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## “The Road Not Taken” – Israeli Teachers’ Reactions to Top-Down Educational Reform

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### **Abstract**

The authors have investigated teachers’ reactions towards an imposed reform initiated by the Israeli Ministry of Education in collaboration with one of two teachers’ unions based on the messages and letters sent by high school teachers to an internet forum during a teachers’ strike which took place between October and December of 2007. This study is the result of collaborative work between a teacher educator and a veteran teacher studying towards her Master of Education degree in Learning and Instruction. The research question was: What were the teachers’ attitudes regarding the “New Horizon” reform as conveyed on an internet forum during the strike? The article focuses on the teachers’ opposition to the proposed reform. The authors explore the use of the internet for sustaining this strike while also discussing the methodological issues related to this type of analysis and relation to collaborative research. Recommendations are suggested for successful implementation of educational reforms.

### **Keywords**

Educational Reform, “New Horizon” reform, Teachers and Change, Internet-based Research, Qualitative Research

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## **“The Road Not Taken” – Israeli Teachers’ Reactions to Top-Down Educational Reform**

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This paper presents a collaborative study between a teacher educator in a Master’s of Education program in Mentoring at Gordon Teachers College in Israel and one of the graduate students who took part in this program. The idea of a collaborative study arose as a result of a serious discussion we had on a very significant issue that was going on at the end of 2007 in the Israeli educational system; namely, the longest teachers’ strike in Israel’s history. Both of us shared the same anxiety about the impact of such a long strike (64 days) on the teachers, the students, and the future of education in general. We had both read email messages sent to a teachers’ online forum, and we decided to analyze them using qualitative methods. We met many times in order to discuss this issue, to decide on the research question, to read the teachers’ input, and to analyze the findings. It was quite difficult to decide when to stop because at that point we were both very involved in this project. In addition to the significant amount of information to which we were exposed, we had to consider all the ethical issues posed by this type of research and the way we dealt with these issues will be presented in our discussion of the study’s methodology.

To the best of our knowledge this type of study is new in the educational scene in Israel. Its importance lies in the fact that educational reform of this magnitude will have a very significant impact on the Israeli educational system as a whole, on almost 154,000 teachers and over 1.7 million students. The success or failure of such a reform will be

determined, at least partly, by the attitude of the teachers who are supposed to implement it on a daily basis, and therefore it is crucial to understand their point of view in order to be able to successfully deal with resistance to change by creating a partnership between all those involved. In addition to that, this study presents a model of conducting research on the internet in general, and in a collaborative way, in particular.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review deals with educational reforms from a historical perspective in general, and the educational reforms in Israel during the last decade in particular. The literature related to collaborative work in qualitative research will be dealt with in the section dealing with the methodology.

The issue of improving education has been a consistent policy aspiration in many countries (Harris, 2009; Townsend, 2007). Significant educational reforms have to deal with basic questions about learning and teaching before they plan the organizational structure of the educational institutions. Goldman and Conley (1997) reject the bureaucratic view of teachers as paper pushers as well as the union's view of teachers as free agents, and propose a middle ground approach based on acknowledgement of teachers as professional decision-makers and teachers' recognition that they are accountable to the organization in which they work. Teachers are professionals whose decisions are related to instruction, counseling, management, planning, implementation and evaluation, and this combination of factors is very demanding. In their view, any reform should take into account two basic elements: teacher education and the professional development of teachers. It should only be planned after listening to what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) call "the teachers' voices."

Goldman and Conley (1997) show teachers' frustration when they are told that the state requires them to make changes without providing adequate resources, and they stress the importance of funding any significant reform. Perkins (1993) uses the metaphor of the apple in the Garden of Eden. Just like the apple Adam and Eve ate which made them realize the reality of their life, Perkins stresses the importance of teaching for understanding, as opposed to a mere knowledge of facts. He calls for a restructuring of priorities and curricula; for more depth at the expense of width. In his view, any reform should stress teacher preparation and ongoing assessment, rather than the summative assessment, which is more prevalent in teacher education programs.

Many researchers have emphasized the need for administrators and teachers to rethink together the nature of learning before one considers the necessary elements to educational reforms (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994). Fullan (2001) examined some of the consequences of teachers' participation in schools with participatory structures as opposed to schools with traditional administrative ones. He found that schools which involved their teachers in the decision-making process created a sense of ownership of decisions, paid more attention to student-centered issues and were found to be more innovative in terms of the reform agenda, which included interdisciplinary teaching, block scheduling, de-tracking and introducing hard content for all students. He also claims that too much change is disorienting to both teachers and students and therefore gradual change should be preferred. Odden and Kelley (2002) stress the importance of

rewards for teachers as part of any successful reform and mentioned that this issue is rarely adequately addressed.

Billett, Ovens, Clemans, and Seddon (2007) distinguished between four dimensions of organizational change: reaching goals by accomplishing *tasks* through the creation of a *structure* which has distinctive characteristics such as *technology* and *people*. He suggests that resistance to change is always a factor that has to be considered since many people see any proposed change as criticism. In order to minimize the resistance to change, teachers have to be listened to and then they should receive detailed explanations about the change process, help in the implementation process and assurance that their work conditions will be improved. Fullan and Hargreaves (2008) discuss Marsh's *technological*, *political* and *cultural* perspectives to change in businesses and apply it to schools. The first perspective looks at teaching as at a technique to be improved; the second focuses on the conflicts and compromises which occur any time change is proposed; and the last one reflects very different cultures and subcultures whose values and interest vary. The goal is to create a situation in which teachers' voices are heard and taken into account since they are the one who are supposed to implement the proposed change. Eisner (1998) talks about the balance of curriculum and believes that any significant school reform should make sure that teachers are given the necessary conditions to develop multiple forms of literacy. In his opinion, any educational reform that does not take this issue into consideration will not have a significant impact on student learning.

Hodgkinson (1986) and Schlechty (1997) base their opinions about introducing and implementing reforms on the historical perspective, although the latter looks at the issue from a more philosophical perspective. In their view, in order to decide where one wants to go and which changes should be made, one should know where we come from and to discredit some of the myths about the past. Schools were not better in the past than they are now, they were only more limited in their goals. Hodgkinson points out that according to the Greek tradition, the aim of education was aesthetic and the basic curriculum of liberal arts and humanities was aimed at enjoyment of life. The Romans added pragmatism and practicality and the result was vocational education, which is economic in motivation. Later, the Church added religious indoctrination and moral conditioning, and the role of ideological education became to transmit the culture of society (a very similar concept to what Schlechty calls 'schools as tribal centers'), while the moral education aimed at transmitting patriotic and citizenship ideals. Hodgkinson (1986) points out that after WWI the mission of sociological sorting was added to education, which was seen as an avenue for upward mobility, and the new political realities (communism and fascism) had a profound impact on education as they added the dimension of propaganda. After WWII, when the "global village" emerged, mass information became correlated with mass education and the concept of lifelong learning became accepted.

Sashkin and Egermeier (1992) examine the history of educational change and they identify the *rational scientific* perspective, the *political* perspective (the top-down approach) and the *cultural* perspective. They claim that the top-down approach, which attempts to legislate change by "fixing the parts" (through curricular or instructional innovations); "fixing the people" (through training and professional development), "fixing the schools" (through organizational development); and "fixing the system"

(through comprehensive school restructuring), has failed. Israeli researchers such as Hofman (2006) point out that there is a consensus among the researchers that society expects more and more from teachers since in the past only a small number of children belonging to one sort of elite group or other were entitled to education, whereas today teachers are expected to teach everybody, and to do so in a way which is both interesting and relevant to the students' needs and abilities. The implementers of educational reforms should therefore start by recognizing the hard work teachers have to do and by believing in their will and ability to implement changes which would benefit students. Hofman (2006) explains that the paradox of reform is that "it begins with distrust of teachers, but it is teachers who are expected to carry it out" (p. 7). He claims that most of the educational reforms in Israel are not academic but rather political, and their leaders are not educators but rather politicians, administrators, and in Israel's case, even businessmen. For example, in 2005, The National Task Force for the Advancement of Education in Israel was appointed by the Government of Israel at the initiative of Limor Livnat, then Minister of Education, Culture, and Sports, and with the support of then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (the present Prime Minister). It began in October 2003, charged with conducting a comprehensive examination of the Israeli educational system and recommending an inclusive plan for change. Its final report was published with its inclusive plan for change—pedagogical, structural and organizational—in what is called the Dovrat Report (2005).

According to Hofman (2006), the Dovrat committee failed because it did not understand the historical setting of reforms. Moreover, it did not trust teachers who were supposed to carry out this reform, and it did not support the teacher education system, which provides both the theoretical and the practical foundations of the educational system. On one hand the committee blamed teachers for being ineffective and inefficient, and on the other hand it claimed that "their professionalism, enthusiasm and motivation are necessary conditions for the success of the educational system" (Dovrat Report, 2005, p. 123). Hofman (2006) concludes that "reform must be negotiated, not dictated" (p. 6).

Fuks (2004) distinguishes between three types of change: *external* changes that force the individual to change, *internal* changes which directly affect the individual, and *transfers* which are individual changes that occur due to natural development and not imposed from outside. Other researchers (Lutz, 1975) distinguish between two main types of change: *first order*, which happens as a result of regular routine and seeks to fix the problems within the system; and *second order* change, which is much more significant because it challenges the fundamental assumptions about reality and therefore affects the very basis of the structural organization by proposing a brand new way of dealing with the system itself. Some researchers add the *third order* change, which develops skills that will enable people to change whenever change is needed (Moch, 1987).

Israeli researchers as well as Israeli educators have shown a growing discontent regarding the disappointing outcomes of the educational system in Israel. This is part of a larger crisis revealed in the results of international tests such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, an international organization of 34 countries which develops way to compare policy experiences of its members in order to find solutions to common challenges), Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). This

situation is rightfully seen as dangerous to the future of Israeli society in general, but there is no consensus about the causes of this crisis and even less so about the means through which the system should be changed.

In 2005, former Education Minister Limor Livnat (Likud party), initiated and adopted the Dovrat report proposed by the economist Shlomo Dovrat. It is significant to mention that in spite of the fact that the Dovrat Report points out that the Israeli educational system was going through “a deep crisis” (p. 28) which had to be dealt with by cooperation between all those involved, “one of Dovrat’s preconditions was that the teachers’ union must be barred from his committee room” (Lahav, 2004, p. 5). Before the report was published, on the day Dovrat presented it to the Educational Committee of the Parliament (Monday, May 17, 2004), he explained away the low results obtained by the Israeli students on international tests by blaming the teachers for being “incompetent” (p. 3). He claimed that one of the main goals of the report is to assure “a significant increase in the quality of the teachers” by demanding higher qualifications in order to enter the teacher education programs, an additional year of practical training after graduation and a final examination in order to receive a teaching license. His conclusion was that a system that allows salary raises for teachers based only on seniority does not encourage quality and that “most teachers’ rooms are not places which provide inspiration” (Dovrat, 2004, p. 4).

In order to correct this situation, Dovrat suggested attracting qualified teachers to a structurally reformed educational system, while significantly raising their salaries in exchange for an increased work load and accountability. The funds for this salary increase were supposed to come from the early retirement of 15,000 teachers, but the plan did not take into consideration the fact that the teachers unions, still not consulted, would refuse to adhere to this plan, and indeed the plan was strongly opposed by both teachers unions. The report also did not take into account the fact that there was already a significant shortage of teachers. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2008), a shortage of almost 11,000 teachers is expected for the year 2013. Classes at the time were already very large (up to 41 students), and the proposed reform did not offer a solution to these problems. In fact, Hofman (2006) mentioned that in Great Britain a similar type of reform had the effect of creating a significant shortage of teachers (White & Smith, 2005), and he warned that the problem of a teacher shortage, which already exists in Israel, would worsen if many teachers quit as a result of the proposed reform in this country.

This reform did not succeed because of two main reasons: first, the sum of \$250 million dollars which was allocated for its implementation is significantly lower even than what the proponents of this reform considered necessary. Second, at the start, both of the teachers unions strongly opposed the plan which completely changed the working conditions of teachers and principals without their consent (Hofman, 2006).

After the 2006 elections, a new coalition was formed and the new Education Minister, Yael Tamir (Labor party) took charge. A former faculty member in the School of Education at Tel Aviv University, Professor Tamir chose an entirely different approach by attempting to work with the teachers and with the Teachers Union in order to persuade them to agree to a different reform called “New Horizons” (Tamir, 2008). This reform had in fact adopted some ideas from the Dovrat Report, but Tamir was willing to make some significant changes and more importantly, the Ministry of

Education allotted a lot of time and effort to meetings with the union as well as with teachers and principals. Most teachers felt the new leadership was friendlier to them, understood the main challenges they had to face, and mainly worked with them instead of blaming them for all the evils in the Israeli society (Kizel, 2009).

All Israeli teachers are members of one of the two teachers' unions: the largest union includes all those who teach at the elementary level and some of those who teach middle school. The members of the second teachers' union comprise mainly high school teachers and some middle school teachers. The two teachers' unions did not find a way to work together because of objective reasons (i.e., different needs of elementary teachers versus high school teachers) and because of political reasons, as well as due to the personalities of the two leaders who wanted to receive personal credit and each one of them wanted to demonstrate that he was more dedicated to the fight for preserving teachers' rights (Kizel, 2009). Soon enough it became obvious that the union of the elementary school teachers was more open to the proposed reform, while the union of the high school teachers claimed that the new plan did not take into consideration the interests of its members and strongly opposed it. Middle school teachers found themselves caught in the middle as they were split between the two unions. The two opposing groups taught side by side in the same middle schools from the very beginning.

To summarize the attempts to adopt educational reforms in Israel during the first decade of the 21st century, we can conclude that until 2001 there was an agreement between the Israeli government and the two teachers' unions which specified the working conditions such as workload, salary, tenure, sabbatical, etc. The five years following, the parties conducted negotiations in order to renew the contract, but the lack of cooperation between them was so significant that they arrived at a dead end. During these years, the Dovrat committee was formed and in 2005 this committee published its recommendations, which included major changes to the Israeli education system. The government decided to adopt the proposed changes but both of the teachers' unions strongly opposed those changes, refused to sign an agreement and its members went on strike (Inbar, 2006).

In 2006, the "New Horizon" reform was proposed and its full implementation would take about a decade. The elementary teachers' union was involved in the negotiations with the Ministry of Education and accepted to gradually implement the proposed reform. On the other hand, the high school teachers' union refused to negotiate based on the same principles and asked to start the negotiations from scratch. The Minister of Education was not willing to do so because she feared that by doing so she might endanger the agreement she had reached with the main teachers' union, and the result was that the high school teachers were not part of the process.

During the 2006-2007 school years, the high school teachers went on a partial strike. By the 2007-2008 school years the high school teachers decided to go on full, unlimited strike starting in October 2007 until the government decided to deal with this organization and to reach a separate agreement with its members. This strike went on for 64 days and was the longest education strike in Israel's history.

The purpose of this study is to examine the positions and the attitudes of the teachers regarding the proposed reform as they are revealed in the open letters they had sent through email. The main research question is: What were the teachers' attitudes regarding the "New Horizon" reform as conveyed on an internet forum during the strike?

## Methodology

This section discusses the methodological challenges related to this type of study as they are presented in the research literature, while also revealing the specific way in which the researchers dealt with those issues.

While for many years researchers were seen as people working alone, in recent years the research culture has changed. Collaboration is now stressed as part of the collective way of knowing (Potter, 2008; Wassler & Bressler, 1996). In the past there was a clear distinction between teaching and performing research, but today these boundaries are far from being clear and there are new definitions regarding the interaction between the two. Researchers have pointed out the advantages and the challenges involved in collaborative research (Bickel & Hatrup, 1995; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Calderhead, 1989).

This paper presents the collaborative work between a teacher educator and a veteran high school teacher in order to answer the question “What were the teachers’ reactions to the ‘New Horizon’ reform, in the way it was conveyed on an internet forum during the strike?” In order to answer this question, qualitative research was found most appropriate. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined, “by the term qualitative research we mean any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (p. 17). The researchers gain an in-depth understanding of the literature in the relevant domain by approaching the question without any hypothesis, and instead using “sensitizing concepts” (Glaser, 1998, p. 28). This describes social phenomena in order to gain a deeper understanding. There are several options for conducting qualitative research, and we found grounded theory the best method for the purposes of our study. We did not come with a certain hypothesis that we attempted to prove or to reject; instead, we let the data speak for themselves. We presented the data and we adopted the inductive approach of looking for patterns and reaching conclusions based on the data we found *on the ground*.

The literature presents different types of grounded theory. At the extremes there are those who claim that the researcher should start the research without having read any literature in order to be free of preconceptions in the collection and analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Today most researchers agree that no researcher is really *tabula rasa*, and the decision of how much to read before and during the research is a matter of trade-off and there are no clear answers. The reading process in our case was a circular one, meaning that we read literature on organizational change, on change in educational settings, educational reform, reaction to change in general and to impose change in particular, teachers’ participation on decision making, empowerment of teachers, different types of qualitative research, internet-based research and collaborative research. Then we went back and read more on some of these issues as we advanced in our research and came back to some of the readings when writing this paper. We constantly compared this type of work with other studies in order to make sure we adhered to the necessary standards. Internet-based research has become more widely accepted and an increasing amount is written on this subject, so we felt we needed to read the most up to date literature in this field, as it changes more rapidly than any other we have encountered.

Hahn (2008) points out the challenges involved in this type of work, such as the fact that qualitative research produces a significant amount of data whose meaning is crucial to the success of the study. He also mentions that in order to analyze the data the researchers need tools which will enable them to focus on the research questions. In order to accomplish that, Lewins and Silver (2007) explain how to analyze the data by using either unstructured or structured coding. Gaizer and Schreiner (2009) quote Jonathan Kozol, who justified his method of analyzing the lives of homeless people by saying: “What has driven them to the streets? What hope have they to reconstruct their former lives? The answer will be told in their own words” (p. 38).

The aim of this paper is to answer the questions regarding the teachers’ attitudes to the proposed reform by enabling them to “answer in their own words”. By doing so, we establish content validity, meaning we allow the reader to decide if the data measures what the researchers claim it does. This type of research does not aim to prove any hypothesis, but to reveal the “subjective reality” the way the participants in the study perceive it. This inductive type of research is based on, or ‘grounded’ in, the data from which it was developed. Grumet (1990) presents the “voice model” (p. 323) in educational theory and proposes the use of paradigmatic categories which are based on the identification of general ideas expressed in the narratives which are analyzed. The concepts and ideas derive straight from the narratives and they do not represent an objective and “real” situation, but the situation the way the specific individuals see it. For example, if a teacher wrote that the fact that many of the participants at the demonstration of protest against the reform were not teachers and therefore she felt the public opinion as a whole is in favor of the strike, we as researchers can learn a fact (that some of the demonstrators were not teachers), but this does not necessarily mean that we also agree with her interpretation; we just present her opinion and her way of understanding reality.

We explore the forum which destroyed the classic boundaries between what Potter (2008) calls “researchers regarded as thinkers and teachers as technicians” (p. 199). Potter (2008) distinguishes between the teacher as an object of study and a teacher as an active participant as teacher-researcher, involved in data collection and analysis. Feldman (1993) presents the change that took place in the research culture where today the teacher is also involved in the conceptualization of a research question and is engaged in “collaborative analysis and interpretation and giving voice to the findings” (p. 350).

A collaborative study between a teacher educator and a veteran teacher models in the best way the fact that learning is an ongoing process for all and that new knowledge can be created in a collaborative way through learning and research. This fact is especially important since the veteran teacher is an MEd student in Learning and Instruction focusing on Mentoring, and therefore it is an important experience in the give and take process involved in collaborative work and in issues related to what Miller and Martens (1990) call “hierarchy and imposition as constraints as well as potential” (p.50) in collaborative work. In this way, one realizes that learning is “a means of increasing one’s ability, not a sign of weakness” (Potter, 2008, p. 11). Fullan (2001) explained that there is a “ceiling effect” on how much we can learn from our personal reflections if we keep them to ourselves. He believes that the ability to collaborate is becoming one of the core requisites of postmodern society. He also claims that personal mastery and group mastery feed on each other in learning organizations. Without collaborative skills and relationships, it is not possible to continue learning as much as one may need in order to

be an agent for improvement. Fullan and Hargreaves (2008), however, warned against losing sight of quality individualism when moving towards collaborative reflection. While isolation is a problem because it constrains personal inquiry learning and solutions at the individuals' resources, the capacity to think and work independently is essential. The key therefore is for individualism and collectivism to have equal power in the process of change and professional development (Christensen, Eldridge, Ibom, Johnston, & Thomas, 1996; Lieberman, 1986).

As explained in the introduction, issues such as the purpose of this study, the research question, the way of analyzing the data and the interpretation of the findings were all negotiated between the teacher educator and the high school teacher throughout the research work. Both of the researchers read the messages sent by the teachers to the forum and analyzed them individually and then met and discussed them in order to make decisions about the best way to interpret the data. The contextual analysis involved carefully coding the data and discerning emerging themes in a consistent way.

Flicker, Haans, and Skinner (2004) claim that students involved in collaborative research must be able to engage perspectives at three levels. First, they must engage a perspective *for content* by summarizing information and restate the perspective in their own words. Second, they must be able to engage a perspective *with empathy*. Third, they must be able to engage a perspective in *a critical way* by analyzing it.

Since this study started as part of a thesis for a Master's degree, it was subject to the review of the members of the committee in charge of monitoring every phase of the research in order to ensure the maintenance of high ethical standards, even in the cases where there are exemptions to IRB approval. This study was exempt from obtaining the written consent of the participants in the context of this research. After obtaining the approval to go on with the research, we followed the following steps.

First, we started reading hundreds of messages sent by high school teachers on the forum during the strike that took place at the end of 2007. There were a total of 689 messages, not including very short messages, sometimes one line long, which just agreed or disagreed with a certain point made by someone on the forum. We considered each one of these longer messages part of the data. We had to choose from an overwhelming amount of data. Some of the most interesting messages expressed the same ideas by using very similar words, while other messages were original and exceptional in their approach to the topic. We decided which ones to quote in order to present ideas that repeat themselves in the same words or in similar terms. The ideas expressed in these letters were not strange to us because as educators we had both heard similar opinions on a daily basis from the teachers with whom we were working. As a high school teacher, one of us knew what many of the colleagues talked about in the teachers' room, and as a teacher educator working both with pre-service and with in-service teachers, the other was well aware of the basic ideas expressed by them openly during class discussions. Still, this was the first time for both of us to see these words in print, black on white, for all to see. We were both empathic to the teachers' feelings and we admired their courage in openly opposing the establishment. We discussed the data in a critical manner, reflecting on the larger impact not only on the teachers themselves, but also on the future of the proposed reform and the future of the Israeli education system as a whole. We read and reread the messages in order to get a general idea of the main ideas the teachers had conveyed. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) have suggested reading over the entire text at least twice. Both

of us read all the teachers' postings three times and then we met and talked about the text again. We felt that this process was very important in terms of the validity of our analysis. Ryan and Bernard (2003) claim that "the more agreement among team members, the more confidence we have in themes being valid" (p. 91).

The second step was to look for patterns like repetitions of words, for key words and words with a similar meaning. These patterns were carefully coded: we marked each one of them with different colors and this eventually led us to the discovery of the main themes and sub-themes. We started up with quite a few themes, which we then had to narrow in order to arrive to a point where we only dealt with a manageable number of main themes. D'Andrade (1991) pointed out that people generally come back to the same "network of ideas" (p. 287). We decided on themes once we encountered the same concepts over and over again, either because teachers used the same words or similar words in order to convey the same idea. The main themes that emerged out of this process were:

1. The teachers' attitudes towards the government
2. Teachers' status
3. Teaching as an idealistic profession
4. Call to protest.

The third step was the most challenging because we had to decide which comments belonged to which theme. Sometimes, certain ideas seemed to belong to more than one theme, and in those cases we had to make decisions regarding which theme would better represent them. For example, one of the teachers, Ben (pseudonym), wrote that "The teachers should not be treated as simple clerks, but rather as a serving elite ... and the fight for public education is a fight for the good of society as a whole". We discussed if this sentence belonged to the theme of 'teachers' status' or to the theme of 'teaching as an idealistic profession'. This teacher, Ben, talked about the fact that if this reform is implemented, the status of the teaching profession would be lower and therefore it could seem that he was talking about his own interest as a teacher, and as a professional. The use of the term "simple clerks" shows Ben's feeling that the teachers' very professionalism was being questioned. By rereading what was written before and after that sentence, and going back to all the messages this teacher had sent to the forum, we decided that he stressed the fact that teaching is an idealistic profession and therefore the teachers need to go beyond their personal interests and think of "the good of society as a whole", of organized labor as a whole. More than one teacher expressed this view, although in different words, that this battle goes beyond the profession. This battle is about the empowerment or disempowerment and humiliation of organized workers in general.

Bogdan and Taylor (1975) pointed out the importance of looking for missing themes and suggested it is important to uncover topics that the subjects "either intentionally or unintentionally avoid" (p. 82). As researchers, we tried to figure out what were the main issues raised by the teachers as well as what were the missing issues that did not appear in those messages. We reached the conclusion that the information the teachers avoided was regarding the approach of their school principals and school administrators. There was a lot of information regarding the opinions of teachers, but we

didn't find anything regarding the administrators' points of view on the proposed reform. One possible explanation is that it is easier to criticize a more distant decision-maker, such as the Minister of Education, than it is to confront the principals of the school where one works day after day, especially since many of the teachers felt confident enough to write their own names instead of using pseudonyms. Also, although none of the school principals wrote to the forum, some teachers mentioned that it was important to continue writing because some principals read those messages.

Special attention was devoted to ethical issues involved in conducting research by using information obtained from the internet. Researchers have dealt at length with the challenges involved in this type of studies (Clarke, 2009; Jones, 1994; Sharf, 1999). Permission and privacy are complex issues when dealing with research done on the internet (Howe & Moses, 1999). Norskov and Rask (2011) point out the danger of announcing to the group members that a study is being conducted, as it can influence their reactions. Therefore we decided to collect the data without announcing the research to the participants so that they could not change their reactions. Christians and Chen (2004) explain at length the fact that "just as the internet presents new advantages in social research, it also presents new limitations. The application of traditional methodologies online is often both difficult and unsuccessful" (p. 18). Hine (2005) also discusses the issue of self presentation and claims that "establishing one's presence as a bona fide researcher and trustworthy recipient of confidences is not automatic.... The doubts of informants, the risks to which they feel research may expose them and their expectations of online relationships may vary widely between settings" (p. 153). In the case of our study, it did not deal with a small group that formed an anonymous group on the web in order to solve a problem, to plan how to mobilize people to action or to bring support to each other. Rather, it dealt with hundreds of teachers who wrote from one single message to daily messages to the forum. Most of these teachers wrote messages using their own names and the names of their schools, so they were obviously not interested in anonymity. The issue of consent has been discussed at length, especially by researchers in the field of health, who decided to take advantage of the different forums on the web in order to better understand the way their patients feel (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). According to them, three main issues have to be considered when making decisions related to this issue. First of all the researchers need to decide whether postings on an internet community are "private" or "public" communications. This distinction is important because researchers "may conduct research in public places or use publicly available information about individuals without obtaining consent" (Eysenbach & Till, 2001, p.1105) since it can be expected that the participants are seeking public visibility. They suggested that if no form of registration is required to gain access to a discussion group, then most of the subscribers are likely to regard the group as a 'public place' in cyberspace.

The second issue considered was how many users in an online community there needed to be in order to be defined as *public*: "A posting to a mailing list with 10 subscribers is different from a posting to a mailing list with 100 or 1000 subscribers" (Eysenbach & Till, 2001, p. 1109). Thirdly, they mention that the researchers should take into account "the individual group's norms and codes, target audience" (Eysenbach & Till, 2001, p.1110), which show the difference between a discussion list free to all adults interested in the subject and a group for children who are ill where "adults will NOT be

permitted to participate on this list as its purpose is to provide kids with their own personal place to share” (Eysenbach & Till, 2001, p. 1112).

While reading the messages written by the teachers it became obvious to us that they were intended for teachers and decision-makers in the field of education as well as for public opinion, and not as an intimate place for a few teachers who were trying to form a self-support community. Therefore we felt consent was not needed, but we made sure to keep our presence on the forum under the radar so that it would not influence the teachers’ reactions on the forum. It was our understanding as researchers that we were not ‘intruders’ in a private space, but rather spectators in an ongoing situation which was developing in front of our eyes on a daily basis. We decided to document it by acting as passive researchers who observe and report and do not actively react. In this study, informed consent was never asked because of two reasons: first, it was obvious that the participants wanted their opinion to be heard, so much so that sometimes they addressed their messages to other teachers, principals, leaders of the teachers’ unions and even to the Minister of Education herself. It is therefore safe to conclude that this is a public sphere and most researchers have concluded that it is ethical to conduct research in public places, since it can be expected that the participants are seeking public visibility. The second reason has to do with the fact that when participants in such forums know that a study is being conducted, they tend to change their behavior by expressing more extreme opinions, and we believed it was important to keep the dialogue on the forum authentic and unaltered by external influences.

Another decision we made was that in spite of the fact that many teachers used their own names and even mentioned the names of the schools where they worked, we would preserve their confidentiality by using pseudonyms for all who are referenced in this article. Norskov and Rask (2011) recommend that researchers consider issues such as intrusiveness, perceived privacy and vulnerability. Snelson also recommends discussing whether informed consent can be waived or how it will be obtained, and also how the anonymity of participants can be protected. She suggests that verbatim quotes can be easily identified using search engines and therefore researchers should consider ways to protect against any possible harm. In our study, since we translated all the original quotes from the Hebrew, all danger of disclosing the participants in the study is avoided in spite of the fact that the teachers did not seem to mind using their real names. As researchers, we felt it was our duty to protect their interests given the fact that in some cases they may have written their messages in the heat of the moment, but today they might think differently about issues such as anonymity, etc. We felt it was our responsibility to preserve their anonymity and so we didn't use their real names, even in those cases when the teachers themselves chose to do so.

We paid special attention to the issue of confidentiality and consent by reading a lot about the way research is conducted online. Beddows (2008) argues that the requirement of informed consent is not always possible when performing research online and she claims that “when people are in a public setting online they can expect to be observed” (p. 130). Gaiser and Schreiner (2009) point out that “the internet has created communities which could not have been formed otherwise and it provides the opportunity to new possibilities to produce and distribute knowledge” (p. 71). They also mention that the internet itself has a significant impact on how the focus groups, which he calls “emerging social forms in cyberspace” (p. 140), evolve and sustain themselves. Since

research on the internet is relatively new, we decided to veer towards safe side wherever we could in order to make sure that we did not endanger the teachers in any way.

### **Analysis of Findings**

This section presents the main findings that came out of the letters written by the teachers on the forum during the strike that started in October 2007 and ended, 64 days later, in December 2007. After carefully coding the data, we decided on four main themes:

1. Teachers' attitudes and feelings towards the government's actions
2. Teachers' status
3. Teaching as a profession based on ideals
4. The call for intransigent opposition to the proposed reform.

As we have mentioned in the Methodology section, we read and reread the entire data several times in order to be able to code it by looking for words used in a repetitive way by different teachers. We used the cut and paste technique in order to put together sentences or paragraphs which were similar in their content. We coded them (what some researchers call open coding) and we used different colors for the different themes and subthemes. We also looked for the main ideas that the teachers wanted to convey. We started out with several themes and sub-themes, but eventually we managed to hone in on the four main themes mentioned above.

Qualitative researchers do not believe that given the same data, all researchers would analyze it in exactly the same manner and reach the same conclusions. Rather, the idea is to present the data in such a way that the reader can decide if the choice of the researchers is valid or not. Dey (1993) points out that "there is no single set of categories or themes waiting to be discovered. There are as many ways of seeing the data as one can invent" (pp. 10-11). Although we disagree with the term 'to invent', we accept the general idea that there are as many themes or categories as one can prove using the data. In the interest of validity, we provided rich descriptions of the data so that our judgement becomes explicit and so that other researchers can argue with our conclusions (Agar, 1980) using what Strauss and Corbin (1990) called theoretical sensitivity. In our case, since each step of the study went through the scrutiny of a committee, the text presented were shown to several researchers and they could also comment if they thought the quotations presented expressed the views of the teachers or not.

#### **1. Attitude Towards the Actions of the Government**

Ninety-eight teachers sent a total of 689 messages to the forum. The teachers have expressed strong negative feelings regarding the way the government dealt with the teachers' strike. Many of them expressed a profound lack of trust and a strong feeling of disrespect for the former Minister of Education and the Prime Minister. The main feelings expressed were frustration, anger and disappointment:

*Almost every citizen knows that the education system is on a dangerous downward slope. The majority agree that we need a major reform, but the same people don't understand why the teachers oppose the proposed reform. The answer is that we feel we have been lied to, the proposals do not aim for a real reform. It is just one more way to humiliate us. (Sarah)*

Sandy complained both about the proposed reform and about the way it was introduced:

*It's tragic that the ministry of education does not realize that the fact that 40000 teachers are ready not to receive any salary for over 40 days shows that they feel very strongly about this issue. We feel that any reform should be discussed with us, the teachers who are supposed to implement it, and not to be imposed on us in an aggressive way where teachers who refuse to join are threatened with dismissal. We feel that this reform which was supposed to improve our status, is actually worsening our working conditions.*

The feeling of frustration becomes obvious when one reads many of the letters sent by angry teachers:

*We are fed up hearing that the education system is failing and that we are bad teachers. We are fed up hearing that we don't give individual attention when we deal with overcrowded classes of forty students each. We don't want to be compared to Finland until we are given the same working conditions as the Finnish teachers. (Joshua)*

In an open letter to the Minister of Education, Joshua described how humiliated the teachers feel:

*Good people will not join the education system even if you give a monthly raise of 1000 shekels (about \$250). Educators feel alone and humiliated not only because of their pay, but because of the fact that they have to cope on a daily basis with students who make fun of the learning and of teachers, because parents automatically support them no matter what they do.... Dear Minister of Education, I don't know when was the last time you had a long and serious talk with sad teachers. Not only about the strike. When was the last time you let teachers express their real feelings, their frustrations, the humiliation and disappointment related to the system which degrades them and leaves them alone in the field? Our government makes fun of the academic abilities and the pedagogical skills of teachers, and our educational system prefers the narrow interest of pleasing the students and parents instead of listening to teachers and improving education.*

In December 2007, on the eve of Hanukkah vacation, the government went to Court and asked for court orders to force the strikers back to work. This act was considered by

many teachers as ‘an act of war’ and they expressed a lot of anger and fury in their letters to the forum.

*These days we all discuss this terrible Court decision and we try to find our way in this darkness which fell on us during the festival of lights. The teachers, as law-abiding citizens, debate the question whether it is moral for Israeli educators not to obey a court order. This is exactly the position in which the clerks who work for the Ministry of Finance want us to be and the Minister of Education follows them like a puppy. (Joe)*

Julie, a veteran teacher from northern Israel, added:

*Even if a reasonable agreement is reached and we go back to our students and to our classes victorious, I will never forgive my Minister of Education and my Prime Minister for forcing me in a situation in which I had to behave in a way which goes against everything I have taught generation after generation of young students.*

Many teachers expressed strong feelings of anger not only against the Minister of Education, but also against politicians in general:

*Our teachers’ strike reaches a decisive moment. Every moral citizen is amazed by the evil indifference shown by the government. These politicians not only display insensitivity, but also a complete lack of understanding of the needs of the country and of the people. They don't understand anything. They are the ones who are supposed to be responsible for the fate of the people and for our future and they are completely disconnected from the people and our needs. (Andy)*

A math and chemistry teacher wrote an open letter to the Minister of Education:

*Distinguished Minister of Education,  
Let me share with you something that your advisors have forgotten to tell you. The anger and the bitterness felt by the teachers at this point is immense: we are frustrated by our low salaries, the poor working conditions, about the fact that the system and you personally do not back us up. We ask you to wake up, to get out of the trap your petty politicians prepared for you like in the British sketch comedy ‘Yes, minister’, we demand you to show your leadership, to raise to the occasion and to talk on our behalf. (Ron)*

The feeling of disappointment was eloquently expressed in a letter sent to the Minister of Education by a coordinator who represented a group of teachers from a school in a Tel Aviv suburb:

*When you were appointed as Minister of Education there was a lot of joy and hope among all teachers. We considered you an intelligent and educated person, a decent human being who has the best interests of education at heart.*

*We expected you to join us at the demonstration. We lead a struggle of people in despair, people who have nothing to lose. Think about it: who will stand in front of a classroom full of students at the end of this strike? Do you want us to be beaten and humiliated because the government brought us to our knees? Dear Minister of Education, we are not against you, but we don't feel you are on our side. Not enough anyway. Dear Minister of Education, come with us to the demonstrations, join us when we organize groups in order to protest on the main roads near the traffic lights of the main roads. (Rebecca)*

The teachers' negative reactions toward the way the proposed reform was pushed were so strong that in their messages they talked much less about the details of the reform itself. Instead they shared the feeling that they felt trapped in a reform which they believed was not going to improve student learning, while at the same time negatively influencing their working conditions and the status of their profession. The assumption was that all the teachers knew the details of the reform itself since all the teachers received daily information about it from the two teachers' unions and it was all over the media. In terms of qualitative research analysis, this is the 'missing information'. It is the type of information that professionals don't have to explain when they talk among themselves because it is clear that everybody knows what they mean. For example, when they talked about the fact that their workload would increase as a result of the proposed reform, every single teacher knew they meant the workload would increase from 24 hours of teaching per week to 40 hours per week.

## **2. Teachers' Status**

While most of the teachers agreed in their letters that there was a need for reform, all expressed their strong concern about the status of the teaching profession and the deterioration of their status. Sharon, an English teacher from a high school in Haifa (the third largest city in Israel) wrote:

*I am well aware of the fact that a reform is needed. Still, before you start implementing it, maybe it is time to go back one step and think again. Do we want to improve the status of the teaching profession and to bring teachers some of the respect they have lost? The teachers should be given suitable working conditions and a decent salary, the respect for teachers should be assured through deeds and not only through empty words.*

Tom, a teacher from a high school in Northern Israel, added:

*The status of teachers is linked to very conception that the teacher's time is not important. It shows a much deeper problem. The teacher is not*

*available for any educational activities during the day because he or she has to run from one class to the other in order to teach, and no teacher has a place of his or her own. No room, no phone, no quiet place where to meet students and parents. Any major change should start by redefining what one means by a full-time position for a teacher. It should mean that during the working hours, a certain amount of hours will be devoted to teaching, while others will be devoted to other types of work related to teaching: preparing the material, checking homework, correcting exams, meetings with students and parents. If the physical and structural conditions for this type of work are clearly established, the parents will also understand that a teacher should be master of his or her own free time and they will realize that if they want to meet with a teacher, they should do so during those hours and stop calling at home at any time of the day, late in the evening or during weekends for the least important issues.*

Similar feelings of frustration were also expressed in a letter addressed to the Minister of Education by another teacher:

*Our country can be proud because we have achieved a lot in spite of all the obstacles and the challenges we face. In any problematic issue society has to deal with, the teachers are always the ones to be blamed. I wonder how come that we never get credit for any of the achievements but we are always blamed when there is a problem. The norm has become that humiliating teachers is a national sport; it is the “bon ton.” Look at some of the expressions used about the teachers these days: ‘They will not gain one single penny. We will break them when they see they won't get their pay and they will come back to work on their knees’. I can't recall of any other strike when a similar vocabulary was used against the strikers. We understand the rules of the game: in order to get the attention of the media, one needs to see blood; otherwise it won't get published and will not appear on the screen. I expect the Minister of Education to protest against this way of solving a conflict, I expect you not to play by these rules. (Michael)*

### **3. Teaching as an Idealistic Profession**

Some of the idealistic views of teachers, which are seldom heard in a society that stresses individualism more than ever, came across crystal clear in some of the messages sent to the forum. The teachers expressed in their letters the feeling that they see teaching as an ideal and not as a mere way of paying the bills. They talked about the love and consideration they feel toward their students and about their concern for the future of the country. Dana wrote a letter addressed to the Prime Minister:

*I could have become a doctor, an engineer, a lawyer, a journalist. It was important for me to become a teacher, an educator. I love hundreds of*

*students and I believe in them. I love the subjects I teach. I am proud of being a teacher here, in Israel. I know that most of my students and their parents appreciate the importance of the task I have undertaken.*

Shirley, a teacher who teaches 11th grade, expresses similar feelings:

*My choice of becoming a teacher and an educator derives from my will to educate and to influence a generation which will contribute to society. I feel I can help create a better society along the way.*

Jacob, a citizenship teacher, wrote a letter addressed to Mr. Shimon Peres, Israel's president:

*I have served in the army for over 25 years. When I retired I decided on a career change, I retrained, became a teacher of citizenship and a classroom teacher and I am very happy I have made this decision. I am proud to play a role in the education of young people and to teach them to love this country and to contribute to society. I could have done many different things; I chose teaching because I want to have an impact on the young people.*

Natalie, a literature teacher from Jerusalem also resented the fact that teachers are presented as people who did not have any other choice:

*I was born to be a teacher. I have known it since I was in 5th grade. I became a leader in the youth movement, then an officer in the army, and that only proved to me I was on the right path. I fell in love with this close world of teachers that is not obvious to an outsider. I love the magic moments I share with my students. A stranger would never understand what it means to influence someone's approach to life.*

#### **4. Call to Protest**

At the beginning of the strike, the teachers protested against the way this reform has been pushed without consulting them first. When the strike continued, the teachers became angrier and started calling for a stronger type of protest and even for rebellion. They resented the fact that other unions did not join them because they saw the way the government treated them as endangering to all types of organized labor. Ben, a high school teacher, considers the strike as part of a larger social struggle:

*The fight for public education is a fight for the good of society as a whole. Everyone in society will not suffer if we fail this battle. It is a sad fact that in the present situation the teachers take upon themselves to represent the interest of society as a whole. The teachers take upon themselves this incredible task and we do it at our own expense (!) although education is really one of the most important services the government is supposed to*

*ensure to all citizens. They don't pay us because they want to break our spirit. Unfortunately, none of the other sectors have joined us in this fight. This fact weakens our position during the strike and it weakens the pressure we could have put on the government. We didn't expect help from the Finance Minister, but we expected more from the Minister of Education, the media, the left wing parties, not to mention the religious parties who have their own schools and continue teaching there as usual.\**

The teachers as a group are generally known, both in Israel and elsewhere, as one willing to conform, one which rarely rebels. In many of the letters sent by teachers to the forum they called for the right to strike and they asked other teachers to come out and join the fight, to join the demonstrations, to protest loudly instead of quietly complaining. Indeed, many of the teachers wrote their opinions on forums, sent letters to newspapers, participated in protest meetings and in demonstrations. In one of the letters written by Gaby, a teacher educator, she calls teachers and teacher educators not to give up, but rather to be louder and more active in their fight:

*We must never accept this reform. Let's not take this road!!! It will bring us to a dead end. It is time to rebel. Let's come and say it out loud: it is time to rebel!!! This is my call to all the good teachers, those teachers who love teaching, giving, improving a child's life. Let's not be afraid to say loud and clear: 'We are not going back to classes until reality is changed'. We<sup>1</sup> must make them listen to us. We simply have to. They can't force this reform down our throats.*

On November 17, 2007, a demonstration of over 100,000 people took place in a central square in Tel Aviv. After the demonstration, more militant voices were heard and most of the teachers who wrote letters to the forum called for a "social revolution." Jordan, a history teacher who is also an active member of one of the teachers' unions, wrote an open letter to the representatives of the negotiating parties, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance:

*You haven't noticed that a hundred thousand teachers, students, parents have joined our protest on the main roads, on the main squares, everywhere. While you were living your comfortable and stable lives in your own homes, a social revolution was born. It is a revolution of those who have been deprived of their basic rights by the government which was supposed to take care of them. On Saturday night, in the Tel Aviv square, the social revolution planted the flag of quality education in the hearts of the Israeli public.*

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<sup>1</sup> \*In Israel, public schools are either secular or religious, and both types of schools receive public funding. All secular public schools were on strike while the religious public schools went on teaching, claiming a teachers' strike is non-educational by its very nature and that protest should be expressed in a different way.

Nathan, a teacher from Haifa who participated in the Tel Aviv demonstration, wrote on the forum:

*I am proud of my fellow teachers. The same teachers who have proved all over the country that it is not possible to trample on the dignity of teachers, they have proved that they have persistence, they are creative and they have continued to fight even after receiving zero salary for the first month of the strike. We will deal with all obstacles and we will not lose our self-respect not only for our sake, but also for the sake of the future of our country and the future of education. I am proud of all of you, my fellow teachers!*

Once the government went to ask for court orders to force the teachers to return to schools, the tone of the teachers' letters became even more radical and they demanded total opposition not only to the court order, but also to the government itself.

*We, as teachers, can and should not go back to school under these conditions. We need to adopt the non-violent opposition towards this insensitive government which has no values whatsoever and which is suspected of corruption. Non-violent opposition means not cooperating with the government. It means standing up together as one, tens of thousands of us, not in schools, but in the buildings of the ministry of education all over the country and crying out loud: not any more! This is a time to let anger and fury talk. Only after that, the lights of Hanukkah will prevail. (Orly)*

The teachers did not believe that the government would ask for court orders in order to force them to go back to work, and when this has happened, on December 4, 2007, there was a terrible disappointment, and the teachers felt as if they were pushed with their backs against the wall. David, one of those teachers, wrote:

*The court can force us to go back to schools, but they can't force us to teach. They can't impose a collective bargaining on us. They want anarchy, they will get anarchy! This goes against everything I believe in, everything I teach my students to do... But we are not sheep, we won't go quietly to the slaughterhouse. If a revolution is needed, they will get one. We can't fight by being nice, we have to change our peaceful approach which has not brought us anywhere till now.*

Karin, another teacher, was also quite radical in her demand:

*Today, on this very day, I decided to take off the white innocent gloves which have covered my hands till now. I am a very peaceful person and I opened my hands waiting for one of them to shake them friendly, warmly, with courage and boldness. Enough is enough: the loud noise of the hammer that hit my open hands is still pounding in my ears, but I have*

*decided to transform this noise into a pleasant sound of bells calling all of us to stand up together and to stick together. We have to fight against this court order; we have to refuse to obey it. They can't put us all in jail.*

Silvie, a civic education teacher in one of the Israeli high schools, mentioned the role of the internet in keeping the strike going:

*The teachers' strike will be remembered as being conducted online, using the internet more than any other strike before. Tens of thousands of teachers took advantage of the abilities offered by the personal computer which they normally use for their daily teaching and they used it in order to disseminate information which was relevant for their professional struggle. Thousands of email messages were sent among the teachers who were members of this organization, parents, students and the rest of the public. This is democracy at its best.*

As we have seen, the teachers not only expressed in their messages their point of view about the way the government treated them. They also revealed their ideals, feelings, hopes and disillusion, and they shared with each other and with the politicians their disappointments. Finally, when they felt they had no other choice, they asked for a fight without compromise for something which they considered more than just their professional interests, but rather in the interest of society at large. Eventually, the teachers returned to work before the court order went into effect and therefore the law was respected. The Ministry of Education decided to start implementing the proposed reform in elementary schools only. The "New Horizon" reform was not used in the high schools and is still not today.

### **Discussion**

The aim of the authors was to present their analysis of the reactions of teachers versus the proposed educational reform as they appeared on the teachers' forum during the teachers' strike. The change process can be confusing (Fuks, 1995) and this fact could be clearly observed in the teachers' letters. Some did not have enough information, some had inaccurate information and decisions were not always made on solid ground. Fullan (1993) stresses not only the importance of introducing change, but also to the way it can be achieved. The teachers expressed in their letters to the forum their strong feelings against the Minister of Education and even against the Prime Minister who attempted to implement the change without listening to what teachers had to say or asking for their input. The teachers agree that their status is very low and that significant change is more than welcome, but they claim that this way of imposing change is not suited if they do not have a say in professional matters that directly affect their working conditions.

There is a consensus in the literature (Fuks, 1995; Samuel, 1996) that a gradual change process which takes into consideration the input of those who are supposed to implement it and are directly affected by the change is less painful and that it significantly decreases the resistance to change. In the case presented in this study, the teachers who were supposed to be affected by the change perceive the Ministry of

Education (which proposed the educational reform) as belittling teachers, as condescending and disrespectful, and not as a change agent that considers them partners in a process where their professional competence as well as their personal needs are heard and taken into consideration.

Samuel (1996), Levy (2000) and Kfir (2002) propose four methods of dealing with resistance to change: explaining all the elements involved and mentoring; collaboration and involvement; offering of rewards and benefits; and finally forcing and punishing. The teachers' letters reveal a situation where, from their point of view, only the last method was used while the other three were completely ignored. In the few cases where the proposed reform was explained to teachers, they felt the information was not accurate and reliable, and a lot of questions were left unanswered. In any case, they felt they were never consulted and there was no active role for them to play (e.g., deciding any aspects of the reform) except in implementing the reform. Moreover, they felt their professionalism was put into question and they felt the reform was brutally pushed against their best professional judgment in an environment that was not suited for its implementation. They mentioned repeatedly the lack of resources, the fact that in most schools the physical space was too limited to allow each teacher a personal place of his or her own, etc. Therefore, when they talked about the intentions of the agents of change the teachers used words such as *evil*, *demeaning* and *humiliating*, and their messages convey bitterness and a strong feeling of having no support. None of them talked about any attempt to use collaboration and involvement as suggested by some researchers (Kfir, 2002; Levy, 2000; Samuel, 1996). Instead, they presented the reform as being forced upon them, without any consideration for the teachers' opinion or feelings.

The teachers were disappointed by the fact that the Minister of Education, who was supposed to represent their interests, had 'abandoned' them and had even expressed a point of view in the media that was closer to that of the Finance Minister than to that of the teachers. In spite of the fact that many researchers stress the fact that the teachers' motivation to identify with reform is a major element in its successful implementation, and that even top-down reform should offer as much autonomy as possible to teachers in terms of planning and implementing it, the teachers felt this had not been the case. From the teachers' messages to the forum it seems that they strongly opposed the proposed reform and even more than that they resented the way this reform had been "pushed down their throat." This is totally opposed to the literature, which stresses the fact that in order for teachers to identify with large scale reforms they need to be regarded as partners and consulted regarding its most important elements (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994).

In this case, the teachers felt they were not at all involved in the process, that their voices were not considered important and therefore was not heard, and that they were used as pawns who should simply accept the reform as is and should implement it the way they were asked to without asking questions. Their frustration was stronger because of the fact that they had higher expectations and they decided to strongly oppose the proposed reform.

Barak and Gluck-Ofri (2007) distinguishes between three levels of self-disclosure categories on internet forums: statements that provide *information* without any personal reference; *thoughts* expressing general ideas as well as thoughts and wishful ideas; and *feelings*, from the mild ones such as confusion, inconvenience, concern and frustration to

deep feelings such as humiliation, fear, pain and anxiety. Our analysis of the messages sent by the teachers to the forum reflect all three levels of self-disclosure, from using the internet in order to inform (about the date and place of a meeting or of a demonstration of protest), to express thoughts (less about the proposed reform and more about the aggressive way in which it was pushed) and feelings (of betrayal, loneliness, as well as feeling of pride in their profession and in the solidarity that was created among themselves). The messages on the forum were also meant to help teachers in their moments of despair in order to make sure they would not give up and it is our belief that the internet helped the most active teachers to continue with the strike even after over two months with no pay.

The feelings expressed by the teachers in their letters are similar to the ones reported by the researchers who have studied change processes. Levy (2000) reported that teachers are proud of their mission but disillusioned by the way they are treated and frustrated by the fact that the importance of their task and their devotion to it is not fully appreciated. The teachers wrote on the forum that they chose this profession in spite of the low salaries, because of the chance to have an impact of the future of the younger generations and not because of a lack of other options. Even before this strike Kfir (2002) claimed that the level of distrust reached by the teachers was so high that it could become dangerous to the democratic system that they are expected to promote. In some letters, one can indeed find very militant voices which call for rebellion, for not respecting court orders, etc. They present their fight not only as part of a struggle for teachers' rights, but as one for the very future of organized labor in Israel and workers' rights.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This type of research has certain strengths because it allows for compelling data to be collected from a variety of teachers who freely expressed themselves without attempting to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed in a favorable way by the researchers. While this type of social desirability bias is excluded, it is also important to point out the inherent limitations of such a study. The volume of data made the analysis extremely time-consuming. We also need to mention the fact that in this type of study some groups may be overrepresented since only the teachers who felt free to use this type of technology took part in the discussion. Also, only teachers who were very opinionated felt free to present their opinions, while others, who kept quiet, maybe had some important information to share, but they chose not to do so. In addition to that, it is possible that this is some sort of bias since it is to be expected that more active teachers would write more while others would not. Still, the significant number of teachers from different regions of the country who did take part in the discussions, some of them even for the first time in their life according to their own testimonies, allowed us to conclude that it was important for us to present their opinions while pointing out to the inherent limitations of this type of study.

Another limitation of this study is that, as with any research conducted online, the researchers can't have direct access to the participants and therefore are not aware of the body language, the tone, emotional clues, etc. As Herring and Danet (2007) have noted, this type of study has certain limitations inherent to the media; for example, the researchers do not have access to any "visual aids such as eye contact, facial expressions,

body language, emotions, no sound cues to indicate reflection, pauses” (Herring & Danet, 2007, p. 18), of which we were aware. We were also aware of the fact that this type of research can lead to information overload and the literature warns about the dangers of now knowing when to stop collecting data in a medium which is constantly changing. We decided to limit the collection data to the messages sent during the 64 days of strike, so in this case the boundaries of the data collection were very clear, although they were not obvious when the study started.

### **Recommendations**

This study was entirely based on letters and messages sent by teachers through email on different teachers’ forums during the teachers’ strike which took place at the end of 2007. The study presents the situation from the perspective of the teachers the way they saw it at that point in time. Future studies should present findings of in-depth interviews with teachers to determine their attitude towards the proposed reform as well as towards that strike seen in retrospect. In addition to that, quantitative studies based on large scales surveys are needed in order to evaluate the impact of the “New Horizon” reform on students and teachers and in order to be able to generalize these findings.

The strike ended in December 2007 and more studies are needed in order to find out what the teachers’ attitudes are towards the way in which the strike was conducted, the roles played by the leaders and the effects of this strike on the implemented reform. In addition to that, it is important to study the results of this change in the schools where it was implemented in order to understand how it works, its effects on teachers and on students and how these effects could be maximized for the benefit of all those involved.

The findings of this study show that the teachers who posted on the forum did not feel they were treated as partners in the change process implemented by the Ministry of Education. It appears that the change agents have ignored the basic recommendations made by the researchers on the issue of systemic reform, as the change was not introduced gradually after involving those who were supposed to implement it. On the contrary, the change agents have acted in a way which is totally opposed to what was expected if they wanted to create a partnership with the teachers and their respective unions. There is a great and immediate need to change the atmosphere of distrust that prevails today and to present accurate and reliable information regarding the actions which are going to influence teachers’ lives. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2008), out of 153,863 teachers working in the Israeli educational system, less than 40,000 have implemented the “New Horizons” reform program. Optimists can maintain that the change is significant given the fact that it affects one-third of the teachers at the elementary level and since it is a part of the teachers’ contract with the teachers’ union, it is not a temporary reform which can be easily abolished in a future political situation. Opponents can claim that this reform did not have any impact whatsoever on the high schools, it has a limited impact on middle schools and it will not be accepted as such without making significant changes which would make it more relevant to teachers at those levels.

We recommend studying how this reform is implemented in schools, what works best by listening to the teachers who have to implement it in order to better understand their point of view, and also by studying its outcomes in terms of student learning. Once

this approach is adopted, the implementation of the reform can continue until all elementary schools join. If one is interested in implementing a similar reform in high schools, one should do so by defining the specific needs of this type of school and by making the necessary adjustments in collaboration with the high school teachers' union. It is to be expected that the road will not be easy and that the negotiations will take time, but if it is done right, the main advantage is that teachers will go along with the reform and do their best in order to assure its success.

In the well-known poem "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost (1914/1967), the speaker claims that it is difficult to decide at a crossroads; when one has to choose between two options, especially when one road is well-traveled than the other. In all cases of educational reform that took place in Israel, the teachers felt they were not part of a dialogue, they did not have a say and they were pushed to accept and to implement the decisions made by high-ranking officials (Kizel, 2009). In this case, the elementary school teachers accepted the reform while the high school teachers decided to rebel, to take the road less-traveled, and they asked for a different type of reform that better suits their needs. At this point in time, the jury is still out, but if an agreement is reached, one will be able to see if "the road not taken" by the high school teachers when they strongly opposed the "New Horizon" reform would prove to be a better way than the one chosen by their colleagues at the elementary level. In any case, research is needed in order to compare and contrast the two agreements reached by the two teachers' unions as well as the way these agreements are implemented.

As for the methodological issues, we agree with Eysenbach and Till (2001) that the internet is "the most comprehensive electronic archive of written material representing our world and people's opinions, concerns, and desires...and as such qualitative analysis of material published on the web can serve to systematize and codify the teachers' needs, values and concerns" (p. 1110). We recommend that this type of research should be conducted while giving special consideration to ethical issues such as private versus public domain, informed consent, confidentiality, decisions regarding when to stop collecting data, etc. We recommend that researchers carefully consider these points while bearing in mind that not enough is yet known about the psychological aspects of internet use and the risks of internet-based research. Any future research done using cyberspace should take into consideration all these aspects. To researchers who decide to work collaboratively, we recommend to do so in an egalitarian way, without taking into consideration issues such as academic rank, etc. The challenges should not be ignored, but in the end, we feel that the effort was worthwhile and that we have learned a lot in the process.

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