THE INVOLVEMENT OF NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY

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Abstract

NGO involved in education academic programs in western countries, participate in re-shaping policy implementation. This study aims to explore the effect of NGOs on the implementation of education policies in Israel. We have applied a qualitative research method, analyzing government documents, and conducting 50 in-depth interviews with 5 groups each of 10 participants: 1. Education high officials; 2. NGO executives; 3. Principals of elementary state-Jewish schools with low socio-economic background; 4. Parents; 5. Pupils. Our findings reveal that (a) The stated policy in the last 4 years (2013-2017) is based on a cross-sector partnership. (b) This policy re-examines the sharing of responsibility for education. (c) The partial privatization funds give a voice to deprived populations. (d) The principals serve as gatekeepers.

Keywords: *NGO, educational policy, policy implementation, education policies in Israel*

PURPOSE

In the last three decades, the western world as well as Israel, have witnessed an increasing involvement of NGOs of third sector and private society in education systems. These NGOs have become key players with an economic, social and political power (Bulkley & Burch, 2011), re-shaping the education nature and contents and the conduct of education systems and schools (Shiffer et al., 2010). They are gaining a respectable status in public education (Berkovich & Foldes, 2012; Patrinos, Osorio, & Guaqueta, 2009), being more closely integrated in the daily activity of public education (Bulkley & Burch, 2011). Moreover, some researchers maintain that these organizations are essential to the education system (Bradaschia, 2009) and their presence is manifested by varied meaningful educational initiatives (Newman, 2006; Weber, 2012; Yemini & Sagie, 2015). The NGOs capitalize on the expansion of the neoliberal ideology, decentralization and privatization trends and cutdowns in government budgets.

In an age whereby demand for education is expanding globally, being perceived as a crucial factor in the assurance of national economic growth (Ball, 2013), education systems financed only by the "public purse" are not a realistic or exclusive option alone and privatization options become inevitable (Rizvi, 2016). In this reality, the question is not merely whether non-governmental players are allowed to be involved in education but rather the democratic ways of shaping and implementing educational policy in the privatization age.

The issue of NGOs involvement in the Israeli education system is complex and multi-faceted (Berkovich & Foldes, 2012; Paz-Fuchs & Ben-Simchon-Peleg, 2014). Despite its scope, no studies of this involvement have been conducted so far in Israel. This study, however, explores the perceptions and differentiation of the three stakeholder groups - policy makers, policy implementers and policy clients – regarding the involvement motives and implications for the educational policy shaping and implementation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Privatization trend in the western world

Privatization implies transfer of assets from public to private ownership. The worldwide privatization wave started at the end of the 2nd World War, characterized by a strong trend of product privatization.

In this sense, privatization is part of a wider process of pushing to the margins the policy that guided most of the world countries in the post WW2 era. This policy was grounded in an extensive government involvement in managing the economic and social activity. The "Keynesian approach" advocated this was the case and demanded from the state to relate to education as being "for the public good" (Rizvi, 2016). Most of the public education systems accepted this rule and believed that financing the public education would be essential for their national development (Tilak, 2009). Education was accepted then as public goods that the state has to supply to all its citizens. Hence, government authorities in most countries considered themselves responsible for education, financing it with public funds and supervising it (Ichilov, 2010). This is in line with the United Nations' view about education, not only as a human right but as crucial also to people's development, expansion of opportunities for promoting democracy and economic growth and reduction of poverty (Rizvi, 2016). However, since the 1970s, economists have challenged the socio-democratic Keynesian economy and the welfare policy. These years saw the onset of a neoliberal economic discourse that professed glorification of the private business sector's status at the expense of the state's status (Svirsky, 2001); assimilation of quasi market mechanisms encompassing a growing number of NGOs that provide services and private funding; introduction of business-managerial practices into the public sector (Clark & Newman, 1997); and enhanced response to the customers' needs and replacement of bureaucratic orders by market mechanisms and utilitarian motives, based on the belief that NGOs are capable of providing services on a higher level of efficiency than government institutions (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006).

Privatization processes in worldwide education systems

The neoliberal policy in education has abandoned the communal logic, embracing the free market economy (Armstrong, 2003; Ball, 2013; Olssen & Peters, 2005). It was accompanied by far-reaching reforms whose common trait was the wish to shift the responsibility for education from the state to the individual (Mundy, 2005; Ozga & Lingard, 2007). As part of privatization in the education system, the state has reduced its involvement both from aspects of funding and content management of the system. Thus, it has facilitated the empowerment and activity of various organizations that are not part of the formal education system, enabling them to operate and assimilate pedagogical programs in schools (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). This move was supported by Friedman (1955), who advocated transferring the schools' operation from the state to the private sector and fund them by school vouchers. The vouchers system separates between state-funded education and the school management and might help in founding, financing and managing the schools (Wohlstetter et al., 2004). Furthermore, it promises parents a maximum freedom when choosing the education for their children, regardless of their place of residence or level of their income.

The free market laws have changed the educational reality and the orders prevalent in it (Dahan & Yonah, 2006; Shapira, 2010). Schools are required to function in a quasi-competitive market that particularly emphasizes accountability, attainments and high performance (Astiz, Wiseman, & Baker, 2002; Goldring & Schuermann, 2009). Adopting these laws in education affects schools' survival in the "open choice boundaries age", since it encourages competition between public educational institutions as well as between them and private, unique and attractive private educational institutions (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). Due to the competitiveness, principals experience an increasing pressure to demonstrate diversity and uniqueness in the learning contents and be high-achievers in comparative measurement tests versus other schools in order to market the school to potential registrants. Accordingly, schools are becoming market-driven, namely there is a tight relation between their performance and new students recruitment (Kearney & Arnold, 1994). This implies that schools build their activities through responsiveness to the community and parents' needs and are obliged to re-organize their curricula and social activity (Fosket, 1998a). Otherwise, unsuccessful schools will have to be closed (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). Increased pressures for demonstrating achievements and privatization processes enabled introduction of new players into the school arena, including the business sector and NGOs. These players set challenges to the school staff but also offer opportunities for promoting new initiatives and leading changes in the schools and communities. Schools aspire to encourage interrelations and various collaborations with the environment, believing in their ability to raise funds from additional sources that are not available to public bodies (Borasi &

Finnigan, 2010). These interrelations are based on the flow of knowledge, money and additional resources for the benefit of the school. The funding options have generated considerable changes in the school functioning (Bulkley & Burch, 2011). Yemini. & Sagie (2015) argue that the search and involvement of external organizations have created a state of proactivity for seeking new opportunities, aiming to render the school more attractive to all populations from physical, interesting, fascinating and exciting aspects.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Education systems in the western world, including Israel, are still based on a strong public infrastructure (Yustman, 2007). However, the privatization and decentralization trend in the Israeli education system is growing and the significance of non-profit associations and business bodies is intensifying (Ichilov, 2012). The OECD figures (Table B3.1 2013) illustrate that educational programs delivered by external bodies are most common in Israel, entailing the disintegration of the public education perception as a basic right that the state must provide. Moreover, involvement transpires without any legislation changes (Dagan-Buzaglo, 2010) and manifests the loss of governance (Bar, 2006; Ichilov, 2012). This duality brings to the surface complex issues regarding the responsibility in the educational policy when many players function in the educational field, the regulating role of the state and the importance of the schools' accountability.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This is a qualitative research that relates to the investigated reality and focuses on the players in it and the research participants, aiming to provide rich textual descriptions of all the stakeholders associated with the NOGs involvement in education. This research approach acknowledges the existence of structured, fluid, subjective, flexible and dynamic realities that are attributed different meanings and interpretations and are shaped within political, cultural and social contexts (Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2016).

This qualitative research method, analyzing government documents, and conducting 50 in-depth interviews with five groups, each of 10 participants who are involved in this phenomenon comprised the following: 1. Education high officials; 2. NGO executives; 3. Principals of elementary state-Jewish schools with low socio-economic background; 4. Parents; 5. Pupils. We targeted heterogeneous populations of varying views, whose voice has yet been unheard in the research in a way that would allow for retrieving meaningful information regarding the phenomenon at hand.

The research findings were collected during the first semester of the 2015-2016 academic year by in-depth interviews, designed to examine the participants' personal viewpoint (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In order to thoroughly understand the investigated issue, policy documents were analyzed as secondary information sources that were "natural data…, that existed without the researchers' intervention" (Silverman, 2006, p. 403). The challenge of using secondary sources resided in enhancing their validity so that they reflected the participants' viewpoints (Shkedi, 2014).

The interviews consisted of questions adapted to the interviewees according to their group affiliation, field of occupation and course of conversation (Gray, Williamson, Karp, & Dalphin, 2007). Moreover, the interviews included several identical questions addressed to all the participants of the five stakeholder groups. The interviews I conducted for the purpose of this study were characterized by great extent of openness and attention to the participants' words, while relating to general framework topics that focused on the research area (Hugh-Jones, 2010; Mason, 2002).

Four stages of data analysis were performed: (1) condensing – making analytic choices as to which data chunks to code and which to pull out (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014); (2) coding, which is "the action of identifying a passage of text… that exemplifies some idea or concept, and then connecting it to a named code that represents that idea or concept" (Gibbs, 2007, p. 148); (3)

categorizing – clustering codes together according to similarity; and (4) theorizing – aiming to transcend the categories toward a conceptual construct (Richards & Morse, 2013).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our findings illustrate that (a) The stated policy of the Ministry of Education in the last 4 years (2013-2017) is based on a partnership between the Ministry of Education and NGOs. (b) The policy supporting New Public Governance (NPG) manifests innovativeness and initiatives and uses the existing potential for collaboration between NGOs and the education system. (c) The cross-sector partnership policy re-examines the sharing of responsibility for education. (d) The partial privatization by matching funds gives a voice to economically-challenged populations. This facilitates implementation of school goals, increase of resources and improvement of students' academic and social achievements. (e) Finally, because of these changes, the principals have a new role. They serve as gatekeepers whose task is to prevent undesirable access or corruption on the NGOs' part.

EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

This study constitutes a new theoretical framework for understanding the processes and challenges involved in shaping, implementing and assessing the educational policy that is based on cross-sector collaboration. This policy aims to generate the required change in regulating the relations in the institutionalized education system and is perceived by many as a necessary reform. On the one hand, this policy allows the Ministry of Education to actualize its regulative role and the right of veto, being entrusted with the educational institutions and having the authority to determine the conditions of involvement. On the other, this policy should prevent perception of the system as “frozen” and bureaucratic as well as inhibit regulation mechanisms and safety nets from “suffocating” initiatives that could improve the system. This study has direct implications for the essence of the public policy, its definitions and implementation, in order to enable it to manifest the power relations and interests of each stakeholders group.

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