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Teacher Activism and Social Media

By

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Abstract

Based upon the status of politics within the educational sphere in the last few decades, and, specifically, the rapidly changing state of politics within the U.S. recently, it is reasonable to say that teachers have had more and more of a reason to be upset. The aim of this research is to complete a preliminary investigation of how teachers voice their dissent to macro and micro level politics via social media, and the strategies that teachers use via social media to act in an activist role.

Problem

Within the last few decades, teachers have had more and more of a reason to be upset with the status of politics in the educational sphere. They are upset about the reproduction of class through the educational system (Bourdieu, 1977), the lack of movement within policy (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), the attempt at “universal” standards (Kincheloe, Steinberg & Tippins, 1990), and topics around inclusive education (Margolin, 2017; Stolberg, 2017). More recently, the instability of the political climate in the United States, since the 2016 election, has led to more teachers taking on roles as activists inside and outside their classrooms in order for their voices to be heard (Berkovich, 2011). However, due to common belief that teachers should stay out of political discourse (Dunn, 2016), attention has not been brought to these teacher voices or their response to this changing climate within their classroom.

Aim

The purpose of research is to complete a preliminary investigation to inform my dissertation on teachers’ use of social media platforms to voice their resistance to macro and micro level educational policies and current social issues. The primary goal of this study is to understand how teachers resist authority in a political atmosphere that is constantly changing, and by understanding what issues teachers are showing resistance to, we can hopefully take steps towards effective change. The foundational questions for this pilot research include:

- 1) What types of actions are teachers taking part in on Facebook that might constitute them as working in an activist capacity?
- 2) How are teachers using social media alone or in consort with other activist strategies and what role does social media play in this?

Methods

In order to meet the previously mentioned goals, a pilot study was conducted to take a look at teachers’ public social media profiles through their connection to the #BlackLivesMatter Movement, the March for Science, and the Women’s March, and to try to determine how teachers are acting in an activist capacity and

what role social media plays in this. For this pilot study, ten teacher activists were selected based on the recruitment criteria found in Figure 1.

Facebook posts were collected from January 1st, 2017 onward, creating a collection of 922 politically charged/activist Facebook posts made amongst the ten teacher activists. These posts included shared stories about politics in the news, the teacher's posts about their reactions to political stories, as well as these teachers call to action. Teacher posts covered a wide array of topics, and main topics seemed to vary from teacher to teacher.

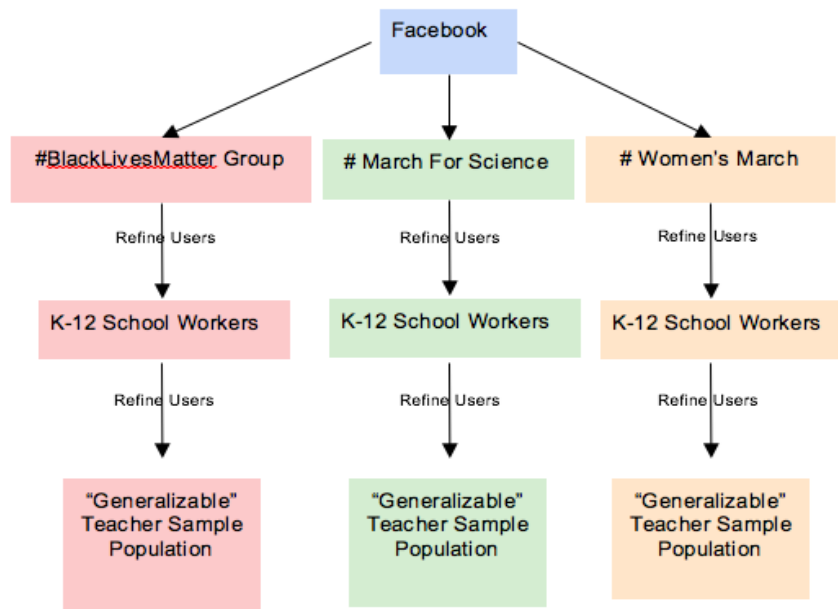


Figure 1. Recruitment Criteria

Findings

Based on these posts, and the codes produced through an open coding process, the codes were organized into four general categories of actions that teachers are taking on Facebook, these included:

- 1) Correspondence- where teachers were taking action by writing letters or calling politicians
- 2) Marches- where teachers took part in activist marches
- 3) Calls to action- where teachers were encouraging others to join in social activism
- 4) Grievances- where teachers were posting about their thoughts and feelings on political matters

It was also clear that teacher activists vary in their use of these actions, with some teachers partaking in things like activist marches while others are just encouraging others.

Conclusion

After having gathered the data from this pilot study, it was clear that teacher activists are falling into a pattern of social activism often seen by other social activists online. McCaughey & Ayers (2003) outline levels of online activism including awareness, organization, and action, and the teacher activists within this study fit nicely into these levels. It was also made clear that teacher activists act as communities of practice (Lave & Wagner, 1991) with a core and periphery to involvement of online activism. The core being those teachers central to activism, having partaken in activist activities, with the periphery being those teachers that are not quite partaking in activist activities, but rather commenting on them or encouraging others to partake. This clarity does raise several questions though, including how do teachers move from the core to the periphery in these online communities of practices. With that being said, more research needs to be conducted in this area to determine how teachers move amongst these spaces.

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Author Biography

Katelyn Bright Alderfer received her Bachelor's of Science in Education from West Chester University of Pennsylvania and her Master's in Education from Pennsylvania State University. Prior to entering Drexel University's PhD program, she was an English teacher and department head at a North Philadelphia charter school, and a math teacher at juvenile detention center during the summer.

Katelyn is currently a second-year PhD student in Drexel's "Educational Leadership and Learning Technologies" program with her focus on educational leadership. While at Drexel, Katelyn has served on the University Conduct Board, the Doctoral Student Run Journal Committee, and is the newest student editor for the Doctoral Student Research Briefs. Her research interests involve teacher activism and teacher activists use of social media.