Recurring reforms and changes in the Israeli educational system: an analytic approach

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The evaluation of education systems with regard to the demands of the labour market and from the perspective of economic growth and of employment policies
The papers focuses on the issue of the recurrence of school reform and changes in the Israeli educational system. This phenomenon has been observed in recent years in the United States (Marsh and Bowman, 1989; Hatic and La Brecque, 1989; Murphy, 1990) and in many education systems and education level in Europe (Cerych and Sabatier, 1986; Clark, 1987; Lawton, 1989; Weiler, 1988; McClean, 1989). Seemingly, the phenomenon of recurrence in educational reform movements is not limited to special educational system, but bears signs of a more universal character (Cuban, 1990; Ginsburg et al., 1991). The identification of some common features of this phenomenon and its explanations may contribute to the understanding of educational reform and changes in general.

The recurrence of reform movements and changes is discernible in the Israeli educational system as well, and it focuses on four issues, namely the structure of the system; curricular policies; patterns of Matriculation examination (Bagrut); and on the locus of influence on policy making. The underlying common base of this phenomenon in Israel are changes in the ideological realm, in which emphasis on excellence in education alternates with emphasis on equality. The changes reflect shifts in the philosophy of "equal educational opportunity", to which the Israeli system has been committed since the inception. The interpretation of this philosophy underwent several phases.

During the first decade of Israel's statehood (1948-1957) "equal education opportunity" meant formal equality which was consistent with the prevailing "melting pot" absorption policy (Eisenstadt, 1967). But soon it became evident that this approach did not narrow the scholastic gap between students of Oriental (North African) origin especially on the secondary school level (Iram, 1986; Schmida, 1987). Consequently during the second decade (1958-1967) the "formal" approach alternated with the compensatory approach of "national protectionism" by which extra resources were diverted to disadvantaged student populations, largely of Oriental origin (Smilansky, 1957; Adler, 1984). The failure of this approach too, motivated the introduction of still another approach in the educational systems philosophy. Indeed during the third decade (1968-1977) educational equality emphasized the recognition of individual differences and the need to realize the students potentialities. This was to be achieved by providing differentiated education opportunities within newly established integrative junior high schools (Schmida, 1987).
During the fourth decade still another change in the philosophy of education became discernible. The orientation towards equality in education weakened and a more elitistic approach, stressing excellence, took over again. This trend was evident in the decrease in the pace of opening new junior high schools, and the expansion of private, semi-private and specialized ("distinctive") schools within the public-state school system which adhered to the forces of open market, competing for stronger student populations (Schmida, 1988; Shapira, 1988).

Similar trends are observed in other Western countries, especially in the United States and Western Europe (Leshinsky and Meyer, 1990). Since World War II the educational systems in these countries, too, moved from being highly elitistic, especially on the high school level, towards a more open, democratic and egalitarian system. But as of the 80's, there are indications that the systems are moving again in the direction of more excellence on the expense of equality, especially in the United States (Murphy, 1990) and the United Kingdom (Tulasiewicz, 1987).

CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The most salient expression of the change in the conception of equal educational opportunity in the Israeli education system is identifiable in the educational structure. The issue is relevant especially at the secondary school level, because as to primary schooling the "Law of Compulsory Learning" (1949) provided equal educational opportunities to all the children, from age 5 up to 14 years (K-8). With relation to secondary education, the orientation was elitistic during the first decade of statehood (1948-1957). Only students of high academic ability, and those whose parents were able to pay tuition fees, attended the few existing academic high schools (Bentwich, 1965). Moreover, in 1955 a national screening examination was introduced at the end of the primary school level, which turned the entrance into secondary education, especially into the academic type of schooling, even more difficult, as failure on this examination served as a serious barrier. Indeed the median school entrance in 1961 was 5.9 years for students of Oriental origin compared to 9.1 years for Westerns aged 14 and over (Israel, 1963). The percentage of failure in the screening test was proportionally high among students of Oriental origin. This consequently caused their underrepresentation on the high school level, when compared to their percentage in the corresponding age group. As a result their way to higher education and to higher occupational positions was also barred (Irám, 1986).
The second decade of the State of Israel was characterized by national pedagogical efforts to raise the educational level of Students from Oriental origin, in order to close the gap between them and between those from western origin. These compensatory efforts included a lower standard for success in the screening examination for Oriental students, the establishment of new types of high schools among them schools of a more comprehensive nature, and the investment of additional resources in the upper third of the more talented Oriental students. The compensatory educational approach was motivated by national and social considerations. It was rooted in the concern for the nation’s social solidarity which was threatened by socioeconomic gaps and the need to cope with social and ethnic unrest which occurred at the end of this decade (Cohen, 1980).

These educational measures may be considered as the forerunners which paved the way for the educational reform, on which the Israeli Parliament decided during the third decade of the State’s existence (Words of Parliament, 1969). The reform differed from the previous educational stepwise measures which were taken during the 1950’s. It was designed to constitute a total overhaul of the educational system, both to change its structure and philosophy and to revise the criteria according to which human and economic resources were distributed among student groups varying in ethnic origin and socio-economic stratum. The main features of the structural changes and the legal measures of the reform process have been extensively dealt with in literature (Amir, Sharan and Ben-Ari, 1984; Peled, 1982; Schmida, 1987, 1988). But attention should be drawn to the fact that the main purpose of the structural reform was to democratize secondary education by means of raising the compulsory leaving age to 16 (Rimalt, 1971) and by confronting the system with the two-fold aim: to raise the level of academic achievements and to close the educational gap between students from different ethnic backgrouns and different socio-economic strata, and to accelerate the processes of social integration among these groups (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1971, 1972).

THE ACADEMIC APPROACH TO CURRICULUM vs. THE MORE PRACTICAL ONE

The role of curriculum is to provide educational means to convert ideology into social objectives, on one hand and on the other to facilitate individual needs and intellectual mastery. Reforms in curriculum are responses to changes in philosophy of education and to social circumstances. Contradictory tendencies, individualistic-intellectual and ideological-social,
are the dual goals of education and curriculum. This tension exists latently, and emerges to the surface whenever curricular changes are considered.

Indeed the observed phenomenon of recurrency of changes in educational practice in general and in the field of curriculum in particular, such as the tension between the stresses on academic, vocational, and more general fields of study, are caused in part by this dual set of goals. Kliebard (1988) offers four hypotheses to explain cyclical changes in curriculum in the United States. These hypotheses do not apply equally to all educational systems, and do not cover all possible motives for changes in curriculum, nevertheless they may explain, to a certain degree, the too frequent recurrernt in curriculum reforms and the return to the status-quo ante which follows school reforms in many countries. Kliebard's third hypotesis on the interaction between curricular theories and sociopolitical ideologies in relevant to the understanding of frequent curricular changes in the Israeli educational system. In times of sociopolitical ideologies tending towards excellence, curricular trends emphasize orientations which Eisner and Vallance (1974) call "academic rationalism" or "structure of knowledge", whereas in time when sociopolitical ideologies tend towards equality, curricular objectives stress "self-actualization" and "social reconstruction - relevance" (ibid).

Kliebard's (1988) explanation is suggesting that during the first decade of Israel's existence, until the end of 1950's, the tendency was towards a uniform, rigid, academic curriculum, in order to reach excellence in academic standards (Smilansky, 1957); more structured processes of teacher qualification and accreditation were introduced by the Ministry of Education while textbooks were either published or had to be approved by the Ministry if published by others (Peled and Glasman, 1990). The analysis of the stated aims of the 1953 State Education Law, and the specific goals of various curricula subjects, as well as the study of their content and construct, indicate that curriculum construction was guided by the conceptions of "academic rationalism" and "structure of knowledge". These conceptions were in line with the overarching aim of schooling, which was oriented exclusively towards cultural transmission and national solidarity (Eisenstadt, 1967). But soon it became evident that the approach of "formal equality" (Smilansky, 1973) left behind pupils from the lower socio-economic strata which belonged mainly from Oriental origin, and a deep gap in academic achievements became evident between them and between pupils from Western origin and higher socio-economic strata (Smooha and Peres, 1974).
In order to narrow the gap in academic achievements, on one hand, but also to keep the standards of academic excellence, on the other hand, another curriculum approach was taken. The assumption during the second decade, the 1960’s, was that disadvantaged student populations need compensatory curricular programs - more of the same - in order to reach higher standards of academic achievements and to foster a sense of national solidarity. This curricular orientation was in line with the conception of the "development of cognitive processes" (Eisner and Vallance, 1974) and aimed to weaker student populations. But the outcomes of this approach were disappointing and the educational gap narrowed only slightly, especially on the high-school level.

The Israeli society confronted a severe social problem: on one hand it had to deal with the continuing Arab-Israeli conflict and with problems of a modern technological society which demanded high standards of academic excellence. On the other hand there was a real social danger of disintegration of the Israeli society into ethnic groups, because of the consistent correlation between ethnic origin and economic, occupational, educational and political power to the disadvantage of the Orientals (Kleinberger, 1969). Therefore the third decade of the Israeli educational system adopted a socio-political orientation which turned more towards equality. The new approach was embodied in the Educational Reform Act of 1969, which depended heavily on the construction of new curricular programs. During the 1970’s the curriculum was conceived as "technology" and aimed at the "self-actualization" of students’ individual potentialities and skills (Eisner and Vallance, 1974). The supremacy of academic subject matter was weakened, and a more practical nature of curriculum took over (Eden, 1973). Multiple and ability differentiated curricular programs were introduced in Comprehensive high schools, and the vocational school system was expanded to comprise about half of the secondary school age group (Iram, 1986).

Seemingly, the fourth decade of the Israeli educational system, the 1980’s, witnessed again a shift from the more egalitarian ideology to that of excellence. In concordance with this swing, academic orientations in school curriculum regained momentum at the expense of more practical ones.

**RIGIDITY vs. FLEXIBILITY OF MATRICULATION EXAMINATIONS**

The oscillations between orientations towards excellence versus equality in education, as well as different approaches to curricula, are
reflected in the approach to matriculation examinations. These examinations were introduced in the pre-state educational system (Lewy, 1990) and adopted by the Ministry of Education and Culture after the establishment of the State of Israel. The examinations are conducted at the end of high school and reflect standards of academic achievement in the system in general, as well as the achievements of individual students. Students who pass all the examinations will be granted a Matriculation Certificate (Bagrut) and access to higher education and in turn to higher status professional positions. Although secondary education, and especially the most prestigious academic high schools, were rather selective, the rate of success in examinations was quite low during the years, and the percentage of students from Oriental origin who passed the examinations successfully was lower than the national mean.

Following the implementation of the Reform Act, which made the first stage of secondary education compulsory and free for all, more and new student populations entered also the second stage of secondary education. These were heterogenous student bodies, characterized by different interests and competencies than the more selective ones. The students and their parents exerted pressure on the academic high school to sit for Matriculation examinations and to pass them with success. The leading principles of the reform in the matriculation examinations were to enable individual schools to offer optional combinations of subjects for examinations, instead of the existing prescribed and mandatory subjects; to reduce the number of examinations and spread them over three years; to offer various levels of examinations within each subject matter, and to differentiate between obligatory and optional subjects for examinations. Consequently, each pupil could choose the scope of the subject matter for his individual examinations which were obligatory for all (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1976). The more flexible policy with regard to the Matriculation examinations served well the more egalitarian approach to secondary education and increased the number of students of Oriental origin who passed the examinations with success from about 6 percent in the late 1960's to about 15 percent in the early 1980's while the rate of success of Western origin students remained constant at about 33 percent (Bilezki and Turki, 1982; Adler, 1986).

During the 1980's the tendency towards liberalization with regard to the examinations was changed again, in accordance with the shift from more egalitarian orientation of education towards those encouraging excellence. The number of optional subjects for examinations was reduced by half, in order to increase the uniformity of the various Matriculation diplomas, and
more balance between the various subjects was recommended (Lewy, 1990). The most crucial decisions for the weaker student population were the rise in minimal requirements in English and Mathematics as obligatory subjects for examinations, in which the chances of weaker students to succeed are quite low. The inevitable consequence of the recurrence of more rigid measures with regard to Matriculation examinations was the decrease in the number of students, especially students from weaker strata of population, mainly Orientals, to pass the examinations with success and to get access to academic studies.

SECTORIAL vs. NATIONAL EMPHASIS ON EDUCATION

The pre-state educational system was characterized by the influence of political parties which instilled the schools with sectorial ideologies. The parties established their own schools and directed them according to their ideologies and beliefs (Bentwich, 1965). "The Law of State Education" (1953) put an end to this situation, leaving behind only the division of the system into two sectors, namely the state educational sector, and the state religious one.

During the following decade and until the mid 1970's, the influence of political parties on the educational system weakened and a much stronger national - central orientation took over.

Since the late 1970's, although the national regulations were not abolished, sectorial emphasis in the educational system reappeared. In that decade the central instrument for the implementation of equality, the integrative junior high school, was negatively affected. During the whole decade, 1980-1990, less than 10 percent of children from the relevant age group joined integrative schools (The Ministry of Education and Culture, 1989). By the same token, parents from stronger socio-economic strata buy educational services within the framework of public education, and sometimes in addition or outside it. Thus the phenomenon of "grey education" spreads especially in elementary schools. Better-off groups of parents form on their own expense supplementary programs to enrich their children in the arts which were drastically reduced as well as in academic subject matter. Throughout this decade a number of specialized ("distinctive") schools have been established, which focus either on particular learning content areas, such as arts, sciences, or on ideological value orientations, such as Labour party values or special religious values. Other schools emphasize special pedagogical approaches, directed towards more experi-
mental and open education. The common denominator of these schools is that they attract mostly a selective student populations with stronger academic background and ability, from well-to-do economic strata. The phenomenon of "Grey Education" may be looked upon as the reaction of frustrated parents to a slimmed down curriculum, void of various enrichment courses. As of the mid 1970's the funding of public social and educational services was cut down, because of exogenous factors (Cerych and Sabatier, 1986) namely the economic crisis, high inflation, and budgetory restrictions which prevailed in Israel (Kop, 1985).

The fact that the national authority - the Ministry of Education - encouraged stronger population segments, directly or indirectly, to supplement public educations services by their own means while removing support from weaker population segments resulted in the strenghtening of sectorial influence on education. Various interest groups exerted pressures on the system, demanding rights of parental choice of schools (Shapira and Goldring, 1990), thus circumventing and altering accepted policies of social integration and equality in a variety of ways. As a result, schooling conditions in well-to-do neighbourhoods are better. This happened despite the existence of a wide consensus regarding the stated policy of school integration, and the allocation of additional resources for the education of disadvantaged student populations (Minkovitch et al., 1977; Elboim-Dror, 1989; Inbar and Sever, 1989).

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The paper has illuminated the phenomenon of the recurrency of changes and reform movements in the Israeli educational system in four areas. In search for an explanation for the recurrency of reform movements in the U.S.A., Cuban (1990), suggests two perspectives, the political and the institutional. The political approach rests on the assumption that hidden tensions exist between competing social values inside the school which, when faced by external events, trigger individuals and groups to demand changes which are reached by political tradeoffs. The institutional perspective analyzes schools as organizations, which try to be responsive to the values and demands of their constituencies, on the one hand but on the other hand, promise teachers a satisfying autonomy and isolation, by means of certain school activities which are insulated from external driven pressures.

It seems that the two perspectives suggested by Cuban (1990) - the political and the institutional - are relevant also to the explanation of the
recurrency of reform and changes in the Israeli educational system. It should be mentioned, though, that the political perspective in Israel is induced by socio-economic dimensions, namely socio-economic gaps between ethnic groups, those of Oriental origin and those of Wester, origin. The development of inequalities in income, occupation, political power and education (Smooha and Peres, 1980) posed a threat to the solidarity of the various components of the evolving Israeli society. The hidden tensions erupted in riots during the 1950’s and 1960’s (Cohen, 1980) and reached the forefront of the central political scene, following the gradual transition of young Orientals from their peripheral positions of power in the local municipalities, to more central positions on the national level (Shills, 1975; Peled, 1979). Thus the ethnic socioeconomic and educational gap became a "salient issue" (Dawson, 1973) on the national agenda, with which the Ministry of Education and Culture tried to cope during the 1960’s.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the educational system has been conceived as an instrument for individual improvement and social integration as well as for national unity. Thus, because of the persistence of the gap between the ethnic groups, the Israeli Parliament decided upon the Reform of Education in 1968, after many intensive deliberations (Schmida, 1987). The Parliamentary decision, concerning the educational reform, serves as a cause of "Political Manipulation" due to political trade-off (Archer, 1979). In order to reach political consensus, the Reform lacked decisiveness, as far as its orientation towards equality and integration was concerned. The inherent weakness of the decision made possible its ambiguous interpretation, which in turn paved the way to ambiguity in its implementation. Nevertheless, during the initial stages, the implementation of the Reform, instigated by the central government, following the European model (Clark, 1987), was ambitious in its depth, breadth and level of implementation (Cerych and Sabatier, 1986). However, the political coalition which the Reform mobilized was not wide enough to protect the changes against its opponents. Various groups were not content with the spirit of consensus which was crucial for its success, and paving the way for its later decline. In addition, the Parliamentary decision granted the local authorities freedom whether to introduce or to eject the reform in their localities. Some local authorities ceded to pressure groups, mainly well-situated parents, who feared of educational dilution and declining standards attributed to the Reform and its policy of integration. In order to evade the Reform there was even shifting of populations among schools in some localities (Coleman, 1989). The end result was that in 1990, only 55 percent of the relevant age group attended reformed schools. Individual schools, too, retained a fair amount of autonomy in the implementation of the Reform. Some of them
based instruction on curricular tracking and ability grouping, which are segregative mechanism highly correlated with ethnicity, thus avoiding the Ministry’s directive of social integration (Shavit, 1984).

These and other tactics adopted by schools in order to evade social integration were explained also by teachers’ opposition to basic premises, social, psychological and organizational, upon which the Reform was based. As a matter of fact, teachers were not involved in the political process of planning the Reform. More so, the Teachers Union opposed the Reform throughout (Peled, 1982). Indeed the European Council for Cultural Cooperation (1987), too, stated that "many educational reform in Europe have no been successful because the teachers had not been involved right from start and had not been fully convinced" (p. 5). Teachers may also be afraid of lowering standards of students’ academic achievements (Schwarzward and Amir, 1984) or may be that they were incompetent to cope with integrative, heterogeneous student bodies in the classrooms because they were not provided with appropriate training in new methods of instruction, proper facilities and learning materials (Dar and Resh, 1986). Thus the incongruency between the national-political level, which decided upon the educational reform, the Teachers Union opposition, the reluctance of some local authorities, and the conduct of individual schools, which did not comply with it, may explain the decline of the Reform and the recurrency of pre-reform phenomena, including practical "resegregation" (Epstein, 1986). On top of these "internal" educational factors one might add the "external" ideological developments which caused the weakening of the ethos of striving towards social justice and solidarity which characterized the Israeli society (Horowits and Lisak, 1989). These developments were in line with similar trends such as liberalism, economic competitive enterprunuity, individual rights for self realization, and the increased power of the community and local authority (Report, 1991). Thus, parents choice of schools has become a central idea for improving education, a demand which is voiced in Israel as in the United States and England (Boyd and Walberg, 1990; Lawton, 1989).

The explanation of the recurrency of reform and changes in the Israeli educational system by means of the political and institutional perspectives suggested by Cuban, might be elaborated by means of the sociological approach. The movement towards democracy and equality is embedded within the assumption that the intended changes are for the better (Ginsburg et al., 1991). Reforms are conceived as improvements in certain aspects of education, such as its effectiveness and efficiency (Merritt and Coombs, 1977; Spanlding, 1988). The explanation is rooted in the equilibrium
paradigm based upon the structural-functional analysis. Indeed the Israeli reform started its way based upon universal homeostatic principles, such as reforms should be an integral part of its social context; should mobilize a wide political coalition; be planned carefully and based upon slow and gradual strategies of implementation; involve both formal educational networks and informal networks, such as family and community; put in efforts to overcome initial resistance of change; build in mechanisms of monitoring and evaluations; provide leadership for educational change and finally secure financial resources (Goodlad, 1983; Passow, 1984; Husen, 1986).

But whereas the changes in the late 60’s and 70’s may be explained by the structural functional Parsonian approach, the events in the 1980’s lean themselves to the Weberian model of status group conflict explanation (Archer, 1979; Banks, 1987). During the 1980’s, a decline in the reform process is witnessed, together with recurrent tendencies in the other spheres, in which changes took place, namely the structural, the curricular, the matriculation examinations and in the national vs. sectorial orientations in education. This development marks a break in national consensus which was agreed upon in the 1970’s, and constitutes a process of "external transaction" (Archer, 1979), by which groups outside the public educational system, make efforts to obtain more and better services and provide additional resources directly to educators. This has been done in Israel in the frameworks of "grey education" within state schools providing additional educational services paid for by parents and in largely "reseggregated" "specialized schools". The retreat from the Reform may be viewed as an outcome of an ongoing struggle between groups, conflicting interests and inherently contradictory social relations (Archer, 1979; Banks, 1987). This approach tends to analyze educational reform in terms of struggles between ethnic, racial or economic status groups based upon competition for scarce resources (Ginsburg, 1991).

CONCLUSIONS

The Reforms and changes in structure, curriculum, examinations, and socio-political orientation of the educational system in Israel, during the 1960’s and 1970’s, were explained as processes based upon homeostatic principles, whereas their decline and the recurrence of earlier trends in the 1980’s were conceived as conflictual processes (Kashti, 1978). There are signs that the present decade, the 1990’s, will be influenced again by homeostatic principles. But this time the cyclic movement will not stop at the
secondary school but will reach also the tertiary level (Iram, 1992). The council of Higher Education, which is responsible for planning tertiary education in Israel, has announced its intention to expand the framework of higher education by establishing independent undergraduate colleges, in order to absorb the graduates of high schools who have been admitted to the Universities, because of the rigidity of entrance requirements, and also because of the growing demand for higher education caused by increased immigration from the Soviet Union and its potential social and economic effects (Council for Higher Education, 1991).

The analysis of the phenomenon of reform recurrency in Israel's education system might be of interest because it confronts a multitude of problems of socio-economic and ethnic nature due to the fact that Israel is an immigrant pluralistic economy. Although caution should be taken as to the generalization of the explanations offered to the recurrency of educational changes in the Israeli system, because of its relative short existence and small size, nevertheless this study offers a possible model for further analysis of case studies in educational reform, and educational policy in general, in other countries.

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