

**Book Review**

# Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Unions, and Race in the Battle for School Equity

Jonna Perrillo

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012

Reviewed by: Virginia Loh-Hagan  
San Diego State University

In *Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Unions, and Race in the Battle for School Equity*, Perrillo presents a historical study of the tensions between the teachers union, teachers guild, and Harlem parent/community activists in New York City from the 1930s to 1980s; the tensions were about teachers' rights versus civil rights. According to Perrillo, this book examines "teachers' participation in creating a progressive 'social order,' their investment in the status quo, and the relationships of both to their professional self interests" (p. 1). Perrillo chronicles the evolution of two social movements, which are the plight of teachers advocating for professional agency and the plight of African Americans advocating for equal education. She also argues that these tensions continue to influence and shape current discourses around teacher professionalism, education reform, and civil rights.

What makes this book unique is how Perrillo attempts to study the relationships and intersections between the fight for teacher professionalism and the fight for better education for minority students. She writes,

Although teachers' rights and civil rights need not be viewed as conflicting categories, they often were made so, both by teachers, who came to see civil rights efforts as detracting from or competing with their own goals, and by civil rights efforts and mandates that regulated and at times deprofessionalized teachers' work in minority schools." (p. 2)

Historically, political self-interests and agendas have usurped the common goal of serving minority children. Perrillo seeks to address the question, *To what extent are teachers' rights and civil rights conflicting concepts?* Investigating both moments of conflict and moments of collaboration, Perrillo concludes that placing teachers' rights and students' rights in conflict shortchanges all involved parties.

One of the most interesting claims Perrillo makes is suggesting that the teacher unions in New York City limited their reform agenda by using "rights rhetoric" (p. 3). For example, by using the term *oppressed teachers*, the unions drew upon the civil rights movement and forced their agendas into the public arena. However, such use seemed to polarize teacher professionalism with students' rights, creating an unnecessary dichotomy. In addition, it also seems to minimize the oppression of the minority students in Harlem who were suffering from substandard teaching and substandard educational resources.

Perrillo also makes claims about the need to diversify the teaching force. For example, she

states that “with such a relatively small number of black teachers in the city schools, black students’ educational experiences were much more dependent on the quality and attitudes of white teachers” (p. 25). As Perrillo confirms, Harlem city youth were often relegated to second-class citizenry; readers can explore the extent to which this relegation was caused by the racist orientations of white teachers and the institutionalized racism that kept marginalized groups from achieving. Perrillo notes that white teachers in Harlem, due to their pre-conceived and prejudiced notions of African Americans, denied these students opportunities for social and academic success.

Another interesting point is Perrillo’s insistence on seeing a more holistic and sympathetic view of the teacher unions, particularly in New York City. She writes,

[T]he history of the Teachers Union, and moments in the Guild’s history, contest a popular interpretation of teacher unions as purely reactionary and divisive. Critiques of unions as solely self-interested exclude all of the public works that teachers have performed through their unions, including designing multicultural curricula, petitioning for black school board representatives, fighting for better school facilities and other resources for black students, teaching in freedom schools, and risking their job security to speak out on behalf of black children’s civil rights. (p. 186)

Popular during the Civil Rights Movement, freedom schools were alternative free schools for African Americans; these schools were products of a nationwide effort to bridge the achievement gap caused by racial inequality. The curriculum of these freedom schools was student centered and culturally relevant. Perrillo does a fair job of representing the positive intentions of the teacher unions, especially of the teacher unions in New York City. Because it seems more natural to sympathize with the Harlem activists who wanted a better education for their children, Perrillo’s skill in presenting the New York City teacher unions as both contenders and collaborators is commendable.

A major strength of the book is Perrillo’s historical research, which was informed by primary sources such as newspapers, correspondence, and the unions’ archives. To help make her case, she shared several interesting historical narratives. For example, Perrillo opens her first chapter by describing the 1936 Robert Shelton incident in which an African American teenaged boy was allegedly beaten by his school principal. This incident served as a rallying cry for teachers and community activists in Harlem to protest for better treatment of students. To further show the dire state of race relations in Harlem, Perrillo describes events such as the March 1935 riot in Harlem, which was the city’s first race riot instigated by rumours of the police beating a black Puerto Rican youth who was caught shoplifting. Perrillo also shows how the teachers’ unions in New York City suffered. For example, the unions protested against Emil Altman, a medical examiner who was accused of violating his medical license on the School Board’s behalf in order to fire teachers and thus, save the city money. To this end, Altman diagnosed over 1,500 teachers as mentally imbalanced and/or legally insane to warrant their firing. To show tensions between community members and the teacher unions in New York, Perrillo describes the Ocean Hill-Brownsville crisis, otherwise known as the New York City teachers’ strike of 1968. By providing readers with such rich historical accounts, Perrillo clearly demonstrates how and why the educational politics presented in this book have evolved over time. She creates a historical frame of reference for considering how and why the tensions between and among the unions and civil rights activists came to be. As such, the book’s significance to the field is its provision of content knowledge on the subject matter.

Perrillo seems to have a bias against *managed curriculum*. I would have liked for this topic to be examined more deeply. Perrillo states, “The prevalent use of scripted curricula in many urban districts nationwide suggests that because poor children come to school less prepared than middle-class children, they must sacrifice discovery and innovation for efficiency regimentation, and routine” (p. 181). Perrillo also suggests that teachers are not served by such curriculum. She writes, “In a situation in which the educators who teach the most disadvantaged children possess the least opportunity to design creative and intellectually rewarding classrooms, students’ and teachers’ rights alike have been sacrificed” (p. 181). To further illustrate her point, Perrillo quotes a teacher who describes managed curriculum as an “intellectual straightjacket” (p. 181). It would seem that managed curriculum not only disadvantages minority students by providing less than robust instruction but it also disenfranchises teachers who should have the academic and intellectual freedom to teach what and how they want. I wonder about the research that supports the efficacy of managed curriculum and I also wonder about the assumptions being made about the competency of teachers. Not all teachers are competent and not all managed curriculum is bad.

The recommended target audience for this book is educators interested in learning more about educational reform from a historical perspective and from the perspectives of the unions and civil rights activists. Perrillo writes, “Today, teachers are in the precarious position of needing to win back the professional ‘right’ to control their work more than ever” (p. 181). *Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Unions, and Race in the Battle for School Equity* provides readers with an interpretation of the trials and tribulations of the attempts of a group of teachers in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood to fight for control of their professionalism. Given the public distrust of teachers and the centrality of teacher competence in discussions about the problems of public education, today’s advocates can learn from the struggles and successes of the groups presented in Perrillo’s book. Improving the education of our disadvantaged students is a major national policy and readers of this book will consider the extent to which the historical events as presented by Perrillo led to such advocacy and concern.

---

*Dr. Virginia Loh-Hagan* is an author, educator, and curriculum designer. She is a faculty member and Block Leader at San Diego State University, coordinating two credential programs. Her dissertation was a qualitative study on the cultural authenticity of Asian-American children's literature. She serves on several book award committees and has published over 70 children's books. She is the Cover Editor and columnist for *The California Reader*, the peer-reviewed journal for the California Reading Association.