



## **Negotiating Between Equality and Choice – A Dilemma of Israeli Educational Policy in Historical Context**

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## **Negotiating Between Equality and Choice – A Dilemma of Israeli Educational policy in Historical context**

*Zvi Berger\**

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*Abstract:* In this article, I focus upon an underlying and recurring tension between two recurring and often interrelated areas of tension in Israeli education, the interplay between centralizing and decentralizing tendencies, and the clash between the values of equality and choice. I show how these tensions come to fore in relation to three turning points in Israeli educational policy formation: 1) the abolition of state recognition of political and ideological trends of education in 1953; 2) the educational reform and integration program of 1968-69 and subsequent efforts of implementation; 3) the various proposals and programs of decentralization, recognizing community schools, school autonomy, school-based management and parental choice of the 1980's and '90's, whose effects are felt to this day. I then bring a number of prominent examples of ideologically oriented choice initiatives which have emerged within the last 3 decades in Israeli state education, and I argue for the encouragement of such initiatives, while ensuring through proper regulation that the commitment to equality be maintained. I also argue that striving for true educational equality for peripheral communities requires vast resources, and that with proper regulatory frameworks the 'third sector' can and should be part of this process. Within this context, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), foundations and private donors may be seen as potential strengthening agents of public education, rather than as facilitators of its dissolution.

*Keywords:* pre-state background, ideological educational trends, Israel

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## **Introduction**

When the state of Israel was created in 1948, the framework for a modern Hebrew educational system had long ago been established. Already in the 1880's, with the First *Aliyah* (the 1<sup>st</sup> wave of modern Zionist settlement) the first modern Hebrew schools were established in various communities, and by 1913 the World Zionist Organization (established in 1897) had formed an Education Committee to oversee modern Hebrew schooling in Palestine.

The British Mandate over Palestine (1921) recognized Jewish educational autonomy (under Zionist auspices). This Hebrew educational system, however, was far from centralized. Traditional schools established by philanthropic organizations for the ultra-Orthodox Jews of the Old *Yishuv* (the pre-Zionist Jewish community in the Holy Land) were not integrated into the Zionist framework. Ideological differences within the Zionist camp found their expression with the recognition of three internally autonomous trends of Hebrew education. The workers' trend was directly connected to the Labor Zionists, who played a dominant role in the Jewish community in Palestine. These schools placed heavy emphasis upon the educational ideal of the 'new Jew', imbued with socialist ideology, pioneering values and a strong connection to the land. Reflecting the influence of modern progressive education, these schools stressed 'hands-on' learning in such areas as crafts, gardening (as preparation for manual agricultural labor) and nature studies. Religious Zionists were strictly Orthodox and thus educated for the internalization of religious belief and behavioral norms. At the same time, however, they affirmed the necessity of Zionism and enthusiastically identified with the overall movement, despite the avowed secularism of most Zionists. These educators also sought to give their students the practical skills and general knowledge needed to function in a modern society. The third approach, known as the general trend, placed emphasis upon the study of the Hebrew language and the Jewish heritage (primarily Bible) from a modern, secular and national perspective. While based upon a liberal approach and loosely affiliated with centrist and right-wing political factions within the Zionist movement, it was less ideologically based than the others, and many Labor Zionists (including such prominent figures as David Ben-Gurion) sent their children to general schools. As a result, this trend was actually the largest of the three, despite the fact that the dominating ideological current and political

force in this period was Labor Zionism, as manifested in the powerful *Histadrut* (the labor union) and the various workers' political parties.

The establishment of the three educational trends created a decentralized framework in which the various factions could freely engage in ideological education, while still fostering cooperation towards the achievement of common national goals. Despite the dominance of Labor ideology and institutions, a variety of educational choices with distinct curricular and pedagogical approaches were offered within the Jewish community. On the eve of the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948, the foundations for the establishment of the educational system were already well in place. The Zionist administrative bodies for education formed the basis for the Ministry of Education established after the founding of the state. Other primary actors in policy making were the supervisory departments for the three educational trends, the Teachers Union, and local governments (Elboim-Dror, 1999).

### ***Mamlachtiyut* ('Statism') in Israeli education and the abolition of ideological trends in 1953**

In its initial years, the newly created state of Israel faced serious challenges to its very existence. Besides the extremely heavy casualties of the 1948-49 war, during the war and in its aftermath Israel absorbed hundreds of thousands of refugees, including Oriental Jewish communities from many Middle Eastern countries as well as survivors of the Nazi holocaust in Europe. The country faced serious housing shortages, and financial resources were meager. Internally, Jewish society was deeply divided, with serious ideological gulfs between socialist and capitalist factions, as well as between the predominantly secular majority and the various religiously observant communities. In this context, the first prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion embarked upon a comprehensive policy known as *mamlachtiyut* ('statism'), which was designed to ensure the exclusive authority of newly created state institutions. This policy often necessitated unpopular actions, such as the disbanding of militias with connections to ideological movements and the incorporation of their members into the Israel Defense Forces. In education, the statist approach was enthusiastically promulgated, not only by Ben-Gurion, but also by the historian Prof. Ben-Zion Dinur, who served as Minister of Education from 1951 to 1955. The ongoing process of nation-building required educating

immigrants from widely varying cultural and social contexts to become Israelis. This nebulous Israeli national character was a Zionist ideological construct, in which 'Israeliness' was associated with the cultural ethos and behavioral norms of the dominant elite, which was European Ashkenazic in ethnic origin, and predominantly secular in outlook. It is in the overall context of the pursuit of statism, coupled with the practical difficulties and challenges resulting from the massive immigration, that the first decade of Israeli educational policy may best be understood. These years are characterized by a highly centralized educational system, grounded in foundational legislation.

One of the first pieces of legislation enacted in Israel was the Compulsory Education Law of 1949. This law stipulated that public education was to be free and compulsory for all children from the ages of 5 to 13, as well as all those from 14 to 17 who had not received an elementary education. In general, educational services were to be provided by the central government through the Ministry of Education, while local authorities were mandated to participate in the maintenance of these services whenever required. This law clarified that henceforth there would be one central authority for Israeli education, the national government. It 'granted legitimation to centralization' (Gaziel, 1996, p. 36). Old loyalties die hard, however, and as a result the autonomous ideological trends remained until 1953.

Full implementation of the Compulsory Education Law proved to be extremely difficult. The number of children in elementary schools grew from 91,000 in 1948 to 185,000 in 1951, which led to a serious shortage of qualified teachers (Bentwich, 1960). The situation was the most severe in the immigrant camps and tent cities which had been hastily set up to provide temporary housing for the huge waves of immigrants. According to official statistics, in May 1950, there were 12,570 children (from 5 to 14) in these camps, of which only 4,451 were actually attending school. (Zameret, 1993).

The educational challenges created by the mass immigration, particularly in regard to those who came from the 'Oriental communities' of the Middle East were indeed daunting. Many of these immigrants were poor and relied upon their children to work and supplement their income. Some came from countries where primary education was not compulsory, nor the need for such a system always recognized by the immigrants. In order to modernize the immigrants and socialize them as quickly as possible to Israeli life, the 'melting pot' approach became the dominant

ideal. In its most extreme expressions, this led to a number of instances of anti-religious coercion in immigrant camps, including the cutting of sidelocks of Yemenite male children, and disruption of traditional *Torah* study. The public outcry which ensued led to the creation of an official government commission of inquiry, the Frumkin Commission, convened in August 1950. This commission conducted a thorough investigation into the claims and complaints raised, and it concluded that serious mistakes were made by those working in the immigrant camps, which demonstrated a lack of sufficient respect for the immigrants' own traditions. The commission's report documented many examples of what became known as 'soul-stalking', which involved struggles between the various political parties to bribe and pressure immigrant parents to send their children to their schools, in the hope that they would join their ranks. While parents were legally entitled to send their children to whatever type of school they wished, in practice this freedom was largely denied to the masses of new immigrants. The report served as the major catalyst for the fall of the first government in February 1951 (Zameret, 2001). In the aftermath of these elections of 1951, it became clear that public opinion was now ripe for abandoning the system of trends. This was the background to the adoption of the State Education Law of 1953, which formally abolished ideological trends. This development was another clear extension of the centralization policy, yet the practical effect of this law was limited. While the labor and general trends were now amalgamated into one system of general state education, a certain degree of autonomy was still granted to schools in kibbutzim, and a separate branch for education in rural settlements was maintained. Moreover, the educational and structural autonomy of state religious education, (subordinate to the authority of the Minister of Education) was maintained, thus creating two recognized types of state education; state general education and state religious. The ultra-Orthodox schools were allowed to continue to function outside the state system, while still receiving quasi-formal status as 'recognized but not official' schools. (Ministry of Education, 1953). The law granted the Minister of Education the right to determine the requirements which all such 'recognized' schools must comply with in order to be eligible for state funding, as well as the level and extent of such funding. The autonomous framework for state religious education, the limited autonomy granted to kibbutz schools, as well as the 'recognized but not official' status of the ultra-Orthodox schools all demonstrate that centralization of the educational system was not absolute, and that the principle of choice in education was still recognized.

Another provision theoretically allowing for decentralization reserved for parents of children in official schools was the right to determine (subject to ministry approval) up to 25% of the general curriculum, though this clause was seldom utilized. Still, the law did formally establish a centralized state education system, clarifying that education is the responsibility of the state, and that political or religious organizations would not be involved in state schools.

### **The *reforma* - educational reform and the quest for social equality**

Educational policy in the 1950's remained highly centralized. The policies were rooted in the overall conception of education promulgated by Minister of Education Dinur, which reflected a commitment to the value of formal equality. Dinur believed that uniformity in administrative structures, curricula and allocation would lead to equality of results among students from varying ethnic backgrounds. By the late 1950's, however, it became apparent that this faith was overly naïve. Differences in scholastic achievement between students of Asian or African background as compared to those of European origin were pronounced, and only a small percentage of Asian-African students succeeded in entrance exams required to enroll in secondary schools (Gaziel, 1996). The riots which broke out in the Wadi Salib neighborhood of Haifa in 1959 focused public attention to the problem of ethnic inequality, and this led to a different strategy, that of differential inputs to favor the disadvantaged sectors of the population. This policy assumed that commitment to equality in education required concerted effort to foster not only equal opportunities, but equal educational outcomes (Shapira & Haymann, 1991). At the initiative of Education Minister Zalman Aranne, special budgetary allocations were made to create a variety of enrichment programs, textbooks and curricula for all levels of primary education from nursery school through eighth grade (Ackerman, 2008a). Despite the worthwhile intentions, however, these programs did not foster significant change. Disturbingly large gaps in achievement remained. For example, the results of the 1966 survey examination given to students at the end of the eighth grade in order to determine eligibility for tuition discounts and placement in academic secondary schools, showed that 75% of children from Western origin had passed the exam, as opposed to only 33% of the students from Middle Eastern origin (Ackerman, 2008a). Even Israeli-born children whose

fathers were of Middle Eastern origin were significantly under-represented in the academic schools (Gaziel, 1996).

This led policy makers to a more comprehensive attempt to foster educational equality, known as the *reforma*. In 1963 a committee headed by Yehoshua Praver (former head of the Pedagogical Secretariat) was established by Education Minister Aranne, to consider extending the Compulsory Education act in order to provide free and compulsory education through the ninth grade. The committee endorsed Aranne's proposal, but made its recommendation conditional on the acceptance of a much larger agenda of reform. Specifically, a restructuring of the school system was called for; replacing the 8-year primary school and four-year secondary school with a 6-3-3- arrangement, creating 'middle schools' for 7-9 graders, and development of appropriate curricula and teacher training programs for those schools (Ackerman, 2008a). From the outset, the structural reform was tied to the goal of integration, as the middle schools would draw students from primary schools located in a variety of neighborhoods. Subsequent to the Praver committee, a lively social debate ensued concerning educational reform and integration in education. Not surprisingly, the Teacher's Union (which represented all elementary school teachers, as well as 30% of all secondary school teachers), expressed strong opposition to the Praver proposals. Kibbutz spokesmen and educators as well as leaders of the religious parties also spoke out against the proposal. The controversy engendered led to the creation of a formal parliamentary committee; the Rimalt commission. The committee heard testimony from a wide variety of interested parties, as well as from academicians from countries in which integration reforms had been attempted. Significantly, the Teachers Union was not represented on either the Praver or Rimalt committees. Ultimately, supporters of reform gained the upper hand, and the Knesset voted in favor of educational reform in June 1968. The reform had two goals: 1) to foster social integration of students of Jewish Asian-African origin with their European counterparts, as well as between various social strata in the Arab schools, and 2) to enhance the scholastic achievement of the lower socio-economic pupils in Jewish schools, in order to enable them to climb the social ladder (Gaziel, 1994).

It should be noted that while the *reforma* constituted a major shift in educational policy, the commitment to the fundamental social ideal of the 'melting pot' had not changed. On the contrary, the impetus for reform had stemmed precisely from the growing realization that the previous policies

of uniformity had failed to achieve the broad national goals that Ben-Gurion and Dinur had envisioned.

The *reforma* was the major focus for educational policy in Israel in the 1970's. Yet despite the vast expenditures involved, the program was beset with numerous difficulties and was only partially implemented. A report commissioned by the Knesset Education committee in 1981 revealed that after 13 years of reform, only 56% of Jewish children and 48% of Arab children were studying in middle schools, and only 46% of the local municipalities had implemented the reform program (Gaziel, 1994). Their resistance may be attributed primarily to pressure exerted by affluent parents who feared that integration would lower the educational level in local schools. The local authorities were particularly susceptible to these pressures at this time, as a result of the passing of a law in 1975 calling for direct election of local council heads (Gaziel, 1994). Implementation of the reform was also hampered by the fact that the Knesset had only voted to approve the Rimalt commission report, without passing formal binding legislation (Gibton, 2003, p. 425)

Even schools and communities which fully implemented the structural reform of integration in middle schools did not always achieve integration in actual practice. The placement of students into academic or vocational tracks often left largely segregated populations intact within the supposedly integrated schools. This phenomenon led to severe criticism of the reform from both Leftist and Rightist parliamentary factions in the Knesset in 1983, in which tracking was seen as sabotaging social integration (Gaziel, 1994). Academics writing from the perspective of critical theory often went further, describing tracking as the means whereby the dominant Ashkenazi social elite maintains hegemony, while still giving 'lip service' to the progressive ideal of equality as embodied in the reform (Resh & Dar, 1996; Swirski, 1999; Yonah & Dahan, 1999). Despite the problems and difficulties in implementation, however, there can be little doubt that the reform program did succeed in furthering the cause of educational equality for *Mizrachi* Asian-African Jews. Indeed, Ami Volansky, an academic involved in many Israeli reform efforts, cites the *reforma* as the outstanding example of a successful reform program (Harpaz & Volansky, 2007).

The difficulties in implementation of the reform stemmed largely from the opposition of key actors, including teachers, parents, and local authorities (Gaziel, 1994). This opposition, however, does not fully explain why the integration reform lost its dominant place in the educational agenda in the 1980's. Integration became less compelling due to ideological

changes in Israeli society, which in turn reflected larger supranational trends in the Western world. In particular, the Zionist-socialist ethos had been superseded by a growing attraction to liberal-democratic ideals (Yonah, 2000). The decline of the welfare state and the concurrent shift to free-market ideologies and decentralized organizational models was accompanied by a switch in focus to individual success and fulfillment, rather than commitment to collective goals (Volansky, 1994). Concurrently, the influence of the Ethiopian and Russian waves of immigration, as well as the growing and increasingly vocal Palestinian Arab minority in Israel led to a preponderance of more pluralistic visions of Israeli society and culture, including a common perception of Israel as a multicultural society. In education, this shift in values and priorities has expressed itself in a variety of ways, most of which involve decentralization and increased choice within the educational system. Ironically, decentralization also received a boost from the integration reform. This program was instituted by the Education Ministry in a centralized manner, but its implementation required cooperation from local authorities, who built the middle schools, determined their enrollment zones and coped with periodic strikes and protests of parents. Thus the involvement of the local authorities in education was significantly increased, and decentralization was fostered (Elboim-Dror, 1982).

### **Contemporary Israel (1977-present). A diffused educational landscape**

Decentralization and the concurrent adoption of market models in education have been expressed in four areas; parental choice, evaluation and feedback, fundraising from external sources, and school-based management programs. These developments reflect contemporary socio-economic trends in the Western world, and they have dominated Israeli educational policy discourse since the late 1970's until the present. In Israel, (as in other countries) they have engendered considerable controversy and debate. Decentralized models of school autonomy and/or parental choice are often criticized as negatively impacting upon equality in educational opportunity.

The move toward educational autonomy was not an entirely new phenomenon. As we have noted, Hebrew education in the pre-state period was divided into largely autonomous ideological streams. And while the State Education Laws of 1953 abolished the ideological streams, state

religious education still had autonomous status, as did the independent 'recognized' ultra-Orthodox networks. But in the late 70's and early 80's a new conception of school autonomy developed, which proposed a decentralized framework for the educational system as a whole. This understanding spoke of granting schools pedagogical independence, to be expressed in greater flexibility in school curriculum, and a greater willingness for parental and community involvement in the determination of local school policy. Such developments were not unique to Israel, as during these years school choice became increasingly popular and was hotly debated in many countries in the Western world, including the United States and Great Britain (Cookson, 1994; Shapira & Cookson, 1996).

School autonomy was first officially recognized in Israel as a legitimate educational policy in 1981, in a circular sent out by the Director-General of the Ministry of Education. Primary schools were now given "a considerable degree of pedagogic independence, with wider powers and responsibilities in planning and implementation of teaching, educational and cultural activities" (Ministry of Education, 1981, p. 18). In reality, however, little was done to implement this policy, and autonomy remained largely declarative (Haymann, Golan & Shapira, 1997). These schools would be characterized by a number of key components, including:

- 1) Development of a unique school 'credo'
  - 2) Determination of educational aims and curricula by the school teaching staff
  - 3) Viewing the students and parents as active partners in school policy-making
  - 4) Budgetary independence for schools (as much as possible)
- (Haymann, Golan & Shapira, 1997)

Despite the bureaucratic obstacles, the gradual movement in the 1980's and '90's towards recognition of school autonomy and the principle of parental choice led to the crystallization of three broad models of 'schools of choice' in the primary school system:

1) Autonomous neighborhood schools. These schools develop as a result of local initiatives from educators and/or parental and community groups. They typically formulate a 'school ethos' as expressed in a credo, as well as a particular curriculum and/or pedagogic orientation. They are often popular among parents and students, but they have been criticized for remaining largely homogenous and thus preserving social gaps.

2) Autonomous, selective schools of choice. Autonomous, selective schools of choice are 'magnet schools', which specialize in a particular

curricular focus (examples include the School for the Arts and the School for Nature, Environmental and Social Studies in Tel Aviv). These schools educate for excellence in their particular curricular areas; they are by nature selective due to inherent space limitations. Enrollment in these schools is not limited to students in the immediate district. Typically such schools require large parental financial outlays, and thus they are often criticized as elitist. In order to deal with this problem, quotas are employed to provide scholarships for economically disadvantaged students.

3) Autonomous, non-selective schools of choice. These schools are characterized by a particular ideological orientation. They are usually established as a result of parental dissatisfaction with the standard curricula. A primary example of this model is the TALI network, which aim to enrich Jewish education within the general state schools. Another example of this trend is alternative schools with unique philosophical and pedagogical approaches, such as 'open', 'democratic' or 'experimental' schools, as well as the anthroposophic (Waldorf) schools.

Among the educational benefits documented in autonomous schools are greater teacher involvement in curriculum planning, the creation of a unique school atmosphere characterized by strong parental and student involvement, increased motivation for learning among students, and increased parental satisfaction. While recognizing the possibility that autonomy and choice may come at the expense of equality in educational opportunity, Shapira, Haymann and Shavit (1995) found that in some cases schools of choice actually increase the potential for integration, as parents of means dissatisfied with neighborhood schools often move out of neighborhoods, thus fostering segregated neighborhoods and homogenous neighborhood schools. Nevertheless, it is clear that unbridled parental choice in public education can easily lead to increasing gaps between the socially advantaged and disadvantaged. In order to deal with the threat to educational equality, they advocate a policy of 'controlled parental choice', whereby parents are allowed to choose, (in order of preference) three out of four or five schools in an expanded district, which are relatively similar in measured study achievements, reputation etc. The final assignment is handled by the local authorities, whose mandate is to ensure social integration. They stress that implementation of autonomy and parental choice must take into account local conditions, as well as continual analysis and evaluation of implementation, in order to ensure that educational and social goals are being met (Shapira, Haymann & Shavit, 1995). In this they echo Henig, who writes: "When bounded by publicly defined goals and

implemented authoritatively and effectively by public officials, school-choice plans have the potential to be stimulating and liberating. But when public officials lack the capacity to intervene affirmatively to ensure that public goals are kept in the forefront, the result may be greater inequality, greater disillusionment with public institutions, and greater fragmentation along racial, ethnic, class, and cultural lines” (Henig 1994, p. 200).

While school autonomy was spoken about in numerous articles and conferences in the 1980’s and officially espoused in a number of ministry policy circulars, in actuality the move toward autonomy was significantly hampered by supervisors and other elements within the ministry who feared losing control to principals and local authorities. While local innovation was encouraged, approval of ministry supervisors was required. Even more inhibiting were extensive budget cuts in education. From 1981-1986, the allocation for school hours for elementary schools dropped by 28.5 %; while the number of students in the system increased by almost 13%. The effect was to effectively turn school autonomy into a “right which could not be implemented” (Inbar, 1990, p.71).

In the ‘90’s, a new mode of decentralization in education known as school-based management was developed and implemented in many Western countries. This model developed in the wake of the research supporting the movement toward effective schools (Volansky & Friedman, 2003). Political influences include classical liberal thought, which places cardinal value on individual freedom, as well as traditions of community democracy, (which stress the rights of communities to educate according to their fundamental values) and participatory democracy, which provides justification for school educators to set budgets and determine and execute pedagogic policies within their schools. Free-market economic philosophies and contemporary developments in organizational theory also are significant contributing factors to school-based management initiatives (Gaziel, 2002). In Israel, school-based management was instituted on a trial basis in over 800 schools between 1996-2001 (Shahar & Magen-Nagar, 2010), and new localities have signed on to the program in the present school year.

A committee appointed by the Minister of Education in 1992, presented the following recommendations, which have since become part of the school-based management initiative: 1) funding based upon a ‘pupil basket’ of services, which would be equitable and transparent, including differential support for special needs students, 2) operation of the school as a closed financial system, 3) schools will define clear goals in work plans,

4) internal frameworks for feedback and evaluation, 5) delegation of authority concerning personnel to the school itself, 6) focusing the role of external ministry inspectors on consulting and support for schools to achieve their stated goals. The overall result is to create schools with “maximum authority to carry out policy with maximum flexibility” (Volansky, 2003, p. 223), while limiting the primary role of the Education Ministry to setting overall policies in such areas as a general state curriculum, budget criteria to “reinforce the foundations of equality”, setting scholastic achievement standards, and supervision to ensure that central values and national goals as defined by law are not compromised (Volansky, 2003, p. 224).

Critics of the various autonomy and choice initiatives view such efforts as inevitably deepening social inequality. Dahan and Yonah bewail the growing trend toward what is known in Israel as ‘gray education’, meaning privately-sponsored additional curricula. They cite a study in 1988 which found that 73% of schools operating such programs were located in affluent neighbourhoods, while only 10% were in poor neighbourhoods (Dahan & Yonah, 2006). In regard to the regulatory mechanisms proposed by Shapira and others, they express skepticism in regard to their effectiveness, as the affluent tend to exercise their connections to ‘pull strings’ and to manipulate in order to ensure that their interests are served. Ichilov has also expressed strong reservations concerning the increasing privatization of education in Israel, which she views as representing a fundamental retreat from the traditional Zionist commitment to public state education. She is also concerned about fund-raising practices of schools from external sources, including allowing programs sponsored by businesses which may reflect narrow corporate interests at the expense of the public good, citing as an example a program in consumer education sponsored by a supermarket chain, which one study found promoted primarily consumerism and brand-name loyalty (Ichilov, 2009).

Yet even if we accept Ichilov’s characterization of these schools as ‘quasi-private’ and share reservations and concerns regarding this development, this need not necessarily lead to a totally negative assessment of this phenomenon. It is conceivable to formulate a more nuanced and balanced approach. At any rate, it is clear that the educational system is becoming increasingly decentralized and fragmented and that autonomous schools and the larger principle of educational choice are becoming increasingly prevalent and accepted in Israel. This trend was recognized in a comprehensive proposal for Israeli educational reform published in 2005,

known as the Dovrat report. This report called for a significant governmental financial investment in order to reform the educational system. Among its many recommendations, the report called for instituting a long school day, limiting school to 5 days a week, with special enrichment programs on Fridays for peripheral communities, and made closing educational and social gaps as well as significantly raising the salary, conditions of employment and social status of teachers' major priorities. It also called for decentralization of the educational system, involving the creation of regional education authorities and encouraging school autonomy. Despite these seemingly worthwhile recommendations, the report inspired much criticism and controversy. Specifically, the report was criticized for not including practicing teachers and teacher union representatives in the committee (Peled, 2006), as giving undue authority to principals (particularly in regard to hiring and firing), as threatening the job security of teachers, as leaving classroom teachers and the teachers' unions out of the process of reform, and as encouraging the privatization of education. This acceptance of privatization is viewed by critics as a reflection of an overriding neoliberal agenda (Dahan & Yonah, 2006) and of a 'managerial discourse' (Resnik, 2011). The commitment to closing educational gaps is dismissed as an empty slogan, while the predicted effects of the proposed reform were viewed by these critics as actually deepening educational inequality. The concerns about privatization of the educational system were only fueled by the choice of Dovrat, a wealthy figure deeply associated with the business sector, to head the commission.

The debate concerning the relative merits or faults of the proposed reform became purely academic, as political realities rendered the plan inoperative and it was consigned (like so many commission reports before it) to the bookshelf. The Teachers Union refused to accept the reform plan, which in turn led the Finance Ministry to refuse to begin the process of allocating the huge sums necessary for its implementation. The practical result, then, was that the vast expenditure of financial resources and human effort which went into the Dovrat reform plan did not lead to any practical implementation. The controversy which accompanied this report is significant, however, in that it points to the difficulties and many obstacles to widespread educational reform, as well as the public sensitivity to issues of equality and choice in education.

### **Equality and choice in contemporary Israeli educational policy - a normative discussion**

The tension between the values of equality and choice as expressed in education is fundamental. The issues raised are difficult, as both are cardinal democratic values, which seem to contradict each other. Despite many indicators of increasing privatization, the ideal of equality, as expressed in free, public education for all is still part and parcel of the Israeli educational and social ethos. Furthermore, it is commonly assumed that educational choice programs are designed to serve narrow interests. Parents quite naturally wish to do all that they can to ensure high quality education for their children as a basis for future occupational success and upward mobility; parental choice initiatives clearly serve these personal interests. Similarly, communities with various ideological agendas may act to create and achieve recognition for schools which educate according to their particular approaches. In this light, it behooves us to ask whether these relatively narrow interests may be reconciled with the larger common good of Israeli society, and whether choice initiatives may go hand in hand with furthering equality in educational opportunity and outcomes.

The roots of 'privatization' in Israeli education are found primarily within the various religious sectors. The formal basis for such 'privatization' is the aforementioned category of 'recognized but not official' schools (as described in the State Education Law of 1953) which, allowed independent *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) schools to be licensed and to receive partial funding at the discretion of the Minister of Education. When the law was passed, relatively few of these 'recognized but not official' schools existed, and most of them were associated with Ashkenazic *haredi* factions. It was probably assumed that with the creation of a modern democratic state such schools would gradually vanish from the scene. This was not to be the case, however. In fact, the numbers of independent religious schools increased dramatically, particularly in the 1980's with the emergence of the Sephardic network of *El Hama'ayan* schools under the tutelage of the *Shas* political party. This network arose due to a feeling that Sephardic children were often denied acceptance to the predominantly Ashkenazic frameworks, due to concerns in regard to the level of religious observance in these families. All 'recognized but not official' schools are loosely supervised by the ministry, and in principle they are committed to a core curriculum common to all schools, but in fact there is much resistance in the *haredi* community to the core curriculum, and in most instances it

has not been instituted. The basis for this antagonism lies in the fear that exposure to such secular subjects as Math, English, and Modern Hebrew may lead to secularization and a falling apart from the closed society and strictly traditional *haredi* way of life and cultural norms. Today, 'recognized but not official' *haredi* schools typically receive at least 75% funding (as compared to official schools). The public funding of such institutions has inspired loud and vociferous opposition from secular Israelis, who claim that the state is supporting populations who do not educate their children to serve in the army and do not prepare them for entry into the workplace.

Within the State religious schools, privatization has also taken root, as various frameworks have been created in order to strengthen the level of religious studies in these schools. In 1991, the Kashti Committee determined that roughly half of the students in the State Religious system were enrolled in various special settings (Gaziel, 1996). One of the most popular frameworks, the *No'am* system, was severely criticized as impeding social integration, due to the small number of students of Asian-African origin in these schools. Asian-African (*Mizrachi* or Oriental) families, while overwhelmingly traditional in outlook, are often characterized by a less rigorous approach to strict religious observance, and as a result students from these families were often not accepted in schools of this nature, which wished to strengthen religious instruction.

In the last 20 years or so, many non-religious schools with distinctive pedagogic, philosophic or ideological orientations have also applied for funding on the basis of 'recognized but not official status', as have other schools whose overall goal may best be described as educating for excellence. These schools are often characterized as elitist in nature, and they are viewed by many as a threat to the future of public education in Israel. The clearest example of privatization for educational excellence and the strong opposition that this trend has engendered may be seen in the case of the Hevruta School near Netanya, which opened in September 2009. This school offers a full school day with excellent, highly paid teachers, as well as an extensive informal education program. From the outset, the school inspired much controversy and antagonism, largely due to its tuition rates (full yearly tuition is 35,000 NIS; or approximately 7,000 Euros). Critics of the school have also noted the highly selective admissions policy for students (Ben Shahr, 2012). The NGO which created Hevruta applied for a license and recognition from the Ministry of Education. Only in June 2010 did the ministry inform the school that the requests for licensing and

recognition were denied. The denial was justified by the ministry on the grounds that the school was an impediment to integration, and that its existence lowered the quality of education available in other schools in the region. At this point the NGO appealed the ministry's decision to a special appeals committee set up within the ministry, which supported the school. Subsequently the ministry took the school to court, thus beginning a legal battle which culminated in July 2011 in an appeal by the ministry to the Supreme Court. While the court did not rule in this appeal it did recently inform the ministry that the tactic of denying licensing in specific cases is not acceptable, and it recommended that the state take the bold step of legislating specific criteria for funding of private schools, or take a clear stand against funding of such 'recognized but not official' schools in all cases (Nesher, 2012).

The case of the Hevruta school, as well as widespread public dissatisfaction with the failure to implement core curricula programs in the ultra-Orthodox sector, have both served to focus public attention on the lack of a coherent national educational policy in regard to privatization of education in Israel. The Supreme Court has given the government and the Education Ministry a clear challenge, namely, to encourage the enactment of legislation which will formalize a clear and consistent public policy in regard to parental choice initiatives in education. In this regard, at least three major issues need to be addressed:

1) Financing – what percentage of total school costs may be covered by extra-governmental sources (parents, as well as private organizations and foundations) while still allowing for schools to be eligible for state funding?

2) Selectivity – in what circumstances, (if any), is selectivity in student selection considered acceptable for schools funded by the state?

3) Curriculum – is a core curriculum necessary for all schools receiving state funding, and if so, what are the minimum basic contours of such a curriculum?

We have seen that autonomy and choice have deep roots in the history of Israeli education. When we add to this the increasingly individualistic trend in Israeli society of the past three decades, coupled with the global disillusionment with collectivist socialistic ideologies and the greater acceptance in Israel of culturally pluralistic or multicultural perspectives, it becomes exceedingly difficult to speak today of a common, overriding and compelling social ethos which could serve as the basis for a uniform public education system. It appears that autonomy and choice are here to stay. Yet

in order to view these choice initiatives not simply as inevitable but also as desirable, we need to demonstrate what potential benefits they may offer for Israeli society at large, and what measures may be taken in order to minimize the potentially harmful effects of such initiatives on the overall social fabric.

Parental choice initiatives have played a major role in educational reform movements in many democratic countries in recent decades. More and more parents are no longer content to rely upon local educational authorities to decide where their children will be educated. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that choice initiatives can improve educational systems. Parents who share a common philosophical or ideological approach that have the recognized right and practical means to send their children to schools which educate according to their perspective, tend to be highly involved in their children's education and in the schools themselves. Israeli schools of choice demonstrate a commitment to high quality education and a proven success record, as reflected in enriched curricular content, pedagogical innovation, and teacher involvement in curricular planning. Magnet schools have been shown to foster excellence in educational achievement in their respective curricular specializations, while ideologically oriented schools exhibit a welcome renewed emphasis upon values education. Schools of choice also create a sense of community and shared commitment among educators, students and parents (Shapira & Haymann, 1991). Studies of schools participating in the school-based management initiative performed in 1996-97 and in 2011-12 reported increased satisfaction among school principals, who describe the emergence of a new managerial culture (Friedman & Barma, 1998, Friedman, Barma, & Toren, 1997), as well as an increase in their authority (Greenstein & Gibton, 2011). Teachers also exhibit greater satisfaction and an increased sense of professional autonomy (Shahat & Magen-Nagar, 2012).

The record of schools of choice in Israel in regard to fostering social integration is less conclusive, yet here too these schools have in some cases succeeding in fostering non-coercive models of integration, and in so doing, they may also contribute to advancing educational equality (Shapira & Haymann, 1991; Goldring & Zisenwine, 1989; Kopelowitz & Markowitz, 2011). Magnet schools have succeeded in attracting students from all social strata, though by their nature such integration is limited to those students who are exceptionally talented. Ideological schools are non-selective, yet some of these schools appeal primarily to affluent

populations, thus practically limiting the extent of social integration fostered. The mechanism of 'controlled choice' is designed to give local authorities the ability to ensure that minimum levels of integration are achieved. Still, it does seem that parental choice often creates relatively homogenous student populations, and given that parents of lower socio-economic strata tend not to exercise parental choice in education, it may well be that practically the more affluent are the primary beneficiaries of educational choice. On the other hand, the existence of recognized public educational alternatives may benefit society at large, in that they challenge the conventional approaches, thereby facilitating consideration of new directions which may impact on the system as a whole.

Many ideologically oriented educational alternatives have developed in Israel in recent decades. Such schools are typically founded after years of lobbying and meetings organized by parental committees, and often in the face of opposition from the Education Ministry and from local authorities. Often these schools receive only partial state funding (on the basis of 'recognized but not official' status), while others have succeeded in achieving full official recognition. Prominent examples include: 1) 26 democratic schools, characterized by a high level of student choice and initiative in learning, as well as student involvement at all levels in school policy-making, within the framework of school parliamentary assemblies (Hecht, 2005; Argaman, 2011; Boneh-Levy, 2011). 2) Schools with intensified Jewish studies. These include the TALI network; which encompasses over 80 schools and 30 pre-schools, offering enriched Jewish study within a liberal and pluralistic framework, stressing humanistic and democratic values (Chikli, 2004; Ackerman & Showstack, 2008), and the Meitarim schools, which bring religious and secular youth together to study and interact in a common school framework, thus undermining the prevailing dichotomy between secular and religious within the Israeli Jewish populace (Kopelowitz & Markowitz, 2011). Both of these frameworks succeeded in garnering the support of influential political figures, which paved the way for official recognition. In the case of TALI, the Orthodox Education Minister Zevulun Hammer saw this network as a means to bring the secular public closer to Jewish tradition, which led him in 1984 to grant TALI official status as a track within the general education system. With Meitarim the enthusiastic support of Knesset member and former Chief Rabbi of Norway, Michael Melchior led to the passing of a law in 2008 formally recognizing joint education of religious and secular students as an official trend, on the level of general state and religious state

schools, (though this law is only in the initial stages of implementation). Many other examples of ideological schools of choice may be found today in Israel; notable examples are the network of anthroposophic (Waldorf) schools, inspired by the writings of Rudolf Steiner, and bilingual schools where Jewish and Arab children learn together.

The examples of educational choice initiatives brought above share a number of common characteristics. They are all born of local ‘grass-roots’ initiative, designed not only to provide a high quality education for children, but also to challenge the educational establishment and to further a particular social agenda. They all exhibit a high level of parental involvement, as well as exceptional dedication and commitment to educational innovation on the part of their teaching staff. They also provide concrete examples to back up the claim of three researchers concerning the positive social impact of NGO or third sector organizations in Israel. Such organizations “enrich the public discussion in that they are independent, they challenge official policies, and raise important issues to be placed on the public and political agenda” (Gidron, Bar & Katz, 2003, p. 163).

As Dror has stressed, there is much historical precedent for this, as from the earliest days of Zionist settlement, innovative educational approaches were developed in the field, on the “grass-roots level” (Dekel, 2010). Together they provide further evidence of the significant potential benefits of choice initiatives for educational policy. This is not to say, of course, that these initiatives do not have their problems. On the contrary, they tend to encounter significant opposition and face numerous bureaucratic and practical difficulties on an almost day to day basis. Of particular concern is the tendency toward homogeneity of student populations and the “privatization” discussed above, with the clear threat to equality of educational opportunity. Yet such problems need not be insurmountable. If educational administrators, local authorities, the Ministry of Education, teacher representatives and academics work together, much can be done to encourage social integration in non-coercive methods. Scholarship programs can be established for low-income families. When tuition payments are necessary, payment can be made on a graded scale based upon parental income levels. Volansky has argued that establishing differential formulas to encourage low-income families to take advantage of educational alternatives provides a means to reconcile individualist desires for choice with legitimate societal concerns for educational equality (Volansky, 1994). In a similar vein, special efforts may be made in low-income areas to ensure that parents and students are aware of the

educational choices available to them, and particularly gifted students can be located and encouraged to consider 'magnet schools' specializing in particular curricular orientations.

Related to the question of the proper role of choice initiatives is the issue of the increasing involvement of NGO's in Israeli society. In 2004, some 35,000 NGO's were registered in Israel. Many NGO's are involved in educational programming; including some 70 organizations working in the areas of democratic and coexistence education, while as of the year 2000, 89 organizations were involved in Jewish education initiatives, most of whom operated from an avowed religiously pluralistic agenda (Paz-Fuchs & Kohavi, 2010, p. 21, Tzabar Ben-Yehoshua & Stein, 2007, p. 50). While welcoming the positive contributions of NGO's in the public sphere, Tamir (who would later serve from 2006-2009 as Minister of Education), has raised a number of important questions concerning their role. She asks: Who is responsible for determining the societal agenda? Who determines which programs are needed or not; who takes responsibility for the programs and ensures their proper and objective evaluation? Who determines the future course of action, and who makes the key decisions of funding; who is to provide funding, what is to be funded and how does the funding process transpire? (Tamir, 2004).

Tamir also cites other problems associated with NGO involvement in public programs, including that of changing organizational priorities which conceivably could leave programs without the ability to continue providing services to those in need, as well as the relative inability of those sectors lowest on the socio-economic scale to effectively garner private support to answer their pressing needs, which in effect is liable to foster social inequality.

Eden argues that there is a pressing need for the state to redefine the boundaries of control and regulation, through legislation which will allow third sector organizations to operate and to influence the educational system, while retaining for the state its vital public responsibility of regulation (Eden, 2012).

Above and beyond the need to carefully monitor choice initiatives to ensure that educational equality is not compromised, it is eminently clear that the goal of educational equality for all sectors of Israeli society remains far from fulfillment. This is particularly clear in regard to the Arab sector. It is well known that comparisons to the Jewish frameworks reveal significant gaps in relation to infrastructure and allocation of resources (Arar, 2011), and it is clear that a long-term substantial financial investment would be

required to bring the Arab schools up to par with their Jewish counterparts. It is difficult to conceive how any Israeli government would be capable of marshalling the necessary support to undertake such a vast financial undertaking. Given this reality, it seems appropriate to engage the assistance of NGO's and foundations in such an effort. Such initiatives clearly need to be regulated by the state mechanisms, but it is critical to meaningfully involve recognized public figures within the Arab community, both in the policy formation process and in the various stages of implementation. The same principles should apply to raise educational achievements of other peripheral and disadvantaged communities, such as Ethiopian Jews.

### **Conclusions**

Ichilov has described the contemporary status of educational policy in Israel as a 'retreat from public education', which she argues, Israel cannot afford. However, neither can it afford to ignore the fact that in the past 30 years choice initiatives have engendered numerous examples of sorely needed innovation in Israeli education, and this during a time of periodic budgetary cutbacks for education. Private factions, be they parents, communities, or organizations seem particularly suited for providing new and innovative ideological and pedagogical orientations. It may be then, that a strong commitment to public education may go hand in hand with embracing private initiatives which encourage educational diversity, so long as the various elements do not go against accepted and established general criteria which should apply and be implemented equally in all publicly supported educational institutions. Neither should the strong commitment and perseverance of parents and community activists, who have invested tremendous energy (often at no small personal expense) in pursuing their various visions of alternative frameworks for education be underestimated. These efforts reflect needs and desires of parents and community figures who quite legitimately demand the right to be significantly involved in educational policy making for the schools of their choice. Rather than grudgingly acknowledge the existence of 'back-door privatization', it may be more beneficial to welcome these innovations and take advantage of them in order to revitalize public state education. Just as the pre-state Zionist education system affirmed the principle of choice by recognizing the three streams of education (religious, workers and general)

and the state system recognized the right to choose general or religious education while also allowing independent ultra-Orthodox schools to function with a semi-public status, so today the right to choice is invoked (though today many more options are viewed as legitimate). A state public education system which embraces choice would offer a variety of educational approaches, curricular specializations, and ideological or philosophical orientations, while still maintaining a core curriculum in order to foster social cohesion and a shared civic identity, and to impart key skills and knowledge necessary for functioning in a complex economy and technologically sophisticated society. Private monies (e.g. from foundations and parent fees), would be utilized in order to enrich supplementary educational programs, while being subject to regulation and supervision based upon appropriate legislation and/or administrative directives of the Education Ministry and/or local authorities. The criteria for such regulations should be established (and periodically reevaluated) by a committee with representatives from the ministry, educators, academics engaged in educational research, as well as educators working in the third sector (e.g. for NGO'S and foundations). Similarly, public regulatory mechanisms should be formed to ensure that programs run by NGO's contracted by local state schools adhere faithfully to the fundamental values expressed in relevant legislation.

While educational policy is determined on the national level, it is often influenced by developments on the ground, e.g. community initiatives or efforts of groups committed to a particular educational, social or cultural agenda. In Israel, teachers, academics, social activists, parents and pupils themselves have all engaged in such initiatives at various periods in Zionist and Israeli history. I have argued here that 'grass-roots' initiatives have significant potential for meaningful educational reform. The commitment and creative thinking exhibited by these educational activists creates new alternatives for educational practice. Rather than creating bureaucratic obstacles to innovation, governmental bodies should encourage choice initiatives, while carefully guarding their regulatory role to ensure that fundamental societal values (such as equality of educational opportunity) are consistently upheld.

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