Organized Leadership for Equitable Change: Union-active Teachers dedicated to Social Justice

by

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Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education
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Abstract

Historically, teachers’ unions have been some of the major organizational sites of social justice leadership in K-12 education (Kuehn, 2007; M. Murphy, 1990; Urban, 1982), but until the mid 1990s, the term “social justice unionism” (Peterson & Charney, 1999) had little currency in teacher union circles. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the concept of social justice unionism in context. In particular, I asked how teacher union activists contributed and responded to the institutionalization of social justice in their organization. I used a critical constructionist (Ball, 1987; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 1987) perspective to analyze 25 career history (Goodson, 1994) interviews with teachers, staff and elected officials affiliated with the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation between 1967 and 2007, and found that successive generations of union-involved activists dedicated to labour solidarity, feminism, multiculturalism, anti-colonialism and anti-homophobia used networks of like-minded colleagues to counter bureaucratic norms within their organization, the education system and society. A qualitative depiction of these changes suggests that they were layered, multi-dimensional and uneven. They played out on a contested, uphill gradient shaped, but not determined, by four factors: the organizational prioritization of teacher welfare over social justice; historically persistent micro-political struggles between two federation caucuses; the centralizing tendencies
of union leadership in response to the provincial government’s centralization of educational authority; and broader ruling relations in Canadian society. Still, despite this uphill gradient, all activist networks left a durable trace on federation history. The major significance of this finding for critical theorists and social justice activists is a modestly hopeful alternative to the traditional conceptions of change embedded in organizational theory: revolution, evolution or despair.
Acknowledgments

*If a horse with four legs can sometimes stumble, how much more a human being with only one tongue!* (Shalom Aleichem)

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Chapter One: Introduction

“Are you for unions or against them?” This is the question I am frequently asked at bar-mitzvahs, weddings and other social gatherings after telling people that I am studying social justice teacher unionism. My answer in the form of a question seems too sarcastic to articulate: I want to ask doctors if they are for or against hospitals, teachers if they are for or against schools and educational policy makers if they are for or against the Department of Education. My somewhat defensive response is a product of my discomfort with the antagonism inherent in this far too common legitimacy question.

Fortunately, after the first dozen repetitions of the same question, I have learned to treat my conversation partner with less hostility. I now ask teachers to tell me about their week and then attempt to connect their experiences with a recent teacher union advocacy effort related to their struggles. I ask school administrators, government officials and parents to share their experiences of teachers’ unions then attempt to provide a historical explanation for each concern. If they seem interested, I then point out a few concrete connections between teachers’ working conditions and students’ opportunities to learn. If I am speaking to labour historians or educational administration researchers, I address the importance of studying teacher unionism as a way of gaining deeper insights about public sector unionism, teacher leadership and educational reform. If I am speaking to activists, I attempt to connect them with union-involved educators working on similar issues. With a few exceptions, even my less defensive strategy is met with a trip to the nearest buffet table followed by a search for another seat.

I am not being deliberately evasive, boring or even academic. I am just trying to respond to a direct question in a way that involves honesty about the limits of my knowledge. I am not an expert on trade unionism. What I do know, as a result of carefully analyzing 3000 pages of career history transcripts generated by teacher activists who worked for social justice in the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation between 1967 and 2007, is how social justice unionism took shape in that organization over the last four decades from the perspectives of 25 organizational insiders. Interestingly, nobody asks me if I am
for social justice or against it, and only my thesis committee expects me to define the term. To me, social justice means challenging patterns of privilege, status and resource allocation that advantage some groups over others, but this study is not based exclusively on my definition. It is also based on the definitions of social justice articulated by 30 educators, 25 affiliated with the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation and five affiliated with teachers’ organizations across the country, all of whom self-identified or were identified by others as social justice activists.

If my conversation partner remains with me, as he or she is apt to do at a conference presentation, guest lecture or formal social gathering for which seating has been assigned, I am usually asked a second type of legitimacy question: “What do teachers’ unions have to do with social justice?” A version of this question was recently asked by a professor of education following a presentation I gave on social justice teacher unionism. He asked me to identify the legitimate function of teachers’ unions. When I asked him what he meant by “legitimate”—again, answering a question with a question—he told me that according to government legislation, teachers’ unions are responsible for bargaining with the employer for teachers’ salaries, benefits and fair employment practices, not for promoting or supporting the social justice activist work of its members. Before I had a chance to respond, a union-involved teacher at the presentation quickly pointed out that social justice drove his everyday work. How, he wondered, could something so central to teaching be anything other than a legitimate concern of his organization? A third participant joined the conversation by stating that the fundamental goals of teachers’ federations legitimately shift in relation to the needs of their professional membership.

I found this discussion interesting for three reasons. First, it revealed a level of teacher federation goal diversity rarely acknowledged by school improvement researchers and government policy makers. Second, it organizationally positioned teachers’ federations as dynamic mediators of centralized government decisions and teachers’ everyday practice. And third, it reflected the most commonly cited responsibilities of teachers’ federations: 1) bargaining, 2) professional advocacy and 3) social justice.
These three functions co-exist in many teachers’ organizations today but they emerged at
different times in response to a range of external and internal pressures. Bargaining
achieved prominence in North America in the late 1960s and early 1970s as teachers’
associations began to advocate for and gain collective bargaining rights (Fuller, Mitchell,
& Hartmann, 2000; Stone, 2000; Whitehead, 1998). Debates about organized
professional advocacy have been traced back to the origin of teachers’ federations (Gitlin,
1996; Ingersoll & Perda, 2008; Larson, 1997; McClure, 1992; Rodrigue, 2003) but they
achieved a level of prominence across North America in the late 80s after a group of
educational researchers began to advocate for professional unionism and reform
American teachers’ federations interested in merging industrial and professional models
of unionism have since adopted the tagline, “A Union of Professionals” (Kerchner &
Koppich, 1993). Finally, in 1994, the National Coalition of Education Activists generated
a vision for social justice unionism (See Peterson & Charney, 1999). In addition to
bargaining and professional advocacy, they argued that teachers’ organizations ought to
work in solidarity with marginalized communities of students and parents.

While it is not possible to attribute changes in teacher union discourse to this 1994
meeting which may or may not have been on teacher unionists’ radar, it is the case that a
decade and a half after the NCEA articulated their vision, a social justice discourse has
become increasingly prevalent on North American teacher union websites (Rottmann,
2007b, 2008). This discourse occupies a marginal location on some union websites and a
central location on others, but organizational websites are promotional in nature and thus
say little about the day to day functioning of social justice unionism. A more complex
story can only be told if social justice unionism is examined through the everyday
practices, goals and resource decisions of organizational actors over time. My case study

1 I am referencing Peterson and Charney rather than the whole group because they have edited a full text on
the issue of social justice teacher unionism. It is important to state, however, that the original idea did not
emerge from two people; 29 members of the National Coalition of Education Activists met in Portland in
1994 to document their vision.
of social justice unionism in the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) tells such a story.

In this introductory chapter, I identify the educational problems to which my study responds, develop my research questions, articulate my theoretical perspective and generate a conceptual framework. In Chapter Two, I provide a focussed review of the literature on teachers’ unions with an eye to social justice activism and in Chapter Three I outline my methodological approach. I present my findings in Chapters Four and Five. In Chapter Four I weave together teacher activists’ career histories through eight composite profiles, and in Chapter Five I expose the resulting poly-vocal history to the questions implicit in my conceptual framework. I conclude in Chapter Six by outlining the significance and limitations of my findings and drawing out a few practical and theoretical implications of the study.

1 Social Justice Teacher Unionism as a Lived Experience

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Public education in North America has been shaped, since the turn of the twentieth century, by both industrial and democratic forces (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Tyack, 1974). Since that time, schools have acted as institutions of social reproduction, perpetuating dominant values, divisions and practices in a society over time (Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Bourdieu, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976), and sites of resistance disrupting the perpetuation of dominant values (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1983; Weiler, 1988; Willis, 1977). Research on the social reproductive function of education has demonstrated how schools reinforce societal dimensions of privilege (Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Biklen, 1995; Dei, 2000; Oakes, 1986; Willis, 1977), while research on democratic education has revealed practices that support increasingly equitable

2 I use the term “teacher activist” rather than simply referring to my participants as teachers because in addition to working or having worked as classroom teachers, their careers have been driven by goals—anti-racist, feminist, environmental, pacifist, international solidarity and Aboriginal advocacy—that are not specified within the provincial Education Act.
distribution of resources and decision-making authority (Dewey, 1916; hooks, 2003a; Portelli & Solomon, 2001). Both bodies of research implicate teachers—the first as regulators of an inequitable system and the second as agents of change.

Recently, teachers who have attempted to bring about democratic changes in schools have begun to refer to their efforts as “social justice education” (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Applebaum, 2004; Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Barry, 2005; Clark, 2006; Cochran-Smith, 1999; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002; Greene, 1998; Kohli, 2005). According to Fraser (1997), these efforts are based on two concepts central to the term “social justice”, redistribution and recognition:

Many actors appear to be moving away from a socialist political imaginary, in which the central problem of justice is redistribution, to a ‘postsocialist’ political imaginary, in which the central problem of justice is recognition. With this shift, the most salient social movements are no longer economically defined 'classes' who are struggling to defend their 'interests,' and 'exploitation,' and win 'redistribution.' Instead, they are culturally defined 'groups' or 'communities of value' who are struggling to defend their 'identities,' end 'cultural domination,' and win 'recognition' (p.2-3).

In words that are more familiar to me, social justice as redistribution is based on Marx’s historical materialism, and social justice as recognition is based on cultural identity theories. By returning to the roots of each concept, it is possible to identify at least three types of difference in addition to the conceptual one between redistribution and recognition: 1) critical vs. liberal ideology, 2) theoretical vs. activist roots and 3) singular (class) vs. multiple (race, gender, sexuality, ability) conceptions of identity. Regardless of their conceptual, theoretical or ideological focus, however, people who study or advocate for social justice agree on two things: 1) we have not yet achieved a socially just society, and 2) those who attempt to bring it about face multiple systemic and organizational barriers.

The work of social justice-oriented teachers is constrained by a Eurocentric curriculum (Dei & Calliste, 2000; Solomon, 2002), relative cultural homogeneity within the teaching profession (Collins, 1991; Reynolds, 1990; Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009) and a series of regulatory policy mandates at the federal, state/provincial, and district level.
Barriers to teacher activism also exist at the school level. Teachers’ locations in classrooms (Bascia, 1996a; Hargreaves, 1994), their restricted access to broader decision making structures (Ingersoll, 1996, 2003, 2007; Ingersoll & Perda, 2008) and their limited opportunities to establish cross-school networks of like-minded colleagues (Little, 1992; Rosenholz, 1989) constrain their individual and collective abilities to act beyond the classroom level. Their physical, cultural and professional isolation, combined with their limited decision-making authority, decreases teachers’ abilities to participate in sustained social justice action at the school, district and system level.

Fortunately, Canadian public school teachers belong to organizations that can facilitate their collective decision-making authority and reduce their professional isolation. By organizing people who work near the bottom of the educational hierarchy, teachers’ unions, federations, associations and societies have historically been some of the major organizational sites of educational activism (M. Murphy, 1990; Peterson & Charney, 1999; Poole, 2007c; Rottmann, 2008). At the same time, they have been known to reproduce the very structures they have set out to challenge (Bascia, 2008; Compton & Weiner, 2008; Perlstein, 2005; Rottmann, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2005; Weiner, 1998).

“Social justice unionism” (Peterson & Charney, 1999) has been proposed as a potential solution to this problem. Building on the strengths of industrial and professional traditions, it involves “defending public education and the rights of teachers, a strong emphasis on professionalism, and a commitment to children and community” (Peterson & Charney, 1999 p.5). This visionary solution to the reproduction of societal inequity within union walls underscores the importance of fighting societal injustice without giving up on collective self-advocacy, at the same time as it provides North American teachers’ unions with a discursive framework to blend social and occupational activism. Teacher union insiders have used this framework to chart social justice initiatives within their organization (CTF, 2007; Kuehn, 2006a, 2007; MacRae, 2008; McAdie, Giles, Makan, & Flessa, 2007; O’Haire, 2007), but while their accounts provide activists with richly contextualized organizational history and an important template for strategic social justice unionism, their limited attention to educational theory and policy issues means
that their audience rarely extends beyond teacher activists within their networks who are already sympathetic to their pursuits.

My case study of social justice unionism in a Canadian provincial teachers’ federation contributes to the scholarship on teacher leadership and organizational change by supplementing system-driven theories of leadership and reform with teachers’ experientially-driven ones. It also extends activist conversations already in progress by providing union-involved educators with an outsider’s, bird’s eye view of their highly complex organization. Individual participants know their organization in much greater depth than I do, but as somebody who is not involved in the day to day politics of the organization, it is possible for me to gain access to a set of stories, perspectives and strategies that are not available, in their entirety, to individuals who spend most of their time in a particular local association or organizational division. The story I tell will be politicized because I am a human being who cannot be neutral, but my political orientation is less likely to fall into existing organizational patterns and, as such, will provide all actors with an additional, empirically-informed perspective on their individual and collective work.

1.2 Research question

This case study of social justice teacher unionism in the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation has undergone many shifts in focus. Each shift was a product of my four year struggle to identify a unit of analysis—organization, sub-group, individual—that would correspond with my interests, suggestions from my supervisor and committee, gaps in the literature and my preliminary findings. In this section I briefly outline the inductive process that led to my final research question.

At the early conceptual stage, I set out to study teachers’ unions as sites for social justice work. I planned to examine social justice unionism in the context of three teachers’ organizations—the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, the Alberta Teachers’ Association and the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario. I chose these three organizations because the social justice work of their elected officials, staff and teacher activists occurred in response to contrasting provincial political contexts. At this stage,
my primary unit of analysis was the organization and my research question was: **How do teachers’ unions function as social justice sites for their members, elected leadership and staff?**

Following a few conversations with my supervisor, I learned of her concern that my focus on inter-organizational comparisons might lead me to simplify internal organizational dynamics. In response to her suggestions, I developed a research proposal that foregrounded teacher activism and back-grounded teachers’ federations. At this stage, my primary unit of analysis was the *individual* and my research question was: **How do union-active teachers do social justice work through their organizations?**

It was not until the later stages of data analysis that my focus and unit of analysis transformed for the third and final time. A year after I had completed my interviews, transcribing and early analysis, I became increasingly aware of the connections between activists—not simply thematic connections arising from my analysis, but also networks of organized relationships independent of my thinking. The individual no longer seemed like an appropriate unit of analysis but neither did the organization. The individual and organization swung back and forth in my mind between figure and ground until I realized that my primary unit of analysis could not artificially separate the two. Teacher union activism, by definition, connects the individual to the organization and the organization to the individual. This realization led me back to the literature on qualitative methodology.

With the career histories of twenty-five teacher activists in mind, I read Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton and Oakes’ (1995) chapter on constructivist approaches to contextually bounding cases. Wells and her colleagues identify their unit of analysis as “the phenomenon of detracking reform as a complex and multidimensional school change process” (Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton, & Oakes, 1995, p.18). Following their methodological lead, I identified my unit of analysis as the *institutionalization of social justice unionism as an organizational change process*. This *process*-based unit of analysis allowed me to foreground dynamic connections between organized individuals without merging the experiences of individuals or constructing their organization as an internally
homogeneous monolith. It also allowed me to delimit my study in a way that was meaningful to participants. Harper (1992) expands on this point:

"The boundaries and sociological characteristics of settings are often taken for granted or defined in an ad hoc manner, meaningful to the researchers but perhaps not to the subjects under study. For example, sociologists often use bureaucratically derived boundaries, such as those defined by census tracts, to define a community...lining up the sociological definition with bureaucratic definitions makes data accessible and comparable. Yet such definitions may overlook boundaries or characteristics which emerge from an inductive approach grounded in the points of view of community members. (Harper, 1992, p.142)"

To take Harpers’ point seriously is to identify a phenomenon and unit of analysis that is meaningful to participants. Stated differently, it only makes sense for me to examine the institutionalization of social justice in the context of the federation if the term “social justice” holds meaning for study participants. While conducting my interviews, I learned that the term did in fact hold meaning for all twenty-five participants. I also learned that while they defined social justice in a variety of ways, teacher activists experienced BCTF social justice unionism as a concrete phenomenon rather than an abstract concept. For example, they were all able to name social justice structures such as the division in the provincial office that housed the social justice committee; they all had opinions about the best programmatic vehicle for conducting social justice work—discrete identity based programs with local networks vs. an integrated umbrella committee with local grant opportunities; they could all identify a teacher activist’s political caucus affiliation by his or her preference for discrete or integrated social justice programming and they were all aware of BCTF grant money earmarked for local social justice initiatives.

Because participants were able to connect the concept of social justice to somewhat durable organizational structures, I felt confident referring to social justice as a BCTF institution (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 2002) and the process by which this abstract concept was formalized as the federation’s institutionalization of social justice. I describe the term “institutionalization” in greater detail later in this chapter but for my current purposes it suffices to say that institutionalization is a shared process of realization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) with “realization” being used in a double sense: 1) apprehension or recognition of a concept as real by members within a group and 2) the
process by which a group of connected actors makes the concept real (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Building on this definition, the research question arising from my field work and early analysis is: **How did teacher union activists contribute and respond to the institutionalization of social justice in their federation?**

This research question requires further theoretical and conceptual clarification. In the next two sections, I articulate my theoretical perspective and generate a conceptual framework to guide my inquiry.

1.3 Theoretical Perspective: A move from universality to particularity

One question drives my theoretical perspective—*How can researchers who believe reality is socially constructed account for the social and material consequences of inequitable power relations?*

An in-depth examination of this problem is beyond the scope of my study but I believe it is important to articulate my perspective because my assumptions about the social world guide my research. Like social constructionists (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), I believe that human beings understand the social world in different ways and that there is no objective or transcendental representation of reality, but like critical theorists (eg. Apple, 1998; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; Gramsci, 1971; Marx, 1906), I also believe that there are material consequences of social inequity. I experienced a theoretical struggle when I realized that I was trying to simultaneously adopt two contradictory philosophical positions—nominalism (social phenomena are constructed through the perceiving mind) and realism (social phenomena exist independent of the perceiving mind). In this section I address this tension by identifying the philosophical point of departure for social constructionist theory, outlining concepts relevant to my inquiry, exposing these

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3 I initially used the terms social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) interchangeably but learned from two source books that their differences lie in disciplinary distinctions and levels of analysis. Both perspectives draw on a philosophical tradition rooted in nominalism, but social constructionism is more often used by sociologists who study how social phenomenon are produced through human interaction, while social constructivism is more often used by
concepts to a critical micro-political lens and synthesizing them in relation to my research.

1.3.1 Logical Positivism & Logical Empiricism: A Point of Departure

Social constructionists (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and critical theorists (Apple, 2003; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; Gramsci, 1971; Marx, 1906; McLaren, 1999; Portelli & Solomon, 2001) conceptualize the world in different ways, but they share a general disdain for logical positivism and logical empiricism—two philosophical approaches to inquiry based on the work of Aguste Comte, John Locke, David Hume and Francis Bacon. The early logical positivists and logical empiricists sought to replace theological and metaphysical theories with the more easily verifiable scientific method (Sarkar, 1996). In particular, they were uncomfortable with the theorizing of abstract concepts such as “being,” “knowing,” “identity,” “time” and “space” because they could not be certain that these theories were free of moral considerations or bias. Empiricists believe the only verifiable or objective knowledge is that which can be derived through the five senses, and positivists argue that researchers should limit knowledge to scientifically verifiable facts and the analysis of those facts through logical or mathematical proof. These two philosophical traditions continue to guide educational research today. Few people refer to themselves as positivists but many continue to believe that the search for knowledge should be limited to logical deduction or inference from observable facts, and that, by revealing and codifying social facts in ways that can be verified and replicated by others, social scientists can free themselves from the problematic biases embedded in metaphysical and theological assumptions.

As someone who inherited logical positivist thinking from my training in cognitive psychology, I believed, for the duration of my undergraduate education, that logic, empiricism and the scientific method could be usefully applied to social science in order
to increase methodological transparency. Reflecting back on this very rational reason for
my early disciplinary socialization, however, I now believe that my easy acceptance of
logic and empiricism was driven by a deeply emotional experience. My first year of
university was a challenging one. After growing up in a Jewish community in which
Anti-Semitism was spoken about but rarely enacted, I moved to a place where intolerance
toward Jewish people was alive. As the only Jewish student on my floor in residence, I
was left alone to deal with people who expected me to have horns on my head and
explain my behaviours in terms of stereotypes. All of a sudden, it became very important
for me to find out what kind of evidence and logic was fuelling their beliefs. More often
than not, I found that their beliefs emerged from problematic assumptions. I believe now
that I accepted my early academic training in part because I believed that the universal
adoption of a logical positivist paradigm by social scientists could result in a reduction of
stereotypical biases fuelling hateful propaganda.

I did not learn to name logical positivism until I began my teacher education year, but I
did adopt an unnamed and unacknowledged positivist framework for my undergraduate
thesis on human impression formation (Rottmann, 1996). Without any real awareness of
the incongruities embedded in the task, I used the scientific method and quasi-
experimental design to prove that human impression formation was not a purely
conscious, analytic process—a topic that seems to lend itself more easily to a critical or
social constructionist inquiry. I am only speculating on the basis of my particular
experience, but I believe it is possible that the early positivists were idealists who found
their inherited metaphysical and theological theories objectionable because the rules
underlying these theories were not immediately obvious to them. This promise of
methodological transparency appealed to me because it provided me with a mechanism
for invalidating painful and personally incomprehensible discrimination.

My paradigm shifted (Kuhn, 1962) during my teacher education year. I initially viewed
the constructionist and critical writing we were expected to read as embarrassingly
ideological but eventually came to see that positivism was no less ideological. I also
learned that logical positivism could be used to reinforce rather than challenge societal oppression. More than any other factor, however, my growing disaffection with this branch of philosophy followed my rapidly shifting beliefs about human nature. I came to believe that human logic is diverse and contradictory, that neutrality is impossible and that social dynamics can not be understood when data collection is limited to observation through the five senses. These beliefs drive my research questions, methodology and analysis.

1.3.2 Social Constructionism

The extreme realism implicit in positivism and empiricism can be contrasted with the extreme nominalism implicit in social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social constructionists believe that we invent and generate rather than discover or reveal social properties of a society. Instead of accessing truth through an impartial sensing of reality, as the empiricists and positivists suggest, constructionists believe we learn about contextualized social structures, dynamics and actions by interacting with individuals who are familiar with the context in question and whose interactions have produced the processes under examination. Social constructionists believe that our understanding about what is real in certain contexts depends on our inter-subjective representations of frequently repeated social interactions in that time and place (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). When these socially constructed customs, interpretations, routines and linguistic codes are embedded, concretized or objectified in a society, culture or organization, they are said to be “institutionalized” (Bakhtin, 1986; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 2002).

The explanatory strength of Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) social constructionist theory lies in their clear explanation of institutionalization as a dynamic, reciprocal process. They describe this abstract concept by introducing the reader to a hypothetical interacting

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4 The recent trend in evidence-based research (Burns & Schuller, 2007; Carnine, 2000; Coe, 2004; Cook & Gorard, 2007; D. H. Hargreaves, 1999; Slavin, 2002) is a case in point. Rather than being used to eliminate bias, many critical researchers (Bedard, 1999; Biesta, 2007; Clegg, 2005; Lather, 2004; St.Pierre, 2006) have found that it has been used to reinforce existing power relations by concealing rather than eliminating the biases of elite decision-makers charged with governance.
dyad made up of two adults, A and B, who have never met one another but have come to the relationship already having been socialized by their home communities. Each adult responds to familiar circumstances in habitual ways (e.g. A may be in the habit of shaking hands when he meets a new person and B may be in the habit of smiling when she meets a new person). A’s habitualized behaviour might not be discernable to members of his society but it is easily observed and characterized by B, a complete stranger, as “there he goes again.” As this is happening, B’s habitualized behaviour is observed and characterized by A as “there she goes again.” As A and B get to know one another, they begin to respond to one another in habitual ways (perhaps by combining the two types of greetings into a smiling handshake). If A and B have a child, C, they are likely to pass their interactive behaviour (smiling handshake) on to C as the correct way to greet people—“how things are done around here.” Berger and Luckman characterize societies as networks of social relationships made up of multiple interacting dyads and groups. It is in the context of these societies, or networks of dyadic social relationships, that biographically specific actions and interactions become formalized. The two social constructionists refer to this formalization process as “institutionalization” and the resulting formalized habit as an “institution.”

Institutions feel real to those who inherit them (e.g. to C, the child of A & B), but they are never static. Rather, they are based on social relations, interpretations and contextual cues that change from one generation to the next. When one generation passes on an institution to the next, the new generation inherits the rules, customs and language, but not the underlying logic. As members of the new generation gain access to external influences in their environment (a new culture with a different way of thinking, a changing resource base, new technology) they may begin to question, resist or reshape the traditions that have been passed on to them as truth. As they do this, they become involved in the social construction of reality for themselves and the next generation.

1.3.3 Exposing Social Constructionism to Critical Micro-Political theory

Notwithstanding the explanatory strength of Berger and Luckmann’s concept of institutionalization, the critical theorist in me feels compelled to take their theory further
by asking questions about power, privilege and conflict. For example, whose reciprocally habitualized actions (here we go again) are passed on to new members as institutional fact (this is how things are done)? How does this relate to patterns of privilege within the larger network of social relations? Who benefits from social institutions in a particular context? When there are points of disagreement within generations or between individuals, who’s biographically based social constructions function as real for the majority? What are the material and social consequences of differential access to organizational, societal, cultural and institutional meaning-making?

One way to respond to these critical realist questions without abandoning the useful nominal elements of social constructionism is to shift my theoretical focus from universality to particularity. Ball’s theory of micro-politics (1987, 1991) helps me do this. His inductively generated theory is based on a secondary analysis of case studies he and his students had conducted between the late 1970s and mid 1980s on how teachers and Head teachers (principals) in English comprehensive schools dealt with a range of external events (e.g. falling rolls, changes in school leadership, de-streaming reform and amalgamation). He pays detailed attention to micro-politics as a dynamic struggle between domination and resistance:

On the one hand, I became specifically concerned with strategies of organizational power and control—domination…on the other hand, I wanted to explore the ways in which the imposition of organizational forms is resisted, and to explore the participation of varieties of members in the political process….This dualistic conceptualization [of politics] pointed to a realist and discursive analysis of micro-political processes…I tried to make sense of outcomes…as the products of compromise and negotiations. (p.170, emphasis added)

Ball’s practical insight about the dualistic conception of politics permits me to merge the nominalism implicit in social constructionism with the realism implicit in critical theory. By studying social construction in progress, a researcher can attend discursively to the structured products of social relations without losing the dynamic compromises and negotiations that are implicated in their construction.

I have chosen to draw on Ball’s work rather than the work of other micro-political theorists (Blase, 1991a, 1991b; Everhart, 1991; Iannaccone, 1991; Willower, 1991) for
two reasons; one is ideological and the other ontological. The ideological reason is that Ball bases his work on the belief that micro-political interactions are salient educational issues, not dysfunctional teacher behaviours which must be managed by school principals. Instead of reifying the bureaucratic notion of a single school hierarchy with principals at the helm, he depicts schools as organizations with multiple, occasionally contradictory school hierarchies. This approach is useful, not only to teachers who are more likely to recognize their experiences in his case studies, but also to school administrators who are interested in exchanging a managerial or instrumental school leadership approach with a more responsive, generative or democratic one (Glickman, 1998; Karumanchery & Portelli, 2005; Ryan, 2006; Starrat, 2001; Woods, 2004).

The second reason for my choice is that despite some major differences in their ideological commitments and analyses of power, Ball (1991) and Berger & Luckmann (1966) share a fundamental philosophical assumption about the social world. Of particular interest to me is their shared ontological assumption that organizations are not “real” but rather a product of the human mind and social interactions:

> The ontological status of the organization was changed—ethnographies [in comparison with organizational theories] were for the most part, based on theoretical premises like symbolic interactionism. They brought, often in inchoate form, a conception of organization as the product of multiple social interactions. That its realities lay in the things people said and thought, rather than in some kind of abstract system that was somehow greater than the sum of its parts. (Ball, 1991, p.167-168)

To describe the organizational context independent of the multiple simultaneous social and political interactions of individuals, is to artificially separate the collection of social relations from those whose interactions produce, reproduce and resist (Clune, 1990; Crocco, Munro, & Weiler, 1999; Giroux, 1983; Henry, 1992; Wotherspoon, 1989) these relations. From this perspective, the role of organizational theory is to “provide a side light on organizational processes” (Ball, 1991, p. 167) not to concretize, objectify or reveal the truth about a bounded entity within which people work. Ball’s theory of micro-politics helps me account for struggles over meaning making and resource allocation within the context of an organization, but it says little about how organizational dynamics
and norms relate to broader power structures within the education system and society (Webb, 2008).

Like Berger & Luckmann and Ball, Smith (1987) bases her feminist sociology on the philosophical assumption that organizations and institutions are socially constructed, but in contrast to these three theorists, she conceptualizes micro-political interactions as concrete, contextualized reflections of broader ruling relations (D. E. Smith, 1990). Smith focuses on the “everyday realities” of women’s lives without losing the socially constructed relations of production within which they are realized. This allows her to rely on an “ontology of the social that does not separate theory from practice” (Smith, 2002, p.21). Using Marxism as a referent, Smith argues that analysts ought to replace the:

Theory-derived conceptualization of class that creates virtual people in a virtual structure with an examination of the interlocking of work, time, and economy of actual people situated differently in the institutional order.
(Smith, 2002, p.34)

In contrast to macro-political sociological theorists who implicitly generalize the experiences of “rational men,” Smith explicitly makes the “everyday world” of women a sociological problematic (D. E. Smith, 1987). Without using this wording, Ball does the same thing for classroom teachers in his theory of educational micro-politics. This inherent connection makes it relatively easy to merge the two theories.

1.3.4 Merging philosophical perspectives

Returning to the question that framed this ontological inquiry—How can researchers who believe reality is socially constructed account for the social and material consequences of inequitable power relations?—one way to respond to this question is to recognize that realism and nominalism can co-exist in a single study. To suggest that they cannot is to inhabit a logical positivist perspective that presumes nominalism can be avoided by limiting inquiry to logical analysis of observational data. From a critical constructionist perspective, it is possible to conceive of social rules, norms and practices as being constructed by human beings (nominalism) without denying that they advantage some individuals more than others in a concrete way (realism).
An unintended consequence of my struggle to resolve this ontological conflict has been my increased familiarity with four theoretical perspectives—logical positivism, social constructionism, critical micro-politics and critical feminism—the last three of which I have adopted and merged into a hybrid perspective—critical constructionism (Ball, 1987; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 1987).

Social constructionism allows me to foreground nominalism over realism and thus illustrate the dynamic human construction of social structures, but it says little about the unequal terrain upon which this ongoing social construction takes place. Critical theory allows me to reveal dimensions of societal privilege but its macro-political focus on social inequities leaves little room for human agency. Micro-political theory allows me to illustrate organizational dynamics in an easily recognizable way, but it does not help me connect locally contextualized cases to broader social relations. Critical feminism helps me connect the everyday realities of organizationally and socially located people with broader social structures, but it does not help me theorize multiple interacting dimensions of privilege. The critical constructionist perspective (Ball, 1987; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 1987) I have adopted for this study merges these ideas. It allows me to analyze the institutionalization of social justice at the BCTF without losing the everyday realities of teacher activists, the micro-political tensions between sub-groups of activists and the broader patterns of privilege within which these activists and sub-groups work. In the next section, I use concepts central to this theoretical perspective to focus my research question.

1.4 Conceptual Framework: Structure and Agency

My research question—How did teacher union activists contribute and respond to the institutionalization of social justice in their federation?—carries traces of my theoretical perspective. Stated differently, it prepares readers to enter a critical constructionist conversation already in progress. The conceptual framework I develop in this section helps me subdivide my research question into five manageable sub-questions. At a fundamental level, it is based on the dynamic sociological tension between structure—social, historical, political, economic and organizational forces which shape people’s opportunities for action and agency—human beings’ individual and collective
capacity to take up and shape those opportunities (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Reed, 2003; Scherer, 2003). My conceptual framework builds on the structure-agency dynamic because I believe it is central to the idea of teacher union activism.

Disciplinary norms and theoretical perspectives often dictate researchers’ analyses of the relationship between structure and agency. Some believe that human agency is a fiction produced by elite decision makers (Bakhtin, 1986; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Gemmill & Oakley, 1997; Spivak, 1988; Willis, 1977), while others construct it as a relatively unmediated force driving human action (Bai, 2006; Craig, 1999; Vanderslice, 1988). Many social scientists, however, position themselves between these two poles. Berger and Luckmann (1966) are among this group. They argue that a “purely structural sociology is endemically in danger of reifying social phenomena” (p.187) but that “the self cannot be adequately understood apart from the particular social context in which it is shaped” (p.50). They build on the Marxist dialectic between social structure and individual existence in history and by doing so set themselves apart from theorists who “posit an ahistorical ‘social system’ or an ahistorical ‘human nature’”(p.187).

One way to explore the dynamic relationship between structure and agency without negating historical or organizational context is to use teacher activists’ interpretations of a shared organizational process to generate two types of analytic product: a map that depicts and locates the institutionalization of social justice in broader relations of

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5 I was initially tempted to use the concept “dialectic” to describe the relationship between agency and structure but it has so many philosophical roots that I thought it would elicit a broader universe of meaning than I intended to convey. I was also torn about whom to credit with the idea since it has been theorized by many generations of culturally and geographically disparate theorists. Hegel’s concept of dialectic—thesis-antithesis-synthesis—is useful to the extent that it challenges the mutual exclusivity of opposites but it is too abstract and formulaic to help me make meaning of my data. Marx and Engle’s concept of dialectic is helpful because it is historically rooted in the material world, but I am not fully committed to their theoretical perspective and thus did not want to borrow one decontextualized element of their work. My attraction to the idea of a dialectical relationship between agency and structure comes from its dynamism, relational nature, recognition of the temporal context, conception of change as something other than linear, capacity to analyze rather than fix or dismiss contradictions and refusal to conceptualize opposites as dichotomous or mutually exclusive entities. My worry about its imprecise use and the demand that I commit to a theory that does not fit my analytic bent, however, has overridden my attraction to the concept. For this reason, I am using the word “dynamic” instead of dialectic to describe the relationship between human agency and social structure.
production (D. E. Smith, 2002); and an analysis of the ways in which individual activists mediate, resist and construct (Clune, 1990; Giroux, 1983) this map through their careers. I can generate these analytic products from participants’ career histories because their organizationally specific, longitudinal narratives already contain traces of the individual and the social across time and space (Goodson, 1994, 1997). In section 1.4.1, I elaborate on three concepts relevant to social structure: Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) conception of “institutionalization,” Ball’s (1987) conception of “micro-politics” and Smith’s (1987) conception of “social relations of ruling,” and in section 1.4.2, I elaborate on five concepts relevant to human agency: Smith’s (1987) conception of “subverting institutionalization,” Giroux’s (1983) conception of “resistance,” and Clune’s 6 (1990) conceptions of “mediation,” “critique” and “construction.” Together, these eight concepts help me depict the institutionalization of social justice as a complex, unfinished, socially constructed project.

1.4.1 Mapping Organizational Structure

I cannot answer my research question about how social justice was institutionalized at the BCTF without first defining the term “institutionalization.” Berger and Luckmann’s forty-five page theory of institutionalization (1966, p.47-92) is thorough, insightful and informative but it does not lend itself easily to definition. The closest they come to defining the concept is to depict institutionalization as a “reciprocal typification of habitualized actions” (p.54) that involves three moments in the ongoing relationship between collections of individuals and their environments—*externalization, objectivation and internalization*. Because I believe their text must be studied as a whole to make sense, I have decided to distil their major conceptual points with my research in mind rather than to dissect it.

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6 My use of Clune (1990) is an extrapolation from his text. He conducted a secondary analysis of his former research on policy implementation in multiple school contexts to encourage policy researchers to conceptualize schools as mediators, critics or constructors of educational policy rather than technical implementers of centralized decisions. I am using his concepts of “mediation,” “critique” and “construction” to analyze how individual and sub-groups of teacher activists negotiate organizational norms because, like Clune, I am analyzing the relationship between particular, localized work and centralized decisions.
One way to begin this distillation process is to condense their text while retaining their organizing structure of five related elements: 1) organism and activity, 2) origins of institutionalization, 3) sedimentation and tradition, 4) roles and 5) scope. The first section outlines their understanding of social order while the second through fifth describe respectively how social worlds are constructed, how knowledge is produced in socially constructed worlds, how actions and conduct are typified in these worlds and how disparate elements are integrated. These five elements read through a critical lens (Ball, 1987; D. E. Smith, 1987) make up the “structure” component of my conceptual framework.

1.4.1.1 Social Order

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), the process of becoming human always happens in relation to the environment. For this reason, the social self cannot be understood apart from the particular social and historical context in which it is shaped. Their research on social worlds across time, space and cultural contexts leads them to conclude that while complete chaos may be theoretically conceivable, it is empirically unavailable. In other words, all societies are patterned or ordered to some extent. Taking this point further, any characterization of institutionalization within a society must include a description of the social order.

Smith’s (1987) contribution to the conversation on social order is to raise the issue of structural inequity. She notes that while any relationship between (at least) two people or (at least) two groups may theoretically be equitable, empirical evidence in North American society suggests that it has consistently occurred on an uneven political terrain. As such, each relationship between people or groups provides concrete evidence of broader ruling relations within a society.

Bringing these two ideas together in relation to my study, it behoves me to identify the patterns of privilege comprising the social order of the BCTF.
1.4.1.2 The Origins of Institutionalization

Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) theory of institutionalization not only accounts for the impact of the environment on the social self, but also the impact of interacting social selves on the environment. In fact, they set themselves apart from sociologists who came before them by asserting that no social or historical context can be understood apart from the collection of individuals whose interactions produce the social world of which they are a part. Thus, the production of social order, according to Berger and Luckmann, is always, by definition, a collective enterprise. Taking their ideas seriously demands that I not only describe the social order of the BCTF but also investigate where this order came from. That is, I must tell the easily apprehended origin story of social justice in the BCTF.

It is also important, given my critical constructionist perspective, that I identify whose versions of history are easily apprehended, even if not agreed upon, by participants and how they reflect patterns of privilege within the BCTF and broader ruling relations in society (Ball, 1987; D. E. Smith, 1987).

1.4.1.3 Sedimentation and Tradition

No social justice origin story contains all teacher activists’ versions of reality. For this reason, it is important to ask how some actions, experiences and understandings are institutionalized while others slip from collective memory. Berger and Luckmann (1966) answer this question by tracing the knowledge production process from “sedimentation” to “tradition.” They use the term “sedimentation” to refer to the process of converting an action or string of actions into traditional procedural knowledge—how we do things around here. Berger and Luckmann (1966) use the concept “inter-subjective sedimentation” to refer to the process by which an action or event, experienced by a subgroup of members within a society, is incorporated into a common stock of knowledge. They illustrate this process through a hunting example:

1) A few members of a hunting society lose their weapons and are forced to fight a wild boar with their hands. 2) They transmit this experience linguistically to the hunting society using specific language “lone big kill with one hand.” 3) By describing their experience in this abstract way, they detach it from the biographies of particular hunters who faced the
challenge. 4) This new strategy is taught to successive generations as the correct way to hunt when faced with a loss of weapons. 5) Over time, it is integrated into a larger body of tradition through instruction, inspirational poetry or religious allegory and stored through socially shared language and culture. 6) Since the origin of sedimentation is no longer important, individuals can invent a new origin story which fits with the current institutional order. 7) With the emergence of each new generation, potential actors are systematically acquainted with the meaning of the institution through a socially constructed learning apparatus made up of knowers and non-knowers (learners). 8) Through this selective educational process, institutional meanings of sedimented knowledge are transmitted in a simplified, decontextualized way. (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p.68-70, condensed)

Berger and Luckmann’s illustration of the inter-subjective sedimentation process is highly relevant to my study as it forces me to ask how the institution of social justice in the BCTF emerged from the actions and strategies of a few union-involved teachers.

It does not, however, help me account for the role of micro-political struggle or conflict between groups in the process. Stretching Berger and Luckmann’s analogy, what if multiple groups of hunters used different ways of killing a wild boar without weapons and all lived to tell about it? Whose strategies would make it into the common stock of knowledge? Would multiple hunters’ strategies come together to form procedural knowledge about how to kill an animal without weapons, or would one win out over the other? Ball’s (1987) micro-political theory of the school adds an element of struggle and heterogeneity to this relatively neat process of “inter-subjective sedimentation”. Parallel to Berger and Luckmann’s interest in examining sedimented traditions, is Ball’s interest in examining participants’ “folk knowledge,” but in contrast to Berger and Luckmann’s reliance on a hypothetical example to demonstrate their theory, Ball bases his theory on an inductive analysis of educators’ conflicting experiences and realities. The result is a more complex set of findings about organizationally shared knowledge.

Returning to my study, it is important that I examine how teacher activists’ particular behaviours became sedimented, formalized or realized in the BCTF.
1.4.1.4 Roles and Career trajectories

What does it mean to be a social justice activist in the BCTF? Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) concept of “role”—forms of actions that can be repeated by any actor of a certain type—helps me answer this question. Most directly related to my study, the concept of “role” marks the intersection of individuals and the organization, thereby introducing a level of dynamism to my analysis. Because roles and the relationships between them represent the institutional order, an examination of typical roles will help me reveal the social structure of the organization. At the same time, because “institutions are embodied in individual experience by means of roles” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.74), all individuals who perform an organizationally recognized role will leave a distinctive trace on the organization, however strong, faint, durable or quickly forgotten. Though Berger and Luckmann do not explicitly make this point, the relative strength of these traces can then be meaningfully compared with organizational patterns of privilege.

The concept of role is reflected in Ball’s (1987) and Smith’s (1987) work as well. Ball writes about the micro-politics of career as setting “the work experiences of individuals against the backdrop of organizational conflict and the competition of interests” (p.166) and Smith (1987) identifies status and intensity differences among roles typically occupied by individuals occupying relatively marginalized social locations. For example, she notes that feminized roles, such as the role of mother tend to “lack authority [but are] over-burdened with responsibility for outcomes over which they have little control” (p.22).

By analyzing the career histories of differently located teacher activists for promotion patterns, organizational status, work intensity and contribution to organizational knowledge production, I can reveal the texture of social justice unionism in the BCTF across organizational locations, participant biographies, time and societal dimensions of privilege.

1.4.1.5 Scope of Institutionalization

Berger and Luckmann (1966) conclude their theory of institutionalization by reminding the reader that not everything is institutionalized. In this final section, they ask “how
large is the sector of institutionalized activity as compared with the sector that is left uninstitutionalized?” (p.79) A simplified version of their answer is that it depends on the level of diversity in a society. In a homogeneous or monopolistic society, institutionalization is total. Members share all social problems and there is no division of labour or roles because everybody knows everything. Conflict is only experienced at the individual level as each member attempts to integrate socially constructed meaning with his or her subjectively experienced reality. At the other extreme is a heterogeneous or pluralistic society in which there is only one common problem. Actions and knowledge associated with this one problem are institutionalized while others are left un-institutionalized. Knowledge is role-specific and follows a complex division of labour. Conflict occurs between sub-groups over the allocation of resources and exemptions from productive labour. These “social conflicts are readily translated into conflicts between rival groups of thought, each seeking to establish itself and discredit if not liquidate the competitive body of knowledge” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p.85-86). As any society approaches the first extreme (homogenous/monopolistic), the reduction in number of perspectives increases the likelihood of unified action. As it approaches the second extreme (heterogeneous, pluralistic), the multiplication of perspectives increases the likelihood of fragmentation.

One issue not addressed by Berger and Luckmann is what happens if individuals and sub-groups with decision-making authority in a diverse or heterogeneous society lead as though the society was homogeneous. This possibility raises the uneven tension between the unifying/assimilating pressures exerted by those whose actions have been sedimented into societal or organizational tradition and the diversifying/fragmenting pressures exerted by those whose actions and biographical experiences are least likely to be institutionalized as organizational or societal norms. Smith’s (1987) theory of institutionalization provides an important insight for my analysis of this tension. Rather than assuming that it is beneficial for any individual or sub-group to compete in an unfair market to institutionalize his or her perspectives, she cautions feminists and Marxists against mainstreaming, formalizing or institutionalizing their theories. To do so in an unjust society is to expose critical work to highly oppressive ruling relations, thereby restricting critical thought and action.
Directly related to my study is Berger and Luckmann’s conception of scope—the extent to which social justice has been institutionalized in the BCTF—and Smith’s concern about mainstreaming critical thought—that it is not always advisable to formalize critical practices into oppressive structures.

1.4.1.6 Connecting the three theories of institutionalization

I have been able to connect Berger & Luckmann’s (1966), Ball’s (1987) and Smith’s (1987) theories of institutionalization because they are based on a similar ontological assumption. All three sets of theories build on the nominalist belief that while social institutions (eg. law, family or education) are experienced by many members of a society as having a natural, concrete existence independent of human action and language, these institutions have actually been spoken and acted into existence by interacting human beings. Additionally, all three sets of theorists privilege the everyday realities of individuals in context.

The theorists’ perspectives on conflict, however, differ considerably. Berger and Luckmann (1966) conceptualize conflict as a problem and thus set out to examine how social actors integrate discrepant meanings. Smith (1987) seeks to “subvert institutionalization” (p.222, emphasis added) thereby freeing potentially anti-oppressive theories like feminism and Marxism from crystallization, regulation and control. Ball (1987) is less interested in the integration or subversion of institutionalization and more interested in the salience of micro-political tensions across institutionalized settings.

Discrepant perspectives on conflict aside, the ideas embedded in the three theories can be brought together in the form of sub-questions to shape my analysis of social justice unionism in the BCTF. Before I articulate these questions, however, I turn my attention to the idea of human agency.

1.4.2 Unsettling the Map through Human Agency

The concepts I outlined in section 1.4.1 help me examine how social justice was woven into the fabric of the BCTF, but they tend to obscure the actions and perspectives of individual participants. One way to honour the collective and individual efforts of
activists without de-contextualizing their work is to unsettle my map of the BCTF institutionalization of social justice with examples of individual and collective mediation, critique, construction (Clune, 1990), subversion (D. E. Smith, 1987) and resistance (Giroux, 1983). The first three concepts are drawn from policy research, the fourth from a text on feminist standpoint theory and the fifth from an article applying sociological theories of reproduction and resistance to educational contexts.

1.4.2.1 The School as Policy Mediator, Critic and Constructor

Clune’s (1990) analysis of curriculum policy begins with his observation that educational policy is too often studied by researchers who view it in an absolute way—as an inflexible mandate to be implemented by those who work in schools. In contrast to this dominant view of policy, he conceptualizes context-sensitive school level policy making as the natural consequence of the fundamental differences between policy and school contexts. Based on this empirically demonstrated mismatch between simplistic policy mandates and complex school contexts, Clune argues that that more can be learned about education and policy if the school context is legitimately conceptualized as a mediator, critic or constructor of educational policy.

To say that schools mediate policy is to acknowledge the role of discretion, “regardless of how curriculum policy is formulated, schools and teachers exercise an extraordinary amount of discretion about how the policy will be implemented” (p.257). To say that schools critique policy is to account for the “possibility that the policy goals cannot be achieved at the school level, or that policies have adverse effects that outweigh the benefits of any goals achieved” (p.258). Finally, to view the school as policy constructor is to assume that it is, “engaged in the same kind of activity as policy makers—the construction of ideal curriculum content and pedagogy—at a level that responds to a different set of needs and priorities...[and to argue that] schools are not primarily the implementers of exogenous policy commands; rather, they [respond to their] own complex, shifting and contradictory agendas” (p.258).

The bridge to my study is that uniform implementation of social justice unionism, as the 29 members of the National Coalition of Education Activists envisioned it, across
national, state, provincial and local union contexts, is a practical impossibility. Teachers’
unions, like schools, are collective enterprises that must integrate a variety of policies and
practices with a variety of provincial and local goals. They deal with external pressures
from government officials, senior administrators and community groups and internal
pressures from their membership and staff. They are responsible for supporting teacher
welfare, professional advocacy, bargaining, professional development, communication,
educational campaigns, research, social justice and internal organizational affairs among
other functions. Compounding these varied responsibilities is the great diversity of social
justice goals held by union-involved educators. At the most general level, study
participants are all doing the “same” work—that is, they are all engaging in social justice
activism in a union context, but by moving from the general to the specific, it becomes
clear that their work is not at all uniform. Its diversity emerges from the range of goals,
values, strategies, commitments, experiences and socio-political contexts inhabited by
study participants. This diversity and the resulting complexity of social justice unionism
can be better understood by thinking of the BCTF as a mediator, critic and constructor of
social justice unionism.

Clune’s (1990) conceptions of policy mediation, critique and construction help me
conceptualize teacher activist agency by allowing me to ask how study participants used
their discretion to mediate conceptions of social justice learned through union
involvement, how they criticized the conceptions of social justice prioritized within the
context of the federation and how they constructed social justice in the contexts of their
families, careers and communities in ways that were not directly dictated by the
federation.

1.4.2.2 Subverting Institutionalization

Smith’s text The Everyday World as Problematic (1987) is a compilation of her decade
long theoretical and methodological project to generate “a sociology from the standpoint
of women” (p.3). She builds on Marxist and feminist thought as well as on her
experiences as a mother, colleague and feminist activist. Given Smith’s theoretical roots,
it makes sense that her work would help me conceptualize social structure, but what
about human agency? I soon realized that her very project depends on an assumption that
she as a feminist theorist can rewrite the patriarchal sub-text of an entire discipline. She is not writing a feminist theory of sociology but rather theorizing sociology from the standpoint of women:

Sociology is examined as a constituent of patriarchal relations of ruling. In its texts, women appear as objects. An alternative standpoint of women is developed with which to inscribe women as subjects within the texts of sociological inquiry. I am looking for a sociology, not just topics within sociology, and therefore for a standpoint that will look out at the world at large and not just at those pieces of it of immediate relevance to women. (Smith, 1987, p.9-10)

No woman who truly believed that women were powerless objects or that our actions were fully determined by social relations of ruling would bother to do this. Because Smith embodies a belief in her own human agency, and because her final chapter contains a section on subverting institutionalization, I chose to use her text, not only to flesh out my understanding of institutionalization but also to mark moments in which this mainstreaming process may be destabilized:

The sociology I have wanted to create is meant to subvert this process of institutionalizing both feminism and Marxism. It proposes discourse organized differently, where knowledge does not become a body of knowledge, where issues are not crystallized, where the conventions and relevances of discourse do not assume an independent authority over against its speakers and readers. It would have the capability of continually opening up a different experience of the world, as women who have not yet spoken now speak. Each speaker from a new site discloses a new problematic for inquiry. It is in this continually opening up that the sociology I have wanted has its home and sense. But the possibility of its expanding as a consciousness of society from the standpoint of women, the possibility of going beyond particular cases to exploring the relations of ruling and the relations of capital and their internal articulations from the standpoint of women, depends, as I have tried to show, on discovering from within the expanded relations that contain, organize and provide the dynamic interconnections linking our one-sided knowledge of our own existence into a larger knowledge of a historical process in which we are active and to which we are captive. (Smith, 1987, p. 222-223)

In one paragraph, Smith manages to combine activist and deterministic thinking. She raises the possibility that human beings may open up an alternative way of experiencing the world and then closes this possibility by suggesting that we are held “captive” to history. I agree with her that our actions are socially and historically constrained, but if I
start comparing that constraint to being held captive, I will be inclined to give up. In the end, I have not given up because of the inspirational evidence of activist influence on the BCTF emerging from 25 career history interviews. Keeping activists’ lives in mind, Smith’s feminist standpoint theory provides me with powerful analytic tools. Her work encourages me to ask how participants *subvert the institutionalization* of social justice in the context of their federation. That is, how do they do social justice work without crystallizing, unifying, generalizing, formalizing or regulating it and without reproducing sexist, racist and capitalist *ruling relations*?

1.4.2.3 Resisting Ideological Domination

Giroux’s (1983) theory of *resistance*, adds a measure of hope to Smith’s (1987) notion of subverting institutionalization and a measure of emancipation to Clune’s (1990) three views on policy. He uses the Marxist concept of dominant ideology as a standard against which to measure oppositional behaviour in educational contexts. He does this to avoid characterizing all forms of opposition (even opposition to critical thought) as “resistance.” Given the everyday occurrence of conflict and debate in the lives of union activists and the wide range of actions performed under the banner “social justice,” it would be of limited value for me to characterize all oppositional behaviours as resistance. Giroux’s (1983) precise definition is useful because it allows me to cut through the highly politicized and often polarized environment of a teachers’ union without fixing ideological attributions to any one individual.  

Giroux’s (1983) focus on action and political struggle in education makes his theory especially relevant to social justice teacher unionism:

I want to emphasize that the ultimate value of the notion of resistance must be measured not only by the degree to which it promotes critical thinking and reflective action but, more importantly, by the degree to which it contains the possibility of galvanizing collective political struggle among parents, teachers and students. (p.291)

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7 Most human beings, teacher activists included, resist dominant ideology in some situations and accommodate or conform to it in others. Giroux’ theory of resistance allows me analyze organizational dynamics without vilifying individuals.
By identifying an indicator of resistance—collective political struggle—Giroux proposes a practical theory of resistance. He reveals rather than masks the oppressive nature of social structure, and thus stands apart from liberal theories of human agency. At the same time, he recognizes the feasibility of collective struggle and thus stands apart from deterministic theories of social reproduction. Giroux assumes that power is exercised both on and by people and conceives of human agency as a process involving intentionality, consciousness, emancipation, struggle, critique, self-reflection, hope and transformation.

1.4.2.4 Connecting the Five Conceptions of Human Agency

In the process of carving out a space for human agency, Giroux’s (1983) critical theory of resistance echoes social constructionist thought—in particular, the belief that human beings in context “both make and reproduce the conditions of their existence” (p.259). This is the case for Clune’s (1990) and Smith’s (1987) conceptions of human agency as well. Because the three theories I referenced in section 1.4.1 also recognize the dynamic tension between human agency and social structure, it is possible to bring them together in my conceptual framework. The final section of this introductory chapter merges Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) theory of institutionalization, Ball’s (1987) theory of educational micro-politics, Smith’s (1987) conceptions of ruling relations and subverting institutionalization, Clune’s (1990) three views of curriculum policy in the school context and Giroux’s (1983) theory of resistance. These five merged clarifications of the agency structure dynamic enable me to divide my research question into five manageable sub-questions.

1.4.3 Connecting Concepts and Clarifying Sub-Questions

Concepts such as institutionalization (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), micro-politics (Ball, 1987) and ruling relations (Smith, 1987) allow me to analyze the formalization of social justice in the BCTF and concepts such as mediation, critique, construction (Clune, 1990), subversion (Smith, 1987) and resistance (Giroux, 1983) allow me to clarify how activists individually and collectively contributed to, disrupted or unsettled the process. In this section, I bring these concepts together to clarify my research question. Because the
clearly laid out concepts in Berger and Luckmann’s theory of institutionalization contain the dynamic tension between human agency and social structure, I have chosen to use their five elements of institutionalization as an explicit organizing structure for my conceptual framework. See Table 1.1 below for a schematic version of this framework.

Table 1.1 Conceptual Framework

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<tr>
<td>Social Order</td>
<td>Patterns of privilege</td>
<td>Patterns of participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin of Institutionalization</td>
<td>Unifying SJ history</td>
<td>Diversifying SJ history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sedimentation and Tradition</td>
<td>Inherited SJ wisdom</td>
<td>Producing SJ knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role &amp; Career</td>
<td>Typifying SJ career trajectories</td>
<td>Recasting the role SJ activist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scope of Institutionalization</td>
<td>Mainstreaming SJ</td>
<td>Resisting the mainstreaming of SJ</td>
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These ten conceptual points based on my critical constructionist theoretical perspective help me answer my research question. Together, they guide my analysis of the BCTF social justice institutionalization process from the varied perspectives of differently located teacher union activists.

Research question: **How did teacher union activists contribute and respond to the institutionalization of social justice in their federation?**

Sub-questions, (all including the structure/agency dynamic):

1) What are the patterns of privilege within the BCTF and how do social justice teacher union activists mediate, critique, construct and subvert them through their patterns of participation?

2) What is the easily apprehended history of social justice in the BCTF and how do social justice teacher union activists retell the story through their everyday experiences?

3) How are social justice traditions in the BCTF sedimented, dissolved and reshaped over time by social justice teacher union activists?
4) What is the typical teacher union activist career trajectory and how has it been recast through the everyday experiences of social justice teacher union activists?

5) How has social justice become mainstreamed in BCTF structures and how have social justice teacher union activists negotiated and resisted these structures in pursuit of their goals?

This introductory chapter has provided me with a theoretical and conceptual focus for the remainder of the study. In the next chapter, I review the teacher union literature with an eye to author conceptions of social justice activism.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The term “Social justice teacher unionism” (Peterson & Charney, 1999) has only recently been coined; however, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that teachers’ unions have functioned as sites of teacher activism, much of it with a social justice focus, since their inception at the turn of the 20th century (Danylewycz & Prentice, 1986; French, 1968; Gitlin, 1996; Glass, 1989; King, 1991; Kuehn, 2006a; Labatt, 1993; M. Murphy, 1990; Ozga & Lawn, 1981; Richter, 2006; Rousmaniere, 2005; Smaller, 1991; Staton & Light, 1987; Wotherspoon, 1993). Perhaps because of its recent arrival on the scene, little research has been done explicitly on the topic of social justice teacher unionism. Still, for the careful reader, a number of important insights about social justice can be drawn from the historical and contemporary teacher union literature. In this chapter, I respond to the question: What does the teacher union literature have to say about social justice activism? I begin by defining the term “social justice” and contextualizing the recent social justice teacher union movement. I then provide some historical context about Canadian teachers’ unions, and review the contemporary teacher union literature through a social justice lens. Finally, I conclude by locating my research in the reviewed literature.

2 Social Justice & Social Justice Teacher Unionism

The term “social justice,” is so well utilized in education circles by researchers and activists with a range of ideological perspectives (Ayers et al., 1998; Bell, 1997; Cochran-Smith, 1999; CTF, 2007; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002; Kelly, 2007; Kohli, 2005; Kozol, 1991; Kuehn, 2007; North, 2006; Peterson, 1999; Poole, 2007c; Rottmann, 2008, 2009; Ryan & Rottmann, 2007) that it is extremely difficult to discern its meaning. According to Kohli (2005), the roots of the term “social justice” can be traced back to 19th century liberal capitalism and the Kantian assumption that human beings are free, equal and rational decision makers. These ideas, along with Rousseau’s (1762) social contract theory were revived and formalized in the 20th century by Rawls (1971) who argued that social justice would be realized if a group of rational individuals with no information about their status or social location were given the responsibility to generate
a set of governance guidelines. All subsequent decisions made by rational men would result in the maintenance of social justice in society so long as these decisions did not worsen the material conditions of the least fortunate. One clear problem with this philosophy is that the “rational men” making governance decisions for the rest of us have historically been elite members of society with a material interest in maintaining the existing social hierarchies, not neutral decision-makers who arrived on a deserted island with no information about their relative social status.

Another way of thinking about social justice comes from Marxist economic theory (Marx, 1906). While Rawls argued that social conflict is a problem to be solved (or at least minimized) by fairly applied social contracts, Marx (1906) argued that social conflict is a productive catalyst for class struggle that can be used by the working and unemployed masses to bring about economic justice through revolution. For Marx, revolutionary collective action is the primary vehicle through which the working and unemployed majority can gain power over the elite minority.

Given my focus on teacher activism, it is useful to extrapolate lessons about activism from the two theorists whose work I have summarized above. For Rawls, the most active role in society is left in the hands of “rational” men in decision-making authority. All other members of society are implicitly relegated to a passive, trusting or responsive role. Marx challenges this fatalistic acceptance of one’s place in society. For him, the active or activist role is the responsibility of the working and unemployed majority. Because of Marx’ attention to collective activism, many contemporary critical theorists trace their roots back to his work (See for example, Apple, 2003; Bates, 1982; Carlson, 1986; Foster, 1986; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; Gramsci, 1971; Habermas, 1979; Willis, 1977).

Recently, both Rawlsian and Marxian conceptions of justice have been challenged by successive groups of social justice theorists who have found fault with their exclusive focus on social class (Biklen, 1995; de Lauretis, 1991; Dei, 2000; Dei & Calliste, 2000; hooks, 1984, 2003b; Sawicki, 1991; D. E. Smith, 1987; Spivak, 1988). These critics have argued that class is not the sole dimension of inequity in any society. Theorists must also account for the ways in which racism, sexism, homophobia and other dimensions of
oppression structure the social relations of production (Marx, 1906; D. E. Smith, 1987). For the sake of conceptual clarity, North (2006) and Gewirtz & Cribb (2002) have attempted to distinguish between social class and other identity-based conceptions of justice. They refer to the first as distributive and the second as recognition-based justice. These two conceptions of justice help the reader distinguish between social class and other dimensions of privilege, but they mask the important ideological differences between critical and liberal theory. Thus, their framework would have no clear way of distinguishing a liberal multicultural food fair from an anti-racist critique of educational policy and practice.

In a recent survey of teacher union websites in Canada (Rottmann, 2008) and the United States (Rottmann, 2007b), I added the dimension of ideology (critical vs. liberal) to Gewirtz and Cribb’s (2002) conceptual contrast. The resulting conceptual framework illustrates the contrasts between liberal distribution (e.g. Rawlsian social justice), critical distribution (e.g. Marxist critical theory), liberal recognition (e.g. multicultural theory) and critical recognition (e.g. anti-racist theory). There is evidence that teachers’ unions across space and time have been involved in activist efforts reflecting each of these four conceptions of social justice, but these efforts have only recently been promoted under the banner of “social justice teacher unionism” (Peterson & Charney, 1999).

In the summer of 1994, a small group of teacher union activists and researchers affiliated with the National Coalition of Education Activists articulated a new teacher union movement highlighting the connections between teachers’ working conditions, students’ learning conditions and relationship building with historically marginalized student and parent communities. The working draft they generated is published in Peterson and Charney’s (1999) text, Transforming Teachers’ Unions: Fighting for Better Schools and Social Justice. The seven key components of social justice teacher unionism laid out in this document include: 1) defending the rights of members while fighting for the rights of students and community, 2) building strategic alliances with parents, labour unions and community group allies, 3) opening union governance to rank-and-file members, 4) putting teachers at the centre of reform by shifting educational decision-making to the school site, 5) supporting pedagogy and assessment strategies that combat racism and
prejudice, 6) forcefully advocating for a radical restructuring of American education and 7) mobilizing union members to fight for social justice in society (summary of Peterson & Charney, 1999, p.129-130). These key components are preceded by conceptual articles on social justice unionism, case studies of promising social justice and professional union practices, lessons from history, discussions of a possible merger between the two national teachers’ unions in the United States, arguments against privatized, market-based education and a list of resources on social justice education.

Peterson and Charney’s (1999) collection along with two moving presentations given by teacher union activists at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in 2005 catalyzed my interest in social justice teacher unionism. I was deeply inspired by the promise of the text but noticed a sizeable gap between contributing authors’ optimistic, visionary articles and the teacher union activists’ stories of uphill struggle accented with periodic supports and constraints⁸.


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⁸ For example, an article commending the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation for its Program Against Racism (McKenna, 1999), was published the same year that it and a feminist program were terminated by the BCTF leadership.

For the remainder of this chapter, I present the condensed highlights of my fairly extensive literature review on social justice teacher unionism from a historical and contemporary perspective.

2.1 Canadian Teacher union history

Nearly two decades ago, an Australian teacher union historian conducted a careful meta-analysis of the historical research on Canadian teachers’ unions and expressed his disappointment with the field (Spaull, 1991). His chief complaint was that researchers “sacrificed historical sensitivity in their concern for organizational theories on the dichotomous relationship between trade unionism and professionalism” (p.23). In comparison to histories written about organized teachers in Australia, France, England

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9 The research I am characterizing as “historical” deals with the process of teacher union formation in relation to a newly developing system of universal education. The research I am characterizing as “contemporary” deals with teachers’ unions as a somewhat permanent organizational reality in the context of a firmly established public education system.
and the United States, Spaull found that Canadian accounts were told outside the context of social and labour history and that researchers muted internal conflict by presenting unions as unified oligarchies. Spaull’s challenge motivated me to learn more about Canadian teacher union history.

I found a book with a promising title: *Teachers’ Unions in Canada* (Lawton et al., 1999), but discovered that it was primarily concerned with the role of teachers’ unions in public education finance, not the history of teacher unionization in Canada. I also found a published lecture series on *The Role of Teachers’ Organizations in Canada* (Paton, 1962), but found it to be a highly promotional call for professional recognition, not an analytic text. Similarly promotional and lacking in theoretical implications were a number of in-house provincial teacher union histories that laid out detailed records of organizational strategy in response to shifting educational policy contexts (Chafe, 1968; Cuff, 1985; French, 1968; Graham, 1974; Richter, 2006; Skolrood, 1967). I did locate two more analytically useful histories of teacher unionization in Ontario and British Columbia (Smaller, 1988, 1991; Wotherspoon, 1989, 1993), but found that authors made little reference to teachers’ organizations elsewhere in the country. After an extended search that proved no more fruitful, I consigned myself to agree with Spaull’s (1991) assessment of Canadian teacher union history. It was, in fact, a disappointment.

Two histories of teacher unionism that meet Spaull’s criteria for rigorous historical research are Urban’s (1982) *Why Teachers Organized* and Murphy’s (1990) *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980*. Both texts trace the history of teacher unionization in the United States, but I believe their insights hold meaning in the Canadian context as well. My belief is supported by Bray and Rouillard’s (1996) analysis of 20th century worker organization in Canada which suggests that Canadian labour relations were historically influenced by two larger, more powerful nations— England and the United States. The American influence comes from economic trade lines which historically ran north and south across the Canada/US border rather than east or west between provinces and Canadian worker membership in the American Federation of Labour, while the British influence emerged from the predominantly British ancestry of Canadians in positions of decision-making authority.
British immigrants involved in Canadian governance brought norms and organizing principles with them from their mother countries (Bray & Rouillard, 1996; Kealey, 1981; Muir, 1969; Wotherspoon, 1998a). These strong cultural and economic influences on Canadian labour relations and education allow me to use the more comprehensive teacher union histories in the United States (M. Murphy, 1990; Urban, 1982) and England\(^\text{10}\) (Kean, 1989; Lawn & Ozga, 1986; Ozga & Lawn, 1988) to frame my review of the small number of disconnected texts dealing with Canadian teacher union history—descriptive chapters on teacher politics (Martin & Macdonell, 1978; Paton, 1962; Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2007), articles on national labour relations (Bray & Rouillard, 1996; Kealey, 1981; Morton, 2000), an article on the history of the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (Nason, 1965), a brief comparative article on Canadian teacher union history for an American audience (Smaller, 1998), three texts on pan-Canadian teacher unionism written by researchers outside the discipline of history (Lawton et al., 1999; Muir, 1969; Paton, 1962) and more extensive histories of teachers’ work in specific regions of Canada (Chafe, 1968; Cuff, 1985; Danylewycz & Prentice, 1986; Graham, 1974; F. H. Johnson, 1964; Smaller, 1988, 1991; Wotherspoon, 1993, 1998a).

2.1.1 Developing the questions I: Teacher union history in the United States

Urban’s (1982) *Why Teachers Organized* and Murphy’s (1990) *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980* tell a comprehensive, contextually-driven history of American teacher unionization from the late 1800s to the mid 1980s\(^\text{11}\). Urban explores why teachers organized into unions and Murphy examines why this process was so difficult. In this section, I review their major findings with an eye to social justice.

\(\text{10}\) I am using England rather than the UK or Great Britain as a context because there is more research on the NUT (National Union of Teachers, which exclusively organizes teachers from England and Wales) than on any other teachers’ organization in the UK. Historical research on the NUT deals most comprehensively with the English context.

\(\text{11}\) There are other educational historians who write about American teachers’ unions (See for example, Gitlin, 1996; Perlstein, 2005; Rousmaniere, 2005) but my main aim in this first sub-section is to lay out a historic process to frame my analysis of Canadian teacher union history, not conduct a comprehensive review of the literature on American teacher union history.
Urban analyzed case studies of four local unions in three cities—Atlanta, Chicago and New York—and the two national teachers’ organizations—the National Education Association (NEA), and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and found evidence that teachers organized to pursue material improvements in salary, pensions and tenure; to help raise the status of teaching as a profession for the women who practiced it and to institutionalize experience as a criterion in teaching. Most directly related to social justice teacher unionism is his finding that however compelling social or political activism may be to equity-minded historians, organized teachers have historically prioritized material over philosophical needs. According to Urban, they have done so because of their chronic underpayment, political conservatism, position on the most subordinate rung of an increasingly expanding educational hierarchy and vulnerability to organizational fragmentation along gender, panel (elementary/secondary) and immigrant status lines. Urban’s historical analysis of union leaders who attempted to stray too far from economic advocacy, is that they inevitably ran into problems with their membership\(^\text{12}\) . Implicit in this statement is a portrayal of rank and file teachers as a monolithic group who prioritized economics over social justice and pressured their leaders to do the same. Other teacher union historians and researchers have conceptualized organized teachers in a more diverse way, thereby challenging rather than reifying the distinction between leaders and members (Bascia, 1994; S. M. Johnson, 1983; M. Murphy, 1990; Rottmann, 2010). Still, however one understands organizational diversity or homogeneity, it is important to take seriously Urban’s historical lesson that teachers’ unions have typically prioritized economics over social justice in moments when the two objectives have diverged.

Like Urban, Murphy (1990) examines the history of teacher unionization in the United States. Her book *Blackboard Unions: the AFT and the NEA, 1900 -1980*, traces the

\(^\text{12}\) For example, while Margaret Haley of the Chicago Teachers’ Federation was known for challenging the injustices of capitalism, educational bureaucracy and the civic disenfranchisement of women, and Henry Linville of Teachers’ Union (New York) was known for challenging the conservative and xenophobic nature of American patriotism, neither could do this work without addressing the material needs of their members. To shift the balance too far in the direction of social justice was to risk confrontation and subject themselves to tests of legitimacy through subtle forms of membership resistance.
unionization of a group of public sector, mostly female, employees who were historically poorly paid and selected by reformers a century ago to meet a scientific norm of professionalism. She begins, like Urban, by depicting the formative years of the American teacher union movement in Chicago and New York—organized resistance to turn of the century teacher subordination caused by increasing centralization and growing layers of administrative bureaucracy. She then tracks the competitive interdependent relationship between two national teachers’ organizations (NEA and AFT) and follows local, state and national organizations across time marked by the first world war, periods of economic depression, an early red scare, the second world war, McCarthy era red-baiting, the baby boom, collective bargaining, civil rights, community control and debates about public sector employees’ right to strike. By moving along the contours of organized teachers’ lives in the United States between 1900 and the mid 1980s, Murphy dexterously charts the intersection of teacher unionization and prominent ideological debates of the 20th century. As she does this, she highlights the role played by educational reformers who have historically shaped educational change from behind the scenes of public scrutiny. She examines, not only external factors, but also the historic micro-political dynamics present among organized educators: men and women, elementary and secondary teachers, new and experienced teachers; “American” patriots and immigrant teachers; middle class and working class educators; white and black educators; teachers and administrators.

Most directly related to social justice teacher activism is Murphy’s conclusion that teachers’ unions are not conservative by nature but rather have historically taken the only door open to them by a conservative society that has consistently subordinated their needs. She notes that union-involved teachers have become engaged in socially just work throughout history, but each time they have done so they have encountered at least one of three major obstacles: the ideology of professionalism, recurrent seasons of red baiting and chronic fiscal crises. The ideology of professionalism was (and continues to be) used by multiple generations of reformers to blame existing problems with the education
system on declining teacher quality. Recurrent seasons of red baiting and accusations of un-American activities resulted in highly publicized arrests, job losses and tight public scrutiny over the teacher workforce as a whole. Chronic fiscal crises resulted in deteriorating working conditions, pay cuts and shifts in union leader priorities from social to material concerns. Despite her attention to these three obstacles, however, Murphy’s history of teacher unionization in the United States has an optimistic feel. Her portrayal of the unrelenting activist energy exerted by organized teachers provides clear evidence that “social justice teacher unionism” (Peterson & Charney, 1999) is not a modern invention. Rather, it has been going on under a variety of names since teachers first organized at the turn of the century.

Together, Urban’s and Murphy’s comprehensive histories provide me with four important insights into the history of teacher unionization in the United States: first, teachers in the US organized shortly after the rise of mass education because of poor working conditions and their consistently subordinated status in a rapidly expanding public education system; second, the ideology of professionalism has been used by educational reformers across generations to dissuade teachers from affiliating with labour; third, American teachers’ historic divisions along gender, panel (primary/secondary), immigrant status, race, class and organizational (teacher/administrator) lines have made their unions vulnerable to internal fragmentation; and fourth, the competitive relationship between two national organizations (NEA and AFT) has mediated teacher-state relations and shaped the history of teacher unionization in the country.

2.1.2 Developing the questions II: Teacher union history in England

Contemporary teachers’ unions in England and the United States can be distinguished by scale, structure, national union development and teacher-state relations, but in relation to

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13 This term functioned as an all purpose ideological tool for successive generations of educational reformers. For instance, during the Progressive era teachers were criticized for their “unprofessional” allegiances to community while during the Community Control era, teachers were criticized for their “unprofessional” distance from community. For a recent example, see the alarmist 2010 film Waiting for Superman.
their historic context, organized teachers in the two countries have developed along similar trajectories. In this comparative section, I identify the contemporary distinctions and historic similarities between American and English teachers’ unions to help me frame my review of the Canadian literature.

At nearly 300,000 the NUT, the largest and oldest teachers’ union in England, is about five times smaller than the AFT (1.4 million members) and about ten times smaller than the NEA (3.2 million members). Its size is more comparable to that of the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (250,000 members). Beyond the quantitative difference in scale is a qualitative difference in structure. Teachers in England and the rest of the UK, unlike those in the United States and Canada work in a context of multi-unionism (Manzer, 1970; Morris, 1969). That is, in contrast to teachers in American school districts who are all represented by a single bargaining agent (in states where collective bargaining is legal), teachers working at a single school in England may be represented by up to six organizations. Third, the historic relationship between national teachers’ organizations in England can be characterized as a relationship between the generalist NUT and its five specialist organizational offspring (Manzer, 1970; Morris, 1969; NUT, 2008) while the early developmental relationship between national organizations in the United States is more accurately characterized as an ongoing interdependent competition between a large, centrally established association (NEA) and a small, locally organized federation of unions (AFT) (M. Murphy, 1990; Urban, 1982). Finally, in addition to easily identifiable differences in scale and structure, there is a more subtle distinction between teachers’ unions in England and the United States. This difference relates to the nature, level and prominence of teacher-state relations (Kean, 1989; Lawn & Ozga, 1986; Ozga & Lawn, 1988). Bray and Rouillard (1996), characterize historic worker organization in the United States as anti-statist individualism and in England as statist collectivism.

Distinctions in scale and structure aside, it is important not to overstate the difference between teachers’ unions in the two national contexts. Teachers in England, like those in the United States, organized following the rise of universal education, along a similar timeline, in response to poor working conditions and pay, in the context of similar historical events and movements such as the suffrage movement, the labour movement
and two world wars separated by periods of economic depression (Kean, 1989; Manzer, 1970; Morris, 1969; M. Murphy, 1990; NUT, 2008; Urban, 1982). Unions in both countries have experienced internal factionalism along similar dimensions to those that exist in each country as a whole (Gitlin, 1996; Kean, 1989; King, 1991; Manzer, 1970; M. Murphy, 1990; Perlstein, 2005; Rousmaniere, 2005; Urban, 1982, 2000, 2004). Developmental differences in the relationships between national organizations in the two countries has not prevented them from using similar types of collective strategy in response to historically related obstacles (Morris, 1969; M. Murphy, 1990; Urban, 1982). Teachers in both countries have experienced a chilly climate within organized labour and been subject to state-induced regulatory use of the ideology of professionalism to dissuade them from labour affiliation (Gitlin, 1996; King, 1991; Lawn & Ozga, 1986; Morris, 1969; NUT, 2008; Ozga & Lawn, 1981, 1988; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Urban, 1982, 2004). Finally, teachers in both England and the United States, have historically operated as organizationally subordinated actors within a growing state apparatus to which they are irrevocably tied (Kean, 1989; M. Murphy, 1990).

These similarities in the teacher union histories of two countries with the greatest economic and cultural influence on Canadian politics allow me to frame my inquiry about Canadian teacher union history on the basis of three inductively generated points of convergence: 1) Why did Canadian teachers’ unionize? 2) How have internal divisions among teachers played out in their organizations? & 3) How has the ideology of professionalism functioned in the context of Canadian teacher-state relations?

2.1.3 A Bridge to Anglophone\(^{14}\) Canada: A history of constitutionally protected regionalism

In a comparative international study of teachers’ organizations in 15 countries, Cooper identified Canada as having “by far the most complex labour relations system for teachers’ unions” (Cooper, 2000, p.256). His findings relate, in part, to the great diversity of publicly funded school systems and the even greater diversity of organizations

\(^{14}\) Unfortunately, my French language skills are too weak to conduct a bilingual review of the teacher union literature.
representing teachers and administrators in the country. Some provincial and territorial organizations represent teachers and administrators, others only teachers; some represent educators employed by a range of religious and linguistic school boards while others have separate organizations for each board. A few provincial organizations have formally affiliated with organized labour, while most have restricted their affiliation to the Canadian Teachers’ Federation. In most provinces, organizational decision-making takes place at the provincial level, but in many cases, a few of the larger, more independent locals resist the directive tendencies of provincial leaders. Labour relations have become increasingly centralized in most provinces but many local teachers’ organizations continue to bargain some provisions locally.

An additional source of confusion about Canadian teacher unionism for the uninitiated outsider is that differences in the names of Canadian provincial teachers’ organizations—Federation, Association, Society, Union—while meaningful to organizational insiders, do little to guide others. For example, while it might make semantic sense to presume that “Federations” have the most independent locals, provincial-local relations vary in teachers’ organizations across the country, and even with different locals in a single province. Also, while an outsider might reasonably expect that the provincial organization most likely to be formally affiliated with organized labour is the “union,” the organizations that are currently affiliated with labour happen to be “federations”. Finally, in contrast to the names of state-based organizations in the United States which generally end in “FT” if they are AFT affiliates and “EA” if they are NEA affiliates, there is no particular connection between the organizations that refer to themselves as “Federations” and the Canadian Teachers’ Federation or for that matter, the organizations that refer to themselves as “Associations” and the Canadian Education Association. Until

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As recently as 1997, public school teachers in Ontario were represented by different organizations on the basis of panel (elementary/secondary), language (Anglophone /Francophone), sex & panel (male elementary/female elementary) and religion (Catholic/Secular). Teachers in Quebec and New Brunswick have historically been organized by religion and language. Teachers in all other provinces and territories are represented by a single provincial teachers’ organization. All organizations with the exception of those in British Columbia and Ontario organize school administrators as well as teachers.
recently\textsuperscript{16}, all provincial teachers’ organizations were affiliated with the CTF, none with the CEA. This lack of national standardization can be traced back to at least two factors which are themselves symptomatic of the confederate tendency of Canadian governance: the constitutionally protected decentralization of education to the provinces and the relatively weak national presence of the Canadian Federation of Teachers (Lawton et al., 1999). It is worth reviewing the historical development of these two factors because they complicate my international comparison\textsuperscript{17}.

The BNA Act was passed 26 years after the first of many Common School Acts in Upper Canada, at a time when education in most provinces had already begun to be centralized by emerging provincial governments. It stipulates that education in Canada, other than the protection of rights for religious minorities and education for Aboriginal people on federally governed land, falls under the exclusive jurisdiction of the provinces (Lawton et al., 1999; Wotherspoon, 1998b). The legal interpretation of the British North America Act of 1867\textsuperscript{18} (later renamed The Constitution Act, 1982) cemented regional differences, not only in education but also in labour relations, by placing labour, like education, under provincial jurisdiction (Bray & Rouillard, 1996).

The relative autonomy of provincial and territorial Ministers of Education from the federal government is reinforced in the teacher union context by the absence of a directive national union. The Dominion Education Association (later the Canadian Education Association) was established in Toronto in 1891 by resolution at the annual

\textsuperscript{16} In recent years, partly because it has no specific legislated role in collective bargaining, a few provincial affiliates—the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation and all organizations in Quebec other than the relatively small Provincial Association of Protestant Teachers have withdrawn their membership from the Canadian Teachers’ Federation and opted to affiliate formally with organized labour.

\textsuperscript{17} That is, the historic persistence of Canadian federalism is neither particularly English, nor particularly American.

\textsuperscript{18} The passing of the British North America Act on July 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1867 marked the establishment of the federal Dominion of Canada, made up of four provinces—Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Manitoba and the Northwest Territories joined in 1870, British Columbia in 1871, Prince Edward Island in 1873, Yukon territory in 1898, Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1905, Newfoundland in 1949 (Newfoundland and Labrador in 2001) and Nunavut in 1999.
meeting of the American NEA, but failed to take hold as a national teachers’ union because of provincial leaders’ concerns about centralization, the prohibitive cost of travel and the eventual withdrawal of funds from Quebec (Martin & Macdonell, 1978). These factors led the CEA to shift its focus from inter-provincial standardization of education to advocating for “better moral instruction in the schools, more generous financial aid for education, and greater emphasis on patriotism” (Stewart, 1957, p.19, quoted in Martin and Macdonell, 1978).

A second national organization of teachers—the Canadian Teachers’ Federation—was founded in 1919 by the leaders of the BCTF and ATA with the backing of organized teacher leaders from Saskatchewan and Manitoba (Nason, 1965), but in contrast to the NEA and AFT, it never became a highly directive national union. The CTF’s responsive relationship with provincial affiliates can be traced back to its 1927 constitution which ensured:

Representation of every affiliate on both policy and the management bodies of the organization; jealous protection of provincial autonomy and assurance that interference would be avoided; safeguards insuring as far as possible that national policy would indeed be supported unanimously by the affiliates; and a fee structure which assured the national organization of continuing financial security (Nason, 1965 p.299)

The CTF’s constitutional protection of provincial autonomy and the establishment of a dues structure ensuring long term organizational security of the umbrella organization were more popular among provincial affiliates in the late 1920s than was the CEA’s more directive centralizing tendencies.

This brief history of the CEA and CTF allows me to construct a tentative response to Spaull’s (1991) critique of Canadian teacher union history. One of the reasons it is so difficult to establish a national history of Canadian teacher unionism is that provincial teachers’ organizations have had their autonomy protected by the Canadian constitution and the CTF constitution. As a result of the BNA Act, Canadian teachers worked and diverged in response to provincial education legislation and regionally specific cultural identities; and as a result of the non-directive CTF constitution, provincial teachers’ unions experienced minimal pressure to centralize their efforts.
Canadian teacher union history must be told as the temporally related but regionally distinct histories of teacher unionisation in each of the provinces and territories. Unfortunately, such histories do not exist in all provinces and territories across the country\textsuperscript{19}. Where they do exist, they make little reference to teacher unionization in other provincial contexts. In the three sections that follow, I piece together the histories I was able to locate in response to the three questions I generated in my review of American and English teacher union histories. A clear limitation is that my constructed history will take on the regional flavour of the provinces with the greatest number of accessible publications, rather than the country as a whole.

2.1.3.1 Why did Canadian teachers’ unionize?

Like in the United States and England, educational governance structures in Canadian provinces became increasingly centralized in response to the rise of mass education in the mid to late 1800s (Gidney & Lawr, 1980; Wotherspoon, 1998b) and educational authority shifted from the private to public sphere as senior administrators became increasingly responsible for educational decision making that had once been the responsibility of local communities (Gidney & Lawr, 1980). As part of the institutionalization process, universal schooling was sold by its adherents as a democratic, regulatory or economic solution to existing social ills as perceived by a range of differently positioned audiences (Wotherspoon, 1998a). Paton (1962) locates the first stage of teacher union development in this context of a not yet confederated country and a not yet institutionalized Canadian public education system:

> We are accustomed in this country to looking for the origin of our institutions in the United Kingdom. Our first educational leaders were largely imports from England or Scotland….in both instances (Educational Institute of Scotland and the National Union of Teachers) one can detect in their stated aims and actual activities that combination of

\textsuperscript{19} I found it challenging to track down hard or electronic copies of organizational histories without visiting every province and territory in the country. My difficulty arose from the fact these histories tended to be either unpublished dissertations written before the electronic age or organizational publications located exclusively on the shelves of teachers’ federations across the country. My over-reliance on histories of organizations located in Ontario and British Columbia is a product of my residence in Ontario and field research in British Columbia.
a desire to meet together for mutual help and inspiration, and a hope that
united effort would bring material benefits, which characterizes all these
early groupings. The first attempts of teachers in what we now call Canada
to organize and hold meetings appear to have had more of the inspirational
than the material in their motivation…usually the initiative in forming the
group was taken by those we would now call departmental inspectors or
superintendents; and when formed, the group had as its president, as often
as not, a university head or distinguished layman….to start with Upper
Canada, now Ontario, we know that in the early 1850s the Superintendent
of Education, Dr. Egerton Ryerson, stimulated the formation of “Teachers’
Institutes” in various counties in the hope of providing a simple kind of in-
service teacher training; and that a few county teacher groups met at
intervals, but not necessarily as part of the institutes. In 1860 a Newmarket
teacher named Alexander attended a meeting of teachers in Buffalo which
is described by one authority as a state association meeting, and by
another as a convention of the National Teachers’ Association in the
United States, the forerunner of the National Education Association.
Alexander apparently returned full of enthusiasm for the establishment of
a similar kind of organization in his province, and we are told that the
Ontario Educational Association came into being the next year with the
head of the University of Toronto, Dr. McCaul as its first president. (p.23-
26)

When read against historical analyses of education in Canada (Danylewycz & Prentice,
1986; Gidney & Lawr, 1980; Smaller, 1988; Wot Moraspoon, 1998a, 1998b; Young et al.,
2007), this passage reveals a number of important details about early Canadian teachers’
unions: they were shaped by British (ancestry) and American (industrial) influences; they
predated the confederation of the country; they emerged shortly after the rise of universal
education in North America; they were initiated and run by senior administrators,
university professors and elite members of society; and their primary objectives were
professional development rather than teacher welfare-oriented. Paton’s text presents a
story of fledgling teachers’ organizations that came of age in the first few decades of the
20th century; were recognized as legitimate but subordinate partners of the government in
the 30s and 40s; struggled to be seen as vital educational decision-makers in the 40s and
50s and began advocating for increased power, responsibility and the right to bargain
collectively at the time of his lecture in the early 1960s. This highly linear history lacks
an element of political struggle, but it provides a useful time frame for the emergence of
the first teacher’s organizations in Canada.
In-house teacher union histories from four organizations—Newfoundland Teachers’ Association (Cuff, 1985), Federation of Women Teachers’ Associations of Ontario (French, 1968; Graham, 1974; Labatt, 1993; Smaller, 1988, 1991; Staton & Light, 1987), Manitoba Teachers’ Society (Chafe, 1968) and the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (F. H. Johnson, 1964; Kuehn, 2006a; Skolrood, 1967; Wotherspoon, 1989)—include an element of political struggle and thus provide a useful contrast to Paton’s assertion that the first Canadian teachers’ organizations were superintendent-initiated Teacher Institutes at which classroom teachers attended meetings “with their betters” (Paton, 1962, p. 23). According to these organizational histories, Canadian teachers organized for material reasons and in response to the centralizing tendencies of provincial educational reformers, not because of the top-down encouragement they received from senior administrators.

For example, teachers in Newfoundland received 15 years of top-down encouragement to organize from the inspectors of the Church of England and Methodist schools, but did not come together as a critical mass until a sufficient number of them became interested in establishing a pension plan (Cuff, 1985). Teachers in Ontario organized to deal with material problems caused in large part by the Upper Canada Common School Act of 1841 (Smaller, 1988), nearly a decade before Ryerson set up a summer tour of Teacher Institutes modelled on European and American professional development seminars. Teachers in British Columbia were brought together as early as 1874 by the Department of Education for Teacher Institutes (F. H. Johnson, 1964), but organized themselves in 1919 because they were “inspired by a desire to ameliorate the appalling teaching conditions, accentuated partly by wartime conditions and partly by the accumulated ineptitude of a static educational system” (Skolrood, 1967, p.1). Finally, Manitoba teachers organized themselves in 1919 to rectify the poor material working conditions and romantic public expectations about teachers’ commitment:

My profession is education but I have no say in what I teach, I work longer hours for less pay than the janitor and I have no security—you would hire another teacher tomorrow if she would work for less money. And I have to please everybody, even to the company I keep. Heart of education? This heart is stopping—I’m leaving to join the human race. (Maud, Swanson, 1891, quoted by H.W. Huntly, the first president of the MTS, and reprinted in Chafe, 1968).
When read together, these accounts demonstrate that teachers in Canada, like those in the United States and England, organized themselves in reaction to unpopular educational reform ideas and in support of better working conditions and professional recognition, not because they were summoned to meetings by their employers.

Most directly related to the idea of social justice teacher unionism is the detailed account in each of the provincial histories of organized teachers’ active involvement in the political life of the country: the suffrage movement, the labour movement, struggles of women school teachers to achieve pension benefits and gender-equitable pay scales, advocacy for rural educators, resistance to regulatory administrative supervision, advocacy for collective bargaining, implementation of federal multiculturalism policy, advocacy for Aboriginal education, opposition to free trade and opposition to apartheid (Chafe, 1968; Clarke, 2002; Cuff, 1985; Danylewycz & Prentice, 1986; French, 1968; Graham, 1974; F. H. Johnson, 1964; Kuehn, 2006a; Labatt, 1993; Smaller, 1988; Staton & Light, 1987; Wotherspoon, 1993).

This record of historic teacher activism feeds my interest in social justice teacher unionism, but it does not tell the whole story. Rather, it is a partial record of teachers’ activist involvement generated by authors whose accounts of teacher union history are primarily commemorative rather than analytical. As such, it is useful to keep Urban’s (1982) warning to equity-minded historians in mind: the most interesting story from the perspective of the researcher is not always the most representative one. I do not aim to tell a representative social history of the BCTF, but I do need to keep participant’s organizational context in mind. Canadian teachers, like their American and English counterparts, organized to improve the dismal conditions of teachers’ work.

2.1.3.2 How have internal divisions among teachers played out in their organizations?

There are two possible explanations for the highly consensual feel of teacher union histories reviewed in the last section; either Canadian teachers are more highly unified than teachers in the United States and England, or the authors of the accounts I reviewed deliberately foregrounded teacher-state relations and back-grounded micro-political
struggles between organized teachers. Whatever the explanation, one way to fill the gap left by these promotional histories is to review a more critical body of Canadian educational history (Danylewycz & Prentice, 1986; Smaller, 1988, 1991; Wotherspoon, 1993) for insights into the changing conditions of differently positioned teachers’ work. In this section, I review critical histories of teachers’ work in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia (Danylewycz & Prentice, 1986; Smaller, 1988, 1991; Wotherspoon, 1993) for insights into the historic tensions within the Canadian teaching workforce. The three texts I have selected to review all include references to Canadian teachers’ unions.

Danylewycz and Prentice (1986), shed light on working conditions in schools in Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec) in the 19th and 20th century, when state systems of education were in the process of being established and teacher workforces were becoming increasingly female. As working conditions deteriorated, male teachers with first class certificates began to be promoted to administrative positions. The result was an intensification of women teachers’ work and an increasingly evident gender based hierarchy in education. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that women teachers, in some cities, organized separately from their male colleagues. The first such organization to be established was founded in 1885—the Lady Teachers’ Association of Toronto (Danylewycz & Prentice, 1986; Smaller, 1988)—which organized within a decade or two of the Chicago Teachers’ Federation (1897), the Ligue d’Enseignement in Montreal (1902) and the Inter-borough Association of Women Teachers of New York (1906). It is possible that women teachers in Toronto, Chicago, Montreal and New York discussed organizing strategies with one another; however, this is highly unlikely given their low salaries and the prohibitively high cost of travel. Another, more likely

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20 The documented changes in teachers’ working conditions at this time included: increasing class sizes, low pay, one year contracts without tenure or pension guarantees, the introduction of new subjects without sufficient training, increasing paperwork, increasing emphasis on discipline and hierarchy, increasing accountability measures enforced by a growing bureaucracy of male administrators and superintendents, closely monitored expectations of uniformity and routine and increasing responsibilities for the maintenance of crowded, poorly ventilated schools with sub-standard heating systems.

21 Women teachers not only had to face more challenging working conditions but were also forced to accept their lower status in relation to male teachers and administrators who were paid more for work that involved fewer responsibilities.
possibility is that women teachers in large urban centres in both Canada and the United States organized into gender segregated organizations because collective action was the most obvious vehicle open to disenfranchised women facing poor working conditions and lower salaries than their unionized brothers and fathers.

Smaller (1988) builds on Danylewycz and Prentice’s (1986) findings by making connections between teachers’ working conditions and the development of gender segregated teachers’ organizations in 19th century Upper Canada (Ontario). According to Smaller, teachers in the province began to think about forming protective organizations as early as the 1880s but were unsuccessful due to a number of factors: the powerful efforts of senior educators who dissuaded their employees from unionizing, geographic disparity, increasing state power, lack of access to effective communication, the inability of teachers to afford union dues, a ready supply of unemployed teachers waiting to take their positions and honest scepticism among classroom teachers about how to unionize employees of multiple different employers. In this context, only those who had large enough numbers and little to lose dared to organize themselves for material gain, a context ripe for the establishment of the Lady (later Woman) Teachers’ Association of Toronto

Moving west across the country, Wotherspoon (1993) traces the development of a gender segregated teaching force in a provincial context with no recorded history of gender-segregated organizing. According to the author, the first generation of teachers in British Columbia were highly educated men with first class teaching certificates, most of whom had completed their university education in Eastern Canada or Great Britain before moving to British Columbia to find work. The first superintendent of schools managed

22 The WTA was born in 1885 by eight female teachers who raised the issue of salary at a meeting of their hierarchically structured organization (Toronto Teachers’ Association), eventually gained in popularity and grew into the province-wide Federation of Women Teachers’ Associations of Ontario (FWTAO), and was very recently collapsed (1998) following a controversial merger with the considerably smaller organization of male elementary school teachers and administrators in the province.

23 In contrast to the situations in Ontario and Quebec, but like most provincial teachers’ organizations in Canada, the BCTF has, from its inception, organized all public school teachers, male and female, elementary and secondary.
the financial costs of a growing public education system by altering certification criteria and increasing the supply of locally trained female teachers with lower class teaching certificates. Highly educated male teachers with an interest in maintaining a differentiated occupation with good working conditions and possibilities for advancement began to organize in 1878 after a second superintendent was appointed with a mandate to reduce educational spending. The new Superintendent was aware of the unrest among male teachers and began promoting those with first class certificates to newly established administrative positions in order to prevent them from leaving the occupation for higher paying jobs in developing industries (mining & lumber). In return for these promotions, school administrators were expected to play a role in supporting centralized educational reform.

Thus, like in other provincial, state and national contexts, a demographic shift in education was integrally linked to the establishment of an educational hierarchy in British Columbia. Wotherspoon (1993) conceptualizes this change in teacher status as a shift from “subordinate partners to dependent employees.” As education moved from the private to the public sphere, high status male teachers functioned as “subordinate partners” to government officials in their drive for educational reform. Once the public education system was more firmly established and male school teachers with first class certificates were promoted to administrative posts, the remaining teachers, most of whom were poorly paid local women with minimal formal education, became highly regulated “dependent employees” (Wotherspoon, 1993). Wotherspoon’s (1993), Danylewycz & Prentice’s (1986), and Smaller’s (1988) analyses demonstrate that educational reform, in at least three Canadian provinces, was no less socially engineered, economically driven or demographically specific in its impact than that in the United States (Gitlin, 1996; M. Murphy, 1990; Urban, 1982) and England (Kean, 1989; King, 1991; Lawn & Ozga, 1986).

In this section, I have reviewed three texts that reveal the historical link between the establishment of universal public education in three Canadian provinces and the bifurcation of the educational workforce along gendered lines. The relevance of these findings to my examination of social justice teacher unionism at the BCTF is that status
inequities within the teacher workforce have a long history in Canadian education. They are not the result of a contemporary or even temporary struggle between sub-groups of educators and are thus unlikely to stop at the door of the teachers’ organization, even if social justice is an articulated priority of organizational leaders.

2.1.3.3 How has the ideology of professionalism functioned in Canadian teacher-state relations?

Researchers in the United States, England and Canada have found a historic link between teacher-state relations, working conditions, teacher demographics and the ideology of professionalism (Gitlin, 1996; M. Murphy, 1990; Ozga & Lawn, 1981, 1988; Rousmaniere, 2005; Smaller, 1988, 1998; Urban, 1982). In all three national contexts, the ideology of professionalism based on a highly educated, middle class, male standard was used by educational reformers to evaluate and regulate teachers, most of whom were poorly educated, working class, female elementary school teachers. Organized teachers, in turn, responded to these reform movements by demanding that they be treated as professionals. In the Canadian context, this ideological struggle took on an interesting shape as teacher-state negotiations over the meaning of professionalism became formalized through a string of Teaching Profession Acts. The first Teaching Profession Act (TPA) was legislated in Saskatchewan in 1935 and repeated in nearly every educational jurisdiction in Canada over the next decade (Lawton et al., 1999; Smaller, 1998). Explanations of the immediate effects and legacy of TPAs differ, but even ideologically disparate researchers point to the importance and durability of these Acts in the Canadian educational context. For the remainder of this section, I present three perspectives on the Canadian Teaching Profession Acts (Lawton et al., 1999; Paton, 1962; Smaller, 1998).

According to Smaller (1998), the TPAs were introduced as a settlement between government officials unhappy with the 1930s labour unrest in education and union leaders experiencing a crisis of legitimacy caused by a depression-induced reduction in membership and dues. Between the mid 1930s and mid 1940s, the governments of nearly every province in the country promised automatic membership of public school teachers to their respective provincial associations in exchange for labour peace. Smaller’s (1998)
critique of the TPA is that it resulted in strong social controls over Canadian teachers. His contemporary analysis of this historically durable settlement is that the discourse of “professionalism” continues to be used by educational decision makers as an instrument of social control over teachers.

Lawton and his colleagues (1999) similarly take issue with the idea of social control, but they attribute it to teacher union leaders, not government policy makers. They criticize the TPA, not for its role in subduing activist teachers, but rather for its role in providing unwarranted security to union leaders through “closed-shop” unionism. Finally, in contrast to both Smaller and Lawton et. al, Paton (1962) reflects on the TPA with pride—as an effective and revolutionary teacher union initiative that paved the way for teacher recognition and participation in Canadian educational governance. In the end, despite distinctions in their ideological perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds, the three authors agree on one point—the brief moment of co-operation between teachers and the state in the 1930s and 40s is a significant marker in Canadian teacher union history.

Most directly related to my research are the three distinct conceptions of teacher activism implicit in Smaller’s, Lawton et al.’s and Paton’s texts: Smaller (1998) portrays teacher activism as perpetually uphill battle; Lawton et al. (1999) as an excessively powerful interest group activity resulting in social disorder; and Paton (1962) as a co-operative, if not exactly equal dance between partners with different interests but similar objectives.

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24 This unlikely consensus motivated me to search for similarly durable worker-state policy settlements in other contexts. Bray and Rouillard (1996) point out that in 1944, the federal government passed a law allowing Canadians to choose to unionize freely and bargain in good faith as a way of encouraging unionized workers to support the war effort. The two labour historians connect this piece of Canadian legislation with a similar piece of legislation south of the border, the 1935 Wagner Act. The timing of the Canadian TPA also overlaps with the 1944 Butler Act in England, a historic Act responsible for legitimizing and regulating teacher-state relations in England through educational restructuring (Lawn & Ozga, 1986). These overlapping labour and educational legislations in Canada, the United States and England point to multiple instances of policy documenting government trade offs in the mid to late 1930s and early 1940s, around the time of the great depression and second world war. In all cases, workers were presented with an organizing opportunity in exchange for labour peace and patriotic behaviour.
2.1.4 Fields of disappointment?

My review of American, English and Canadian teacher union histories has given me an appreciation for this deeply nuanced and textured body of literature. Rather than leaving me with fields of disappointment (Spaull, 1991), it has taught me four valuable lessons about social justice teacher unionism: First, teachers’ unions in Canada, the US and England have historically functioned as sites of teacher activism. Second, while some of this activism has been motivated by a collective desire to challenge social oppression, much of it has been motivated by deteriorating working conditions and organizational subordination within the education system. Third, the social divisions and status hierarchies present in all three countries have historically made their way into the education system and into teacher’s organizations. Finally, in all three countries, two contrasting conceptions of social justice—one based on conflict and the other based on consensus—are embedded in teachers’ and reformers’ historically persistent use of the ideology of “professionalism.” If carefully traced across space and time, the ongoing reframing of this durable idea (professionalism) tells the history of teacher-state relations in context.

The final point brings me to Spaull’s (1991) critique that Canadian teacher union historians have “sacrificed historical sensitivity in their concern for organizational theories on the dichotomous relationship between trade unionism and professionalism” (p.23). I agree with Spaull that a comprehensive Canadian teacher union history has not yet been written, but my review of teacher union histories in three national contexts has taught me that the relationship between trade unionism and professionalism is a historically persistent, organizationally contextualized tension reflecting changes in political context, social movements and teachers’ working conditions across space and time. By perceiving interdisciplinary research (educational history and organizational theory) as mutually beneficial rather than sacrificial or impure, I can construct a deeply contextualized body of teacher union research with contemporary resonance. On that note, I now review the contemporary teacher union research for insights about social justice teacher unionism.
2.2 Contemporary teacher union research

In the last section, I focussed, in some detail, on the unionization of teachers in the United States, England and Canada between the turn of the century and the Second World War. In this section I change gears along a number of dimensions: I shift from past to present; I take a cross-sectional rather than longitudinal view of the research and I exchange detailed contextual description with a thematically-related list of empirical findings. Despite these seemingly unbridgeable differences, the two sections are integrally related. The first sets the historical context for persistent tensions examined in the second, while the second provides a way of assessing the contemporary resonance of the trends revealed in the first.

Most of the contemporary teacher union research, as noted by Bascia (2009), involves an exploration of the extent to which organized teachers measure up to an external standard: their ability to support neoliberal reform ideas (Ballou & Podgursky, 2000; Brimelow, 2003; Cibulka, 2000; Fuller et al., 2000; Lawton, 2001; Lawton et al., 1999; M. Lieberman, 1997, 1998; Loveless, 2000; McDonnell & Pascal, 1988; Stone, 2000); “professionally” collaborate with senior administrators, university-based researchers and educational policy makers (Bascia, 1999; Hendricks-Lee & Mooney, 1998; Humphries, 2001; S. M. Johnson, 1988; S. M. Johnson & Kardos, 2000; Kerchner & Koppich, 1993, 2000; Kerchner & Mitchell, 1988; Mitchell & Kerchner, 1983; Naylor, 2005, 2007; Rodrigue, 2003; Urbanski, 1998); and advocate for social justice in the education system and their own organizations (Bascia, 1998; Bouvier, 2004; Briskin, 1998; D Carlson, 1987; Dennis Carlson, 1992; Compton & Weiner, 2008; CTF, 2007; Foley, 2000; Goldberg, 1995; Kuehn, 2006a, 2007; MacRae, 2008; Mawhinney, 1997; McAdie, Giles, Makan, & Flessa, 2007; McKenna, 1999; Noel & Samuelson, 2006; O'Haire, 2007; Perlstein, 2005; Peterson, 1999; Peterson & Charney, 1999; Poole, 2007b; Robertson & Smaller, 1996; Rottmann, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Shamsher & Decker, 2004; Stewart, 2008; Urban, 2000). By evaluating teachers’ unions against a fixed standard—whether that standard is neoliberal market based reform, professionalism, or social justice—these authors miss details about teachers’ unions that can only be discerned by studying these educationally subordinated organizations in a more open-ended way. More relevant to
my thesis, these authors also limit their ability to critique contemporary educational phenomena—neoliberal market-based reform, professionalism and social justice—by attributing all mismatches between teachers’ unions and a given standard to a teacher union deficit.

For the remaining three sections of this chapter, I take an inductive approach to my review of the contemporary teacher union research. That is, instead of measuring authors’ findings against my pre-determined definition of social justice, I review their findings for new insights about social justice. I then use these insights to guide and position my study. For the sake of clarity, I have organized the literature by unit of analysis: the studies I review in the first section examine the organized activism of teachers’ unions in relation to their external policy context; those I review in the second section examine the activism of teacher union sub-groups in the context of their organizations; and those I review in the third section examine the work of individual union-involved teacher activists in schools, their organizations and a range of community-based groups.

2.2.1 Challenging neoliberalism through organized activism

In her recent study of activist teachers, Poole (2008) noted that many of her participants equated teacher activism with placard carrying protesters, an image depicted on the front page of Martell’s (1974) book *The Politics of the Canadian Public School* and again more than two decades later on a poster distributed by the Alberta Teachers’ Association.\(^{25}\) The prevalence of these images is not surprising given the media’s almost exclusive focus on teachers’ unions during moments of labour disruption and political protest but it is highly problematic because it masks the deteriorating working conditions and legislative changes teachers are protesting.

The most recent iteration of educational restructuring to be protested by teachers is “neoliberal” or “market-based” reform—a policy idea that has landed in slightly different forms in multiple educational jurisdictions around the world (Ball, 1998) but generally

\(^{25}\) The ATA poster is a photograph of 20,000 public school teachers in front of the Alberta Legislature protesting decisions made by the provincial Minister of Education.
involves the transfer of cost and responsibility for public services to the private sector, under the rhetoric of “choice” (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Brown, 1990; Cibulka, 2000; Dehli, 1996; Dei & Karumanchery, 2001; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Kachur, 1999; Whitty, 1997). Extreme examples include voucher schemes and charter schools, while more moderate examples include specialized programming within public schools paired with selectively loosened zoning restrictions and the publication of standardized test scores. A major impact of this most recent wave of reform has been the reification of educational inequity as students who do poorly on “standardized” tests based on Eurocentric, middle class norms or whose parents are not intimately familiar with the workings of the education system are becoming increasingly disadvantaged (Apple, 2003; Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Dei & Karumanchery, 2001; Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Kachur, 1999; S. Murphy, 2001; Portelli & Solomon, 2001; Portelli & Vibert, 2001).

Teachers who work in schools serving disadvantaged populations have faced the uneven effects of these policies while unionized teachers as a whole have faced attacks on teaching quality, a tightening of accountability measures and a reduction of government goodwill at the bargaining table (Bascia, 2006; Bascia & Rottmann, 2005a; Brouillette, 2006; Compton & Weiner, 2008; Coulter, 1996; Flower & Booi, 1999; Fowler, 1996; Harrison & Kachur, 1999; Kuehn, 2006b, 2008; Martell, 1974, 2006, 2008; Poole, 2007a; Robertson & Chadbourne, 1996; Robertson & Smaller, 1996; Stevenson, 2007). Like their predecessors, organized teachers have joined other activist groups in challenging neoliberal government restructuring efforts and the tight accountability measures associated with them (Bascia, 2006; Bascia & Rottmann, 2005; Compton & Weiner, 2008; Martell, 2006; Poole, 2007a; Robertson & Smaller, 1996).

Robertson and Smaller’s edited text, Teacher Activism in the 1990s, and Martell’s edited text, Education’s Iron Cage and its Dismantling in the New Global Order, both published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in their periodical Our Schools/Our Selves: a magazine for Canadian education activists, connect multiple accounts of teacher politics in action (Martell, 2006; Robertson & Smaller, 1996). Each account depicts organized teacher response to global, neo-liberal educational restructuring in a
particular local, state/provincial or federal context. A recent edited collection which accomplishes a similar goal on a larger scale is Compton and Weiner’s (2008) book the *Global Assault on Teachers, Teaching and their Unions*. Amplifying the theoretical and practical contributions of the first two texts, the chapters in this book depict international resistance to neoliberal government reform from the perspectives of teacher activists, teacher union leaders and teacher union researchers in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, England, Germany, India, Israel, Korea, Mexico, Namibia, New Zealand, South Africa, South America, St. Lucia, the United States, West Indies and a global network of teachers’ organizations called *Education International*.

Between the three volumes, readers are invited into educational jurisdictions across the globe to learn about social justice issues in education, social movements in particular national contexts, struggles for equity and diversity in union contexts, organized teacher resistance to neoliberal reform efforts and co-ordinated international resistance to economically driven educational policy. By inviting readers to learn about teacher activism, not only in their own local contexts, but also in a number of international jurisdictions without the neoliberal filter of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Martell, Smaller & Robertson and Compton & Weiner construct texts that are themselves examples of collective activism. They do this by connecting teachers’ day to day classroom experiences with broader ruling relations (D. E. Smith, 1987, 2002) and motivating activist-inclined teachers to take part in collective educational change by illustrating the feasibility of similar efforts in other jurisdictions. Each chapter on its own depicts a seemingly idiosyncratic instance of teacher activism, but the collection as a whole sheds light on the transnational privatization of educational governance. Thus, in a very concrete way, the three edited texts connect teachers in local contexts to global activist networks of colleagues facing similar situations. In fact, the authors and publishers of the third text have established an electronic forum for information and networking opportunities through a *Teacher Solidarity* blog [http://www.teachersolidarity.com/blog/](http://www.teachersolidarity.com/blog/). This new platform enables teacher activists to contribute to and learn about episodes of organized activism around the world. It also indirectly supports the development of global democratizing networks to counter the less accessible ones woven by transnational education policy makers like the OECD.
A few of the activist episodes depicted in these energizing edited collections have been theorized and reframed by teacher union leaders and researchers for audiences of educational policy makers and organizational theorists (Bascia, 2006; Bascia & Rottmann, 2005; Flower & Booi, 1999; Poole, 2000, 2007a; Stevenson, 2007a). Stevenson (2007a) addresses unionized teachers’ response to workforce remodelling in England, Poole (2007a) charts teachers’ organized resistance to neo-liberal government reform in British Columbia and (2000) outlines the paradoxical interests of teacher unionists in Nova Scotia, and Flower & Booi (1999), Bascia (2006) and Bascia & Rottmann (2005) examine contextualized teacher-state relations in Alberta. I briefly review the five Canadian articles below.

Poole (2007a) depicts the neoliberal actions of the (Campbell, Liberal) government and the anti-neoliberal actions of the BCTF in the early 2000s as ideological warfare rooted in more substantive contrasts in each group’s perspective on the purpose of public education and the status of professional teacher identity. She concludes that as long as neoliberalism conflicts with teachers’ professional identities and their understanding of the purposes of education, the struggles will continue. Flower and Booi, (1999) like Poole, begin by laying out the neoconservative agenda of the (Klein, Conservative) government and the response of the Alberta Teachers’ Association, but in contrast to Poole’s depiction of the BCTF’s warfare with the government, they depict the ATA’s strategy as a measured attempt to be included in educational decision-making. Bascia (2006) concludes her study on the ATA’s remarkable ability to retain “an even keel” in the face of intense government pressure, by recommending that teacher unionists in other organizations consider a range of context-sensitive options most likely to achieve success in a particular time, place and political dynamic. Her study demonstrates the fundamental link between teacher learning and political action, a theme that is taken up again in her and my (Bascia & Rottmann, 2005) paper on organizational resilience in the ATA. In our examination of the ATA’s response to government restructuring across two time periods, 1998/99 to

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26 Educational reformers, in particular, tend to begin from the perspective that teachers’ unions are self-interested barriers to educational improvement.
2002/3 we revealed the cyclical nature of teacher union activism and resistance: resource-intensive, externally-directed action in the early stages of unilateral government restructuring and resource-conserving, internally directed learning during periods of sustained government attack. While the second period may have appeared from the outside as a phase of relative dormancy, it was actually an active phase of internal learning and planning in a context of ongoing political crisis. Poole (2000) notes a similar pattern of activism in her analysis of union leaders’ perspectives of teachers’ paradoxical interests in the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union. She found that in times of acute external crisis, such as the 1995 restructuring of education in the province, union leaders focussed on short term goals related to the professional development and teacher welfare of their members. In the years following the crisis, they shifted their focus to longer term goals such as social justice and educational improvement.

Together, the five examples of organized teacher activism in Nova Scotia, Alberta and British Columbia help me critique the dominant “self-interested teachers’ union” discourse (Brimelow, 2003; Lawton et al., 1999; M. Lieberman, 1997). One of the reasons teacher unionists are constructed by many segments of the public as self-interested is that they tend to be in the media spotlight at the precise moment when economic welfare issues supersede longer term educational improvement issues such as social justice advocacy and curriculum development. As Bascia (1994) has noted, this is timing is not accidental, but rather a product of the simplified mass media construction of “news” as emotionally powerful events dichotomizing heroes (good teacher) and villains (selfish teacher). Beyond these problematic media constructions of organized teachers, it is important to note that organized teachers are least likely to engage in social justice work when their efforts are being undermined by cost-cutting government restructuring efforts. That is, neoliberal reform not only feeds the media with opportunities to generate bad press for teachers; it also contributes to the erosion of educational quality and social justice activism by diverting teachers’ energies from innovative teaching strategies to economic self-preservation.

I do not mean to suggest that that the neoliberal restructuring efforts of provincial Departments/Ministries of Education are independently responsible for undermining
social justice capacity in the education system. In the next section, I turn my attention to the internal teacher union critics; those who argue that union leaders who wait till the external crisis fades to deal with social justice are themselves implicated in the reproduction of existing inequities within the education system and the union.

2.2.2 Teacher activism within the union: micro-political struggles between teacher sub-groups

The Canadian teacher workforce is predominantly white, female and middle class (Ryan et al., 2009), but relative homogeneity is not the same as absolute homogeneity. Men and women with a range of growing up experiences and social locations have taught in Canadian schools. Beyond these slight demographic and experiential differences are those related to ideology, panel (elementary/secondary), organizational location (teacher, department head, school administrator, senior administrator) and degree of specialization. This rarely acknowledged diversity among teachers has historically resulted in micro-political tensions and contrasting priorities within teachers’ organizations (Smaller, 1988; Wotherspoon, 1993). In this sub-section, I review the contemporary research on teacher union micro-politics with a particular focus on gender.

In 1960, the Canadian Teachers’ Federation took an interest in what it referred to as “the diversity of its membership” because the issue of provincially sponsored subject-matter groups had emerged as a topic of interest among a few of its affiliates (CTF, 1960). The CTF research department consulted the literature and chose to report the findings of a doctoral thesis on psychological sub-groups among secondary school teachers (Andrews, 1957). Of greatest concern to the authors of the report was Andrew’s (1957) finding that members of a generalist teacher reference group (female) were more union-involved than members of a subject-matter reference group (male). Leaving the supposed impetus of the report aside (whether or not provincial organizations should sponsor subject-matter groups), the CTF researchers articulated their concern that highly union-engaged generalists (women) outnumbered and could thus “collectively thwart” the aspirations of their specialist (male) colleagues. The reports’ recommendation to teacher union leaders across the country was to actively recruit more male subject matter-oriented teachers.
This report provides evidence that, like American Progressive Era educational reformers fifty years earlier, the CTF leadership characterized large numbers of highly active, female teachers as a problem to be solved by attracting more highly educated, male, secondary school “professionals” to their ranks (Gitlin, 1996; M. Murphy, 1990; Rousmaniere, 2005; Urban, 1982). The main difference is that one group used the ideology of “professionalism” and the other used the code “subject matter specialist” as a proxy for male teachers. The continuity of this trend demonstrates the durability of thinly veiled sexism within the education system across temporal (1920s, 1960s), spatial (United States, Canada) and organizational (government, union) contexts, a patriarchal bias that has been noted by a number of more critical teacher activists and researchers.

For the remainder of this section, I explore the gender micro-politics of Canadian teacher unionism in greater depth. I do this by reviewing four studies: one that examines teacher unionism through a gendered lens (Bascia, 1998c), one that analyzes the legal struggles of an elementary women teachers’ federation in Ontario fighting to retain its women-only status (Mawhinney, 1997) and two that examine the growth and struggles of a women teachers’ program in a mixed sex organization in British Columbia (Foley, 2000; Goldberg, 1995). My decision to focus on gender is related to the availability of research on teacher union micro-politics; women teacher activists are the only organized sub-group within the context of teachers’ unions to be extensively examined in the literature. Reports on the anti-racist initiatives of teachers’ unions exist (McKenna, 1999), but this work tends to explore how an undifferentiated group of teachers deals with student diversity, not how diverse groups of teachers experience the structures, policies and norms of their union.

In contrast to the CTF research departments’ deliberate masking of gender under the code “subject-matter oriented teacher” (CTF, 1960), Bascia (1998c) deliberately applies a gendered lens to data she collected for two previous studies on teacher unionism: one exploring the value of unionism to teachers in three secondary schools (Bascia, 1994), and one examining the contributions of teachers’ unions to educational reform (Bascia, 1997a). By considering teaching and teacher unionism through a gendered lens, she reveals discriminatory structures that subordinate all teachers, women in particular: the
gendered nature of authority relations between teachers and administrators, gendered assumptions about teachers’ careers, characterizations of militant union leaders as male and a number of gendered assumptions about teachers’ abilities, interests and work. She divides her findings into four sections: teachers’ material concerns (women teachers have historically turned to their unions for these issues because of gendered discrepancies in salary and working conditions) advocacy (union involvement is a crucial strategy for teachers assigned to organizationally marginalized programs, a disproportionate number of whom are women) careers (union involvement provides teachers with opportunities to better understand the education system and develop skills without having to rely on administratively controlled professional development channels) and leadership (women teachers’ leadership opportunities are constrained in school, district and union contexts where male colleagues rarely relinquish power). She concludes by arguing that women teachers have much to gain through union involvement and unions have much to gain by supporting the active involvement of women teachers.

The next three studies I review foreground feminist organizing in two Canadian teachers’ unions, the Federation of Women Teachers’ Associations of Ontario (Mawhinney, 1997) and the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (Foley, 2000; Goldberg, 1995). The first is an analysis of the legal battles faced by feminist teacher union leaders struggling to retain their gender segregated organization in Ontario, while the second and third depict the organizational challenges faced by feminist teacher activists struggling to retain their gender segregated program within the context of a heterogeneous organization in British Columbia. The two groups of feminist teacher activists are located in different provincial contexts but both gained strength in the early 1970s and both lost their fights to smaller groups of male colleagues in the late 1990s, a finding that suggests international social movements and globally prevalent sexism might actually be more powerful forces among Canadian educators than constitutionally protected regionalism.

The Federation of Women Teachers’ Associations of Ontario (FWTAO) organized female, public elementary school teachers in the province from 1918 till its demise in 1998 when it amalgamated with the considerably smaller and less well resourced elementary men teachers’ federation, the Ontario Public School Teachers’ Federation
(OPSTF) to become the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO). The brief history of the two predecessor organizations outlined on the ETFO website suggests a smooth, consensual transition; that FWTAO and OPSTF “retired” in the late 1990s to make way for the stronger, merged organization (Richter, 2006), but a critical analysis of the FWTAO’s legal battles calls the consensual nature of the merger into question (Mawhinney, 1997). Mawhinney (1997) traces the legal battle of women teachers’ who lost their right to organize separately when one of their female colleagues (supported financially by the men teachers’ federation) launched a judicial review in the Ontario Divisional Court seeking an order to eliminate the Ontario Teachers’ Federation’s by-law granting women elementary school teachers automatic membership to FWTAO. The teacher in question argued that by forcing her to be a member of the women teachers’ federation, the by-law discriminated against her on the basis of sex according to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The same teacher and one of her colleagues, both backed by the men teachers’ federation, also filed an application to the Ontario Human Rights Commission for a ruling that the OTF by-law violated the non-discrimination provisions set out in the Ontario Human Rights Code. Mawhinney’s (1997) case study of the FWTAO struggle for organizational autonomy provides a useful illustration of women teachers’ activism in a patriarchal institution that disadvantages women, even when they make up the numeric majority of an occupation and have greater financial resources at their disposal.

The next two texts I review reveal similar barriers to women teachers’ activism in the context of a patriarchal institution, but the institution in question is their own federation, not the broader legal system. One traces the activist strategies of the BCTF Status of Women committee from the perspective of an insider and her colleagues (Goldberg, 1995), while the other develops an explanatory framework for the eventual demise of the same committee (Foley, 2000). Goldberg’s (1995) study examines what can be learned from the activities of the BCTF Status of Women committee. She found three necessary conditions for success: sufficient funding for staff and committee operation, decision-making autonomy and a reliance on feminist process. In particular, she found feminist process methods to be a necessary, but insufficient criterion for social change within her organization. Her advice to women involved in mixed gender organizations is to hold on
to feminist principles even when faced with hierarchal, patriarchal pressures to function as an arm of the organization. To abandon these principles, according to Goldberg, is to risk losing the ability to oppose ongoing attacks on feminist power.

Like Goldberg, Foley (2000) explores the experiences of the BCTF Status of Women committee from the 1970s to the mid 1990s, but in contrast to Goldberg who concludes that she and her colleagues should have held onto their feminist instincts in the face of patriarchal hierarchy, Foley concludes that they would have experienced the greatest success if they had mobilized the membership to pressure the leadership to bring about organizational change. Reading the two theses in their entirety, it seems that Goldberg and Foley are not so much disagreeing as speaking from different organizational positions (insider/outsider), prioritizing different goals (personal consistency, organizational change) and strategizing through different modes of influence (direct/indirect). As a Status of Women committee insider, Goldberg reflects on committee members’ regrets and views success in relation to their ability to directly advocate for feminist change without compromising their values. As an organizational outsider who has studied other cases of social movement activism, Foley measures feminist group success by committee longevity and activists’ abilities to indirectly influence organizational outcomes through membership mobilization. Despite these differences, the two researchers share an understanding that feminist activist sub-groups within larger mixed-sex organizations face multiple barriers to their work and severe restrictions on their autonomy. This shared finding reinforces the concerns of FWTAO leaders four provinces to the east about merging with the smaller men teachers’ organization.

All four studies of feminist teacher union activism provide evidence of restricted agency for women teachers who are always working for change within “the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984). At a slightly less revolutionary level, however, they also demonstrate the inroads made by organized women teachers within union contexts. By relying on their intuition, feminist process and critical mass, union-involved women have been able to shape federation rules, norms and policies, increase their access to leadership positions and support anti-sexist pedagogy in schools. The same could be said about macro-
political teacher union organizing against neoliberalism. Anti-neoliberal teacher activists have not successfully dismantled market driven education, but they have made use of indirect forms of influence to collectively shape educational policies and practices around the world.

There is evidence to suggest that an even greater set of challenges is faced by anti-racist, anti-homophobia and anti-colonial teacher activists who lack a critical mass of similarly positioned teachers (Perlstein, 2005; Rottmann, 2008; Stewart, 2008; Westbrook, 2008b). Feminist teachers working in patriarchal organizations struggle against patriarchal norms and policies that are not of their making, but the majority of teacher union members are women who would personally benefit from, even if they are not willing to march in support of, reduced sexism within their organization. In contrast to the case of women teachers, many other groups of socially marginalized teachers (eg. racialized, Aboriginal and LGBTQ teachers) lack a critical mass of similarly positioned colleagues. What kind of activist inroads have they made and how have they been treated within their respective organizations? One of the few texts I have found that responds to this question is Stewart’s (2008) article on advocating for Aboriginal issues in the BCTF. After identifying the federation’s positive accomplishments with respect to Aboriginal issues, she raises the important point that some social justice messages are easier to deliver than others. For example, it is much easier for the union president to inform the membership about the social justice benefits of small class size than for an Aboriginal activist to inform his or her colleagues that they are part of the problem. If, as Foley (2000) suggests, membership support is the critical factor affecting sub-group activist outcomes in the organization as a whole, Aboriginal activists who require members to acknowledge their own deep seated prejudices must face a seemingly insurmountable set of obstacles. Stewarts’ concluding recommendations for activists who find themselves in this predicament is to rely on coalition building within and beyond the union.

2.2.3 Teacher activists (leaders) working for social justice through their unions

Teacher activism is one of the oldest and most persistent forms of teacher leadership, but it has become increasingly masked by two decades of “teacher leadership as school
improvement” research in the United States and Canada (A. Lieberman, Saxl, & Miles, 1988; Little, 1988; MOE, 2006; Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002; Wasley, 1991; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The long overdue recognition of teachers’ leadership role in education, has been overshadowed by the instrumental nature of government-initiated teacher leadership policy which restricts “teacher leadership” to system-driven opportunities for professional development directed at teachers identified by school administrators as “masters” of their profession (Day & Harris, 2002; Heller & Firestone, 1995; A. Lieberman et al., 1988; Little, 1988; Riley, 2004; Smylie et al., 2002; Wasley, 1991; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), capable of supporting reform through “distributed leadership” (Gronn, 2002) and willing to facilitate “self-managed” teams (Smylie et al., 2002). A major problem with these programs is that teachers’ leadership potential is measured against a centrally-defined standard shaped by the latest reform idea, a selection criteria that favours following the school improvement initiatives of others over leading (Rottmann, 2007a).

A number of teacher leadership studies are notably absent from the literature reviews backing these instrumental programs. For example, teachers who “lead with their lives” (Bascia, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a; Bascia & Young, 2001; Casey, 1993; Crocco et al., 1999; Henry, 1992; Sattler, 1997; Thiessen, Bascia, & Goodson, 1996; Weiler, 1988; Whitehead, 1998) might be dismissed as “activists” and not “leaders” by school improvement reformers, but the influential roles of the teachers described in these studies (in classrooms, schools and communities) means that they are also leaders. By leading with their lives, values, experiences and beliefs about the purposes of education, these teachers blur artificial distinctions between leadership and activism. One of the central features of this research is that it values teachers for what they bring to the classroom instead of condemning them for what they are missing. This feature makes teacher leadership models based on “leading with one’s life” more popular among teacher unionists than models based on “leading one’s colleagues to see the light of externally proposed reform efforts.”

For the remainder of this section I review the literature on teacher leadership in union contexts written by researchers coming from a range of disciplinary and organizational
Educational historians who have analyzed the work and lives of charismatic teacher union leaders like Margaret Haley (Rousmaniere, 2005) and Albert Shanker (Gaffney, 2007; Kahlenberg, 2007; Weiner, 1998); long time teacher unionists who have analyzed their activist work and that of their colleagues (Kuehn, 2006a; MacRae, 2008; Naylor, O'Brien, Alexandrou, & Garsed, 2008; Whitehead, 1998) and educational administration researchers who have written about teachers’ unions as alternative organizational sites for teacher leadership (Bascia, 1997a; Poole, 2007c, 2008; Rottmann, 2007a).

Educational historians who write about charismatic teacher union leaders (Gaffney, 2007; Kahlenberg, 2007; Rousmaniere, 2005; Weiner, 1998), like those who chart teacher union history at the organizational level (M. Murphy, 1990; Urban, 1982), write deeply contextualized accounts of teacher activism, but in contrast to those who focus on the organization, those whose work is more biographical, tend to write in ways that emphasize human agency. In their accounts, history not only shapes, but is also shaped by the efforts of influential leaders. The two most popular muses for teacher union historians have been Margaret Haley and Albert Shanker, two American teacher union presidents who frequently found themselves at the centre of educational controversy at the local, state and federal level. While they were not necessarily known for their social justice activism, both were widely known for their leadership. Historical accounts of these two teacher activists’ careers blend personal and organizational histories so that no history of the Chicago Teachers’ Federation can be told without referring to Margaret Haley and no history of the United Federation of Teachers or American Federation of Teachers can be told without referring to Albert Shanker. Conversely, no biography of Haley or Shanker is complete without a detailed account of CTF/UFT/AFT development.

Like the four educational historians cited above (Gaffney, 2007; Kahlenberg, 2007; Rousmaniere, 2005; Weiner, 1998), Kuehn (2006a), MacRae (2008), Whitehead (1998) and Naylor et al. (2008) examine the work of highly active teacher unionists over time, but in contrast to the former group who highlight the posthumous work of well known union presidents with long tenures, the latter group builds on the living memories of teacher activists who work behind the scenes of public scrutiny. Naylor and his
colleagues (2008) write about a union-university-community-school partnership aimed at supporting the work of international teacher leaders in Canada, Scotland and Australia through new web-based technology. Whitehead (1998) reflects on his experiences muddling through the world of educational politics, collective bargaining, local union politics and an initially mysterious provincial union structure, and concludes by thanking his organization for providing him with a highly engaging career. Kuehn (2006a) expresses similar gratitude to his organization after tracing its 85 year history of international programming, and concludes that BCTF teacher activists’ reciprocal rather than unilateral relationship with union-involved colleagues in the global south has strengthened their collective resolve to resist powerful, neoliberal forces in education. Finally, MacRae (2006) examines how four contemporary, mid-career social justice activist teachers in British Columbia theorize their work experiences. Consistent with the findings present in the “teachers who lead with their lives” research, Naylor et al, Whitehead, Kuehn and MacRae found that participants’ identities and work as teachers drove their activism.

Another similarity between these two bodies of union-based teacher leadership research is the authors’ focus on human agency and their writing about the feasibility of educational change. By charting, not only structural constraints, but also the strategic use of opportunities for change, these activist texts provide the next generation of union involved teachers with an invaluable resource. In particular, future BCTF activists who learn about their organization from Kuehn’s (2006a) analysis will be sitting on nearly a century of teacher union history and strategy, told from the perspective of a key organizational strategist who has worked behind the scenes and through networks of allies to get things moving on a provincial and global scale.

Moving from insider union-based research to outsider university-based research, Poole (2007c, 2008), Bascia (1997) and I (2007a) have written about teacher leadership and teacher union activism from an organizational theory perspective, building on teacher union research in other organizational contexts. All three of us analyze multiple career histories of teacher union activists involved in broader educational change efforts. Bascia (1997) draws on her previous decade of North American teacher union research to reveal
invisible opportunities for teacher leadership to an audience of policy makers and
educational researchers. I (Rottmann, 2007a) build on the career histories of nine teacher
unionists in one organization to illustrate the contrast between instrumental, government-
initiated teacher leadership and generative, informal opportunities for teacher leadership
in a union context. Poole (2007c, 2008) examines the activist identities of fourteen self-
identified social justice teacher activists to reveal the diversity of initiatives in which
unionized teachers are engaged. When read together, it is possible to gain at least three
insights about organized teacher activists and their unions from these texts: 1) the activist
work of unionized teachers often carries traces of organizational discourse, policies and
practice; 2) despite these traces, empirical studies on teacher union activism reveal a great
diversity of goals and strategies beyond that reified by media reports; and 3) the
neoliberal construction of the authoritarian union leader forcing his or her will on a group
of naïve, unsuspecting teacher members has little empirical backing.

By analyzing teacher union activism and union-based teacher leadership at the individual
level, all authors whose work I have reviewed in this section challenge the monolithic
portrayal of teachers’ unions so common in the educational improvement literature. More
relevant to my thesis, they also flesh out the NCEA (1994) vision of social justice
unionism by adding historically and organizationally contextualized details to the
rhetorical ideal.

2.3 Positioning the study in the reviewed literature

After reviewing the historic and contemporary teacher union research through a social
justice lens, I can now respond to the question that shaped this inquiry: *What does the
teacher union literature have to say about social justice activism?* In this concluding
section, I identify major insights about social justice activism from the historic and
contemporary literature on teachers’ unions, and then position my study in relation to the
findings.

Studies on early to mid 20th century teacher unionization in the United States, England
and Canada suggest that Peterson and Charney’s (1999) vision of “social justice teacher
unionism” has a long historical precedent (Lawn & Ozga, 1986; M. Murphy, 1990;
Smaller, 1991; Urban, 1982; Wotherspoon, 1993). As members of an occupationally subordinated group, unionized teachers have consistently challenged educational reform ideas that exclude them (M. Murphy, 1990; Urban, 1982); become involved in the political lives of their municipalities, states/provinces and countries (Chafe, 1968; Cuff, 1985; French, 1968; Glass, 1989; Kuehn, 2006a; Labatt, 1993; M. Murphy, 1990; Staton & Light, 1987); and fought for women’s rights to salary parity and good working conditions (Danylewycz & Prentice, 1986; Gitlin, 1996; M. Murphy, 1990; Ozga & Lawn, 1988; Rousmaniere, 2005; Smaller, 1991). They have also; however, been found across historic and national contexts to elevate their personal material justice needs over other types of equity-based concerns (Urban, 1982), adopt the patriarchal structures of the societies and education systems in which they are embedded (Danylewycz & Prentice, 1986; Kean, 1989; M. Murphy, 1990; Smaller, 1991; Urban, 2000; Wotherspoon, 1993), and reify the racism present within the education system (Perlstein, 2005; Podair, 2002).

These historically durable ideological discrepancies—civil rights activists who resist African American community control, advocates for gender equity in the school system who reinforce patriarchal norms within their organization, and teacher welfare advocates who distance themselves from organized labour—have been explained by teacher union historians in slightly different but overlapping ways. Urban (1982) attributes teacher union activism/conservatism in the United States to teachers’ chronic underpayment and strategic support for reform ideas most likely to improve their material conditions. Smaller (1988, 1998) suggests that the active/passive cycle of teacher activism in Canada is a product of two related forces: incomplete social controls used by successive governments to actively dissuade teachers from labour affiliation, and periods of labour unrest following the collective realization that eroding working conditions require industrial action. And, Murphy (1990) concludes that organized teachers’ ideological discrepancies across time and space in the United States reflect the narrow, perpetually shifting window of opportunity for activism permitted by the conservative society in which teachers work and live. In the end, Smaller, Urban and Murphy all point to the salience of teachers’ subordinate location on the “uneven terrain” (S. Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997) of educational policy making as a major factor shaping their inconsistent record on social justice activism.
The contemporary teacher union research confirms and extends this finding: organized teachers continue to be involved in the political lives of their municipalities, states/provinces and countries, most recently through their resistance to neoliberal educational reform (Bascia, 2006; Compton & Weiner, 2008; Kuehn, 1996, 2006b; Martell, 2006; Poole, 2007a; Robertson & Smaller, 1996); teachers’ unions are most likely to be in the public spotlight at the moment in their activist cycle when economic welfare issues supersede longer term educational improvement issues such as social justice advocacy (Bascia, 1998b, 2005, 2006, 2009; Lawn & Ozga, 1986; Poole, 1999, 2007a; Rottmann, 2008; Stevenson, 2007a); the teacher workforce continues to be divided along gendered lines and patriarchal norms continue to make their way into teacher union policy and practice (Bascia, 1998c; Coulter, 1996; Foley, 1995, 2000; Goldberg, 1995; Mawhinney, 1997); feminist teachers continue to make inroads into educational and teacher union practice by relying on their intuition, feminist process and critical mass (Bascia, 1998c; Foley, 1995; Goldberg, 1995); anti-racism, anti-homophobia, anti-colonialism activists continue to experience steep barriers to activism in the education system and their unions (Bouvier, 2004; Carlson, 1992; Compton & Weiner, 2008; Kuehn, 2006a; Peterson & Charney, 1999; Rottmann, 2009; Stewart, 2008); and individual, union-involved teacher activists continue to “lead with their lives” (Casey, 1993) in support of socially just change (Bascia, 1997a; Bascia & Young, 2001; Kuehn, 2006a; MacRae, 2008; Naylor et al., 2008; Poole, 2007c, 2008; Rottmann, 2007a; Rousmaniere, 2005; Weiner, 1998; Whitehead, 1998).

In this chapter, I have reviewed historic and contemporary teacher union research for insights about social justice activism; a strategy I employed because of the paucity of research focussing directly and explicitly on the phenomenon “social justice teacher unionism.” I believe my case study of a self-described social justice teachers’ union—the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation—will begin to fill this gap in the literature. In the next chapter, I lay out my methodological strategies for achieving this goal.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The primary objective of this qualitative case study is to examine the phenomenon of social justice teacher unionism in context. In this chapter, I connect my methodological decisions with my research questions, theoretical perspective and conceptual framework.

3 Qualitative Research

According to Mason (1996), qualitative research is,

grounded in a philosophical position which is: 1) broadly ‘interpretivist’ in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced; 2) based on methods of data generation which are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced rather than rigidly standardized or structured, or removed from ‘real life’ or ‘natural’ social context, as in some forms of experimental method; and 3) based on methods of analysis and explanation building which involve understandings of complexity, detail and context. Qualitative research aims to produce rounded understandings on the basis of rich, contextual and detailed data. There is more emphasis on ‘holistic’ forms of analysis and explanation, than on charting surface patterns, trends and correlations. (p.4)

Building on Mason’s (1996) definition, I have chosen to conduct a qualitative study for three reasons: my theoretical perspective—critical constructionism (Ball, 1991; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 1987) is grounded in an epistemological position concerned with how the social world is produced, organized, experienced and understood; my study draws on the ‘real life’ experiences of teacher activists in the context of their organization; and my analytic preferences privilege holism over reductionism. To state that my study is qualitative, however, is insufficiently precise. In the next section I provide reasons for conducting a qualitative case study of social justice teacher unionism.

3.1 Case Studies

Social justice teacher unionism has been proposed as a reform movement (Froese-Germain & O’Haire, 2007; Kuehn, 2007; Peterson & Charney, 1999) and used as a standard against which to measure school, community and union based initiatives.
(Compton & Weiner, 2008; McAdie et al., 2007; O'Haire, 2007; Poole, 2007b, 2007c; Rottmann, 2008; Shamsher & Decker, 2004), but it has not yet been examined in depth in a particular organizational context. My thesis contributes to the teacher union literature through a deeply contextualized case study of social justice teacher unionism in action.

The term “case study” is often used interchangeably with the term “qualitative research,” but not all case studies are qualitative and not all examples of qualitative research are case studies (Merriam, 1998). MacDonald and Walker (1975) compare the case study researcher to the artist who “communicates enduring truths about the human condition” (p.3) by portraying an instance of a phenomenon locked in time and circumstance. Similarly, Anderson and Arsenault (1998) point to the importance of examining a phenomenon in its “real life context” (p.121), but for them, the distinguishing feature of case study research is the researchers’ selection of “an event or process considered worthy of study” (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p.121). Finally, Mason (1996) informs the novice qualitative researcher that “case study [research] is particularly amenable to those who wish to understand intricately interwoven parts of a data set, social processes, or complex narratives…that are too complicated or elaborate to be amenable to categorical indexing” (Mason, 1996, p.129). These three definitions highlight different moments in the research process: the selection of a significant event (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998), analysis (Mason, 1996) and writing (MacDonald & Walker, 1975), but all three include elements of boundedness (L. M. Smith, 1978) and integration (Stake, 1995). For this reason it behoves me to demonstrate the bounded and integrated nature of my study.

According to Merriam (1998), a good test of boundedness is to ask whether there is an actual or theoretical end to the number of people who could have been interviewed. While I did not reach the actual end of possible participants who could have helped me answer my research question—How did teacher union activists contribute and respond to the institutionalization of social justice at the BCTF?—I theoretically could have had my resources not been limited and had all social justice teacher union activists with living memory of their BCTF involvement been willing to participate.
The second criterion, integration, is less clearly defined by qualitative research experts but as I understand the term, it implies both analytic and concrete connections between data sources. *Analytic integration* is a characteristic of qualitative research in general. That is, qualitative researchers generate findings by articulating connections between multiple interrelated data sources. I believe I have met the criterion of analytic integration through my critical constructionist perspective which leads me to understand institutionalization as a “reciprocal typification of habitualized actions” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.54) reflecting interconnected relations of ruling (D. E. Smith, 1987). This theoretical perspective is inconsistent with data reduction techniques such as thematic categorization because such strategies separate rather than depict the connections between participants, their immediate socially constructed contexts and broader ruling relations (D. E. Smith, 1987). The fundamental methodological implication for researchers adopting a social constructionist or critical constructionist perspective is continuous integration of multiple data sources and perspectives.

Analytic integration is easier to accomplish if it is based on *concrete integration*—that is, a set of pre-existing relationships between participants, not just because they are members of a conceptually defined group such as “principals,” “women” or “social justice teacher union activists,” but because they actually know one another and interact with one another on a day to day basis. While analytic integration is a property of qualitative research in general, concrete integration is an additional requirement to be met by case study researchers. Case study researchers are not only making connections between data sets according to their understanding of society, but are also speaking with individuals who are themselves aware of connections with one another based on a shared workplace, shared experience, shared social network or some other shared relational scheme. In other words, concrete integration implies that the data sources are themselves connected independent of the researcher’s thinking. I believe I have met the criterion of concrete integration by interviewing participants whose relationships with one another and with BCTF social justice programming preceded my analysis of their experiences.

Having demonstrated that my research meets the two main criteria of a case study—boundedness and integration—it now behoves me to identify the relative advantages and
disadvantages of this methodological type, particularly as it relates to the phenomenon of social justice unionism. The major advantage of case study research is the depth of analysis that can be achieved by focussing one’s attention on an intricately contextualized instance of a phenomenon in action. The corresponding disadvantage is reduced breadth and limited ability to generalize my findings across contexts. I can live with this trade-off. Had I conducted a survey of teacher union activists across the country, I would have learned more about the range of teacher activist goals, demographics, concerns and successes, but I would have missed the dynamic social interactions between activists who contribute and respond to social justice unionism through their everyday lives.

3.2 Site selection

My decision to conduct a case study preceded my selection of a particular site. I chose to study a provincial teachers’ organization because education in Canada falls under provincial jurisdiction. This governance context means that a great deal of teacher union activism occurs in response to provincial policy, legislation and reform. My initial plan was to study social justice unionism in three provincial teachers’ organizations: The Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA), the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) and the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF). I chose these organizations because of their contrasting provincial contexts and distinct histories of social justice activism. The BCTF had received international attention for its social justice programming, especially its Program Against Racism (McKenna, 1999) which was highlighted in Peterson and Charney’s (1999) text on social justice teacher unionism; ETFO is a merger of two former, sex segregated organizations with two very different histories of social justice activism (Richter, 2006) and thus would have provided me with an interesting case of internally negotiated social justice unionism and the ATA has retained social justice programming over the years despite its location in a highly conservative political climate and thus would have provided me with an informative case of externally negotiated social justice activism in constraining circumstances. In the end, my committee members recommended that I focus on one organization. I now appreciate their decision because it enabled me to conserve resources without sacrificing depth of
analysis. Because the BCTF was known to them as a social justice union, they recommended that I begin there. I followed their suggestion.

3.3 Participant identification

It is one thing to select an organization based on theoretical criteria, but quite another to make connections with potential research participants. I began by contacting a colleague/mentor I had met through the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Special Interest Group focusing on teachers’ work and teachers’ unions. He put me in contact with one of his BCTF colleagues who was responsible for organizational research. We had a few email conversations and came to an agreement. I shared my research objectives, perspectives on teacher unionism and concern for the ethical treatment of participants and he shared his interest in gaining access to transcripts and research findings. In the end, we negotiated a type of access that would benefit both my research program and the BCTF without placing participants at risk.

Participants varied according to organizational position, caucus affiliation, social location, activist commitments and focus, but all self identified or were identified by others as social justice activists. I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify twenty-five activists affiliated with the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation and convenience sampling to identify five additional teacher activists affiliated with teachers’ organizations in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Nova Scotia. The first set of interviews taught me about the lived realities of teacher activists in one organizational context while the second set helped me contextualize and bound the case.

I approached participants in a variety of organizational divisions (communications, bargaining, member services, professional development, research, executive), organizational locations (school, local, provincial), position types (union involved teacher activist, elected official, permanent and contract staff), and career stages (early, mid, late, retired) following the recommendations of organizational insiders. I did this to maximize the diversity of perspectives within the organization. Putting my intentions aside, however, many additional factors shaped my access to participants. I intended to
interview 12 BCTF involved teachers, staff, and elected officials but ended up interviewing 25 because many participants, feminist activists in particular connected me with colleagues in their networks. I was able to interview teacher activists affiliated with the two political caucuses that run candidates for provincial election, but my sample was skewed in favour of the left leaning Teachers’ Viewpoint27 caucus. Once I began interviewing people and learned about the salience of the caucuses, I deliberately sought out additional participants affiliated with the Teachers for a United Federation caucus, but only a few agreed to participate. All 25 participants, regardless of caucus affiliation either self-identified or were identified by others as social justice advocates.

I interviewed more teachers working in urban and suburban than rural or northern districts because full time teachers working in and around the lower mainland were more accessible to me than others. Predicting that urban teachers would be over-represented in my sample, I deliberately planned my visit to coincide with the Annual General Meeting. I believed this would allow me to connect with teacher activists from across the province. Unfortunately, the AGM was cancelled due to a labour dispute between the BCTF and the administrative staff union, so I was unable to interview teacher activists living outside of Vancouver. Fortunately, I was able to learn a little bit about social justice teacher activism in rural and northern contexts from my interviews with administrative staff members who had begun their careers in these districts but were living in Vancouver at the time of my visit.

I did not experience overt resistance to participation from anybody I approached, but in the end I spoke to more staff working in the Professional and Social Issues Division (PSID) than in any other division. I deliberately sought out participants working in all divisions, but my use of the words “social justice” in the invitation led people in some divisions and at some levels—particularly full time administrative staff employed in the Communication and Campaigns Division (CCD) and the Collective Agreements and

27 Teachers’ Viewpoint affiliated participants described themselves as “left-leaning” and the other caucus (Teachers for a United Federation, TUF) as the “right wing of the organization.” TUF-affiliated participants described themselves as “left-leaning” and the other caucus (Viewpoint) as the “loony left.” Either way, both groups were using ideological markers to position Viewpoint to the ideological left of TUF.
Protective Services division (CAPS)—to redirect my invitation to one of the two staff members responsible for the social justice advisory committee in PSID. This redirecting of my invitation from staff working in collective bargaining and campaigns taught me that social justice responsibilities were somewhat compartmentalized within the federation. It did not, however, prevent me from continuing to elicit broader participation by attending a number of meetings and having informal conversations with people across divisions. Through this process, I was able to gain preliminary insights into social justice work across the federation, insights that were further developed through my interviews with retired and transferred staff from the three BCTF divisions that preceded CCD and CAPS—Learning and Working Conditions, Organizational Support, and Collective Bargaining. I also interviewed two former CCD staff members who were working in another capacity at the time of my visit.

Other than my deliberate attempt to over-identify activists late in their careers who had long memories of BCTF activism, I did not identify people on the basis of demographic diversity. Rather, I presumed that my final sample, when compared with the demographic characteristics of teachers and students in the province as a whole would reveal something about access to and interest in social justice teacher union activism at the BCTF. The twenty-five activists I interviewed have taught for seven to forty years and been BCTF-involved for five and thirty-five years. The majority were nearing or at retirement age (68%), white (84%), female (60%), heterosexual (88%), had grown up in middle class homes (80%) and spoke English as their first language (96%). Compared to the population of British Columbia as indicated in charts assembled by Statistics Canada and research conducted by the BCTF between 1999 and 2007, the 25 teacher activists I interviewed are more female, white, and Anglophone than residents of the province. The over-representation of women disappears when the gender characteristics of teachers rather than BC residents are used as the comparison. While I am not aiming for a representative sample, it is useful to note that my participants are demographically comparable to that of teachers, in the province, who are also more female, white and Anglophone than the students they teach.
This demographic comparability of union activists and staff to BC teachers, especially with respect to gender, disappears when one considers high and low status administrative staff positions within the federation. My informal demographic research in the BCTF, suggests that while women may have become increasingly visible in high profile positions in recent decades, men continue to be over-represented in positions of high decision-making authority and security. I looked around the provincial building, had my observations about staff demographics confirmed by participants, and sought out names and pictures of local presidents across the province. This informal observation led me to conclude that the two groups of individuals with the greatest local and provincial decision-making authority (full time BCTF staff officers and local presidents) were more white and male than my participants. Within my group of 25 interviewees, all but one of the participants in the most secure, full time provincial administrative staff positions were white, middle class, heterosexual men late in their careers. I have included this section on demographics, not to claim typicality or representation of the teaching force or the population of British Columbia as a whole, but to give the reader a feeling for the social and organizational locations of the activists I interviewed. After looking past the demographics of the provincially elected officials to that of the central decision-makers, it is apparent that the demographic homogeneity found in most North American teachers’ unions can also be found in the BCTF.

The demographic homogeneity of my sample did not translate into organizational homogeneity. I interviewed administrative staff on temporary and permanent contracts in Research and Technology, Professional and Social Issues, Field Services, Collective Bargaining (former division), Organizational Support (former division), and Teaching and Learning Conditions (former division). I interviewed Table Officers and Executive Committee members in the provincial federation and local associations. I interviewed School Representatives, Annual General Meeting attendees and Local Representatives from locals affiliated with both political caucuses. I interviewed teacher activists who had participated in multiple committees, voluntary positions related to the generation and provision of social justice professional development throughout the province and community activists who have moved in and out of union involvement throughout their careers depending on a variety of personal and contextual factors.
Through these interviews, I learned about the experiences of people advocating for universally accessible public education, international solidarity, inclusive education, feminism, multiculturalism, bystander education, Holocaust education, Aboriginal education, environmentalism, anti-corporatization of schools, health and safety, anti-heterosexism and anti-homophobia education, support of English Language Learners, anti-poverty education, global education, global feminist education, anti-colonialism, and critical thinking in schools. Their varied experiences came through in their richly textured career history interviews.

3.4 Data Generation: Career History Interviews

I spent March of 2007 in Vancouver attending meetings and reading archival BCTF documents related to social justice but the primary source of data for this study was 25 career history interviews with teacher activists, staff, and elected officials at the BCTF. I chose to use qualitative interviews for four reasons: My ontological position suggests that “people’s knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality which [my] research question is designed to explore” (Mason, 1996, p. 41); My epistemological position suggests that “a legitimate way to generate data on these ontological properties is to interact with people” (Mason, 1996, p.41); My methodological preferences suggest that social explanations depend on “the depth, complexity and roundedness in data, rather than the kind of broad surveys of surface patterns which, for example, questionnaires might provide” (Mason, 1996, p.41); And my ethical commitments demand that I conceptualize myself as “active and reflexive in the process of data generation, rather than as a neutral data collector” (Mason, 1996, p.41-42).

I gave participants the interview guide (see Appendix B) ahead of time. A few consulted notes and CVs to provide me with accurate dates, sequences of events and program names, but most reconstructed their careers from memory. The interviews were deliberately open-ended to allow for participant influence but lightly structured to encourage chronological narration related to career development. They lasted from one and a half to three hours with most reaching the two hour mark. I asked clarification
questions and attempted to respond to participants’ energy levels over the course of the interview.

My decision to conduct career history interviews rather than more directive or heavily structured interviews (Bascia & Young, 2001; Goodson, 1994, 1997; Sikes, Measor, & Woods, 1985) reflects my desire to avoid “making research a victim of the current policy context” (Goodson, 1994 p.29). If I had asked the 25 teacher union activists to walk me through their week, each account would have carried traces of only one political context (the current large scale accountability reform context). By asking them to tell me about their careers beginning with their decisions to become teachers, I was able to elicit accounts that carried traces of multiple policy contexts. While only about half of the participants articulated an explicit perspective on provincially mandated educational reform ideas, their stories “exist in history, [and are thus]...deeply located in time and space” (Goodson, 1997, p.113). Their “narratives are rooted in personal and social histories and social intelligibility norms...They connect past and present, individual and social, potential to actual” (Lawler, 2002 p.246-250). Participants’ career histories provided me with a methodological remedy for timeless, de-contextualized narratives. Life history interviews would have provided me with even more detail, but I decided to achieve a level of expedience by focusing on participants’ careers (Bascia & Young, 2001).

After completing the first few interviews, I noticed that participants found some questions more difficult to answer than others. For example, they were easily able to reflect on their decisions to become teachers, activists and union-involved educators but found it difficult to describe their impact on the federation. When I asked them what they found so difficult about this question, they had some insightful responses: “BCTF activism is a collective rather than individual pursuit so I cannot tell you about my personal impact;” “Isn’t that a question you should be asking my colleagues?;” “I have been so busy putting out fires that I haven’t had time to consider my impact;” “One of the differences between you and I is that in this instance, I am the activist and you are the researcher. The first questions were for me. This one is yours to answer.”
These responses illustrate a set of advantages of career history interviews over highly directive questioning procedures. Direct questions tend to impose discursive norms and assumptions that differ from those typically used by participants in day to day conversation and they are often framed in ways that cut off dialogue. They can put people on the spot. They can be invasive and often require greater reflection than a single interview session permits. Beyond generating discomfort for interviewees, direct questioning presumes that the interviewee interprets the interviewer’s question as the interviewer had intended. Career history interviews, on the other hand, are personal narratives which carry social, historical, and organizational traces. They are relatively easy for participants to tell once they get started and they permit participants a measure of control over the direction of the story being told. They also teach interviewers more than we could possibly have learned through a string of direct questions based on our entering assumptions. Beyond the ease of narration and expanded scope associated with this data generation strategy, career history interviews fit well with my conceptual framework because each interview illustrates the dynamic relationship between agency and structure. When woven together, the 25 career histories with teacher activists, staff and elected officials help me critically construct social justice unionism at the BCTF.

3.5 Data Analysis: Analytic Induction & Constant Comparison

In qualitative research, “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 1998, p.7). My analytic tendency, when conducting qualitative research, is to rely on induction to a greater extent than deduction. That is, I prefer to learn from the data than to use the data to confirm or reject my initial hypotheses. Still, no research is purely inductive because researchers have curiosities and interests that shape the questions they ask, the phrases they hear and remember, the way they collect or generate data with participants and the way they analyze that data. One primarily inductive strategy that accounts for these somewhat deductive influences is the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)—an iterative approach to data analysis involving continual movement between the researchers’ theoretical perspective or conceptual framework and the data. In this study, I used the constant comparison
approach to analyze 25 career history interviews with BCTF-involved social justice activists.

After conducting and listening to all thirty interviews and typing out 3000 pages of transcripts verbatim in 2008, I sent transcripts to participants for feedback. Two asked me to make minor linguistic changes, one asked me to omit a sensitive passage and a third provided me with additional documentation related to her interview. I made all of the changes then replaced identifying information with codes. I then conducted several layers of analysis on the 25 BCTF interviews in 2008 and 2009 by comparing participants’ career histories with my critical constructionist perspective (Ball, 1987, 1991; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 1987, 2002) and conceptual framework.

I recorded my analytic process in a similar way for each participant producing 25 easily comparable summary documents. For each document, I began by noting participants’ background information and outlining their career path in chronological order. I then recorded the inductively generated and conceptual framework-driven phrases produced using the method noted above. Under each phrase, I listed relevant quotations. I indexed each quotation using line references from the transcript. Finally, I concluded with a page of prose weaving my findings together. As I went through this highly detailed process for each of the twenty-five BCTF activists, I began to see individual and organizational trends. I noted the organizational trends on a cross-case summary sheet and referenced the transcripts from which they had emerged.

The summary sheets for each activist helped me index the transcripts without losing the person or career path. As I was doing this, I became aware of tensions between groups of activists. These tensions seemed to revolve around caucus affiliation, organizational position and activist priority. As a result of my increasing awareness of tensions and struggles between groups of activists, I began to incorporate a micro-political (Ball, 1987, 1991; Blase, 1991b; Iannaccone, 1991) analysis into my conceptual framework. This subtle change to my analytic lens made me acutely aware of the constant comparison method’s iterative nature—I was not only using my conceptual framework to analyze the
data, but also using my data analysis process to clarify my theoretical perspective and conceptual framework.

Without repeating all of the details described in chapter one, Ball’s (1987) description of organizations as collections of social interactions led me to Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) theory on the social construction of reality. The conceptually useful but insufficiently critical nature of this theory led me to Smith’s (1987) institutional ethnography. I spent the next month rewriting my theoretical perspective and tightening my conceptual framework. I then returned to the data with a renewed focus. The focal point of my analysis, as I eventually saw it, was a salient process experienced by all twenty five BCTF activists—a controversial 1998 Annual General Meeting at which equity-based programming was restructured under the banner of “Social Justice”. This restructuring process provided me with a useful point of departure for my analysis because it was experienced by all participants, was perceived differently by different groups of activists and coincided with a sharp increase in federation-wide apprehension of a “social justice” discourse.

After identifying this shared critical incident, I read through each transcript again attempting to answer a particular question: How did the interviewee experience the 1998 social justice restructuring process? My answers to this question helped me articulate eight distinct perspectives on the 1998 AGM, perspectives which helped me generate eight composite groups of activists. In Chapter Four, I use these eight composite career trajectories to tell a layered history about the institutionalization of social justice at the BCTF. I follow this highly inductive findings chapter with a researcher-directed one. In Chapter Five, I analyze the eight composite histories generated in Chapter Four through my conceptual framework.

3.6 Writing

The documentation of qualitative case study research findings cannot be formulaic. If it is, it will fail to engage the reader, but even more problematically, it will fail to be analytically useful. I cannot present a list of “best practices” or abstract findings because to generalize from a sample case to the larger population from which it is drawn is to
work on two assumptions: first that it is possible to find a case which represents the whole, and second that the context of that case is unimportant. Since my case study of the institutionalization of social justice in the BCTF is not necessarily representative of similar processes in other organizational contexts, and since the multiple contextual layers connected to the case are themselves part of the findings, I cannot unproblematically apply my findings to all other cases of social justice teacher unionism. I can, however, use what Stake (1995) refers to as “naturalistic generalization:”

To assist the reader in making naturalistic generalizations, case study researchers need to provide opportunity for vicarious experience. Our accounts need to be personal, describing the things of our sensory experiences, not failing to attend to the matters that personal curiosity dictates. A narrative account, a story, a chronological presentation, personalistic description, emphasis on time and place provide rich ingredients for vicarious experience. (p.87)

This vicarious experience allows the reader to make personal connections between the case study findings and his or her organizational context so long as it engages the intended audiences. The immediate audience for my thesis includes my thesis committee and an external examiner. Secondary audiences include union-involved teacher activists, teacher union researchers and organizational theorists. One of the strategies I used to maximize naturalistic generalization among teacher union activists was to write the BCTF case with the five additional career history interviews in mind. Participants from the ATA, STF, OSSTF, ETFO and NSTU used organizationally specific terminology to describe a range of social justice initiatives, but the internal dynamics, tensions and structures in these organizations were similar to those I found in the BCTF. The similarities and differences across organizational contexts helped me bound the BCTF case and gain a feeling for the most and least typical findings.

I gained further advice about how to bound my case from a highly practical article on judging the quality of case study reports (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). In it, Lincoln and Guba operationalized Geertz’ (1973) somewhat ambiguous concept “thick description” by naming and defining four classes of criteria against which case study reports can be evaluated: resonance, rhetoric, empowerment and applicability.
According to Lincoln and Guba, the criterion of *resonance* is met if the researcher’s paradigm or theoretical perspective is consistent with his or her methodology and findings. I believe the iterative process inherent in the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) helped me meet this criterion. I spent nearly two years rewriting and revising my theoretical perspective and findings in relation to one another until I felt confident with the fit.

Second, the criterion of *rhetoric* is met, according to Lincoln and Guba, if the report is well organized, contains elements of good fiction\(^{28}\), recaptures the language of participants and powerfully merges the author’s intellectual and emotional commitments. I lack the literary skill of Margaret Atwood, but I did make a point of using first person accounts to connect my intellectual and emotional commitments with those of my participants. The result, I hope, is a findings chapter (Chapter Four) communicated with a sense of immediacy and intimacy through merged quotations of teacher union activists with a range of perspectives on social justice activism.

Lincoln and Guba’s third criterion of *empowerment* assesses the ability of the documented findings to inspire readers to act. This third criterion seems challenging to ascertain prior to completion of the study. I remember feeling inspired to act when interviewing participants and hope that I have communicated some of their enthusiasm and strategies to you, the reader\(^{29}\).

Finally, the report’s *applicability* depends on its ability to help readers draw inferences in their own contexts. This final criterion is similar to Stake’s (1995) naturalistic generalization. As with Lincoln and Guba’s third criterion, I am unclear about how to assess the applicability of my report. I have, however, attempted to maximize the probability that my findings will be used by teacher union activists in other contexts by

\(^{28}\) Lincoln and Guba reference Zeller (1987) when describing elements of good fiction: rising action, climax and falling action; a lack of loose ends, disappearing characters or dangling storylines; and appropriate use of first, second and third person narration.

\(^{29}\) This seems somewhat unlikely given a sentiment of a recent *Sunday New York Times*’ contributor who suggested that most doctoral theses get as much use as Epsom salts in the back of the medicine cabinet.
writing about the institutionalization of social justice in the BCTF with the experiences of union-involved participants from the ATA, STF, OSSTF, ETFO and NSTU in mind.

In the end, I found Lincoln and Guba’s (1990) criteria for high quality, qualitative reports extremely useful because they represent a high standard for research based on something other than a positivist paradigm. I am not certain that I have met their expectations, but I believe my thesis is strengthened by my attempt to do so.

3.7 Ethical Concerns

The idea of “ethics” cannot exist without a referent. The University of Toronto has a particular code of ethics with which all university professors and thesis stream graduate students must comply. Existing alongside this mandated code is my personal code of ethics which requires that I challenge rather than reify oppressive practices, pay attention to the needs of each participant and write in a way that does not contribute to organizational fragmentation. In some cases my personal code overlaps with the institutional one; in other cases the two codes diverge. In this final section of my methodology chapter, I identify the ways in which I have met the ethical concerns of the university, my participants and myself.

On January 23rd, 2007, I gained ethical approval from the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto. I shared my research objectives, methodology, recruitment strategies, strategies for maintaining confidentiality, informed consent procedures and the projected risks and benefits to participants with the Education Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto. I applied for and was granted an expedited review because my research involved minimal risk to participants. I was exclusively interviewing individuals over the legislated age of consent. I interviewed them only once and thus required a minimal time commitment. I provided them with the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time and I retained their anonymity in the final report by presenting

30 From the beginning, I made the decision (approved by the UofT office of research ethics and participants) to retain the anonymity of the participants but not the organization. I did this because it would have been impossible to generate “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) and retain anonymity at the
composite rather than individual cases. I removed all identifying material from transcripts and kept them in a secure, locked file cabinet as well as an electronic folder on my password encrypted computer. I erased the digital recordings of participants’ voices and agreed to shred the transcripts within five years of completing the research.

In the end, I demonstrated that the probability of harm caused by participation in my study was “no greater than that encountered by participants in their daily lives” (UofT Expedited Review criterion, 2007). I gained approval to begin data collection and was assigned a protocol number (19065). (Please see Appendix A for copies of participant cover letters and informed consent forms). Since the time of my first approval, I have conducted research according to the specifications laid out in the form. No participants have chosen to withdraw. I will send a bound copy of the final thesis to the BCTF and a summary report to all participants.

Having met the requirements documented in the institutional ethical code, I began to consider my own ethical code. I agree with most of the principles behind the UofT research ethics policy but do not believe centralized bureaucratic procedures devised by high status decision makers are the best way to achieve them. Without minimizing the seriousness of decontextualized ethical codes, I was comforted by the fact that most participants in my study were familiar with bureaucratic structures at the time of their interviews. They all worked in a bureaucratically structured organization; nearly half of them have completed graduate degrees; the great majority have participated in other studies and all of them posses an in-depth understanding of the Canadian education system. As such, their consent to participate was experientially informed.

Informed consent aside, it is important for me not only to avoid harming participants, but also to do what I can to support their work. While the UofT ethics review procedure includes a section on research benefits, the timing of the process is extremely patronizing. The very fact that these benefits must be identified before the researcher is permitted to

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organizational level. I could have substituted the name of the organization with a pseudonym, but that would have been a superficial masking procedure. Instead, I have chosen to name the organization and be careful about my claims.
contact participants means that participants’ perspectives on possible benefits are not included. For this reason, I made a point of asking for and listening to participants’ descriptions of their needs during my visit to the BCTF.

One of the requests I received early on from a long time federation leader was that the BCTF gain access to interview transcripts for the purpose of succession planning. The timing of my visit corresponded with a decade of generational turnover in the BCTF and as such, was seen by my initial contact to be of use to organizational planners. This need is not particular to the BCTF. Most union active teachers and staff affiliated with many Canadian teachers’ organizations are either recently retired or close to retirement. Their career histories will be lost if they are not recorded. I do not presume to record the “true” social history of the BCTF, but do believe my study has the potential to be of use to future generations of teacher union activists interested in building on the work and insights of colleagues who came before them. In short, I understand and hope to support the organizational need for succession planning. I could not, however, ethically meet this need by handing teacher activists’ personal transcripts over to people in positions of decision-making authority without placing participants who expressed critical views at risk of occupational marginalization. In the end I found a compromise position; I agreed to inform participants that, while they were under no obligation to do so, they could send their transcripts, in full or in part, amended or as is, to the research division of the BCTF for archival purposes. Perhaps more useful to organizational leaders, I also deliberately wrote my findings chapters in a way that would support succession planning.

Anonymity is not always desirable or even protective. While there are legitimate reasons for the University of Toronto’s anonymity requirement, there are also downsides. Most of the people who agreed to participate in my study are life-long activists who, I believe, deserve to be acknowledged for the important work they have done. By using pseudonyms and relying on composite profiles, I am doing what I can to protect participants from organizational sanction, but I am simultaneously cheating them from the opportunity to be recognized for their achievements. While I have not found a way to simultaneously meet the needs of these activists and the university, I have attempted to provide participants with a level of control over their anonymity. If they read my case
study and are comfortable with my portrayal of their work, they can self-identify to others and send their transcripts, along with their names, to the BCTF research office for archival purposes. If they would prefer to remain anonymous, they can either hold on to their transcripts or ask a friend (or me) to send their transcript to the research division with all identifying information removed.

Whether or not anonymity is desirable to individual participants, I have found over my short research career that it is never completely achievable. Insiders reading the narratives are likely to recognize certain speech patterns and views, but because no profile represents a single individual, no reader will be able to trace more than that familiar turn of phrase back to a single actor. Even if readers can identify one or two of their colleagues within a particular composite, they will not know which of these colleagues said which of the preceding or following statements. I am comfortable with this level of anonymity for two reasons: first, because participants signed consent forms acknowledging that the BCTF would be named and that their experiences would be presented through composite profiles and second, because the relative tensions between organizational sub-groups in the BCTF is already high and participants already know who disagrees with whom about what. By taking potential readers away from the immediate dispute and helping them see where their colleagues are coming from, I believe I am more likely to build empathy among conflicting actors than reify sub-group tensions.

Finally, my internal ethical code demands that I challenge rather than reify societal patterns of privilege. All interviewees work in an institution that is almost always under fire from the provincial government, media and members of the public. Attacks on labour are increasingly common products of neo-liberal policy. For this reason, one of my major concerns was to present this case in a way that did not place the federation at further risk of external fragmentation while at the same time being honest about internal organizational dynamics so as not to place organizationally marginalized activists at risk of further oppression. In the next two chapters, I present my findings while attempting to meet this somewhat challenging objective, but first, I position myself in relation to the study.
3.8 Researcher reflexivity: locating myself in relation to the study

As a researcher conducting a critical constructionist analysis of “social justice teacher unionism,” I cannot legitimately presume to be a distant or neutral observer of participants’ experiences. My entering bias about “social justice” follows from my decade and a half of critical theoretical training. Like Kohli (2005), I believe “social justice” is a term with liberal roots based on the Rawlsian (1971) concept that social conflict is a problem to be solved by fairly applied contracts generated by rational men. In contrast, I prefer the more critical term “anti-oppression” which builds on the Marxian (1906) notion that social conflict is a productive catalyst for class struggle. I do not wholly espouse Marxist economic theory, but I do believe we need to acknowledge the inequitable terrain upon which human beings interact.

Why would a person with such a bias choose to study social justice teacher activism? Even more troubling, from an experiential perspective, is the following question: How did a person who has never been active in the labour movement, has led a very privileged upper middle class life, has rarely moved beyond “thinking” about activism, and whose recently adopted critical perspective made her sceptical about the activist potential of “social justice” decide to study social justice teacher unionism? The answer to this question can only be gleaned by reviewing my career history as a student and researcher of teachers’ unions.

As a teacher candidate in Ontario in the fall of 1997, I joined teachers in their collective protest of Bill 160. I would not have read the Bill on my own, but was fortunate enough to learn about its content and context from a professor who was willing to condense it for her class of teacher candidates. This experience of protest, paired with my professor’s insightful analysis, primed me to transform my thinking about teaching as a gender-typical occupation, to a career with activist potential.

A few years later, as I began working on my PhD, I was fortunate enough to work as a research assistant on a study of union-active educators committed to change (Bascia & Young, 2001). As I was analyzing transcripts, I became aware that participants’
experiences as life long teacher union activists deeply inspired me. Two days after presenting a paper based on this project about the Alberta Teachers’ Association’s response to two generations of government reform (Bascia & Rottmann, 2005) I attended an inspirational presentation on social justice teacher unionism given by two BCTF-affiliated staff officers (Turner & Stewart, 2005). Together, these three experiences helped me see teachers’ unions as an important site for activism.
Chapter Four: Eight Perspectives on Social Justice in the BCTF

The institutionalization of social justice at the BCTF was socially constructed by multiple generations of teacher union activists, elected officials and staff, some of whom traced social justice back to the founding of the organization, others who traced it back to the early 1970s, and others still who believe social justice has yet to arrive. In this chapter, I tell a poly-vocal social justice history of the BCTF from the perspective of 25 organizational insiders. For the sake of anonymity and conceptual clarity, I have organized these 25 career histories into eight composite profiles.

4 Composite Profiles

The eight composite career histories that follow can be read as an inductive, critical constructionist response to my research question. Before presenting the stories, however, I describe a few of my analytic decisions: why I chose to construct eight composite profiles from 25 participants’ career histories, how much of each profile came from participants’ actual words, how I combined the stories, where I decided to insert my voice as the interviewer, why I chose to order the stories as I have, why I have chosen to do a combined narrative approach and how the profiles help me answer my research question.

I chose to generate eight composite profiles from 25 career history interviews because there were eight distinct explanations for a critical incident that occurred at the 1998 AGM. This critical incident held meaning for all 25 participants, even those who began their BCTF involvement after 1998. The most straightforward description of this incident is that it marked a moment of internal social justice restructuring. Two discrete, well-networked, social justice programs (feminist and multicultural) were replaced with an integrated social justice advisory committee and centralized grant structure. Returning to Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) double conception of realization, this incident marked a moment of social justice realization in the first sense (apprehension) at the same time as it marked an erosion of social justice realization in the second sense (making it real). I make this claim on the basis of career history evidence. All but five participants noted the
irony of the situation—BCTF leaders began to refer to the federation as a “social justice union” at the precise moment that feminist and anti-racist programs were “cut off at the knees.” The explanations for why this happened diverged in at least eight ways. I initially planned to write a much shorter Chapter Four detailing eight responses to the question “what happened at the 1998 AGM?” but had I done this, I would have reified ahistorical micro-political tensions in the organization. Because the eight perspectives corresponded quite well with eight distinct career trajectories, I decided, instead, to tell longer stories beginning with participants’ initial union involvement and moving through and beyond the 1998 AGM to the 2007 interview.

Once I grouped participants’ histories according to the eight career trajectories, I re-read each transcript for three types of information: 1) career trajectory in relation to education, activism and teacher unionism, 2) perspective on the best model for social justice and 3) reflections on the BCTF as a location for social justice work. In the end, I condensed 2500 pages of interview transcripts into 130 pages of findings. I accomplished the first stage of this 20 fold reduction by removing information that fell outside of the three categories listed above. I then chose details that were common to the majority of participants within a particular career trajectory and omitted others. I outlined each story then fleshed it out with participants’ words and sentence constructions. Other than completing sentences, condensing narratives and omitting quotation marks, I generated all eight profiles using connected quotations of participants. In most cases, participants whose experiences contributed to one profile shared a number of characteristics, but when a demographically or organizationally diverse group of participants shared a perspective on social justice programming, I chose to depict the composite “character” using the demographic and organizational characteristics of the within-group majority.

My use of composite profiles reflects my interest in blurring the identities of individual activists. As I indicated in Chapter Three, complete anonymity is not possible because insiders will be able to deduce or at least narrow down which of their colleagues’ stories are contained in any one activist profile. They will not, however, know with any certainty, who said what for the entire profile, because no profile represents only one person. They can only identify particular quotations as articulations of particular people if
they have already heard their colleagues say these things, in which case I would not be revealing anything they did not already know. I am comfortable with this level of partial anonymity, not only because participants consented to participation knowing their words would contribute to composite profiles, but also because these profiles help participants empathize with one another. BCTF activists already know which teacher activists, elected officials and staff members are part of which caucus, committee and division and what their perspectives are on a range of social justice issues; what they do not know is the life history or career trajectory of colleagues with whom they frequently disagree. My longitudinal rather than cross-sectional construction of events from eight perspectives is more likely to maximize empathy than reify organizational conflict.

In addition to making analytical process decisions, I made a number of presentation decisions. For example, I have chosen to order the eight subsections below chronologically rather than thematically because each activist group responded to and built on the inherited wisdom of their predecessors. I decided to insert my voice as the interviewer into all eight profiles when a section of the participants’ narrative was a direct response to one of my redirecting question during the interview; and I chose to use first person singular or first person plural to mark distinctions between those participants who spoke about themselves as individuals and those who spoke about themselves as members of a caucus or some other organized body. In no case, does the use of “I” indicate that a profile reflects the experience of only one person. Six of the eight profiles reflect the career histories of three or four participants, another reflects the experiences of two participants and another reflects the experiences of seven participants. For the one profile based on only two participants’ experiences, I deliberately included a few masking details.

I have chosen to use a combined narrative approach to present my findings because my critical, social constructionist framework would not allow me to tell a unified history. I considered beginning this chapter by telling a unified social justice history using a few overlapping features of the eight composite career histories, but I chose not to do that because as a researcher using a critical constructionist theoretical perspective, I cannot presume to tell a unified, authoritative history of social justice unionism at the BCTF.
Every time I sit down to write a single story, I find myself reproducing the dominant tale. This dominant tale appears in Chapter Five, as the “unified” story in Section 5.2—“Unifying and Diversifying Federation History.” Until then, the story will be told from the eight perspectives of twenty-five activists, one layer at a time. Together their eight career histories help me answer my research question—*how did teacher union activists contribute and respond to the institutionalization of social justice in their federation?*

This highly inductive findings chapter increases the immediacy and contextual sensitivity of participants’ experiences, but it may not be immediately obvious to the reader how it functions in the thesis. The eight narratives in this chapter provide a poly-vocal, social history of the BCTF from the perspective of differently positioned activists. It tells the reader how eight sub-groups of activists got involved in their union, began to advocate for their priorities within the federation context and built on or reshaped existing norms, policies and practices related to social justice in the BCTF. In short, it is the socially constructed response to my research question, from eight perspectives. By comparing the narratives of differently positioned actors, this chapter reveals, not only how social justice was institutionalized in the federation, but also how this process was mediated by organizational and societal patterns of privilege and participation.

For the remainder of this chapter, I present eight narratives to shed a “side light” (Ball, 1991, p.167) on social justice unionism at the BCTF. No narrative tells the whole story because no individual activist has access to all aspects of the organization, but most of the gaps present in each of the composite profiles are filled by their colleagues’ narratives.

**4.1 Perspective 1, Teachers’ Viewpoint: Discrete Programs and Networks Worked well in the 70s and 80s**

*The discrete social responsibility programs were necessary in the 70s and 80s when racism and sexism were so in your face, and something like them is still necessary but we’re no longer experts on the issues. As teachers, we’re good organizers but we’re generalists when it comes to social justice.*

Looking back over my career, one of the most rewarding experiences I’ve had, outside of my classroom teaching, has been my work with student teachers at UBC. That’s where I
believe I’ve had the greatest impact. **Was this through the BCTF?** Yes. I initially pitched the idea to the union so that the BCTF would have some presence on campus. I had seen a National Education Association (NEA) promotional video that showed two new teachers driving by the NEA building asking “what do they do for me?” I thought a good way to gain access to student teachers before they became too overwhelmed with their jobs was to answer this question during their PDP year. They’ll notice the dues deduction quickly enough, so I figured we should let them know what they’re getting for it. The federation agreed and released me to work for a year at UBC with student teachers. We showed them the salary scale but they were less interested in their salary, health and welfare benefits than in how to get through the year. They were so focussed on survival in the classroom as opposed to survival as human beings, you know, having to pay the rent and pay off student loans. I was like that too as a student teacher. They wanted to know how the federation could help them with their teaching, so I brought a number of our lesson plans of a social responsibility nature. Years later, many of them have come back to thank me.

Teaching courses at UBC taught me that social justice is a burning issue for student teachers, but it seems that once they start teaching, social justice takes a back seat. Maybe they just lose some of that spark once they get into a school with the heaviness of the curriculum and provincial exams crashing down on them. It’s a different time now. I think the teaching force in some ways has taken on conservative elements because there’s declining enrolment and employers hold teachers over a barrel with job security. Your entry level today is through a teacher on call. I never did any teacher on call work to get a job. You walked into a classroom and it was yours for the rest of the year, but now you can be thrown off the list for being too critical. You just don’t get a continuing contract like we did in the 60s and 70s when things were booming.

I keep thinking, gee, we got away with so many things at the time. We were quite abrasive and shrill about a lot of the things we did early on. We lobbied people on these things, you know? When I think back, it could have cost us our job in some ways. In the 60s and 70s there was that real challenge that was happening. We were so bold when we started but we could be because there was so little being done in the area of social
responsibility that it was easier to figure out what to do. We really were stepping out and taking on the issues without a lot of support, but the times were conducive to changes that were happening in schools. We were becoming more aware of inequities. At the front end, we got away with an awful lot, I think. We were able to get lots of mileage out of our initiatives especially around racial discrimination and sexism in schools. Now there are so many community groups working on these issues that we need to do more groundwork before sticking ourselves into the middle of it. So, it’s not just about job security or conservatism in the new generation of teachers. I’ve become more cautious over the years too. For instance, I used to play a leadership role in the federation’s Program Against Racism. I just wouldn’t be qualified to do that now. Yeah, actually, I was surprised when you walked in. I didn’t expect you to be white. Mmm hmm.

_How did you become involved in PAR?_ In my early years as an administrative staff person in the PD division, I was known for my social responsibility work and was asked to be involved in the Program Against Racism. You’ve probably heard the story. A black teacher who was teaching in a suburb of Vancouver got up at an AGM and presented the motion. He didn’t even have a seconder for the motion. That’s how unprepared he was and I think he felt, I know him well, I think he felt that he’d present the motion but that the organization wasn’t ready for it and would never go this route. But because his motion was so powerful it was quickly seconded and voted upon and passed virtually unanimously. A task force was then struck to explore the issue of racism in schools.

One of the first things we knew we had to do once we had struck the task force on racism was to go out into the field and build awareness that racism was a problem in schools, not just a function of hot headed radicals at an AGM. We put together a slide presentation of the history of racism in BC. It was pretty grim, the overall impact. It outlined the treatment that Indo-Canadians received coming here in 1914 on the _Komagata Maru_, not being allowed to disembark from the ship, the treatment of First Nations people, the Chinese race riots, a whole litany of events have gone on in the province characterizing the degree of racism up to the present. Two school districts in the province banned the showing of it in the schools. They said it was a self-fulfilling prophecy, “if you talk about racism in schools, it is going to happen.” Well, the banning of that slide show was a
negative thing that resulted in a very positive outcome. It had an enormous impact. When you deny people access to a piece of information, it’s like the books being banned in Boston, it just took off and we could hardly keep up with the demand for it. So, the task force was useful in its own right, but what it said at the time about the teachers’ federation was that it was now a key place to address major social issues. It represented a clear demarcation. A line had been crossed over from those traditional areas of salary, bargaining, professional development and advocacy. In the early days of the program, during the 70s and 80s we were asked by senior administrators, journalists and even our own membership why we were involved in issues that seemed to be outside of our mandate. One of our presidents had the most effective response, I think. He asked “Well, why wouldn’t we be? Where else would you do it?” Little did we know at the time, of course that it would mushroom into the number of issues that we see in that whole gamut of social justice today. You know, there is a debate within the organization, which you’re going to find out about as you interview more people, about how to close the door on all these issues and why we can’t continue to focus on and do well fewer issues. I mean there are nine or ten that I’ve heard of. We’ve taken on the issue of gay and lesbian teachers, the whole issue of poverty, peace, the green movement, sexism, racism and many more. The Status of Women came first in 1972. The Program Against Racism came in 1975. The peace movement came in 83 or 84. And so it went. All of these programs were supported by Teachers’ Viewpoint, the left leaning caucus in the Federation…but I am getting ahead of myself. Where would you like me to start?

How about how you first become interested in social justice work? OK, I took political economy and history at UBC at a time of rising social consciousness and ferment. I had considered a career in law but developed an interest in social issues while at university and came out of it sort of wanting to do something where I would be able to change the world. It took me a year or so to realize that teaching might be a place where I would have the best chance to do that. Teaching appealed to me because of its social activist side. I liked school and thought it was a great avenue for influencing how decisions get made in people’s lives. I was influenced by Neil Postman’s book Teaching as a Subversive Activity which didn’t go into social responsibility issues directly but was a call for injecting critical thinking in schooling. Another book that had a big influence on me
was Saul Alinsky’s book *Rules for Radicals* which was sort of a primer for hell raising. Later in my career, Paulo Freire also shaped my thinking.

By the time I graduated I felt that I was ready to teach, but I found out fairly quickly that changing the world wasn’t going to be easy. You kind of have these lived experiences; I had two early on. The first was my difficulty as a teacher in the interior of the province getting the kids in my class to empathize with students who were fleeing persecution similar to the persecution their parents and grandparents had fled. Their overtly racist comments took me by surprise. I realized at the time that my teacher training had not prepared me to respond to the situation unfolding in my classroom. The second experience happened later on, after I got a job in the city and became president of the local association there. One of the younger woman teachers was pregnant and the school district wasn’t going to give her maternity leave. In those days they could do that. The employer’s approach was that she could go on sick leave, but that was laughable. She’s not sick, right? She’s pregnant. That was another one of those moments that I realized how prejudicial some practices were as far as women were concerned. I started looking into a bunch of others, the pension plan and seniority rules. There were no accommodations for women to recognize the different nature of their work. That incident made me realize that there was a real inequity here.

So, those were the two experiences that opened my eyes to social issues. I grew up in a multicultural city, so I was used to diversity, but I had come from a lot of privilege, right? I’m male, grew up in Vancouver, west side, white, heterosexual. I don’t really have any barriers, any hurdles to jump. I never personally experienced any kind of discrimination, so I wasn’t prepared to deal with the racism that broke out in the classroom, or the occupational discrimination faced by women teachers. Once I realized that I needed to learn more about these issues, I became involved in the professional development committee of my local. I also volunteered to be the editor of a teachers’ monthly newsletter. It was quite an eye-opener for me because I came to see a document that goes into every teacher’s letter box as a powerful organizational tool, a vehicle of opinion and influence. I learned about the power of networks. If you had access to networks like these across the district, you could start to bring about change as teachers.
Once I got more deeply involved in my local association, I learned that there was a whole life for teachers outside of the classroom. Going to meetings at the local association, you start to pick up on the disparities that exist within the profession in terms of power and decision making. The administrators had so much more power and influence with elected school trustees than the teachers even though there were far more teachers. The principals were part of the federation and our local association at the time. So, you quickly saw that union decisions came down in their favour. You’d be at a meeting and the principal of your school might happen to be there and would speak to an issue and it became at times difficult to challenge that because they were seen as your boss. They had the power to put you on probation or to make your contract a term contract. We had very few rights, but the rights we had were to negotiate salaries and benefits so it served to silence a lot of teachers. It started to occur to a lot of teachers, certainly me included, that administrators had too much power and the thing we needed to do was organize ourselves to challenge them at meetings.

We eventually organized ourselves provincially under the name “Teachers’ Viewpoint.” We chose that name because we believed we needed a teachers’ rather than a principal’s viewpoint on working and learning in schools. We communicated with teachers in other locals and collectively crafted a motion at the 1977 AGM to have a labour history committee. It was defeated because principals were a part of the federation and they didn’t think that labour history was part of what we should be about. We were disappointed that the motion didn’t pass but there was a larger issue at play. We thought it was undemocratic for principals who constituted a minority of the membership to dictate to the majority. By coming together at the provincial level and crafting a motion, even one that didn’t pass, we were able to make a statement. From that point on we became the official opposition within the federation. We ran candidates, communicated with one another across locals and were successful in electing teachers to federation leadership. We also managed to increase our representation on staff, bring in temporary contracts and secure equal pay for teachers and administrators who were doing the same work within the federation.
It sounds like you were quite successful, especially since I am still hearing about Teachers’ Viewpoint three decades later. Yes, well I think that’s evidence of the power of the caucuses. A year before principals were removed from the federation some members of Viewpoint formed a splinter group called Teachers for a United Federation. TUF emerged in response to government legislation in 1987 that made us into a union. They grew by attracting previously unaffiliated teachers in more conservative locals. What makes a local conservative? I think it is a reflection of the membership, the history of the local and the extent to which union leadership is recognized as a stepping stone to school administration.

Did you ever work as a school administrator? No, but after teaching for a few years I found a teaching post in the city. My second local was also affiliated with Viewpoint, so I found it easy to remain involved. I chaired the local learning and working conditions committee. We did surveys of teachers’ working conditions in the district and published the outcomes. The early social issue programs at the federation were done locally through working and learning conditions where we started to expose the inequities that exist in the school system—racism, sexism, class bias, the curriculum inadequacies and the lack of resources for certain students. We didn’t use the term “social justice” in the 60s and 70s. We spoke of “social responsibility” which tied the issue back into learning conditions. The whole thrust of learning and working conditions was to create better learning conditions for kids and better working conditions for teachers. To get to that you had to look at SES factors because the only socially responsible way to teach was to consider the socio-economic factors making it harder for kids to learn and for teachers to teach. We called this work “social responsibility.” It’s not that we rejected the word “social justice,” it just wasn’t used. Working and learning conditions was our Trojan horse, if you like, the way we could get in and talk about those issues.

Get in? Yes. There were those within the federation who referred to what we were doing as “social engineering.” While the federation is today looked upon as a social justice union, it has always had it’s detractors within. It’s not like everybody embraced it and said, “Oh, now we’re a social justice union. We’ve seen the light! Take us forward. I believe. I believe!” The conservative voice within the federation said we shouldn’t deal
with social issues. We had to present the arguments carefully so as not to sound shrill or alienate the membership. One of the things we did early on was to commission a firm to identify greater needs schools using Stats Can’s SES maps. We had huge maps for every district in the province where we could see inequities at a glance. It was a very graphic way to make a point. Teacher advocacy has always been viewed as the traditional role of a union in a narrow sense. You know, that when teachers get themselves into a glue they turn to the union. But, our analysis of the SES maps showed us that these were not teachers or students who had done anything wrong. They were simply working and learning in difficult situations. By linking working and learning conditions to resource discrepancies we could connect social responsibility issues to the traditional work of the union.

After a few years as local association President, I was encouraged to run for provincial executive. I was reluctant to leave my classroom but I did it because I thought I might be able to accomplish more at a provincial level. I was elected as Member at Large, then Vice President and I eventually became BCTF President. I then returned to the classroom. After a year of teaching, I applied for a temporary administrative staff posting. Once it was up, I was asked to stay on and was given a permanent contract. I remained on staff until my retirement a few years ago. *Were you always involved in Professional Development?* Mostly, but not exclusively; I started in Working and Learning Conditions then moved to Professional Development. I also worked in Bargaining for a while. *What was the climate for social justice issues in Bargaining compared to that in PD?* Professional Development and Bargaining are a world apart when it comes to social justice. The PD division, which is now called PSID to account for social issues, is the Federation’s home for social justice, whereas in Bargaining there tends to be a bit of breathing space from social issues. Professional Development is more of a natural home for social justice. Not everybody in the division does it but our social justice programs have a heavy professional development focus. They teach progressive methodologies and raise the consciousness of teachers about the issues.

PSID is the Federation’s notion of a social justice union. You’ve probably heard that expression quite a bit. *Yes, I’ve heard the expression but I’ve also heard that the whole*
federation is a social justice union. I’m not sure that’s true. I’d like it to be true but in Bargaining, as I said, there has always been some breathing room from social justice.

What made you switch from PD to Bargaining? Bargaining work was exciting because of the energetic activity related to our achievement of full bargaining rights. Many people got swept up in that work. So you were moving toward bargaining rather than away from social justice? Yes, but I also learned something about my own limitations. In early days it was easier to do social responsibility work because the racism and sexism was so in your face. It was so obvious. It is much subtler now and our programs are not as effective as they were when we began. Our approach has changed over the years. At first we attempted to improve working and learning conditions by better understanding the impact of socio-economic status on teaching and learning; then we worked on feminist and anti-racist professional development and anti-discrimination work because it became obvious that those issues needed to be addressed, and now we seem to be talking about identity.

What brought on the most recent shift? That’s a long story that mostly has to do with a change in leadership at the federation. TUF came to power in 1987 over a divisive legislative decision. The government of the day came up with a mechanism for individual teachers and locals to opt out of collective bargaining because they knew we were about to win the right to bargain legally at the Supreme Court level. They forced every teacher in the province to decide whether he or she wanted to be a member of a professional association or a local union. In Viewpoint we saw ourselves as professionals AND workers and resented the requirement to choose one dimension of our identity over the other so we began to communicate the advantages of collective bargaining to all locals. TUF wanted to gain control of the federation, so they argued that our collective education strategy was undemocratic. In the end, all locals chose union, but TUF gained control of the federation. Their campaign appealed to teachers in the political centre who saw themselves as professionals, not workers, and to socially conservative teachers who were looking for a way to cut spending on the two discrete social responsibility programs. TUF remained in power for the next 12 years.

How is this related to the change in social justice models? Over their 12 years in office, TUF slowly drained funding and support from Viewpoint initiatives like the Status of
Women program and Program Against Racism. Their main target was SW because they saw it as the “stalking horse” for our opposition Viewpoint caucus. Many SW activists had become active in the caucus and were able to rise to leadership and prominence. Partly because of this power, the program was seen as a threat by some of the more conservative male activists in the federation. As a staff member on permanent contract, I was no longer a Viewpoint activist so I could not advocate for the social justice programs, but I tried to be as supportive as possible behind the scenes. Still, the coordinators of both programs experienced a great deal of isolation. After 12 years of struggle under TUF leadership, the two discrete social justice programs were cut. Interestingly the cutting of these programs marked the moment we started as a federation to call what we were doing, “Social Justice.”

And this happened because of the struggles between caucuses? Partly that but it was also a budgetary issue. Two new social justice groups, Aboriginal Education and H&H, Homophobia and Heterosexism had become active and energized at the 1997 AGM and the executive started freaking out because of the negative media attention and the costs. The Aboriginal education group got support because they went the route of being an education program whose primary concerns were more traditionally and typically within the concerns of a union, you know employment rights for Aboriginal teachers, hiring of Aboriginal teachers and training of Aboriginal teachers. The H&H group, on the other hand, went the route of social justice, and as a result they were placed under a social justice umbrella with SW, anti-racism and anti-poverty. Did homophobia have a role to play in this placement? Internally, not much; the H&H program was supported by teachers since homophobia was exercised repeatedly, daily, hourly in schools and was a source of a lot of bullying, but the community went completely nuts, particularly the fundamentalist church community. The place was just inundated. We had to hire extra staff to answer the telephones. There were two threats on the building. The Christians were going to bomb it.

31 According to Wikipedia (January 8, 2010) a “stalking horse is a person who mounts a challenge on behalf of an anonymous, more powerful third party.”
According to TUF, this got members worried about safety and costs. The leadership then used the ideas of safety and cost to rationalize their decision to cut the two discrete programs and place them along with H&H under an umbrella. They figured this would keep the costs under control and have the added benefit of squeezing programs and networks that fed the opposition. *OK, so that’s how they rationalized it but how did they come up with the idea of an integrated umbrella model?* Well, after the 1997 AGM when a task force was passed for Aboriginal Education and H&H and the executive started worrying about costs, the President and Vice Presidents approached a few staff to ask about alternative models. I regret it now for a variety of reasons but when the president came to talk to me, I described a community development model I had learned about in some of my earlier activist work. My work taught me about the integrated nature of all these issues, that poverty is really connected to women’s issues is really connected to sexual minority questions and that there are overlapping issues in all of these discrete concerns. I didn’t suggest the idea of an umbrella structure or the abolition of the networks and discrete programs, but I thought we could learn from the work of Paulo Freire and take a popular education approach rooted in the lived realities of local communities. I believed this would allow organized teachers to connect with students, parents and community activists beyond prudential concerns.

Another reason I initially thought an integrated social justice program might work is that teachers are generalists. Our intentions are good but most of the social justice stuff we do is sort of boiler plate activism. *What does that mean?* You take an old cast iron boiler and put bronze on it. It’s still a cast iron boiler. It’s just got bronze on it. *What does that say about the BCTF as a social justice union?* We do better than most but I don’t think we’re set up that way. The BCTF is good in opposition. In the late 1980s, for example, a Social Credit Premier removed principals from the federation, made unreasonable cuts without consultation, eliminated human rights legislation and cut collective agreements. We couldn’t have structured a crisis better than what he did! It gave us some victories. On the other hand, when it comes to an issue like social justice, the correct path is less obvious. We are not fighting against a common enemy. We’re trying to make decisions about something teachers think about in different ways. Social justice work needs to happen in collaboration with others, but it can be hard to work collaboratively when people don’t
agree about what should be done. Coming to consensus can be especially difficult when people with different commitments are expected to work together in a single committee staffed by a 1.0 staff position shared by two Professional Development staff with other time consuming responsibilities for their remaining, 0.5.

Also, however supportive the federation may be of social justice, it very legitimately has other priorities related to teaches’ welfare, and is structured to meet those priorities. Recently, the provincially legislated change in bargaining structure, centralization of federation governance to accommodate this change and increased focus on campaigns has left the federation in a perpetual crisis mode. The problem with continual crisis is that social justice resources are forever being redirected. They are not completely abolished but they become a secondary or tertiary priority. Social justice activism seems to be an uphill battle in the federation. Well, yes. As I have told many of my friends, retirement was a good decision! It was a good time to leave. I wanted to go out upright rather than in a gurney.

You have had such an active career. How is retirement treating you? It is treating me well, but I don’t want to give you the wrong impression. I really am appreciative of everything the federation has done for me. Over the last four decades, I have learned important organizing strategies, had relative autonomy to shape my work, gained life long friends and colleagues, worked with at least two generations of teachers and witnessed a great deal of positive change in schools and my organization. It has been a rewarding career and I continue to care about what will happen next.

4.2 Perspective 2, Teachers for a United Federation:
Managing the Cost of Social Justice

This was the only cost efficient way to recognize the integrated nature of oppression and to redirect resources from a few provincial staff to our diverse membership.

I am a teacher. I have been a teacher for many years and whether or not I am in the classroom at any moment, I am a teacher still. Most BCTF activists grew up as lefties or as red diaper babies. That just wasn’t my experience. I grew up middle class or even wealthy really. I understand that now but didn’t understand it as a child or a teenager. My
world was one of family and friends who were pretty much middle class. My parents took me to see aunts, uncles and cousins, not the world. One of my cousins reminded me year after year that “they can take everything away from you except what you learn”—so I learned. *I’ve heard that from family too.* Yeah, I think it’s a common sentiment among survivors. I’m a history buff and considered becoming a lawyer but teaching has always been my passion. I am a teacher not a unionist. *Really? but you’ve spent so much of your life in the union.* Yes, but I’ve done it from the perspective of a teacher not a politician. I started teaching in my mid twenties and more than three decades later I am a teacher still.

My story of BCTF involvement is a long one but not a typical one. I seem to be a dissident in the federation right now. I consider myself, well in every other universe I am a left winger, but in the federation I’m an arch conservative. It was never my intention to become union active but I got swept up in the excitement of it all. At first I just wanted to improve my craft. My focus, like that of most new teachers, was on my self. I worked to gain confidence in the classroom—preparing to teach, teaching and assessing student achievement. Once I had mastered the curriculum I started to focus more on the students and got involved in developing curriculum. The BCTF contacted me because of some of the anti-racist work I was doing in the community, deprogramming students whose teacher had taught them to hate. I was never formally involved in the Program Against Racism but I did conduct a number of professional development workshops for teachers during the summer conference.

I never worked as a staff rep. It just wasn’t a very important position. I was what you might call an informal leader rather than formal leader. I talk a lot. I was the guy at my school who would stand up and speak my mind. I was known as someone who when somebody was in trouble in my school, I was an advocate for them. I went to local union meetings and spoke up but did not by any means consider myself something other than a rank and file member of the federation. *So, how did you get more formally involved?* I was happily teaching in my classroom when I got a call from the former president of my local. She was no longer interested in doing the job and asked if I would be willing to do it. I strenuously objected to the overture. *Why?* I liked teaching. I just couldn’t conceive of myself as doing anything other than going into my classroom every day and teaching
but she put some pressure on me. She got the incoming president of the federation who I didn’t know to call me and say “we think you’d be a fine leader.” I said, “you don’t know who I am, who told you to call me? Leave me alone.” Well, long and short I was persuaded to do it so I left the classroom and worked as a local president. To tell you the truth, I was not entirely even appreciative of what my union did for me behind the scenes. My story is a rather unusual one from a federation perspective. How so? It was a rather rapid and inexplicable ascent. I didn’t seek out postings or apply for jobs and as I said I was never a staff rep. It seemed people just called me and convinced me to take on new leadership roles. I worked as a local president, had a brief term on administrative staff, went back to the classroom, had a few terms on provincial executive and returned to my work as a teacher and local president.

By the time I took the first local president job it was full time release. I missed the leadership training in the summer because I was involved in a community based education program that took me abroad but I did attend meetings during the year. On April 4, 1987 I was called to a meeting at the BCTF to hear the enunciation of Bills 19 and 20 which made us a union. It was an exciting time. I got swept up in the early stages of us changing our sense of who we were both as individual teachers and as an organization. Until then, I hadn’t thought about the structural limitations on our rights and the implications of our rights for how we taught, for the kids we taught and for a larger society and the conditions that would make this possible.

Bills 19 and 20 made us a union but the legislation wasn’t simple. It said each of the 76 locals could be a union with the right to strike and bargain collectively or a professional association with no right to strike and no bargaining rights. What the government of the day counted on was that the majority of teachers would not see themselves as union members, that they would rather be in a more paternalistic relationship with their employer than contaminate themselves with the union image. They were wrong in the end because 99.9% of members chose union but two debates broke out in the federation. One was do we become a union? That was a no-brainer when everyone looked at the full scope bargaining versus no right to bargain or strike but the second question caused a rift within the federation. We didn’t know at the time that everybody would unionize so in
the year or so it would take for people to exercise their choice a debate broke out about whether we would be a union of unions or embrace both those locals which chose to unionise and those which chose to be associations.

Like every other organizational divide, it occurred along party lines. Officially, the BCTF does not have political parties or caucuses. In fact, BCTF policy bans the use of federation resources for internal partisanship, but there have been two major caucuses within my tenure that have functioned as vehicles for internal organizational decision making. The one I was involved in no longer exists and the other one has recently reinvented itself to regain control of the federation but the internal political party process lives on. At the time of Bill 19 and 20 the two parties battling for power were called Teachers for a United Federation and Teachers’ Viewpoint or as a friend of mine called them—the left and the loony left. TUF supported the idea of an umbrella union that would include all teachers since we believed it was more important to be a unitary teachers’ body than it was to have a common ideology or nature. Teachers’ Viewpoint was in power. They had been around for a long time, since the mid 70s, and they were identified as the more progressive or left faction of the federation. They said “no. If you’re not a union, you can’t belong to the BCTF.” They didn’t have a contingency plan. They simply argued that local presidents and activists should conduct an intensive education campaign to ensure that all 76 locals chose union. The more pragmatic of us in smaller conservative locals worried that if our members chose association, we would no longer be part of the BCTF. We argued that we should prepare for the vote by changing our constitution to embrace all locals, those that chose union and those that chose association. We broke off from Viewpoint over this debate about what kind of organization we would be, a union of unions or an umbrella organization of unions and associations. That’s how we got our name. More than anything else we wanted to keep local teachers united at a provincial level. So Teachers’ Viewpoint wasn’t interested in uniting teachers? They said “we only want…” They forced the will of the majority of teachers who wanted to make their own decisions.

You’ve probably figured this out by now but caucuses are very powerful. Of course, the average teacher knows nothing about them. In fact, most members carry out their daily
work oblivious to the federation’s existence. I was a table officer in a very conservative local in a district where most teachers are wives of executives and lawyers. I knew how important it was for us to remain part of the federation but I wasn’t sure that our local would vote union. I was an advocate for bargaining rights and the right to strike but I worried that my membership would be enticed by the promise of professionalism. So, before I knew it I became heavily involved in TUF and the struggle to keep us united as a federation. In the end, local leaders across caucus lines participated in an enthusiastic membership education drive promoting the merits of collective bargaining and the right to strike which resulted, as I said, in all locals choosing union. So what kept the caucuses going once the debate over a union of unions or umbrella union was resolved? Internal politics. Teachers’ Viewpoint wasn’t happy about losing control of the federation.

You might wonder why I am telling you this. Well, I can’t answer your question about social justice without talking about the caucuses. They are the most salient organizational factor for all internal decision making. Viewpoint lost control of the federation in 1987 because of their approach to Bills 19 and 20. Their single minded advocacy for a union of unions rather than an umbrella organization angered many members of the smaller, more conservative locals who felt their democratic rights were being taken away by the organization that was supposed to represent them.

As a TUF activist, my union involvement increased as a result of my caucus gaining control of the federation. Officially, administrative staff are supposed to be neutral but I was hired because I was a TUF activist. Sometimes we hired people from the other side but ultimately it was a patronage system. It still is. Half of the people who work in this building right now are our former adversaries on the floors of AGMs. They’re all great people. We all get along really well as friends but we stand on opposite sides of federation debates. You might think that this friendly opposition of teacher activists and even staff allows for increased democracy since members vote for the executive at the Annual General Meeting, but you have to keep in mind that these are not just average teachers. They are 700 to 800 local leaders, staff representatives and activists—people who know the union well. They look to their local leaders to vote. Their leaders invite them to hear the issues of the day and then instruct them on how to vote. One thing they
vote on is the composition of the incoming executive, the President, the first Vice
President, the second Vice President and 8 Members at Large. The caucus with at least 6
out of 11 executive members controls the federation and drives human resource and
budgetary decisions.

Administrative staff jobs are posted, teacher activists apply, their names go to the
executive, they are interviewed and the vote happens by secret ballot in an executive
meeting. When Viewpoint is in control, they favour Viewpoint activists. When TUF is in
control, we favour TUF activists. This was never a problem because it used to be
understood that people came on staff from political backgrounds and then became
apolitical. *Is that an official policy?* No, but it was understood that in exchange for the
privileges of a high salary, great benefits and tremendous job flexibility, staff would
agree to be neutral and abstain from political activity. *How can former caucus activists
become neutral or abstain from political activity?* They can refrain from influencing
executive decisions. Anyway, that tradition ended once Viewpoint, reinvented as
“Coalition” regained power. They simply started employing people whose politics ran so
deep that they could no longer abstain from political work. Unfortunately, the leadership
of the day tolerates that.

At the time of my early federation involvement, though, staff still abided by the tradition
of apolitical work. I was very active for the 12 years TUF was in power. I had a brief
tenure on staff and spent the remainder of the time in my classroom, local executive, and
provincial executive as a Member at Large. Our party’s demise in 1999 brought about an
end to my provincial involvement outside of AGM attendance, but I have continued to
teach and be involved in my local.

*What brought about the change in leadership?* Well, it happened a year after our
membership passed a motion to replace two discrete social programs with a more
inclusive and integrated umbrella structure. *Umbrella again?* Yes, except instead of
including all teachers in the federation regardless of labour affinity, we integrated all
social justice issues into a single, cohesive committee. Our motion was perceived as an
attack on social justice. TUF was not soft on social justice issues but Viewpoint activists
thought we were. We were in favour of social justice, but we wanted to bring resources to
the community and integrate a range of issues into a new structure that would honour all
forms of justice. We thought the discrete social justice programs had done good work, but
we were concerned that the networks affiliated with these programs were being used to
fuel the opposition Viewpoint caucus.

Viewpoint was in charge of the internal social justice programs—the Status of Women
and the Program Against Racism. Each program had a staff person in charge of co-
ordinating the network and each network included representatives in every district and in
some cases local representatives in the schools. This was great for increasing the
involvement of local teachers in the federation, particularly women, but the structure had
evolved into a network of political opposition within the federation. The discrete
programs were no longer focused on serving the social issues of the day. What were they
focussed on? Mostly campaigning for Viewpoint. Viewpoint had run the federation until
1987 when they lost the debate about whether we would be a union of unions or an
umbrella of unions and associations. They lost by a 65% to 35% margin and were very
unhappy about it so they used their network of activist supporters to regain control.

We believed the SW and PAR networks were good to the extent that they facilitated
federation involvement of teacher activists concerned with social issues and we
recognized that these programs brought about a number of important changes for women
and girls, but we had a problem with the fact that more federation resources were going
to meetings that were largely political in nature than to the broader community. There
had been excellent work done by SW and PAR in developing multicultural teaching
materials and promoting women in science and leadership, and once we gained collective
bargaining rights, we had a program called Women In Negotiations that did really
important work. Really, there were some tremendous programs in the 70s and 80s, but by
the late 1980s we thought it was largely a political opposition group and we thought for
all the resources that were now going into it, the positive effects should at least be spread
out to the community.
We as teachers bring tremendous organizational skills into the arena of social justice and social activism and our executive thought we should be using our skills as teachers and as organizers to actually work in communities, to actually take on, not theoretically and not just in curriculum but take on in communities, the issues that we care about and we know effect the students who come into our classes. So, after speaking to a few staff and teacher activists, we came up with the idea of an umbrella structure with a streamlined committee that would embrace all social justice causes without a lot of staff resources. One or two people on staff would support that committee in addition to doing other work, but most of the resources would go to supporting projects in communities that addressed poverty, violence, racism, gender equity, Aboriginal issues and homophobia. We tried to take about a third of the money, it was about $700,000 in those days, we tried to take a third of the money which had gone to committee meetings and say, “this is a pool that’s there. If you’ve got an idea, we have the resources,” you know? There are two books. I haven’t seen them in a long time but for two years we published booklets that highlighted these projects. There was a fire that burned down a First Nations meeting house or long house near Kamloops. We helped them rebuild it. We were helping people in inner cities establish day care which didn’t exist. The BCTF was helping people in communities.

Two things guided our feelings about the nature of those programs. The first, as I mentioned, was our concern about the use of networks as an opposition caucus. The second was that our definition of need and focus had changed dramatically since the late 1960s when both the Status of Women and Program Against Racism first emerged. We had added to the list of social issues that teachers had concerns in, issues like poverty, violence, the failure of First Nations students in public schools. Homophobia was just emerging at the time as an issue. So, we had three programs which had the lion’s share of the resources for social justice, the Status of Women, the Program Against Racism and a smaller program focusing on children’s rights. Then we had other groups who said, “We have issues which effect kids and society too. Where do we fit in?” The Status of Women and Program Against Racism said, “We’ll look after you. We’ll absorb you in our programs.” But we thought that was unsatisfactory. Well, if you were someone interested in violence against women, fine, but even with violence against women, there are issues, time, circumstances, racism and poverty that all play a role. These issues
don’t exist in discrete silos and we thought there was a need to have discussion across social issues. But the Status of Women advocates in particular did not want to discuss the issues. There was no space for critical dialogue with them. More resources were going to teachers, staff and meetings than to students and the community.

*OK, but didn’t SW and PAR networks also connect to the community?* They could have, but they didn’t. They networked inside. They were caught up in the political split in the federation. The Status of Women activists were opposed to Teachers for a United Federation. *Why?* Well, it comes back to ideology. In my view both caucuses are progressive but Teachers’ Viewpoint takes a much more ideological position on almost everything and so did the Status of Women activists. Viewpoint fights every battle and their view is that it’s better to go to bed believing they stuck by their guns and principles than to have actually negotiated a change in anything. They would argue that we are weak people who surrender our principles and sit down with the devil. *These are pretty extreme characterizations.* Well.

*Did TUF and Viewpoint ever converge on social justice issues?* Yeah, we had other models within the federation that were working well for people in both caucuses, so we thought it would be a good idea to build on them. We had the Ed May Social Responsibility fund that supported the activist work of teachers in locals through individual grants and we had a very successful International Solidarity program. The International Solidarity program involved, and still does involve, teacher activists from both caucuses. It experiences little opposition within the federation. Its successes are reported to teachers without challenging their ability to do their work in the classroom and without making them feel less confident about their abilities to teach. We as Canadians are so privileged, so what member can deny our responsibility to reach out to teachers in South America, Southern Africa, and Cuba with far fewer financial resources available to them? That’s why there is so little opposition to the International Solidarity program. It helps, of course that it is a stand alone program led by a powerful and venerable figure. It also helps that he does not have to fight for his budget every year. But the reason he doesn’t have to fight is because of the strength and inclusive nature of the model. Members of both caucuses trust him to do good work.
So TUF wondered why we couldn’t do the same kind of work through our internal social justice programs. Teachers in British Columbia are more privileged than the average resident of the province. Why couldn’t we support work done in the community through local social justice grants? Why not just take the tremendous resources available to the Status of Women and Program Against Racism and put them into the local grant program? We could still have a staff member allocated to co-ordinating an advisory committee and the advisory committee could still advise the executive on social justice issues in the federation as they arose. We weren’t set on a particular structure and we would have been open to negotiation if the umbrella structure had been tried and failed, but we knew we wanted to redirect resources that were funnelled into partisan meetings aimed at removing us from power.

So, we consulted with teacher activists and staff from both caucuses and then brought forward a motion to the 1998 AGM to restructure social justice programming from discrete programs with networks to a provincial umbrella committee with local grants. We also supported the creation of an Aboriginal Education program following an internal task force on the issue because the data says Aboriginal kids are the only ones falling off the end of the world. Of course there are other issues but we have laid a pretty good blueprint for working on them. The legacy of the relationship between Aboriginal communities and the government is unlike any other community-government relationship, especially in BC where the violent uprooting of Aboriginal culture was more sudden than in the rest of Canada.

So, we put forward two important social justice motions at the 1998 AGM. The first proposed that we replace the three discrete programs with an integrated social justice umbrella committee and local grant structure and the second proposed that we initiate a program on Aboriginal Education. Both motions passed; the first one very narrowly. The year following the AGM, Viewpoint reinvented themselves as “Coalition” and regained control of the federation. TUF no longer exists though some former activists are now running as independents. *So, from your perspective Coalition is not actually a coalition of the two caucuses but just a re-articulation of Viewpoint?* It’s Viewpoint having absorbed former TUF locals because of the issue of amalgamation. In ‘95 or ‘96
the provincial government, like in Ontario, decided to amalgamate school districts. A BCTF by-law said that when districts amalgamate, locals will also amalgamate. It made sense to amalgamate locals that were all going to have the same employer, so we followed the by-law and tried unsuccessfully to amalgamate districts. We actually still have locals with 27 or 100 members and a full time president. Half the secondary schools in the province employ more members than that. But the federation is run by politics not rationality. Much of our support had come from small locals that were slated for amalgamation, so Viewpoint reinvented themselves as the Coalition for Change and promised to support local autonomy. It was a very successful strategy. Twelve locals changed sides and Coalition ascended to power.

So, the change in leadership was not exclusively a social justice issue. No, but redirecting resources from the discrete programs and networks to the umbrella energized our political opposition. Amalgamation on its own would not have engaged as many activists. It only affected 12 out of 76 locals. There were multiple organizational factors leading to our demise. The federation can be a rigid place, an unforgiving place, a place where politics, ideology and loyalty to process take precedence over negotiation, compromise and a consideration of results. There is little space for an individual and little regard for the external context. But it seems to me that the external policy context elicited the most salient internal debates—Bills 19 and 20 that turned you into a union, the move from local to provincial bargaining and provincial amalgamation of school districts. Well yes, TUF took government legislation into account because we knew it was important to have good relationships with people in power who could hurt our membership, but Viewpoint responded solely to internal pressures.

Have you been union-involved much since 99? Yeah, but more at a local level. After the demise of TUF, I was content to return to my classroom and my local, to attend AGMs when they happened and to participate in critical federation debate when I felt strongly about an issue. As a local President, I have been able to provide support for teacher members working in classrooms. Looking back, I’ve realized it’s what I do best. I am not a politician. I’m a teacher. Teaching is hard work and people’s lives are difficult. As a local president, I can make sure they don’t drown in professional and family obligations.
I can also support their aspirations to be union involved by helping them navigate federation structures. I have told teachers in my local and I will tell you now that the federation can be a rigid, unforgiving, political place but at its best, federation work translates into things teachers do in their classrooms and communities. I think that’s a powerful force. I am a teacher and the classroom is the world I know best. It’s the world in which I understand how influence happens. So, when social justice is exercised through the union and it results in developing a curriculum or change in policy where teachers can use their books to talk about same sex marriage in a kindergarten class, for example, it is a powerful force. TUF’s impact was less enduring than I initially thought it would be. About a decade ago, I believed our caucus could reform the federation and help us make informed decisions in response to external social and political factors. A decade later, no new teacher knows who we are or what we did and bit by bit the federation is creeping back to the discrete program model. It disappoints me that they did not give the community grant program a serious try, but I can’t go back. Even if I could be elected as an independent Member at Large and put pressure on the Executive Committee to give the umbrella model another chance, I could not return to provincial executive work. Why not? I just can’t think about managing on a provincial scale right now.

In spite of the challenges I have faced over the years, I believe the strengths of the federation as a social justice organization outweigh its weaknesses. At its best, the BCTF offers a link between the resources of the union and a localized teaching environment that is quite amenable to influence. On this level, all teachers can participate in social justice work. Education is the only institution that we have whose primary purpose is to ameliorate the differences between the most privileged and the worst off. At the same time, it is forever under attack, like for instance with the latest high stakes testing regime. As teachers, our capacity to forge the incredible challenge of a democratic, tolerant society is facilitated by a union whose resources can be directed to at least two causes: the support of teachers’ social justice efforts in their classrooms and communities and the reduction of strains placed on teachers by external forces. It is too bad that these two causes are clouded by political infighting. We have always been committed as an
organization to doing this important work, but we cannot, it seems, prevent ourselves from emulating politicians in our fight for control of our own organization.

4.3 Perspective 3, Feminist Fossils: Women Beware Men from the Left!

The right wing caucus within the federation slowly starved us then cut us off at the knees to punish us for opposing their election. Enough friends from the left wing caucus stood quietly by to let it happen. It seems few people can deal with powerful union-active women who do not always do as they are told.

Are you kidding Cindy? Of course I consider myself to be a social justice activist. Just before we start, though, I have to apologize in advance. I just read a transcript of my interview with another person and I can’t believe how inarticulate I am! Well, I think people always feel inarticulate when reading transcripts. We’re more used to reading prose. Yes, I guess so. Well, just so you know, I tend to diverge. I start one place and then I move to another and then I come back, so sorry in advance, sorry. I think career histories can be like that, not really linear. As an aside, though, the only people who have apologized to me for anything so far have been women. Isn’t that funny? I guess that’s not so unusual. So what can I say about social justice activism at the BCTF? Well, it used to be a lot more fun, Cindy. We used to have fun. We used to have a lot of fun.

So, let’s see. Where to begin? How about how you decided to go into teaching? OK. I knew I was going to be a teacher from the time I was in junior high school. I had a great English teacher in grade nine. She was open, warm, friendly, stimulating, smart and engaging. I thought about her work, not only as my teacher, but also as a living example of what I might become. I guess it was role modeling. Here was a woman who behaved in ways that worked for me. Another factor was my parents’ desire, well, my mothers’ in particular, for my sisters and I to go to university. My grandmother was denied university and so that was a permeating issue through the family. “You must go to school. You must get a degree.” And of course in those days the options were teaching and nursing. That’s what women did. If we wanted to work outside of the home, we could become teachers or nurses.
So, I went to university with the intention of becoming a teacher. It was expensive but the credentialing process for teaching was more affordable than for other professions. You could take courses and finish your degree in the summer and through correspondence while you were teaching. It wasn’t too difficult to find a job when I began. I went to university for two years and then began teaching elementary school. In retrospect, it was a good decision. I am entirely suited to being a teacher. It is the most wonderful career I could have chosen. What do you like about it? It works for me and I work for it. I discovered in my adulthood that I have a lot of energy. I am able to start one stream and if somebody throws something at me, I am quite happy to go in a different direction, always keeping the big picture in mind. Teaching is fun. Kids are fun. They’re funny, smart, complicated and fun. Every single day is a challenge, so what better way to get out of bed every morning than to do this?

Quite honestly I had no thoughts about the BCTF when I first started teaching. It wasn’t a union of course at that time. It was only an association, but I attended the meetings. I sort of fell into union work. I was a staff rep because the teacher I was hired to replace had been the staff rep at the school. On my first day I was told “Since Allison was staff rep, I guess you are too.” So, I went to meetings. I eventually became quite involved but my first experience of a local union meeting was not great. I was really confused by the process and I didn’t really attach to the issues, except things like class size. But even with class size, I totally misunderstood. For example, the BCTF had a members’ guide that took you through the numbers. I read it like a collective agreement. I was refusing to take the 26th kid in my class because the BCTF’s ideal number was 25. I was very naive about the whole thing, but I kept going to meetings.

Fairly early on a teacher at my school told me about the Status of Women committee at the local. I don’t know that I’ve always been a feminist, but I do remember that when I first started teaching in the early to mid 70s, I was appalled by the dress code. Female teachers couldn’t wear pants or open toed shoes and there was no maternity leave at that time. Can you believe it? It was ridiculous! I was changing my clothes repeatedly every day! The teacher who invited me to join the SW committee said it sounded just like me. I had been feeling all of these things on my own in small ways and was looking forward to
being with other women and maybe start looking at the issues in a broader more systemic way than just within my classroom or school. I enjoyed the group so I got involved. We had monthly meetings and what was really great was that at every meeting we did something. We didn’t just do business and talk about the typical minutes taken from the last meeting. We had a plan to do something for International Women’s Day or whatever it was. We always had a film, in those days there were films, or a speaker. Often we would read about the issues. There was always a PD element to it and in fact it was win, win, win because I was able to use some of that in my teaching. It was really fun. The kids loved it too.

So you became active after the Status of Women program had already been established?

Yeah, but a friend of mine was involved in its genesis. She was part of an informal group of women who called themselves WIT, Women In Teaching. You should interview her. I’ll give you her number. OK, thanks. She started teaching a few years before me and is now retired, but we’re in touch. Actually, I’m still friends with many of the women I’ve met through this program. I can give you some of their numbers if you’d like. Anyway, this one friend of mine joined WIT in 1969. It was part support group, part study group and part activist group. WIT made a presentation to the BCTF executive in 1971 as a result of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. My friend knew one of the executive members because they taught in the same district. He was a lefty teacher and he helped appoint her to chair a task force on the Status of Women in education.

Task forces are interesting. It seems to be the federation’s way of pausing when faced with pressure from internal social movements. The executive appoints a staff member and group of teacher activists to study the issue for a year and then the group reports back to the membership. It is a very rational, male way of doing things and the concept of appointments is just so hierarchical, but my friend was only in her fourth year of teaching and was impressed that the executive did not immediately turn the group of young feminist teachers away. She quickly became less impressed while trying to chair the task force. There were men on it who resisted almost all of her suggestions. They told her that she couldn’t look at teaching or counselling practices because that would be offensive to
teachers. Can you believe it? There were some women appointed to the task force but they were not feminist.

She was distressed with the final report so a few women from WIT suggested that she write a minority report and take that to the executive. What's a minority report? That’s what she wanted to know. She had never heard of such a thing but trusted her friends and followed their advice. It worked out in the end. The committee was angry with her but they knew she did it innocently and so the executive accepted the report. They disbanded the task force and struck a new one with four feminists on it. Together, this new group read the Royal Commission on the Status of Women report through their teaching experiences and identified 47 recommendations related to education. They presented the recommendations to the executive and membership at the AGM in 1973. Their major recommendation involved the creation of a BCTF Status of Women program with a network of activist contacts in every local co-ordinated by a full time administrative staff person. They also recommenced an affirmative action policy stating that so long as all qualifications were equal, women should be hired into administrative staff positions in the federation before men. Well, they called this recommendation the “bomb”. The membership of the BCTF has always been around 70% female but the administrative staff at the union were almost exclusively male. It’s better now, but men still outnumber women, particularly in positions with the greatest amount of flexibility and security.

Well, the members of the new task force on the Status of Women didn’t figure “the bomb” would pass but they thought it would facilitate the passing of more expensive and foundational recommendations like a staff member and network. As they expected, the recommendation for affirmative action was defeated and the other 46 recommendations were passed. Interestingly, one of the things that helped was the behaviour of male teachers at the AGM. It was more acceptable at that time to shoo, hoot, holler and carry on. There had been a hockey game at the 1973 AGM when these reports came to the floor and a lot of the delegates had been drinking over the dinner hour. They almost had to adjourn the meeting because it was so rowdy. Some of the more obnoxious male delegates suggested that all the SW task force needed was a good fuck! Well, a member of the task force got up and said “The reason we need a Status of Woman program is
because of the kind of comment you just heard. If teachers who are supposed to be promoting the educational development of girls in schools can talk like this, we’ve got a problem!” and of course there was all this humiliation and “grumble, grumble, I guess she’s right.”

So, the program began the following September. The federation advertised for the first staff person job and this friend of mine got it. She was only 26 at the time. It’s just amazing what she was able to accomplish in her short time in the position. She started the program from scratch. She worked in the professional development division which at the time was called General Office. You know, one of the things I’ve reflected on over the years is the wisdom of putting social justice into a PD division. It was a decision that was never questioned. Where would you have put it? Well, if our executive is right and there are really three pillars to the federation, each one should have a separate division. What are the three pillars? Bargaining, PD and Social Justice. Bargaining has two divisions right now and Social Justice sits in PD. Then there are two separate divisions for research and campaigns. So you think social justice should have it’s own division? Yeah, that would be great but if they’re already going to put it into an existing division, why not Bargaining? The Status of Women is more of a teacher welfare issue than a PD issue. PD is important for education but it lacks an appropriate activist framework. It sometimes attracts dreamers, not movers and shakers. It attracts people who aren’t really political. They are great at conceptualizing but they don’t always get things moving.

Anyway, there were only two divisions in 1973, General Office and Economic Welfare and SW was put into General Office. My friend stayed in the job for two years then passed it on to another activist because she and her SW colleagues were adamant that the staff co-ordinator be on a term contract. They believed that frequent rotations in leadership between feminist activists with current classroom experience would help the program retain its collective, grass roots nature. They also had an organizational reform goal in mind. They were dissatisfied with the hierarchy and bureaucracy of the federation and wanted to democratize the hiring process so they argued that all administrative staff should be on term contracts. That way more teacher activists could have the opportunity to work in the federation and more teachers with union experience could bring their
insights back to the classroom. Their view reflected the opinion of left leaning teacher activists in the federation as a whole.

In two years both my friend and the program experienced incredible growth. She set up speaking engagements with locals, found contact people, built a committee of SW activists from every geographic zone in the province and started a conference, handbook and newsletter. The program organized a very well attended conference at Simon Fraser University in 1975. I was there because I was our local SW committee chair at the time. The energy was fantastic. The feminist movement was in full swing and the UN had declared 1975 the International Year of Women. The BC government was NDP and the education Minister hired a full time sex discrimination co-ordinator. My friend and the BCTF SW committee were very busy meeting with the Minister about sexist text books and practices. They were also involved with the Canadian Teachers’ Federation. They wound up having a conference to get other teachers’ organizations involved. The Federation of Women Teachers’ Associations of Ontario were always on board and were often initiators of these events, but it was much more difficult to engage activists from other federations across the country.

The BCTF SW program was based on a support network of teacher activists in every local in the province. The networks were necessary to ensure local relevance of SW initiatives and because feminist-identified teachers couldn’t function in the job without support. The sexism was just so blatant at the time. It was dreadful. We had to deal with sexist male colleagues who felt threatened by us, frequent sexual harassment, crude humour and even a few instances of sexual assault; one that I know of in an elevator at an AGM! Actually, we continued having to deal with this behaviour years after the program began. As the Status of Woman committee chair in my local, I was exhausted. You want to change the world and you can’t and it’s the hardest job in the world. This was around 1975 or 1978. The conditions in the schools were quite different than they are now. Being a feminist was a lightening rod for all of the male chauvinist pig jokes and glares from the women who did not want to be challenged. I would walk into the staffroom and men would drop their keys on the floor so they could look up your skirt. Or you would hear them barking and then you’d walk around the corner and they’d stop. I asked them what
they were doing and they’d say, “oh, not you, but you know, feminists are dogs” I’d tell them that I was a feminist, so that must make me a dog. They’d say “no.” It was constant. And beyond the harassing comments, my workload tripled. Any time that anybody—student, staff or parent—had a women’s question, they’d send them to me. That still seems to be happening. What do you mean? Well, I can’t tell you how many people redirected my interview requests to you. That’s true. I did get a number of forwards.

So, working as an SW chair was an exhausting Sisyphusian task. The one advantage was that in some ways this behaviour among our colleagues helped us demonstrate the ongoing need for the program. This issue of accountability and demonstrating need is an interesting phenomenon in the federation. There are many initiatives like the Teacher Magazine and the campaign of the day that cost a lot of money but are not required to account for their spending. Unlike those programs, we had to account for every penny spent all the way through and we had to tie every initiative to education. No member wanted to spend their hard earned money supporting a bunch of women’s libbers. They were teachers first and wanted to make sure what we did was tied to teaching. Every financial decision was so political, right up until the end of the program in 1998.

Early on, we had a certain level of support from our left leaning male colleagues within the federation. But in hindsight it was probably related to their political aspirations. They weren’t working against us like some of the more conservative activists and staff, but they had different priorities and expected that we would support them on all motions. SW activists were part of the left of the federation so we did generally support their motions. Are you referring to Teachers’ Viewpoint? Oh, you’ve heard of it? Hard to miss.

So, yes, I did get involved in Viewpoint, but the caucus didn’t formally organize until 1977. Before that a left leaning teacher at my school exposed me to Marxist readings. I came to feminism before I came to Marxism but between the two I learned the importance of the personal and the political. Interestingly, that’s what I think is lacking in the new social justice model at the federation. It focuses on morality and do-gooder charitable work rather than an analysis of structural or material inequity. Of course, a
systemic analysis is not enough. Experience is also important. My personal experiences with sexism helped me see some holes in Marxist thinking. Some of my male colleagues at the federation who approach social justice as though it is all about class can’t always see past their own lefty agendas and don’t always understand that what they are doing can be detrimental to others, but I do see the value of a class-based analysis.

I think the early SW activists were mostly socialist feminists. As the program became more popular some more cautious liberal women joined us but early on those women were more drawn to the Program Against Racism. Why? I think it had to do with experience. PAR started in 1975 and built on our model. Well, they built on the structural components, the full time staff co-ordinator, the zone meetings, the committee and the local networks, but they had a different energy. They did some interesting work for which they got international accolades but they were missing the experience element. The program was initiated by a motion put forward by Lloyd Edwards at the AGM in 1975. He was a black teacher and a couple of the co-ordinators were people of colour but most co-ordinators and activists were white teachers who were upset by the racist name calling going on in their schools. Without a critical mass of teachers of colour, it became quite moralistic. It was more about putting an end to name calling than systemic change.

Did PAR and SW activists ever work together? The co-ordinators did but the programs had different goals. It might look different if it were around today. Anyway, both programs were supported by Teachers’ Viewpoint.

As a result of my early engagement with SW, I began to involve myself in other areas of the federation. I became immersed in Viewpoint politics. Partly it was out of interest, but also what we realized was that working exclusively on the SW committee meant we got ghettoized. You’re the women’s issue one and you want to do all this social justice work and women’s work but you realize that the budget for the BCTF is set through the Representative Assembly and to be in control of the budget you have to be a member of the RA and you need to get elected as such. Also, there is a more altruistic reason for leaving the SW chair work to another activist. It’s important to share and let other people get these experiences. SW committee chair is a good entry level leadership position because it engages many teachers who would not otherwise be interested in union
activism. So, I left the committee. I was ready to move on to be the LR to affect the budget which would then spend more money on women’s issues and so that’s what I did. We basically infiltrated every element of the organization.

One of the initiatives we had was Women In Negotiations (WIN). We started it because bargaining, the last bastion of the boys needed to be taken over by the girls if we wanted to have clauses negotiated that were supportive of women and their families. I’ll give you an example. A disproportionate number of part timers were women who wanted to have children. Gee, what a shock! And yet until I got on my local negotiating team, we didn’t have provisions for part time teachers. One of the first things we did was negotiate part time benefits for part time work. So, all this happened in the 80s. A lot of the women who eventually became involved in the federation began with the women’s program and then learned these other things.

It was a growth experience for each of us as individuals but it also changed the organization because everywhere you’d go, you’d take your social justice agenda with you, whether it was in the Representative Assembly voting money for social justice initiatives, at an AGM supporting social justice recommendations, as a local executive making contacts and doing outreach with community people who were working for social justice or as local professional development chair making sure that our district PD conference dealt with social justice issues. That’s what we did. It didn’t matter what your role was. Social justice would sort of infuse into everything you’d do. Of course, people didn’t call it social justice at the time. They had other names for it. It would be funny if it wasn’t so sad. But do you know when we actually started using the term “social justice” as an organization? When? The year all of our social justice programming was decimated. Around that time people were running around saying “everything we do is social justice” What a laugh! We’re starting to get better again, but the 1998 AGM was a real low point.

Not all of my jobs were social justice jobs, but because of who I am I bring social justice to everything I do. I volunteered to be a PD associate providing workshops all over the province on assertiveness training and building influence. I continued to teach full time of course. The training was great. It also made me a known entity within the federation. For
a few years, I was president of my local. That was before I moved to Vancouver and before presidents of small locals were on full time release. In exchange for my work as local president, I was given one course release. I taught 7 out of 8 classes and did association work on the side. *That sounds like a lot of work.* Yeah, but it was actually a less intensive job at the time and my local was really small.

Eventually I got tired of living in the interior. It’s pretty and idyllic but there’s more action on the coast, so I decided to take a year’s leave of absence and move to Vancouver. I did that without a job. I just packed up and moved. In those days you could afford to rent something. So, I moved and ended up doing 50 workshops all over the province and being on two committees. I was pretty busy. Basically, I was working a lot for the federation as a volunteer for a year but it was worth it because the training was great. I was exposed to feminist networks and research and gained skills in adult education. At the end of the year, I was hired on staff to be the BCTF Status of Women co-ordinator. I was given a two year term and offered a one year extension. I really enjoyed the work and as a high energy person, I was able to accomplish quite a bit.

One of the things I am most proud of is my work on the SW journal. I took a small leaflet and helped it grow. I came up with themes based on what was happening in the broader social context and the latest research. One year I think we had 55 different grass roots women teachers contributing to it. It was really a voice for the Status of Women, not just the staff. Members were writing. In an honest way, it was about teaching and society and federation politics. We asked questions about what policy looked like in our organization and brainstormed ways it could change. We did an issue on women and the law with a focus on how women could change the law. There were always resources at the back. We looked at feminist goals, control of our bodies, sex education, reproductive rights, ending poverty for women and global women’s issues. It just broke my heart to see what happened to the journal by the end as resources were being sucked from the Status of Women program.

We did a special issue following the Nairobi women’s conference in 1985. That was an interesting moment that marked a change for the feminist movement. We had a
conference in Canada following the one in Nairobi to ask where we were going next. That was around the time when the women on the Immigrant and Visible Minority task force were just gaining a more public voice. That was fine but there was this one really vicious personal attack on one of the long time feminists who had organized the conference asking her who she thought she was as a white woman of privilege presuming to speak for all women. I’m not blaming anybody. We were women of privilege, but it was just an interesting dynamic. I think a lot of women backed off; white women and women of colour. We decided to put our energy into something less destructive. But anyway, that issue of our journal covered some of the concerns raised in Nairobi, mostly about the impact of poverty and racism on women. It was an attractive journal with a nice design on the front. Oh, have you seen the new BCTF website? Yeah. It’s so corporate. It’s just awful! I mean, I get the concept of branding but couldn’t it have been more attractive? Not just stripes and old fashioned pictures that look like jpegs of personals.

Well, after my time as staff, I taught for two years at Simon Fraser as a faculty associate teaching methodologies, social issues and supervising students on practicum. I really enjoyed that and was able to use the adult education skills I gained while working as a PD Associate at the federation. The resources I came across and developed as SW coordinator were also very useful. As I was doing that I got an M.Ed and reinvented myself as a special education teacher. I’ll tell you one thing. Recent curriculum reforms and the accountability push haven’t helped. One of the things we’re dealing with right now is that there’s so much emphasis on literacy and the kids struggle. Like, for example, in the new math program so much of it requires strong language skills. These kids are struggling as it is but one area they used to be able to do was math, right? Now that it has so much print, they can’t get beyond the language and they get frustrated. And then we have grade 10 literacy exams which they can only take once. What happens if they fail? They’re hooped.

It was just so much easier to do activist work in the 70s and 80s. We had more time in the day and it was easier to get released. There was a really beautiful moment with the Status of Women that happened in 78. Actually, it might have been 79 or 80. What happened? The committee brought forward a recommendation on choice at the Annual General
Meeting and it passed. We were like, “Wow! We’re so powerful. We can do anything.”

How did that come about? Women’s reproductive rights were under attack and we wanted to make sure that the BCTF weighed in on it because we are a fairly important organization. Having a position on something like this does make a difference. I was a local SW committee chair at the time. It was pretty exciting and it had come from the contacts. That was the beauty of it all. It was done in a feminist way, from the bottom up not top down. It wasn’t the committee deciding that this was going to happen. A counsellor contacted the SW committee and said she had a pregnant student who came to her. She wanted to give her advice about the places she could go for help and support, one of which was Planned Parenthood and another was a place she could go to get a safe abortion, but she realized that if she told this student where to go and her parents had a problem with it, her job would be on the line. She wanted to know what kind of support the union would give her. Well, the union had no policy on this so we realized that we needed policy in order to help teachers help kids. That was where it started.

Then what we decided to do, because we knew it was going to be an incredibly controversial issue, was to talk to contacts instead of making the decision as a provincial committee. We asked the contacts what they thought and how they felt and so every committee member had a meeting with her contacts in their zones and the issue was raised, “What do you think? Are you supportive of this?” And what came back were these incredible stories from all across the province. “This isn’t just about kids, this is about teachers.” “Teachers don’t have access to abortion in my town.” “There is no abortion facility in my town. “The chief nurse on that ward is the principal’s wife and I couldn’t get an abortion without everybody in town knowing about it.” We heard all these horror stories about women’s lack of access to reproductive freedom, especially in rural areas.

Well, we had heard from the members so then we thought about how to craft a motion that would work for teachers and for kids. We sent it out to our network and it came back. After a few revisions we took it to the AGM and it passed. It passed because women knew how to organize. It was pretty impressive. You could go to an AGM and there would be organizational strategies, people lined up at the microphone recording who was
planning to talk about what when, thinking about when we should call the question. We were well organized. Needless to say, the shit hit the fan. The right to lifers came out in droves. There was word that we were going to be picketed by the Catholic Church with dead foetus pictures all around. Did it happen? No. We did get picketed, but not with dead foetus pictures. So, anyway, the motion carried and then every year thereafter people tried to get it out of the policy book. They tried to water it down but it was defended. It was defended for about ten years and then finally it was defeated and removed from the policy book because it was seen as no longer necessary since women had rights to reproductive freedom. Really? Yeah, you wouldn’t believe how many completely unnecessary things are still in the BCTF policy book, but that was the nature of women’s work. Politically sensitive policies that threaten men’s power have a shorter shelf life than do so called “neutral” policies. I’m shocked.

There was a huge backlash to SW within the federation around that time, not necessarily because of the abortion motion, but because of what it represented—the power of a women’s committee in a co-ed organization that had historically been run by men. Some people thought the women’s committee could do anything and get what we wanted from budgets. It’s amazing how inflated their perception of our power was. After some time we started to call ourselves the feminist fossils because the program started to lose some steam. The backlash within the federation—saying the program was too powerful, that it was a sacred cow, that nobody could touch it—was taking effect on later generations of teachers. There was a lot of anger from people who resented the money that was going into it and there were people who thought the frequency of our meetings was too high, that it was unfair since other committees didn’t meet as frequently, but of course what works for one committee doesn’t necessarily work for another.

Anyway, it was around this time that feminist activists in the federation learned an important lesson about autonomy. Well, I don’t know if you’d call it autonomy, but we learned to trust our instincts and intuition instead of always turning to our friends in Viewpoint for guidance. You have to understand, we were part of the left wing in the federation and there was a very definite right wing of the BCTF at the time. Teachers for a United Federation? No, they came later. This was in the late 70s as Viewpoint was just
becoming public and when principals were still part of the federation. One of the recommendations our SW committee had brought to the AGM was co-educational PE. Well, the jocks came out in full force to defeat this motion because they were really upset about it. One of the women on the task force was running for the executive as a Member at Large. She ended up winning but we paid a price. One of our male friends came to our caucus meeting the night before the AGM and asked for a meeting with the SW caucus. He said to us “if you guys proceed with this recommendation on co-ed sports, your friend is going to lose the election.” They wanted her to win because we were all part of Viewpoint. So we had this agonizing meeting with the committee and decided that we were going to withdraw the recommendation.

That was a huge mistake but it taught us a lesson. It helped us realize that we had let a strategic, smart, left wing guy override what we knew to be right. It wouldn’t have been appropriate to pull the motion even if it had meant our friend’s defeat but even more importantly, it wasn’t appropriate to allow a guy with different priorities stand between us and our intuition. We could trust ourselves and not rely on men who supposedly knew better. We learned a lot from that and we weren’t going there any more. You see, we had been socialized as women to live through men’s power. We were attracted to powerful men and it was through our experience in the Status of Women program that we actually learned to understand that we had our own power. We didn’t actually need to live through men or be with men who were powerful in order to experience power. What we had to do was trust in our own instincts and beliefs and rights. But you know, it’s not something you can sort of learn once and then you’ve got it. You learn it and then have to learn it again. So, we kept learning it over the years.

One of the most painful learning experiences, of course, was the slow suffocation of the Status of Women program. What happened? Well, it all started in 1987 when TUF gained control of the federation over a divisive anti-labour Bill. In that year all locals were forced by legislation to decide whether to become unions with bargaining rights or professional associations without rights. TUF argued that we should change our constitution to shield all locals regardless of choice. They called it the “Umbrella motion.” They rationalized their argument as inclusion. We knew it was a ploy to gain
federation control but TUF leaders moved so fast. There wasn’t time to think. It felt very male and they were quite patronizing about the whole thing. They said “ok, you’ve made your point, you don’t think this is right but the majority of people think it is and so you should vote with us to change the constitution.” They made Viewpoint out to be anti-democratic—a group of powerful leaders forcing the wills of the majority. Well, it worked. TUF led for 12 years and for 12 years we were in the political wilderness of the BCTF. I couldn’t have been elected dog catcher! No Viewpoint activist could have been. We tried. We couldn’t do anything. We couldn’t get appointed to committees; we couldn’t be elected to the Executive Committee and once the TUF president became Executive Director, a woman no less, we couldn’t even be hired on staff.

Now, we weren’t idle during our 12 years in the political wilderness of the BCTF. We just became more active in our respective locals. In 1987 when locals won the right to bargain all conditions and terms of employment, everybody thought that bargaining was the panacea. So, bargaining took the forefront and the provincial SW program just kind of trucked along quietly. Bargaining was powerful. In 1998, most Viewpoint members believed we could do everything through bargaining. So, the SW program came up with this idea of WIN—Women In Negotiations. We set this program up within the Bargaining division as part of our need for feminist infusion. We looked actively for women we could train to go into bargaining and then all of the issues that we wanted bargained like part time benefits for teachers, maternity leave top up, protections for gay and lesbian employees and parenthood leave could be brought into the bargaining arena through the Status of Women.

That was actually a controversial move within the SW committee. There were some people who didn’t want to deal with bargaining because they wanted to focus on political action and women’s rights. Half of the committee thought we should move within the BCTF and half felt that we needed to also move with other women’s groups. I’ve learned over the last few decades that union activism is important but it lacks the depth of coalition work with community groups. Teachers have meeting skills and can talk to large groups but we don’t always understand the issues as deeply. Community groups brought that depth of understanding and experience to our coalitions and we brought
resources, meeting spaces and organizational skills. OK, but wouldn’t it have been possible to involve yourselves in both bargaining and community activism? Of course but the difference of opinion within the SW group somehow got perceived as an irreconcilable conflict.

Where did you stand? I thought local bargaining rights were important but I didn’t want us to get sucked into only one initiative. In the end my fears were founded because in 1988, when we bargained our first collective agreement, bargaining started to be seen by some as the only credible goal for SW. They thought that we could infuse all of our issues into the realm of bargaining. What women teachers needed, they argued, was more credibility. My analysis is that it had to do with the pressures from our male friends. The bargainers in those days were like the old boys club, not right wing, but tightly controlled. We were trying to play their game and get in with their rules to make positive change for women teachers. It didn’t help that feminist groups in the community groups referred to us as big business—mainstream, privileged, white, WASPy women. In some ways that was true but the insinuation offended a number of women on our committee. As a result we all became more institutionalized within the BCTF and limited our links with community groups.

The positive outcome of our redirected energy, of course, was that we were able to accomplish a lot for women teachers. We were very early to get maternity leave, rights for lesbian and gay teachers, and harassment language. I was involved in bargaining our first two collective agreements. I’m glad I got feminist clauses into our agreements but let me tell you, it wasn’t a cakewalk. The bargaining chair person sent by the federation to my local, who will remain nameless, said to me, “you want harassment language in contracts, you go bargain it!” So, we did. He didn’t even show up. He was our chief negotiator and he didn’t even come to negotiate. Well, I was on the bargaining committee and we showed up. So did the board. They took us seriously so we negotiated and got our clauses. It was a really fun process. Of course, we lost many of our gains in the early 2000s after the last TUF president went against the wish of his executive and brought in provincial bargaining, but that’s another story.
Anyway, it was during the height of our bargaining gains that the SW program was being slowly suffocated. With TUF in power, our programs got squeezed. The executive stopped taking SW recommendations when hiring new program co-ordinators, the journal was cut back from five to one issue per year, our ability to communicate directly with the contacts was restricted, our budget was more tightly controlled and our zone meetings were cut back and externally organized. Now, it used to be that the zone meetings were just for the Status of Women people to bond, connect, have training, take up issues of concern to people, make plans and strategize. They were organized by the nine SW committee members assigned to nine geographic zones across the province. The committee would bring questions and issues to SW activists and occasionally bring in guest speakers or videos, but most of the time was spent creatively generating ideas and activist initiatives. SW activists would talk about how to bring issues to life in their local contexts. The nine committee members would then return to the provincial group and cross pollinate ideas. It was a very creative, iterative process.

With every year of TUF leadership, the Representative Assembly cut back the budget for SW and PAR which meant that zone meetings were cut back. Without time to talk about the issues and plan for the year, the program became less and less effective. SW stopped being allowed to have separate zone meetings because they were too costly and because the TUF executive thought we were using them for political campaigning. We had to sit and be subjected to the federations’ latest campaign for the first day and a half and then have the last half day to discuss our own stuff. Our budget was controlled so that instead of doing what we had done in the past—encouraging activists to share rooms and using the remainder of the budget for professional development—all activists were required to have their own rooms. It was crazy because TUF leaders were always arguing about fiscal responsibility and here they were preventing us from making our money stretch. There were so many controlling forces that by the time the program was actually disbanded in 1998 it had already been dead for some time.

For the final death knell, TUF used the idea of economic reform to rationalize their decision to centralize control. In addition to SW and PAR, two activist groups in the province were beginning to organize, Gay and Lesbian educators and Aboriginal
educators. TUF argued that it would be too expensive to support four programs with staff co-ordinators, committees, meetings and local networks so they called a social justice review. It was the first of many. I was among the 25 activists who were consulted. The process itself was participatory but unfortunately what they did in the end was limit the vote to two options which I thought was a skewing of the results. The two options were framed as 1) an expensive, spiralling out of control set of discrete programs with staff and networks, or 2) a single manageable social justice committee that would allow for a flexible integration of all social justice issues. The clear implication was that we needed to try this other model. The results of the review were reported at the following AGM but SW and PAR activists came out in full force and voted it down. Unfortunately, our resistance did not last. The new social justice umbrella motion passed at the 1998 AGM.

So, do you think the TUF leadership was anti-social justice? Not exactly. The problem wasn’t purely ideological. It was more political. TUF wanted to be in control and they favoured centralization. Unions are set up for ideological debate so that means it’s always possible to come to an AGM and publicly disagree about the issues, but when control is centralized, there is less space for negotiation. Centralized control was the death knell for the Status of Women program because it was a very male approach. It reinforced hierarchy and bureaucracy, squelched debate, restricted multidirectional lines of communication and made it difficult to respond creatively to activist concerns. Now, when I say male, I don’t mean that only men used it. This strategy was used by women too. It just lacked a feminist analysis.

The SW committee of the day were not prepared to provide that feminist analysis because they were much more timid. Most of them were liberal feminists appointed by TUF without SW consultation so the feminist fossils decided some time in the 80s that we needed to meet with the committee, talk about our experiences, give them strength and support them. They were facing powerful people who wanted them to be more demure and not raise a fuss. How did they respond? The co-ordinators kept saying that if they co-operated with the leadership, they would be able to accomplish more. We told them “you need to have your own power! You can’t give it away. You can’t depend on these guys to help you. You’ve got to create your own base.” But they weren’t going to go
there. It was very sad. We tried to prop up the program but funding was squeezed and the succession of TUF appointed SW co-ordinators did little to fight back. Those of us in the local networks fought hard every year to keep it afloat but in the end we lost the vote by a small margin.

That loss was huge but by the next AGM, we were finally able to change the tide of leadership. A new Coalition caucus made up of former Viewpoint members gained control of the federation and they’ve been in power ever since. It’s been almost 9 years now and things are starting to turn around where social justice is concerned, but the 1998 AGM was just so sad. Some horrible people got up and spoke in favour of the social justice umbrella because it would cost less and because they knew people who had the passion for social justice would keep on doing the work anyway. They actually had the nerve to get up and say that at the microphone! There was one smug guy who walked around through the whole debate with a great big button that said “we’re a union not the UN.” You know, in the end they had these great parties. The Program Against Racism put on this big dinner. It was disgusting. It was like celebrating all of the wonderful things the committee had done as they shut it down. People who had worked on it for years were there celebrating. I just didn’t understand. What did the Status of Women do? We cried. We just cried. We had fought for our program right till the very end and the vote was so close. It was like 11 votes, so close.

So now you’re back at the federation. Yeah, I’m part way through a temporary contract. I’m working in Field Services which allows me to connect with locals all over the province but this position is much less creative, open and fun than SW co-ordinator was. It’s just so much more controlled by the executive. Actually, it’s not just this division. TUF’s legacy of centralized control seems to be living on in the current executive. Coalition has done little to disrupt that because, let’s face it, even they like to be in control. Have you been able to infuse social justice work into the position? Well, I try but it’s much harder to do. In 2002, our Bargaining division was split into two divisions—Collective Agreements and Protective Services (CAPS) and Field Services (FS). CAPS is filled with lawyers and FS was created to take over the field component from all other divisions. The only problem is that the Federation’s only contact with the field is now
done by a division that used to be concerned solely with bargaining. It’s not that anybody prevents us from doing social justice but we are so busy meeting the technical needs of the locals as defined by the presidents and presidents are just trying to keep up with contract maintenance and grievance issues, so social justice ends up dropping off the agenda.

Just last week, in fact, I sent out a note reminding local presidents about International Women’s Day and asking them what they planned to do. I’ve heard nothing back. Yeah, I was wondering about that. I actually expected to see some kind of celebration here on IWD day. Oh, we celebrated. We just took it out of the building so that it wouldn’t be controlled by the executive. FS is stuck between two groups of leaders, the local leaders who are trying to keep afloat with grievances and the executive who expect us to communicate the latest campaign from the top down. It is so hierarchical and bureaucratic. The creativity and imagination and intellectual questioning I remember from my first staff appointment is gone. You know, there is no climate for equity issues in this whole bloody building! Well, that’s not exactly true but the change is disheartening.

*Do you like being on staff?* Yeah, definitely, but it’s less exciting than being a local activist. It’s less immediate. It is a slow, ponderous form of activism. As SW co-ordinator, I was on staff but it was more in the capacity of an activist. We were more able to drive our own action. Now our work is driven by the executive. It’s a little constraining because we can’t rely on our intuition. We need to respond to the needs of the EC. Don’t get me wrong, I am indebted to my union for all it has done for me, but it just used to be more fun, Cindy. *You sound tired.* It’s congenital. Of course it doesn’t help that I’m working at least 125%. The good thing about being staff is that you can bring your interests and commitments to the work. The hard thing is finding the time to breathe.

Oh, speaking of breathing space, I don’t know how the two staff members responsible for social justice find time to think, let alone relax. Social justice at the federation has been allocated a 1.0 staff appointment but it has been split between two staff members who have very full profiles for their second 0.5. Among other things, they are responsible for
running the School Union Representative Training (SURT) program which trains union reps across the province, organizing and facilitating a committee dealing with sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, peace, global issues and the environment; generating social justice workshops; training PD associates; putting out a publication; writing for the teacher magazine; responding to the campaign of the day and organizing conferences. At one point, one was also the division chair and the other was expected to help organize an international Peace conference. We used to have a full staff appointment for just the Status of Women and in the early days we also had full time administrative support.

I’m not blaming the staff or local activists but the current social justice program is a disaster! Nothing gets moving and the excitement is gone. It is a shell of the former programs. TUF brought the umbrella in but left former SW and PAR activists to prop it up and none of us had the inclination to do it, especially in the early years. The new model is based on short-term, disconnected local grants, so there is no way to learn from other activists across locals. The grants only last a year; the same teacher can’t apply twice; the same idea can’t get funded twice in the same local and there is a delay between the time of the application and the time of the reward, so it’s much harder to sustain activism or build on each others’ work. Even if two locals have a similar idea they can’t work out the holes together or consolidate their resources to fight it collectively. Everything happens through committee meetings that feel like bureaucratic exercises. It doesn’t help that the networks are missing. Sure, there is now a SJ contact in each local but people are passionate about specific issues that are personally meaningful to them, not to something as amorphous as social justice. It’s just too overwhelming for one person. If on top of their full time teaching load which is becoming more intense each year, local activists are expected to respond to the needs of all of the action groups when their passion is only with one, very little will happen.

One of the biggest problems is that the committee is just advisory. They can make suggestions to the executive but they can’t do anything without executive permission and getting permission takes forever. So, what ends up happening is that lots of social justice motions are brought forward but there is no action. There’s no point in passing a motion if people don’t understand the issues. The motion is the icing on the cake, it’s not the
cake and what happened is that passing the motion became the cake and so the depth was lost. Very few issues were coming to the surface. If you ask me, it’s another product of centralized control. The executive started to take credit for our ideas. So, for example when I was on the old SW program, if we wanted a motion to go to the executive, it went to the books under SW. It went to the floor and was debated and then either passed or failed. Now what happens is that social justice motions go to the executive and the executive passes half of them because they think they are good ideas and they figure members will support them but when motions do get passed by the executive they’re put in the book as “recommendations” which means that they come from the executive but they’re not under “social justice” as a category. The recommendation status of these motions means that the ideas are rarely debated. Without the broad based discussion, members have lost sight of how much work can be done and should be going on in the area and without the paper trail in the reports and recommendations book, the work the SJ committee seems insignificant.

*Were you ever involved in the committee?* No, but I sat in on one of their meetings early on. Now, this was before I really thought about the limitations placed on them but my impression at the time was that people just wanted to hear themselves talk and have somebody else do the work. I tried to spur them into action but they didn’t take it particularly well. They saw me as part of the problem, the larger system of control. It was just so sad. There was no energy. It was all damage control and band-aids, not penetrating systemic change. I’m a little more hopeful now that the action groups are back and of course the integration or cross-pollination of issues has been useful, but they’re missing the networks. I know it’s my bias but I really do think we had the best model for social justice. Social justice work needs a social justice structure. Our program was grass roots, locally sensitive, built on teachers’ experiences, well networked, analytical, supported by a rotation of activist staff, co-operative and collective. It gave women access to their union, provided a productive outlet for creative energy, provided space for growth and raised the appeal of the union to its membership.

If a union is all about bargaining and campaigns, it will lack membership appeal. Unions need to be more than service organizations. They need to spark members’ imaginations.
Belonging to a union brings with it a source of pride. If the membership knows their work goes to more than just stuff for themselves, they’ll be more likely to support it. This is not just my personal view. A poll was done recently by the BCTF and teachers said overwhelmingly that they were pleased that their union did work that included but went beyond the welfare of teachers. So, the union can be a source of pride for ordinary members at the same time as it can be a vehicle for social change. If unions don’t want to outlive their usefulness, they really need to become more than just service organizations. Networks of activists are an important way to prevent this from happening. They allow activists to drive their own initiatives in relation to one another instead of relying on patronizing ideas from the province or disconnected one-off local initiatives.

You know, I’m listening to myself and I sound so critical and negative. My heart is just not in this work the way it once was, but that’s probably more about me than the current generation of activists. You know, the thing about cutting the old programs prematurely is that we never got to see how they would have played out. That’s the glory of failure in a sense. You know? It’s like Marilyn Monroe, right? She’s always young and beautiful. We never really got to see her age and we never really got to see what would have happened with the networks had they received full support. They only really existed for 8 years in their purest form.

So, what keeps you going? The knowledge that federation resources, if put to good use, can bring about important change. I have seen so much change in my years. Sure, it is not exactly linear progress, but nobody is forcing me to wear a dress to work, I can wear open toed shoes if I want and two of the three provincial table officers are women who came up through the SW and PAR programs. Beyond the presence of female bodies in leadership, there has been a real climate change. How so? 35 years ago the BCTF had a more jocular, masculine culture. People may still think the same things but at least they feel less free to publicly harass women at AGMs. Another thing that has kept me going through the never ending rollercoaster of gains and losses has been good friends and the Feminist Caucus. Is the Feminist Caucus anything like TUF and Viewpoint? Well, not exactly. We draw from both groups and don’t run candidates but we do organize. We formed in 1998 to bring back the SW program. We haven’t managed to do that yet but
I’m pretty sure we were influential in bringing back discrete social justice programming through the action groups.

As I said, I sound negative, but I really am grateful to the BCTF for the opportunities it has given me. Through my federation activism I have been able to gain access to organizations I never would have dreamed of approaching when I first chose teaching over nursing. I have worked with CIDA, the Ministry of Education, my district, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Co-Development Canada and have not felt intimidated in the least. But more importantly, my quality of life has been greatly enhanced through my involvement in the Federations’ Status of Women program. SW got many women involved in the BCTF. It made the federation a less sexist place and provided learning and leadership experiences for women teachers. It gave us a peer group with whom to share life experiences and a group of lifelong friends who could help us cope with pain. We became more committed to our union as we learned about education and ourselves. We learned to teach adults as well as students, gained negotiation skills and became more assertive through our collective self-advocacy. But you know what Cindy? *What?* The positive impact goes far beyond the personal growth of activists. Through the work of the Status of Women program, the BCTF has improved the conditions of work for female teachers and students. I feel privileged and fulfilled to be able to do the work I am doing in this organization that has been my home for nearly four decades.

*You sound quite appreciative.* I am. *So what’s next?* I’m looking forward to retirement. I’m not sure exactly what I’ll do but I won’t be sitting at home twiddling my thumbs. I’ve thought about doing adult literacy but I don’t want to take away other people’s jobs. I’m interested in new technologies for activist organizing and communication. I’ve also thought of working with women on the lower east side helping them write notes to their landlords. I can work in community kitchens. I’ve worked for the NDP in the past but really, SoCred, Liberal, NDP? What’s the difference? Where are the women? If I stay in the political realm, I’ll do it to challenge welfare cuts and support women’s causes like the 52% coalition. I might work overseas. Who knows? Something will keep me excited and interested.
The great thing is I won’t have to ask anybody’s permission to act. Well, it’s not like I ask permission now, but I can participate in the occupation of government offices if I want without worrying how it will reflect on the federation. I can open my mouth and laugh without disrupting decorum or arousing suspicion and I can follow my own desires. Retirement will afford me a certain kind of freedom, but you know what? \textit{What?} My actions will be based on many years of work and learning at the BCTF. I’ve learned so much about activism through my work here, especially through the Status of Women. We were the first real social movement to have an impact on the federation.

4.4 Perspective 4, Full time Administrative Staff: Social Justice in our Union is much Broader than Identity

\begin{quote}
Our social justice programming is broader than an identity-based struggle. Can you please include our support of universal public education, international solidarity, professional development, teacher welfare and health & safety?
\end{quote}

I think you should be careful about overstating the level of partisanship within the federation. \textit{OK, what would I miss by doing that?} You’ll get a feel for the federation as a politicized organization—which it is—and you’ll hear a lot about the most contentious issues, but you’ll miss the social justice work we do on a daily basis that is not the exclusive domain of one caucus. \textit{I understand your point and I would like to get to the day to day social justice work of the federation, but so far, my interviews suggest that the caucuses are highly salient to organizational dynamics and social justice programming.}

They are, but the tensions between federation parties are almost always blown out of proportion and have negative ramifications for federation programming. In fact, we’re one of the few organizations that can afford to have two left wing parties within it. \textit{They aren’t always described that way.} I know, but the fact that I’ve described them that way comes from my analysis about how few differences exist in principle and values between the two parties. \textit{Were you ever affiliated with one?} Yes, as a teacher activist I was involved in Teachers’ Viewpoint, but from my current perspective as staff, I can see that most of the differences between caucuses are strategic or personal, not substantive or ideological. These kinds of divisions happen in every organization, but the point I am making is that there are programs and initiatives like the International Solidarity program,
inclusive education research, health and safety and Aboriginal Education that are critically tied to social justice without getting caught up in partisan disputes. We need to think broadly about what social justice means in the context of a teachers’ union.

*What does it mean in the context of the BCTF?* It means many things since there are activists and staff with a range of commitments who advocate for social justice in different ways, but at a fundamental level, it means we fight for high quality public education for all children regardless of their economic, religious, racial or ethnic background. It is crucial and vital to the existence of a democratic society and it’s not something we can take for granted. That does not negate the importance of our programs that carry the social justice name, but it does require that we look beyond short term disputes with our colleagues and support social justice for teachers and students in our schools, the province, the country and the world. We do a lot in many different ways to support social justice. The social justice committee is only one of our many initiatives.

Thank-you. *That helps me gain some perspective on the micro-political dynamics of the federation.* Mmhmm. *Now can you tell me what shaped your decision to go into teaching?* We’re only on question one? *Yes, sorry.* I don’t think I ever had a blinding moment of vocation but I wanted to work in a people rich landscape and make some kind of difference in people’s lives and the world. For my first job, I taught a group of 15 year old boys who valued the world of work more than the world of books. They were forced to remain in school until their 16th birthday, but there was no curriculum for them. *Did you choose this placement?* No, but I ended up having an affinity for it. I worked collaboratively with a few other teachers to design curriculum that met their needs. Through my teaching, I became acutely aware of the learning conditions that worked against my students, so I joined the working and learning conditions committee of my local.

In the late 70s and early 80s, I became more heavily involved in my local association. Like many teacher activists at the time, I got swept up in our push for better working and learning conditions. Now, this was prior to 1988 when we gained full collective bargaining rights but we had some power because we were able to file grievances. Also,
in contrast to the current situation, it was not too difficult in the 70s and 80s to find full
time teaching contracts in the province so we had the labour market on our side. I became
a local table officer in 1981 and was involved in negotiating better working conditions
with the board. After speaking with teacher activists around the province, we put a
number of unilaterally declared working and learning conditions on the table and decided
not to talk about salary until we had some movement on things like class size. You see,
provincial legislation only allowed unions to bargain salaries and bonuses, and at the time
we weren’t even a union. But the district administrators met with us, so we negotiated.
We didn’t put a figure on the table at all and the result was this very strange bargaining
season that gave us by far the biggest wage increase in BCTF history. As the boards
would say no to all of our working and learning conditions, they would put more money
on the table and ended up giving an average of 17% increases across the province.

It was through this process that I came to realize the strength of professional unionism, a
tradition that can be traced back to the culture of the BCTF in the 30s and 40s. Federation
leaders had advocated for strong teaching and working conditions for many decades but
by the 80s, for a variety of reasons, it was easier to achieve these objectives. Many of us
were involved in expanding the scope of bargaining to achieve class size, full bargaining
rights and the right to strike. Our strategy was effective because the public was
sympathetic with teachers who supported something other than personal wage hikes. We
retained a focus on working and learning conditions, but we also recognized the
importance of gaining full collective bargaining rights, so we set out to develop closer
ties to organized labour.

In the early 80s, I was hired on a temporary staff contract in the Organizational Support
division to work on developing these ties through the Operation Solidarity coalition.
That was really interesting work that proved teachers’ willingness to stand up for better
conditions, not only for themselves, but for public and private sector workers in the
province. After my contract finished, I returned to the classroom for a couple of years
then came back as provincial table officer and was eventually hired on staff. I have been
here ever since. I have worked in four divisions; Organizational Support, Bargaining,
Communications and Research. I have not worked in Professional Development but I have worked very closely with staff in that division.

My initial focus was on bargaining and labour solidarity, but over the years, I’ve had the good fortune to work on and develop a number of initiatives with my colleagues. The ones that come to mind when I think of social justice are the International Solidarity program, our collaborative research projects and our health and safety program. None of these initiatives fall under the federation’s social justice umbrella, but they all involve social justice work. Can you tell me a bit about your work on these projects? It’s not just my work but the work we’ve done together. You can’t do a good job if you do it by yourself, but I’ll tell you a bit about the projects.

I was asked to start the health and safety program with the help of a committee of teacher activists. The initiative was a grass roots one that came from the members. It was not favoured by the Executive Committee of the day but we followed up because it was passed by a majority of delegates at a Representative Assembly. Health and safety had been men’s work, industrial mostly, but teachers grabbed hold of it too. Our committee did some research into health and safety in other industries and adapted it to fit the work of teachers. We wrote a manual that school boards and teachers continue to depend on and developed a training series. It has stood the test of time and is now self sustaining. The first year I led the workshops but since then teachers have been doing them. I am no longer involved in the program but am proud to say it is still thriving. Districts pay us to train teachers, administrators and support staff. We’ve dealt with health, safety, violence, air quality and many other issues. I didn’t think of it as social justice when I was initially approached to take on the work, but after hearing about and witnessing all of the violence against teachers and kids and the lies and cover-ups that were unearthed through the program, I certainly do now. I couldn’t believe how much I learned that year. Until the Health and safety program, teachers facing these issues had no avenue for recourse.

OK, and your collaborative research projects? Our inclusive education work builds on collaborative research with members, school districts, the Ministry of Education and Universities. We have always developed resources with teachers in different districts and
encouraged them to share these resources with each other but now, with the governments’ accountability focus, the districts are being encouraged to sell their resources to one another. We have been trying to counter this competitive corporate culture by collaborating with universities, teachers and districts and publishing the information. We have worked with faculty members at UBC and OISE on projects dealing with inclusive communication technologies, teacher mentorship and multi-literacies. When teachers participate in these projects, they gain research skills and insights about pedagogical innovation.

Over the years I have found that this not only supports their personal professional development, but also helps us uncover inequities in the education system. Can you give me an example? Mmhm. A problem with specialist teachers came across our radar because of research we did in two school districts. Our research focussed on what was happening in schools after the government reduced the number of specialist teachers in the contract. We had 45 reports in all, case studies and statistical reports. All 45 were done collaboratively with a group of teachers. We found that the proportion of teachers decreased by 7.5% while the proportion of a subset of those teachers—Special Education teachers, librarians, and ESL teachers—decreased by 18%. After investigating these numbers, we interviewed specialist teachers and found that their case loads were going through the roof and that many of the most experienced ones chose to leave their specialist work for more manageable teaching assignments. There was a clear connection to learning conditions since students who needed special education and English language support were being taught by new teachers with high case loads and minimal, if any, specialist training. Our research project revealed the erosion of special education in the province at the same time as it trained a group of teacher members in research methodology. It had the added benefit of connecting a new group of teachers to the federation, those who have not been engaged by the “fight fight fight, campaign, campaign, campaign” approach.

From what I’ve learned so far in my interviews, it sounds like your International Solidarity program has also connected teachers to the federation beyond campaign involvement. Mmhm. Of the three programs I’m telling you about, our international
solidarity work is probably the most transparently tied to social justice, even for those members who are not actively involved in it. It builds on the federation’s long standing commitment to international work going back to the 1920s. We initiated the current International Solidarity program in the early 80s and secured funding for it by building it in as a percentage of fees. Stable funding and membership support have allowed us to do a wide range of programming. How does it compare with the CTF’s Project Overseas program? Our program has more of a union development focus and less of a focus on professional development or charity. We don’t presume to have the final word on how to teach. Instead, we build union to union networks. We put resources into the hands of people who can do this work in their local contexts in Southern Africa and Latin America. We have done anti-apartheid work, developed a research network in the Americas called the IDEA network and developed an anti-corporate antidote to the World Bank through Education International, an international solidarity network of teachers’ unions. Through the IDEA network and Education International we have been able to counter links between trade agreements and education before they have become known to the Ministry of Education.

Free trade seems so pervasive and hard to pin down. Can you give me an example of how you interrupted it in education? Mhmm, in the fall of 1999, we—the BCTF, Co-Development Canada (an NGO in BC) and teachers’ unions in Central America, Peru, Argentina and Quebec (CSQ)—organized a conference in Cuba just before the WTO meetings in Seattle. As a result of our early co-ordinated analysis of trade agreements and education, we were able to get union commitment from presidents of Brazil and Argentina to exclude public education from any trade agreements they sign. We did this by dealing with the issue before it became a formal agenda item on the radar of our respective Ministries of Education. That’s amazing. I imagine that a great deal of preparation and strategy went into this one meeting. This is just one example, but our international work has been the springboard for many global activist networks. We couldn’t do this work alone. It depends on our ability to build networks with other unions and trust the insights, perspectives and strategies of union leaders and activists in other national contexts.
When you look back over your work in the three initiatives you just described, what would you say your impact has been on the federation? Not something I’ve thought about. Really? Really. You know, when I was generating interview questions, this wasn’t one of the ones I expected people to have difficulty with, but they have. I think most of our work is collective so it’s hard to answer a question about individual impact. That makes sense, but you have taken the lead on so many projects. Don’t you have a feel for how your work has affected your colleagues? I think that’s really a question you need to ask my colleagues. Fair enough. You know, without any solicitation on my part, your name has come up as a central actor in social justice work at the federation. Well, very seldom is there a proposal that I make that does not get listened to. It does happen sometimes, but not very often. I guess I try to raise issues and provide analysis. I write for The Teacher and generate memos and articles. These are all ways of trying to influence and shape the way people will understand and act.

What would you say are some of the major constraints facing the federations’ internal social justice programming? One problem faced by those of us who would like to challenge injustice internally is that it can be hard to deal with systemic inequities without getting people’s backs up. Unions are supposed to support their members, not critique them. In a context where teachers are undervalued by the government, it can be hard to be legitimately critical without teachers feeling that you’re attacking their performance and values. When teachers think about the international programs, for example, they look beyond their immediate conflicts. For at least a moment, they stop focussing on their grievances with students, colleagues and teacher activists in the other caucus and start looking at global resource inequities. I really believe that people have a hard time understanding their own context until they move outside of it. The international programs don’t take all teachers out of their context, but when we invite visiting union leaders to speak at our AGMs, they learn about the deep disparities in resources and privilege between Canadian teachers and almost everybody else in the world. Even teachers who have not developed a systemic analysis of globalization can see this contrast. As a result, they feel less defensive and more inclined to act, or at least support motions. It also helps that we involve people from both caucuses in the programs.
A second difficulty faced by those most actively involved in the internal social justice programs is one of isolation. The success of the discrete feminist and anti-racist programs depended on the ability of a staff person on a temporary contract to make all other staff in the building challenge the organizational status quo. That work can be isolating and exhausting because it is piled on top of the co-ordinator’s contractual duties. I didn’t see it when I was President of the federation, but the staff co-ordinators responsible for the Status of Women and Program Against Racism really suffered as a result of this isolation, resistance and high intensity workload. I regret not supporting them more and have deliberately become a critical friend to the current Aboriginal Education co-ordinator as a result.

Were you involved at all in the 1998 restructuring effort? I didn’t get involved in the debate at the time because as staff we are supposed to stay out of union politics, but I really believe the SW program should have stayed stand alone. I also think that an anti-racist program should have continued, but I’m not certain I would have followed the PAR model. I think the federation can get stuck replicating models that have worked for one program in another context. You can’t always apply models to different contexts and expect them to work.

Actually, one of the problems we are facing now as admin staff is that the current executive is doing the same thing; they are replicating a previously successful model in a different context. Without going into too much detail, our 2005 campaign was extremely effective and a great privilege to work on, but it was a once in a lifetime experience. Teachers are exhausted and demoralized. They are understandably reluctant to stick their necks out all the time and can’t keep up this level of battle. Right, you mentioned the fight, fight, fight, campaign, campaign, campaign pressure. Mmhm, it’s not sustainable. It also works against social justice because if you spend all of your time and resources riling people up to do a single campaign, you become unable to spend your time and money on a range of other initiatives.

So when it comes to campaigns, what would you recommend? I believe they are often necessary in a political climate lacking government goodwill to organized labour, but
they can be very resource intensive and are not generally sustainable. As I said, it was an incredible privilege to work on our 2005 campaign, but it was very resource hungry and it was three years in the making. It also addressed a legislation affecting all teachers. The current FSA campaign promoted by the executive only directly affects teachers in grades 4 and 7, and it reduces their professional autonomy by asking them to refuse to give the tests. Teachers on the whole are not anarchists. They tend to be law abiding citizens who can’t be expected to do illegal things all the time, particularly when the instruction to do so is issued from the top down. I agree that standardized testing is a problem, but we need another strategy to deal with it. We can’t simply replicate our 2005 strategy without several more years of preparation, which would have some implications for the federation’s social justice work since the human resources used to feed crises are typically pulled from our social justice programming. Yes, that’s actually one of the few points of agreement so far among the activists I’ve interviewed. Mmm.

Now, this may be slightly off the topic, but I came here to conduct my study because of the BCTF’s strong reputation as a social justice union. Can you identify a moment in time when the federation started referring to itself as a social justice union? No, not really. Really? Hmmm. I’m asking because a number of activists have suggested that the term “social justice” began to be used in 1998 when the discrete Status of Women program and Program Against Racism were replaced with the Social Justice umbrella Committee. That might explain why some activists are distancing themselves from the term, but unlike “A Union of Professionals” which appeared on our tagline and letterhead in 1987 and is still being used; social justice is one of our founding principles that lacks a firm birth date. I didn’t see it written into the constitution as a main goal. No, it’s not there but it is conceptually integrated into our work.

Can you walk me through each of the federation divisions and tell me how it has been integrated? The culture of the organization has always been to get support for working and learning conditions, so just through that culture, when compared with the more traditional model of business unionism which focuses on wages, pensions, and benefits, our approach has involved a social justice bent. Also, right from our inception in 1917, we were open to men and women and people of all races and religions which was not the
case for most trade unions at the time. In more recent history, we have structured our organization to respond to the needs of students and teachers.

In Research and Technology (R&T), we bring a critical social justice perspective to our research and strategic development. For example, we use SES vulnerability indices to back up our advocacy for a compensatory education model, and do collaborative research to promote inclusion for students with special needs. The Research division helps us as an organization sniff the breeze and respond to social and educational trends more proactively than is possible when we are forced to react to changes in government legislation and neoliberal educational reform.

The Field Services (FS) division is not necessarily structured to do identity based social justice work but most of the staff in that division came up through the discrete social justice programs, so that always informs their work.

The Professional and Social Issues (PSID) division houses our Aboriginal Education program that is doing good work and a Social Justice Advisory committee with feminist, anti-racist, anti-poverty and anti-homophobia action groups. Staff and volunteers involved in this division also provide social justice workshops on demand to teachers around the province.

Collective Agreements and Protective Services (CAPS) is more traditionally involved in contract enforcement, but as I alluded to earlier, support for teachers’ working conditions has a strong social justice element to it. Also, the Memorandum of Understanding between the provincial government and Aboriginal communities is addressed in this division. The lawyers who work in this division do not necessarily initiate social justice projects but they have been responsive when asked to generate legal opinions on issues related to social justice.

The Communication and Campaigns (CCD) division produces *The Teacher* news magazine that almost always has at least one social justice article in it. Staff in this division take the lead on generating our campaigns, many of which have a social justice bent. Also, like many of the staff in Field Services and PSID, and two out of our three
current Table Officers, a few staff in CCD came up through the federation’s discrete social justice programming.

Finally, in addition to the social justice work done in each of the divisions, we have cross divisional work groups on social justice and Aboriginal education supported by staff representatives from all divisions. They don’t always work as planned, but at best they reduce the separation between divisions. We strive to be a democratic organization. We’re not there yet and like any large organization, we can get bogged down in bureaucracy and hierarchy, but most of us work with a democratic ideal in mind. We don’t always agree on the issues and we often find ourselves competing for resources, but we generally agree on the processes involved and have worked collaboratively on a range of projects and programs dedicated to social justice.

*It sounds like there are many sites for activism within the BCTF.* Yes. *How does it compare with the work you’ve done through other organizations?* This is the only organization I’ve worked in. *What about volunteer organizations?* It is much easier to do advocacy work through the BCTF than through volunteer organizations because it has the structure, supports and resources necessary to make things happen. We don’t have to raise the funds. We just have to generate strategies and do the work. *Are there any disadvantages?* Well, I think you’re probably more restricted by the policies of the organization than you would be in a community-based volunteer organization. That doesn’t create a problem for me because I agree with virtually all organizational policies, but for some people it does.

*Your work and the work of the federation seem almost seamless.* I think that’s true. When I think about what I’ve been able to do, I know it is as a result of the fact that I work for an organization with values and resources that allow for that. The BCTF has been a good organizational fit for me. *You sound grateful to be working here.* I am. I absolutely am. *So, what’s up next for you?* Well, my dilemma at this stage is that I’m getting to an age, well past an age, where most people retire but I don’t really have the desire to stop doing what I’m doing now because if I did retire I would just go out and
look for similar things without having the resources to do the work I am already doing.

So, you'll keep doing this? Yes, until there’s some reason not to.

4.5 Perspective 5, Executive Committee: Everything we do is Social Justice

We are a social justice union. Everything we do is social justice. In hindsight, the removal of our discrete social justice programming was not a great idea, but it doesn’t help to dwell on it. We need to learn from our mistakes and celebrate our accomplishments.

I know how we can start. You can tell me about yourself and then when I finish eating I can tell you about myself. Sure, what would you like to know? Well, how did you get interested in studying social justice teacher unionism? I did my teacher education year in 1997 at a time when teachers in Ontario went out en masse to protest Bill 180. The collective strength of teachers’ parents’ and students’ resolve at Queen’s Park that year taught me an important lesson about teacher activism. I also had the good fortune of having a professor for one of my social foundations classes help us make sense of the Bill. Eight years and a few educational experiences later, I worked with this same professor on a research project exploring union active educators’ commitment to change. We presented a paper at the American Educational Research Association that year, so I had the chance to attend the business meeting of an AERA Teachers’ Work/Teachers’ Unions interest group. I felt at home with the researchers, practitioners and issues and made the decision at that point to conduct my doctoral research on teachers’ unions. Actually, it was at that meeting that I first became aware of your social justice programs. Chris Stewart and Jane Turner gave an engaging presentation on social justice teacher unionism at the BCTF.

Well, in that case, you must know that you’ve walked into a very complex organization. Yeah, I’m getting that sense. Very complex, but it works. What makes it work? It works in terms of member involvement. It works in terms of decision making. It works in terms of decision implementation. It works in terms of delivery. It works in terms of making a difference to teachers. It works in a lot of ways. For example, have you heard about our 2005 campaign? Well, yes, I heard about it on CBC, but I’d rather have a first hand account. Of course!
British Columbians care very deeply about kids, and it’s not just people who have kids. There is this feeling of collective responsibility for an educated future generation, so when the government began to hollow out the system and then deny that any cuts were happening, people noticed. Schools were closing, classes were large, really large and ESL had been cut. There were fewer teacher counsellors, fewer learning assistants and support for special needs kids was being really really poorly delivered because it had been decimated. In 2001, the government passed the Essential Service legislation which took away our right to strike without going through the LRB and getting some rulings. That was in violation of the UN! When the cuts were first being made, we played within the rules they had made. We continued to teach but refused to attend administrator-run meetings. This was a very limited and legally permissible type of job action. Work to rule? Well, in part, yes, but we never stopped meeting with parents or anybody else, just administrators. The government responded to this by bringing in that final legislation, Bill 12. This decision made even our more cautious teachers say “enough is enough!”

We went to our membership for vote after vote after vote. I mean when Bill 12 was introduced we had told our members, this is our plan. “If any legislation comes in, you will get another vote.” So a legislation came in. It was introduced and we held meetings right around the province, in every community. We didn’t just have big meetings in Vancouver. Well, we did. Whenever you get Vancouver teachers together that’s a big meeting, but we had meetings around the province. All 11 EC members went around the province to attend local meetings and when teachers voted, we told them, “This is where we’ve been. This is what the government has done now and these are the doors open to us. If we go on strike now, this is what can happen to us legally, to the BCTF and to the local unions, to teachers collectively and individually, including jail and including losing your house because of exorbitant fines. “First they will come for the leaders and then for you. Knowing that, we want you to vote.” We held nothing back.

We let media into our meetings and they heard the debate. We didn’t cut anybody off. As a matter of fact one of the meetings I was attending, after I finished my speech and was about to describe the legal ramifications, people got up to their feet, stomping and clapping saying “we don’t need that, let’s vote.” I had to put my hand up and say no, “the
ballots will not open until you’ve heard the legal ramifications and we’ve answered your questions.” So we did and then they voted and the vote for an illegal civil disobedience was higher than our legal strike vote. The employer had already gone to court and filed an injunction so we knew we were illegal before we went out, but our teachers walked and the community supported us. They brought us food and stood with us on the picket lines. After we won our first battle in the courts, the provincial government changed the legislation. We took it to the international courts and we won four different times. The ILO condemned this government four different times for its actions against teachers and the government totally ignored it. At the end of the day, the public has a lot of respect for international protocols.

I think teachers gained confidence in our collective voice through the 2005 strike. The campaign helped make us much more aware of and interested in protecting the system. The average member sees his or her collective agreement and professional autonomy, not only as a personal employee benefit, but also as a measure of protection for the quality of public education. We, as teachers, see ourselves quite naturally as the advocates of high quality public education. We are not the only ones, but we have a central role. It’s our profession. It’s what we are, so we should be the frontrunners, right?

Right, well, you have me convinced, but I’m wondering a bit about how you orchestrated the campaign. It was a huge event that must have taken some planning. Oh yeah, we had terrific support from members and staff. I honestly don’t think we could have asked for more support from members or from the community. Which community? The public at large and the media; we had a lot of coverage at the time so BCTF issues became household issues. People were talking at their dinner tables about class size and composition. You could talk to people in the grocery store and they knew what you meant. It was a common household word, well “how is your class size and composition?” When the Bills in 2001/2002 hit us, teachers went into shock. Things we’d fought for and walked the picket lines for were being unilaterally taken away. We’d given up salary to have class size and class composition language. In my local we stayed out an extra week to get more support for special needs kids. All of that was just taken away with the stroke
of a pen. I was in the legislature when the Bill came down and I cried. The first thing you do is cry, and then you organize. How does that happen?

Well, it begins with the executive committee because we are basically responsible for establishing the strategic framework for federation work at any given time. After the devastation of our collective agreement in 2002, we established a five year advocacy plan. Part of that plan involved launching a campaign called Caravan Against the Cuts. You may have heard of that. Yes, I have the fridge magnet. We basically tried to draw public attention to what the funding policies of the government were doing to public education. Well, that was something that the executive strategically would have made a decision about and put the resources there to fund that campaign to make it happen. OK, so the executive committee is responsible for making decisions about campaigns? Yes, well we work collaboratively, but the way things are set up, we are the decision making body of the federation who chooses what strategy we’re going to employ at any given time and allocates the resources to support that. Staff and local presidents do a lot of the work on the ground but it’s under the auspices, if you like, of the executive committee’s strategic planning. What role do staff play?

Research and Technology is the brains of the organization. They provide our data and track trends of interest to the Executive Committee. Field Service is the legs. They are our liaison people who work with the locals. They have two functions. They encourage local implementation of provincial campaigns and they help fiercely independent locals work through their initiatives. When those initiatives have currency at the provincial level, we use them as the foundation for broad based, collective activism. The Communications and Campaigns division then develops and disseminates our strategy. The Collective Agreements and Protective Services division houses our legal support and health and safety program and the Professional and Social Issues division houses our identity based social justice programs. We also have cross divisional work groups that flesh out the political direction set by the executive.

OK, and can you take me through that process, how political decisions are made by the executive? Sure. They are made within a framework of an annual priorities plan that we
take to the AGM. Others are made in the budget setting process when we take a budget to the Representative Assembly for approval. The executive puts into the budget what we think we’re going to need to carry out all of the priorities in the subsequent years. So, those are the two major ways that we do it and then in terms of responding to issues that may arise, for example legislation that comes that we weren’t expecting, we may have to allocate some resources to working on those particular issues. Then we, as the executive, would fill out the details of our strategy. It can be anything from newspaper ads to mobilizing members to school visits. It depends on the nature of the issues we’re trying to address.

Let me give you an example, when the status of the profession was attacked by the Minster of Education, Christie Clarke, she fired counsellors of our Teachers’ College and appointed her own board. So what we did was that we en masse refused to pay our annual fee. The fee was due on December 15th, so in September of 2001 or 2002 we collected letters from just about every individual teacher in the province saying they weren’t going to pay their fees. See, that amazes me. I just can’t see a group of teachers in Ontario deciding en masse not to pay their fees to the OCT. How did you manage to make that happen? Well, we had a campaign. I was in the local office at the time. We created a little presentation and went out to every school and we spoke about the implications of a profession that doesn’t have control of the regulations of the profession through the College, how that was de-professionalizing teachers, how it was undermining the quality of public education. We went into every school in the province and held a member vote. Then we had the letters. By December, the Minster had to backtrack. She announced that there would be a new College council constructed and two thirds of it would be made of elected representatives of the BCTF, so we regained control of our College and that taught us the strength of our collective voice. It was an example of how we can affect change, and actually we follow the same model with other issues. We say “what did we do with the College of Teachers? In that case, this is what we have to do now.” We inform teachers, we have school visits, we have elections, and we have membership votes. We ask the members to vote every step of the way. We had five member votes on the 2005 strike. We always consult the members and the members are always in charge of
that action. We have policy that guides our job action and we now have policy that guides our political action.

I’m a Saul Alinsky kind of person. What does that mean? Saul was a social organizer in the 60s and 70s. He was an activism guru who talked about how you organize communities. We in the federation take it so seriously that we have codified our political action—this is how we are going to do our collective political action. He wrote a book called “Rules for Radicals.” Radicals need rules? Yeah, well it’s not just rules it also means that we know we will be taking political action. It’s part of being a teacher. Public policy is political. I’m not talking partisan politics. Our work and our profession are embedded in public policy. It IS public policy because we are public education teachers. We must be political. So, in moments when you are shut out of formal government decision making at the provincial level, how do you make policy? Well, right now we are engaged in an overt campaign of resistance against the FSAs, Foundation Skills Assessments. We are going to do what we can to resist the testing and accountability agenda by focussing on the FSA which is the basis of government reporting. That’s what we’re going to do and we are going to achieve it too! I have no doubt.

I would like to hear more about your involvement in these campaigns but can we move from the collective to the individual for a bit? What do you mean? I’d like to hear more about how you got involved in teaching and the federation. Oh, OK, I remember in high school I had very limited career choices. It was nursing, teaching, secretarial work or airline stewardess. Airline stewardesses were supposed to be beautiful. What does that mean? In those days there weren’t all kinds of beautiful, and I knew I couldn’t be a nurse; I wasn’t cut out for that kind of work and I didn’t want to be a boring secretary. But beyond that, I felt drawn to teaching because of an engaging, politically aware history teacher I had in middle school. She used to dress up in costume and bring different historical periods to life, so I became a teacher. Teaching felt natural for me and it worked with my skills. Also, my mother wanted me to go to university so I got a lot of support for my career choice. I was the first one in my family to have a grade 12 education. I also had the good fortune to be a Centennial traveler in grade 12. What’s that? It was a high school program paid for by the federal government. This was in the
late 60s, at the beginning of the Trudeau era. For three weeks in the summer they would take groups of students who applied. Our school board office was in Sydney, British Columbia and we were sent to Sydney, Nova Scotia by sea and train. We stopped in Halifax and made a visit to an African Canadian community. That helped me become aware of some of the issues black people faced in Nova Scotia which I hadn’t realized before. The other issue was residential schools. I remember as a kid, when we went to the beach, the road we took went through a reserve and I remember asking my parents about the difference between our homes and theirs. A few years later when I went to junior secondary school for a year, I realized some of the kids in my class lived in those homes. That left an impression on me, but I didn’t really think about it until my second year of teaching when I was working in a community that served kids on the reserve. Later in life, I got involved in the peace movement and women’s issues. I met men who thought they would help me with everything including the way I was going to think and form my life. That didn’t work so well for me so I decided not to get married.

I couldn’t afford to do a full degree so I did two years then taught for a year then did another year then taught and did the rest of my degree through summer school and correspondence. By the end, I had done the equivalent of a masters’ but without the thesis. In my district, the pay is similar for a masters and what they call a five plus thirty, so I did the five plus thirty. After teaching elementary school for a few years, I went to Europe and studied French. When I returned, the little French I had was enough to change my career. As a result of having a bit of French, I started teaching core French to students in grades 4 to 7. Around that time I met someone at a local union meeting who was not interested in thinking for me and we decided to get married. It wasn’t part of the plan but has worked out fine. My husband and I taught in a strong labour town for two years then moved to the city where I had always wanted to work. While our kids were growing up, I focussed on teaching and didn’t seek out much union involvement, but it found me. I joined the district French club which morphed into a multicultural committee and somehow I got to chair it.

As chair of the multicultural committee, I got a call from the BCTF Program Against Racism co-ordinator who invited me to become a PD associate for the federation. I
helped create some workshops and learned adult education skills. It was really a phenomenal experience. We had one or two conferences a year and sometimes had meetings on infusing multiculturalism into the curriculum and dealing with the racism against Aboriginal students in schools. We had brainstorming sessions at zone meetings and came up with new initiatives which we were then able to bring back to our locals. I led cultural sensitivity and anti-discrimination response workshops all over BC and got a feel for locals around the province.

This work got me involved in a district level multicultural curriculum committee where we responded to the needs of ESL students. It was really great because I was able to use my BCTF contacts, knowledge and workshop experience to provide PD to my colleagues at a time when there was a lot of PD money in the district. I also got involved in multiculturalism camps where we did leadership and trust building exercises with students to uncover and deal with discriminatory practices. But mostly I spent time planting the seed of social justice with my colleagues around the province. They tended to be defensive at first but many of them eventually came around. I’ve learned over time that people go nowhere when they’re uncomfortable. I think that might have been one of the differences between PAR and the Status of Women.

Can you tell me more about that? The Status of Women were extremely active, well so were we but it was just more people, more women involved in the Status of Women. There were some men but there was a real focus on the Status of Women. They did an excellent job and we were doing a good job as the Program Against Racism. We met at the same time so you often knew people in the other program and a number of us did both kinds of work in our lives since many of us, even at the Program Against Racism were women, but at zone meetings and AGMs activists tended to focus on one or the other. We were all quite supportive of one another but we didn’t necessarily work together. Was the focus of the work different? Well, I would say the Status of Women did a lot of advocacy work in the federation and the Program Against Racism were assisting community groups to advocate for themselves. We both did work in schools but PAR was never as large a group. We were also a quieter group. Why do you think that was? Probably because of the
size and just the way people were involved. The Status of Women was probably more dominant.

*I’ve been wondering something. The people I’ve spoken to who have been involved with PAR have been mostly white and the people I’ve spoken to from SW have been exclusively women.* Yes, yes. So, I’m wondering if the difference in programs has anything to do with people’s experiences and the salience of the issues in people’s lives. Yeah, I think it’s a point to be raised and even today most of the people on the social justice advisory committee are of European heritage which is also true of the school I was working at before I became a table officer. If we had real representation at the school, the teachers would be mostly Chinese and partly Filipino but that is not the case. It’s partly a problem of teacher workforce demographics. Not everybody has the same kind of attraction or access to teaching. The other thing that might not be as obvious to you if you’re just interviewing a few people is that some of the leaders and participants in PAR are of European heritage but come from backgrounds where they have experienced discrimination, like Dukabor and Jewish teachers. That hasn’t been the case for me but I know others have brought their experiences with discrimination to their work. Also, while many of the teacher activists in the program have been of European heritage, a few PAR co-ordinators have been Aboriginal, Black and South Asian. So, going back to your question, I don’t know if the difference between programs is only about experience. OK, that’s helpful. Thanks.

So, as all this PAR work was going on, I got swept up in the fight for full collective bargaining rights and questions about solidarity with the labour movement. In 1983, when I was president of my local, we had a provincial government onslaught on a whole front of social policy. There were cuts to welfare programs and attacks on union rights and we as teachers took the lead in opposing that right wing agenda. We went out on an illegal strike hoping that we would be the vanguard of a general strike. I became quite active in helping to organize that strike but it was really disappointing in the end because the other unions, affiliates of the BC Federation of Labour didn’t end up going out. We weren’t even a union at the time. We were just an association. It’s interesting because we
knew at that point already that we were a social justice union and we weren’t even a union yet!

It was interesting when you think about it because labour had a nominal leadership role in that event. We at the BCTF went out on strike but the Kelowna Accord that collapsed it was done by labour. It is something I will always be proud of but it was also a real learning experience for teachers. What did you learn? We learned that the BC Federation of Labour was afraid of the lack of controllability of a general strike. We weren’t in the house of labour and we definitely weren’t under the control of centrist labour leaders and so there was a fear and a lack of courage, that’s what I think. I think it set us back in terms of our solidarity with the labour movement. We would probably have become members of the BC Fed and CLC two decades earlier had that not happened. What made you eventually join in 2003? Well actually we almost joined in 1996 but the membership turned it down, partly because it was a grass roots initiative without much leadership support and partly because we had an NDP government so people weren’t as interested in fighting. In 2003 when the Liberal government stripped our collective agreement, members were more likely to consider labour affiliation. Another thing that helped was that the federation leadership in 2003 took the motion to the AGM, did some background work and got resources to support it through the RA. But our action was driven all along by a sense that one has to be part of the greater movement toward social equity.

It’s funny, you know. Unions are a structure and vehicle for social equity and at the same time they can be one of the most conservative societal forces. Historically, unions resisted women’s rights and racial integration and some of them right now are resisting environmental sustainability because it’s a jobs issue, right? So there is a sense that we have to define unionism as a vehicle for social justice and that by being inside that tent we can do that—we can make a difference by creating a greater vehicle for social change within the labour movement. I think those of us who voted for labour affiliation in 1996 and 2003 saw it as an opportunity to take a leadership role in the labour movement and share in a greater collective voice. And those who voted against it? They probably feared that the conservative elements in labour would blunt our voice.
What about conservative elements in the federation? Oh, I was talking about big labour. I’m very proud of us. But sure, there is an element of conservatism, even in our social justice union. I was at a new teachers’ conference yesterday and we had a question “why are my dues going to social programming?” That’s a question you get for sure. We have a fixed amount set aside from dues for international programs, 1.76% or whatever that goes automatically to international programs but there are people who would say, “No! For crying out loud, it should all go to member welfare.” So there’s always been a tension in the union based on a competition for resources and whether or not we should be spending dues on things that are not directly related to member welfare, but one thing we are very very clear about is our identity as a social justice union of professionals. I think we’ve evolved in a sense because we are now very clearly a union that takes care of its members’ welfare without being a business union. We distinguish ourselves that way.

Social justice is the core of everything we do. That’s why I’m here. That’s why I do what I do. There’s no other reason. That’s what it’s all about for me and for a lot of us here, staff, executive, teacher activists. My initial involvement was through a social justice program and I have remained committed to that throughout my career. You know, once we gained collective bargaining rights, I was even involved in negotiating some clauses to support women teachers. How did that come about? It actually started as a favour to a friend who taught at my school and was the chair of the local Status of Women program. You know how you get your friends to do things for you? Well, in 1987 this friend asked if I would be willing to help her out with some research she had been doing. We were in negotiation for our first agreement and she wanted to raise the issue of paid maternity leave. Unfortunately, on the day of the negotiations she had a family emergency and asked if I would step in for her. I told her I didn’t know anything about it but she said “just go, they need a woman.”

It was an all male negotiating team. In those days when a woman became pregnant, she got nothing, she just got to go on EI for a few weeks. Her husband, on the other hand, automatically got three days which could be extended to five with the superintendent’s permission. The logic behind this decision blew me away, so I asked a question. “If my husband and I both teach at the same school in the same district in the same province at
the same time as teachers of the same subjects with the same qualifications, why are you willing to pay him up to five days and me nothing?” At that time we were asking for a top up to EI, nothing beyond, and they just had no answers. They kept saying, “we can’t do that. We can’t do it.” It drove me crazy because you’re saying to two people, because you’re a woman, we’re not going to give you a penny but if you’re a man, you get 3 to 5 days paid. So I asked why the 3 to 5 days? The explanation given from across the table was that “well, we know sometimes labour can last for 72 hours and if you’ve been up for that long you’d need to recover.” So, I said, “using that same premise, shouldn’t the woman also have some time to recover?” After that, I began to look at the collective agreement differently. How could you separate member welfare from social justice?

As a result of this success, some people in my local tried to encourage me to run for provincial executive but I said no because I knew it would be all consuming and I didn’t want to neglect my children. What made you eventually run? My children grew up and didn’t need as much direct care so I agreed to run for BCTF Member at Large. I was elected and was then encouraged at the first EC meeting to run for first Vice President. I thought it was a little soon but the President of the day and a few friends convinced me that I could do the job based on what they had heard when I had come to the microphone to speak. I don’t think I ever had concerns that I wouldn’t be able to do the job because one thing I do know about myself is that whatever I take on, I’ll give 100%. I’ll give it my best shot, but I knew it was a big commitment and I wanted to make sure it would be ok for my family. When I ran for Vice President, in my heart of hearts, I was thinking it wasn’t going to happen, but I was elected. I think the look on my face said it all, but life happens like that. Situations that you’ve never dreamed of present themselves.

OK, and you ran as part of the Coalition caucus? Yes. I’ve been hearing quite a bit about the caucuses. That doesn’t surprise me. Yeah, the only thing is that I can’t quite figure out how formal they are. They’re very formal. We do everything very formally around here. The two caucuses cause huge angst and consternation. There is a centrist one that has had a variety of names—Teachers First, Teachers For an Independent Voice, Teachers for a United Federation—and a left wing progressive caucus which has for the last 20 years anyway been called Teachers’ Viewpoint. Viewpoint activism is like these
guys here. *Miniature bobble-head turtles?* Yes, a turtle only makes progress when it sticks out its neck. So there’s always been a rivalry between those two caucuses and some years ago, after being in the political wilderness for a while, the Teachers’ Viewpoint caucus merged with some other folk to become a Coalition for Change, and the Coalition has formed a much broader-based caucus. We will be passing out these brochures at the AGM in a couple of weeks to install the Coalition candidates. In the past the other group has done the same thing but now I guess they’re characterizing themselves as independents so they won’t have a unified slate.

*Ok, so you said that one is more progressive than the other.* I guess I shouldn’t have said that. It’s very arrogant to say one is more progressive. A columnist once wrote that in the BCTF you have the left, the very left and the very very left. *I remember reading that somewhere.* I shy away from that but Viewpoint does have a set of principles or values or ideologies that are definitional. Of course they seem to be breaking down right now and I find that sad. *What about Coalition?* Coalition was this opportunistic marriage of people who recognized or felt that the other caucus was making the federation too centralized, too divorced from members, too top down and so the Coalition was formed because Viewpoint wasn’t able to have any electoral success for some years. Since that marriage, there has been an evolution of principles. It started as an electoral coalition with minimal connecting threads but that has evolved over the years so that we can now boast a set of unifying principles including being member driven, having strong locals, bringing back local bargaining, social justice and defence of the profession. *That sounds like Viewpoint.* Umm hmm, but the idea of a Teachers’ Viewpoint made more sense when we had principals as members. *OK, so is it fair to say that Coalition takes a Viewpoint ideology into the current organizational and legislative context?* Yes, but maybe a little less left-leaning.

*So, now just to get my timing right, when did Coalition form?* We were first elected in 1999 so we formed in the year leading up to the 99 AGM. *And that was the year after the social justice programming was being restructured, right?* Yeah, that was a sad time in federation history. The leadership proposed a motion to collapse our social justice programs into one advisory committee. It was called an “umbrella” structure and all the
money that had gone to SW and PAR was collapsed into one pot. The networks were cut off, a local grant structure was set up and locals could only send one social justice representative to zone meetings. Over successive years the pot was shrunk and along with it came a great reduction in our Capital SJ work. What do you mean by Capital SJ? Well, we ARE a social justice union and we continued to be one even with the umbrella structure because we worked on public education which I define as a social justice issue, but our capital SJ work like our SW program and our PAR program shrivelled because we cut it off at the knees. We didn’t have any more contacts in the locals and that was a very hard fought loss. It brought about the diminishment of our work on feminism and racism. The local grant structure resulted in a series of little projects here and there but no co-ordinated action for systemic change. Some of the projects were so trivial. I think one was about furniture in the staff room. You’re kidding. No.

And how did this umbrella structure come about? It’s always a coalition of forces that brings about these changes. In this case it was fiscal responsibility, bigotry and the increasing centralization of the federation. The bigotry was not wide spread but the members who were racist, homophobic and sexist made their voices heard. There were also people with religious convictions. So there was the money, the bigotry and a third issue that people don’t generally talk about. What was that? The tension between central control of the federation and decentralized local control. We have a bunch of advisory committees that pull the executive committee in different directions when it comes to resource allocation. This decision-making structure can be efficient but it can also result in excessive centralized control. It’s very difficult to responsibly and efficiently weigh competing interests. I’m more aware of that now as a provincial table officer than I was as a local teacher activist. The demands on your time can be onerous when you have a large number of advisory committees, so one of the things TUF did was to reduce their leadership load by merging social justice programs. From the perspective of SW and PAR activists it was a travesty, but from a management perspective it could be rationalized. This change angered the social justice activists, but it did not alone bring down the TUF leadership.
What brought them down? Their unilateral centralization of social justice and collective bargaining in combination with their plan to follow the government’s district amalgamation plan brought them down because it made their centralized control both visible and distasteful to members across ideological perspectives. Even former supporters began to characterize the leadership as one that attacked local rights and reduced member control. The Coalition I belong to was elected with a mandate to re-establish local authority and member control over its union. As a coalition of social justice activists and advocates of decentralization, we developed an understanding that local member control was also a social justice issue.

So, is it always the case that decentralized structures support social justice better than decentralized structures? That’s a good question. Actually, three years ago after conducting a review of social justice programming, the EC proposed an alternative social justice model based on action groups. In effect, we were using centralized authority to support social justice, but we did it in a way that was responsive to local needs. We realized at the local and central level that the umbrella didn’t work too well. Our federation had won awards for our discrete social justice work. We won national awards for our work on anti-racism and national acclaim for our work on women’s rights, right? And we were beginning to bring about change on homophobia in schools when we experienced this setback. The umbrella structure made sense in terms of integration but it lacked focus and the necessary pressure to bring about systemic change. The thing about Canadians is that we’re always looking for nice language that doesn’t offend anybody and so people don’t want to talk about some of the isms, but unless you deal with racism, sexism, homophobia and classism head on, you can’t make change. What we found with the umbrella structure was that the concept of social justice was too general. People didn’t know where to start. There were so many aspects of social justice work. When we negotiate, that’s an aspect of social justice. When you’re doing health and safety, that’s social justice; our pension administration, rehab work and even our curriculum fights have elements of social justice. And getting new furniture for the staff lounge? Well, yeah, I don’t know about that one, but anyway, it wasn’t clear what exactly the social justice committee was supposed to work on.
After a while even the erstwhile supporters of the umbrella recognized that it lacked focus so we conducted a social justice review and responded to people’s concerns by merging elements of the discrete and integrated programs. We did this by filling out the spokes of the umbrella with feminist, anti-racist, anti-poverty and anti-homophobia action groups. Committee members still have the opportunity to work across social justice issues but they break into smaller issue-based sub-groups to work on projects. The new integrated structure with action groups has the best of both worlds; it allows activists to commit their passion and energy to specific issues (like the old discrete programs had allowed them to do) and a mechanism to collaborate across issues (like the newer umbrella model had encouraged). One of the things that we are most excited about is the social justice lens that has come out of one of the subgroups. I believe it will help us integrate our efforts and connect local activist across the province.

OK, so it sounds like you were not in favour of the umbrella but that you’re willing to work with the inherited structure. Yeah, I’m the first to admit we were all set back by the collapse of SW and PAR, but I really believe we have pulled through it with a more integrated program. Also, the shift was never total. It’s true that SW and PAR no longer exist in their original form but most of the SW and PAR activists are still involved and even those who have no interest in the umbrella are still active in other areas. It felt like a travesty at the time, but I’m happy to report that TUF didn’t have the power to erase activist relationships or experiences, both of which have made the organization stronger. I came out of PAR programming and so did another table officer. Many SW activists are currently involved in the Feminist Caucus and some former PAR activists have become involved in a Provincial Specialist Association called Educators Against Racism. So SW and PAR activists are still involved, even if not in the same ways. And then there’s the new generation of activists who have been instrumental in bringing about change in H&H and Aboriginal Education.

What would you say your impact on the federation has been? Well, I’m more of a cog in the wheel than anything else but I can generally remain calm when others around me are losing it and I can agree to disagree without becoming disagreeable or personalizing issues. I think both of those things have helped me in this role. We all bring different
strengths to the federation. That’s one of the things that makes this work so interesting. We are a social justice union and a union of professionals. We build safe and equitable schools and we take action. It is not enough just to talk. It is absolutely our responsibility to be involved in social and educational development in the province and around the world. In spite of our organizational location under layers of management and a collective agreement that can always be trumped by provincial legislation, we are an effective organization. We have a good communications department, the ear of the government, a commitment to social justice and a hard working staff. As a result of this infrastructure, we have been effective in challenging discrimination, informing public policy, supporting member welfare and advocating for an accessible, high quality public education system.

*It sounds like you’re proud of the federation.* Yeah, the only thing I worry about is the centralizing tendency I was telling you about earlier. As you become entrenched in power, you become more concerned about retaining it than sticking your head out and making progress. I just hope our Coalition caucus will be replaced by a new left wing caucus of young people before we get to that point. In the meantime, I am still engaged and making a difference. I have been involved in the international programs as part of a continental network of women educators looking at the impacts of the free trade agreements on public education. I’ve also chaired the BCFed women’s committee and become involved in the CTF social justice committee. I’m involved in the IDEA network and have recently become a member of a tri-national committee—Canada, US, and Mexico—that examines the impact of NAFTA on public education in North America. This work is a labour of love more than anything else, but let’s be honest. I would never have had the opportunity to do any of it had I not become involved in my union. The BCTF gave me an opportunity not only to teach, but to learn and act. It has transformed me from an observer and thinker to an advocate with a vehicle to support my activism.

4.6 Perspective 6, PAR & Aboriginal Education: There are More than Enough Resources for All of Us.

*If this unnecessarily competitive struggle over resources is what social justice teacher unionism is about, I am NOT a social justice activist.*
If somebody had asked me when I started working, “Do you want to be a teacher? Do you see yourself as a teacher?” I would have said “no bloody way!” I don’t have any romantic stories about how I liked the smell of chalk or the smell of erasers. My first teaching job was not by choice, it was almost by force through Indian Affairs. I had not done well in my first year of university and got a job as a telephone operator over the summer. So, I was happily working as a telephone operator when I got a call in September from the department of Indian Affairs saying I had to go teach at an Indian day school in the federal education system. I told them I couldn’t go because I didn’t like teaching, I didn’t know how to teach and I wasn’t qualified to teach and they told me to get the next train. So, I left the telephone office, packed a suitcase and was on the train to start teaching the next day. *This may be a stupid question, but was there any way to say no?* Well, no. I owed Indian Affairs because they had paid for my first year of university so I wouldn’t even have considered saying no to them.

I was 18 years old and had 45 students in my class. It was a 2/3 split. I was a terrible teacher, as you can imagine, however there was this incredible service in the district. They had a primary consultant who used to go around to all the rural schools. So, this woman came to observe me and was in shock because I was teaching like the nuns. Part of my schooling was in residential school, so all I knew were these cruel nuns as teachers. That’s what I was like. I was like the Gestapo. That’s all I knew. Anyway, she was horrified but she didn’t show her horror. What she did after observing me was ask if she could take over the class after recess. She and I co-taught for the afternoon and then she caught the train home. She came to visit me once a month. She’d teach in the morning and give me a break. So what she was doing was modeling good practice and bringing me a bunch of teaching ideas that she had observed around the district. By the end of the year, the superintendent came to evaluate me and said I would be an excellent teacher. He suggested that I go back to university. I went back and did very well. I got my Elementary Basic, then Elementary Advanced and eventually my Bachelor and Master of Education. So that was the start of my teaching. Those poor kids! *Did they ever complain?* Oh no. Nobody would complain because the Indian Agent was in the community and he was like the judge and jury. He was a terrible guy so the parents didn’t dare complain, the kids didn’t dare complain and I didn’t dare complain.
After getting my Elementary Basic, I applied to teach in the public school system. I taught on and off in the 60s while I was having my family and by the mid 60s it was hard to find work because of the overabundance of teachers, so I registered for my Bachelor of Education. After I got my B.Ed., I subbed for a few months then got a job teaching grade 6/7. I like working with kids. They’re a lot of fun. You can do things with them. They’re still so idealistic and they’re fearless. They’re just full of all kinds of energy that you can really work with. Adults are harder to deal with. I had a really great time with the kids, but I was working in a toxic school environment. The administrator was mean and ruled her house by setting it up with a handful of people in the inner circle who knew everything. The rest of us were on the outs. *What made people in or out?* Well, I think it was that they would do whatever she said and make her look good. She gossiped about people and it wasn’t until I was getting to the point of just getting sick going to school that I actually went in there and said that I couldn’t participate or collude with this negative talk. I was so stupid and naïve; I told her that hearing her talk about my colleagues made me feel like I couldn’t trust her. She didn’t say anything to me, but she started to treat me quite badly. I was working with another person who wanted us to be a team that would undermine and fight the administrators but I didn’t feel I could trust him either. He would often make these derogatory comments about the kids we were working with, the Aboriginal kids in particular, and I remember just feeling really sick about it. I felt like he was not trustworthy to me. I rely a lot on my intuition. I just stopped wanting to collude or get involved in anything with him but that didn’t mean I wanted to be with the principal either and so I was really torn. I also had two support workers, one of whom was not willing to be with the kids and create a nice place. I said something to him and to the principal but she went back to them and started blabbing about what I had said and that was just a disaster.

So, that’s what pushed me into local union stuff. I made sure to read my collective agreement from cover to cover. I don’t like getting my information second hand and didn’t trust the people in the union office at the time. They were part of this faction. *Teachers for a United Federation?* No, that didn’t start till the 80s but this group was just as conservative. Anyway, I started to feel more comfortable with them, whatever they called themselves, because I realized I could speak my mind without feeling the need to
sensor anything with them. They already knew I had another agenda. **So you felt more comfortable with them than you did with the other faction?** Yes, and the reason is, I don’t need to belong. Being an Aboriginal teacher, I don’t belong already. So, I already knew that and I met some other teachers who were not affiliated with the conservative caucus. They were more affiliated with Viewpoint, but you know, once they know you’re there, that you’re a friend of the family, they’re kinder and they’ll let you know others. **That sounds kind of cliquey.** It’s really cliquey. I think it’s gross but as someone who was trying to keep Aboriginal kids at the centre of my work, I needed both groups to listen to me. **So, you’ve worked across the groups.** I had to. I couldn’t afford not to. I wouldn’t have been very effective. I mean, I thought about joining Viewpoint, but I didn’t and I’m glad about that. I just think it’s unnecessary. It’s a little late in my career now, but if I had decided to run at some point, I think I would have done it as an independent because as an independent you don’t owe anybody anything, even though people assume right now that “independent” is part of Teachers for a United Front.

Well, anyway, I got out of the toxic school by putting in for a transfer. I took some summer courses and extra session courses and took over as the teacher librarian. I really enjoyed that work because I could work with students in a different way. I really liked the flexibility I had in helping them with their homework and getting them interested in reading and getting them to be comfortable in the library. A lot of elementary schools have library rules saying that you have to be totally quiet, but when I took over I encouraged them to work together. I didn’t let them go crazy, but the library didn’t have to be perfectly silent. The other thing I liked was the ability to build up resources for the teachers in the different subject areas. That flexibility led to the improvement of teacher resources. So then while I was a teacher librarian, I joined the Library Teachers’ Association. It’s a specialist association, a PSA with the BCTF. The librarians were trying to get together every couple of months to share ideas on what the up and coming resources were that we might want to give our schools and at the time our library really had quite a healthy budget. So, anyway, because of this being a BCTF thing, I started to take an interest in the union, beyond just the collective agreement. I started to get a better understanding of how BCTF politics filtered down to the local level. I also learned more about how school boards functioned.
Now, in the meantime, I was involved in the BC Native Woman’s Society. We had three issues that were our priorities. One was the adoption of Aboriginal children. Children were being taken away from their homes by social services because of overcrowding or because of a lack of adequate diet. Up north, the children were eating whale meat and seal and weren’t getting their beef and vegetables. Our homes were considered improperly clean because maybe some homes had fish hanging and drying in the house. It was just based on white, middle class standards, not our standards. All these children were being taken away and given to white families. Once the children were taken away, the parents got depressed and started drinking and gave up hope, so the BC Native Women’s society was fighting for parents to have their rights to be able to have their children. That was one thing we struggled for. The other thing was closure of the residential schools and the other thing was section 12-1b of the Indian Act. This was for women who married non-Indian men. The Act blocked their status so I became really heavily involved in that and there were a lot of other women who were involved. Through these struggles, I became a representative on a lot of provincial Aboriginal groups.

Residential schools are closed now but the legacy is alive. It’s criminal that we don’t provide adequate services to Aboriginal learners, but until somebody takes the public school system to the Human Rights Commission, we need to do something to support the kids. In 1979, I applied and was hired on as the Native Education Co-ordinator in a northern school district. I thought I would try to make things better for the Indian kids in the public education system, but while I was out fighting for their rights, my own rights were being violated. I had my Bachelor of Education at the time and had been making good money as a teacher. When I took the job, I took a $10,000 drop in salary or wages which was not right. I found out they should have paid me a teacher’s salary because I was a certified teacher but they paid me as uncertified staff. After I found that out, I stopped trusting the board but I stayed on because I needed to keep the kids at the centre of my work. After the first year they wanted to renew my contract but I said I would only come back if they gave me a teachers’ salary with the increments that I was entitled to. They agreed and I did that work from 1979 to 1987.
Being a woman, I thought part of the reason I didn’t get the salary I was entitled to was that I was a woman. A man would probably have gotten full teacher wages. I think number one, I was a woman. No. Number one, I was Aboriginal. Number two, I was a woman. So, that got me involved in Status of Women issues and Aboriginal rights issues at the BCTF. We brought employment discrimination to the board’s attention and advocated for affirmative action type policy. We also started looking at the placement of Aboriginal kids because they were not being challenged and they were being placed in lower streams of education. There wasn’t a high expectation that they would do well and go on to university. And that became a self-fulfilling prophesy. I could see what was happening here was racism in action so I became a member of the Committee Against Racism at the BCTF. I became really active as a member of that committee looking at racism and the impact it had on teachers and students and the community. We were also looking at getting Aboriginal issues to teachers for staff development. At that time the administrators were part of the BCTF so some of us worked together to improve the conditions of Aboriginal kids and teachers in schools.

Eventually, because I was known to the BCTF as someone who had been active on PAR initiatives at the local and provincial level, I applied to be the PAR co-ordinator and got the job. I thought this was just going to be the greatest job because you have the support of teachers and a supportive working environment and good pay, but it wasn’t. Now, I don’t know if it was the personality of the president, the politics or just how things work inside the BCTF, but I had a hard time. I was always pushing for an anti-racist agenda and people would just say “stop your whining. What’s wrong with you? Don’t whine.” I was saying, “Racism is a problem. You’re seeing it.” The newspapers were full of articles. The Indo-Canadian students were really having a difficult time in the school system and the ESL programs were totally being attacked, you know “why can’t the Asians just learn English? Why should we have to foot the bill for this? Why should teachers have to make allowance for these kids?” We were looking at affirmative action but it took us two years just to craft a motion for the AGM, and it didn’t even pass.

The job of PAR co-ordinator was exhausting. I met monthly with the committee against racism, nine teacher activists from various school boards around the province who were
appointed by the executive committee. They directed the program. They were extremely dedicated people and I really liked working with them. In addition to that there was a large group of professional development associates around the province. We wrote workshops collaboratively and presented them to schools and districts that requested them. Each year we trained more PD associates at our annual conference. Now, I don’t think PD is a great way to approach racism because it’s not a matter of ignorance or learning, but it’s very difficult to convince an organization of teachers that anti-racism can’t be taught. Anyway, I found out pretty quickly that I wasn’t hired to make that kind of suggestion. So that was another difficult aspect of the job. What I did try to do was to shift our workshops from focussing on the kids to focussing on the teachers’ privilege, but those workshops were less popular and not all PD associates were able to present things that way.

Another part of the job was to work with local committees against racism. All representatives from these committees came together for a conference each year and they had smaller zone meetings that were held all over the province in nine geographic zones. The meetings were co-ordinated by each of the nine activists on the committee, but there was always unstructured time to get together and collaborate on different projects. Local PAR chairs came to zone meetings and brought the ideas back to their local committees to work on. It was this local activism that gave the program its power. We also ran race relations camps all over the province with district resource support. There were always requests coming in by phone because part of my job, in addition to making these things happen, was to raise awareness about the program and resources that were available in schools throughout the province.

And then on top of the work that was actually part of the job description, I had to trouble shoot on everything anti-racist in the building. I mean, the BCTF is still a pretty white organization. It was a little easier with the Status of Women because most teachers are women. The SW co-ordinator had to deal with a lot of the same resistance because women have never been the majority of people on staff, but they had 50-60% of the membership while we had 10% at most. At times I would avoid people because I thought, “I’m sick of this. Stop asking me to tell you if what you’re doing is racist or poor
bashing. Do the work yourself” So, I got exhausted, but then I realized I couldn’t stop because Aboriginal kids were consumers of educational services and I didn’t trust other people to do the work. They just didn’t have the analysis. I felt exhausted by it but I also realized that these were my colleagues. They were smart and good at navigating the system, and some of them could be helpful at times.

The BCTF can be a very effective political organization but it doesn’t look after its employees that well. This is especially the case for term staff assigned to social justice work. As PAR co-ordinator, I had to justify our program regularly, so I had less time to spend on my work. Every time anybody in the executive committee or representative assembly had a brain fart, the structure of the program would change and I’d have to justify the money going to it. It was a constant. The other thing was that when it came to campaigns or bargaining everybody pitched in, but in PAR and SW we did everything. We did our own research, communications, PD, internal advocacy, external advocacy, field services and campaigning. We were even responsible for collective bargaining in a way since it was up to us to negotiate anti-racist and feminist clauses into local contracts.

The work was difficult and exhausting, but it had some good parts. One of the things I enjoyed was our collaborative curriculum development with the CTF. As PAR co-ordinator, I had the opportunity to work with teacher representatives from across the country on an anti-racism booklet and teachers’ guide. It was a resource that got used in schools across the country. The PAR program was focussed on work in education but we also connected with community organizations in the province that were dealing with poverty, multiculturalism and racism. We were working with other unions and universities. We were called in by parents, administrators, trustees and community groups to deal with racism in schools. So, in many ways we were doing useful work. Local activists were taking ownership of the program and taking an interest in the union as a result.

_You said something earlier about employment equity._ Yes, that was awful. You would think that the BCTF which was the representative of teachers and supposed to have this social justice bent would really be supportive of it but particularly the male teachers who
were regional reps had a hard time with affirmative action or “employment equity” as we called it. There was very little racial diversity in the classrooms and so the committee against racism developed a really good employment equity proposal. Our people in school districts took it to their local collective bargaining tables and many of them were quite successful. So, the next step for the committee was to ask about our own hiring practices at the BCTF, right? What about practicing what we preach? We worked very hard to develop and support a good clause and took it to the executive committee who passed it and from there it was to go to the AGM, but when we took it to the AGM, the president of the BCTF stood up and defeated it. She stood up from the floor of the AGM after the executive passed it and made a motion to defeat it.

*Can a president do that?* Well, it was completely unexpected, completely unanticipated. You know for a president to go to the floor and make a motion from the floor. Certainly she spoke to something that was influencing the membership, but I think that without her voice they might have passed the motion. There were enough teacher activists in the room from the Status of Women and Program Against Racism to support it and we had managed as BCTF representatives to get better hiring practices in the schools. We just couldn’t get them in our own organization. *Why?* I don’t know for sure because it was pretty chaotic, but I think it’s because there were a lot of teacher activists who were privileged by their race or gender who wanted to work as staff in the federation and felt threatened by the policy. There was a lot of emotion to get through. I’m not around anymore but from what I’ve heard there is still a lot of resistance to the idea. The motion was proposed almost twenty years ago and we still don’t have an employment equity policy in the BCTF, so it can’t just be the fault of one president or one caucus. I recently spoke with a member of the Aboriginal Education committee and she said the struggle is ongoing. They’ve developed a workshop and proposed a retention package that would grant new Aboriginal teachers some seniority. They’re suggesting this as one way to ensure that the few Aboriginal teachers who are hired into the system will not be laid off immediately, but so far the BCTF is fighting it because unions depend on the existing seniority system.
So, it was really a struggle, and not only with the teachers, also with the staff. I found that maybe 20% of the staff in my division understood and supported my position as PAR co-ordinator. There was a lot of animosity towards that and then eventually the budget was cut back, the meetings of the committees were cut back and the same thing happened with the Status of Women. It became very difficult. The BCTF is not an awful organization, and I don’t feel like I was expected to sell out or become an Indian Agent, but I presumed there would be all kinds of support for these kinds of programs and it just wasn’t there. The SW co-ordinator and I often worked together because we were in the same boat. We were trying to keep the programs and services afloat for the students and teachers, but we had different strategies and were set up to compete for resources. How were your strategies different? Well, the Status of Women were more process-oriented and we were more goal-oriented. Actually, that might not be completely true because they were also concerned with goals and we tried to work in ways that would be consistent with anti-racist education. So, I think it was less about the difference in strategy and more about the difference in numbers and the competition set up by the organization.

Well, anyway, after my term was up, the committee against racism made a recommendation to the BCTF that my term be extended, which was quite common practice. There were people on contracts who had four and five year terms, but they didn’t extend mine, and that really annoyed the committee. Do you know why they didn’t extend your term? I don’t know, but I think one of the things that I did that bothered the executive was I never cut the committee out of a decision. If I was asked, for example, for the policy on affirmative action, it was framed as “We have a meeting next week and we need the policy. Please draft it and give it to us.” I would say “no, that’s the committee’s job,” because I honestly believed that I represented the committee, that I represented the teachers, and I was not there to tell the teachers what to do. I honestly believed that. If they make the recommendations, I will draft them and take them to the table and speak to them but I will not make all the decisions.

The Executive Committee didn’t like that. They hated it. The president would say “who should we have as a speaker for such and such?” and I said “I’ll set up a conference call
with the committee and get back to you.” Often what happened at the BCTF was that it was very convenient to get people from the lower mainland and it really bothered the people from way up north, or in the small rural communities that we didn’t have equitable representation. There were people in the smaller communities who would have been excellent resources for the BCTF who were never considered, so I always wanted the committee to have some input and I would not do anything without their input or support. And that’s probably why the executive didn’t want me there. It was much easier for them to have staff under their control so they could just tell us what to do, but I wouldn’t do that.

So, I left the federation and went to work for a school board for a couple of years as a multicultural education officer. I was responsible for about 54,000 kids and about 5,300 staff. I worked with administrators, teachers and others in the district to revise and enact the race relations policy. We also worked at creating curriculum that was more appropriate for a school district whose population was 54% Chinese. So, you know, I was really looking at getting Chinese communities involved and getting their perspectives on what was needed in ESL policy. The job was not without its challenges, but overall I enjoyed it. One of the most exciting things I was involved in was the SEED project. I worked with a former trustee and a faculty member from the University of Victoria. We started by looking at black authors with 28 teacher participants. We met once a month, read a few novels, shared them with one another and developed curriculum. That was a really rewarding, wonderful year and it had some effect on the curriculum.

The curriculum is still dominated by white voices, but there are pockets of anti-racist activity across the province. I did a survey for the Department of Canadian Heritage a few years ago. They wanted me to identify all anti-racism and diversity education resources that had been developed in the last couple of years and find out which ones were being used by teachers. So, by doing that survey I became more aware of how much wasn’t happening in the province. I found very few resources developed over the past few years and very few teachers able to tell me what resources they’d used. Every once in a while there would be a little hub of activity, and it would be where there was a local committee or grant. It made me aware of how much this province needs a co-ordinated
anti-racism program so that these teachers can connect with each other and reduce their isolation. The Program Against Racism had its faults, but one of its strengths was its networking capacity. We had the infrastructure, full time staff, decision making committee, local committees and local reps dealing exclusively with racism. It wasn’t perfect, but it was definitely a program that could be worked with.

There is only one program standing now at the BCTF, an Aboriginal Education program that got started in 1999 or 2000. I retired soon after it started, but I actually went to the AGM when the motion was put forward. It was a really volatile debate. A recommendation was put on the floor and everybody who had opinions about Aboriginal education or who didn’t even know but heard somebody else did, you know, they all got up and said what they thought about it. People felt free to say anything and most of them did. It was really disgusting and nobody challenged it but something good came out of it. An Aboriginal activist got up and suggested they strike a task force for First Nations education. What are your thoughts about task forces? Well, in this case it worked, probably because it was led by a strong advocate within the organization. I really trust him. He is quietly powerful and fearless. He has been a genuine friend to Aboriginal education. The debate that brought about the task force motion was toxic and from what I heard the task force process itself burnt out the Aboriginal teacher activists who were on it, but it produced a program, so in that way it was good. Almost all Aboriginal Education motions that went to the AGM the following year passed. The only one that didn’t pass was employment equity.

That doesn’t surprise me after hearing about your experiences and the experiences of SW activists, but just to go back a bit in time, do you have any idea why PAR and SW folded? People said it was about money, about a drop in revenues because of the loss of principals from the union and the redirection of resources to lawyers when local bargaining became provincial, but I don’t think it was really about the money. People talk about money, but what they’re really arguing about is priorities. PAR and SW were set up by the executive to compete for a small pot of resources and that’s even more the case today with the umbrella. There is more than enough for everybody, but in the BCTF it’s always “rob Peter to pay Paul” not “we’re going to make this work.” Rarely is it that.
There is this mentality of lack of resources. I know they don’t have a money tree and I
always make fun of that but I think that our thinking needs to be re-jigged so that it’s seen
as, and I think that’s very Aboriginal, that there’s plenty for everyone, right? There’s
plenty for everyone.

You know, I don’t want to bash the organization, but I think more could be done if
people stopped blocking each other. So, for example, the government has imposed these
enhancement agreements in Aboriginal communities that look a lot like accountability
contracts. They haven’t invited the union to the table, but the current Aboriginal
education co-ordinator at the BCTF has been trying to get the federation included so they
can interrupt the problematic elements of these contracts. Do you know how that’s going?
Well, from what I’ve heard, BCTF staff come to the table and say, “No. You can’t do
that. No, that won’t work. No, that will just feed into the government’s plan. No. that’s
too conservative. No, we’ve tried something like that in the past and it has backfired.” So,
that’s how Aboriginal people see people from the BCTF, as the “no” people or the
barriers to success. We need to inform our members and staff so they don’t look like a
bunch of racists every time they sit down with the community.

So, this may be a stupid question but do you consider yourself to be a social justice
activist? No. It might just be my interpretation, but the term social justice bothers me. It
almost dismisses the need for activism because organizations can claim to be competent
at an issue without supporting it. It’s not that our people don’t experience racism or poor
bashing or sexism or homophobia. We do, but Aboriginal Education is not ready to be a
stream under the social justice umbrella. I think the only reason there is an Aboriginal
Education program at the BCTF right now is because of guilt and shame, not because a
critical mass of teachers really care about what’s happening to our kids or our teachers. I
don’t mean that teachers are uncaring people. It’s just that most of them lack an
awareness of their privilege and the impact that has on their students. Teachers are not yet
at a place where they can hear the advice of a committee and have it translate into their
practice. They don’t think about land claims, treaty processes, residential schools or the
fact that they have benefited from the blood shed by my people psychologically,
spiritually and emotionally, so how can they be left alone to do Aboriginal Education in their classrooms?

*Do you think that can change?* I hope so. It’s going to take a huge paradigm shift but I think it’s not impossible. I don’t know when it will happen, but I don’t think teachers should be doing professional development on an issue until they can acknowledge their unearned privilege. The Status of Women model worked really well for feminist teachers but it is less effective for PAR and Aboriginal Education because we lack a critical mass of teachers who have personally experienced racism or colonialism. We also lack a critical mass of people who are competent at dealing with the issues. When I did professional development through PAR, I tried to start by challenging the assumptions teachers had about race, but some of the workshops that are coming out now are focused on practical strategies teachers can use to manage their diverse students. I think it’s still possible to do good advocacy work on Aboriginal education through the BCTF, but I wish they would start with employment equity and go from there. If they feel the need to continue with the workshops, they could at least make sure the teachers they send out have a good analysis. I think that would minimize the racism and poor bashing.

You know, I feel I’m being hyper critical of the BCTF right now. It makes me a little uncomfortable since I haven’t said these things to my former colleagues and I usually like to be direct. *Well, I’ll send you the transcript and you can circle things you want me to remove.* No, it’s not that. It’s just that I hope you speak to other people who are also critical. *OK, Do you feel comfortable connecting me with some of your colleagues?* Sure. I’ll call some friends after we finish the interview. Maybe we can go for dinner. *Sounds good.*

*So, when it comes to Aboriginal education and anti-racist education, how would you compare the BCTF with other places you’ve worked?* You know, as conservative as it is, the BCTF is actually more democratic than many other educational organizations. Sometimes, when I talk to Aboriginal people who work at the Ministry of Education, I wonder how they do what they do. *What makes the union a different kind of place than the Ministry of Education?* Well, I’ve often thought about interviewing people who work
there because I wonder, “do you know what’s happening to you? Do you know it’s like working for the Catholic Church or residential schools or something?” I think that in the federation, there’s a place where you can put forward your positions or query things without a lot of humiliation. That’s much harder to do at the Ministry because of the legislations you have to follow. The BCTF has to follow the BC Public School Act, but there are certainly things that allow for a more democratic purpose or process, a different way of being than what’s imposed at the Ministry. *What allows for more democratic process in the union?* Well, because we have to pay membership dues as teachers to an organization that’s to have our interests at the centre, it’s a service we demand and expect of our union. That’s different than the Ministry of Education where the accountability structure is more distant and the idea of public service can be very vague. Now, democratic might not be the right word to describe the BCTF either, but at least it is possible to raise questions about federation policies and practices without being disciplined for it. *So there’s more of a culture of critique?* I’m not sure I’d go that far, but I think there are more protections in place.

*Can you think of any structures, policies or practices that have facilitated your work?* I think I’ve felt most comfortable and productive working with people, not structures, policies or practices. I’ve learned over the years to follow my intuition and build relationships with people I trust instead of searching for a positive climate for Aboriginal issues. If I had to wait for a positive climate, I don’t think I would ever have gotten started. It’s not that I have to like all my colleagues or hang out with them outside of work, it’s just that if I am going to work productively with them, I have to trust that they will get things done because they know how to do the work and are genuinely committed to it. It might not sound like it, but when I look back over my career I feel grateful for my BCTF experience. I didn’t always feel supported, but I learned a lot about writing and networking and met some incredible teachers who I was able to assist. To this day they’re my cohort in the work that needs to be done. I just attended the Aboriginal education conference in the beginning of December and there were three people from the Committee Against Racism that I knew from years ago. They are still doing the work. I don’t agree with the Executive that the BCTF is a social justice union, but I would say that it is an organization that has supported many teacher activists in BC schools.
4.7 Perspective 7, GALE BC: What Happened to our Program?

This was an interesting bureaucratic strategy to avoid dealing explicitly with heterosexism and homophobia in schools.

You know, I wasn’t always a social justice activist. No? No. Do you consider yourself to be one now? Are you kidding? Well, I think you are but my supervisor suggested that I ask people how they see themselves. In that case, yes, yes, I am most definitely an activist, but as I was saying, I wasn’t always one. Looking back at the homophobia I experienced as a child in school I guess I was primed in a way, but experience isn’t enough. My view of myself now is informed through my actions, not what kind of person I am or my lived experience. It’s the actions that I take every day, whether with colleagues, political organizing, hours and hours on email every night or at the classroom level. Activism involves living as an activist. It involves, you know, walking the walk 90% of the time and talking the talk 10% of the time. You have to walk it more than you talk it. Hmmm….In that case, I don’t measure up. I’m more of a thinking activist. You’re in good company, but that’s not what I meant. There are people at the BCTF who are kind hearted people who think social justice work is important but they don’t think it’s the lifeblood of the federation. They think bargaining is or some other aspect of the federation and so they talk a good talk because they think it will advance their careers but they don’t really vote in favour of social justice motions. You’re not the first one to tell me that. Yeah.

So, how do you feel about walking me through your career? Sure. I grew up in a religious family in Newfoundland. There was very little acceptance for my homosexuality at school or in town and I had little support at home for the things I was experiencing in school. I had no particular interest in becoming a teacher but I wanted to go to university and my family didn’t have the resources to support me. Summer jobs were available to students who went to university and the tuition for basic teacher education was waved so long as graduates agreed to remain in the province and teach for two years. So, I taught elementary and middle school for two years then got out. The west coast seemed like a good option at the time.
I completed my B.Ed when I got to Vancouver. That year was a turning point for me. When I first started out I thought I could deal with homophobia and heterosexism and that the other issues didn’t belong to me, but our instructor, a BCTF activist, went into this big long discussion about how it was our professional responsibility to challenge all kinds of injustice. She shared some strategies with us that were pretty useful. She was really positive and gentle, but forceful at the same time. I was embarrassed, but I realized that I couldn’t just stick to my little piece of the world in my little island. There have been times when I haven’t understood the other issues, but I know they’re all my responsibility. I’m still learning.

I eventually got a masters but it was that PDP year that marked the beginning of my activism. I started as a Teacher On Call. I accepted all teaching assignments and even taught French immersion when called on to do so. I eventually got a temporary contract teaching a grade 2/3 class and then got a continuing contract teaching grade one. In addition to my teaching, I’ve also worked as a literacy consultant for three years and faculty associate at Simon Fraser University for two. I worked with an arts cohort and a group of mature students.

I really enjoy working with student teachers, both in the faculty and in my classroom. They tend to take more risks than my colleagues, especially if they have somebody encouraging them to think deeply about the issues. You know, one of the things I would like to see is a mandatory course in social justice for pre-service students. If they happen to have an instructor or supervising teacher who focuses on it, that’s great, but there is no formal requirement from what I can tell. I was lucky to have a BCTF social justice activist as one of my program co-ordinators. It’s just so much more difficult to introduce teachers to social justice once they are set in their careers. My impact on colleagues has accelerated over time because of my increased credibility but still most of them don’t take on social justice issues. When it comes to H&H (heterosexism and homophobia) they either resist my efforts or expect me to mentor them and provide them with resources. I don’t mind doing the work but it would be nice to have some like-minded colleagues in my school.
In 1992, I found these like-minded colleagues when I joined an organization called GALE BC—Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia. We’re all teachers and all members of the BCTF, but we aren’t affiliated with them. We focus on H&H issues and provide one another with social support. GALE seemed like a more natural fit for me when I started teaching than did the federation. I don’t think I realized the value of the union at the time. I just saw the BCTF as another group whose members had to be convinced that H&H work was important.

GALE BC has been a wonderful organization for me. I’ve worked with two different school districts, the government, SFU, my local union, the BCTF, Human Rights Defenders, EGALE and the CTF, but GALE BC has by far been the best activist space. It is grassroots and has a small core of like-minded, action-oriented individuals with lots of collective knowledge about how to work in different systems. We are all BCTF members but we are not bound by the same set of regulations. We function on consensus rather than hierarchical leadership. The first few years were really hard but eventually we developed a flow. We were initially a social organization with 95% gay men, mostly closeted, mostly older. Then a group of us upstarts came along in the early 90s and politicized it. It’s flowing back into a social organization again because those of us who have done the political work for so many years are getting tired but the political is still there.

Even during our most political moments we have remained responsive to our membership. Most of our members just want to get a monthly newsletter and be informed of the things we are doing and attend social events but there is a small core group of really highly motivated people who have been able to get things done. We all come from different school boards so we have knowledge of the many locals. Some of the people I’ve worked with over the years have gained knowledge of BCTF structure, policies and culture through the feminist networks. Others have been involved in different committees that were not necessarily focussed on social justice but our collective set of experiences has given us personal connections with BCTF activists and staff, protocols and strategies for stick handling issues through our locals.
The BCTF invited us to become a PSA—Provincial Specialist Association but we refused. Some members were not comfortable with people knowing about their sexual orientation, so for safety reasons we would never agree to be a PSA but beyond safety and privacy, there is the issue of governance. I’m not convinced that we would be as effective if we lost our organizational autonomy and focus. The BCTF has a social justice list serve, for instance, that probably was initiated with the best of intentions but it has been taken over by a virulently homophobic teacher. I was on it a few years ago but I told them I wanted to be removed because I just didn’t want to deal with that individual. It is supposed to be a space for social justice but it has been side-tracked by a hateful individual. One of the things that GALE BC has been very good at over the years is that we haven’t gotten side tracked by a particular individual. We let them rant or go on but we don’t fight with them. We are a social and activist group whose main objective over the years has been to advocate for LGBT students and teachers. To that end we’ve been agitating the Ministry of Education and plugging into the BCTF. Sometimes our relationship with the federation has been really positive and sometimes it has been challenging, just depending on who’s been in power within the executive and how supportive they’ve been, but overall it’s been quite positive.

We’re following the same pattern as the feminist organizations, I think. You know, we developed a network over many years. We gained credibility within our locals and our province. We’ve been involved in national level organizations like the Canadian Teachers’ Federation and EGALE. A few of us have co-chaired the EGALE education committee. We have connections in most provinces so we can tap into the issues arising outside of our individual classrooms and strategize more broadly. I’m sure you’re aware of this, but sexuality issues can really polarize a community, particularly when raised in primary school. Yes. Well, this polarization hit an all time high for one of my GALE activist colleagues. Are you talking about the book banning case? Yes. Can you tell me a little bit about it? Sure.

In the early 1990s, a gay teacher who is a member of GALE BC, brought a few books with same sex parents into his kindergarten class. They fit with the BC social studies curriculum which has a focus on family in grade one. He figured that if he was expected
by the province to complete a unit on family, he needed to represent the realities of all of his students. One of the kids in his class had two moms so he decided to read one of the books to validate his experiences on Father’s day. This seemingly innocuous event brought about a great deal of controversy. His classroom was picketed daily. He was accused of being unprofessional and a few protesters insinuated that he was molesting young children. His principal attempted to cap the negative media attention by telling the teacher he could only use district approved books. A few of us at GALE BC supported our colleague’s decision to submit the books with same-sex parents for approval. In the end, the books were banned twice, once on the basis of age-appropriateness and the second time on the basis of poor grammar. Neither of these reasons for banning the book got at the heart of the matter—homophobia. The board was clearly discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation, but there was no official record to prove this. A group of us from GALE BC decided to take legal action. You can read about it online, but after 7 years and many challenging battles, we eventually won the case at the Supreme Court of Canada in 2002. That was a politically charged period of our lives. We worked at the local, provincial and national levels. We also supported each other in personal and spiritual ways by throwing parties and spoofing the situations we encountered. It’s really important to retain a sense of humour when dealing with challenges.

To read media reports you’d think our case was a virulent attack on the institution of family, but actually we were just trying to make schools safer for gay and lesbian students and ourselves. I was one of the five litigants. The teacher whose name was listed on the case—a fluke of the alphabet—got the greatest media attention, both positive and negative, but he did not take on a greater leadership role than the rest of us. It has been a collective effort. We have all experienced homophobia in our classrooms, but the legal system makes it hard for a small group of activists to take on a type of discrimination. It is easier to grieve a particular case. As time went on, my partner and I actually took responsibility for the legal bill.

While this case was going on, GALE BC was getting involved in a number of initiatives. We worked with EGALE (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere) to support same-sex marriage legislation and same-sex adoption; we petitioned the Ministry of Education
because the Safe Schools Act omitted any mention of sexual orientation, same sex families and gender identity; and we all got involved in our local districts. My partner and I launched a Human Rights Complaint against the Ministry of Education. Again, this is something you can read more about on Wikipedia, but finally, after 11 years of persistent activism, many closed doors and a slight progressive shift in the socio-political climate, we appear to be getting somewhere. BC will soon have a new senior course on social justice that explicitly mentions sexuality, same sex parenting, and gender identity.

In the midst of all these legal battles, GALE members thought we might have more success working with and through an organization that counted us as members, the BCTF. In preparation for the 1997 AGM and with a great deal of help from some Status of Women activists, we decided to put forward a resolution to establish an H&H program at the federation. GALE members teach across the province so we have contacts in many locals. Our first strategy was to have contacts in 7 locals put the same resolution forward to the AGM. This was in 1996 when the feminist and anti-racist groups still had full program status. Well, as luck would have it the media got hold of the resolution and again everything was blown out of proportion. The conservative executive of the federation—Teachers for a United Federation, and a few very vocal right wing fundamentalist Christian delegates weren’t happy with the thought of H&H work in the BCTF. The combination of fear and activism resulted in one of the most sensational AGMs in BCTF history. The national media was there. There were pickets and protesters. There were about 100 fundamentalist parents and about 300 LGBT kids. Actually, I believe the H&H resolution passed in part because of the vehement homophobia.

We knew we weren’t going to convince the right wing picketers to support us, but we thought we could speak to the average teacher. I think most classroom teachers are shy and timid on social justice issues. They want harmony on any issue and they’re afraid to rock the boat. They want to know that their union supports them, that their school board supports them and that there are policies in place to protect them before they move forward. As GALE BC, we thought an H&H program would help us establish these support structures. To do so, though, we needed to convince teachers who support the idea of social justice, that this was an important issue for their students. GALE worked
with LGBT youth in each district to make the situation relevant to delegates. We co-ordinated a postcard campaign. Each card had detailed account of one student’s personal experience with homophobia in school. We used pseudonyms for the students but the districts and stories were real. GALE delivered the stories to delegates at tables corresponding with each of the districts. We handed them out the day of the vote.

The Status of Women activists helped us with our microphone strategy and gave us other tips. One of the most useful things they said was to make sure not to reveal our strategy to seemingly friendly executive members who show up at GALE meetings promising support. Who would have known? Most of us were thrilled to see the federation executive at our meetings. After all of the anger expressed to us over the years from parents, senior administrators and government officials, it seemed like a positive turn of events, but we followed the SW activists’ suggestion and played naïve. In the end, this combination of factors helped us carry the day. We deliberately used broad educational statements. Our goals were to support student safety and achieve positive visibility in the curriculum. Our argument was that students needed to feel safe and have role models in order to reach their learning potential and that teachers could not accomplish anything with homophobic epithets being hurled at them and their students on a daily basis in their classrooms and schools. In the end, we had 95% support for our motion and a task force was struck to establish an H&H program. That moment was a real career high for me. We were finally gaining meaningful support from our peers. Then the media picked it up and the shit hit the fan. They insinuated that the BCTF was “raping the innocence of children.” I think the federation had to hire somebody to deal with some right wing groups who threatened to bomb the building. I still wonder what would have happened had we not stuck to our motherhood and apple pie approach.

That year, as the BCTF task force was doing their work, as my partner and I were challenging the Ministry’s Safe Schools Act omission and as the book banning court case was going on, I decided to get involved in my local to generate an H&H committee geared at challenging district level homophobia. I put a lot of energy into that committee and got a lot out of it. After a year, the BCTF task force on H&H returned to the 1998 AGM and recommended an H&H program. I’m not entirely sure what happened that year.
but instead of us getting our program, all social justice programming was cut. The Status of Women program, Program Against Racism and our zygote of an H&H program were shoved under an umbrella and an Aboriginal Education group gained program status. I supported that motion and am really glad for them, but I can’t quite make sense of how the rest of us lost our programs. Everything happened so quickly. It was a really acrimonious AGM and the motion passed by something like 1%. I think it only passed because the right wing TUF executive still had a majority of delegates. It might have been a backlash from the old boy’s network to get rid of the Status of Women program. SW threatened the old boys and was unpopular with some of the delegates because of an abortion motion that was passed in the 80s. I think there was also some backlash against SW for supporting H&H activists. PAR just went by the wayside. I don’t think they were ever as effective at mobilizing support or attracting anger as SW, but of course they also cost money, so if the executive was going to use an economic argument to rationalize their decision, they couldn’t cut one of two programs receiving equal funds.

I’m not sure what the behind the scenes factors were, but I’m glad we never agreed to become a PSA. The power of GALE BC is our insider/outsider status. We are all members of the BCTF with voting privileges and access to policies and procedures but our activism is not driven by the federation executive. Somehow, in 1998, when social justice programming was eliminated, the federation began to refer to itself as a “social justice union.” Beyond the ironic timing, how accurate do you think that label is? I wouldn’t go so far as to say that social justice is absent, but I would say that it is the poor third cousin to bargaining and professional development.

After the high of the 1997 AGM, the early years of the federation’s umbrella program were pretty depressing. The first group of SJ committee members were appointed on the basis of their allegiance to TUF, so the program was being run by people who had voted to cut feminist and anti-racist programming. Very little meaningful social justice work was done. Luckily, there was a change in leadership at the federation the following year. The new Coalition executive realized the umbrella model wasn’t working so they tried to bring back some qualities of the former programs. I’m not involved in caucus politics at the federation but if anything, I’d probably support Viewpoint. Why are you not
involved? The divisions don’t seem all that relevant to me and I’d rather focus on substantive issues than personal attacks. I’m glad Coalition is in. Ever since they were elected, AGM debates have been less vicious.

The good thing about my not having been involved in the Status of Women, Program Against Racism or either caucus is that I didn’t experience the same level of disappointment with the federation when the programs were cut. Why not? I don’t think I ever expected as much from the federation as some of my SW activist friends whose entire activist careers to that point had been spent fighting sexism in the federation. The feminist caucus is still trying to revive the discrete programs. I support their efforts but I doubt the federation will go in that direction. Fewer and fewer teachers remember the programs as they were during their glory days. The average classroom teacher doesn’t see where their dues go, but I think most of them want to ensure support for teacher welfare and professional development issues. Also, the proportional increase in new teachers who make less money than experienced teachers means that the federation has fewer resource to play with than they had a decade or so ago. That has a negative effect on social justice because in moments of budgetary crunch, social justice is seen as a frill. So, I doubt that the discrete programs will be revived, but it’s worth moving in that direction.

Social justice is complicated. It involves advocacy for education, something the BCTF is very good at, but it also involves reducing barriers to racism, sexism, classism and homophobia, something with which they have less experience. The umbrella structure was supposed to help with intersectionality but in practice, it seems to foster competition between social justice identity based groups. I think it makes more sense for teacher activists to focus our energy on an issue that is personally meaningful. Social justice as a whole is just too large and abstract. I do think that we as teachers should be responsible for all areas in our classroom, but we should limit our provincial leadership role to those issues with which we have some personal experience.

I really shouldn’t slag the federation too much. I think their very public stance on social justice is part of what is making teachers more likely to do that work now. The other big factor is the increasing diversity in most classrooms across the province. I’ve noticed a
difference in my school. Teachers are more likely to ask me for H&H resources and less likely to distance themselves from me. One of the most popular ones has been a “that’s so gay” poster with a red line through it. We produced 10,000 of them in the first run and they can’t keep them in the BCTF building. They just keep getting so many requests for them and the same with buttons. These resources have been extremely popular with classroom teachers because they can put them up in their classrooms and have conversations about them whenever the need arises. They’re concrete and get the message across without taking a lot of time. Classroom teachers’ desire for resources is probably related to the increased availability of those resources, something GALE BC has done in collaboration with the BCTF. I helped bring some of that about through my involvement in the social justice advisory committee.

In the early 2000s, when the leadership stopped appointing TUF activists, I applied and was appointed to the committee. I volunteered for two years but things move so slowly at the federation that I decided to put my energy elsewhere. We talk and pass motions, but we don’t accomplish much. We dedicate our time to the federation without getting much in return. I don’t really need activist lessons or professional development or evidence of fair process as much as I need change. Don’t get me wrong, these things are important, but I’ve been able to access them through GALE BC. When I come to the BCTF I come because I have expertise to share with staff and elected officials who say they’re interested in making our organization more responsive to the needs of queer students and members. The problem is that whenever we raise ideas, they seem to disappear into the ether. Some initiatives are taken up, by the executive but many simply dissolve. The major problem is that the committee is advisory. We have limited decision making powers so we get little done within the organization. The federation uses fewer bureaucratic tricks than the Ministry and doesn’t seem to deliberately resist social justice, but its centralized, hierarchical structure can really slow down activism.

I’ve found that it is much more energizing to plug into the federation through GALE, so I’ve decided to direct the bulk of my activist efforts there and into a district level pride committee that has been making progress. GALE BC has done some great work when partnered with the BCTF. We understand the issues and have a great deal of collective
knowledge about how to work in different systems. The federation, in turn, has resources and extensive provincial networks. After the H&H task force came back recommending a program in 1998, the federation agreed to help us in a more constructive manner. They must have realized that they had to do something on H&H but they didn’t have any resources. They put out a call out for PD associates to train teachers and to do in service workshops across the province. All the people who applied and were selected were GALE BC members. It’s a volunteer position but you’re given release time to do that work, and so we developed all the workshops that the BCTF offered on H&H and went around the province delivering them while teaching full time. We also developed a resource guide for teachers called “Challenging Homophobia in Schools”, a mini handbook for counsellors, a small handbook on Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs in schools, and a handbook on how to deal with homophobic name calling. So, we generated all of those resources and applied for funding through the BCTF.

*How did you do that?* We applied for social justice grants to match GALE BC money. With the big handbook we wrote letters to all the locals asking for their donations and we ended up getting 27 locals to donate money. They were located all over the province. The handbook is now in its second edition. The BCTF helped by distributing one copy to every school in the province. They didn’t pay for the copying but they had the mechanism through which to distribute it to schools. As a result of all that work and a shift in executive from TUF to Coalition, the federation realized that the umbrella model wasn’t working, so they moved to social justice action groups. That’s actually one of the more useful things the SJ advisory committee did. Leading up the 2004 action group decision, we advised the executive to divide the committee into discrete groups dealing with H&H, SW, Anti-Racism and Poverty. That’s made a bit of a difference since people can focus on discrete issues again. It also helps that one of the staff in charge is a former SW activist whose heart is in the work.

*I’d just like to go back to something for a moment. You mentioned that GALE BC was able to apply for social justice grants through the BCTF. Yes. I thought it was only locals that could apply.* Well, it is but we would apply through the locals. GALE BC is province wide but we also have members in many locals so we were able to apply for
grants through those locals as individual teachers. When the federation set up the umbrella program, they said they were interested in spreading resources from staff to teachers and from two discrete programs to many local initiatives but local teachers are not that well connected without a network and they don’t always have the time to take on projects or write proposals which may or may not be funded. I don’t think isolated local teachers applied in great numbers. At GALE BC, we have a network of local teachers and we have people with proposal writing and social justice experience so we were well positioned to take advantage of the grants. The federation tried to dissuade people from working long term on a single project, so they made rules about not funding the same project twice in the same local with the same lead teacher. Knowing this, we had different people apply in different locals. We spoke to each other frequently so we had the advantage of knowing what a successful application looked like and we made sure that no single person was left with the full responsibility of running a project. Instead we shared the responsibility for a series of local projects. We listed priority areas together and planned initiatives as a group. Right now, what we’re doing is Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) conferences through the BCTF and GALE BC jointly. We fly into one region of the province, do a day long workshop with students and teachers on GSAs, provide them with materials and supports and then we leave. I’m really pleased with the work GALE BC has been able to do in co-operation with the BCTF.

You said something a little earlier about also being pleased with your involvement in a district level pride committee. Yeah, that was great. It worked because we were able to take advantage of a change in trustees. For three years the conservative trustees were ejected by the public and a more progressive group came in. During this period the district set up a pride committee of which I have been a member. One of the interesting things about being a GALE member is that I can be a community rep rather than a teacher union rep. I am glad to be external. It feels less constraining to represent a queer organization than a teachers’ organization. Our first year involved building trust. We had to prove that we were not going to attack the district. Probably as a result of our approach we have a district-wide reputation for our positive, action-oriented approach. There was lots of political manoeuvring behind the scenes to make it work and as a result we became a consensus-oriented team with members who have complementary skills.
We went with the motherhood education statements that worked well at the 1997 AGM. We had two objectives, student safety and positive visibility within the curriculum. Between the progressive district leadership, funding, concrete action plan and well constructed team, we have been able to accomplish a lot. This work has helped me retain my optimism that we can reduce homophobia and heterosexism in schools. It has also helped me build networks and gain credibility in the education system at a variety of levels.

My impact in the classroom has accelerated over time because of the credibility I’ve built through varied networks and organizations. I feel more confident teaching a social justice curriculum than I did when I started. Compared to the work we’ve done through the district pride committee, GALE BC and the BCTF, my impact at the classroom level has been kind of limited but I don’t shy away from pushing boundaries. My teaching is completely informed by a social justice lens. I’m always looking for opportunities with my kids to talk about social justice issues and my goal as a classroom teacher is to turn out global citizens, you know, to make them not just tolerate or respect everybody but know what social justice issues are and what they mean. I’m teaching a grade 2/3 split right now and I’ve talked to my students about homophobia, racism, sexism and classism. I usually start with racism because it is something they have some familiarity with. I teach in a predominantly Indo-Canadian catchment area. I do a lot of work at the beginning of the year with social responsibility, performance standards, how we treat one another and establishing co-operative class rules. I read many stories to the kids about friendship and inequities between characters in novels and I have a social justice bin of books in my room. Does your bin contain the books that were banned? No, but that’s because the curricular focus is different. The family curriculum is highlighted in kindergarten and grade one. In grades two and three the focus shifts to community.

Interestingly, the issue did come up a couple of days ago, though. I have a student teacher in my room and we were teaching about the roles of women and girls, men and boys. We were doing a Venn diagram to analyze the kinds of work done by men and women. Through our debate, we moved most things into the middle of the diagram. We talked with the kids about sexism and equality and they freaked out at the word sexism which
they do every year. I got them over that and then I said, “Is there anything anybody sees on this chart that could only be done by women and girls?” And one kid put up his hand and said “cleaning the house.” I said, “well, there’s nobody in my house that’s female to clean the dishes and clean the house and we still have to do the jobs.” He said, “well, if you got married, your wife would do it.” I told him I was married and that turned into a discussion about being gay. This year’s group were kind of shocked. There were “oohs” and “ahhs,” so today we debriefed by linking racism, sexism and homophobia. We talked about their reactions to unfamiliar issues in the past, like resistance education which they learned in kindergarten. We had a very animated and interesting discussion today and in the end they were not freaking out when I was saying, “I am a gay man and now you have some more information about me and it doesn’t change who I am as a person.”

It was probably one of the best teachable moments I’ve had in my career, yesterday and today, to be so open with the kids in a climate that is not always conducive to that. I didn’t expect it to happen but it’s important to be honest and I think that is one of the ways I have the most impact, you know when you have those connections with kids on whatever the social justice issue is. Those moments don’t happen that often or to that intensity and they can’t really be planned but when they come up, they provide a good space for learning. This afternoon one little girl in the class said “I didn’t have a problem with you yesterday and I don’t have a problem with you today. You’re still the same teacher. You’re still fun and you treat us nicely.” One child picked a flower outside and asked me to take it to my partner. There were some negative comments but they sort of dissipated when I told them they could ask me whatever they wanted. They asked about having children. It’s fun to work with grade 2s and 3s. They’re generally very caring, giving and accepting. They sometimes struggle with concepts when they’re introduced to them for the first time but they’re open to and capable of critical discussion. I keep waiting for the principal to come to the class with parent complaints but he hasn’t yet.

*Are these kinds of teachable moments any easier to take advantage of now than they were when you started?* I think so. I’ve been teaching for about 15 years and have been involved in H&H activism for at least as long. When I look back at the state of anti-
homophobia education in the province over that time, I see a slow start with many setbacks but I also see improvement, especially in the last three or four years. When I started teaching, I was most strongly motivated by the homophobia I experienced as a child in school and a desire to make the education system better for others, but motivation is not enough. I didn’t have any strategies or support. The organized support I have gained through GALE BC has been invaluable. Our personal and organizational gains have happened as a result of collective work, personal and organizational support systems, networks, like-minded colleagues with passion for the work and experience in a range of educational organizations, partners who put up with the long hours, the celebration of small changes and a sense of humour. It also helps to be optimistic without ignoring reality. For the last two days I’ve been waiting for my principal to come in with a parent complaint but he didn’t come today and hopefully he won’t come tomorrow. If he does come in, I will stick to my mantra—“it came up in class and I was just being honest with the kids.” Anything is possible. You just have to figure out how to make the system work for you.

4.8 Perspective 8, Early-Mid Career teachers in Large Urban Locals: No need to align our Local Social Justice Work with the BCTF

The BCTF is a strong, powerful, well resourced venue for activism but it can be difficult to penetrate especially if you want to make the transition from supporter to initiator.

From the outside, it seems like, I don’t know how to describe it, but if you only met the people in the building, you’d see a certain side of things. You won’t get the whole picture, that’s for sure. What would I miss? Well, once people get staff positions they can’t be activists anymore. Can you remove an activist commitment from a person because of a change in job? Well, for example, one of the people in charge of social justice is a very prominent activist in the province. She was a local president, led various campaigns and is in the feminist caucus, but now that she’s a staff person, she can’t really do that anymore. She’s obviously instrumental in doing lots of important work, but it’s different. When you’re president, you’re a political leader. If you’re staff, then you’re kind of like support, so you have to support whatever the executive decides. Can staff
inform executive decisions? Well, they do but they can’t go to their friends and say “let’s vote this person out because bla bla bla bla bla.” They can’t do that because they’re supporting them.

OK, so, this might not be what you’re saying, but do you think I would be more likely to get the official line in the building whereas at the locals I’d hear more about the political dynamics and how these issues are playing out? You might, yeah. Like with the staff member responsible for the social justice committee, I don’t know if she would tell you all the problems or give you the official line, but if you talk to a local president you’ll see a certain side of things. What would I see? Some people are just more frank than others I suppose. Yeah, actually, I’m wondering not only about how frank they’d be but also about what they’d have access to seeing and knowing. I’m not sure. I don’t really know how things work in the building. I only have four contacts, the social justice and Aboriginal ed co-ordinators, the leader of the International Solidarity program and the person from Field Services who is assigned to my local. If I ever need to get something done I call one of them.

What about Collective Bargaining and Protective Services? No. Oh, OK, I was asking because I know you’ve recently done some bargaining and grievance work. I’m not involved in BCTF bargaining. I do the bargaining in my organization. So, by your organization, you mean your local? Yes. And the BCTF is not your organization? It is, but I feel more attached to my local. It’s more of an activist organization. It uses a more grassroots approach and we don’t have anybody there on a permanent contract so it’s more open. I think term positions are really important, even at the provincial level. They encourage activists to go back to the classroom which enriches the education system and makes the union more accessible to new teachers. The provincial organization is like Fort Knox; it’s impenetrable for most teachers. It’s easy to get PD resources and be helped but it’s hard to get involved, especially if you’re not involved in your local. OK. This is really helpful. Most of the people I’ve interviewed have been involved in the BCTF for 3 to 4 decades, so they might not fully understand the access issues.
So, how did you get started as a teacher and activist? I was definitely an activist before I was a teacher. My dad is an activist in the Anglican Church so some of my earliest activism was church based. When I was really little my mom said she caught me playing communion with my friends and by the time I was 13 my friend and I started a club for peace in Central America. We held events and made a newsletter which we sent to each other. That was probably the earliest organized activist thing I did. We had five members and put on an event. And actually, a year before that when I was 12, I wrote my first letter to the editor. Somebody had written a racist letter about Sikh police officers not being allowed to wear turbans. I was horrified and so I wrote this impassioned letter and got a really good response.

Your confidence amazes me. At 12, I was reading trashy romance and vampire books. Well, I was in a gifted program where we were basically told “everything you say has value, so go out and speak your mind. Go out and do what you want to do.” I think our teachers were ex-hippies who were interested in education for the same reasons. The teachers really just let us run the show. It was a really experimental program at the time that contrasted with what was happening everywhere else in the school. Once I got a little older, I started standing up more for myself and my peers in the school but nothing really organized. We had a biology teacher who used to say fairly sexist things publicly and I went to the administration and to the counselling staff about getting that stopped. I did work with my peer group about things we didn’t think were ok, walking out to protest the Iraq war and things like that. So, there were lots of good things about the program, but it was also really highly problematic. It’s not good practice to tell kids every day that they are different and special and better; we’re now a disproportionately high percentage of alcoholics and people who are institutionalized and I think that’s where my sense of entitlement comes from. It also comes obviously from my class and ethnic background but anyway, I’m weary about saying that that program was the thing that made me who I am. What else factored into who you are?

I did different things. After I finished my English degree, I went to Mexico for 8 months and worked for the Centre for Intercultural Dialogue. We received groups from North America, usually church groups but not all and they did a course on poverty and the
reality of Mexican politics and Central America. Each course was two weeks long. So, I
would accompany the group. Going through that program was really formative for me as
a teacher and activist. How so? Well, it was experiential learning about poverty. We’d go
and visit people and hear them talk about their lives and what they were trying to do and
how impossible it was for them. In teaching, you’re always going around a little
curriculum and that was the same since we had a similar program each time, but the visits
were tailored to each group. If it was a women’s group, we’d visit women. If it was a
church group, we’d do churchy stuff. Then we’d segue into Central American politics. I
didn’t really reflect on it at the time but I took a group of teachers from my local back
there a couple of years ago and realized how the program had shaped my thinking and
made me an activist, even more than a teacher. When I was there the first time, I didn’t
realize how special it was to learn about inequality or Mexican history or the history of
the Christian based movements, but when I went back I realized how fortunate I was to
have had that experience.

I returned to Canada, moved to Vancouver and got a few part time jobs. I moved
furniture in schools, taught at a multicultural Sunday school and did desktop publishing. I
also got involved pretty quickly with a violence against women organization called Rape
Relief. They were radical feminists who did really good feminist work. We had a 24 hour
crisis line and a transition house and we did tons of meeting and self educating. There
was extraordinary process and really high accountability. My experience there provided
me really useful training on how to be an activist. Again, this was not without problem. I
don’t know if you’re familiar with the organization, but I left eventually because of the
radical feminist belief that sexism is the fundamental unit of oppression. They publicly
said things like “race complicates sexism” instead of having a proper analysis, and then
wondered why no women of colour came to work for them. So, that was a bit of a crisis
for me as a feminist. Where do you go when you have radical feminist politics but no
organization that matches your needs? You can’t go back to liberal feminism. It’s really
hard when there’s nothing that represents the kind of feminism you want to practice. So
my friends and I just continued to be political together. We responded to things that we
saw by making our own posters, writing letters to the editor, and organizing local
response, more grassroots kinds of things which is what I feel better doing.
So, I was working in different kinds of jobs, including the general labourer one in schools, and started thinking about education as a catalyst for change which I hadn’t thought about before. My mom also thought it would be good for me to get a marketable degree, so I went to teachers’ college. There were some good parts, but overall it was a really conservative program. There were all of these progressive teaching philosophies put forward, but at the same time they would warn us about how conservative the system was. There was a lot of, you know, “to be a teacher you have to say this. You have to look this way. You have to act this way. You can’t do this kind of thing. Don’t ever cause a fuss. Don’t ever stand out.” These kinds of lessons were integrated into the program and so they were reinforcing the conservatism of the system. I actually went into the closet for the first time in my adult life. There were people from the College of Teachers who said things like, “if you engage in activities that are unbecoming of a teacher, you can be fired.” So, I started to think about what’s conduct unbecoming of a teacher? Is it because I smoke pot? Is it because I sleep with women? I was terrified that it wasn’t just about me getting through the year with a certificate, but also that I could be fired or reprimanded throughout my career. So, I wondered what I had signed up for.

I’m actually sorry that I came this late to unionism. *Late?* Yeah, that should have been the answer when I was feeling scared about my rights as a teacher during my PDP year. It should have been the logical conclusion, but it wasn’t. The more thinking I do about the world and about social justice, the more class plays prominently for me, but I had a lot of reservations about becoming involved in big labour because it can stop being about class and start being about protectionism. I didn’t think of unions as places that could deal with social change until I started going to organizations like the BC Federation of Labour and heard people talking about how many people had died or been injured in their local and the ally work we do through those organizations. I felt reassured, like there was a space to make it what I needed. The motto of the BC Fed is something like “what we have for ourselves we want for all others.” I’m paraphrasing, but I think it’s important to look at workplace safety, wage and equity together in that way. There are a lot of organizations affiliated with the BC Fed that do hospital care, food service, factory work and most of their members are people of colour, a lot of women and a lot of queer people. So, I really think our affiliation with labour is important.
When I got out, it was really hard to find work, but I was subbing pretty regularly. I subbed for a year and three months and was called a lot to teach special education. I kept applying for contracts but of course I was an “F” which is right at the bottom, no teaching experience. I had never even had a long term subbing job because as luck would have it, I never stumbled into anything that lasted more than a week. So, I applied and applied and applied. I had a great letter of recommendation from my teaching practicum and I think that was the only thing that got me in the door. I went through all these interviews and finally landed a job at a place where I had had an interview before and someone with more experience from another district had taken it, but the principal remembered me and gave me the job. That was my first temporary contract and I found it really hard. It was in a huge open-area school but the only thing open about it was the fact that it had no walls. In every other way it was pretty traditional. People just did their own thing and it was very noisy. The other thing that made it difficult was that I was trained in primary and this was intermediate. I worked hard, but was stressed out most of the time.

By the end of the contract I had lost my confidence, so when it came time to apply for another contract, I applied only for part time work. The job I ended up getting was full time, but it was in a high school and had three different components. I taught two periods of English and then did ESL and computer support. So, because I had these components, I thought I’d be ok. It worked out really well and in the end helped me regain my confidence. After those two temporary contracts, I had accumulated enough to be continuing, but then in 2001, the Liberals had a big layoff, so from that point on I was fully employed for 3 years but only on temporary contracts because they had cut all these continuing contracts. In three years, I worked in 6 different schools and two different districts. Eventually, I applied for a continuing job and got it. It was 80% when I applied but turned into 100% the next year.

That sounds like a long process. Were you involved in the union at all during this time? Well, I went to the new teacher induction and thought the union might be a good venue for my activism. Nobody was arguing that there was one single unit of oppression, and the people who led it seemed sincere. It felt very real. What felt real about it? I think the intrinsic connection to teaching was helpful. I thought it was funny that we actually had
to put our hands on our hearts, and you know, there was a code of ethics that involved
being direct and forward with teachers. There were a few things we actually had to recite.
I can’t remember what they were anymore but I liked it because people were sincerely
looking for change in a kind of democratic format. They were so passionate about
teaching. I used to be pretty anti-school, but after I started teaching I realized that it could
be a lot less regimented than I thought. You are constantly interacting with kids who can
go on to do interesting, adventurous, activist things. So, that’s fun.

I became a staff rep mostly by default. When I moved to my fourth school, nobody was
union active or socially active. I ended up as union rep because I was the only one who
spoke up at staff meetings. A lot of other people sat through meetings without saying
anything. Nobody else wanted to do it so they sent me to meetings. I was inspired to do
the work because one of the first schools I was at had a group of strong First Nations
women who were very involved and active. One of them was a new teacher. She had
only been teaching for a year and she became the union rep. I was inspired because she
did it simply and well. It wasn’t much fun to be union rep at my fourth school because it
was a pretty conservative school and I ended up being the fall person for the BCTF, but at
my fifth school it was better. It was a larger school, so we had more than one rep. The
only problem was that the other union rep was a really difficult guy. He was just this big
blowhard who likes to tell you how it is all the time, you know, a very male union
activist. I was tired of him. I felt I had to manage him. As an activist, I didn’t like having
to manage this other activist who would always say things like “it is incumbent on me to
speak up because the administration did bla bla bla bla.” So, then I moved to the
sixth school and again volunteered to be a staff rep.

How do you like the work? It was fine for a couple of years, but I wanted to be a Local
Rep too. Staff Reps are the foot soldiers and LRs are the decision makers. I ran for LR
but didn’t get elected. It’s really difficult to be elected in my local because there are a lot
of union-active people, so I stayed on as staff rep for a couple of years. It was a lot of fun
being staff rep during our strike. You got to go out and hang out in front of the school,
and have a barbeque everyday, and get to know each other in a different way, and
everybody had time to talk to each other. So, that was really good. The principal even
came out and gave us food and talked to us all the time. I was in a pretty conservative school at the time, but people still went out really solidly during the job action. Everybody supported it so I felt successful as a staff organizer.

Other times, it’s been harder. The teachers in my schools haven’t always been supportive. I learned that when I brought up an anti-privatization issue at one of our staff meetings. The ease of the strike campaign led me to think people would also support my fight against Starbucks. I have pretty strong convictions about corporate sponsorship of public education and expected others would feel at least mildly upset about it too so I came charging into a staff meeting all upset about this huge Starbucks logo on the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) newsletter and found out that I was on my own. I figured everybody would be as incensed as I was, but they didn’t really care. They were just happy to get resources. I raised the issue at my local and they listened attentively but said not much could be done because the decision was made by the parents (PAC) and not the principal. It helped me realize the importance of union backing of teacher activism. I think what helped for the strike was that my local and the BCTF had worked things out very well in terms of education and the vote. Teachers were on board because of the groundwork done by the union, so it was easy for me to do my job. Well, part of it was the powerful backing of the union, but the other thing that made the strike so smooth was that teachers tend to support things that directly affect them. The strike had to do with their salaries and class sizes so it had a tangible affect on their personal lives. Fighting corporate sponsorship would mean that they’d have to go out searching for resources.

At my current school teachers are a little more active so I don’t have to spend as much time defending the union. On top of being staff rep, I volunteered to chair the staff committee. It’s kind of a good job to have. Is that a union job? No. It’s a school committee. I didn’t do it in my first couple of years because I didn’t think I should be a leader of the staff, but it’s a lot of work so people drop out after a while. I waited till someone dropped out and then nominated myself. I actually have a really good principal and was almost in shock because my principals till then had generally been terrible. So, I had this guy who worked really hard and was not anti-union and was nice and listened really well and I didn’t know what to do with myself because I was used to going, “stick
it to the man!” but then I’m like, “hey, you’re my friend.” Have you ever considered going into administration? Well, quite a few principals are telling me that I have the skills and should be a leader, but I don’t want to not be in the union so I don’t think so. Also, I really like teaching. Kids are a lot of fun and it’s totally hilarious all the time so I would really miss that. But, you can’t go on forever in the classroom. It’s exhausting.

One of the things that worked better was a Pro-D conference I organized for teachers a couple of years ago. It was really fun. It was an adult day. We’re always focusing on children’s literacy, but adults like to read and write and be creative too so this was an outlet for that kind of thing. 170 people came. Did you organize this conference through the district or the union? The district; they are always looking for volunteers. There are 5 Pro-D days in the school year. One is the provincial day where every school in BC has the day off. That one is organized by the Provincial Specialist Associations (PSAs) so it’s mostly run by BCTF teacher activists. Then there are four others. In our district one is a local union conference day and the other three days are technically decided by individual schools. In the last few years a lot of schools have had at least two of those days coordinated with each other, so the district puts on the events. They get some big fat-ass keynote speaker to tell us how to do something, and they put it on in their privatized public private partnership theatres. It’s total bullshit, but then they have other focus days so I just decided to organize one. They set assessment as the theme, but I didn’t like it so I did something different. They were fine with it because they’re so desperate to find something to offer to all these teachers. So, I recruited my friends and it was a dream committee. I didn’t ever have to see the budget. It was amazing. I asked if we could get guest speakers and lunch and have folders and they said yes to everything. I was in shock because I’m used to doing church work and community work were everything is on a shoestring. So, that was really great. They let us do whatever we wanted mostly because they didn’t have the personnel to monitor it.

OK, so this work is mostly outside of the union. How did you get involved in union work? Well, I started as a staff rep and tried to get to know my local. I also tried to jump into provincial activism but that has proven more difficult. The BCTF is a very political organization. There are these two caucuses. My union is mostly affiliated with the
Viewpoint caucus, but I’ve also done work on the provincial Cuba team which has a lot of people from the TUF caucus. So, what would happen was, the people from my local didn’t always trust me because I was on the Cuba team, and the people on the Cuba team didn’t trust me because I was in a Viewpoint local. How did you deal with that? I just thought, whatever, they’re weird. Some of it is just silly. It’s based on grievances from the 1980s that I just can’t get worked up about. So, you don’t hold membership to either? No, I generally agree with Viewpoint but I’m not a member.

*Do you think you had a harder time getting elected as an LR in your local because you are not a Viewpoint member?* I don’t know. I think it’s just that I’m in a very active local and a lot of people want to be decision-makers. I got involved in other ways though, mostly through some of the social justice committees. The Status of Women activists invited me to join their committee and so I learned a lot about process and political history. *There’s still a Status of Women committee?* Yeah, our local decided not to align our committees with BCTF committees. We have our own thing. We don’t necessarily affiliate closely with the BCTF. Any time we haven’t agreed with them politically, we’ve done our own thing. So, my union and a couple of the other larger locals still have status of women committees. *How are they funded?* My union provides a little bit of money for any standing committee, and then we apply for BCTF social justice grants to supplement that. The same teacher can’t apply twice so we just rotate applicants from the committee. We really should have core funding for organizing things, but because we don’t, we’re forced to play the system.

*What other social justice committees do you have?* We’ve had a multicultural committee, anti-poverty, pride, international solidarity and one for teachers on call. The anti-poverty one isn’t on the go at the moment because we can’t find a chair but our table officers are actively looking for someone. We also just started a South Asian one. The local was torn about that one because some people wanted it to be part of the multicultural committee, but a slightly larger number of people thought we should support grassroots activism, so it passed and now there’s a committee. That kind of committee would never have passed at the BCTF. *Which committees have you been on?* Status of women, international solidarity and Pride committees. I actually chaired the international solidarity and pride
committees, which meant that I became a member of the executive. I started going to endless meetings. We met every second week for 5 hours, and so it was hard to come and do that without becoming involved. As I started learning more about how the union worked, I decided that I didn’t want to be a committee chair anymore; I wanted to start doing more integrated work, so I passed the committee chair stuff on to someone else.

I also got involved in three Provincial Specialist Associations, Peace and Global Educators, Modern languages and First Nations. What attracted you to the PSAs? They can be good places to get teaching ideas, and they’re good ways to get involved in the union for teachers who don’t care about the political part. So, PSAs aren’t political? Well, they took a beating the year of the strike, so they’re definitely tied up in the politics of the federation, but they’re not usually the major concern of AGM debates. We were fined by the province for the two week strike, so the BCTF decided to save money by cancelling all the PSA conferences in October. I don’t think anybody is really passionately anti-PSA but that decision really decimated our numbers because PSAs depend on getting membership at the annual conference. It’s usually part of your conference dues to buy your yearly membership. So people have to pay to be members of PSAs? Yes, you get a grant from the BCTF but you also depend on membership fees.

But anyway, through the Peace and Global educators’ PSA, I got involved in the World Peace Forum that was held at the BCTF. I got to know a couple of provincial social justice staff through that event and then got involved in the provincial School Union Rep Training program (SURT). There are 25 or 30 SURT trainers in the province and we do workshops for the school union reps around the province. They have workshops on grievances and professional issues. The workshops I do are mainly about professional development and professional autonomy. I chose these because most of the grievance ones were already taken, but also because I like doing them. One of the things I was most impressed with when I started teaching was the level of professional autonomy we had. I used to be involved in church activism which involved running around doing other people’s work all the time. As a teacher, it was different; people had confidence in my ability to deal with a class. I found that really reinforcing.
Do you see a link between your SURT work and social justice activism? Well, if they are done well, they aren’t that different. Our job is to integrate analyses of class, race, gender, sexuality, colonialism and power into our teaching and PD. You can speak out against oppression wherever you are whether you’re talking about grievances or advocating for professional autonomy. I think social justice work involves deploying yourself where you think you can have an affect. So, for example, part of what I do in SURT training is to help teachers think of professionalism in a political way. It’s a good way to resist what’s going on in the US right now, where standardized exams are out of control and professionalism has completely been eroded. When most teachers talk about professionalism they’re making a claim to status, not challenging standardization, so I go to locals around the province and try to challenge that way of thinking by talking about the professionalization of education without giving into the anti-labour sentiment. Being a SURT trainer has also been great and a smart political move if I want to be a prominent activist in the BCTF, because you go around the province and meet all these presidents. You’re seen as a credible person because you’re coming in as a full time teacher rather than a politician. I’m there to run a workshop, not campaign. So, your identity as a full time teacher is part of what gives you legitimacy as a federation leader? Yeah, or it gives you an idea about what’s going on around the province. You don’t just get sucked into your own local. I wanted to get involved provincially so that I could figure out the dynamic between my local and the federation.

You’re on the BCTF social justice committee as well, right? Yeah, but it’s a bit of a gong show. How so? It involves a group of very liberal white women in their fifties talking about process. It’s sort of old school, you know, woman as victim, we need to be going out to save sex trade workers and women who have to wear the burqa, you know, stuff like that. Some Status of Women activists are more critical, but the advisory committee work is frustrating. It is slow moving, procedural and more basic than our local committees. Don’t get me wrong, I love process when it’s done well, but when that’s all you get to see it’s hard to see it as social justice activism. Is there anything you like about the provincial Social Justice committee? One of the things I really like is that it has given me a chance to meet some other people around the province and find out what other groups are doing. I go to the far north twice a year and bring resources and talk
about what we can do to foster social justice. We try to organize funding and get speakers to come up and talk about mobilization. That’s the part that I enjoy the most. *How well connected are activist teachers in the north to the BCTF?* Theoretically there is a network there, but up north there are two social justice contacts who are pretty overwhelmed with their lives, so it’s not really a network. It’s more that the three of us get together and talk about things. That’s one of the differences between larger and smaller locals. In my local there are tons of social justice committees that are pretty autonomous from the BCTF and really well networked, but you don’t see that up north. The lack of network makes it really isolating for them. That’s probably the biggest problem with a centralized social justice umbrella committee located in Vancouver. You can’t just apply the same model to all locals.

*That’s interesting, because one of the arguments for going to the umbrella model was to decentralize social justice activism.* Well maybe, but if they really wanted to do that they should have kept the networks. When you have 40 teachers in your local instead of 4000, it’s harder to find activist allies. *Can the two social justice reps up north connect with other activists through the social justice list serve?* They can, but there’s a lot of nonsense on that list. Anyone can sign up and post to it, even non-teachers. That’s fine, but there is one teacher who wrote a letter to the editor saying that gays were going to hell and should be reformed. He was disciplined but is now back in school and he’s on the list. He puts terrible homophobic shit up on it all the time. Then there are people who spend their time dealing with him, so it’s a bit of a mixed bag. It’s not a great networking tool for activists across the province.

The other problem is that most teachers are either conservative or liberal, so they need the federation to take the lead on social change, but the BCTF can’t take the lead on every issue. *Why not?* Well, for example, there is definitely an intrinsic credibility issue when it comes to race. Most local presidents are white men. It’s one of the things I’ve noticed when I’ve gone around the province doing SURT training. They are all part of the RA, which sets the annual budget, so it can be really hard to get resources to support employment equity. Also, when I first came to the building, I looked around and saw that everyone was white and asked about that. It’s a bit ridiculous. Even the anti-racism action
group is mostly white, and I think that’s a problem. They told me that when people apply there is no way to know if a person is a person of colour and so I said that we needed to fix that. We need a policy that explicitly says we prioritize underrepresented teachers. It’s a volunteer position, so it wouldn’t be employment equity language, but we need to figure out something else. Still, even if we had that kind of policy it would be hard for people to come to an institution with such a white face. Teachers in general are a pretty white group so it’s not just the BCTF, but federation staff are even whiter than the teaching population. When new teachers interested in social justice activism come to meetings or AGMs and hear white union men arguing with each other about things that don’t matter to them, they get turned off. I just think more work could be done.

*Like what?* Well, they could start by becoming more comfortable with controversy. The executive does some dubious things when it comes to race and social justice, even though they describe themselves as a social justice union. They don’t always ally themselves with colonized people during AGM debates. An employment equity policy would be a good first step, and in the meantime more funding could be given to the Aboriginal Education committee and more profile could be given to people who are doing anti-racism work. More funding and support should actually be given to all the social justice programming. I’m not saying that the BCTF doesn’t do social justice work. There is tons of good work going on, it’s just that it’s a large institution that is a bit impenetrable and if it’s impenetrable for me, then it probably is for a lot of other people as well. It’s easy to get a lesson plan or a resource or a workshop, and I think they’re excellent at that, but in terms of actually engaging in an ongoing way with your union about these issues, it’s harder to do, especially if you’re not part of a large urban local that dedicates resources to social justice committees. It’s really hard to make the transition from foot soldier to decision-maker, so a lot of people don’t bother getting involved.

There are people who are hovering on the edge of more involvement but need the support, access to the organization and a promise of work/life balance before increasing their involvement. Teaching can be exhausting. Most new teachers I’ve spoken to need the little bit of leisure time they have just to recover from the week and connect with their families and friends. They aren’t all interested in union involvement, but for the ones who
are I think there are things we could do to make it easier; things that would make it more accessible to people who are not already politically prominent. This is especially a problem for new teachers who are TOCs, who don’t see anything about the union other than the odd poster on the staff room door as they move through schools. Even if they start off pro-labour, the union can be a big creepy thing preventing them from getting a job. If they start off anti-labour, the seniority system just reinforces their views. I know it is there for a reason, but something needs to be done to make the union accessible to members who are not yet in secure teaching positions, because when they eventually get full time contracts, they might not see it as a good venue for their activism. Actually, partly because of this issue, our local created a committee for TOCs. I consider it to be one of our social justice committees even though TOCs are not necessarily as a group, anti-oppression educators.

So, what’s up next for you? I’ll probably leave the provincial social justice committee next year and get more involved in my local. I’m on three local collective bargaining committees and am really enjoying it. Is there much local bargaining that happens now after the legislated switch to provincial bargaining? Well, we obviously want to get back to local bargaining, but that hasn’t happened yet so we’re doing what we can to negotiate clauses. We’ve actually been given the opportunity to do some local negotiating this year since it is not a provincial bargaining year. Of course, everything we came to the table with they said, “no, that’s provincial, no that’s provincial” but one of the things we did get done was changing the harassment language so that it included gender identity and I think we might be the first people in BC to get that passed. So, that’s exciting.

I’m also going to run for grievance officer next year, which I don’t think will be a problem. Was it your idea or did somebody identify you as a person who would be good at this kind of work? A bit of both. I was around the local a lot with my two committee chair roles, so I was approached about the work, but at the same time I’ve been saying it is something I’m interested in doing. I’m being mentored for the role right now, but I’ve also volunteered and expressed an interest in it. I’ve been on the grievance committee for almost two years and this year I’ve been floating around doing pickup work. It was by doing the work that I started to actually see the possibilities in the position. I wouldn’t
have guessed it in my first couple of years, but grievance work is actually one of the best ways I’ve found to integrate all of my interests, experiences and skills. It can feel a bit like banging your head against the wall doing this sporadic, alienated, isolated social justice thing, and I’m at a point in my life where I’m done with being the representative queer. I don’t want to be the person who’s always standing up and talking about what we’re really like, especially since the queer community in the city mostly drives me crazy. I like the international solidarity work I’ve been doing and will continue with that, but at the local level it isn’t well funded. We are forever having to apply for annual social justice grants and I’d rather spend my energy on activism than fundraising. I’m also ready to do something different and have decided that grievance work is the way to do it. I really believe that defending the collective agreement is about social justice, especially if it’s done by activists with an anti-oppression commitment.

*How have you been able to integrate your perspective into your grievance work?* I think my perspective lets me see things differently. So, when someone’s calling and saying that something’s going on in their school where they don’t feel comfortable with their co-worker, I’ll be able to see it. I’ll be able to see sexism, or I can go to schools and make the argument that homophobic comments in the staff room make the workplace unsafe, and that it’s against the code of ethics. That kind of thing is not generally said by table officers or other people who are in grievance type positions. There are things I don’t see, but I think I have better insight into a lot of stuff than some table officers who have never done social justice work. Also, my involvement in community organizations, schools, districts, my local and the BCTF means I have the language, contacts, access to information and understanding of organizational culture necessary to connect people across the province. It will be a steep learning curve, but that’s good. I’m excited to do the work. *Good luck.* Thanks.

*You’ve done a lot in your first ten years of teaching.* Yeah, now that I’m involved I’m finding it easier to focus on those areas where I think I’ll have an effect. You need focus as an activist. You can’t do everything. I started out by doing too many things, but I think I’m more focussed now. You know, the union has really been a good institutional means to get where I want to get. *How so?* It’s strong, well resourced, strategic, networked,
mainstream enough to be heard by a variety of groups, more supportive of activists than other educational structures, less focussed on a fundamental unit of oppression than many community-based organizations, provides teachers with concrete resources and allows me to be a more efficient activist than I am when I’m teaching, since I don’t have to wait 25 years for my students to change the world. I especially feel supported and challenged by my local. It’s a great local and we do good work. I don’t change my mind easily, but you know, I frequently change my mind 6 or 7 times in one meeting. Before I come to any issue, I’ve already thought about it, looked at my own ideas and feelings and come to some conclusion, so it takes a good argument to make me change my mind. I used to be one of those people who always had the answer and always knew what was going on, but now I come to meetings and I sit and listen. I’ve never learned so much from people in my entire life. My local union really is one of the best venues I’ve found for my activism. It sounds like a good fit. Yeah, it is. I’m excited to get more involved.

4.9 From inductive to deductive analysis

In this chapter, I have generated an inductive answer to my research question—**How did teacher union activists contribute and respond to the institutionalization of social justice in their federation?**—by condensing and weaving 3,000 pages of interview transcripts into a 100 page poly-vocal history of social justice at the BCTF. I have lost many details and activist experiences by converting 25 histories into 8 composite profiles, but I believe participants’ words and perspectives have helped me shed a more accessible and engaging “side light” (Ball, 1991) on four decades of social justice history than I could have managed by inserting their quotes into my own outsider narrative. In Chapter Five, I more directly impose my own analytic perspective on the data by reading these eight stories through the conceptual framework I developed in Chapter One.

Before doing so, however, I build a bridge to the rest of the study by reading the eight composite profiles through three key questions: 1) How, when and why did you become involved in the BCTF? 2) How did you experience the 1998 restructuring of social justice programming? And 3) Are you a social justice activist? Eight sets of answers to each of these questions provide the reader with a *Coles’ Notes* version of my findings.
4.9.1 How, when and why did you become involved in the BCTF?

Teachers’ Viewpoint: I became involved in the BCTF in the late 1960s because teachers comprised the majority of union membership, but we had no voice. The essential problem was that a small group of administrators used their power to oppose a pro-labour perspective. We finally organized as a labour caucus in 1977.

Teachers for a United Federation: I became involved in the BCTF in the 1980s after improving my craft in the classroom for many years. On April 4, 1987, I was called to a meeting at the BCTF to hear the enunciation of Bills 19 and 20 that made us a union. It was an exciting time. I got swept up in the early stages of us changing our sense of who we were as individual teachers and an organization. As a member of a more conservative local, I joined the TUF caucus because we were in favour of uniting teachers regardless of members’ individual preferences to be a labour union with collective bargaining rights or a professional association. My personal preference was to gain collective bargaining rights, but I did not like Viewpoint’s single minded, exclusionary approach to the vote.

Feminist Fossils: I became involved in the BCTF in the late 1960s because women teachers comprised the majority of union membership, but we were dramatically under-represented in leadership positions. A group of us used the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women report to advocate for a Status of Women program in our union. It was an exciting time.

Full time Administrative Staff Officers: See Teacher’s Viewpoint entry, followed by a series of shoulder taps.

Executive Committee: I became involved in the BCTF in the late 1970s after a friend told me about the Status of Women program/Program Against Racism. The ideas, social networks, activist experiences and creative energy at zone meetings helped me feel connected to the union and helped me see the education system beyond my own classroom. Soon, people began to encourage me to run for leadership positions.

Aboriginal Educators: I became involved in the BCTF in the late 1970s/1990s because I believed it would be a good place to continue the work I was doing in community organizations. Our kids and our teachers continue to be harmed by public schools. The intergenerational abuse experienced by my people in residential schools continues to this day. I can’t afford not to become involved. I don’t trust many others to have the analysis.

Gay And Lesbian Educators of BC: I became involved in the BCTF in the mid 1990s when my organization, GALE BC, began to advocate for an H&H (anti-Homophobia and anti-Heterosexism) program. We wanted to make sure that gay and lesbian students wouldn’t have to go through what we had to go through, and we thought a BCTF program would be a good way to protect our members from homophobic harassment in schools.

Early to mid career teachers in large urban locals: I became involved in the union in the late 1990s. After a bunch of years as a Teacher On Call in many schools in the
district, I finally got a full time job. At the first union meeting, I spoke up about
something and my colleagues asked me to be a School Representative. I started going to
meetings at my organization (local), and quickly got involved in some of the social
justice committees.

4.9.2 What happened in 1998?

Teachers’ Viewpoint: The discrete social responsibility programs were necessary in the
70s and 80s when racism and sexism were so in your face, and something like them is
still necessary but we’re no longer experts on the issues. As teachers, we’re good
organizers, but we’re generalists when it comes to social justice.

Teachers for a United Federation: We, as teachers bring tremendous organizational
skills into the arena of social justice activism and our executive thought we should be
using our skills as teachers and as organizers to actually take on issues that we care about
and we know effect the students who come into our classes. So, after speaking to a few
staff and teacher activists, we came up with the idea of an umbrella structure with a
streamlined committee that would embrace all social justice issues without a lot of staff
resources.

Feminist Fossils: The right wing caucus within the federation slowly starved us and then
cut us off at the knees to punish us for opposing their election. Enough friends from the
left wing caucus stood quietly by to let it happen. It seems few people can deal with
powerful, union-active women who do not always do as they are told.

Full time Administrative Staff Officers: Please look beyond this highly contentious
moment in federation history. Social justice in our union includes support for universal
public education, international solidarity, professional development, teacher welfare and
health and safety. It has always been much broader than an identity-based struggle.

Executive Committee: In hindsight the removal of our discrete social justice
programming was not a great idea, but it doesn’t help to dwell on it. We need to learn
from our mistakes and celebrate our accomplishments. Really, as a social justice union,
everything we do is social justice, from our Capital SJ programming to our most recent
campaign to resist standardized testing.

Aboriginal Educators: I wasn’t really involved at the time, so I can’t tell you. The
Program Against Racism wasn’t perfect, but it could definitely have been worked with.
Over the years I was able to assist many PAR and Aboriginal Education activists. To this
day, they are my cohort in the work that needs to be done.

Gay And Lesbian Educators of BC: This was an interesting bureaucratic strategy to
avoid dealing explicitly with heterosexism and homophobia in schools.

Early to mid career teachers in large urban locals: I just can’t get worked up over
grievances that go back to the 1980s, but one of the things we should have kept is the
discrete activist networks. Fortunately, we still have discrete issue social justice committees in my organization (local).

4.9.3 Are you a social justice activist?

Teachers’ Viewpoint: Yes, but over the years, I’ve learned something about my own limitations. In the early days it was easier to do social responsibility work because the racism and sexism was so in your face. It was so obvious. It is much subtler now and our programs are not as effective as they were when we began.

Teachers for a United Federation: Yes, you know, in every other universe I am left winger, but in the Federation, I’m an arch conservative. I’m a big supporter of the early SW and PAR programs as a way of involving more teachers in the union and our international solidarity work is phenomenal, but I’m frustrated that every time we have a new idea about how to organize social justice programming, it is clouded by political infighting. This is even a problem with the staff. It used to be that when people became staff, they knew that in exchange for a high salary and relative autonomy, they had to remain neutral about political affairs, but there are people in this building whose politics run so deep that they cannot do this. Education is the only institution whose primary purpose is to ameliorate the differences between the most privileged and worse off. On this level, all teachers can participate in social justice work. At its best, the BCTF facilitates their efforts by offering a link between the resources of the union and a localized teaching environment that is quite amenable to influence.

Feminist Fossils: Are you kidding Cindy? Of course I consider myself to be a social justice activist.

Full time Administrative Staff Officers: Mmhm. As staff, we are supposed to stay out of union politics, but I guess I try to raise issues and provide analysis. I write for The Teacher and generate memos and articles. These are all ways of trying to influence and shape the way people will understand and act.

Executive Committee: Yes, we are very clear about our identity as a social justice union of professionals. I think we’ve evolved in a sense because we are now very clearly a union that takes care of its members’ welfare without being a business union. We distinguish ourselves that way. Social justice is the core of everything we do. That’s why I’m here. That’s why I do what I do. There’s no other reason. That’s what it’s all about for me and for a lot of us here, staff, executive, teacher activists. My initial involvement was through a social justice program and I have remained committed to that throughout my career.

Aboriginal Educators: It might just be my interpretation, but the term social justice bothers me. It almost dismisses the need for activism because organizations can claim to be competent at an issue without supporting it. It’s not that our people don’t experience racism or poor bashing or sexism or homophobia. We do, but Aboriginal Education is not ready to be a stream under the social justice umbrella. If this competitive struggle over
resources is what social justice teacher unionism is about, I am not a social justice activist. There are more than enough resources for all of us.

**Gay And Lesbian Educators of BC:** Are you kidding? Yes, yes, I am most definitely a social justice activist, but I wasn’t always one. Activism involves living as an activist. It involves, you know, walking the walk 90% of the time and talking the talk 10% of the time. You have to walk it more than you talk it. Social justice is the poor third cousin to bargaining and professional development in the federation. There are people here who are kind-hearted people who think social justice work is important but they don’t think it’s the lifeblood of the federation. They think bargaining is or some other aspect of the federation and so they talk a good talk because they think it will advance their careers, but they don’t really vote in favour of social justice motions.

**Early to mid career teachers in large urban locals:** I was definitely an activist before I was a teacher, but the more thinking I do about the world and about social justice, the more I realize that my union (local) is really a good institutional means to get where I want to get. It’s strong, well resourced, strategic, networked, mainstream enough to be heard by a variety of groups, more supportive of activists than other educational structures, less focussed on a fundamental unit of oppression than many community-based organizations and allows me to be a more efficient activist than I am when I’m teaching. On the other hand, it can be a bit impenetrable for new teachers.

These eight distinct answers to three key questions help me bridge the complex and deeply contextualized narratives of 25 social justice teacher union activists with my more streamlined analysis in Chapter Five.
Chapter Five: Analysis

“I will tell you my story, but it is your job to analyze it. I am the activist and you are the researcher.” (PAR activist)

I remember being taken aback when a highly reflective participant, who had completed a doctoral dissertation nearly a decade earlier, made this statement following our interview. I was puzzled and distraught that he so easily reinstated the distinction I had set out to blur between researcher and activist. At first I believed he was trying to tell me something about our relative skills—he was better at strategizing and I was better at conceptualizing—but as time went on, I began to doubt my initial interpretation of his statement. Within a month of the interview, he had sent me his doctoral dissertation and added me to his activist network. From these two actions, I learned that he was not trying to restrict either of us to a single role (researcher vs. activist) or even suggest that the two roles were mutually exclusive. Rather, he was providing me with some guidance for my thesis. For this study, it is my responsibility to analyze the data. I recount his words of advice at this point in my dissertation to illustrate my transition from weaver of stories to analyst of trends. In Chapter Four, I connected participants’ overlapping narratives to provide a deeply contextualized answer to my research question. In this chapter, I exchange the immediacy of participants’ experiences for a more focussed response to my research question. I do this by analyzing the 25 career history interviews and 8 overlapping narratives through the conceptual framework I developed in Chapter One.

5 Reviewing my conceptual framework

The conceptual tension between human agency and social structure drove my initial inquiry and helped me break my research question—How did teacher union activists contribute and respond to the institutionalization of social justice in their federation?—into five sub-questions, each of which contains the dynamic tension between structure and agency. Please see Table 5.1 for a review of the conceptual framework developed in Chapter One.
Table 5.1: Review of Conceptual Framework

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The five sub-questions emerging from this framework, all of which contain the structure/agency dynamic, drive my analysis of the eight composite career histories presented in Chapter Four.

1) What are the patterns of privilege within the BCTF and how do social justice teacher union activists mediate, critique, construct and subvert them through their patterns of participation?

2) What is the easily apprehended history of social justice in the BCTF and how do social justice teacher union activists retell the story through their everyday experiences?

3) How are social justice traditions in the BCTF sedimented, dissolved and reshaped over time by social justice teacher union activists?

4) What is the typical teacher union activist career trajectory and how has it been recast through the everyday experiences of social justice teacher union activists?

5) How has social justice become mainstreamed in BCTF structures and how have social justice teacher union activists negotiated and resisted these structures in pursuit of their goals?

5.1 Patterns of privilege and patterns of participation

What are the patterns of privilege within the BCTF and how do social justice teacher union activists mediate, critique, construct and subvert these patterns?

5.1.1 Structure: Hierarchical bureaucracy

My analysis of participants’ career histories and documentary evidence about organizational priorities, divisional structures and activist access to provincial decision
making authority reveal three patterns of privilege in the BCTF, all mediated by broader ruling relations in society (D.E. Smith, 1987): 1) traditional organizational priorities elevating bargaining, campaigns and professional development over social justice mean that material resources more often flow away from than toward social justice activism; 2) local activists and staff involved in social justice work are disproportionately found in high intensity, low autonomy organizational locations; and 3) organizational restructuring decisions have resulted in reduced opportunities for local social justice activists to connect with provincial staff.

5.1.1.1 Resource flow reflects organizational priorities (Bargaining & Campaigns > PD> SJ)

Participants most directly responsible for public relations at the BCTF frequently made reference to the “three pillars of the federation” (Elected official)—bargaining, professional development and social justice—thereby setting up an image of three equal structural foundations upon which all organizational efforts sit. The majority of participants, however, produced imagery indicating a less even relationship between organizational priorities. One participant, whose primary work took place outside of the federation and who consistently encountered barriers to his activism, described social justice as the “poor third cousin to bargaining and professional development” (GALE)—an image that clearly contrasts with that of three uniform pillars. Another participant, who had worked for many years as a senior elected official and permanent staff member told me that while federation intentions were good, most of their social justice efforts could be described as “boiler plate activism” (View point)—earnest, well meaning work that rarely went deeper than a surface coat of bronze on an old cast iron boiler. Another participant, who had been a provincial table officer and long time activist, personified the organization—“research and technology is the brains of the organization and field services are our legs” (Elected official). She did not associate social justice with a body part, but implied the equivalent of a heart, spirit or energizing force. “Social justice drives everything we do. It is the reason we are here” (Elected official). This characterization was confirmed by another long time activist and staff who told me that the official tagline of the BCTF, like that of other teachers’ organizations in North
America was “A Union of Professionals, not a Social Justice Union,” (Staff) but that the BCTF had always been committed to social justice principles. Across participants, I found a collectively understood feeling that the BCTF was a social justice union, but this identity was not codified in official documents, other than the recently produced promotional brochure about social justice programming.

The perspectives and experiences of social justice activists suggest that when it comes to BCTF priorities, social justice is something other than an organizational pillar. Less tangible than the field service divisions’ “legs” or the research and technology divisions’ “brains,” social justice enters the organization through the activist energies of participants who continue with the long hours and high intensity work because they were internally driven by the passion to eliminate social injustice. As I was listening to and analyzing participants’ experiences, I was struck by the irony of the situation: union activists (traditionally known for their advocacy for distributive and material justice) told me over and over again, either implicitly or explicitly, that social justice in their organization lived on a spiritual or symbolic level. Social justice initiatives did gain material support, but this support was considerably less stable or reliable than that allocated to other organizational priorities—bargaining, campaigns and professional development.

Divisional status within the federation reflected the hierarchical relationship between organizational priorities. That is, despite having undergone a number of name changes, both bargaining and professional development retained divisional status through multiple generations of federation restructuring. Social justice, on the other hand, first gained program status in 1972 and dropped to advisory committee status in 1998. It never gained division status, but rather has historically been located within the professional development division. The recent name change of the PD division from “Professional Development” to “Professional and Social Issues” suggests that social justice shares divisional status with professional development, however, the number of staff assigned to the two priorities demonstrates that the name change is more rhetorical than realized.

Thus, activists’ experiences more often than not contradicted the tri-pillar imagery used by public relations staff. One foundational pillar—bargaining—is prioritized in the year
and months leading up to the expiry of a provincial contract while the other—campaigns—is privileged in the years and months between contracts. Professional development is consistently supported, but rarely privileged, while social justice depends on the goodwill of the leadership and the energy of activists\textsuperscript{32}. The federation’s status as a social justice union depends on its widely acknowledged and repeatedly articulated organizational identity and a cadre of persistent, well organized social justice activists who are perpetually in search for well resourced, divisional home.

5.1.1.2 SJ teacher activists and staff are disproportionately located in high intensity, low autonomy, low security positions

Unfortunately, the temporary home found by the majority of social justice activists has involved relatively tightly defined, intense job descriptions. They have been temporary, in part, because of an early political decision of the left leaning caucus (Teachers’ Viewpoint) to increase the accessibility of highly desirable provincial staff positions. This commitment has meant that when social justice activists affiliated with Viewpoint have applied for staff positions, few have attempted to convert their temporary appointments into to permanent ones. Related to this political commitment, the two discrete social justice programs that derived their support from the left leaning caucus in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s—the Status of Women and Program Against Racism—were led by a series of rotating co-ordinators on short term contracts.

At the time of my visit, a few former SW and PAR activists were on temporary contracts in the Field Services division, a division characterized by a table officer as the “legs” of the federation. Staff in this division, had relatively high intensity, low autonomy positions compared with those in other divisions. All but one of those I interviewed was on a temporary contract. While all had strong social justice commitments, few were able to focus on this work because most of their time was spent running back and forth from local presidents to the provincial executive communicating campaigns in one direction and grievances in the other with little time or energy remaining to dedicate to their

\textsuperscript{32} These points are meant to be descriptive rather than judgemental. I do not believe a teachers’ union needs to allocate equivalent material support to bargaining, PD and social justice.
activist pursuits: “it’s not that anybody prevents us from doing social justice, but we are so busy meeting the technical needs of the locals as defined by the presidents and presidents are just trying to keep up with contract maintenance and grievance issues, so social justice ends up dropping off the agenda” (Feminist Fossil).

A similar level of high intensity work was experienced by the three staff members filling the 2.0 Full Time Equivalent “capital SJ” positions at the time of my visit. The co-ordinator of the Aboriginal Education program was on a full time (1.0 FTE), short term contract. Like the SW and PAR co-ordinators who came before her, she not only had to fulfill her job description and redirect her energies in response to organizational campaigns and bargaining, but was also expected to regularly justify her program and teach her colleagues about Aboriginal issues on demand. The remaining 1.0 position was shared by two staff in the Professional Development and Social Issues division. One of the two was on a term contract while the other was on a permanent contract. In both cases, their other half time positions were highly demanding. Their personal commitment to social justice, rather than their job descriptions, was what kept the social justice committee afloat. The committee was also buoyed by nine committee member volunteers who were full time teachers with periodic release from their classrooms to attend meetings.

To understand the value of a secure, flexible position to social justice activists, one needs only turn to the International Solidarity program—the only equity-based initiative to survive the 1998 restructuring of social justice. According to the co-ordinator of the program and a number of other participants who had been involved as teacher activists or federation leaders, the International Solidarity program enjoyed a greater level of support from the membership because it focussed primarily on issues outside the classroom—issues that were less likely to make members feel defensive about their own teaching. In addition to this difference in emotional proximity, however, there were a number of structural supports in place for the program which were not in place for other Social Justice programming at the federation: a guaranteed funding clause, relative autonomy for the staff-co-ordinator, consistent leadership by a highly respected, full time staff member with high job security, support from members of both caucuses and reduced
vulnerability to organizational restructuring efforts. While the survival and long term success of the International Solidarity program cannot be solely attributed to the status, security or working conditions of its co-ordinator, it is fair to say that the continuity of leadership could not have hurt the program’s status.

Moving from the provincial to local level, I found a similar pattern of social justice teacher activists over-represented in high intensity, low decision-making authority type-positions. Local teacher activists involved in social justice networks found themselves doing activist work on top of a full time teaching load and having access to only one of two provincial meetings (Annual General Meeting, AGM), while those who were elected as full time local presidents had full time release to do their union work, were frequently re-elected, and had access to both the AGM and the Representative Assembly (RA).

All of the local teacher activists I interviewed began their union involvement as voluntary or involuntary school Staff Representatives (SR). After learning about union involvement and the education system through teacher grievances at their school, local union meetings and campaigns, they experienced “widening horizons and broadening allegiances” (Bascia & Young, 2001, p.285), as well as increased confidence in their abilities to perform leadership roles. With this new insight and experience, many attempted to advocate for their own social justice activist interests but found considerably less support at the school, local association and provincial federation level when their activist attempts were not aligned with provincially organized campaigns. Most local activists were disappointed with the labour intensive, minimally influential Staff Representative work, and expressed interest in becoming “decision-makers not foot soldiers” (Local activist). Unfortunately, many found that the decision-making roles—Local Representative (LR), local table officer (President, Vice President) and Member at Large—were more difficult to attain than their labour intensive SR roles had been.

The higher status of the LR position was linked to the two federation locations for local activist decision making—the Annual General Meeting and the Representative Assembly. School Representatives attend the highly accessible AGM at which motions are passed and issues are debated, while Local Representatives attend the more exclusionary RA at
which economic decisions are made and the federation budget is passed. The implication for social justice activism is that money for social justice programming is decided at the RA by local table officers, LRs and the Executive Committee whose priorities tend to mirror those of the organization as a whole—teacher welfare over professional development over social justice—before the AGM takes place. By the time local social justice activists meet with their colleagues to pass motions at the AGM, the budgetary decisions for the year have already been made. In fact, many participants believed that one of the reasons for the demise of the two discrete social justice programs was that few members of the Status of Women and Program Against Racism had had access to financial decision making through the RA until after the programs had already been starved of necessary resources. Beyond their activist priorities, those with voting privileges at the RA have historically been more male, white and knowledgeable about organizational rules of order than have their social justice teacher activist colleagues whose primary provincial involvement occurs at the AGM.

Overall, across local and provincial levels of BCTF involvement, social justice activists found themselves over-represented in highly intense, minimally secure and minimally autonomous organizational locations.

5.1.1.3 Organizational restructuring has resulted in limited networking opportunities for SJ activists

The relatively marginalized organizational locations of local teacher activists and staff with social justice commitments were further constrained by two organizational restructuring decisions. First, the removal of the activist networks and staff co-ordinator positions for the two discrete social justice programs in 1998 meant that local SW and PAR activists no longer had a staff representative or insider contact at the provincial body. Second, an internal restructuring decision made a few years later resulted in a highly bureaucratized division of labour at the federation.

The first incidence of restructuring was highly visible to teacher activists and thus does not need as much analytical attention. Without a provincial staff co-ordinator for discrete social justice programming, the networks were left without an advocate or internal
negotiator in the federation. The second incidence of restructuring was considerably less visible, though no less problematic, than the first. In the early 2000s, the Executive committee restructured the federation to reduce the field services component of provincial federation work. A new division called “Field Services” was created to take care of all communications with local associations in the province. Staff in other divisions who had historically had their own network of local contacts were encouraged to redirect their time to support centrally defined leadership initiatives. This resulted in a further weakening of both “capital” and “lowercase” social justice initiatives.

Staff in Field Services, as I indicated in the last section, were so busy fulfilling their job commitments that they had little time to interact with local social justice activists, while those in PSID and Research & Technology who had worked with local teachers on a wide variety of “lowercase” social justice projects lost an aspect of their work that they had previously enjoyed—connecting with local teachers. Many PSID and R&T staff continued to find ways to sustain their existing relationships, but as local teacher liaison work began to fall outside of their formal job expectations, it became more challenging to build new relationships with the next generation of teachers. For example, prior to the implementation of the internal organizational restructuring decision, a number of full time teachers with an interest in investigating multi-literacies and educational inclusion had collaborated with R&T staff on personally meaningful research projects related to their day to day classroom teaching. These research initiatives depended on collaborative relationships with school districts, universities and the Ministry of Education, and thus benefited from ongoing connections with federation members. The removal of the field services component from the portfolio of staff in all divisions outside of FS resulted in reduced federation access to local teachers across a wide spectrum of activities and reduced local teacher access to federation services outside of those identified by either the executive (campaigns) or their local presidents (grievances).

In the end, even those federation leaders (members of the Executive Committee) who benefited from the increasingly centralized and departmentalized structure because it minimized organizational duplication of services and provided them with increased control over the day to day work of staff, expressed feelings of regret and guilt about the
centralization of federation power and their electoral compromise, “I hope a new, young left-leaning group of teacher activists takes our place and revives the federation” (Elected official). Administrative staff in R&T and PSID quietly hoped for the same. For them, the new division of labour—“R&T is the head, FSD is the legs, SJ is the heart” (Elected official)—was more akin to decapitation or amputation than holistic organizational strategy. Similarly, SW and PAR co-ordinators compared the decimation of their networks to being “cut off at the knees.” (Feminist Fossil)

A highly problematic consequence of both of these restructuring decisions for local social justice activists in the 2000s, was that they had far less access to provincial federation structures than their predecessors—“that place is like Fort Knox” (Local activist); “issues get raised in the social justice committee and then disappear into the ether” (GALE). “It is easy to get a lesson plan or a resource or a workshop…but in terms of actually engaging in an ongoing way with your union about these issues, it’s harder to do” (Local activist).

5.1.1.4 Summarizing patterns of privilege at the BCTF

So far in this section, I have used participants’ career history interviews to analyze organizational patterns of privilege. In particular, I have identified the following indicators of privilege: relative support for organizational priorities, direction of resource flow between divisions, decision making authority, job security, the extent to which participants can shape their own work and level of access to local-provincial networks. Based on these indicators, my analysis suggests that there are multiple organizational constraints to social justice activism at the BCTF—limited material support to social justice as a result of its relatively low priority (compared with bargaining, campaigns, and professional development); high intensity, low security job descriptions for activists and staff with social justice portfolios; and centralized organizational restructuring separating local activists from provincial staff across federation divisions.

Despite these constraints, however, my research indicates an impressive range and depth of social justice work at the BCTF. Social justice activism at the BCTF, like that in other
organizations, is shaped but not determined by federation priorities, policies and practices. In the next section, I shift my analytic attention from structure to agency.

5.1.2 Agency: Reshaping patterns of privilege through networks and dyads

My analysis to this point has been somewhat dismal from a social justice perspective because I have focused on structured patterns of privilege without identifying how activists have been able to reshape inequitable norms. In this section, I identify how participants made space for their work and how their patterns of participation reshaped organizational norms.

The majority of the participants began their BCTF involvement by learning how their organization worked. This learning took many forms. Teachers’ Viewpoint activists learned that teachers had little decision-making authority at local association meetings run by school administrators so they began connecting with colleagues in their schools and local associations. As their activist networks gained momentum, they used their numbers to gain control of federation governance. Female teachers who were shoulder-tapped by male colleagues looking for Teachers’ Viewpoint allies formalized their activism through a Status of Women program. Once they learned that they were not always advantaged by following their male colleagues’ lead, they began to rely more heavily on activist networks of feminist teachers across the province. Over time they “infiltrated every element of the organization” (Feminist fossil) including the Representative Assembly and as a result began to deepen their understanding of and influence over budgetary and policy decisions. Multicultural activists learned from the experiences of the Status of Women and replicated their programmatic structure in the Program Against Racism.

Anti-homophobia advocates learned about BCTF policies, procedures and communication strategies from their Status of Women colleagues. They were initially successful in passing a motion to establish a Homophobia and Heterosexism program, but were blocked from replicating the SW model a year before the program was to begin because of federation-wide social justice restructuring. This disappointing loss taught the
activists involved that they had more power as an independent organization of gay and lesbian teachers, than as a formal program within the organization. As members of the BCTF, the Gay and Lesbian Educators of BC learned to strategize with like-minded colleagues and plug into federation projects on their own terms. Aboriginal activists also learned from the federation’s restructuring of social justice programming, but their lessons, strategies and treatment differed. In contrast to GALE BC, the Aboriginal educators gained program status following the demise of the SW and PAR programs. Leaders of both caucuses supported this program which was pitched as professional development and education support—supporting Aboriginal students and teachers—rather than political advocacy—fighting colonialism in schools and society. Aboriginal activists observed that SW and PAR activists’ exclusive support for the Teachers’ Viewpoint caucus had been a major factor leading to their demise. To avoid this pitfall, they built and maintained bridges across caucuses.

Finally, following the restructuring of social justice from well funded discrete programs with local networks to a poorly funded umbrella committee with a well funded, centrally regulated local grant structure, early to mid career activists involved in large urban locals learned how to protect their discrete social justice committees at the local level. They retained their discrete Status of Women and Program Against Racism committees and added a number of other social justice committees with sufficient member interest and leadership commitment. By pooling their human resources and applying for social justice grants on a rotating basis, they were able to loosen the restrictions of the centrally controlled provincial granting program (eg. one year grants, no successful individual can apply more than once) without eliminating themselves from the competition.

Looking across four decades of social justice teacher union activism at the BCTF, it is clear that each generation of activists built on the collective wisdom of their predecessors and found ways to replicate successful models and avoid pitfalls. They learned about the malleability of programmatic structures, the strength of local networks, the importance of critical mass and the durability of micro-political tension between political caucuses. Much of this learning took place through their connections with other activists. The Teachers’ Viewpoint caucus took advantage of the critical mass of teachers compared to
the relative minority of administrators. SW and PAR activists took advantage of local networks of like minded teachers across the province. Gay and Lesbian educators used their connections with SW activists and collective knowledge of education systems across the province to collaborate with rather than work under the strict governance of federation leaders. Aboriginal Education staff looked to leaders of both caucuses for insights and to their committee and communities for guidance. They used this insight and collective strength to resist hierarchical, bureaucratic demands for expedience. Finally, local teacher activists pooled resources to subvert the individualistic restrictions embedded in the local social justice granting structure.

Despite ongoing setbacks faced by BCTF-involved social justice activists between the late 1960s and 2007, it is clear that their actions were not wholly determined by the hierarchical, bureaucratic structure depicted in the last section. Through their increasing involvement in union politics, social justice activists at the BCTF have been successful in mediating (Clune, 1990), constructing (Clune, 1990), resisting (Clune, 1990; Giroux, 1983) and subverting (D. E. Smith, 1987, 2002) federation norms. They have learned the system, integrated themselves into multiple organizational functions, demystified organizational structures for their like-minded colleagues, increased their numbers and influence, held the federation accountable for claiming to be a social justice union, used their knowledge of existing procedures to push boundaries, held a mirror to delegates behaving in explicitly sexist, racist and homophobic ways, reached out to new generations of activists who did not see themselves reflected in the organization, published their insights in the federation magazine and repeatedly asked members, elected officials, staff and one another what it meant to be a democratic organization.

Across activist groups, participants’ patterns of participation reshaped organizational norms in at least four ways. First, by paying attention to the successes and failures of earlier generations of activists, participants learned how to replicate successful models and avoid the pitfalls faced by their colleagues. By doing this, they gained an implicit appreciation for the relative malleability of organizational structures. Second, by building networks with like minded members across the province, participants managed to engage a new generation of social justice activists in union involvement, thereby increasing the
likelihood that social justice motions would pass at the Annual General Meeting. Activists across generations learned that networks could be used as a structural antidote to hierarchical bureaucracy. Third, by seeking out influential actors whom they could trust, activists who did not have a critical mass of like-minded colleagues in the federation learned organizational strategies to support their goals. Finally, by bringing their worldviews and experiences to federation work, participants were able to reframe a number of organizational norms for the majority of members in the “mushy middle” (GALE) decreasing the organizational tolerance for overtly sexist, racist and homophobic behaviour.

5.2 Unifying and diversifying federation social justice history

What is the easily apprehended history of social justice in the BCTF and how do social justice teacher union activists retell the story through their everyday experiences?

5.2.1 Structure: We have always been a social justice union

No organizational history can be told as a single narrative without losing multiple activist voices along the way, but that does not negate the importance of attempting to chart the social justice accomplishments of BCTF activists. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), origin stories are told after the fact by members of a society deemed to be knowledgeable in order to explain existing traditions to future generations. Exposing their insightful point to a critical perspective, it would be analytically useful for me to tell the easily apprehended “dominant” history recognizing that it is a socially constructed product rather than a statement of truth and contrast activist behaviours and experiences that were institutionalized with those that remained biographically specific. I do the first in this sub-section (structure) and the second in the next sub-section (agency).

My initial plan was to draw on the accounts of social justice history codified by federation promotional material and read participants’ experiences against the institutionally codified history, but as I soon found out, the official BCTF history, as documented on the website, said little about social justice and the BCTF social justice brochure said little about the historical development of the programs. Because of these omissions, I decided to use the points of convergence within participants’ stories to tell
the easily apprehended or dominant history of social justice unionism at the BCTF. I cross referenced their stories with organizational records of AGM minutes to obtain an accurate timeline. After telling the easily apprehended history, I use the points of divergence in participants’ stories to diversify this dominant “truth”:

We have always been a social justice union. From our inception in 1917, we have had an inclusive membership policy. That might not seem like a big deal now but it was unique among trade unions in the province at the time. Beyond inclusive membership, we have always advocated for a high quality, publicly funded education system. This is not always depicted as a social justice issue, but without economic supports, many children in our province would not have had access to formal education.

Our earliest international programs date back to the 1920s when a number of delegates participated in international organizations and the federation became instrumental in bringing an international peace curriculum into BC schools. In the 1930s we continued with our international commitment to pacifism by denouncing fascism. In 1961, we created an international assistance fund to support educational development and teacher organization in newly independent countries, and in 1981 we established an International Solidarity program to formalize BCTF support of organized teachers in Latin America, Southern Africa and the Philippines. For a variety of reasons, solidarity relationships flourished in the first two regions more strongly than in the third, so we decided to focus our efforts on Latin American and Southern Africa. In contrast to the Canadian Teachers’ Federation’s Project Overseas program which provides a range of international experiences for different groups of Canadian teachers each summer, our program involves sustained solidarity relationships with unionized educators in a few international contexts. For the last three decades this program has allowed us to build networks of support with organized teachers in Latin America, Southern Africa and elsewhere. Together we continue to advocate for strong, accessible public education systems in a global context driven by neoliberal educational reform.

In addition to our longstanding international programs, we have worked domestically to protect public education in the face of Depression era funding cuts (1930s). We have also built a strong social justice program. In the 1950s, we strengthened our commitment to gender equity by advocating for the elimination of separate pay scales for men and women. Two decades later, the 1970 publication of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women helped us usher in the first of our discrete social justice programs. An informal group of female BCTF members who referred to themselves as Women In Teaching read the report at one of their meetings and used it to advocate for increased representation of women’s issues in the Federation. They brought their request to the AGM and with the
support of the federation leadership passed a motion to strike a task force in 1971. The following year, the Status of Women program was established. The first full time staff-co-ordinator worked with a committee of teacher activists to establish a network of feminist teachers throughout the province.

In 1974, a teacher attending the AGM voiced his frustration with racism in BC schools and raised a motion in support of an anti-racist program. The motion was passed, a task force was struck and in 1975, we established a Program Against Racism. The structure of the program paralleled that of the Status of Women program. For the next two and half decades we supported anti-racist and feminist reform through these two programs. The positive impact of these changes can be felt across BC schools and within our own federation. In the process we engaged a new generation of teachers in federation life.

In 1997 the Gay and Lesbian Educators of BC (GALE BC) and Aboriginal activist teachers brought motions to the AGM for the establishment of two task forces; one for Aboriginal Education and the other for Homophobia and Heterosexism. Both motions passed at the 1997 AGM, but the following year, when the programs were due to be implemented, social justice programming at the BCTF was restructured. In 1998, the two discrete programs were replaced with an integrated social justice committee and a local social justice grant structure. We retained our International Solidarity program and established a new Aboriginal Education program.

By the early 2000s, we realized that the integrated social justice committee was not working as well as we had hoped so we introduced four action groups dedicated to women’s issues, anti-racism, homophobia & heterosexism and poverty. In 2007, we established a fifth action group dedicated to peace and global education. We also restructured the social justice committee so that it involved 20 members, each of whom belonged to one of the five action groups. In addition to our explicit social justice programs, our federation is also dedicated to high quality public education for all children in the province, health and safety in BC schools and research on inclusive education.

The dominant or easily apprehended social justice history I constructed above by uniting points of convergence in participants stories marks the important social justice accomplishments in federation history, but it lacks a depiction of the micro-political tensions which characterized each moment. Reading it through my critical constructionist lens (Ball, 1987; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 1987) demands that I ask not only which origin story affords easy recognition, but also whose stories are missing.
5.2.2 Agency: Contesting a unified truth about social justice

Because I exclusively interviewed participants who self identified or were identified by others as social justice advocates, I missed the perspective held by some members that social justice had hijacked the fundamentally more important teacher welfare and professional development functions of their federation. In most cases, participants constructed social justice as compatible with other aspects of teacher unionism. Thus, with respect to federation priorities, the easily apprehended social justice origin story did not reproduce the hierarchy between teacher welfare, professional development and social justice reflective of broader organizational and socio-political patterns of privilege.

Upon closer examination, however, it is possible to reveal contests for knowledge production within the easily apprehended “truth” (Ball, 1987). One major example is the lack of agreement about when social justice principles were first integrated into federation life. An organizational history beginning with “We have always seen a social justice union. From our inception in 1917, we have had an inclusive membership policy.” implies that the early presence of female members in the federation provides evidence that the BCTF “never discriminated by gender or race.” This allows storytellers to reinterpret an event that occurred before their birth without critically examining the policy in the context of teacher workforce realities. While there are records indicating that many (white) women were members of the BCTF from the outset, historical analyses of this period suggest that BCTF demographics were a reflection of the gender make up of the profession, not a deliberate gender equity policy (F. H. Johnson, 1964; Wotherspoon, 1989, 1993). Like in other jurisdictions, poorly educated local women teachers were hired by the superintendent to save costs and minimize the dependence on more expensive master teachers trained in other jurisdictions. According to Wotherspoon (1993), the highly educated male teachers organized to retain their status and advocate for better working conditions, not to promote gender parity within the profession. Thus, while it is possible that the Federation deliberately included women for equitable reasons, there is no historical evidence to confirm that this was the case.

Additionally, by beginning the BCTF social history with the claim “we have always been a social justice union” the narrator of the story is implicitly minimizing the importance of
contemporary struggles; in particular, the transformative power of the Status of Women program and Program Against Racism in the 1970s and 80s. If the two discrete programs were not the first women’s or anti-racist programs, but simply an extension of a historically persistent trend toward inclusion, the creation of a social justice committee integrating feminism, anti-racism, poverty and anti-homophobia following the demise of feminist and anti-racist programming can be constructed as a product of progress rather than the product of an economic or ideological clash between conflicting caucuses.

Whose history is this? That is, whose stories are codified as real? A careful analysis demonstrates that the relatively apolitical version of social justice history I constructed above reflects the perspectives of participants occupying high status positions in the federation. In particular, the idea that social justice can be traced back to the inception of the federation was asserted by participants with the greatest decision-making authority and security in the federation—senior administrative staff responsible for federation governance and full time administrative staff in high status divisions with three to four decades of federation experience. Not only did these participants reflect the federations’ organizational patterns of privilege, but as white, middle class, heterosexual men late in their careers, they also reflected broader demographic patterns of privilege in Canadian society. It is important that I not minimize the profound positive influence these staff members have had and continue to have on social justice work in the federation, province, nation and world, but it is equally important for me to diversify their organizationally dominant narratives.

The diversification of this unified, relatively apolitical history demands that I ask not only whose origin stories are easily apprehended as truth at the BCTF, but also whose origin stories have remained biographically specific. That is, whose stories are followed by the comment, “oh, that’s just her/his perspective.” For the remainder of this section, I infuse differently positioned participants’ “everyday realities” (D. E. Smith, 1987, 2002) into the story to illustrate its depth and complexity. I do this by using biographically specific, divergent origin stories to disrupt the consensus.
When I asked people to tell me about the history of social justice unionism at the BCTF, I heard six “truths”:

1) Teachers’ Viewpoint: We began to be a social justice union in the late 1960s when teachers began to act on our recognition of the injustice of an administrator run organization. This action was affirmed by the membership nearly a decade later as our caucus gained control of the federation. Our caucus is fundamentally based on social justice principles and we introduced these principles to the BCTF.

2) Feminist Fossils: The first real social justice movement to affect the federation was feminism. In the early 1970s, we demanded that we be heard in an organization run by men despite its overwhelmingly female membership. It has been an uphill struggle, but at least members no longer feel comfortable sexually harassing and assaulting us at AGMs.

3) Program Against Racism activists: The first social justice program in the BCTF was the Status of Women, but soon after, we made an important statement in the province with our History of Racism in BC slide show. Through the dissemination of this slideshow we challenged the veracity of a tolerant Canada. This action represented a clear demarcation for the federation. A line had been crossed over from those traditional areas of salary, bargaining and PD. From that point on, the BCTF became a key place to address major social issues, not only for teachers but for all Canadians.

4) GALE BC: I believe a group of feminist teachers were the first to raise the issue of social justice in the federation, but from my experience, the organization has a long way to go before calling itself a social justice union. People have good intentions, but there are not enough people willing to walk the talk. Another challenge is that the highly personal and vitriolic tension between caucuses makes it hard to raise controversial issues.

5) Aboriginal Educators: In many cases, the Status of Women and Program Against Racism activists did important work, but that doesn’t mean the federation is a social justice union. If this competitive struggle over a small pot of money is what it means to be a social justice union, I am not a social justice activist.

6) Local activists: I have been told that the first program to move the BCTF toward social justice was the Status of Women, but I have also heard that our international programs have been going on since the 1920s. I really haven’t been involved long enough to tell you when the BCTF became a social justice union, but I do know that it’s hard to gain access to provincial structures.
These six social justice origin stories are only partial accounts but they call into question the truth claim—“we have always been a social justice union” (Elected officials). They also provide alternatives to the apolitical history and have currency among select networks of activists. As they are retold to new generations of activists involved in a range of networks, they reshape organizational and socio-political patterns of privilege by resisting convergence and permitting the expression of disagreement. By reminding BCTF historians of counter-examples to “we have always been a social justice union” and “everything we do is social justice,” these alternative origin stories carry with them the potential to reveal organizational constraints to equity, subvert organizational consensus that everything is fine and carve out supports necessary to live up to the promise of social justice unionism.

5.3 Sedimenting traditions and dissolving/reshaping inherited wisdom about how to do social justice

How are social justice traditions in the BCTF sedimented, dissolved and reshaped over time by social justice teacher union activists?

5.3.1 Structure: Inheriting procedural knowledge

Related to social justice history is the formalization of particular social justice behaviours into standard operating procedure within the federation. Berger and Luckmann (1966) refer to this process as “sedimenting tradition.” The example they use comes from a fictitious hunting society. A few members of a hunting society lose their weapons and are forced to hunt with bare hands. Those who survive this highly contextualized experience are in a position to report their stories and strategies to others. Over time, these strategies are passed down as tradition. They become known as the correct way to do things in the society. Berger and Luckmann’s idea of sedimented tradition as inherited wisdom emerging from the actual experiences of particular members of society who find themselves in new circumstances can be usefully applied to social justice activism at the BCTF.

For this application to have the greatest value, however, I must identify a particular federation institution that began as a contextualized initiative and became a
decontextualized tradition. Between promotional materials and participants’ career history interviews, it seems that the majority of participants, even those who were not actively involved in SW networks, traced social justice programming at the BCTF back to the establishment of the Status of Women program in the early 70s. Because of the salience of this event, I dedicate this section to a critical constructionist analysis of the formation and propagation of the SW model. To do this without losing the critical element of the critical constructionist lens, I must ask not only how the experiences of a certain group of activists were sedimented, but also how this tradition-generating process interacted with patterns of privilege in the federation. I begin this process by narrating my understanding of the contextualized story:

In the late 1960s, women teachers who felt connected to the feminist movement began to meet with one another to discuss ideas, share teaching strategies, read feminist texts and review other feminist media. In 1970, this group, who referred to themselves as “Women In Teaching” (WIT) read the Royal Commission report on the Status of Women and began to apply this report, not only to their experiences in schools and society, but also to their experiences in their federation. A number of these women were also involved in Marxist reading circles and were highly supportive of the emerging Teachers’ Viewpoint caucus. While helping to elect their left-leaning allies, a few of these women were encouraged to bring women’s issues forward to the executive. The first Task Force was led by a member of WIT who was friends with an Executive Committee member from her school. Despite this show of support, she was expected to review the idea of a women’s program with a committee comprised mostly of non-feminist members. The WIT leader of the Task Force was distraught with the perspectives and recommendations of the committee. She consulted with her WIT friends and took their advice to write a “minority report”—a strategy codified by federation by-laws providing committee dissenters with an opportunity to document their version of events. The task force leader wrote a minority report from a feminist perspective with the help of her WIT colleagues and presented it to the executive. The executive committee members were not initially supportive of her subversive strategy, but they eventually agreed to set up another Task Force with a majority of feminist members. The members of the second Task Force used the federal SW report to shape their recommendations. With permission from the Executive, the women brought their recommendations to the Annual General Meeting and all but one—employment equity within the BCTF—was passed. The Status of Women program developed by WIT involved a rotating staff co-ordinator with recent classroom experience, a committee of 9 members, a local activist network and three zone meetings each year at which SW activists could
share and generate strategies for feminist organizing in local associations across the province.

Over time, the particular experiences of these women were decontextualized and the following tradition was sedimented into a three step process: If you would like to start a social justice program at the BCTF: 1) propose a motion at the Annual General Meeting, 2) accept the year long review of this request through a Federation Task Force set up by the Executive, 3) Once the Task Force and membership deem the program acceptable, find a co-ordinator, establish a committee and activist network, and plan zone meetings and conferences. The sedimented tradition began with the specific, contextualized experiences of a few women teachers, but it became the model for the Program Against Racism, a short lived Children’s Rights program and the current Aboriginal Education Program. It is also the inspiration for the current action groups within the social justice umbrella structure. In the process of sedimentation, at least seven important points were lost from the story.

First, the sedimented ideas, strategies and structures of the SW program emerged from the activism of feminist teachers and the *Royal Commission on the Status of Women*, not a general social justice movement. As such, the strategies of the SW cannot be as easily applied to anti-racism, anti-poverty and other anti-oppression issues as to women’s issues.33

Second, the idea for the SW program did not begin with an easily passed motion raised by women activists at the AGM, but was rather a shared initiative of recently politicized feminist activists and pro-labour activist teachers who needed to work together to be heard within their administrator-dominated federation. Micro-political tension between caucuses continued to play an important role in the federation’s social justice programs and was one of the major reasons for the eventual demise of SW and PAR.

33 Because the SW program was under frequent scrutiny by many organizational insiders, this point was frequently identified by participants. In the next six paragraphs, I reveal points that were less frequently articulated by participants. I do this by shifting my gaze from the activists to the organization.
Third, the fact that the sedimented tradition “how to set up a social justice program” included the federation’s rational Task Force strategy and not the WIT’s more subversive Minority Report strategy is an indication of the strength of procedural knowledge and organizational patterns of privilege in the institutionalization process. A comparison to Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) hunters clarifies this point. A small group of hunters faced two barriers—charging animals and lost weapons. Those within the small group who successfully accomplished a bare handed kill and lived to tell about it passed on their strategy. “Bare handed kill” eventually became the sedimented tradition or institutionalized strategy for “how to hunt after losing your weapons” within this fictitious society. WIT also faced a number of barriers, one of which was the Task Force process imposed on them by the Federation executive. Their activist response to this process—generating a minority report—was not sedimented. Rather, the Task Force (one of the barriers to their success) became embedded in the sedimented tradition about how to set up a social justice program at the BCTF.

Fourth, neither the placement of the social justice programs in the PD division (instead of divisions dealing with federation governance, campaigns, teacher welfare or research) nor the institutionalization of the motion passing-AGM rather than the budget setting-RA as the primary location for social justice decision-making were natural products of SW activism. Both of these placements were products of the executive committee’s decision-making process about the “natural place for social justice” (Feminist fossil). Thus, the institutionalized organizational location for SW and PAR programming was the product of executive rather than activist decision-making.

Fifth, federation policy stated that SW co-ordinators were to be appointed by the executive, not elected by teacher activists. Beyond imposing a hierarchical accountability system, the appointment system made the SW activist network perpetually dependent on leadership goodwill. When the Teachers’ Viewpoint executive was in power, they appointed candidates who were recommended by the Status of Women committee, but as soon as the political wind changed, the political appointment process resulted in a string of non-feminist SW co-ordinators.
Sixth, the power of the sedimented SW structure as a social justice template from which to build activist programming led some members to erroneously assume that SW activists had excessive power within the federation. In relative terms, the SW program certainly led to a substantial improvement in federation support of women’s issues, but at no time in federation history did the balance of decision-making power shift from men to women, even during the time of my visit when all three provincial table officers were women. Whatever power SW activists may have gained from their institutionalized program, they continued to be disadvantaged by patterns of privilege within the federation and society.

Finally, it is important to note that many of the initiatives of the early activist group resisted sedimentation. In contrast to Berger and Luckmann’s hunters, the SW activists’ experiences and strategies were not passed down from generation to generation as a whole. Employment equity, for example, was not only rejected in 1972 when feminist teachers first proposed the idea, but was consistently rejected with each repetition of the motion. Participant interviews provide evidence that these rejections were not simply a reflection of membership ideology or desire, but were also actively resisted by well organized leaders at the provincial and local level. During my field visit in 2007, social justice activists were still raising the issue of employment equity and still encountering resistance.

These seven points suggest that the activist strategies of feminist teachers left a number of important social justice traces on the federation, but that their actions were not fully institutionalized. Not only were the actions of feminist teachers decontextualized over time, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) predict, but they were also shaped by existing patterns of privilege within the organization. By focussing on the efforts of SW activists, it is easy to miss the impact of more conservative forces, but by attending to both conservative and anti-oppressive forces, it is possible to identify the ways in which sedimented social justice traditions are mediated by dominant discursive trends within the federation and society. In the next sub-section, I identify how the sedimented SW tradition was partially dissolved and reshaped. In the process, I demonstrate that the reshaping of sedimented social justice traditions does not always work in support of anti-oppressive practice.
5.3.2 Agency: Particular initiatives can be reshaped or dissolved

The 1998 BCTF President was identified by a number of participants as the independent architect of the social justice umbrella committee, but no individual could have accomplished such a feat alone. The few TUF members I interviewed told me that despite their anti-social justice reputations within the federation, they were long time advocates of social justice principles. They wanted to make it clear to me that their aversion to the SW networks was not based on sexism. They commended the SW program for its important feminist work in the 70s and 80s, but resented the use of SW networks as a political tool of the opposition caucus. Many participants challenged the veracity and sincerity of TUF activists’ commitment to social justice, but whether or not they are sincere, the fact remains that they were blamed by the majority of my participants for liquidating a two and a half decade social justice institution at the BCTF.

A more careful analysis of interviews with federation activists across organizational divisions and roles demonstrates that TUF leaders worked with others to accomplish this task: 1) A few staff members who had begun their careers as Viewpoint activists helped them with the rationale for integrated programming; 2) an existing social justice grant program established to mark the lifelong commitment of a former PAR co-ordinator, provided them with organizational precedent for the local granting aspect of the model; 3) sexism among teacher members, long standing micro-political tensions between caucuses and SW & PAR explicit support of allowed Viewpoint allowed TUF to rationalize the cutting of SW programming as smart political strategy; 4) economic concerns tied to demographic shifts in the teaching profession meant that the majority of voting members would be less supportive of additional spending for increasing numbers of discrete social justice programs—Status of Women, Program Against Racism, Aboriginal Education, anti-Homophobia and Heterosexism; 5) centralized control tactics built into the programs from the start including the organizational practice of political appointments for SW and PAR co-ordinators meant that the two discrete programs were highly dependent on leadership goodwill; 6) the deeply held Viewpoint position that all administrative staff should be on contract resulted in limited leadership continuity for the two programs during a period lacking leadership goodwill; 7) controversy about the anti-
homophobia group along with bomb threats and media portrayals of the “BCTF raping the innocence of children” placed increasing pressure on the executive to find a less overt way to deal with homophobic bullying in schools; 8) generational differences in activist experiences meant that the self described “feminist fossils” were no longer as successful at organizing young women teachers as they had been when women were not allowed to wear pants to work; and 9) successive layers of provincially mandated reform increased the intensity of teaching as work, limited new teachers’ abilities to critique educational structures and reduced their willingness to volunteer much time to union activism.

In the end, the reshaping of sedimented traditions about social justice in the federation was no more the fault of a single right wing president, hell bent on taking down feminist programming, than was the initial emergence of the SW program the exclusive product of WIT activist efforts. The birth of discrete social justice programming and the shifting of sands under this program three decades later were both products of combined efforts. The 26 year sedimentation of the SW discrete model was brought about by a coalition of feminist and labour activists in a politicized context shaped by broader social movements, while the transformation of this program two and a half decades later was facilitated by micro-political tensions between caucuses, changing activist needs and highly durable patterns of privilege within the organization and society.

By tracking the process of social justice change in the BCTF, I have found that sedimented traditions and inherited wisdom about social justice changed in a dynamic rather than revolutionary way. I have deliberately not used the word “evolutionary” because in contrast to the popular view that novelty/change is equivalent to progress (See Tyack, 2006 for a critique of this perspective), there was nothing progressive about the shift from networks to umbrella models for social justice at the BCTF. Some traditions are more easily dissolved or changed than others. For example, bureaucratic procedural knowledge has a longer shelf life than social justice initiatives. Fortunately, there is at least one positive consequence of this otherwise problematic shelf life discrepancy problem—social justice traditions are more likely to remain relevant to the existing generation of activists than any other function within the federation.
5.3.3 Conceptual alternatives to the idea of “sedimented traditions”

I have used the concept of sedimented traditions to analyze the twenty-five career histories because it emerges from Berger and Luckmann’s theory of institutionalization, but I could have just as easily used two related concepts: “educational settlement” (CCCS, 1981; Gramsci, 1971; A. Taylor, 2001) and “archaeological layers” (Bascia, 2001b) to analyze the data. Both terms have been used to conceptualize educational policy in a contemporary Canadian provincial setting. Taylor (2001) used the term “educational settlement” to analyze the three year educational business plan of the Alberta government between 1994 and 1996. She borrowed the term from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and defined it as “the accomplishment of hegemony or consensual control within the sphere of education” (A. Taylor, 2001, p.4). When viewed through a critical lens, any one sedimented tradition within the BCTF could be viewed as a temporary settlement. For example, the initial passing of the Status of Women program in the early 1970s was an uneven settlement between Teachers’ Viewpoint activists hoping to gain control of the federation, women activists hoping to gain program status for their work and all other voting members of the Federation to gain support for their respective priorities. This settlement unraveled, or in the words of CCCS researchers “passed into crisis” once Viewpoint members lost control of the federation.

The second concept, “archaeological layers” was used by Bascia (2001b) to analyze two studies of English as a Second Language (ESL) policy in British Columbia and Ontario. She used the concept to challenge two dominant conceptions of social justice policy: 1) the idea that all policies can be characterized as good or bad for educational equity and 2) the idea that educational policy has little direct effect on what happens in schools. Instead, she states that,

> even when official government policy changes radically, some values and practices endure. In this sense, teaching and learning take place in institutions permeated by history, a sort of archaeological dig, where layers of past policy may continue to exert some influence, part of the taken for granted scenery for those who live there but visible to those who have the skill to see them (Bascia, 2001b, p.249)

Bascia’s notion of “archaeological layers” adds depth to the idea of sedimented tradition by revealing the durability of past traditions in the social construction of new ones. For
example, the BCTF social justice umbrella structure, to the disappointment of the TUF activists who had introduced it as social justice reform, continued to carry traces of SW and PAR programs because it was propped up by activists who had been involved in these two discrete social justice programs.

Together the three ideas of “sedimented tradition” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), “educational settlement” (CCCS, 1981; A. Taylor, 2001) and “archaeological layers” (Bascia, 2001b) demonstrate that the ongoing social construction of reality in any organizational context occurs on a contested, inequitable terrain through the dynamic interactions of organizational actors who work through multiple layers of pre-existing policies and practices to make sense of their actions and the actions of their colleagues.

5.4 Career patterns: Typifying and recasting the career trajectories of social justice activists

What is the typical teacher union activist career trajectory and how has it been recast through the everyday experiences of social justice teacher activists?

5.4.1 Structure: Career patterns mediated by broader ruling relations

The career patterns of elected officials, staff and local teacher activists who self-identified or were identified by others as advocates for social justice provide me with a good proxy for the patterns of participation of social justice activists in the BCTF. While there are many variations across their 25 career histories, it is possible to identify three career trajectories—the Career Unionist, Internal Activist and the External Activist. For the purpose of this section, I am defining “career unionists” as participants who have spent the majority of their careers as administrative staff members or fully released local association presidents, “internal activists” as participants whose social justice activist identities developed through union involvement, and “external activists” as participants who came to union involvement with previously developed social justice activist identities. Interestingly, these three career paths break down along demographic and generational lines, indicating something about the changing institutional order within the federation. These patterns reflect occupational and social patterns in education more broadly (Bascia & Young, 2001; Shakeshaft, 1987). Please see Figure 5.1 for an
illustration of the three trajectories. Interestingly, this figure bears a striking resemblance to Shakeshaft’s (1987) depiction of the gender gap in career trajectories of male and female educational administrators more than two decades ago.

Figure 5.1 Three Contrasting Career Paths of Social Justice Teacher Union Activists

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<th>Career Unionist</th>
<th>Internal Activist</th>
<th>External Activist</th>
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<tr>
<td>Career Unionist: SR &amp; local committee member/chair (communications, bargaining, PD) → LR → Local Table Officer (VP, Pres) → Provincial exec → Administrative Staff</td>
<td>Internal Activist: SR &amp; SJ local committee member/chair (SW, PAR) → PD Associate (volunteer) → SJ co-ordinator on contract (SW, PAR) → back and forth from union to classroom through SW/PAR networks</td>
<td>External Activist: social justice activist (prior to teaching career) → local committee (SJ) → provincial SJ committee &amp;/or PD associate (volunteer while teaching full time &amp; involved in community activist groups)</td>
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The three contrasting career trajectories in figure 5.1 represent ideal types, rather than accurate representations of any one activist’s history, but they do have a basis in the 25 activists’ experiences. The advantage of this simplistic schematic is that in combination with an analysis of participant demographics, it reveals the otherwise obscured relationship between organizational patterns of privilege and broader ruling relations: participants whose career pattern most closely resembled the “Career Unionist” trajectory were overwhelmingly white, middle class, heterosexual, left-leaning men with three to
four decades of union involvement; participants whose career pattern most closely resembled the “Internal Activist” trajectory were white, middle class, heterosexual, left-leaning women with three to four decades of union involvement; and participants whose career pattern most closely resembled the “External Activist” trajectory were relatively diverse with respect to race/nationality (white, Aboriginal, racialized), class (middle class, working class, grew up in poverty), sexuality (heterosexual and LGBTQ), ideology (most resisted positioning themselves) and career stage (early, mid and late career). The fact that those with relatively privileged social locations in Canadian society were most quickly able to access high-status, well paid, stable, relatively autonomous positions in the federation suggests that federation patterns of privilege reflect broader ruling relations (D. E. Smith, 1987, 2002).

5.4.2 Agency: Recasting organizational roles

The disadvantage of using ideal types to represent actual people’s lives is that my analysis tends to reinforce simplistic caricatures and obscure the collective agency of successive generations of activists. For this reason, it is important to note that the career trajectories in the federation have shifted over the last four decades. Prior to 1977, the federation was almost exclusively led by (white, male) school administrators with management perspective on labour. Since that time, the traditional career path has gradually diversified as new generations of activists have successfully navigated the continually changing access points in their organization. This has particularly been the case for senior elected positions. Long term traces of participants’ career trajectories provide a hopeful perspective on socially just change in the BCTF, change that is not only specific to a person’s social location, but also to his or her slightly more malleable role within the federation.

Provincially elected table officers were restricted by their short term in office, regular scapegoating, and requirement to act at all times on behalf of the federation, but many were able to use their bird’s eye view of the organization as a whole, public persona, and temporary decision-making authority to raise the profile of certain issues. Provincial staff officers (particularly permanent ones) were restricted by the organizational requirement of mandated neutrality, but their secure, well paid, relatively autonomous (in most
divisions) positions allowed them to inform organizational decision-making through research, planning, organization and the incorporation of personal social justice initiatives into their daily work. Finally, full time teachers were restricted by their limited access to the provincial organization and centralized decision-making authority, but they had the greatest freedom to advocate for personally meaningful initiatives and issues within and beyond federation walls.

In the end, the organizationally-specific wiggle room inherent in each of these three types of roles provided teacher activists across experiential, social and demographic locations with opportunities to influence federation priorities and governance, thereby gradually shifting organizational patterns of privilege.

5.5 Mainstreaming and interrupting the mainstreaming of social justice

How has social justice become mainstreamed in BCTF structures and how have social justice teacher union activists negotiated and resisted these structures in pursuit of their goals?

5.5.1 Structure: Mainstreaming social justice increases federation control of the initiative

Smith (1987) warns anti-oppressive theorists (feminists and Marxists in particular) to remain cautious about the potential institutionalization of their goals because widespread acceptance of their theories will result in lost capacity to counter societal oppression. When I first read her argument, it felt counter-intuitive to me. How could widespread support for and recognition of anti-oppressive work possibly be a bad thing? Berger and Luckmann (1966) helped me decode Smith’s concern by asking a conceptually neat question about the scope of institutionalization. That is, “how large is the sector of institutionalized activity as compared with the sector that is left uninstitutionalized?” (p.79). They respond to this question by hypothesizing two ideal types on opposite sides of a continuum: 1) a homogenous or monopolistic society in which institutionalization is total, and 2) a heterogeneous or pluralistic society in which institutionalization is limited to the actions associated with a single shared problem.
By exposing Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) concept of institutional scope to a critical lens, I began to understand why Smith was so concerned about the potential institutionalization of anti-oppressive theory. We live in a heterogeneous society with an unequal balance of power. Problems deemed to be shared are more often than not responded to in ways that further advantage the most elite members of society. For the remainder of this section, I test Smith’s demand for theoretical purity against the lived realities of 25 BCTF activists across two eras: the discrete program era (1972-1998) and the umbrella committee era (1999-2007). I begin by asking how the institutionalization of social justice facilitated and constrained the efforts of social justice activists and conclude by exploring how participants navigated institutionalized spaces to accomplish their goals.

Two social justice programs thrived during the discrete program era: the Status of Women program and the Program Against Racism. In slightly different ways, the two networks of activists affiliated with these programs benefited from the institutionalization of their programs. SW activists used federation resources to accomplish many goals: they generated programming for women and girls in BC schools; advocated for increased representation of women teachers in federation leadership and staff positions; constructed a Women In Negotiations program to counter the patriarchal bias within the collective bargaining division; bargained clauses into local agreements that would support women teachers’ employment rights; generated a journal with input from local feminist teachers across the province; met three times a year to collectively identify women’s issues and strategies for dealing with them; created professional development workshops and delivered them across the province; involved themselves in feminist campaigns on issues such as abortion and sexual harassment; and participated in global feminist networks. This list provides clear evidence that the formalization of women’s issues through the BCTF SW program coincided with an acceleration of feminist initiatives within the federation.

Similarly, the institutionalization of PAR coincided with an acceleration of federation support for multicultural and anti-racist initiatives in schools and districts across the provinces: the development of a slide show on the history of racism in BC; workshops on
multiculturalism, name calling & racial tolerance; the development of a framework for multicultural camps; collaboration with community groups and race relations committees in districts across the province; the development of race relations policies; and annual anti-racist conferences for PAR activists. In contrast to SW which provided highly focused activist support for feminist teachers and girls, PAR programming was taken up by a wider range of members: white teachers hoping to address racism in their classrooms; Aboriginal teachers advocating for a less violent system for themselves and their students; racialized and ethnic minority teachers who had faced discrimination in schools and wanted to reduce the level of discrimination faced by the next generation; and teachers across the province who sought out professional development support for their classrooms.

Clearly, the institutionalization of feminist and multicultural programming during the discrete era provided activists with a number of important resources, but the formalization of programs in an organization reflecting the patriarchal, Eurocentric social relations of Canadian society had some drawbacks. As BCTF staff, SW and PAR co-ordinators were expected to behave in ways that were consistent with federation policy when advocating for women’s issues and multiculturalism in the public eye. Internally, the institutionalization of the two discreet programs meant that feminist and multicultural activists were required to account for every penny of their budget and respond to every whim of the executive committee. As the programs grew and began to attract a wider ideological spectrum of activists, they faced mounting pressure to limit engagement with controversial issues and focus on gaining credibility with union leaders. Finally, and most relevant to the eventual collapse of the programs, the formalization of women’s and multicultural programming within the BCTF provided federation leaders with concrete ways to regulate feminist and anti-racist activism—appointments of less politicized staff co-ordinators during periods of TUF leadership; reduced tenure for staff co-ordinators who refused to follow executive demands for expedience; shorter, more tightly scheduled zone meetings; limits on committee numbers and restrictions on how to use money allocated to their programs. In addition to the shared constraints faced by SW and PAR activists, SW activists faced a barrage of vitriolic assaults by male and female members
who resented their power, and PAR activists faced ongoing pressure to counter the white face of the federation through a continuous demand for public relations campaigns.

When the SW and PAR programs were replaced with a social justice committee and local grant structure in 1999, many of the most valuable organizational benefits of the old programs were lost. Staff support was drastically reduced; local access points for new teachers were cut; local and provincial committees lost their issue-specific focus; the local grant structure increased the amount of labour required to access small amounts of money; the advisory nature of the committee increased the control of the BCTF leadership to regulate social justice initiatives; increased wait time for approving social justice initiatives resulted in minimal desire among activists to follow through on ideas; the loss of networks resulted in limited capacity to follow up on activist initiatives; the merging of feminist and anti-racist networks meant that teacher activists with a particular social justice focus were forced to generalize their work; and the loss of tri-annual zone meetings meant that ideas were being recycled rather than generated.

At this point, it is useful to return to Smith’s (1987) concern that the institutionalization of anti-oppression theory may result in lost capacity to counter societal oppression. There is certainly evidence that inequitable patterns of privilege within the organization and society were reflected in BCTF accountability measures and funding decisions, but I am not clear that this inequity translates into lost capacity to counter societal oppression. Smith’s concern begs the question: “lost compared to what?” SW and PAR were more highly regulated by federation norms and policies than were teacher activists and staff in more traditional programs, but they also gained a wealth of resources, experiences, skills and networks that had not been available to them prior to the institutionalization of their programs. I am not advocating for ideological relativism, but rather identifying activist realities in an inequitable world. For most of the SW and PAR activists I interviewed, the trade off between resources and regulations was an acceptable one during the discrete program era and an unacceptable one during the integrated umbrella era.
5.5.2 Agency: Moving inside and outside of union walls to maximize the (support : regulation) ratio

BCTF social justice reform constrained but did not determine the work of social justice activists. Interestingly, as the regulation to resource ratio became too high to tolerate in the integrated program, social justice activists began to take their discrete issue activism outside the bounds of the federation: former Status of Women members established a Feminist Caucus to lobby federation leaders for the return of their program; gay and lesbian teacher activists organized themselves outside of the federation then plugged into multiple organizations (federation, school districts, provincial legislative structures and the courts) to pursue their goals; and teacher activists in large urban locals began to distance themselves from the BCTF by retaining discrete social justice committees and identifying their local associations as “their union.”

Looking across two eras of social justice programming—the discrete network era (1972-1998) and the integrated umbrella era (1999-2007)—it is possible to discern two structural elements central to the mainstreaming of social justice within the BCTF: resources and regulation. When the resource to regulation ratio was high (discrete network era), large numbers of social justice activists became engaged in federation life, when it was low (integrated umbrella era), they tended to seek out alternative vehicles for their work. This resource to regulation ratio is a useful indictor, not only of the degree to which social justice activists benefit from working within rather than outside of the federation, but also of organizational patterns of privilege. One senior administrative staff member confirmed this point when he responded to my question about possible disadvantages of working within the federation: “I think you’re probably more constrained by the policies of the organization than you would be in a community-based volunteer organization; that doesn’t create a problem for me because I agree with virtually all organizational policies, but for some people it does” (Staff).

Re-articulated through my critical constructionist lens (Ball, 1987; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 1987), the individuals whose particular behaviours are sedimented into societal (or in this case organizational) tradition, are more likely to benefit from the institutionalization of their activist initiatives within the context of that society, than are
those whose particular behaviours remain biographically specific. In more practical
terms, my analysis of 25 teacher activist histories suggests that the institutionalization of
social justice was more beneficial to some groups than others, and that this benefit
gradient reflected societal and organizational patterns of privilege. Activists affiliated
with the well-resourced, minimally regulated International Solidarity program, Health
and Safety program, inclusive educational research initiatives and century long campaign
for high quality, universal public education, benefited from the mainstreaming of their
work, while the efforts of feminist, queer, anti-racist and Aboriginal activists alternatively
benefited from and were disadvantaged by the institutionalization of gender, race,
sexuality and anti-colonial issues. Advocates of the latter four programs and issues were
more highly dependent on leadership goodwill, economic climate, caucus affiliation and
political climate than were those of the former four.

5.6 The institutionalization of social justice in the BCTF:
Bridging structure and agency

My analysis of eight composite career histories of 25 BCTF-involved social justice
activists has been driven by the dynamic sociological tension between social structure
and human agency. I have operationalized the concept of structure through a critical
constructionist lens (Ball, 1987, 1991; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 1987,
2002) and the concept of agency through a conceptual framework merging elements of
resistance theory (Giroux, 1983), educational policy analysis (Clune, 1990) and critical
feminism (D. E. Smith, 1987, 2002). Each of the five resulting sub-points embodies the
structure-agency dynamic: patterns of privilege and participation; unifying and
diversifying federation history; sedimenting and dissolving social justice traditions;
typifying and recasting teacher activist career trajectories; and mainstreaming and
interrupting the mainstreaming of social justice. See Table 5.2 for a summary of my
findings in relation to these five conceptual tensions.

Table 5.2. Fleshe out Conceptual Framework

| Concept from Berger & Luckmann (1966) | BCTF Structure | Agency of BCTF social justice activists |
| Social order | Human and financial resource flow reflects organizational priorities (Bargaining & Campaigns > PD > SJ) | Learning from past struggles, building on successes and avoiding pitfalls |
| SJ teacher activists and staff are disproportionately located in high intensity, low autonomy, low security positions | Countering bureaucratic, hierarchical norms through provincial networks of like minded activists |
| Provincial organizational restructuring has limited networking opportunities for SJ activists | Building dyadic relationships based on trust with influential actors |
| | Reframing organizational norms so that priorities of the “mushy middle” subtly shift over time |

| Origin of institutionalization | We have always been a social justice union | Contesting and diversifying unified truth about the origin of social justice |

| Sedimentation and tradition | Procedural, bureaucratic knowledge (which rarely favours social justice) is the most durable, inherited tradition. (eg. task forces) | In key moments when internal and external opportunities align, it is possible to use procedural knowledge to transform social justice actions into (temporary) social justice traditions. |

| Role and Career | Career trajectories (career unionist > internal activist > external activist) are aligned with broader ruling relations in society (Smith, 1987) | Activists can take advantage of the organizational opportunity inherent in particular roles (elected officials, staff, local activists) to advocate for SJ. |

| Scope of Institutionalization | Inherent in the mainstreaming of social justice is increased regulation of activists involved in a particular federation initiative | Work inside of union when supports for your initiative are greater than regulation and take your work outside if you are more highly regulated than supported. |

The five interrelated tensions in the table above drove my deductive analysis in this chapter. They allowed me to account for structured privilege within the federation, relate these organizational systems of advantage and disadvantage to broader ruling relations and characterize activist work as shaped but not determined. The 25 activist histories that comprise the primary source of data in my study have provided me with the opportunity to map out organizational barriers to social justice, without fixing them or presenting them as insurmountable. These histories have simultaneously allowed me to trace the subtle but significant changes to organizational structures. I conclude my dissertation in Chapter Six by putting these five, interrelated findings to work. I use them to answer my research question, identify the significance and limitations of the study; generate theoretical and practical implications of the research and propose areas of further study.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

How did teacher union activists contribute and respond to the institutionalization of social justice in their federation? This question was my point of departure for examining the phenomenon of social justice teacher unionism in a particular organizational, socio-political and historical context. Nearly four years after my field work in March of 2007, I can return to the question that sparked my imagination with the insights, experiences and wisdom of 25 BCTF teacher union activists behind me. I can still vividly hear their voices and feel very appreciative for their activist work, leadership and teaching. In this final chapter of my dissertation, I hope to provide something in return by articulating my learning in as concise, accessible and manageable a manner possible.

6 Social Justice Teacher Unionism

Teachers’ unions in North America have historically functioned as sites for social justice activism (French, 1968; Gitlin, 1996; Labatt, 1993; M. Murphy, 1990; Rousmaniere, 2005; Staton & Light, 1987; Urban, 1982), but until the mid 1990s, the term “social justice teacher unionism” (Peterson & Charney, 1999) had little currency in teacher union circles. The concept was first proposed by two activists and their network of colleagues hoping to incorporate anti-oppressive and community-based activism into North American teachers’ organizations, most of which self identify as “unions of professionals” (Kerchner & Koppich, 1993; Kerchner & Mitchell, 1988). Since that time, it has been taken up by teacher union activists in organizations across North America (Compton & Weiner, 2008; CTF, 2007; Froese-Germain & O'Haire, 2007; Kuehn, 2007; McAdie et al., 2007; McKenna, 1999; O'Haire, 2005; Rodrigue, 2003; Rottmann, 2007b, 2008). While teacher union insiders have depicted organizational achievements and struggles related to the operationalization of social justice in their own federations (Kuehn, 2006a, 2007; Rodrigue, 2003), nobody had conducted an in-depth case study of social justice teacher unionism in context. My study of the BCTF institutionalization of social justice between 1967 and 2007 fills this gap in the literature. It simultaneously contributes to bodies of literature on teacher leadership, educational change, teacher union history and teacher activism. In this concluding chapter of my thesis, I respond to...
my research question, identify the theoretical and practical implications of the study, clarify methodological limitations of the findings and propose further areas of research.

6.1 Returning to my research question

If institutionalization is operationalized as “realization” in the double sense—apprehending something as real and making it real through one’s behaviour—(Berger and Luckmann, 1996), then social justice was institutionalized in the BCTF by all 25 of my participants. Their perspectives differed, but all found the term “social justice” to be meaningful in the context of the union (realization in the first sense—recognizing it as real) and all were active participants in shaping social justice programming, policies and norms in their federation (realization in the second sense—making it real). In this section, I draw on my findings and analysis chapters to respond to my research question—How did teacher union activists contribute and respond to the institutionalization of social justice in their federation?

A concise response to this question is that successive generations of networked interest groups contributed and responded to the institutionalization of social justice in the BCTF by countering hierarchical, bureaucratic structures through successive layers of reciprocally typified actions on a highly contested, inequitable terrain. This response translates the last 300 pages of text into a single sentence, but it lacks the clarity and accessibility I promised in the opening paragraph of this chapter. One way to explain what I mean is to return to my critical constructionist (Ball, 1987; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 1987) theoretical perspective.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) state that “institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions” (p.54). At the BCTF, activist sub-groups with a diversity of interests integrated their biographically specific experiences into federation structures; structures which were themselves products of the biographically specific experiences of earlier generations of activists. This multi-layered, multi-generational institutionalization of activists’ experiences was historically shaped, but not predetermined, by caucus-based micro-political tensions between federation activists (Ball, 1987) and broader ruling relations (D. E. Smith, 1987) in Canadian society.
My critical constructionist analysis of lived social justice history at the BCTF between 1967 and 2007 merged two theoretical perspectives. The social constructionist element of my analysis suggest that all activist networks can and do shape federation decision making, while the critical element of my analysis suggests that the extent to which this happens is not equal across groups. There is no set formula to predict what social justice institution will emerge next at the BCTF, but my case study suggests that any one set of actions is most likely to be formalized into “how we do things around here” when it is consistent with earlier activist initiatives, current federation priorities and broader ruling relations in society.

6.2 Limitations and Significance of the study

All research is limited by early methodological decisions made by the researcher. In this qualitative case study of social justice teacher unionism at the BCTF, I privileged depth over breadth and thus cannot legitimately make generalized claims about my findings and expect them to hold true in all teacher union contexts. In particular, this study is limited by its context specificity, participants’ memories, my over-sampling of participants working in urban school districts and my limited access to staff in collective bargaining and communications divisions.

The corresponding significance of the study follows from the deeply contextualized and interrelated quality of participants’ career history interviews. While my analysis of these interviews does not permit me to make generalized truth claims about social justice teacher unionism across educational jurisdictions or spread news of best practices, it does allow me to catalyze “naturalistic generalization” (Stake, 1995):

To assist the reader in making naturalistic generalizations, case study researchers need to provide opportunity for vicarious experience. Our accounts need to be personal, describing the things of our sensory experiences, not failing to attend to the matters that personal curiosity dictates. A narrative account, a story, a chronological presentation, personalistic description, emphasis on time and place provide rich ingredients for vicarious experience. (p.87)

Chapter Four, with its overlapping first person narratives of 8 composite characters, based on the career histories of 25 union active educators involved in the BCTF between
1967 and 2007, provides readers with an opportunity for vicarious experience. These interwoven stories were driven by my personal and analytic curiosities as well as participants’ career history narratives, all of which were located in a particular temporal, spatial, organizational and biographical context. To the extent that broader applicability is possible, the significance of the study will be enhanced by social justice-minded teacher union activists who recognize these dynamics in their own organizational contexts and feel compelled to act on them.

The ultimate significance of this study is that I have initiated a theoretical inquiry into social justice teacher unionism—a phenomenon that had been described in ideal terms as a list of key principals (NCEA, 1994), and used as a rhetorical public relations strategy, but had not has not, as yet, been inductively theorized.

### 6.3 Theorizing Social Justice Teacher Unionism

This institutional case study of social justice teacher unionism demonstrates that teachers’ unions can be an important site for social justice activism. My central argument emerging from the study is that while *social justice teacher unionism* can be an important umbrella under which to organize activist work in schools, society and other educational organizations, the generality of the term can mask the specificity and critical nature of feminist, anti-racist, Aboriginal, environmental, anti-neoliberal, queer and other activist pursuits. If the term is exclusively used rhetorically, presented as a unified rather than diversified vision statement, supported on the voluntary backs of individual activists who are set up to compete for a small pot of resources and forced to redirect their passions to activist pursuits beyond their personal experiences, it will lose its power and relevance. If, however, it is integrated into the organization in a way that subverts institutionalization (Smith, 1987) or co-optation, and is materially resourced by the organization, *social justice unionism* holds great potential to strengthen teachers’ unions’ macro, meso and micro-political struggles to name and alter the amorphous, uphill terrain of societal oppression.

Teachers’ unions’ unique contributions to social justice in schools and society emerge, not simply from their rhetorical claims to be “social justice” organizations, but also from
four of their most prominent organizational characteristics—their long history of collective activism from an organizationally subordinated location in the education system, their well-networked organizational structure, their legislated requirement to take the potentially conflicting needs of their members seriously and their prioritization of collective self advocacy over charity.

Organized teachers’ subordinated status within the broader education system allows social justice activists among their ranks to model internal activism on successful, union-based resistance to oppressive forces beyond union walls. For example, there are many parallels between organized teachers’ macro-political resistance to global neoliberal forces and feminist teachers’ meso-political resistance to patriarchal forces within their own union. The career histories of feminist activists who participated in this study demonstrate that they learned from and supported their predominantly male, left-leaning colleagues in collaborative activist efforts so long as their colleagues did not attempt to control their decision-making process, or sit idly by as their program was replaced by a relatively weak alternative. By analyzing external governance pressures and internal activist initiatives through a similar anti-oppression lens, and following up on this analysis in concrete, material ways, teacher unionists are likely to maximize their capacity to support social justice within and beyond their organizations. I am not suggesting that teachers’ unions prioritize social justice over collective bargaining, member welfare or professional development, but I am suggesting that they critically examine their own experiences with macro-political activism—both opportunities and constraints—for clues about how to minimize the reproduction of inequitable structures within their own organizations.

The second useful organizational feature of teacher unions, as social justice is concerned, is their highly networked structure. This feature guarantees membership representation in every public school classroom, every local, and every community in the province. Combined with an effective and respectful communication and resource distribution strategy, these comprehensive teacher union networks have the potential to support collaborative activism among union leaders, teacher activists, students, parents, and other community members interested in supporting social justice in K-12 schools. Human
proximity alone cannot catalyze collaborative relationships, but if these networks are used as a multi-directional organization tool rather than a top-down public address system, they will provide a vehicle through which unionized teachers and community activists can build, or in some cases rebuild, trusting relationships with one another.

Third, teachers’ unions’ status as a legitimate educational interest group legislatively obligated to represent public school teachers with a wide range of conflicting needs, prepares them to deal productively with contestation, debate, and critique. This potential is not always realized, but this case study demonstrates that as far as social justice unionism is concerned, masking conflict and forcing consensus among teacher union activists is no more productive and no more likely to stave off organizational fragmentation in the long run than recognizing membership diversity and supporting a wide range of activist initiatives. When feminist and multicultural activists lost their discrete BCTF program status and anti-homophobia activists were denied the promised establishment of theirs, many participants became disenchanted with their colleagues and their organization.

Finally, teachers’ unions’ prioritization of a collective self advocacy model over a charity model when it comes to teacher welfare issues sets an important, though not yet fully realized, precedent for internal social justice work. Their prioritization of collective self-advocacy and solidarity over charity at the macro-political level, simultaneously positions them as leaders in the highly contested battle to assign meaning to the term “interest group.” Organized teachers have a legitimate interest in high quality public education, positive working conditions, and supportive educational conditions for their students. Their collective self-interest should not be equated with individualistic or selfish behaviour—a phenomenon that is ironically supported by socially pervasive advertising for consumable products and services. The major difference between these two concepts of “self-interest” is that the first works against dominant ideology in our capitalist, western “democracy,” while the second feeds truth claims about the supremacy of capitalist economics. Moving from a macro-political to meso-political level, socially marginalized teachers within teachers’ unions have a similarly legitimate interest in representative and distributive justice (Fraser, 1997; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002) in their own
organizations. This historically durable, legitimate and legislated interest can and has helped teachers’ unions resist the pull of patronizing “do-gooder” activism. Teachers can use their meeting skills, well networked organization, and personal, experiential connections to their own communities to resist and subvert systemic oppression.

In the end, teachers’ unions’ unique contribution to social justice activism in schools and society is most likely to take root if the increasingly diversifying activist pursuits of their members are supported and the temptation to reproduce social inequities within and beyond union walls is resisted.

6.4 Additional practical and theoretical implications

In addition to catalyzing naturalistic generalization for teacher union activists in other educational jurisdictions and helping me theorize social justice teacher unionism, the findings of this study are significant because: they provide teacher activists with a birds eye, longitudinal view of the structures and possibilities for socially just change in an organization that counts “social justice” among its foundational values; they provide organizational theorists with alternative ways of conceptualizing leadership and change; they provide teacher union historians with a Canadian case of social justice unionism and they allow me to add an element of collective activist agency to Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) social constructionist theory. In this section, I discuss these practical and theoretical implications in greater detail.

6.4.1 Practical implications for teacher union activists: a contribution to the 1994 NCEA vision

According to Peterson, Charney and their activist network of NCEA (National Coalition of Education Activists) colleagues, social justice teacher unionism should:

1) defend the rights of its members while fighting for the rights and needs of the broader community and students; 2) recognize that the parents and neighbours of our students are key allies, and build strategic alliances with parents, labour unions, and community groups; and 3) fully involve rank-and file members in running the union and initiate widespread discussion on how education unions should respond to the crises in education and society. (Peterson & Charney, 1999, p.16)
Using their ideal as a standard against which to measure social justice teacher unionism in a particular organizational context, it is clear that BCTF activists have met all three criteria to some degree. Their campaigns for high quality, inclusive public education, health and safety, collective bargaining and grievance work are most closely aligned with the first criteria; their involvement in establishing a regional BC office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, labour solidarity efforts, International Solidarity program, involvement in Educational International and other global networks of union activists, collaborative research initiatives and connections with community groups through the Status of Women program, Program Against Racism, Aboriginal Education program and social justice committee are most closely aligned with the second; and the democratizing influence of the Teachers’ Viewpoint caucus, Status of Women program, Program Against Racism, Aboriginal Education Program and Gay and Lesbian Educators of BC on BCTF internal governance most closely reflects the third.

Measuring the BCTF against the same three standards not only helps me identify the ways in which the federation fits the NCEA ideal, but also the ways in which it falls short. As I understand it, the third point about fully involving rank-and file members in running their union, holds the greatest potential for social justice unionism. My study provides detailed evidence that social justice activists found themselves obstructed from federation access and support on a regular basis. Teacher activists and staff affiliated with the Status of Women program, Program Against Racism, Aboriginal Education program, GALE BC and local associations showed no shortage of initiative and energy, but were frequently blocked from federation governance and resource allocation. Rather than generating new models for social justice, federation leaders would do well to provide reliable funding to social justice activists among their membership, and allow these activists to generate a wide range of minimally regulated initiatives.

Prescriptions for success rarely work, particularly when articulated by outsiders, but, based on my research, I do have two related recommendations for federation leaders, staff and activists interested in increasing and diversifying teacher activist involvement: 1) If you only do one thing, implement an employment equity policy for staff hiring to increase demographic, ideational and experiential representation in the union. My study
provides evidence that federation norms are socially constructed by federation insiders. To the extent that high status decision-makers within the organization represent the needs, values and experiences of the membership more broadly, the federation will be increasingly democratic and relevant to members; and 2) If you choose to follow a second recommendation, keep track of the resource to regulation ratio for social justice, and make sure it is maintained at a level greater than 1; that is, activist initiatives should be more highly supported than regulated.

If these two recommendations are followed, they will not only result in increasingly just federation governance structures, but will also have a positive effect on membership loyalty and involvement among social justice activists. I make this assertive claim on the basis of four decades of BCTF history told from the perspectives of union-involved social justice activists. When the social justice activists I interviewed experienced internal support for their initiatives, they tended to commit energetic support to all areas of federation involvement, but when they experienced their union as regulatory and insufficiently supportive, they tended to subvert federation structures. In terms more familiar to federation insiders, a high resource to regulation ratio will maximize the likelihood that activists will personally and genuinely experience the popularized 2005 campaign line: “I am the BCTF” (Dobbin, 2007).

I believe these two suggestions are simple enough to implement and would go a long way toward diminishing barriers to social justice teacher unionism in the BCTF. My rudimentary knowledge of other Canadian teachers’ unions suggests that the same two suggestions could be adapted to other organizational contexts by Federation (Association, Union or Society) insiders knowledgeable of organizational dynamics and membership needs. I am not arguing that social justice programming needs to become the centre-piece of Canadian teacher unionism, or even that it should be funded as well as teacher welfare, bargaining, or professional development, but I do believe it would benefit from more material and less symbolic support. Social justice activism is fuelled by the passion, spirit and dedication of those who have committed themselves to resisting societal oppression, but it cannot survive on spirit alone. If social justice is only used for symbolic or
6.4.2 Theoretical implications about leadership and change for organizational theorists

What does my case study of social justice teacher unionism at the BCTF have to say about leadership and organizational change? In one sentence, it provides evidence that leadership is the socially constructed property of groups, not the natural property of charismatic individuals; and that organizational change is layered and multi-dimensional, not revolutionary or evolutionary. The administrative language of “leadership” and “change” can be translated into the sociological language of “agency” and “structure” fairly easily. To the extent that individuals or groups can impact some type of perceivable change in social structure, they are demonstrating human agency; and to the extent that these same individuals or groups are influencing the decisions or behaviours of those with whom they interact, they are demonstrating leadership. For the sake of conceptual clarity, I have divided theoretical implications for organizational theorists into two sub-sections, one on leadership and one on change.

6.4.2.1 Leadership

Managerial conceptions of leadership tend to restrict the role of “leader” to individuals located at or near the top of organizational hierarchies (Evan, 1973; Fiedler, 1967; Simon, 1947). From this perspective, those who are involved in influencing others from different organizational locations are seen to be participating in illegitimate or unacknowledged influence. In fact, even educational leadership theorists who write from a critical perspective about principals or superintendents dedicated to socially just change (Blackmore, 2002; Blount, 1994; Cochran-Smith, 1999; Corson, 2000; Foster, 1989; Gronn, 2002; McLaren, 1999; Ryan, 1998, 2006; Shakeshaft, Nowell, & Perry, 1991; Solomon, 2002) tend to write about individual influence from an organizationally fixed location at or near the top of the educational hierarchy. This influence may be “distributed” (Gronn, 2002) or “democratic” (Woods, 2004), but it is still characterized as emanating from the educational administrator.
The organizational location most likely to be identified with leadership in the BCTF was the office of the federation President, but while those who occupied this short-term, provincial table officer position were conceptualized as influential agents (as evidenced by frequent scapegoating of Presidents for unpopular federation decisions), they more often functioned as communicators of collectively generated decisions than independent decision-makers. However much they might have wanted to independently produce change along some dimension, their everyday realities required them to respond to an ongoing flow of internal and external demands. With the help of their 9 member Executive Committee (only some of whom were affiliated with their electoral caucus), they could influence federation hiring, policy making and resource allocation decisions, but they could not independently make these decisions. They also had minimal influence over external pressures affecting their members within the broader education system. When Presidents affiliated with either caucus tried to centralize their internal organizational control in response to decreased external control, this only led to greater internal resistance from members of the opposition caucus. In the most severe cases, the resistance was strong enough to shift the balance of power. Federation history suggests that the durability of the caucus system prevents any individual president from acting independently. Additionally, beyond the highly visible, well-organized force of any opposition caucus, there are always teacher activists, staff, community group activists, government officials and district level administrators who play subtle but influential roles in the federation decision-making process.

One way of conceptualizing leadership within the BCTF, is to analyze the history of organizational influence, along a particular dimension (eg. social justice), from a critical constructionist perspective (Ball, 1987; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; D. E. Smith, 1987). From this perspective, even the smallest possible group unit, the dyad results in some level of reciprocal influence. This influence may be perceptible or imperceptible to others and it may occur on a relatively even or skewed terrain, but from a critical constructionist perspective, unidirectional influence is a practical impossibility. Viewed through this theoretical perspective, organizational influence does not emanate from a single individual located at the top of the federation hierarchy, but rather emerges from dyads and networks of individuals with a range of perspectives, experiences and goals.
interacting with one another on an inequitable organizational terrain, that is itself influenced but not determined by the agenda setting role of the nine member executive committee, the subtle influence of strategic administrative staff members and an ongoing micro-political dynamic between federation caucuses.

Thus, the “leadership” question from a critical constructionist perspective is less about how to restrict influence to those in particular roles, and more about how influence happens in any group with two or more members. Researchers interested in the issue of socially just leadership from a critical constructionist perspective can replace the managerial question, “how can teacher union presidents (or principals or superintendents) more effectively promote social justice in their organizations?” to a socio-historical question, “How have successive layers of socially just change come about in a complex group of interacting individuals, all of whom aim to influence organizational priorities?”

### 6.4.2.2 Organizational Change

When I asked participants to tell me what had changed in their organization with respect to social justice, some pointed to the increasing numbers of women in provincial table officer positions, others told me about the regressive impact of increasingly centralized federation governance, and others sighed and said, “nothing.” All three of these responses suggest a conception of organizational change that is large scale or macro-political. Fortunately, when I asked participants to take me through their career histories from their decisions to become teachers, through their union involvement, to the moment of the interview, I learned about the many shifts in social justice teacher union activism at the BCTF over four decades.

My micro-political tracing of 25 activists’ lived experiences has made me more optimistic about the possible impact of human agency on inequitable social structures at the same time as it has helped me reconceptualize the idea of “organizational change.” Teachers’ unions’ mixed record on socially just change follows from a common misconception about organizational change—that it must be revolutionary, or at least consistently positive to be measured. In this study I challenged the assumption of “all or nothing” change by replacing the question: “Did the organization become more socially
just?” with a more sympathetic question: “How did teacher union activists contribute and respond to the institutionalization of social justice in their federation?

Organizational change across four decades of social justice activism was not revolutionary, permanent, or even consistently progressive, but it was evident. This change was initially difficult for me to perceive because my mind was filled with the disappointing setbacks faced by highly dedicated teacher union activists—the elimination of feminist and multicultural programming in the late 1990s; the seeming impossibility of passing employment equity by-laws within the organization despite repeated attempts by feminist, anti-racist and Aboriginal activists to raise the issue; competitive funding schemes pitting social justice activists against one another; Eurocentric norms forced on activists within and beyond union walls; and the seeming impenetrability of hierarchical, bureaucratic norms within the federation, particularly for teachers working in small, geographically disparate, rural and northern communities.

Eventually, however, I allowed the resilience of activists in the face of each of these constraints to push me beyond an expectation of unidirectional progress. After two years of weaving together the forty year social history of the federation—connecting the persistent work of activists with the seemingly insurmountable barriers obstructing their paths—I learned about the lasting power of participants’ collective resolve. This resolve is not simply a product of my hope. Nor is it an ephemeral product of social justice rhetoric. Rather, it is a product of a concrete set of small but significant changes to organizational structures, norms and practices at the BCTF: Teachers’ Viewpoint members helped shift the balance of power in the federation from school administrators to teachers; SW and PAR activists were successful in institutionalizing women’s and multicultural programming for two and a half decades beginning in the early 1970s; and Aboriginal and LGBT teachers left a legacy of curriculum development and legal victories in their wake. The first group set a precedent for representative leadership; the second democratized union involvement, and the third carved out a space for politically and numerically minoritized voices within the organization. My analysis of social justice activism in the BCTF from the late 1960s to the late 2000s demonstrates the power of activist persistence and the importance of tracing organizational changes that fall short of
revolutionary or evolutionary progress. The most remarkable finding emerging from the three achievements articulated above is not that participants encountered periodic setbacks to their work, but that these setbacks did not deter them from pursuing their goals or leaving long term traces on the organization.

Nearly four decades ago, a well known theorist writing on the topic of revolutionary and evolutionary organizational change argued that organizations moved through five distinguishable phases of development punctuated by crises (Greiner, 1972). His recommendation for managers seeking to convert organizational crises into opportunities for growth was to become familiar with organizational history. Greiner’s message was intended for organizational managers, but it contains an important lesson for activists as well. While activists are more likely to conceptualize a management “crisis” as an opportunity, they, like managers, would benefit from learning organizational history. By attending to persistent organizational tensions and trends, they can more effectively and strategically deploy their activist efforts.

The subtle but historically perceptible organizational changes generated by social justice activist networks at the BCTF were hard won and significant. It is important not to underestimate their value when theorizing organizational change or collective human agency. A qualitative depiction of these changes suggests that they were layered, multi-dimensional and played out on an uphill gradient, but however challenging any one action may have been, all activist networks left a trace on federation history. The major significance of this finding for critical organizational theorists and social justice activists is a modestly hopeful alternative to the traditional conceptions of change embedded in organizational theory: revolution, evolution and despair. The reason this critical constructionist conception of change—the collection of small scale, layered, inter-dependent, multi-dimensional actions played out on an unequal terrain—is modestly hopeful is that it reveals the contributions of activists whose every day actions are
typically obscured by the work of seemingly autonomous leaders and highly visible, placard carrying protesters\textsuperscript{34}.

6.4.3 Historical implications: A conversation with Urban & Murphy

I am not a trained historian, but I believe that my case study provides a contemporary contribution to Urban’s (1982) and Murphy’s (1990) histories of teacher unionization in the United States between the late 1800s and late 1990s. In particular, it extends their respective analyses of social justice teacher unionism across the Canada/US border and into the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.

Urban (1982) depicts social justice as a relatively high priority for educational historians, but a low priority for organized teachers throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. His account of teacher unionization in the United States suggests that public school teachers have historically prioritized material over social justice needs because of their chronic underpayment, political conservatism, educational subordination and vulnerability to organizational fragmentation along gender, panel, racial and immigrant status lines. My case study supports Urban’s findings about the situation in which teacher union activists find themselves, but does not support his conclusion that these factors have necessarily worked against social justice unionism as a whole. Like Urban, I found that: 1) patterns of privilege within the union prioritized general teacher welfare over specific (capital SJ) social justice needs; 2) teachers continue to be organizationally subordinated within the broader educational hierarchy; and 3) loyalties within the union do periodically break down along demographic and experiential lines. As I indicated above, however, it is not clear to me that these factors consistently work against social justice unionism. To take the third point as an example, there was little evidence that “vulnerability to organizational fragmentation along gender, panel, racial and immigrant status lines” in Urban’s words, or “organizationally formalized diversity of opinion and priorities through activist sub-groups and networks” in mine, worked against “the prioritizing of

\textsuperscript{34} I believe collective protest is an important element of activism. My primary reason for making this comparison is to point out that there is more to social justice activism than highly visible actions.
general teacher welfare over social justice concerns.” In fact, it was these activist sub-groups that were most centrally involved in challenging the hierarchical bureaucracy of the federation. Additionally, while my study cannot confirm or deny Urban’s finding of “teacher workforce conservatism,” it provides at least a few prominent exceptions to this general characterization.

One of the major differences between my study and Urban’s can be derived from our chosen unit of analysis. Urban studied the organization of the teacher workforce over the 20th century, whereas I traced the divergent experiences of interconnected, living teacher union activists over the span of their careers. By focussing on large group behaviour over time, Urban was more likely to foreground macro-political patterns—teachers prioritize material over social justice needs; they have been chronically underpaid; they tend to be politically conservative; they have been occupationally subordinated; and they are vulnerable to organizational fragmentation—while my analysis of individual activists’ career histories has led me to notice career patterns, dyadic relationships, activist networks, moment to moment strategies, organizational patterns of privilege and opportunities to mediate or resist organizational and social barriers to social justice. Overall, I believe that my findings do not contradict Urban’s findings so much as they provide an up-close examination a phenomenon which appears uniform at a distance.

Like Urban, Murphy (1990) highlights the organizationally subordinated status of teachers throughout the 20th century, but in contrast to Urban, she does not paint the teacher workforce with a single ideological brush. After tracing the history of teacher unionization in a historical period marked by two world wars, periods of economic depression, McCarthy era red-baiting, the baby boom, collective bargaining, civil rights, community control and debates about public sector employees right to strike, she concludes that teachers are not conservative by nature but have rather historically taken the only door open to them by a conservative society that has consistently subordinated their needs. She notes that sub-groups of organized teachers’ have been engaged in social justice work throughout American history, but each time they have done so they have encountered one of three obstacles—the ideology of professionalism, recurrent seasons of red baiting and chronic fiscal crisis.
Murphy’s backgrounding of teacher ideology and foregrounding of persistent activist initiatives across a century marked by external environmental challenges helps me articulate five contemporary contributions to North American teacher union history; the first two extend Urban’s and Murphy’s findings across the Canada/US border and into the 21st century, the third indicates the prominence of “social justice unionism” in contemporary teacher union discourse and the final two explain how social justice teacher union activists have navigated through obstacles and opportunities to accomplish their work. While none of these contributions is traditionally historical in nature, all five findings shed light on a contemporary phenomenon with historical roots.

My case study of social justice teacher unionism at the BCTF between 1967 and 2007 suggests that: 1) teachers in at least one Canadian province continue to face obstacles beyond their control, many of which, at a macro-political level, reflect the persistent obstacles their colleagues have faced in the United States since the rise of mass education (Murphy, 1990; Urban, 1982); 2) sub-groups of activist teachers in BC, like their historical counterparts in the United States continue to persist in their activist initiatives despite these obstacles (Murphy, 1990); 3) over the last two or three decades, growing numbers of teacher union activist initiatives have been performed under the auspices of “social justice unionism” (Peterson & Charney, 1999; Rottmann, 2008); 4) contemporary social justice teacher union activists, presumably like their predecessors, build on individual experiences, social movements, networks of like-minded peers, windows of government goodwill and collectively articulated union values to support a range of social justice initiatives most directly related to their activist priorities at a particular moment in time; and 5) the ease with which these objectives are met and the extent to which activists work within or beyond their union to accomplish them are shaped by internal micro-political dynamics, external political challenges and broader ruling relations in society (Smith, 1987).

6.4.4 Teacher activism I: Injecting agency into Berger & Luckmann’s (1966) theory of institutionalization

The fundamental argument in Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) treatise on the sociology of knowledge is that reality is socially constructed by human beings through their everyday
interactions. Given this theoretical reliance on the role of human agency, I expected their theory of institutionalization to help me analyze teacher union activism. Unfortunately, while Berger and Luckmann’s theory of institutionalization did provide me with important insights about how the first generation of BCTF activists might have formalized their everyday actions, it did little to help me understand how successive groups of activists might have contributed to or altered this process. It was not until I incorporated three concepts from Clune’s (1990) educational policy analysis—mediation, resistance and co-construction, Giroux’s (1983) theory of resistance and Smith’s (1987) concept of subverting institutionalization that I was able to examine the dynamic nature of social justice teacher union activism. By analyzing 25 career history interviews with BCTF-involved social justice teacher activists through a conceptual framework merging Berger and Luckman’s (1966) theory of institutionalization, Ball’s (1987) micro-political theory of schools, Smith’s (1987) institutional ethnography and the above three conceptions of human agency, I learned at least seven important lessons about teacher union activism:

1) It is difficult to be a social justice teacher union activist (SJTUA) without a cursory knowledge of the social structures generated by those who preceded you.

2) So long as one has a critical mass of like-minded peers, activist networks provide a good antidote to highly formalized hierarchical bureaucracies.

3) Without a critical mass of like-minded peers, it seems more productive to reshape organizational structures and norms by gathering information from and building dyadic, trusting relationships with knowledgeable actors.

4) The ongoing contestation of unified organizational truth tends to work in favour of social justice activism.

5) When internal and external opportunities align, it is possible to gain wider support for social justice activism by using widely accepted procedural knowledge to formalize new social justice initiatives.

6) Learning about the opportunities and constraints inherent in particular organizational roles—administrative staff, elected official, local teacher activist—can help differently positioned SJTUAs make strategic decisions about where to concentrate their energy. Members of any activist network can build on these individual efforts by spreading themselves out across organizational locations.
7) It is strategic for SJTUAs to concentrate their activist energy within the union when supports for their initiatives outweigh regulatory measures, and to pressure the union from the outside when regulatory measures outweigh organizational supports.

These seven inductively generated lessons about social justice teacher union activism demonstrate the dynamic interplay between human agency and social structure in a particular organization (the BCTF), at a particular period in time (1967-2007). No participant functioned as a lone agent and no participants’ activism was wholly determined by federation structures. Rather, networks of like-minded activists realized (recognized as real and made real) social justice through collectively shaped socially constructed federation policies, programs and norms in interactive ways on a contested organizational terrain. Participants did not shift organizational priorities in their union from bargaining or campaigns to social justice, but they did bring about significant, historically durable organizational changes through their everyday actions. By codifying seven activist strategies that influenced these changes, I hope to provide social justice advocates in other organizational contexts with specific strategies upon which they may reflect and adapt to fit their own organizations.

These seven strategies extend concepts I borrowed from Berger and Luckmann’s theory of institutionalization—social order (1-3), origin of institutionalization (4), sedimentation and tradition (5), role and career (6) and scope of institutionalization (7). As such, they not only provide practical implications for teacher union activists; they also help me advance Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) theory of institutionalization. By merging their work with that of a critical theorist (Giroux, 1983), micro-political theorist (Ball, 1987), feminist sociologist (D. E. Smith, 1987) and policy analyst (Clune, 1990), I have infused a dynamic layer of inter-generational agency into their social constructionist theory.

6.4.5 Teacher activism II: Subversion as an alternative to resistance

Giroux’s (1983) concept of resistance and Smith’s (1987) concept of subverting institutionalization help me translate my findings into two related, but conceptually distinct social justice activist strategies. If resistance is understood as a challenge to the dominant ideology of a particular time and place, and subverting the institutionalization
of social justice is understood as a deliberate attempt to limit the co-optation of anti-oppressive thought and action, the latter approach might present activists with a productive alternative to the more prevalent strategy of resistance. Three examples from this study—one illustrating teacher activism as resistance and the other two illustrating teacher activism as subversion—help me make this point.

The political relationship between the two caucus—the labour/left leaning Teachers’ Viewpoint caucus and the professional/centrist Teachers for a United Federation caucus—can be characterized as one of resistance. Viewpoint members spent 12 years opposing the electoral success of TUF. Their somewhat single-minded effort to regain control of the federation and move it from an ideologically centrist to an ideologically left leaning organization might have been promoted under the auspices of challenging dominant ideology, but it did little to alter the electoral success of TUF. In the meantime, both the Status of Women program and Program Against Racism were increasingly regulated and slowly starved of human and financial resources. This example demonstrates the direct and indirect, material and symbolic losses associated with a single-minded activist strategy of resistance. Without presuming that resistance causes activist failure or that subversion causes activist success, my next two examples illustrate a correlation between subversive strategy and activist success under a TUF-controlled executive.

First, large urban local activists’ attempts to subvert TUFs restructuring of social justice, coincided with their long term retention of discrete issue groups at the local level. Viewpoint-dominated locals used their critical mass to retain discrete social justice committees dedicated to feminism, anti-racism, anti-homophobia and anti-poverty activism despite the 1998 TUF decision to restructure discrete social justice programming into a single integrated committee. Thus, these locals found a way to avoid replicating provincial structures at the local level without opposing centralized organizational policy. Their example of subversive decentralization contrasts with more dominating conceptions of decentralization typical in distributed leadership models (Gronn, 2002).
The second example involves the subversion of TUFs social justice grant structure. TUF leaders’ articulated rationale for redirecting social justice resources from discrete programs to an integrated grant structure was to shift federation support from a smaller number of sustained, collective activist projects aimed at challenging injustices within and beyond the federation, to more widespread support for a larger number of individual grants aimed at helping full time teachers start up self sustaining projects in schools. Two related rules helped them bring about this shift: teacher activists were not permitted to apply for more than one grant, and multiple grants could not be used for the same project. GALE BC members, and for that matter, members of discrete issue committees in large urban locals used their critical mass, understanding of the social justice grant system and well-developed networks to share the responsibility for grant writing, project development and implementation of social justice initiatives. Those members who had experienced past success in gaining BCTF social justice resources helped their colleagues with the grant-writing process, making sure to place a different member’s name on each application. Once the competition results were announced, they pooled resources from successful grants and generated anti-homophobia resources as a group. By doing this, they were able to subvert the intention of the TUF executive without breaking any organizational rules or disqualifying themselves from the process. In more general terms, participants replaced a liberal, individualistic approach to social justice with a more critical, collective approach, thereby subverting the centralized organizational governance of social justice unionism.

The three examples above cannot be used to support the general claim that subversion is always more effective than resistance, but they do illustrate an important distinction between two activist strategies. The concept of resistance (Giroux, 1983) is more consistently used by researchers as the gold standard for anti-oppressive activism than is the concept of subversion (Smith, 1987), but both ideas have their uses. To be fair, Giroux’ concept of resistance is often used in a way that includes subversion of dominant ideology, but the ideologically based term “resistance” does not sufficiently distinguish between the former and latter two examples identified above. Giroux elevates the importance of ideology by comparing oppositional behaviour that supports dominant ideology (conformity) with oppositional behaviour that challenges dominant ideology.
(resistance). This is a useful distinction that helps researchers of social justice activism avoid falling into the trap of theoretical relativism, but my study of social justice unionism suggests that a further sub-division might be useful: dominant ideology may be opposed (resistance) or co-opted (subversion). Anti-oppressive scholars typically shy away from advocating for co-optation—perhaps because it seems dishonest or perhaps because they have encountered the conservative or liberal co-opting of their visions and as a result view co-optation as inherently conservative. My inductively produced conceptual comparison between resistance and subversion, however, suggests that neither strategy is bound to a particular ideology. Resistance involves an explicit, linear push against a more powerful force, while subversion involves multiple channels of indirect influence and deep knowledge of a particular system to obtain access to resources and reframe meaning. Taking these conceptual distinctions a step further, it seems that resistance can help activists collectively decrease the speed of dominant ideology flowing downhill, while subversion can help sustain activists and their multiple initiatives until such a time that they become socially advantaged.

6.5 Future areas of social justice teacher union research

My case study of social justice teacher unionism in context may be extended by asking at least six research questions: How do social justice activists in different educational contexts resist and subvert dominant ideology? How do social justice teacher union activists in teachers’ organizations across the country influence the norms in their respective organizations? What compels local teacher union activists to remain at the local level? How do the opportunities and patterns of teacher union activism in rural, urban, suburban and northern locals compare to one another? How do social justice teacher activists work through other types of educational organizations (NGOs, schools, government agencies and school districts) to accomplish their goals? To what extent do the seven findings identified above hold true across North American teachers’ organizations?
Appendix A—Cover Letters and Informed Consent Forms

Covering letter and administrative consent form (Sent on OISE/UT letterhead)

Dear (name of participant),

My name is Cindy Rottmann and I am a graduate student in the department of theory and policy studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am presently conducting a study for my doctoral thesis entitled “Organized leadership for equitable change: Union-active teachers dedicated to social justice,” that explores how union-active teachers do social justice work through their unions. I have a strong interest in teacher union activism that has been inspired by my experience as a union member (Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation) and enhanced through my research assistantship on Prof. Nina Bascia and Prof. Beth Young’s federally funded research project “Working for educational change: Career histories of union active educators.” The study will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Nina Bascia.

With yours and their permission, I would like to interview eighteen to twenty union-active members who have demonstrated a commitment to principles of social justice. Their contribution will provide me with important information about the variety of ways in which teachers dedicated to principles of social justice find support for their work within the context of their unions. Each educator who agrees to participate will take part in a 90 minute career history interview focussing on their experiences working towards social justice for students and teachers within the context of their classrooms, schools, and association. With their permission, the interview will be taped to ensure accuracy. Approximately four weeks after the interview, I will email participants their transcripts for review. They will have the opportunity at this time to add any further information or clarification regarding their comments. I hope to interview two senior union administrators, two individuals (union staff, elected officials, and full or part time teachers who are union involved) from each unit or program area, and two individuals associated with all union-based social justice initiatives. I have no intention to evaluate teachers, union staff, or the BCTF, but rather intend to explore the variety of ways in which teachers have supported their social justice work through union initiatives and structures during their careers. With your permission, I would also like to gain access to archival and promotional materials regarding social justice initiatives within the Federation. If you have time to identify relevant material I would greatly appreciate it.

I assure you that all participation is voluntary and all information provided by participants will be kept confidential. No individual person will be identified, but the BCTF will be named for contextual purposes. The final report will include composite profiles of teacher activists, elected officials, and staff working toward social justice within the context of the BCTF. Only I will have access to the research data which I will store in a locked file cabinet for five years after which I will dispose of it. I will shred all hard copies of data in five years and will erase the tapes once they have been transcribed. You will have access to the final report, which will be located in the OISE/UT thesis
collection in the R.W.B. Jackson library. I will also mail you a bound copy of the completed dissertation to store in the BCTF library. If you would like additional feedback, I will email you a brief summary of results upon completion of the project.

I am writing to ask your permission to conduct my research at the BCTF. I have selected your organization because of its international reputation for social justice teacher unionism. I have been following the work done by the BCTF for two years now and would like to learn more about existing social justice opportunities and the ways in which union-active teachers have made use of them. Please do not hesitate to contact me at the telephone number or email address below if you have any questions or concerns about my project. If you feel comfortable doing so, please sign, date, and mail the consent form below to the address below. Please also indicate by email whether or not you will allow me to conduct my research at the BCTF.

Thank-you for taking the time to review my request.

Sincerely,

Cindy Rottmann
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Dear Cindy,

I would like to confirm administrative consent for the research project outlined above. I am aware that you will interview 18-20 educators affiliated with BCTF, and that each educator will participate on a voluntary basis, will have the opportunity to withdraw at any time, and will provide individual informed consent. I accept the conditions of confidentiality suggested by you. Please retain a copy of this consent letter for your records.

Signature: ___________________________________________

Date: ____________________________

telephone #: ___________________________

email: ___________________________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the study findings upon completion of the project: ______
Dear (name of participant),

My name is Cindy Rottmann and I am a graduate student in the department of theory and policy studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am presently conducting a study for my doctoral thesis entitled “Organized leadership for equitable change: Union-active teachers dedicated to social justice,” that explores how union-active teachers do social justice work through their unions. I have a strong interest in teacher union activism that has been inspired by my experience as a teacher union member (Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation) and enhanced through my research assistantship on Prof. Nina Bascia and Prof. Beth Young’s federally funded research project “Working for educational change: Career histories of union active educators.” This study will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Nina Bascia.

I have obtained administrative consent from (name of administrator) to conduct my study at the BCTF and would like to invite you to participate in a career history interview. I have sent this invitation to you because I believe that your personal contribution will provide me with important information about how people involved in your organization, and (name of unit) in particular understand the complexity of social justice work in the context of a Canadian teacher union. I hope to interview eighteen to twenty individuals affiliated with the BCTF—two senior union administrators, two individuals (union staff, elected officials, and full or part time teachers who are union involved) from each unit or program area, and two individuals associated with all union-based social justice initiatives. I have no intention to evaluate teachers, union staff, elected officials, or the BCTF, but rather intend to explore the variety of ways in which teachers have supported their social justice work through union initiatives and structures available to them. I have selected you as a (occupational role) representative of (name unit). I would appreciate it if you could take part in a 90 minute career history interview focusing on your union-based work. With your permission, the interview will be taped to ensure accuracy. I would like to conduct the interview at a location and time convenient to you and would be interested in seeing a copy of any union documents or promotional materials which describe existing social justice initiatives. I will provide you with a copy of my proposed interview questions prior to our meeting.

I assure you that all participation is voluntary and all information provided by participants will be kept confidential. No individual person will be identified, but the BCTF will be named for contextual purposes. The final report will include composite profiles of teacher activists, elected officials, and staff working toward social justice within the context of the BCTF. Only I will have access to the research data which I will store in a locked file cabinet for five years after which I will dispose of it. I will shred all hard copies of data in five years and will erase the tapes once they have been transcribed. Four weeks after the date of the interview, I will send you a copy of the transcript by email. The body of the email will include a request that you review the transcript within
two weeks and return it to me along with any additions, clarifications, or concerns you may have about the content of the interview. You will have access to the final report, which will be located in the OISE/UT thesis collection in the R.W.B. Jackson library and the BCTF library. If you would like additional feedback, I will email you a brief summary of results upon completion of the project.

If you are willing to participate please reply by email and suggest a location and a few times (week, month) that are convenient for you to meet. I will ask you to fill out the attached consent form at that time. Please do not hesitate to contact me at the telephone number or email address below if you have any questions or concerns about my project. Thank-you for taking the time to review my request.

Sincerely,

Cindy Rottmann
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Dear Cindy,

I would like to confirm that I am willing to take part in the study outlined above. I accept the conditions of confidentiality suggested by you and understand that I may withdraw at any time. I also understand that my participation is voluntary. Please retain a copy of this consent letter for your records.

Signature:____________________________________
Date:____________________________

telephone #____________________________________
email:___________________________

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio-taped: ___ and if you would like a summary of the findings___
Appendix B—Interview Guide

1) How did you first decide to become a teacher?

2) How did you first become involved in your union? Please describe your work and volunteer responsibilities over time in the BCTF. (follow through career, the remaining questions are probes)

3) What salient events or issues have shaped your work as a union-active educator?

4) To what extent do you consider your work to be social justice activism? Why?

5) Tell me about social justice and equity issues in the context of your divisions/initiative/committee (type of work most/least likely to be supported, climate for equity issues, comparison with other units)? How does this compare with what is possible elsewhere in the federation? (walk through all divisions)

6) Tell me about a time when you felt pleased with your ability to do social justice work within the context of your union (organizational opportunities/constraints, personal strategy, factors contributing to success).

7) Tell me about a time when you felt dissatisfied with your efforts (organizational opportunities/constraints, personal strategy, factors contributing to difficulty).

8) Describe the impact your work has had on others (students? colleagues? community? you? BCTF, your unit).

9) How does your work in the BCTF compare to doing social justice work elsewhere?

10) Tell me about how your thinking about social justice and union-based efforts to support social justice has changed in the time you’ve been involved with the BCTF.

11) What’s next personally and professionally for you? (personal goals, organizational goals)

Thank-you for helping me understand more about social justice initiatives available in your organization. I will send you a copy of the transcript for review before I analyze it for my study. Any additional comments or clarifications you provide will be analyzed and any omissions you request will be excluded from the final dissertation.
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