DIGITAL PROTEST AND ACTIVISM IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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DIGITAL PROTEST AND ACTIVISM IN PUBLIC EDUCATION: REACTIONS TO NEOLIBERAL RESTRUCTURING IN ISRAEL

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INTRODUCTION

Cases of digital activism, particularly protests, in response to neoliberal restructuring of public education, have been documented since the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century. It appears, however, that the phenomenon has gained global momentum in the second decade of the century in view of the financial crisis, rising sovereign debt, and a renewed neoliberal agenda that serves economic elites more effectively than it does the wider public. In 2018 alone, we witnessed in the US a "Teachers' Spring," from West Virginia to Arizona (Forbes, August 7, 2018), in which "protests have been largely driven by social media, rather than union leadership, allowing [teacher] activists to organize rapidly" to pressure policymakers to fund underfunded schools (Reuters, May 1, 2018). Such broad manifestations of digital media engagement by teachers have prompted scholars to argue that

> *from Facebook-coordinated high-school walkouts to compelling Internet-based protest art that has accompanied recent teacher strikes, grassroots education activism in the USA has gone digital. (Thapliyal, 2018a, p. 49)*

In France, thousands of teachers have individually joined the "Red Pens" movement on digital media, outside the control of organized political parties or unions (France24,

February 2, 2018). These instances suggest that analysis of educational activism should take into account the connections between the socio-political context and the lived experience of teachers, parents, and citizens on one hand, and digital activism, conducted online, on the other.

Digital activism in education is part of a broader emerging phenomenon of digital activism. The rise of a networked public domain allows individual citizens to organize and react (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Benkler, 2006) on a scale and pace unknown before. In 2011, *Time* magazine selected "The Protester" as Person of the Year, that is, the many individuals participating in protest movements around the globe, many of them initiated online or supported by digital platforms. Some researchers share the view that the Internet is not yet another communication platform but rather a social "game changer" (Boulianne, 2019) that signifies the rise of a new civic model (Zuckerman, 2014). This optimistic view has been criticized by pessimists, who charged that digital media harms civic engagement in democracies (e.g., Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2012). Nevertheless, the spread of Internet access, and its daily incorporation in numerous arenas of everyday life, have left their mark also on the public domain.

The rise of the Internet enabled the flourishing of previously marginal bottom-up politics. The introduction and rapid spread of digital media made such bottom-up dynamics both practical and easy. Digital media has effectively become a common tool in the hands of citizens trying to influence policy and policymakers (Mossberger, Wu, & Crawford, 2013; Noveck, 2009; Shirky, 2011).

In educational research, however, digital activism and protest have been seldom explored. Traditionally, educational research distinguishes between macro- and micro-politics in education. The macro-level focuses on policymaking and policymakers, and on issues such as the dynamics between

governments and organizations surrounding a given educational policy. The micro-level focuses on educational organizations and on issues such as informal dynamics in the intra-organizational area between school personnel concerning a given policy (e.g., Björk & Blase, 2009; Kelchtermans, 2007; Weiler, 1994). In this division of activity, bottom-up dynamics, or cross-level politics, are neglected. Recently, several educational studies have noted the integration of digital media into the educational sphere, but without accounting for the bottom-up potential of the use of digital media and of their possible role in protest activity. One study found that digital media platforms, such as WhatsApp, have been in common use by parents involved in public schooling (Addi-Raccah & Yemini, 2018). Another study showed how Australian teachers' unions apply digital and Internet-based communications in their union campaigns (Malcher, 2018). A third study described the use Indian non-profit educational organizations made of Facebook as a platform for policy mediatization, with the aim of influencing public information and perceptions (Adhikary, Lingard, & Hardy, 2018). A fourth study analyzed the public debate in the US about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), as conducted on Twitter (Supovitz, Daly, & Fresno, 2018). Thus, cross-level political efforts that have been organized primarily online remain underexplored. This lacuna is unfortunate in view of the claim that education researchers should take seriously the introduction of digital media into the educational field (see Baroutsis, 2018), and because research in related disciplines has been concerned with digital activism for some time (e.g., Barassi, 2015; Castells, 2015; Pickard & Yang, 2017; Scharff, Smith-Prei, & Stehle, 2018).

Another overlooked issue this book aims to address is the association between the rise of digital activism and the adoption and implementation of neoliberal policies in public

education. Since the 1980s, various top-down manifestations of neoliberal restructuring in education governance have been evident, such as privatization, budget cuts, and managerialism (Ross & Gibson, 2007). These efforts to restructure public education have intensified at the start of the twenty-first century, with the creation of an international discourse on education, and with the intensification of national competition and policy borrowing (Nir, 2019), largely cultivated by international agencies supporting this agenda (Pizmony-Levy, 2017; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Neoliberal governance has recast the teachers' profession as technical and teachers as untrustworthy, forming new patterns of accountability. It has also reshaped the role of parents as stakeholders and customers (Posey-Maddox, 2016; Ranson, 2003). These transformations have received much attention on the part of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners worldwide, but the literature on neoliberal restructuring in public education has seldom addressed the role of the new media in public engagement on this matter. Thapliyal (2018b) noted that little is known "about how education activists have used media to counter the cultural, economic and political discourse that normalise neoliberal education reform" (p. 110).

The present book brings together some of our research projects that focus on exploring the various aspects of digital protest and activism in public education in the wake of neoliberal restructuring. The book aims to offer new insights into the construction and development of Internet-based mobilization over public education issues. We are particularly interested in successful cases of political action by individuals and informal ad hoc groups of teachers and parents concerning matters of national policymaking. The book focuses on digital protest, and more specifically on activism in public education in Israel. The Israeli education system maintained a centralized, Weberian structure until the twenty-first century,

when it embarked on neoliberal reform, similarly to other countries with centralized education systems (Berkovich, 2014; Wiborg, 2013).

In the book, we study three cross-level, bottom-up politics cases of digital protest in public education occurring in Israel in the twenty-first century. Chapters 1 and 2 set the background for understanding the genesis of these cases and outline the important changes in Israeli education policies and Israeli society as they move toward neoliberalism. Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of policy developments in Israeli public education, whereas Chapter 2 describes the key changes in Israeli public values and interests, and the manner in which they have affected the public education system.

Next, the book turns to explore three policy cases of digital protest occurring in Israeli public education during the 2000s. These cases provide important insights into the evolving use of new media by teachers and parents for political goals, in their attempt to informally influence national policies. The first case, presented in Chapter 3, investigates the rhetoric and images used in a web-based campaign in 2007, on weblogs and partisan school websites, by teacher activists seeking to enlist public support for their resistance to a new Israeli educational reform containing neoliberal elements (i.e., "New Horizon"). This action motivated the longest teachers' strike in Israeli history. The second and third cases involve Israeli parents as educational activists, the *Strollers* protest of 2011 and the *Sardines* protest of 2014. The *Strollers* protest was part of the Israeli social justice protest of 2011, itself part of a global wave of mobilization (Benski, Langman, Perugoría, & Tejerina, 2013), but focused on economic hardships suffered by young families trying to enroll their children in early childhood education. The *Sardines* protest sought to repeal a decision by the Ministry of Education to eliminate parental private funding of smaller, "non-standard" classes

in public schools. Chapter 4 compares the messages of the two protests, as conveyed through social media, against the background of neoliberal restructuring of the Israeli education system. Chapter 5 presents and compares the two cases in the way in which they used the capabilities of social media. The book is intended to show how the rise of the Internet enabled the flourishing of previously marginal cross-level, bottom-up politics in education. It provides valuable insights into the characteristics of cross-level digital protest and activism, and into the manner in which such digital protest and activism efforts are associated with the neoliberal restructuring of public education.

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