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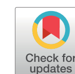
An ideological clash of worldviews in State religious schools in Israel



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ABSTRACT

This research examines the division of one religious-Zionist elementary public school in Israel. Led by the Parents' School Committee (PSC), discussions soon resulted in a fierce religious culture war between two groups of liberal and conservative parents who had two separate visions for the future of the school. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with prominent PSC members. Utilizing Bourdieu's concept of social field, interviews were analyzed to outline the culture war that divided the community and led to the foundation of a conservative school with gender separation and a liberal school with no gender separation for young children. Findings illuminate tensions around admission criteria in religious schools, based on religious observance, which seek to favor academic rigor and privileged social status.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades the religious-Zionist community in Israel - which considers itself committed to Jewish tradition and halakhah alongside support for Zionism and integration into the general society of the State of Israel - has undergone significant transformations (Englander and Sagi, 2013), particularly with changes revolving its educational discourse, religious character parental involvement, school segregation and inequality.[1] Such social changes call for an in-depth look at and analysis of the balance of power between various groups who operate in the field and are deeply committed to influence and shape the future of religious-Zionist schools.

The sensitive location of the religious-Zionist sector on the border between religious observance along with traditional meticulousness and processes of liberalization and renewal, have motivated different groups to take steps in search of influencing its character. These groups, which often belong to two major ideological camps – the liberal and the conservative – have engaged in heated struggles witnessed in every dimension of their communal life, including education.[2] Characterized by a growing parental involvement, conflicts between these groups, particularly those taking place in schools, reflect the rising tensions within the religious-Zionist sector regarding its desired identity and the on-going struggle to preserve traditional observance in a modern world.

The story of Morasha school embodies these complex trends and tensions in the religious-Zionist sector. The Morasha elementary school served the entire religious Zionist population in a thriving neighborhood within a mid-sized city at the center of Israel. In 2010, when the school's student population reached 1300 students, regulations forced its division into two separate schools.[3] The local authority and the management of the Hemed gave permission to the Parents School Committee (PSC) to embark on a process that would determine how to distribute the religious-Zionist population of the neighborhood between two schools. During the three-year discussions, two main groups of parents with opposing ideologies emerged: a conservative group and a progressive group. The progressive group advocated gender inclusion and free dress-code for students, as well as the hiring of progressive teachers, while the conservative group insisted on gender separation, meticulous religious dress-code, and hiring of rabbis to the teaching staff. The question of gender separation has become a symbolic point of contention that quickly swept away the idyllic notion of one school serving one unified neighborhood. Instead, the two groups clashed vehemently to dictate the schools' religious program in their image.

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[1] The religious-Zionist education sector operates under the supervision of Israel's Ministry of Education (MOE) religious department (Hemed). It is a semi-autonomous sector established under the State Education Law of 1953 to provide an educational solution for children of the religious-Zionist community (Katz, 2004). Hemed, the Hebrew abbreviation of religious-Zionist education, has its own pre-elementary, elementary, and secondary schools. In addition, state-sponsored colleges prepare religious teachers in religious colleges of education to support this separate educational sector [see also Sabbagh (2019) in this Special Issue who refers to religious-Zionist schools as "Jewish religious state schools (Mamlachti Dati)"].

[2] For example, local events that involve the integration of women into center roles at their religious community may lead to intense discussions in synagogues and social networks. Religious rulings that have a conservative or liberal trace become subject for journalistic reports, followed by lively discussion in local communities.

[3] According to Datal (2017) the Morasha school belongs to a city with one of the most overpopulated school systems in Israel.

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When this story emerged in 2012, it created a significant stir, first in the neighborhood and then in the social media of the sector. Most discussions underscored the dilemma faced by people who are involved in the school and are aligned with the two groups. We contend that analyzing exploring and understanding these processes in this religious-Zionist school could illuminate larger trends within the field of religious-Zionist schools in Israel. As with other papers in this Special-Issue, this research reveals a particular power struggle around educational policy decision-making and implementation that characterize also other sectors in the Israeli K-12 system.

Finally, this research contributes theoretically to the literature on school culture wars and the use of religiosity as formal or informal admission criteria that offers selection advantages to privileged groups. Such understanding can offer potential insights to both scholars who study this subject and policy makers and parents who seek to promote or confront changes in their local schools.

2. The state of religious education in Israel

The religious-Zionist community in Israel has evolved over the past 100 years as a distinct group with a unique worldview. This community maintains a Jewish religious lifestyle while engaging with the secular Israeli society in different ways, such as housing, employment, army service, academic education and culture. This means that the members of this community, on the one hand, maintain the tradition of customs handed down from the past, while on the other, are involved in contemporary life, and even attain positions of prominence in a range of spheres in Israel (Cohen, 2011; Gross, 2003; Zehavi, 2011).

In the past two decades this community has experienced accelerated processes of change (Englander and Sagi, 2013; Sales, 2015). On the one hand, processes of increased religiosity and conservatism (reflected in more individuals and families choosing to adopt new behaviors in line with religious observance), the establishment of restricted neighborhoods and settlements with stringent religious codes, gender separation in educational institutions and youth movements, an increase in yeshivot that follow a firm line of scholarship, observance of religious law, and a tendency to consult rabbis (Jewish religious leaders) on all spheres of life. All the while, at the opposite pole, there are processes of liberalization that promote free, open dialogue between the religion and the secular public, attendance at varied musical and cultural events, introducing new forms of families into the religious community, promoting religious equality between women and men and integration of women into the religious leadership, encouraging army service for girls, and active, thriving liberal discourse on social media. Along these processes of increased religious diversity, the sector has also experienced a rise in social inequities and school segregation along class lines (similar to the general Israeli society) (Cohen, 2011; Berger, 2015).

In 2018, Hemed pupils comprised 14.1% of all students studying under state education in Israel, which in that year had 2.2 million students (Ministry of Education, 2018). As mentioned, while Hemed is administratively subordinated to the Ministry of Education, it enjoys broad latitude to determine which additional curricular content would cater to and align with the world of values and ideas of the religious-Zionist community. In addition, it has the authority to determine rules of behavior and various norms for the conduct of the educational staff and the students in its educational institutions, as well as to choose principals and teachers befitting this world of values. The state religious education sector of Hemed has a council, whose chairperson has the authority to resolve pedagogical conflicts that are likely to influence the character of its institutions (Katz, 2004).

Hemed council has always considered itself as a leading education force in Israel, committed to helping disadvantaged populations, by offering a combination of academic studies and reinforcement of religious education (Levi and Turjeman, 1999; Misgav, 2015). For this purpose, it determined four guiding principles upon which it bases the schools' curriculum and educational activity: belief in God and education for Torah and the commandments, attitude toward society, commitment to the State of Israel and the land of Israel, and global considerations (Dagan et al., 2008).

Hemed schools operate like all other schools in Israel, albeit with a slightly different character. The pupils and teachers are almost exclusively members of the religious-Zionist community. The day always open with prayer and the class schedule—beyond studying of languages, science and the arts—is amplified with lessons in Bible, Jewish tradition, study about holidays and Jewish law. At events, religious ideas are noted alongside national ones, and the daily activities and spoken language are filled with Jewish symbols and terms from Jewish tradition and law. The dress code is adapted to the religious way of life: a *kippa* (head-covering) and *tzitzit* (ritual fringes on clothing) for the boys and a skirt and blouse with sleeves for the girls.

In recent decades the religious-Zionist community have been increasingly challenged by post-modernist developments. Gross (2011) argues that with the lack of a systematic ideological underpinning, a dynamic flexible system has been formed whose principles, commitments and obligations are in constant flux, responding to the changing political circumstances and those in control of power. Thus, when faced with complicated and divisive issues, such as dress codes, gender separation, and the ratio of hours of study between secular and religious subjects, Hemed leaders preferred standing on the fence (Gross, 2011; Misgav, 2015; Zehavi, 2011). The lack of clarity and decisiveness on the part of the leadership combined with rising neo-liberal tendencies that celebrate competition, individual pursuit of meaning, and parental choice (Ichilov, 2010; Michaeli, 2015), further weakened it, inviting groups and individuals to apply more pressure in order to shape schools' identity and the students studying in them in accordance with their ideological worldview [for more details about these processes, see the study of Sabbagh (2019), which appears in this Special Issue].

One prominent external group that identified the weak leadership of Hemed (both ideologically and religiously), as an opportunity to enter the field and reshape it, were the conservative parents who established in 1971 the private school "Torani Noam" whose aim was to cater their distinct religious requirements (Filber, 2011). "Noam" quickly grew into a network of 54 elementary and secondary schools (Filber, 2011) whose student body was more likely to originate from families with a higher socio-economic status compared to average families attending Hemed schools (Berger, 2015; Cohen, 2011). These private religious schools developed an elaborate admission scheme based on religious observance and interviews that allowed schools to select religiously observant candidates who also happen to behave well and exceed academically. In 1995, an agreement was signed between the heads of the "Noam" network and the Hemed leadership arranging a transition of these private schools under the supervision of Hemed. This move enabled the entrance of conservative ideology into the state system by allowing "Noam" schools to keep their previous curriculum and admission practices that privileged students with higher socio-economic background. In essence, this move contributed to a new hierarchy among Hemed schools, putting at the top "Torani" schools that provided enhanced traditional religious studies (Gross, 2011). This process changed the nature of Hemed and is evident everywhere in current religious-Zionist society (Levi, 2011).

3. Theoretical background

This section builds on three lines of theory that link to and complement each other. One concerns the concept of the American culture war with a focus on conflicts related to perception, understanding and debates about religious concepts and the role of religious culture in public schools. The second line describes emerging evidence about the complex stratifying effect that public religious schools have on educational access and social inequality in England and Israel. The third line consists of Bourdieus theoretical concepts of field and capital offer a

general scheme to map, organize and understand the positions of various players and the power relations between them. Combining these three lines is essential because together they help clarify and theorize the deep conflicts over religious culture, power, ideology and social inequities that are linked to the roles that religious schools play in society.

3.1. Culture wars

Hunter (1992, 1996), describes a deep social realignment in American society characterized by "new lines of conflict… between… a world view that seeks to maintain the normative ideals and social institutions of that traditional civilization and a world view that seeks its transformation" (Hunter, 1992, p. 244). The two new camps are philosophically divided and hold "competing moral epistemologies… of moral authority" (p. 245). One camp is defined by its cultural conservatism that "is rooted in a transcendent metaphysic that is more or less universally binding" (p. 245). The other camp, is rooted in cultural progressivism "that grounds moral authority in human experience" (p. 245), rejecting a rigid universal code of religious conduct and seeking instead to constantly transform, redefine, and reinterpret frameworks of belief and being based on the changing human experience.

The battles between these two camps have escalated to a culture war over the daily function and regulation of key social institutions, like education (Hunter, 1992). As Hartman (2013), notes:

Americans have always fought the so-called culture wars, a term of recent vintage that signifies the angry, often politically consequential clashes over moral conduct and, indeed, over the meaning of Americanism itself. And, for as long as Americans have fought the culture wars, they have debated the role of education, the institution most essential to ensuring the reproduction of national identity (p. 114).

To date, the clashes between secular, science-oriented progressives and religious conservatives continue to define and split American public schools. For example, the struggle over sexual identity and sex education (Irvine, 2000) have become prominent in recent years, while the wars around religion and the school curriculum (e.g., the famous Tennessee "monkey trial" deliberations of 1925) (Hartman, 2019) between evolution scientists and religion creationists (Moore, 2002) have receded. Another emerging issue is the increasing gap between the professional class and lower middle class, which further intensifies cleavages between the religious conservative and progressive camps (Hunter, 2017) and, as we illustrate below, also stratifies religious schools in places like Israel and England.

3.2. The stratifying effect of religious public schools

In contrast to the U.S., many countries offer state-funded religious education through religious public schools. While these religious schools have admitted students primarily based on their religiosity, they also, in some places and instances (e.g., England), developed reputation for academic excellence and became appealing option to affluent secular families (Butler and Hamnett, 2007).

Indeed, findings from a comprehensive dataset in England suggest that children with high academic achievement from affluent and educated families (religious and non-religious) are more likely to attend religious secondary public schools compared to children from poor and less educated families. Moreover, the analysis reveals that on average the socio-economic demographic profile of children who attend religious school tends to be higher compared to children attending schools in a similar geographic location (Allen and West, 2011).

This association of religious schooling with affluence has undermined public trust in the equity mission of public schooling, leading to fierce criticism and further tightening of the admission code to religious schools (Dwyer and Parutis, 2013). Yet, even after discriminatory practices, like interviewing candidates and parents were abolished in England, parts of the admission code remained vague, allowing schools to re-interpret government intentions and find alternative ways to prefer privileged groups (p. 271).

Similar to England, Zionist-religious schools in Israel illustrate how religiosity, class and ethnic considerations are shaping the inner politics of parents' decisions and choices within that sector. Indeed, findings suggest that students from poor families are twice as likely to attend the least religious schools in the sector (i.e., with no gender separation) (Berger, 2015, p. 32). In addition, Zionist-religious schools with high gender separation (Torani) tended to have significantly higher socio-economic demographic profile of students compared to other schools operating in their geographic location (p. 36). One explanation is that these schools were less likely to be part of an integration policy that promotes the mixture of populations across the socio-economic ladder. Another common explanation is that parents of higher economic status in the Zionist-religious movement prefer stricter version of religiosity and like the idea of paying for private schooling to create an exclusive path for academic excellence (Gross, 2008). However, no matter the order of things, "Torani" schools have been exercising implicit and explicit selection procedures that limit the number of accepted poor students, while increasing the number privileged students (Berger, 2015, p. 37).

This rise of exclusive admission-based "Torani" schools reflects the increasing prominence of privileged parents' choice, a pattern consistent with wider trends of neo-liberal ideology in Israel (Dagan-Buzaglo, 2010; Michaeli, 2015), Britain (Ball, 2013), and U.S. (Zeichner, 2010) education systems. Given the trend of more "Torani" schools becoming public Zionist-religious schools entitled to full state-funding, it is essential, more than before, to examine how religiosity, affluence, educational excellence and social inclusiveness vs. exclusiveness shape parents' choices to promote specific educational arrangements for their children.

3.3. Bourdieu's concepts of social field and capital

Bourdieu's conceptual tools of social field (and to a lesser extent of capital) may help illuminate how in reality groups of parents struggle to shape their children educational choices vis-à-vis school administrators, ministry and municipality officials.

A social field is a space where social agents—individuals, groups, institutions, and organizations—strive for positions of power and influence in order to shape it in line with their values, interests and ideology (Bourdieu, 1985). The boundaries of a social field are in a constant state of flow and so are the social agents that engage in shaping it through various forms of participation and action (Bourdieu, 1985; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). These social agents often belong to two groups, orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Social agents who belong to the orthodoxy hold positions of influence and seek to maintain their privileges and prominence in the field. In opposition stands the heterodoxy, a group whose members occupy the lower ranks of the field and while currently being less powerful, strive to replace the orthodoxy (Bourdieu, 1988).

According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), the ability of social agents to achieve prominence is driven primarily by the types and volume of capitals that agents hold, primarily economic, cultural and social[4], as well as their habitus, that is, how agents perceive their positions in the field and how they act upon the opportunities available to them (position taking) (Bourdieu, 1985). Social agents are positioned and operate within a hierarchical structure which values agents based on their volume and composition of capitals. This could mean that in some instances high regard is ascribed to agents with cultural capital, like in the literary field in France (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996) or to agents

[4] For a detailed discussion about the most prominent types of capital, see, Bourdieu's seminal piece "The forms of capital "(1986).

who hold high level of social capital, like in the diamond field (Coleman, 1988).

In what follows, we strive to conduct a nuanced analysis that would integrate insights from Hunter's concept of culture wars, and Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital. This means that first we offer a description of the context which may help readers to situate the particular case of Morasha school within the larger field of religious public schools in Israel, and second, we dig-in to explore the "thick understanding of experience and meaning (and vice versa)" (Ferrare and Apple, 2015, p. 53), that social agents construct and develop through a phenomenological process of interaction with each other.

4. Methodology and data collection

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven males and eight females. Thirteen of the interviews were conducted with prominent parents from the PSC who participated in the school separation discussions. The interviewees represent a diverse set of perceptions and educational ideologies; seven of them were aligned with liberal/progressive views[5] and six with conservative views. All parents had academic degrees and worked as school educators, engineers, university lecturers and social workers. Parents also reported having extensive Jewish education background, including yeshiva and kollel studies for males and religious seminary for females. It is important to note that progressives and conservatives in our sample did not differ in terms of their Jewish education background. We also interviewed the organizational consultant appointed by the local authority to accompany the discussions and one of the founders of the private school network, Noam-Zvia, who lead the private school-network for fifty years and provided invaluable information about general trends in the field.[6]

All interviews were conducted retrospectively taking place at private sites chosen by interviewees and lasting between 60–120 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim under condition of anonymity to interviewees. We targeted prominent, activist, outspoken parents and started searching for them at the PSC, assuming that this voluntary organization would attract opinionated parents who care and want to shape their neighborhood school. After initiating a few successful contacts, we employed a snowball sampling methodology focusing on recruitment of parents from both the conservative and progressive groups (Spreen, 1992; TenHouten, 2017). This purposeful sample of interviewees does not intend to represent the average parent at the Morasha school, but rather aims to bring prominent influential voices of PSC members.

The interviews were designed to ascertain how parents perceived their neighborhood and the Morasha school, what were their hopes and expectations from the school and what was their perspective about and role in the process leading up to the separation of the school. At the beginning of each interview, we asked: "Please tell me about the process that led to the separation of the Morasha school as you understand it." During interviews follow up questions were asked whenever we felt that certain issues were not addressed clearly, examples were needed, or when we tried to find out how interviewees interpreted critical events in the school separation narrative. The parents offered "thick" descriptions accompanied with deep insights, which are the hallmark of a good qualitative study (Geertz, 1973). The interviews reveal parents' religious and ideological commitments and the ways in which the two groups constructed their ideas and operated to promote their religious agenda during the separation process.

We approached data analysis through Dushnik's (2011) method of "theoretical sensitivity," which combines prior knowledge, reliance on relevant background literature and an encounter with the unique voice of the interviewees. The conjunction of these three parameters enabled us to propose and examine concepts and meanings that emerged from the case study of the Morasha school. In other words, codes for the analysis emerged primarily from a careful reading of interview transcripts, and where appropriate, partial integration of ideas from the literature review (e.g., social field and culture war). Examples of codes include, parents' association with particular interests, ideas, commitments (e.g., gender separation), parents' hopes and expectations from the school (e.g., school as a unifying force in the community and school as driver for academic excellence and social and religious exclusivity), parents' conception of religiosity (i.e., level of conservatism), their conception of the religious-Zionist community and its leadership. These codes were organized into larger categories which eventually led to the development of general themes that identify trends and patterns across the interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Sabar Ben Yehshua, 1995; Yosifon, 2001) that may help theorize the story of Morasha school and suggest a framework to better understand the general field of religious state schools and the conflicts that characterize this school community.

5. Results

Located on the outskirts of a mid-sized city, the Morasha school was the only school in its neighborhood serving religious-Zionist children. It enjoyed a solid reputation of a popular, relatively stable, well-managed and academically rigorous school. In 2011, when the number of pupils reached 1300, the local and national authorities asked the PSC to decide how to split the school into two institutions that would continue the legacy of the existing school and provide a viable solution for all existing students. As the PSC deliberated on this case for an entire year, tension between progressives and conservatives has risen to new heights. Finally, the committee decided by a slim margin, to divide the school by age, making no change concerning to gender separation. Upon receiving the PSC decision local and state authorities overturned it and asked PSC to come up with an alternative plan that would gain unanimous support of all PSC members. After two more years of negotiations with no avail, the two groups decided to separate the school into two different schools; one with a progressive bent and one for conservatives.

We analyze parents' discussions about the alternative separation plan and organize the findings along three main themes. The first concerns the centrality of religious education and specifically the importance of Morasha school for families. The second theme focuses on parents' frustration, anger, and disappointment aimed at municipal and state leaders whose lack of leadership was perceived to be a contributing factor to radicalization within the community. The last theme examines progressive and conservative parents' perceptions of academic rigor and prestige as well as gender and social inclusiveness, which shaped their positions in the struggle.

5.1. The importance of the morasha school for families

Finding high quality education for children is a top priority for many families nowadays. Nonetheless, when it comes to choosing a school, religious families are particularly hyper fastidious, as the school is responsible to provide not only academic knowledge, but also religious socialization according to a particular set of values and beliefs. In the case of Morasha school, the growing differences between parents' religious values were contained, as long as everybody attended the same school and no alternative arrangements were considered.

The discussions over the nature of school division opened a hornet's nest of controversies, exposing a deep cleavage within the community around the issue of gender separation in the classroom, leading to a

[5] We use the terms liberal and progressive interchangeably. While the term liberal was frequently mentioned by interviewees, we believe that the term progressive, widely used in the culture war literature, is slightly more adequate.

[6] Secondary data include two additional interviews with parents leaders in the community (Aviram and Barak) to complement and confirm the findings (see, Toorpaz, 2010).

fierce political struggle over the future of the school. A quote of one PSC member demonstrates the calamity and distress that he felt:

The issue of gender separation is a red line for me. It is detrimental to all my principles and beliefs. I'm not the one who has to compromise. And this was a battle over [my] house, far beyond the school—a struggle for the neighborhood! A school is a very significant part for people in their place of residence, and if the neighborhood school begins to be gender separated … then its really a feeling that we are fighting for the character of the neighborhood (interview with Hedva).

This statement reflects the important role that the school had in the psyche of parents who equated resisting gender separation to fighting over one's own home. Other interviewees described the significant connection they felt between the school's identity and that of their family and even their neighborhood. A direct result of this perception was that, whenever possible, families chose their place of residence to ensure their children study in a school that is aligned with their family's beliefs, values and ways of life. Any change in the neighborhood's status-quo was experienced as one that could potentially affect the school and vice versa, leading to feelings of anxiety and fear. As one progressive parent explained,

We were afraid that the character of the neighborhood would change. As you know… when looking for a place to live the issue of a school's location, when you have children, is quite critical. For us, it was clear that a school that becomes separated will bring a more ultra-Orthodox population to the neighborhood (interview with Samuel).

The important place that the school played for families was manifested not only in terms of their residential choice, but also in their desire to feel part of it. Parents' involvement was so apparent in the daily life of the school that, at times, they felt as if they were the ones running the place: “I feel like I built this school with my ten fingers” (interview with Michael). Arguably, for some parents the school has become part of their identity and self-definition, a place where they have invested heavily, both emotionally, socially and intellectually, to make it an anchor of communal belonging.

Nonetheless, when the option of school separation presented itself, the intense conflict that erupted between conservatives and progressives wiped out the utopian imagery of a united neighborhood that many parents used to hold:

It was like a terror attack on the neighborhood. From that minute on, a great war had erupted. This was evident in the slurs cast at people in every forum. You would go to the supermarket and see people talking; suddenly, all were silent because someone from the other camp had arrived. It became uncomfortable to walk around the neighborhood, unpleasant to leave the house (interview with Kfir).

This narrative and use of such divisive terms are suggestive of the severity of the conflict.

Taken together, it becomes clear why this battle over the school made parents fearful and motivated to win at all cost during the time of the school's redefinition.

5.2. There's no responsible adult

Another theme is the deep anger and disappointment parents developed during the process toward the local authority, the Ministry of Education, and the school administration. Parents felt confronted by inept leadership at every step in the process and employed expressions taken from the battlefield to describe the great chaos they were immersed in. Instead of leading the process and guiding it toward a unanimous agreement, institutional players joined the parents in a tailspin, leaving PSC members extremely frustrated, as blatantly shown in the following excerpt:

Children are the soft underbelly of the parents. It's the parents' right to go to the end … it's their right to do what they want, to behave like little children … I expect the Ministry of Education, the municipality, to be the leaders! They turned out to be first class do-nothings! Like people who can't see a meter in front of their nose (interview with Michael).

This perception of ineptness aimed at local and state officials was soon coupled by a deep sense of betrayal, when parents realized that PSC initial decision was overturned, sending parents and the neighborhood for two more years of fight. Kfir describes parents' feelings, as negotiations deteriorated:

They [authorities] took us out of the house at a rate of once a week, twice a week for a whole evening, and all the parents were really devoted to this. Since we wanted to divide the school from a position of unity. This issue was very, very important to us. [However] later on [when the decision was overturned], the situation became quite difficult. Everyone in the neighborhood was agitated. All kinds of very harsh accusations began in the neighborhood … (interview with Kfir).

This point was further stressed by other interviewees who described a critical meeting with the head of the Hemed administration (Ministry of Education). After a prolonged period of conflict between the two groups, parents came to this meeting with a hope that the person in charge of the system would reunite the groups and provide a solution to the communal chaos:

One of the peaks [of the conflict] was in a meeting regarding the school … I asked to speak [and] when I rose to talk, they [conservative parents] closed the microphone, they turned off the light! We were neighborhood friends! … But this was the breaking point, in which the neighborhood had been divided into two (interviews with Sonya).

The lack of a clear stance on part of the head of Hemed, the religious leader of the entire system, signaled a collapse of belief followed by a massive burst of anger, frustration and helplessness, which ultimately led to further radicalization of parents on both sides.

With the lack of central leadership and parents' uncertainty on the rise, some pinned their hopes for a solution on the school administration. Yet, although the school's principal was described by all interviewees as a professional who had turned the school into a leading institution, the crisis has tainted her reputation as well. According to Rina, a parent leader, the principal has decided to “take sides” in the dispute:

Then something happened that I consider unforgivable… the principal made [a] statement … and then the crazy, unwarranted hatred began… the people piloting the matter were the principal, [and] the head of the elementary school department in the municipality … The principal built the school and destroyed it with her own hands … there were hundreds of people there. The principal called out my name in front of everybody. She said to me: You personally, you're the one who's the destroyer! You're the one damaging the fabric of the neighborhood! (interview with Rina).

To conclude, parents felt emboldened to exercise choice and shape the future of the school. Yet, when reaching a dead-end they felt deeply disappointed for not having inspirational officials that could take the lead and resolve their grievances.

5.3. Religiosity, prestige and quality

A third theme emerging from interviews emphasized parents' perceptions of school prestige, class, religious diversity and social justice. These perceptions shaped both the initial and final proposal to divide the Morasha school. The first proposal, which suggested division by age, while making no change concerning to gender separation, reflected a win for progressives. It meant that the neighborhood children would attend schools with no gender separation. The final proposal, on the other hand, changed the status quo and forced progressives to fight for prestige with a competing conservative school.

Once the proposal was approved conservatives moved to add the word “Torani” to their school, declaring that their school would follow a strict gender separation, increase religious studies and implement a firm girls' dress-code. The hope was that the school's conservative character would draw a “stronger” population, namely affluent high-achieving conservative students, similar to other “Torani” schools. This vision responded to conservative parents who were constantly looking

for the best possible education for their children:

There will always be something better. And whatever [school] we have near home is not good enough for me; I'm always looking, maybe there is something better … This is what happens in the religious public. There is a problem with religious education. New yeshivot are opening all the time because everyone needs to tailor a place precisely to his needs (interview with Ruhama).

PSC progressive parents promoted an alternative vision based on social and religious inclusion. They felt uneasy sending their children to schools that aspire to create enclaves of affluence, conservatism and academic excellence. Instead, parents wanted their children to learn in an inclusive school, as one parent commented: "The most basic and critical thing to do is sending your children to a regular Zionist-religious school. That's the appropriate thing for religious Zionist parents who care for the entire people of Israel" (interview with Aviram). This inclusive notion was further elaborated by another parent arguing that a Zionist-religious school should welcome weak populations;

It is important that children know it is their duty to welcome immigrants, to bring them closer and to have spiritual power that will illuminate the environment and help others to strive. Torah and common sense, are commanding us to care for the children of Klal-Yisrael. I believe that Zionist-religious public education, which is diverse and consists of children from all walks of life, including good homes and weak homes, learn together, can only yield positive results to society. (interview with Barak).

While this view illustrates an elitist perspective, it also reflects a social justice commitment to promote disadvantaged groups in socially integrated and liberal Zionist-religious schools.

Promoting social and gender inclusiveness are both related to progressives' attempt to reconnect to the birth-place of Zionist-religious identity. As Hila, a progressive parent notes,

We felt that we had to fight [to reclaim our identity] … Originally, the religious-Zionist homes we grew up in were not extreme [but] liberal homes with worldviews of equal opportunity between boys and girls. Our homes aimed to prepare children for life, where [boys] won't meet girls for the first time in their lives in university (interview with Hila).

This argument casts the conservatives as the group who is undermining the original values of the Zionist-religious society.

Nonetheless, progressives at Morasha were also committed to academic excellence. This commitment and the deep concern of not being perceived as academically rigorous, led liberals to add the term "Torani" to their school's name, signaling that the liberal school would be as good as its conservative competitor.[7]

6. Discussion

This study employs fields theory (Bourdieu, 1985, 1993) and culture war theory (Hunter, 1992, 1996), to examine how parent, that is, social agents (in Bourdieu's terms) or progressives and conservatives (in Hunter's terms), struggled for positions of power to dictate the future of Morasha school. These parents (from both groups) who initially declared a desire to see their children attend a unified school, quickly reconsidered their positions, when the opportunity to disrupt the status-quo presented itself. From that point, both sides engaged in a fierce culture war.

According to Hunter (1992, 1996), conservatives are motivated by deep religious convictions to bend the school structure and curriculum in alignment with their religious interpretation of reality. The re-entry of conservatives to Hemed in the 1980s and 1990s, as equal partners marked the beginning of a creeping process in which conservatives have gradually taken over the positions of power at the state, local and school levels, slowly imposing their values, norms, and religious practices on increasing number of Zionist-religious public schools. In the process, the conservatives (the previous "heterodoxy" of the field) who used to feel excluded have become the ruling group (the new "orthodoxy") that controls the field (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996).

This ascent of religious conservatives to power is noteworthy, as orthodoxies tend to fortify their positions and hold on to their power and privileges (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Nonetheless, as power dissolved from Hemed's central and local administration to local PSCs, it meant that holding the former positions provided conservatives only partial power to control the field. Instead, the key for gaining control and shaping the future of schools was based also on the ability (for both groups) to organize and win the hearts and minds of local parents.

Indeed, findings from the Morasha school suggest, that having a grip over positions of power at the state, municipal and school administration, enabled conservatives to gradually spread their ideological agenda. Yet, progressives' move to re-capture Morasha's PSC changed the balance of power, allowing them to promote a new vision for the school that is based on gender and social inclusion and academic rigor. This progressive win holds both practical and theoretical importance. On a practical level, it offers liberal parents in other communities, who were stripped of their powers, an alternative path to reclaim their vision for establishing inclusive religious-Zionist schools. On a theoretical level, the weakening of Hemed's leadership vis-à-vis the increasing power of PSCs is a pattern consistent with wider trends of neo-liberalism in the Israeli (Dagan-Buzaglo, 2010; Michaeli, 2015), British (Ball, 2013), and American (Zeichner, 2010) education systems and specifically with previous findings about the rising involvement of parents in Israeli public schools (Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren, 2009; Friedman and Fisher, 2002).

Finally, Morasha's case is theoretically illuminating, as it offers two distinct tales about parents' choice and ability to shape schools in the era of neo-liberalism. The first, more common tale, is about privileged PSC parents (in our case, conservatives) utilizing choice to establish and/or join segregated schools that favor their offspring. As shown, this finding is consistent with research, particularly about religious public schools in England (Allen and West, 2011; Dwyer and Parutis, 2013; Butler and Hamnett, 2007) and Israel (Berger, 2015; Gross, 2008), and more generally about inequities related to increased parents' choice in the public school system (e.g., Anyon, 2014; Dagan-Buzaglo, 2010). The second, more surprising tale, is about a group of privileged PSC parents (i.e., progressives), who embraced the notion of gender and social inclusiveness along with high academic standards. This stance of progressives corresponds and reconnects with a past mission of Zionist-religious education to become a home for all Jewish immigrants, a controversial move which led to a considerable expansion of its student body and subsequent decline in the sector's academic achievements (Gross, 2008).

To conclude, these two tales offer divergent viable educational pathways that privileged groups, both in and outside the Zionist-religious sector, can choose from. Contrasting the two is important, because it surfaces structural tensions related to educational visions and expectations among privileged parents on issues, such as religiosity, academic excellence, and class and ethnic inclusivity/exclusivity. Yet, when combined with the rising global prominence of neo-liberal ideology, most privileged parents (in terms of cultural and/or economic capital) operate within the boundaries of one tale and will do everything in their power to demand increased educational choice and apply it to build segregated schools (e.g., Cookson and Persell, 2008). In this reality, the clear and strong voice of religious progressives, which call on privileged parents to take on collective responsibility for disadvantaged groups, is notable, significant and inspiring not only to religious schools, but for parents in general public schools across the world.

[7] It should be noted, that some liberal parents opposed this move, viewing it as a symbolic surrender to conservatives.

7. Concluding remarks and future research

This study offers a thick description of a culture war embedded in layers of cultural, religious and political contexts, between conservatives and progressives who had different religious education visions for their children. This study contributes to a better understanding and conceptualization of deep undercurrents that shape the power structure in the field of Zionist religious public schools in Israel and more generally it further confirms the validity and relevancy of the culture war concept as a framework through which various educational conflicts could be examined. While this case study is unique, the characteristics of the overarching struggle between the two groups resemble conflicts arround class segregation in English religious schools (Dwyer and Parutis, 2013) and religious culture wars, as described in numerous cases in U.S. public schools (e.g., Hartman, 2013; Zimmerman, 2009).

Future research should map and report on Zionist-religious parents' involvement in a larger and more diverse set of school communities, examining which factors shape parent's involvement. Specifically, it would be interesting to highlight how parent's involvement is shaped by ideology, religious identity and social class. Such a research may provide a more diverse sample and possibly more representative findings in comparison to this current research. Another research avenue may focus on a comparative study that contrasts the different motivations that guide and shape the commitment of religious progressive and secular progressive parents to build inclusive schools that are open to and supportive of disadvantaged groups. Lastly, more studies are needed to explore the connections and links between religious and ideological struggles and neo-liberal interventions in education (e.g., privatization, competition, standards and accountability).

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