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## ARTICLE

# Tweeting Care: Educators' Dissent through Social Media in the US and Canada

**Rachel K. Brickner**

### Introduction

TEACHERS' UNIONS HAVE PLAYED the primary role as the political face and voice of educators in the public school system in both the United States and Canada. While legislators, the media, and the broader public recognize (often critically) the political role of unions, public discourse generally treats teachers themselves as apolitical: when the public spotlight shines positively on them, they are lauded for their invaluable role in educating children; when the spotlight is negative, they are frequently portrayed as poor performers, protected by their unions, whose pensions, benefits, and salaries drain the public purse. Indeed, to recognize that individual teachers can be political agents highlights an uncomfortable tension between the ideal of the selfless educator working for the good of the children in her class (and by extension the public good) and the professional who needs resources that are necessarily provided by the public in order to do that work effectively.

Like public sector unions in general, teachers' unions have suffered in the neoliberal era from public backlash and legislative moves that have made unionism more difficult and restricted collective bargaining rights and labour protections for educators. While unions remain critically important in defending public education and the rights of educators in the neoliberal context, it is also important to turn our analytical attention to the activism of educators themselves. Given the growing number of organizations engaged in education politics and the rise of social media, there are more opportunities to become engaged in resistance to neoliberal education policy for educators who are frustrated with policy trends or those who feel isolated and disconnected from their unions.

One of the strategies that both unions and individual educators are using to engage politically is an effort to reframe the public dialogue about public education. Rejecting a narrative that has focused on the financial burden of public education to taxpayers, especially given a widespread perception that too many students are failing to meet academic expectations, some education activists are emphasizing that schools are caring institutions with a mandate to provide for the intellectual, emotional, and physical well-being and development of students. To care for the development of the whole student requires a public commitment of resources as well as a recognition that caregiving labour is a necessary component of educators' work – and one that cannot be easily measured.

While unions have also used what I call a “narrative of care” in formal expressions of resistance, individual educators are using social media platforms to articulate the caring components of their work. This study explores two Twitter campaigns – #EvaluateThat in the US and #ThisIsMyStrikePay in British Columbia – to analyze how narratives of care are articulated and how these articulations act as a form of political dissent and resistance. I argue, building on the work of Donna Baines, Stephen Ackroyd, and Paul Thompson, that educators' participation in these Twitter campaigns represents a form of grassroots dissent, which allows teachers to articulate their multiple identities – as educators, workers engaged in caring labour, and unionists. Moreover, this informal dimension of resistance can generate a stronger sense of solidarity rooted in these identities, which can intersect with and build toward engagement in other formal expressions of resistance and activism, including traditional union activity, public protest, or running for school boards.

This analysis unfolds in five subsequent sections. In the first, I discuss trends in public education policy in the neoliberal context. Next, I explore the feminist ethics of care and how it has become an important theoretical framework for articulating the identities and demands of educators and their unions. Third, I address the methodology of this study – a content analysis of the two aforementioned Twitter campaigns. I subsequently present and discuss the findings of the content analysis. I finish with some observations about the use of narratives of care as a form of dissent.

## **Public Education in the Era of Neoliberalism and Austerity**

PUBLIC EDUCATION POLICY in both the US and Canada has increasingly reflected the neoliberal tenets of privatization, consumer choice, personal accountability, resistance to public sector spending, and hostility to unions. In the US, neoliberal values have been expressed through a movement for education reform that has been gathering momentum since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Its advocates include Democrats and Republicans, as well as powerful foundations and

1. Milwaukee, Wisconsin became the first US city to adopt a voucher program in 1990.

non-governmental organizations. Together, these actors have accepted and perpetuate a narrative that public schools are failing American children, and that to be “college and career ready,” as the Obama administration has described the goal of K–12 schooling, significant reforms have to be enacted.

Neoliberal education reform in the US rests on three main pillars – choice, competition, and accountability. First, it calls for more school choice for parents and students. Accordingly, traditional public schools should exist alongside publicly funded charter schools and virtual schools, while tax payer funded school vouchers could allow parents to send their children to private and religious schools. In this model, tax dollars would follow the student, creating more competition between schools. In principle, competition among schools would have the effect of good schools succeeding, poorly performing schools failing, and all students receiving better educational opportunities through an education marketplace.

In addition to choice and competition, neoliberal education reformers emphasize the importance of being able to hold teachers, schools, and even entire school districts accountable for poor educational outcomes. Thus there has been a push for: 1) more data with which to measure outcomes, hence the dramatic increase in standardized testing,<sup>2</sup> and 2) a concentration of decision making power in mayoral or gubernatorial offices, as opposed to elected school boards.

Implementing this agenda has not been easy, largely because education policy in the US is incredibly decentralized and because teachers’ unions have been able to act as a check on some aspects of the reform program. Therefore, another of the major objectives of neoliberal reformers is to weaken teachers’ unions, and states throughout the US have enacted legislation restricting collective bargaining and attacking teacher protections like tenure.<sup>3</sup>

In Canada, reforms rooted in competition, choice, and accountability have not evolved to the same degree, although the narrative that education is in crisis and in need of urgent reforms is increasingly common.<sup>4</sup> Even so

2. Standardized testing increased considerably after President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001. NCLB required testing in reading, math, and science beginning in Grade Three. The tests were used to measure “adequate yearly progress” towards goals of universal proficiency in 2014. Although the Obama administration criticized NCLB, it has been a strong supporter of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS or Common Core), a set of educational standards for each Grade level created by the National Governors Association, intended to ensure that students across the country would be learning the similar skills at each Grade level. Once implemented by states and school districts, the Common Core Standards would be assessed by standardized tests.

3. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2013).

4. Nova Scotia, Minister’s Panel on Education, *Disrupting the Status Quo: Nova Scotians*

neoliberal ideology, critical of public sector spending, has influenced policy and discourse pertaining to public education. Andy Hanson observes that this has affected the education sector in three ways. First, across Canada, provincial governments have made significant cuts to education funding (without reducing the expectations of the public education system). These cuts have been introduced by parties across the political spectrum, including Liberal governments in British Columbia (BC) and Ontario, Progressive Conservative governments in Alberta and Ontario, and an NDP government in Nova Scotia.<sup>5</sup>

Second, provincial governments have enacted legislation restricting aspects of collective bargaining, such as the imposition of wage freezes (Ontario, Nova Scotia), limitations on the right to strike (Ontario), and prohibitions on bargaining class size and class composition (BC).<sup>6</sup> Finally, new collective bargaining practices have stripped power away from locally elected school boards and centralized control at the provincial level. This is especially true of issues involving funding. As examples from Ontario and BC demonstrate, teachers' unions have been engaged in long-standing and bitter disputes with provincial governments, as those governments use their more concentrated power to impose new contracts or other restrictive legislation, often on very short notice.<sup>7</sup>

Political discourse and rhetoric in both the US and Canada often characterizes educators, teachers' unions, and public education in ways that reflect and perpetuate the objectives of neoliberal education policy. For example, public schools are consistently portrayed as "failing." Teachers are often discussed as objects to be evaluated for their effectiveness or as lazy public servants, rather than skilled professionals. In an era of financial austerity, teachers' salaries, pensions, benefits, and other "perks" are routinely questioned.<sup>8</sup> Finally,

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*Demand a Better Future for Every Student* (Halifax 2014). [https://www.ednet.ns.ca/files/reports/report\\_minister\\_panel\\_on\\_education.pdf](https://www.ednet.ns.ca/files/reports/report_minister_panel_on_education.pdf)

5. Andy Hanson, "Classroom Struggle: Teachers' Unions, Collective Bargaining, and Neoliberal Education Reform," in Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage, eds., *Public Sector Unions in the Age of Austerity* (Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2013), 103–113; Chris Brisbane, "Why a Dexter NDP Government Defeat in N.S. Would Be a Progressive Victory," *rabble.ca*, 22 May 2013, <http://rabble.ca/news/2013/05/nova-scotia-why-dexter-ndp-government-defeat-would-be-progressive-victory>.

6. Hanson, "Classroom Struggle"; Ontario, Minister of Education, *Putting Students First Act, 2012, Bill 115* (Toronto 2012), [http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/bills/bills\\_detail.do?BillID=2665](http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/bills/bills_detail.do?BillID=2665); Katie Hyslop, "Updated: Everything You Need to Know about BC Teacher Bargaining," *The Tyee*, 21 May 2014, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2014/05/21/BC-Teacher-Bargaining/>; Nova Scotia, Minister of Education, *Teachers' Collective Bargaining Act (amended)* (Halifax 2001), [http://nslegislature.ca/legc/bills/58th\\_2nd/3rd\\_read/b015.htm](http://nslegislature.ca/legc/bills/58th_2nd/3rd_read/b015.htm)

7. Hanson, "Classroom Struggle"; Andy Hanson, *When Education and Legislation Meet: Teacher Collective Bargaining in Canada* (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2013), <http://www.ctf-fce.ca/Research-Library/When-Education-and-Legislation-Meet-AndyHanson.pdf>

8. Keith Rispin, "15 Myths Used to Demonize Teachers," *TIE Teachers: Learners to Learn With*,

teachers' unions are portrayed as outmoded organizations that block necessary reforms while protecting ineffective teachers.

### Theorizing Care as Resistance<sup>9</sup>

THE RESPONSE OF TEACHERS' UNIONS to the policies and rhetoric of neoliberal education reform has been varied. Many teachers' unions have mounted vigorous challenges to neoliberal education policies through strikes and formal job actions (Ontario teachers in the 1990s, BC teachers in the 2000s, and Chicago teachers in 2013),<sup>10</sup> bargaining strategy and community outreach (Alberta teachers in the 1990s; St. Paul, Minneapolis teachers in 2013),<sup>11</sup> and more recently, lending support to national, issue oriented movements (Seattle).<sup>12</sup> Yet it is also true that in an era of generally declining labour strength and activism, plenty of teachers' unions and federations have been silent or even acquiesced in the face of policies like budget cuts, school closures, and the implementation of testing regimes.<sup>13</sup> As Mary Compton and Lois Weiner

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13 June 2014, <http://multiaccess.ca/?cat=8>.

9. For a discussion of the ethics of care with respect to union activism in the US see Rachel K. Brickner, "Public Education and the Ethics of Care: Toward a Politics of Kindness?" in P.L. Thomas, Paul R. Carr, Julie A. Gorlewski, and Brad J. Porfilio, eds., *Pedagogies of Kindness and Respect: On the Lives and Education of Children* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 11–24.

10. On Ontario teachers' responses to Mike Harris' policies in the 1990s, see David Camfield, "Assessing Resistance in Harris's Ontario, 1995–1999," in Mike Burke, Colin Mooers, and John Shields, eds., *Restructuring and Resistance: Canadian Public Policy in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2000), 306–317; on the legal and illegal strikes of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF), see Wendy Poole, "Neo-liberalism in British Columbia Education and Teachers' Union Resistance," *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning* 11 (2007), <http://iejll.synergiesprairies.ca/iejll/index.php/iejll/article/view/679/340>; on the Chicago Teachers' Union strike, see Alexandra Bradbury, Mark Brenner, Jenny Brown, Jane Slaughter, and Samantha Winslow, *How to Jump Start Your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers* (Detroit: Labor Notes Labor Education and Research Project, 2014); Micah Uetricht, *Strike for America: Chicago Teachers Against Austerity* (London and New York: Verso, 2014).

11. On the Alberta Teachers' Association public relations campaign in response to neoliberalism in the 1990s, see Victor Soucek and Raj Pannu, "Globalizing Education in Alberta: Teachers' Work and the Option to Fight Back," in Susan Robertson and Harry Smaller, eds., *Teachers' Activism in the 1990s* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1996); on the St. Paul Federation of Teachers' program of community outreach, see Mary Cathryn Ricker, "Teacher-Community Unionism: A Lesson from St. Paul," *Dissent* 310 (Summer 2015), <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/teacher-community-unionism-lesson-st-paul>.

12. See, for example, the Seattle Education Association's support for Garfield High School's boycott of the state of Washington's Measures of Academic Progress test: <https://scrapthemap.wordpress.com/2013/02/02/seattle-education-association-supports-garfield-teachers/>.

13. See Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, "The Continuing Assault on Public Sector Workers," in Ross and Savage, eds., *Public Sector Unions*, 31–45; Mark Naison, "The History of BAT: Why the Badass Teachers Association Has Taken Off," 30 September 2014, <http://>

have noted, "...trade union leaders are too often ready to accept the rhetoric of politicians as the reality and adapt accordingly, instead of standing up boldly and opposing them – if necessary through job action."<sup>14</sup> Further, as neoliberal reforms weaken collective bargaining and other labour rights, it has been more difficult to mount campaigns.<sup>15</sup>

The ability of teachers' unions to mobilize strong campaigns is hampered by the disconnect between many rank-and-file educators and their unions, and by a general de-politicization of the teaching profession. Nina Bascia argues that many rank-and-file educators fail to identify strongly with their unions, and her research highlights several reasons why: a younger generation of educators no longer identifies unions with critical advocacy; the centralization of decision making in education policy and restrictions on union rights have limited the opportunities to engage with their union; finally, the public attacks on unions make it uncomfortable for some educators to identify as unionists.<sup>16</sup> Others highlight that many educators have simply become depoliticized. Paul Thomas argues that teachers struggle against a "powerful social claim" that they "must not be political," which has created "an *essentially passive teacher workforce*."<sup>17</sup> Others note that political attacks on teaching have undermined the confidence of many educators, who no longer feel empowered to stand up for their students or for public education.<sup>18</sup> In short, despite strong challenges to neoliberal policies by some teachers' unions, these responses have not been uniform and are becoming more difficult to carry out because of both labour policy and the challenge of connecting with rank-and-file educators.

Lois Weiner argues that building stronger, social justice oriented unions is critical to pushing back against neoliberal education reform. One important aspect of strengthening social justice unionism, she says, is to "defend

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[www.badassteacher.org/category/history/](http://www.badassteacher.org/category/history/); Jeff Abbott, "International Teacher Solidarity Cross-Pollinates," *Labor Notes*, 4 September 2014, <http://labornotes.org/blogs/2014/09/international-teacher-solidarity-cross-pollinates>.

14. Mary Compton and Lois Weiner, "The Global Assault on Teachers, Teaching, and Teacher Unions," in Mary Compton and Lois Weiner, eds., *The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers, and Their Unions: Stories for Resistance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 7.

15. In Canada, see Panitch and Swartz, "The Continuing Assault." In the US, for example, right-to-work legislation now exists in 25 states, and in 5 states educators cannot engage in collective bargaining.

16. Nina Bascia, "What Teachers Want from their Unions: What We Know from Research," in Compton and Weiner, eds., *The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers, and Their Unions*, 95–96; see also, David Camfield, "Renewing Public Sector Unions," in Ross and Savage, eds., *Public Sector Unions*, 70–71.

17. Paul Thomas, "A Call for the Next Phase in the Resistance," *the becoming radical*, 5 August 2014, <https://radicalscholarship.wordpress.com/2014/08/05/a-call-for-the-next-phase-in-the-resistance/> (emphasis in original).

18. Lois Weiner, *The Future of Our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), Kindle edition, chap. 1, location 176.



teaching's nurturing functions" and for teachers and unions "to stand up for students' human needs."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, despite narratives demonizing educators and policies that withdraw resources from the public education system, as a public we continue to entrust schools and educators with the intellectual, physical, and emotional development and well-being of students. When we think of the role provided by schools and educators through the lens of a feminist ethics of care – and when we listen to educators talk about their work – it becomes clear that schools can be institutions of caring and that educators are regularly engaged in caring labour.

The ethics of care framework emerged in the 1980s, when feminists like Carol Gilligan began to interrogate and challenge the gendered assumptions in mainstream, liberal political philosophy that emphasized the centrality of individual freedom, rationality, and autonomy to moral reasoning, justice, and citizenship. Gilligan's seminal work, *In a Different Voice*, argues, conversely, that "the most basic questions about human living – how to live and what to do – are fundamentally questions about human relations, because people's lives are deeply connected, psychologically, economically, and politically."<sup>20</sup> Consequently, for Gilligan, nothing is more central to human life than care. The point of departure for a feminist ethics of care is a view that humans are not isolated and autonomous; we exist in relation to others. As Fiona Robinson argues, our "moral reality is embedded in relations and practices of responsibility and recognition."<sup>21</sup> This emphasis on relationships does not mean that the individual is unimportant. On the contrary, Patricia Hill Collins argues that an ethic of caring emphasizes the importance of personal expressiveness and individual uniqueness and values how each personality enriches the whole group.<sup>22</sup> But because the individual is not autonomous or self-sufficient, the feminist ethics of care calls on us to recognize that as we move through life, we will rely to varying degrees on the care of others, just as we will have the responsibility at times to provide care for others.<sup>23</sup>

The ethics of care lens is important for understanding the actual practices of educators as well as the growing resistance among educators and their allies to neoliberal education policies. Through their long history in North

19. Weiner, *The Future of Our Schools*, chap. 2, location 338–343.

20. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), xiv.

21. Fiona Robinson, *The Ethics of Care: A Feminist Approach to Security* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 5.

22. Patricia Hill Collins, "Common Grounds and Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Women's Lives," *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989): 765–768.

23. Robinson, *The Ethics of Care*; Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Social Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), Kindle edition; Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).



America, public schools have played a central role as institutions of caregiving that foster the “relations and practices of responsibility and recognition.” First, schools are centres of caring for individual learners. Although there have been continuous debates about what ought to be taught, at a most basic level, schools are charged with fostering the intellectual development of students, and do so with increasing attention to the needs of differently abled learners.<sup>24</sup> Schools and educators also provide support for the emotional and physical well-being of students, both of which are critical to their ability to learn.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond caring for the needs of individual learners, schools serve as centres of care within communities. They have long been cited as among the most important institutions for fostering democratic values and opportunities for marginalized groups.<sup>26</sup> They have more recently become institutions through which students can learn to critically reflect on the histories of exclusion and marginalization.<sup>27</sup> Finally, local public schools are centres of stability within communities, serving diverse families, sometimes over several generations.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to emphasize that the public schools have never met their full potential as centres of caring for all students, whether because of resource differences among school districts and boards, systemic classism, sexism, and racism and their legacies, and even the continued legality of corporal punishment in some jurisdictions. Moreover, two and a half decades of neoliberal education policy have intensified “the challenge to care in schools,” to cite the title of Nel Noddings’ 2005 work. While the implicit expectation of communities and the practice of educators are for schools to function as caregiving

24. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back*; Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*; United States, Department of Education, *Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004* (Washington, DC 2004), <http://idea.ed.gov>.

25. Physical and emotional well-being are supported through many formal and informal programs and practices. In the US, the National School Lunch Act was passed in 1946 and provides free or reduced cost lunch to low-income students. See <http://www.fns.usda.gov/nsnlp/national-school-lunch-program-nsnlp>. School counselors and educators provide an important source of emotional support for students experiencing difficult personal situations. See “Harper High: Parts One and Two,” *This American Life*, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/487/harper-high-school-part-one>. Anti-Bullying Day (or Pink Shirt Day), now celebrated in schools around the world, originated in Nova Scotia.

26. Jelani Cobb, “Class Notes: What’s Really at Stake When a School Closes?” *The New Yorker*, 31 August 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/08/31/class-notes-annals-of-education-jelani-cobb>; John Dewey, *The Political Writings*, ed. Diane Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993); James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” accessed 28 February 2015, *FlaglerLive.com*, <http://flaglerlive.com/2461/james-baldwin-talk-teachers/>; Ravitch, *Left Back*.

27. For example, some Nova Scotia high schools offer courses in Mi’kmaq Studies and African Canadian Studies; British Columbia has introduced the course Social Justice 12.

28. Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*; Jeanette Taylor-Ramann, “In Chicago, Hunger Striking to Save a School,” *Edushyster*, 24 August 2015, <http://edushyster.com/in-chicago-hunger-striking-to-save-a-school/>.

institutions, this has become harder to achieve. Budget cuts have pushed schools and educators beyond their capacities. The increase in testing has narrowed curricula, making it difficult to foster the intellectual development and creativity of different types of learners. Narrowed curricula also reduce students' exposure to the subjects necessary for the development of democratic citizenship, while intensifying the focus on subjects understood as necessary for future participation in the workforce.<sup>29</sup> Finally, privatization and competition for resources, especially in the US but also in Canada, have led to school closures, threatening students' access to high quality neighbourhood schools, especially for the most vulnerable students – lower income and minority children in urban areas.<sup>30</sup>

For Joan Tronto, if we want to create a more equal and just democracy, we ought to foster a robust dialogue about who has responsibilities for care and the role of the state in supporting caregiving activities and institutions. This is because our communities and societies are produced and reproduced by individuals performing caring labour. If our democratic deliberations do not explicitly address the question of “who does the caring?” we are left with a politics in which the care dimensions of life are hidden and undervalued, and we risk perpetuating both inequities in access to care and the unequal burdens in providing care to others.<sup>31</sup> However, Tronto notes the political challenge of bringing care into public dialogue, especially in the neoliberal context in which “people speak only in the languages of economics, interests, and rights.”<sup>32</sup>

Despite this challenge, if we as a democratic public make decisions to invest resources in public schools, we ought to do so with the full participation of educators whose standpoint offers them a unique perspective about the actual needs of students and the caregiving practices of educators. Further, we ought to consider as a public the role that schools play in our communities as caring centres that introduce students to the practices of responsibility and recognition in diverse, democratic societies. Although educators and their unions have been demonized in the neoliberal era, I argue that there is a critical role for both in explicitly bringing the issue of care into our public dialogue around education.

What I call “narratives of care” – ways of discussing or framing the work educators do, and the demands of unions, in terms of meeting the needs of children – are not new to teachers' unions. In the US and Canada, they go back at least to social justice oriented unionism that dates from the 1960s and 1970s and which has engaged unions in advocacy on issues directly affecting

29. See Ravitch, *Reign of Error*; Alan Sears, *Retooling the Mind Factory: Education in a Lean State* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003).

30. Ravitch, *Reign of Error*, xx–xxiii.

31. Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, chap. 6, location 3003.

32. Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, chap. 3, location 1891.

many teachers, such as a defense of public education, issues of equality in the workforce and classroom, issues related to poverty, the importance of small classes, and more recently opposition to standardized testing.<sup>33</sup> Unions have used narratives of care in slogans, such as “great public schools for every child” and “kids matter/teachers care.” They have also developed caring narratives in public relations campaigns and outreach activities.<sup>34</sup> More recent examples of caring narratives have been used in job actions. During their 2012 contract negotiations and strike, the Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU) framed their demands in terms of “the schools Chicago’s students deserve.”<sup>35</sup> And throughout the 2000s, the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) has rallied around issues of class size and composition.<sup>36</sup>

In discussing their 2014 strike, however, Larry Kuehn of the BCTF suggested that beyond the communication and actions of the union, it was the stories teachers would tell – in letters and talking to parents and friends – that effectively communicated messages and rallied public support.<sup>37</sup> In a climate where unions have been inconsistent in their response to neoliberal policies, the engagement of other actors, among them individual educators communicating narratives of care, has become an important part of the education activism landscape.<sup>38</sup>

## A Framework for Understanding Narratives of Care as Resistance

TO UNDERSTAND HOW EDUCATORS have begun to use narratives of care as a form of resistance, I draw on Ackroyd and Thompson’s analysis of organizational misbehaviour, which they define as “anything you do at work that you are not supposed to do.”<sup>39</sup> They argue that understanding how workers misbehave sheds light not only on more militant, formal forms of workers’ action, such as labour union activity, but on the ways that similarly intentional, though

33. Larry Kuehn, interview by author, 20 August 2015; Cindy Rottmann, “Organized Agents: Canadian Teacher Unions as Alternative Sites for Social Justice Activism,” *Canadian Journal of Education* 31, 4 (2008): 997, 999.

34. Soucek and Pannu, “Globalizing Education in Alberta”; on the Madison Teachers Inc (Wisconsin) community partnership program, MTI Cares, see [http://www.madisonteachers.org/mti\\_cares/](http://www.madisonteachers.org/mti_cares/).

35. Chicago Teachers’ Union, *The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve*, February 2012: [http://www.ctunet.com/blog/text/SCSD\\_Report-02-16-2012-1.pdf](http://www.ctunet.com/blog/text/SCSD_Report-02-16-2012-1.pdf). The CTU model influenced other unions, such as the St. Paul (Minnesota) Federation of Teachers and the Portland (Oregon) Education Association. See Brickner, “Public Education and the Ethics of Care.”

36. Poole, “Neo-liberalism in British Columbia Education.”

37. Larry Kuehn, interview by author, 20 August 2015.

38. Paul Thomas, “A Call for the Next Phase in the Resistance.”

39. Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson, *Organizational Misbehaviour* (London: Sage Publications, 2003).

informal, actions of self-organization challenge managerial control in the workplace and assist in the formation of workers' "identities in contradistinction to those imposed by formal hierarchies."<sup>40</sup> In other words, misbehaviour allows workers to construct their identities on their own terms, which can have spillover effects into other kinds of workplace activism.

Ackroyd and Thompson developed a three-category framework for misbehaviour, organized according to the formality or informality of the misbehaviour, as well as whether the misbehaviour was externally or internally directed. As such, *formal external* self-organization and resistance includes union, legislative, and industrial relations activities, which are organized by an official, representative body or take place according to specific, formally agreed upon rules and are directed against an external actor, such as the employer. *Informal external* forms of misbehaviour involve activities such as recalcitrance, work limitations, pilferage, or group rituals and ceremonies. Such activities do not take place according to formally established rules, but are directed against an external actor. Finally, with *informal internal* forms of misbehaviour or resistance, activities such as banter, joking and self-expression are linked to self-regulation and identity formation of the worker, rather than being directed against an internal actor.<sup>41</sup>

Donna Baines has used Ackroyd and Thompson's framework to analyze resistance among care workers in the non-profit social services sector in order to better understand whether and how care workers' resistance strategies promote their own interests and identities (as workers engaging morally just, if sometimes unpaid, work to push back against an uncaring society) or those of management (legitimizing resource cutbacks to the sector). Baines concludes that there is a fine line between resistance and exploitation, but that care workers' resistance carves out spaces where they can foster autonomy within the workplace, thus shifting the moral balance of power away from the employer. Further, she argues that informal resistance helps establish identities and forms of worker self-organization, contributing to further practices of dissent, including formal external practices linked to unions.<sup>42</sup>

I build on Baines by focusing on how caregiving can be employed in acts of resistance. Specifically, I explore how educators use social media to frame their workplace identities through a narrative of care. While this deviates from Ackroyd and Thompson's framework insofar as it is not misbehaviour taking place *in* the workplace, it operates as an example of *dissent*, which Ackroyd understands as "a special kind of demonstrative act" through which spoken or written words are used to indicate disapproval of an official view and to propose alternatives, and which serve as "the foundation for assertive

40. Ackroyd and Thompson, *Organizational Misbehaviour*, 73.

41. Ackroyd and Thompson, *Organizational Misbehaviour*, 58.

42. Donna Baines, "Moral Projects and Compromise Resistance: Resisting Uncaring in Nonprofit Care Work," *Studies in Political Economy* (forthcoming).

action.”<sup>43</sup> By articulating their identities and experiences at work through narratives of care, in both direct and indirect critique of neoliberal education policy, educators use dissent on social media as a form of internal resistance – self-expression and self-organization – that can intersect with and foster participation in formal forms of resistance, and, consequently, contribute to the growing North American movement opposed to neoliberal education reform.

## Methodology

THIS ANALYSIS IS PART of a larger study exploring the motivations, forms, and impact of educators’ activism since 2011, the year of the Wisconsin Uprising.<sup>44</sup> The first phase of the study involved a series of semi-structured interviews with educators, policy makers, and community activists, primarily in Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin – three states that have seen dramatic intensification of neoliberal education reform alongside diverse responses from educators and teachers’ unions.<sup>45</sup> The initial findings from the educators’ interviews revealed the extent to which their political engagement was a response to policies impeding their ability to care for their students, how important social media was in coordinating activism, and the challenges building and maintaining strong connections between union leaders and rank-and-file teachers.<sup>46</sup> This analysis builds on these findings by exploring the use of social media by individual educators as a form of activism, while broadening the comparative focus to include the Canadian context.

Social media has enabled the explosion of dialogue and information sharing by both proponents and critics of neoliberal education reform. Among critics, narratives of care are one of many themes explored in social media, and are represented by blogs such as Paul Thomas’s “The Becoming Radical,” in which he regularly discusses the importance of “kindness,” and by Teachers’ Letters to Bill Gates, a Facebook page and Twitter account dedicated to exploring the impact that policies supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have

43. Stephen Ackroyd, “Even More *Misbehaviour*: What Has Happened in the Last Twenty Years?” in Alison Barnes and Lucy Taksa, eds., *Rethinking Misbehaviour and Resistance in Organizations* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2012), 22–23.

44. In February 2011, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker introduced legislation, Bill 10, which would severely curtail the rights to unionize and bargain collectively for educators and some other public sector workers. Opponents of the legislation responded with a month-long occupation of the state capitol in Madison and campaigns to recall both Governor Walker and several state senators.

45. This study received approval from the Research Ethics Board at Acadia University. All interview participants gave written consent to record, transcribe and, in most cases, use their names in published work.

46. Brickner, “Public Education and the Ethics of Care.”

on the practice of education.<sup>47</sup> For this analysis I conducted a content analysis of two Twitter campaigns. The first campaign –#EvaluateThat – emerged as a forum to draw attention to the aspects of educators’ jobs that cannot be evaluated through standardized tests. It is associated with the Badass Teachers Association (BAT), a national group of educators in the United States that has operated primarily online and is unaffiliated with any teachers’ unions. The second campaign, #ThisIsMyStrikePay, was initiated by Vancouver, BC educator Tobey Steeves during the 2014 strike of the BCTF with the goal of shifting the narrative of teachers’ motivations for staying on the picket line towards the “intangible” aspects of the profession.<sup>48</sup>

These two campaigns were chosen for several reasons. First, they originated organically and opened up a dialogue about themes of care and, therefore, offered a space for educators to narrate their own identities and experiences. Second, unlike blogs or Facebook, Twitter campaigns are public and cannot be easily moderated. Anyone with a Twitter account can post any content using the hashtag. As such, they are open to education critics and trolls, as well as educators and their supporters. Further, there is no guarantee that the campaign will gain momentum, “go viral,” or that the tweets will remain “on message” over the course of the campaign. Thus, they offer the opportunity to explore how well a message resonates with participants over time. Finally, these two campaigns enable rich comparisons, not only between educators operating in different geographic contexts, but also between a campaign associated with a particular job action and a more general campaign.

For the content analysis of the #EvaluateThat campaign, which began in February 2014 and is still generating posts (albeit significantly fewer), I coded a sample of 230 tweets (including 70 “memes”) from the first and most recent months of the campaign. For the #ThisIsMyStrikePay campaign, which ran from June into September of 2014, I coded a similar number of tweets, focusing on the initial and final weeks. Because I was curious about the stories told through original content, I did not code retweets of either memes or tweets. Moreover, when an individual linked to their own or another blog post or

47. Paul Thomas’s blog can be found here: <https://radicalscholarship.wordpress.com>; Teachers’ Letters to Bill Gates can be found on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/TeachersLetters2Gates>) or Twitter (<https://twitter.com/TsLetters2Gates>) and at one time included a blog, which is no longer live. Social media critics of neoliberal education reform focus on a number of other issues. Some focus on an analysis of public policy, such as Nova Scotia educator Ben Sichel’s blog *No Need to Raise Your Hand* (<https://noneedtoraiseyourhand.wordpress.com>) and Michigan Parents for Schools’ blog (<http://www.mipfs.org>). Some comment on the general landscape of education reform, such as *Edushyster* (<http://edushyster.com>) and *Curmudgucation* (<http://curmudgucation.blogspot.ca>). Some educators blend their personal experience with policy, such as Grant Frost in Nova Scotia (<http://frostededucation.com>), Jose Vilson in New York City (<http://thejosevilson.com>), and Jesse Hagopian in Seattle (<http://iamaneducator.com>). Finally, some organizations use social media in particular policy campaigns, such as the anti-testing organization United Opt Out (<http://unitedoptout.com>).

48. Toby Steeves, interview by author, 11 August 2015.

article, I only coded this once unless there was additional content (such as text or a photo). As noted, coding the beginning and end of the campaign enabled me to explore whether, and how, the content of individual tweets shifted over time.

Coding categories fell into three basic areas: 1) information about the poster (e.g., were they an educator or parent, whether they were a first time or repeat poster); 2) information about the “reach” of the tweet (e.g., the number of retweets, favourites, and mentions); and 3) the content of the tweet. More specifically, the content of each tweet was coded to determine whether it included “caring” content and, if so, what kind of caring activity was discussed. A total of 12 general “care themes” were established, with a total of 35 subthemes. The themes and subthemes were initially drawn from literature and interviews; however, following an ethnographic content analysis method, I also added new care themes that emerged out of the analysis.

Although the bulk of this analysis is based on the tweets themselves, which we can understand as interventions, albeit short ones, in the broader public dialogue about education, I have supplemented the content analysis with information from interviews with individuals who are knowledgeable about the campaigns and their impact.

## Educators’ Dissent and Resistance through Twitter

THERE IS DEBATE about whether social media can provide genuinely productive platforms for democratic deliberation and political activism, or whether they are simply forums through which like-minded individuals share information that reproduces their own political views.<sup>49</sup> One prominent education blogger questioned the usefulness of Twitter, given that only 19 per cent of adults are active on Twitter and the inherent limitations of dealing with complicated education issues in 140-character tweets.<sup>50</sup>

I argue that educators’ engagement on social media can be an important form of dissent. Despite the examples of formal resistance by teachers’ unions to neoliberal policy, it remains the case that many educators feel disconnected from their unions or have concerns about speaking out. Moreover, schools and classrooms themselves are protected from politics – by laws restricting political speech and even by the practice of individual teachers quietly paying out of pocket for classroom supplies, thereby absorbing budget cuts

49. Brian D. Loader and Dan Mercea, eds., *Social Media and Democracy: Innovations in Participatory Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Kristi DeWolf, “Counterpower in a Dual Network: An Examination of Young Canadians Using Facebook to Engage in Political Activity,” MA Thesis, Acadia University, 2014.

50. Shaun Johnson, “Social Networking Usage and @ the chalk face,” @ *The Chalk Face* 5 July 2014, <http://atthechalkface.com/2014/07/05/social-networking-usage-and-the-chalk-face/>.



so children and parents feel them less.<sup>51</sup> Engaging publicly to push back against negative rhetoric and draw attention to the effects of neoliberal policy breaks with a neoliberal picture of unions as the key actors opposed to education reform and the individual teacher as an apolitical provider of content or, in the most pernicious rhetoric, an object to be evaluated. By breaking with such expectations, educators' activism represents "misbehaviour." The analysis of #EvaluateThat and #ThisIsMyStrikePay demonstrates how educators using social media to narrate their work experiences and identities through narratives of care are engaging in an important form of resistance to neoliberal education policy.

## #EvaluateThat

THE #EVALUATETHAT campaign was organized by BAT. BAT formed in 2013 as a Facebook group "for every teacher who refuses to be blamed for the failure of our society to erase poverty and inequality, and refuses to accept assessments, tests and evaluations imposed by those who have contempt for real teaching and learning."<sup>52</sup> Initially, BAT developed a loose mandate consisting of three pillars: opposition to the Common Core State Standards,<sup>53</sup> opposition to high stakes standardized testing, and the need to debunk myths about failing teachers and schools. BAT primarily organizes online actions that call on members to voice support or opposition on a specific issue. For example, the first BAT action asked educators to contact the White House and demand the resignation of Education Secretary Arne Duncan.<sup>54</sup> BAT has grown in terms of members – at the time of writing there were approximately 54,000 "badass teachers" – and has broadened its activist repertoire beyond social media campaigns to include collaborative work with other organizations, holding rallies, and lobbying for legislative change. However, its primary methods are focused on social media campaigns.

#EvaluateThat began in late January 2014 when a member from Atlanta, Georgia posted the following story on the BAT Facebook page after a rare snowstorm left students stranded in the school:

51. Julie Underwood, "Do You Have the Right to be an Advocate?" *Education Week*, 5 September 2013, [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/09/01/kappan\\_underwood.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/09/01/kappan_underwood.html); Naomi Lazarus, "It's Time for B.C. Teachers to Stop Lying to Parents," *Huffpost British Columbia*, 23 September 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/naomi-lazarus/bc-schools-funding-isubsidizebcd\\_b\\_5870234.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=bc-teachers-strike-2014](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/naomi-lazarus/bc-schools-funding-isubsidizebcd_b_5870234.html?utm_hp_ref=bc-teachers-strike-2014)

52. Mark Naison, "The History of BAT."

53. The criticism of CCSS is varied, but among educators it is widely condemned for its link to the use of high stakes testing and with establishing developmentally inappropriate standards, especially for elementary students. See Ravitch, *Reign of Error*.

54. Marla Kilfoyle, interview by author, 19 February 2015.

Fifteen teachers and staff members in the special needs program stayed with the [snow-bound] children, some of whom had wheelchairs or required special medication. For some children, it was their first night away from home, and teachers kept worried parents informed through cellphone calls and text photos. One group of teachers walked through the snow to a nearby Kroger to get emergency prescriptions filled, including seizure medication.

The teacher finished her post by exclaiming, “evaluate that!” – a reference to the standardized tests that are increasingly used to evaluate teacher, student, and school performance.<sup>55</sup>

According to BAT General Manager, Marla Kilfoyle, the story “went ballistic on the [Facebook] page,” and subsequently the #EvaluateThat campaign “exploded on Twitter,” as fellow educators posted their own stories about the work they performed as an educator that could not be reduced to metrics.<sup>56</sup>

The content analysis reflects Kilfoyle’s description of the Twitter explosion. Hundreds of original tweets were posted on the first two days of the Twitter campaign – 2–3 February 2014. On 3 February 2014, BAT member Kelly A. Braun began posting “memes” – narratives expressed in words and images – based on educators’ stories that were posted on BAT Facebook page and blog.<sup>57</sup> After an explosive start, the #EvaluateThat campaign gradually slowed. Of the 160 non-meme tweets that were coded there were 75 unique tweeters, and these included educators, community members, parents, students, and organizations. Eleven tweeters posted twice and 14 posted more than twice. The content of tweets also shifted over time, with the more recent tweets mainly criticizing standardized testing and the CCSS. However, the analysis of the first days’ tweeting tells an interesting story about how educators’ identities as workers are informed by an ethic of care.

The vast majority of the original tweets that were coded (131 of 164) reflected care themes, and most of these (111) fell into one of six categories – personal contributions for physical needs (21), personal contributions for academic purposes (10), emotional well-being (23), intellectual well-being (21), nurturing relationships (21), and extra-curricular/extra-contractual activities. Many educators tweeted about using their own financial resources to make sure that students had what they needed to learn. Most often, educators posted about using their own money to help meet the physical well-being of students, such as one educator who tweeted that she keeps extra food and clothing in her classroom for students who need them.<sup>58</sup> This category of tweets made clear that

55. Badass Teachers Assoc, Twitter post, 29 April 2014, 1:50 pm, <https://twitter.com/BadassTeachersA/status/593457289941622784>.

56. Marla Kilfoyle, interview by author, 19 February 2015.

57. I coded 70 of these memes from the first days of the campaign; however, because they were selected by Braun to reflect the themes of the campaign, rather than being posted by individuals, they are not included in the discussion that follows.

58. Blondie, Twitter post, 2 February 2014, 10:05 pm, <https://twitter.com/blondie4spurs/>

students who lack basic material resources are often dealing with challenging family situations, as in the case of a teacher who tweeted that she bought lunch for a student whose father had been arrested.<sup>59</sup> Educators also spent their own money on supplies for the students in their classes. Erin Clancy tweeted that “EVERY supply that my students use 2 help them be successful- calculators, notebooks, pencils were purchased with my own \$.”<sup>60</sup>

Caring for the emotional well-being of students was another common theme of the tweets. Sometimes, caring for the emotional well-being of students meant responding to distressing events arising in a student's life: “When a girl disclosed in wrtg that she had been rapped [sic], I worked with mom to make writing a safe place.”<sup>61</sup> Other educators emphasized the importance of helping students trust in their own abilities: “Student had no self confidence, but I believed in them until they found their own belief in self -> only then did they learn.”<sup>62</sup> These narratives underscore the importance of providing emotional care as the foundation of intellectual growth and exploration.

Many educators also tweeted about the nurturing bonds they formed with their students, which were expressed through acts of kindness on the part of both educator and student: The organization Teachers4Democracy tweeted, “helping teach a class full of young men how to tie a tie. What CC Standard is that again?”<sup>63</sup> And Seeker of the Truth posted, “When your teenage students make you an origami bouquet you know you're doing something right!”<sup>64</sup>

The commitment to go beyond what is required by the curriculum or the contract as part of how educators performed their job was another expression of caring demonstrated in a number of tweets. These extracurricular commitments included activities that celebrated and supported student achievements, like playing music at graduation ceremonies and going to sports games.<sup>65</sup> They also included activities in which the educator responded to particularly tense

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status/430160092902608897.

59. Michelle Fuller, Twitter post, 2 February 2014, 11:10 pm, <https://twitter.com/mfuller1974/status/430176328365514754>.

60. Erin Clancy, Twitter post, 3 February 2014, 12:08 am, <https://twitter.com/ErinClancy33/status/430190916129660928>.

61. ThNaWord, Twitter post, 2 February 2014, 11:20 pm, <https://twitter.com/thenaword/status/430178917576503296>.

62. Susan DuFresnel, Twitter post, 2 February 2014, 11:03 pm, <https://twitter.com/GetUpStandUp2/status/430174554057478144>.

63. Teachers 4 Democracy, Twitter post, 2 February 2014, 11:31 pm, <https://twitter.com/CamdenEANJ/status/430181707929903104>.

64. Seeker of the Truth, Twitter post, 4 February 2015, 6:47 pm, <https://twitter.com/Grtseeker/status/563106683241500672>.

65. Laura Sexton, Twitter post, 3 February 2014, 12:09 am, <https://twitter.com/SraSpanglish/status/430191393105903616>; Pat Woods, Twitter post, 2 February 2014, 11:17 pm, <https://twitter.com/MrPoods/status/430178193555742720>.

or stressful events, as indicated by one educator who tweeted, “I helped a student fill out court papers because his illegal immigrant mom was afraid to go to the courthouse.”<sup>66</sup>

Finally, educators’ expressions of caring extended to their commitment to the intellectual development of their students. Sometimes this meant taking the time to help students find the classes they needed.<sup>67</sup> Other times it meant challenging students to confront racist stereotypes.<sup>68</sup> Still other educators commented on engaging students in what they were learning, such as the educator who posted, “I bring stories to life #readalouds.”<sup>69</sup> Through #EvaluateThat, educators articulated their identities as workers whose jobs required them to meet the diverse needs of diverse students.

### **#ThisIsMyStrikePay**

IN MAY 2014 the BCTF began an escalating series of job actions, culminating in a full-scale walkout that began on 17 June 2014 and ultimately pushed back the beginning of the 2014–15 school year. This contentious round of bargaining, which ended with the ratification of a six-year collective agreement on 18 September 2014, was part of a dispute between the BCTF and the BC Liberal Party dating back to 2002.

In January 2002 the Liberal government passed the Education Services Collective Agreement Act (Bill 27) and the Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act (Bill 28). Among other issues to which the BCTF objected, Bills 27 and 28 stripped class size and composition levels from negotiated collective agreements and removed the right to negotiate them in the future. The bills also erased from provincial collective agreements teacher-to-student ratios for specialist teachers, including counsellors, teacher librarians, and special needs teachers. The BCTF appealed the constitutionality of Bills 27 and 28 to the International Labour Organization as well as to the BC Supreme Court, and both bodies found in favour of the union. Nevertheless, class sizes and composition, levels of specialist teachers, and funding for public education (including salaries, which had been frozen since 2010) have remained in dispute since 2002 and contributed to the job action initiated by the BCTF in 2014.<sup>70</sup>

66. Mr. Fuller, Twitter post, 3 February 2014, 12:06 am, <https://twitter.com/JosephHFuller/status/430190637783474176>.

67. Debbie, Twitter post, 3 February 2014, 12:00 am, <https://twitter.com/MissShuganah/status/43018896675565570>.

68. Ben Sichel, Twitter post, 2 February 2014, 11:35 pm, <https://twitter.com/bsichel/status/43018285522652928>; Debbie, Twitter post, 3 February 2014, 12:07 am, <https://twitter.com/MissShuganah/status/430190693190225920>.

69. Phil Griffin, Twitter post, 2 February 2014, 11:28 pm, <https://twitter.com/philgriffins/status/430181051202142209>.

70. Katie Hyslop, “Updated: Everything You Need to Know about BC Teacher Bargaining,”

Narratives of care were present among parents, teachers, and community members in the public dialogue that developed in response to the BCTF's job action and the Liberal government's lockout and salary cut. For example, in a popular blog post, Naomi Lazarus called out the provincial government for shifting the financial burden of under-resourced schools to individual educators:

The teachers have been lying to us. For *years*. They've been covering it up. Papering over underfunding and mismanaged fiscal priorities with brightly coloured posters and sparkly stickers. Concealing an impoverished system by buying the damn supplies themselves. Without receiving so much as a tax break on those purchases.<sup>71</sup>

The organization Parents for BC used its website to collect stories about education in the province, which they presented to the legislature. Speaking about the campaign, Parents for BC's Lisa Cable said, "People feel that there's not enough focus on the needs of the children. Ultimately, at the end of the day, whether that means smaller classes, more teachers, or more money – whatever that looks like – people really feel that we have lost a sense of what children need for a good education in this province."<sup>72</sup>

Both examples demonstrate a care narrative by drawing attention to the specific needs that children have as learners and, further, by emphasizing that in a public education system, it is a public responsibility to provide the appropriate learning environment.

In the context of the job action, educators also took to social media to engage in the public dialogue. Tobey Steeves initiated #ThisIsMyStrikePay in June 2014 in an effort to shift the public narrative away from the question of the BCTF's inability to provide strike pay to the "intangible" aspects of teaching that compensated for this lost income and kept educators committed to the strike.<sup>73</sup> Like #EvaluateThat, #ThisIsMyStrikePay became a forum for dissent

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*The Tyee*, 21 May 2014, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2014/05/21/BC-Teacher-Bargaining/>; Tamsyn Burgmann and Dene Moore, "B.C. Teachers Vote Results: Majority Ratify Bittersweet Contract Deal With Province," *Huffpost British Columbia*, 19 September 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/09/19/bc-teachers-vote-results\\_n\\_5847236.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=bc-teachers-strike-2014](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/09/19/bc-teachers-vote-results_n_5847236.html?utm_hp_ref=bc-teachers-strike-2014).

71. Naomi Lazarus, "It's Time for B.C. Teachers to Stop Lying to Parents," *Huffpost British Columbia*, 23 September 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/naomi-lazarus/bc-schools-funding-isubsidizebcd\\_b\\_5870234.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/naomi-lazarus/bc-schools-funding-isubsidizebcd_b_5870234.html). Lazarus's blog post was "liked" on Facebook 60,000 times, shared on Facebook 16,707 times, and retweeted 798 times. Additionally, 311 people commented on the blog post.

72. John Streit, "Parents' Group Taking Letters about Experiences in BC Schools to Victoria Today," *Parents for BC*, 28 May 2014, <http://parentsforbc.com/parents-group-taking-letters-about-experiences-in-bc-schools-to-victoria-today/>.

73. Tobey Steeves, interview by author, 11 August 2015. On the issue of strike pay, see Alexandra Posadzki, "B.C. teachers 'prepared' for full-scale strike without pay, union president says," *The Globe and Mail*, 6 June 2014, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/bc-teachers-prepared-for-full-scale-strike-without-pay-union-president-says/>

through which individual educators articulated their identities through a narrative of care.<sup>74</sup>

The 230 tweets that were coded represented 155 unique individuals. Forty people tweeted at least twice. Most of the coded tweets (123) included a photo and text. An additional 76 included text only. Much smaller numbers included text and a link (22), photos only (3), links only (3), or text and video (2). This meant that the content was often articulated through some other medium than the text of the tweet itself. Care themes were explicitly articulated in 117 tweets. An additional 36 tweets included pictures of children, often with text indicating their Grade level or graduation year. The message – “I’m on strike for my/these kids” – implies a commitment to a public education system that will meet the needs of current and future students; however, the discussion that follows focuses on the tweets with more explicit caring narratives.

In the #ThisIsMyStrikePay campaign, the largest number of tweets (47) emphasized the nurturing relationships that develop between educators and their students. For example, educator Jennifer Fort tweeted a photo of a thank you note from a student that began, “In case you ever forget all of the things you helped me with, let me remind you.” In her text, Fort reflected, “sometimes we are all they have that is caring, kind, and a daily presence in their lives.”<sup>75</sup> Another educator tweeted, “Just received Thank You message from grad for mentoring & ‘putting up with’ him. Smile before my picket duty.”<sup>76</sup> These two examples demonstrate the reciprocal value educators and students place on being able to build relationships with each other as part of the education process.

Another common theme (24 tweets) in the campaign articulated the relationship that is cultivated between educators and parents and other community actors. Michelle Hiebert tweeted a photo of a thank you card from a parent, which read in part, “Thank you for being such a wonderful, caring, creative and engaged teacher. We have been so fortunate to have you as a mentor for our children. You show love, patience and compassion in everything you do for them.”<sup>77</sup> As the job action wore on, the theme of community relationships became more dominant. For example, Michelle Young tweeted a photo of a thank you message from teachers to members of the community, which read,

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article19043754/.

74. A significantly smaller number of educators contributed to this Twitter dialogue through #MyStrikePay. The results were similar: an overwhelming number of tweets (40 of 64 total) reflected a care theme.

75. Jennifer Fort, Twitter post, 14 June 2014, 3:44 pm, <https://twitter.com/smidjenn/status/477884357546225664>.

76. Jeff Yasinchuk, Twitter post, 27 June 2014, 11:54 am, <https://twitter.com/jyasinchuk/status/482537390561456128>.

77. Michelle Hiebert, Twitter post, 14 June 2014, 2:45 pm, <https://twitter.com/MauiMickey/status/477869474498887680>.

"We truly appreciate your daily gestures of support. From honks and waves, conversations and coffee, teachers are deeply moved by your encouragement, as well as CUPE, standing by our side. Teachers care. Clearly, so do Clayton residents."<sup>78</sup> These examples demonstrate that the relationships educators build extend beyond the classroom as well as the importance of schools to the well-being of the community.

Another dominant theme from the campaign was the negative impact of provincial policies on educators' ability to provide the support that all students need. A total of 32 tweets touched on these themes of care. Many educators tweeted photos of themselves holding or wearing the official placards of the BCTF, which said, "A Fair Deal for Teachers, Better Support for Our Kids." The BCTF's slogan contains two key messages: that caring for "our" children is a collective responsibility and that their collective agreement, especially as it relates to class size and composition, is linked directly to the resources available to support BC students. Others focused on specific resource constraints, such as one educator who tweeted that "7/18 of the students in [the pictured girl's] kindergarten will have a [special needs] designation without support."<sup>79</sup> Dave Ingram tweeted about how the contentious negotiations affected his ability to offer support to his students: "With 10% lockout deduction and strike pay I could have stocked my class darkroom for September."<sup>80</sup> Although Ingram's tweet points to the BCTF's role in the labour dispute, it also highlights the financial contributions educators make for academic purposes, also a prominent theme in #EvaluateThat, which reflects insufficient resources from the provincial government. These tweets reinforced the notion that, as public employees, educators' capacity to care is linked to public policy.

Finally, educators also used #ThisIsMyStrikePay to discuss their personal commitment and care for students' emotional, physical, and intellectual development. Liz Byrne tweeted: "Why I am fighting: For my kids & for student with duct-taped shoes(we bought him new ones). Public ed means EQUALITY."<sup>81</sup> Another educator tweeted: "Saw grad from 4 yrs ago. She told me since I took her to @bardonthebeach in grade 12, she goes every year. #thisismystrikepay #bcd." Another educator tweeted a picture of stack of books, accompanied by the text: "Hope I can share my souvenirs with my K/1 students on September 2."<sup>82</sup> These examples articulate the personal contributions made by educators

78. Michelle Young, Twitter post, 27 June 2014, 2:21 pm, [https://twitter.com/MsYoung\\_1/status/482574468410142720](https://twitter.com/MsYoung_1/status/482574468410142720).

79. Chris Gauvin, Twitter post, 14 June 2014, 2:37 pm, [https://twitter.com/chris\\_gauvin/status/477867398486183936](https://twitter.com/chris_gauvin/status/477867398486183936).

80. Dave Ingram, Twitter post, 14 June 2014, 2:53 pm, <https://twitter.com/daveingram71/status/477871540604633088>.

81. Liz Byrne, Twitter post, 14 June 2014, 1:37 pm, <https://twitter.com/socialsgoddess/status/477852296282259456>.

82. Eva Jung, Twitter post, 21 August 2014, 12:52 pm, <https://twitter.com/msejung/>



that are necessary for students to go to school at all (shoes), have resources in the classroom during the year (books), and access to inspiring experiences that resonate with the student after they leave school (theatre trips).

As noted, a variety of content besides text was included in #ThisIsMyStrikePay tweets. More than half of the sample included photos, most of which fell into three categories: pictures of children or groups of students, pictures of thank you notes, and pictures of groups on the picket lines. The first two categories in particular are important representations of educators' view that nurturing relationships is a critical aspect of their work. Others posted links to blogs, videos, and articles, some of which explicitly discussed support for educators, for public education, or for the job action of the BCTF. One of the most commonly linked posts was "Why a Teacher?" from BC educator Leah Kelley's blog *Thirty Days of Autism*, in which she recounts the encounter she had on the picket line with the parent of a former student:

I am so grateful that Ty's mom shared with me the impact I had on her son.... This kid was a live-wire and needed time and assurance, and I spent many-a-day at the end of class talking with this parent and working out strategies with her to positively support the development of her child.

That is what we do as teachers.

We change lives...

Sometimes with little things...

Or in ways we may never see...

I needed this reminder.<sup>83</sup>

As with the photos, links such as Kelley's share stories that articulate education as caring labour.

Like those tweeting #EvaluateThat, BC educators used #ThisIsMyStrikePay to express their identities as workers through a narrative of care. However, there were interesting differences between the two campaigns. First was the content of the tweets themselves. BC educators were more likely to emphasize the relationships they develop and maintain with students and parents, as well as the collective responsibility for public schools. In contrast, #EvaluateThat tweets were more likely to emphasize the personal contributions to ensure students' needs were met without emphasizing the public's responsibility for education. These differences reflect the nature of the campaigns themselves. #EvaluateThat emerged in response to the increased use of metrics gathered through (high stakes) standardized testing and called on educators to highlight the aspects of their jobs that cannot be measured. In contrast,

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status/502483288884527104.

83. Leah Kelley, "Why a Teacher?" *Thirty Days of Autism*, accessed 25 August 2015, <https://30daysofautism.wordpress.com/2014/06/24/why-a-teacher-thisismystrikepay-BCTF/>.

#ThisIsMyStrikePay took place during a job action (formal external resistance) by the BCTF.

Second, BC educators were more likely to use hashtags and mentions to add their messages to other Twitter conversations (e.g., #BCed, #BCpoli) or to “call out” external adversaries (e.g., #ChristyClarksLockout, @FassbenderMLA).<sup>84</sup> By inserting themselves directly into other discussions about BC politics and education politics, #ThisIsMyStrikePay tweets were more consistent with the idea of informal external acts of resistance.

A final important difference between the two campaigns involves their relationship with BAT and BCTF, respectively. By creating and posting memes based on posts to their Facebook page, BAT took a hands-on role in the development of #EvaluateThat. This does not detract from the narratives tweeted by others, nor of the memes posted by members of the Facebook group, both of which overwhelmingly articulate care themes. It does somewhat dilute the organic character of the Twitter campaign. According to Steeves, although the BCTF promoted the campaign on its Facebook page, and early on Steeves himself worked hard to promote this cause through different Twitter mechanisms, the BCTF did not directly contribute tweets.<sup>85</sup> Even so, Larry Kuehn noted that the campaign “gathered people really quickly.”<sup>86</sup>

## The Effectiveness of Twitter as Resistance

DETERMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS of #EvaluateThat and #ThisIsMyStrikePay is difficult because neither campaign was created with a concrete, measurable goal. Rather, both campaigns rapidly and organically evolved as a way for educators to share their professional experiences (generally, in the case of #EvaluateThat, or more specific to a job action, in the case of #ThisIsMyStrikePay). Indeed, feminists have cautioned against a singular focus on goals and outcomes of collective action as a measure of their effectiveness, noting that “collective action can also be a goal itself.”<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible to identify at least four effects of the two campaigns. The first two are linked to internal forms of resistance. First, the two campaigns created public spaces within which educators expressed their identities as workers engaged in caring labour whose ability to perform that work is affected and undervalued by current education policy and practice. As BC educator Christine Abrams tweeted, she “found #ThisIsMyStrikePay heartening and then found

84. 43.6 per cent of #ThisIsMyStrikePay tweets included an additional hashtag(s), whereas only 10.3 per cent of #EvaluateThat tweets did.

85. Tobey Steeves, interview by author, 11 August 2015.

86. Larry Kuehn, interview by author, 20 August 2015.

87. Fernando J. Bosco, “The Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Three Decades of Human Rights’ Activism: Embeddedness, Emotions, and Social Movements,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, 2 (March 2010): 361.

my voice.”<sup>88</sup> The volume of tweets and duration of the campaigns speak to their success as a forum of such dissent.

Second, they encouraged solidarity, camaraderie, and networking among geographically disparate educators. Speaking of the growing popularity of BAT, Kilfoyle noted that educators “come on [social media] and they feel they’re not alone.... Wherever it is they go on the ground, they go with the support of 54,000 people.”<sup>89</sup> Reflecting on the effectiveness of #ThisIsMyStrikePay, Steeves noted that the campaign served as a “medium for feeling like they’re tapping into something bigger.”<sup>90</sup> This solidarity and networking could lead to a more activist identity among educators. As BC educator Lizanne Foster wrote of educators’ social media engagement during the strike, “teachers shared information and experiences and built up relationships that had not existed before.... Bit by bit they built up this network of connections and information that’s proving to be quite resilient to anything that the BC Public School Employers’ Association says or does.”<sup>91</sup> As self-expression of identities led to solidarity and networking, educators’ resistance shifted from internal to external.

Third, both campaigns received coverage in the national mainstream media. #EvaluateThat was covered by the *Washington Post*, and #ThisIsMyStrikePay was covered by *Global News*. #ThisIsMyStrikePay was discussed by local media outlets as well.<sup>92</sup> Generating such coverage and pushing back against neoliberal narratives that demonize public education and educators are important examples of the impact of informal external resistance.

Finally, the campaigns had direct and indirect effects on the strength of the BAT and BCTF. For Kilfoyle, there is reason to believe that social media participation fuels other acts of engagement and resistance. #EvaluateThat gave educators the space to articulate their identities as educators engaged in caring labour. This generates solidarity and is leading to more teachers “becoming teachers of conscience” who are engaged in local and national

88. Christine Abrams, Twitter post, 1 September 2014, 5:21 pm, <https://twitter.com/chmoody/status/506537377016594433>.

89. Marla Kilfoyle, interview by author, 19 February 2015.

90. Tobey Steeves, interview by author, 11 August 2015.

91. Lizanne Foster, “Beware, Christy Clark, B.C. Teachers are Talking to Each Other,” *Huffington Post Canada*, 29 July 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/lizanne-foster/bc-teachers-strike-christy-clark\\_b\\_5628967.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/lizanne-foster/bc-teachers-strike-christy-clark_b_5628967.html).

92. Valerie Strauss, “The Things Teachers Do for Kids That Can’t Be Evaluated,” *The Washington Post*, 3 February 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/02/03/evaluatethat/>; Amy Judd, “#thisismystrikepay – Teachers take to Twitter to show what they are fighting for,” *Global News*, 18 June 2014, <http://globalnews.ca/news/1398103/thisismystrikepay-teachers-take-to-twitter-to-show-what-they-are-fighting-for/>; *Kamloops This Week*, “It’s an opportunity to discuss things’: Kamloops teachers are turning to social media to keep informed during the labour dispute,” 26 June 2014, [http://issuu.com/kamthisweek/docs/ktwn140626\\_a](http://issuu.com/kamthisweek/docs/ktwn140626_a).

actions, from running for local school boards to getting more involved in the national anti-testing movement. Further, Kilfoyle argues that the narratives of care articulated in #EvaluateThat are ultimately driving all the organization's action campaigns, which are focused on the question of "what is right for the kids, making sure that all kids get what they need to be successful."<sup>93</sup> In BC, Tobey Steeves said that the success of #ThisIsMyStrikePay influenced other twitter campaigns that the BCTF supported, including #HoldTheLine and #BCedFacts.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, BCTF communications suggest that individual educators' participation in social media broadly helped turn the tide of public support against the BC Liberal government. As Rich Overgaard, the BCTF's Media Officer, reflected:

The impact teachers had on social media was unprecedented in this province. Back in the spring, the combination of the strike (solidarity, support, and community) and the lockout (frustration, disbelief, and anger) sparked something the government was completely unprepared for: a sustained and well-informed conversation about public education, led by classroom teachers.

The BCTF's typical and expected detractors were drowned out, government attempts to engage backfired, and the mainstream media were flooded with ideas, corrections, and perspectives. Collectively, you changed the way print, radio, and TV outlets covered our issues by telling your own stories.

Quickly, your friends, family members, and friends of friends began seeing the stories and messages. For the first time, many of you "came out" as teachers and union members on social media to your community. All of a sudden, our issues and challenges became real and personal for thousands.<sup>95</sup>

By expressing their identities as care givers, educators were engaged in both informal internal and informal external forms of resistance. Informal internal resistance is self-directed. As such, articulating publicly the caregiving aspects of their work is a critical part of their political engagement. By calling on the public to question the flaws in evaluation programs that cannot capture the caring component of their work, however, these forms of self-expression and identity formation also target external actors – the public, as well as those who make and influence policy.

93. Marla Kilfoyle, interview by author, 19 February 2015. Current BAT campaigns demonstrate the organization's commitment to pushing back against neoliberal education reform. Examples of these actions include lobbying for changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, support for the anti-testing movement, and solidarity with a group of Chicago parents who are engaged in a hunger strike to protest the closing of a neighborhood school. See <http://www.badassteacher.org/category/actions/>.

94. Tobey Steeves, interview by author, 11 August 2015.

95. Rich Overgaard, "Social Media and the Strike," *Teacher Newsmagazine*, September/October 2014, <https://BCTF.ca/publications/NewsmagArticle.aspx?id=35782>.

## Conclusions

IN BAINES' STUDY OF RESISTANCE among care workers in the non-profit social services, she argues that there is a fine line between engaging in extra-contractual caring labour as a way of fostering autonomy and power in the workplace – a form of resistance – and being exploited by employers who do not provide sufficient resources to meet clients' needs.

In the #EvaluateThat and #ThisIsMyStrikePay campaigns, it was not the *act* of care giving but the public discussion of the role of the educator as a caregiver that became a form of resistance. Through this resistance, educators engaged in reframing – or dissenting against – a public narrative that has been focused not on the value and public responsibility of our public education system, but instead on the financial burden it poses to taxpayers and, additionally, on whether those taxpayers are getting sufficient value out of educators themselves.

As I have demonstrated, this dissent among individual educators takes the form of informal external resistance, in which educators are pushing back external actors—policy makers and a critical public—as well as informal internal resistance, in which educators use self-expression to establish their identities as professionals engaged in caring labour. Moreover, as Ackroyd and Thompson note, informal forms of resistance can work in tandem with or influence external forms of resistance. We see that in both cases. #ThisIsMyStrikePay was one way that educators engaged in public dissent within the context of a formal job action and, as noted by Overgaard, educators' social media dissent contributed to the BCTF's success. As Kilfoyle notes, albeit anecdotally, more “badass teachers” are harnessing the solidarity and camaraderie they experience as part of social media campaigns like #EvaluateThat and moving on to other forms of activism. There are further questions to explore about how social media helps educators become more political, as well as how informal acts of dissent and resistance contribute to formal acts of resistance, but #EvaluateThat and #MyStrikePay are examples that this phenomenon is taking place and warrants further study.

Finally, it is worth noting that there are potential drawbacks in the use of an ethic of care lens to frame educators' resistance. Because care work is gendered and undervalued in capitalist society, it is not entirely clear that the broader public will respond to resistance focused on caring, especially when providing a professional caring environment is expensive. In addition, it is important that the public understands that the fact that most teachers “don't do it for the money” does not mean that teachers are not professionals who should be paid commensurate with their skills, training, and the value of their work. Last, it is easy to see how narratives of care can be coopted by critics of unions and public educators: to care for students might mean not going on strike or using standardized tests to ensure that every class has an “effective” teacher.