

New Challenges for Educational and Social Policies in International Settings: a review essay

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Politics and Policy-making in Israel's Education System

HAIM GAZIEL, 1996

Brighton, Sussex Academic Press

200 pp., \$24.95

ISBN 1-898723-42-7 (paperback)

Educational Advancement and Distributive Justice Between Equality and Equity

REUVEN KAHANE (Ed.), 1995

Jerusalem, Magnes Press, The Hebrew University

391 pp.

ISBN 0793-3916

Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures: lessons in school reform from the United States and Great Britain

SARAH WARSHAUER FREEMAN, 1994

Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press

288 pp., \$17.95

ISBN 0-674-27393-1 (cloth) and 0-674-27394-X (paperback)

As the information age evolves and the 20th century draws to a close, the educational systems in societies that came into prominence during the industrial age are now facing difficulties. These difficulties translate into a decline in public support and an erosion of public confidence. This situation has developed, in part, because educational systems have not kept pace with ongoing changes in societies in terms of new technology and the production of new information, as well as economic and social changes in a world rapidly experiencing global interdependence. The response of policy makers and educators has often been to discuss the matter in educational and political settings, to conduct research, and to explore creative and innovative ways to deliver education.

In the USA policy makers and educators have addressed what has been termed an education crisis by reducing fiscal allocations for education in various ways, yet they have asked the individual 'consumers' of education to assume a greater share of the cost. Attempts to improve performance levels, to become more efficient and focused, and to seek greater accountability are advocated. Simultaneously, measures that allow families greater partici-

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pation in the education process, including the development of specialized schools, are observed (Alvarez, 1998).

The volumes for this review essay address the subject of education from three different policy perspectives. The work of Haim Gaziel, *Politics and Policy-making in Israel's Education System*, analyzes the impact policy makers have on education by examining the connections between education and the political process in Israel. The second book, *Educational Advancement and Distributive Justice Between Equality and Equity*, edited by Reuven Kahane, is a collection of articles that addresses the subject of educational integration and advancement. It explores issues of education related to the dilemma of excellence versus equality. Since it has an international scope, it is an ideal companion work to Gaziel's. It is the outgrowth of an international seminar held in Jerusalem and provides additional information on the Israeli education system as well as cross-cultural perspectives of educational strategies related to social justice. *Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures: lessons in school reform from the United States and Great Britain* by Sarah Warshauer Freedman is written from a practitioner's perspective. She describes curriculum innovation and development in a cross-national setting. This work concentrates on a creative way to deliver quality education in urban settings, a focus that is not as evident in the other two volumes.

Education is a priority for modern societies because it is seen as a means to create a viable unified society with common goals and a shared value system. Israel is an example of a modern nation that has relied upon the education process to assist in the development of a national spirit to continue principles of collectivism—key visions of its founders. However, as the nation celebrates its 50th year, it is confronted with increasing disparities between different social groups. Policy makers expected the education system to serve as an integrating force in the society and to be the key to social mobility for disadvantaged groups. Yet, Israel finds that it is developing into a tiered society, with its ability to address socio-economic and educational stratification hampered by internal divisions reflecting competing and conflicting interests.

The vision of Israel's founders seems to be fading, and conflicting interests are creating tensions. Political, racial, and ethnic tensions have developed primarily between the founders and the early arrivals, mainly from Eastern Europe, identified as Ashkenazis, and the more recent arrivals from the Middle East and Africa, known as Sephardim. Sephardim are now the majority of the population, but Ashkenazis retain most of the political power and enjoy more economic and educational opportunities. Economic tensions also exist between those who have become the new private entrepreneurs and those who have retained their collective socialist economic value system. In addition to religious tensions between Israel's non-observant Jews and the religious right, the youth of Israel are no longer as concerned about the future of the country and the need to contribute to the well being of the nation. The presence of these tensions points to an even greater need to support the development of an integrated society free of economic inequalities. As Israel struggles to maintain a society that values social justice and provides full participation, the development of a tiered society allows some of its citizens to move forward into the information age, while others remain at the bottom lacking the necessary skills and education to advance.

A reasonable question, given the vision and values of Israel's founders, is why the society in general, and the education system in particular, has failed to produce a more cohesive nation despite measures and efforts taken by decision makers to eliminate disparities.

The work of Haim Gaziel provides insight into how this situation developed and how the divisions evolved. The aim of his work is a comprehensive examination of Israel's education policies for the past three decades, covering the 1970s, period of 'great reform', the equity

era of the 1980s, and the 1990s, age of excellence, quality, and efficiency. The book is a thoughtful presentation of how politics and education are intertwined, and it reveals how educational policy is shaped and influenced in a democratic society. The work has ample documentation and is presented from a solid social science research tradition that is based upon a historical examination of Israel's educational policies. The argument presented is that the goal of the policy maker is to maintain an equilibrium among competing interest groups. The first two chapters provide the theory and the assumptions. The third and fourth chapters give historical and background information. Chapters five and six review outcomes, and chapter seven provides a look at future policy trends.

Historical accounts of educational systems that explain, interpret, and organize data are not a rarity. What is valuable in Gaziel's book, however, is the combination of the historical background with a two-pronged policy analysis of Israel's education system. On one hand, he examines the power distributions involved in the process of decision making. On the other, he observes and evaluates the outcomes of these decisions in the light of changes in the educational structure and the actions of policy makers. He notes that there are many actors and players involved in formulating Israel's educational policy, such as the Knesset (parliament), the political parties, the minister of education and culture, local authorities, teachers' unions, parents, and the social lobby.

Gaziel's analysis is not one that gives equal and impartial weight to all parties involved in the decision process. He believes a more appropriate analysis is one that is government centred. He opts for this approach because it allows him to focus on government actions. What were the choices? What was neglected? What were the outcomes? Were there changes in the institutional structures? What were the consequences of the decisions?

What Gaziel's research reveals is that attempts to reform through policy implementation are difficult to achieve in a democratic pluralistic society. He makes the point that Israel is a multi-valued society with diverse interests where policy makers cannot agree on the aims of education. Because there is a lack of ideological consensus, policy makers are attempting to make decisions and choices that satisfy or appease groups with conflicting ideologies and a variety of interests. The groups with the greatest social advantage have the greatest social power. Decisions must meet with the approval of the strongest group and changes cannot be at their expense.

Gaziel demonstrates how educational policies intended to benefit peripheral groups are developed so that they invariably provide benefits to mainstream interest bodies. That is, efforts to reform the education system were thwarted by the actions of various powerful interest groups because ways to circumvent the reforms were instituted at the inception. Creating an equitable and just society, the overarching goal, is the ever present challenge. For example, in 1969 the Israeli government passed reform measures to provide access to public education at the secondary level for previously excluded social groups, primarily those of Asian and African backgrounds. However, only half the Israeli locations participated; the local authorities, charged with conducting the changes, were more responsive and committed to their advantaged constituents, who were opposed to the reforms. They were permitted to use academic tracking, thus schools developed segregated classrooms. The spirit and intent of the reforms was circumvented.

The work edited by Kahane, *Educational Advancement and Distributive Justice Between Equality and Equity* examines the broad issue of the delivery of education as a matter of social justice. It considers educational strategies used by policy makers to address concerns of equity and equality. The book is a series of articles divided into six parts. Some of the authors are presented below since they highlight salient issues.

How educational systems have confronted the challenge of equity and equality as a social justice issue is addressed in section one by Geoff Whitty & Tony Edwards in an assessment of England's educational system since the passage of Britain's Education Reform Act of 1988. While the main purpose of the Act was to empower parents as consumers by exercising choice, another consequence has been the solidification of a tiered school system, to the detriment of those in Britain's inner cities. Gero Lenhardt describes changes in secondary education in Germany in the last four decades. These changes have provided greater access and have allowed greater independence for both students and teachers, which in turn has promoted equality and equity. Thomas S. Popkewitz addresses the issue of social justice by assessing the struggle for authority in the educational arena by social scientists as they seek to redefine the power of the teacher in the post-modern era. The late James S. Coleman presents an insightful perspective on the issue of social capital as a matter of social justice. He argues that the state has an incentive to educate its most disadvantaged members because they in the long term impose the greater cost to a society while producing the least benefit.

The social organizations of schools, compensatory education, and the social organization of the classroom are topics covered in the second section, which examines the school context in the delivery of education. In this section, Gad Yair concludes from his research that both educational excellence and social equality in achievement can coexist in the same classroom.

Discussions of parental choice and family-state relationships and their joint role in issues of socialization and status placement are presented in the third section on family context. The role of family choice and its impact on school achievement for girls in Southern Africa were investigated through interviews with their mothers.

In the fourth section, comparative perspectives show that educational systems are shaped by various structures. In Poland (a socialist economy where wages tend to be equalized), there is an established link between education and social inequality. This inequality is fostered by a distribution system that favours an intellectual élite by providing them with exclusive non-monetary rewards. In Austria, attempts to expand access to education resulted in a 360% increase in the enrolment of women, but the expansion did not cause low-income groups to obtain greater levels of education. The major determinant of educational opportunity remains family origin. Affirmative action was used in India in an effort to create greater accessibility to higher education, a plan which produced a positive impact on the lower classes.

Of particular interest in this section is an article by Pamela Barnhouse Walters, wherein she argues that the crisis of excellence in American education is actually a crisis in the social order. The origins of the crisis are related to the links between education and other social institutions such as the political system, the economy and the family. Compelling historical data support this argument. Societal change cannot be accomplished by schools alone; simultaneous change must occur in other social institutions.

In the fifth section, Chaim Adler's piece considers the goals of equality and excellence in the Israeli education policy system. He presents data to show that the aim of maximizing both equality and excellence resulted in a significant improvement in education levels in all sectors of the Israeli population. There is also a presentation by Stephen Goldstein that highlights the Israeli court's role in protecting the individual rights of parents to select the schooling they thought best for their child. While the courts were concerned with protecting individual liberties they also had to consider the state's actions in facilitating integration reform. An article by Abraham Yogev gives information on trends in education and raises the issue of a possible need for affirmative action to insure that Jews of Asian origin obtain socio-economic returns on their educational investments.

In the final section on educational decentralization, challenging viewpoints are presented about issues related to parental choice and market influences. This section is especially important because it considers the consequences of new trends in education and presents views that break with traditional notions of education. Should we rely on state intervention or market forces to address educational needs? Len Barton, in evaluating the status of disabled people in education systems, observes that they are commonly viewed as politically insignificant. Their response has been to present themselves as a politicized and outspoken group that is part of a movement where they set their own agenda and emphasize their rights rather than their needs. Does this group merit a decentralized educational system of their own?

The issues of excellence and equity in the delivery of education are a matter of great concern for policy makers. Questions are often raised about the ability to deliver comprehensive education to a heterogeneous school population. More specifically, can a national curriculum respond adequately to the diversity of class, race, and gender in urban schools? *Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures: lessons in school reform from the United States and Great Britain* by Sarah Warshauer Freedman is a cross-national comparison of writing exchanges between students in British and American educational systems. This technique represents one of the innovative measures educators are employing as they seek means to enhance and improve the educational experience of urban students. The writing exchange takes place between eight paired classes from multicultural schools that serve mostly working-class students: four in the greater London area and four in the San Francisco Bay area. The classroom composition in both countries represented an ethnic mix that was a mirror of their urban communities. Teachers selected for the project espoused teaching practices in accord with the theoretical orientation of the study, which also presented new means of helping them think about creative ways of giving students an active role in education. The project not only promoted an interest in writing but was also an opportunity for students to study the cultural practices of another society.

The research conducted for this project has a theoretical foundation which maintains that the process of social interaction is the key to obtaining written language skills, a framework attributed to L. S. Vygotsky. Writing skills are acquired when students are engaged in a writing task that requires social interaction. J. Wertsch later added non-verbal interactions. The challenges of global change make the internationalization of the curriculum a mandate. Linking students to other societies and countries lays the foundation for world citizens and global perspectives. Using writing skills as a means of obtaining this objective is an innovative use of the curriculum.

This book is useful for those who wish to know more about the structure and composition of the British school system and the trends occurring therein. It allows one to compare and contrast the British and American systems. In addition to the expanded world view provided, the work confirms the trend toward declining resources for education as discussed in the volumes by Gaziel and Kahane. It further speaks to the tendency of education policy makers to yield to the pressures of mainstream parents who have greater influence than parents who come from marginal groups. Freedman reveals that British schools are moving away from mixed ability groupings and reverting to ability-level tracking in order to keep middle-class parents from sending their children to private schools.

The research conducted in this cross-national setting identifies the different philosophies and teaching approaches of the two countries. At the secondary level Freedman asserts that the British teachers concentrate on comprehending the development of their students. The structure of their school system supports this approach: teachers tend to keep the same group of students for 2 or more years. In the USA, teachers focus on the curriculum. The work

argues for diverse approaches to writing and learning to write. There is discussion of the non-verbal graphic symbols used in writing versus the role of social interaction in the learning environment.

The material presented in these books helps focus on social practices and how they vary according to cultural and ideological content. The demands and expectations placed on educational systems in the future will reflect the political and economic concerns of those who forge identities based on a global perspective. Mass education that was created for an industrial era is not satisfactory for the approaching information era. Magnet schools and charter schools, market forces, and state intervention may all be aspects of future education; how they are presented is still very much influenced by the political process.

The findings in these offerings point to the need to rethink the delivery of education in today's societies. Kahane contends that the decline in educational performance arises from the broad pool of education for the masses, a phenomenon that became widespread in the second half of the 20th century. Others, such as Berliner & Biddle (1995), dispel this notion. Specialized education is costly and the question arises, who will meet the cost? Not paying for education can have costly consequences. The middle class will agree to added cost if it will benefit their children but they are reluctant to underwrite the cost of education for marginal groups. Research reveals schools perform well when budgets are devoted to improving teaching and learning and employing quality teachers.

While the three works present different policy perspectives, there are certain areas that are not adequately covered. Freedman's work embarks on the educational reforms that help to focus on the interrelated structures in our world through the challenge of the curriculum. In Gaziel's book, there is limited discussion of policy issues related to gender other than a parenthetical insert referring to legislated equality between the sexes and a passing reference to same sex schools. One wonders if this omission is because gender concerns are not paramount issues in Israeli society, or if they are not readily acknowledged. Perhaps the various legal protections mandated for women by the state have relegated this to a secondary issue.

The Kahane work provides a limited discussion on gender but there are other questions. The emphasis presents education as though its only concern is producing a capable work force for national economic achievement. When societal needs are covered it seems to be with a material emphasis and a market focus.

While market forces are important factors, they are not the only factors to consider. Robert Kaplan notes that stable economies are a keystone to democratic societies but concentration on material prosperity creates an indifference to communal life and encourages docility (Kaplan, 1997). If democratic communities are to be sustained and expanded, an educated populace that acknowledges values related to human dignity is a necessity (Beane, 1990). Dorothy Lee, in *Valuing the Self*, suggests that in order for individuals to develop their fullest potential the community has to value the self (Lee, 1987). Education benefits the individual in ways not only related to jobs or work but in ways that enhance self-discovery, self-fulfillment and the acquiring of knowledge, ways that enable one to be a responsible citizen at an international level. These ideas need to be visible and rewarded if they are valued. We cannot give up the push for human emancipation. At the same time individual development cannot occur unchecked without a balanced attention to societal needs. These are pressing matters as we approach the dawn of the 21st century. These issues will take on greater significance as we adjust to a single world system where all our transactions are global and links between people of different nations multiply and move beyond governmental connections and national borders. New knowledge and skills will be necessary for citizens living in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.

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