leadership. It was a movement of everyday individuals. The teachers’ strike, however, did have the OEA as their formal leadership and figurehead to the media. The administrator of the OTTN Facebook page was also an instrumental leader in the movement, and he was able to influence the opinions of teachers who followed his Facebook page. Some teachers who participated in the strike believe it was a movement of rank-and-file teachers and

wildcatters, however the president of the OEA is the one who formally ended the movement and announced it to the media. The teachers were the lifeblood of the movement, but the union was still seen as a “leader” even if they were not as involved or dedicated as the individual teachers.

In the introduction of this study, I presented a summary of previous strikes in the United States and Oklahoma. Through the literature and news articles I read and the data I collected through this study, I am able to make compare and contrast contemporary teachers’ strikes to previous ones. The Chicago teachers’ strike of 2012 can serve as a blueprint for the strikes that took place in 2018. In Oklahoma in 2018, similar to the events that took place six years earlier in Chicago, teachers were pushed to their breaking point in Oklahoma regarding funding and salaries and resorted to walking out of their classrooms. Compared to Oklahoma’s last teachers’ strike in 1990, however, their strategies for organizing were different. Rather than solely depending on unions and formal collective bargaining mechanisms, teachers utilized wildcat organizers and social media pages to organize themselves, apart from any formal union. The union and its leadership still propelled and contributed to the strike, but they were not seen as the main entity behind the striking efforts. I found out through my interviews and through reading social media posts made by teachers that many teachers in Oklahoma do not trust the teachers’ union nor do they feel like the union always accurately fairly represents their interest. Due to this growing distrust, the teachers’ strikes of 2018 were largely grassroots efforts. Teachers utilized private group chats and Facebook pages to disseminate information and organize themselves. This shift can be attributed to the loss of power by unions over time, but also the advancements and convenience of technology. Teachers have been able to communicate and share their experiences in an unprecedented way. Teachers are able to share their stories and experiences

instantaneously with other teachers all over the country, creating a strong and united front of educators.

The significance of this study is that it highlights what happens when workers do not feel powerful and need to find a mechanism to make their voices heard. It shows one case of how workers survive against neoliberalism. In this case, the teachers did everything they could to fight back against neoliberal advances in education. Teachers used traditional means of mobilization like utilizing the state teachers' union, but they also incorporated innovative mobilization strategies of utilizing social media websites and online activism. Using a combination of mobilization strategies shows that depending on the union to produce results was not working and that teachers had to use what they have available to them, which was social media, to induce change. This strike that took place in Oklahoma contributes to the literature of analyzing neoliberal conditions in the education system as well as demonstrates the efforts of workers to resist advances of neoliberalism. Teachers used the power of mass disruption to make their voices heard in conjunction with traditional means of mobilization when only using traditional means of mobilization was not working. The OEA was not producing the results teachers wanted, so they used the power of disruption to get the attention of politicians, the media, and their communities to hopefully generate positive change to improve the public education system in Oklahoma. This study acts as just one example of how teachers, and potentially other workers, use the means that are accessible to them to make their voices heard and fight back against neoliberal strongholds that negatively affect their lives.

Limitations

My research includes some limitations. First, this study only considers the opinions and perceptions of teachers who participated in the walkout. This does not include teachers who could not or chose not to participate, school administrators, union leaders, or state legislators. As a result, this is not a comprehensive study of all contributing factors in the walkout. Another limitation of this study is the small sample size. The scope of this project accounted for 10 interviewees and because of this, my results may not account for the diverse range of experiences teachers faced during the walkout. The sample also was also limited to participants from North-Central, Central, and Eastern Oklahoma, which does not include the perspectives of teachers from Western or Southern parts of the state. The sample also included a majority of respondents being 50 years of age or older, which kept me from integrating perspectives of younger and newer teachers.

Future Research

This research is just one example of the effect neoliberalism has on public education. Teachers in Oklahoma had not gone on strike since the 1990s which is what made this strike so interesting to study. This same strike could be studied from different angles in an effort to paint a more comprehensive picture of the entire social movement. As mentioned previously, this study solely focuses on the perspectives of teachers that participated in the walkout. It does not include the perspectives of other social actors such as community members, teachers who did not participate, administrators, and politicians. Anyone looking to further this research could study the strike from the perspective of a different social actor. More broadly, teacher strikes took

place in multiple states throughout the country in 2018, and more strikes have happened in the years following. It could be productive and fruitful to study the teachers who participated in those strikes and compare to my findings of Oklahoma teachers to discover the similarities and differences.

If someone were to continue this study, it may be beneficial to explore the state teachers' unions further. Through my research and interviews, I found that there are conflicting opinions toward the OEA among teachers. It could be insightful to investigate why these unions are ultimately failing and why there is such a disconnect between the union and the teachers it represents. It can be inferred that some teachers do not think the OEA is radical enough to produce effective change within the public education system and structurally, it is difficult to fight against institutional forces. Powerful individuals, corporations, and other powerful entities have a strong influence over government and politics, and it is difficult for anyone, including the union, to fight against these forces. Even though the OEA has an over 50 percent membership rate, they still do not necessarily have the trust of the teachers or the power in government to produce effective, long-lasting change. Unions were not the focus of this study, so I do not have answers to many of these questions, but these are questions that could be answered in a future study on this topic.

Throughout the process of recruiting participants for this study, I found it difficult to recruit teachers who could be considered "younger." Nine out of ten of my participants were over 50 years of age and no participants were below 40 years of age. This could have just been a byproduct of relying on snowball sampling and personal connections to recruit participants, but it could also speak to a larger phenomenon of younger teachers being more cautious or opposed to discussing their involvement with the strike. It could be worth investigating in a similar study to

solely focus on younger teachers to see if there is a relationship there or not, or to just explore if younger teachers have had different experiences related to teaching conditions, relationships with the union, and experiences during the strike.

It is unlikely that the funding issues that exist for public education in Oklahoma will be completely eradicated any time soon. This means that there is a plethora of research to be conducted about the effects of neoliberalism and underfunding on public schools in Oklahoma. The 2018 teachers' strike was just one result of perpetual underfunding, and there is much to be known about the effects of underfunding on students, families, and communities as a whole. This research could ultimately lead to policy change and long-lasting change within public education to create a more successful and sustainable funding source to improve the quality and conditions of public schools.

References

- Antonucci, M. (2017, June). Analysis: NEA Membership Declined in 27 States, and One Where It grew—NY—Is Anything but Typical. *The 74 Million*. Retrieved from <https://www.the74million.org/article/analysis-nea-membership-declined-in-27-states-and-one-where-it-grew-ny-is-anything-but-typical/>
- Blanc, E. (2019). *Red state revolt: The teachers' strike wave and working-class politics*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Bonanno, Alessandro. (2017). *The Legitimation Crisis of Neoliberalism: The State, Will-Formation, and Resistance*. New York, NY: Springer Nature.
- Brawley, C. (1989, August). 1979 Strike: Struggle for Teachers, City Walkout Compared to Battle. *The Oklahoman*. Retrieved from <https://newsok.com/article/2276618/1979-strike-struggle-for-teachers-city-walkout-compared-to-battle>
- Cameron, A. (2018, April). A Look Back At The 1990 Teacher Strike in Oklahoma. *News 9*. Retrieved from <https://www.news9.com/story/37855420/a-look-back-at-the-1990-techer-strike-in-oklahoma>
- Castells, M. (2015). *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Characteristics of Public School Teachers (2020). *National Center for Education Statistics*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_clr.asp
- Cohen, R. M. (2018, March). Teacher Unrest Spreads to Oklahoma, Where Educators Are “Desperate for a Solution”. *The Intercept*. Retrieved from <https://theintercept.com/2018/03/06/oklahoma-teacher-strike-west-virginia/>

- Crampton, F. E. (2010). The Economics and Financing of Urban Schools: Toward a Productive, Solution-Oriented Discourse. *Educational Considerations*, 33-39.
- Cullison, C. (2018, April). In The Know: The Underfunding of Public Education In Oklahoma. *OK Policy*. Retrieved from <https://okpolicy.org/in-the-know-the-underfunding-of-public-education-in-oklahoma/>
- Duneier, M. (1999). A Statement on Method in *Sidewalk*, pp. 333-357.
- Eger, A. (2019, April). Teacher pay raise boosts Oklahoma to 34th in the nation, new rankings find. *Tulsa World*. Retrieved from https://www.tulsaworld.com/news/teacher-pay-raise-boosts-oklahoma-to-th-in-nation-new/article_b06ad560-40ed-5ccf-9517-036e9dbddb4.html
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). Writing ethnographic fieldnotes. 2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Farmer, L. (2017, June). Nation's Least-Funded Schools Get What They Pay For. *Governing: The States and Localities*. Retrieved from <https://www.governing.com/topics/education/gov-oklahoma-states-education-funding.html>
- Felder, B. (2016, March). A generation after education reform, Oklahoma is facing familiar issues. *The Oklahoman*. Retrieved from <https://newsok.com/article/5487704/a-generation-after-education-reform-oklahoma-is-facing-familiar-issues>
- Felder, B. (2018, January). Oklahoma teachers continue wait for pay raise a decade after last increase. *The Oklahoman*. Retrieved from <https://newsok.com/article/5580331/oklahoma-teachers-continue-wait-for-pay-raise-a-decade-after-last-increase>
- Felder, B. (2018, March). Morning Bell: OKC teachers went on strike in 1979. *The Oklahoman*. Retrieved from <https://newsok.com/article/5587751/morning-bell-okc-teachers-went-on-strike-in-1979>

Franklin, D. (2018, April). What you need to know about the Oklahoma teacher walkout. *Oklahoma's News 4*. Retrieved from <https://kfor.com/2018/04/02/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-oklahoma-teacher-walkout/>

From *The Oral History Reader* (pp. 115-176)/ eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson:
“Learning to listen: interview techniques and analyses,” (1998). Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack.
“Interviewing the women of Phokeng: consciousness and gender, insider and outsider,”
Belinda Bozzoli.

Habermas, J. (1975). *Legitimation crisis*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hess, F. M. (2018, October). Year of the Strike. *National Review*, Retrieved from <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2018/10/29/year-of-the-strike/>

Hurley, B. (2018, September). The teacher pay gap is growing: Teachers are now paid 18.7% less than comparable professions. *Wisconsin Education Association Council*. Retrieved from <https://region5.weac.org/2018/09/06/the-teacher-pay-gap-is-growing-teachers-are-now-paid-18-7-less-than-comparable-professions/>

Inola & Wagoner. (2018, January). What's the matter with Oklahoma? *The Economist*. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2018/01/30/whats-the-matter-with-oklahoma>

Joyce, K. (2018, April). Teacher strikes in Oklahoma, Kentucky shutter hundreds of schools amid demands for better pay. *Fox News*. Retrieved from <https://www.foxnews.com/us/teacher-strikes-in-oklahoma-kentucky-shutter-hundreds-of-schools-amid-demands-for-better-pay>

KOCO YouTube Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeoaAhVmeOo>

- Koivunen, T. (2010). Practicing Power and Gender in the Field: Learning from Interview Refusals. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39(6), 682-708.
- Lieberman, M. (1965). Teachers' Strikes: Acceptable Strategy? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 46(5), 237-240.
- McHenry-Sorber, E. (2018, April). 5 things to know about the teacher strike in Oklahoma. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/5-things-to-know-about-the-teacher-strike-in-oklahoma-94277>
- Merton, Robert. 1987. "Three Fragments from a Sociologist's Notebooks," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 13: pp. 1-28.
- Mills, C. (2016, January). "We're just down to the bone," Oklahoma schools forced to make deeper cuts to their budget. *Oklahoma's News 4*. Retrieved from <https://kfor.com/2016/01/07/were-just-down-to-the-bone-oklahoma-schools-forced-to-make-deeper-cuts-to-their-budget/>
- Nicks, D. (2016, May). Oil Companies Get a Break While Oklahoma Schools Face Budget Crisis. *Money*. Retrieved from <http://money.com/money/4338825/oklahoma-oil-tax-breaks-school-budget-crisis/>
- Nightingale College. (2019). Nurse Salary by State: Which US States Pay the Best. Retrieved from <https://nightingale.edu/blog/nurse-salary-by-state/>
- Oklahoma City Strike Is First by Teachers in the State (1979, August). *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/08/23/archives/oklahoma-city-strike-is-first-by-teachers-in-the-state.html>

- Oklahoma Uses Emergency Certified Teachers During Shortage. (2017, June). *U.S. News*. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/oklahoma/articles/2017-06-23/oklahoma-uses-emergency-certified-teachers-during-shortage>
- Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (1977). *Poor people's movements: Why they succeed, how they fail*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Perry, G. (2016, January). The Cost of Tax Cuts in Oklahoma. *OK Policy*. Retrieved from <https://okpolicy.org/the-cost-of-tax-cuts-in-oklahoma/>
- Rankings of the States 2016 and Estimates of School Statistics 2017. *National Education Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/2017-rankings-and-estimates>
- The Right to Strike. *National Labor Relations Board*. Retrieved from <https://www.nlr.gov/strikes>
- Sanchez, R. (April, 2018). Oklahoma governor compares teachers to 'a teenage kid that wants a better car'. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/04/us/oklahoma-governor-mary-fallin-teacher-comment/index.html>
- Schaeffer, K. (2019). About one-in-six U.S. teachers work second jobs – and not just in the summer. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/01/about-one-in-six-u-s-teachers-work-second-jobs-and-not-just-in-the-summer/>
- Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS). (2008). *National Center for Education Statistics*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass0708_004_t1s.asp
- Shirky, C. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved from <http://sites.asiasociety.org/womenleaders/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/The-Political-Power-of-Social-Media-Foreign-Affairs2.pdf>

- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Strauss, V. (2012). Survey: Teachers work 53 hours per week on average. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/survey-teachers-work-53-hours-per-week-on-average/2012/03/16/gIQAqGxYGS_blog.html
- Strike by Teachers Over Salaries Closes Many Oklahoma Schools (1990, April). *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/17/us/strike-by-teachers-over-salaries-closes-many-oklahoma-schools.html>
- Sullivan, E. (2018, April). Union Leader Calls For An End To Oklahoma Teachers' 9-Day Strike. *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/14/602462055/union-leader-calls-for-an-end-to-oklahoma-teachers-9-day-strike>
- Teacher Compensation: Fact vs. Fiction. *National Education Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/home/12661.htm>
- Tilly, C. & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious Politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis. *Sociological Theory*, 30(3), 167–186.
- Tolich, M. (2004). Internal Confidentiality: When Confidentiality Assurances Fail Relational Informants. *Qualitative Sociology*, 27(1), 101-106.
- Turner, C., Lombardo, C., & Logan, E. B. (2018, April). Teacher Walkouts: A State by State Guide. *NPR Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/25/602859780/teacher-walkouts-a-state-by-state-guide>

Turner, Justin. (2015). Being Young in the Age of Globalization: A Look at Recent Literature on Neoliberalism's Effect on Youth. *Social Justice* 41(4), 8-22.

White, K. (2018, April). What's the difference between a walkout and a strike? For Arizona teachers, it matters. *The Republic*. Retrieved from azcentral.com

Williams, D. (2018, November). 16 Oklahoma Educators Elected into Office on Tuesday. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/07/politics/oklahoma-teachers-election-trnd/index.html>

Winkler, A. M., Scull, J., & Zeehandelaar, D. (2012). How Strong Are U.S. Teacher Unions? A State-by-State Comparison. *Thomas B. Fordham Institute*.

Yan, H., Valencia, N., & Park, M. (2018, April). Kentucky and Oklahoma teachers flood state capitals – and refuse to back down. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/02/us/oklahoma-kentucky-teachers/index.html>

Appendix A - Interview Guide

Before the strike

When and how did you learn about the spring 2018 teachers' strike?

What do you think were the reasons for teachers going on strike?

Tell me about the time period before the strike. What were the main challenges for you as a teacher that led you to take part in the strike?

During the strike

How did you get involved in the strike?

What were your own personal reasons for participating in the strike?

Were these also the reasons for other teachers to participate in the strike?

In what ways did you participate in the strike?

Nine-day walkout?

Rallies at the capitol?

Online activism such as discussion boards, forums, or social media posts?

Talk with the media or political representatives during the strike?

Other forms of participation?

How did teachers go about choosing methods to voice their grievances?

Do you think these methods were successful? Why or why not?

Tell me about any of your coworkers that participated in the strike..

Tell me about any of your coworkers who participated in the strike apart from teachers.. For example, support staff, administrative workers, principals, etc.

If you had coworkers who were against the strike, what do you think was their reason?

How did school and district officials react to the strike?

How did the community react to the strike?

After the strike ended

Do you believe the strike was a success? Why or why not?

What has changed in your state/district/or school since the strike? If anything has improved, what has?

What did you learn throughout the process of striking? Is there anything you would have done differently?

Is there anything you think is important to say about the strike?

Demographic questions

What is your age?

18-29 years old

30-39 years old

40-49 years old

50+ years old

What is your gender identity?

What is your race/ethnicity?

How many years have you worked as a-public school teacher?

At what school district did you work during the strike?

At what school district do you currently work?

How many years have you worked at your current school?

What grade/subjects do you teach?