

The Impact of Mentoring on Novice Union Member Involvement

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Rationale

The density of unions has been declining on average since the 1980s (Wallerstein & Western, 2000). While unions may portray larger populations (also known as union concentration), the density of unions (or the participation among members) is dissimilar (Wallerstein & Western, 2000). It is common for union members to interchangeably consider union concentration and union density, which can disguise union participation as stronger and more consistent than actuality (Wallerstein & Western, 2000).

Presently, union involvement is necessary because of the copious obstacles unions face. Unions are being attacked by politicians with conservative views, competition from overseas manufacturing companies, and the flight of capital abroad (Wallerston & Western, 2000). People employed in nonunion jobs often work harder for less money, have fewer pension contributions from their employers, and have inferior healthcare (Faux, 2014; Hertel-Fernandez & Porter, 2020; Koppelman, 2016). To elude union decline, membership engagement is vital for unions (Tripti & Ginno, 2015). It is also urgent for unions—namely, teachers’ unions—to focus on impacting novice and incoming teachers (Pogodzinski & Jones, 2012) because “the extent to which novices are socialized into their teacher unions has implications for union organizational focus and strength” (Pogodzinski & Jones, 2013, p. 670).

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to summarize the literature on novice teachers union engagement and to provide recommendations based on the limited literature available about combatting union decline. Two research questions guide this study:

- Do novice Toledo Federation of Teachers report being educated enough on how to engage in union activities?
- How do Toledo Federation of Teachers members feel about the support they have received from veteran union members?

Literature Review

There is often a disconnect between teacher unionism and new teachers’ understanding, mainly because of the lack of communication and passing of knowledge from veteran members to incoming members (Pogodzinski & Jones, 2013). A union is a group of employees that join together to improve wages, benefits, and other working conditions (Faux, 2014; Hertel-Fernandez & Porter, 2020; Koppelman, 2016; U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Unions can negotiate more effectively with employers because they act collectively (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). The powerful and collaborative voice of a union can help workers achieve higher wages, health insurance and paid vacation days, paid sick leave, and retirement benefits. Unions also work to improve the quality of jobs by pursuing flexible scheduling options, protections against harassment, and safer working conditions (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Consequently, veteran union members must ensure that new members are coming into a federation with the tools and knowledge they need to continue to keep the union strong.

Novice Members

There is a gap in literature on novice teachers’ union participation (Pogodzinski & Jones, 2013). It is common for novice teachers to be too busy trying to be efficacious in their new position or career to be more involved with their union (Pogodzinski & Jones, 2012). This means that the amount of union involvement from novice individuals may vary, pending teacher leadership within a school (Pogodzinski & Jones, 2013). Pogoszinski and Jones (2013) claim that “how teachers come to adopt specific routines, beliefs, and practices is shaped largely by the

other teachers...in their school” (p. 669). Therefore with the help of veteran union members through socialization, novice teachers will be able to better understand the intentions of the union (Pogodzinski & Jones, 2013). In a study by Murray et al. (1998), teachers deemed working with a mentor effective by giving them a “[s]ense of pride in contributing to improvement of the profession” (p. 26). Another study by Pogodzinski and Jones (2012) showed that novice teachers needed the assistance of veteran members to recognize the importance of becoming a member, become more involved in union activities, and have similar views on how to find a balance between their work and their union involvement.

Methodology

Employing a mixed-method research approach, survey data were collected from sixteen Toledo Federation of Teachers members in three elementary schools. A 5-point ordinal Likert scale was used to measure the rate at which teachers agree or disagree with several statements about union involvement. Data were then analyzed by placing nominal data into tables for visualization and ordinal data in charts. Lastly, the qualitative data collected from the open-ended question in the survey coupled with informal interview data were displayed in a table and briefly coded to a second-cycle coding (Miles et al., 2020).

Findings/Data Analysis

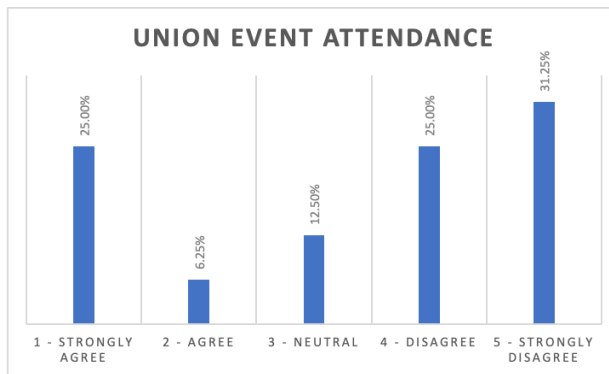
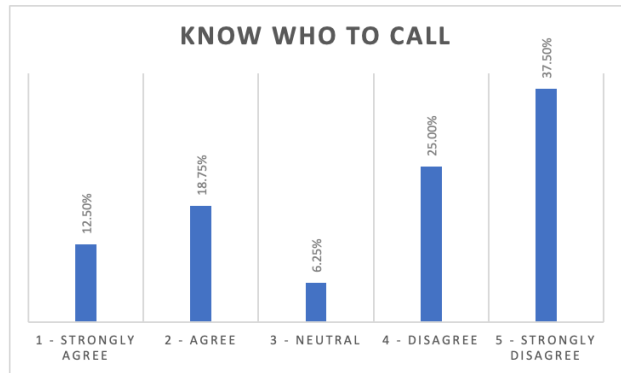
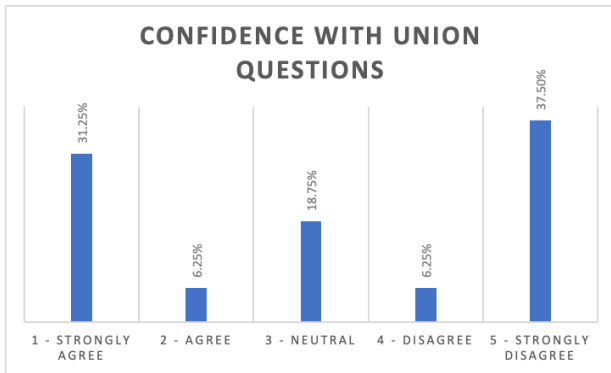
The population of sixteen teachers consisted of 100% Toledo Federation of Teachers members. The data below concluded that a majority of members (both novice and veteran) did not attend many union-sponsored political activities, rarely (if at all) attended union meetings, and weighed heavily on the side of feeling uninformed about knowing whom to contact to obtain more information or become more involved in the union.

Fraction/Percent of Members	Length of Time Teaching
9/16, or 56.25%	Taught ≤ Five Years
7/16, or 43.75%	Taught ≥ 6 Years

Response to nominal level of measurement question: Approximately how many union-sponsored political activities or events have you attended in the 2022 - 2023 school year?	
9/16, or 56.25%	Attended 0
3/16, or 18.75%	Attended 1
3/16, or 18.75%	Attended 2
1/16, or 6.25%	Attended 3
0/16, or 0%	Attended ≥3

Response to nominal level of measurement question: Approximately how many union meetings (including Telephone Townhall phone calls) have you attended in the 2022 - 2023 school year?

3/16, or 18.75%	Attended 0
4/16, or 25%	Attended 1
8/16, or 50%	Attended 2
1/16, or 6.25%	Attended 3
0/16, or 0%	Attended ≥ 3



Qualitative Data Collected from Informal Interviews and Survey Response Data

Member A	I would like more union mentors/members to help inform me of the rights I have due to being in the union.
Member B	I am a huge supporter of the union. I hope to become more involved and possibly be employed by the union some day.

Member C	I recently contacted [the union president] about a problem. [They] were very prompt and helpful to me. I appreciated that.
Member D	I don't have any time to attend union functions. I am loaded with more school responsibilities including state requirements. It would be nice to be more involved.
Member E	Safety is a huge problem. I don't feel safe.
Member F	I would like to get more involved, but I don't know anyone to call!

Recommendations

The researcher offers the following recommendations based on the findings gathered in this investigation:

1. Veteran union members should provide ongoing support and communication with all novice members to ensure the importance of union involvement and clarify misconceptions that may occur when initially joining the federation (Pogoszinski & Jones, 2013). The researcher specifically suggests that mentor union members are placed at each feeder school in a district to oversee all incoming members.
2. Veteran union members should create a bond with novice members ensuring new members feel they do not have to participate in union activities alone (Grima et al., 2014). This will help eliminate novice members from not participating because of any uncertainties that may arise (for example, not knowing events are taking place, not knowing if such events are open to all members, and not knowing anyone else in attendance).
3. Provide an avenue of communication that can be a consistent resource; the researcher specifically suggests an updated union website that can house important union communication, as well as provide resources for all teachers, such as flyers for upcoming events, links to social media, information about the history of the federation, etc.

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