

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Specialized Schools in Israel:
A Longitudinal Policy Research
over the Past Three Decades**

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Abstract

In many Western countries (particularly in the USA and in England), there is a market in education, as part of a broad trend towards privatization of public services, including education. In education, this trend is characterized by three main axes: (a) the ownership axis, with the possibility of schools that are almost completely privately owned (that is, 0% public ownership); (b) the management axis – by increasing the number and proportion of private education suppliers; (c) the funding axis – by increasing tuition fees paid directly by pupils and their families while reducing public funding. Each of these axes can range from 0 to 100 percent in the extent of public involvement (Chalamish, Ayzeman & Yizraelov, 2019). Therefore a variety of situations can be seen in different education systems worldwide, due to: (1) the variable mix between and within the above three axes; (2) the presence of one or more of these axes in the national education system.

Planners of educational systems do not usually adopt an approach of full privatization, and the aim is to balance the various options, thus enabling certain conditions of partial or quasi-markets. These quasi-markets represent an integration between the private and public sectors, and are generally manifested in the ability to choose between public schools, and thereby avoid encouraging the private sector.

One of the most striking features of these processes that are identified as the privatization and marketization of education is the growth and rise of specialized schools (specialist schools and city academies in England, charter schools and magnet schools in the USA).

The professional literature describes tension in the field of education, between choice and markets on one hand, and equity and equality of opportunity on the other hand. Parental freedom of choice with regard to schools has aspects that emphasize the search for quality and effectiveness in promoting competitiveness, which may be inconsistent with equality and social fairness in promoting social cohesiveness. This discussion is valid within the field's accepted theoretical framework consisting of a triangle composed of three core values: equality, efficiency and liberty (Guthrie & Wong, 2015). The interaction between these three core values is described as an ongoing conflict as each one competes with the other two in the political environment.

In Israel, along with the aim of promoting equality of opportunity in education, ever since the early 1980s there have been accelerated processes of decentralization accompanied by strong leanings towards a partial market in education, which stem from the growing influence of the neoliberal worldview. One of the main manifestations of these processes is the rise of new and diverse school prototypes, including specialized schools. These prototypes are characterized, inter alia, by hybrid financing mechanisms (public and private), by pupil selection, and by supra-regional registration (Bialik, 2011).

The growing number of specialized schools poses a challenge for educational policy, because they could promote the value of choice at the expense of equality of opportunity. This challenge becomes sharper in view of the distribution of Israeli students' achievements, which reveals large gaps in comparison with other countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2018). Despite the efforts to close the gaps, it appears that the trend towards inequality is continuing (Ministry of Education, National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education, 2016).

Therefore, this paper focuses on a study of educational policy regarding the establishment of specialized schools in Israel, and analyzes this policy within the accepted theoretical framework that emphasizes the trade-off between equity and freedom of choice.

The work studies the main reasons for the rise of this phenomenon over the past three decades, 1985-2018, with reference to these questions: whether and to what extent, if any, is there a tension between overall educational policy and the specific policy with respect to specialized schools; whether and to what extent, if any, is there a tension between de jure policy and de facto policy with respect to specialized schools in Israel.

The research questions were therefore formulated as follows:

1. To what extent, if any, does educational policy, in the context of specialized schools in Israel, promote equality?
2. To what extent, if any, does educational policy, in the context of specialized schools in Israel, promote choice?

3. Who are the main "actors" in the arena of educational policy in the context of specialized schools in Israel?
4. What are their "voices" in the dynamics of policy formulation?
5. To what extent the voices of the various "actors" composite in (dis)harmony?

The study is conducted using the critical hermeneutical approach that is linked to the thinking of Habermas, who proposes the hermeneutics of suspicion and assumes that a text expresses, consciously or unconsciously, the interests of the powerful. The current study, analyzing the development of educational policy in Israel in the context of specialized schools – which intensely represent the phenomenon of the partial market in education as the outcome of macro and micro social political changes – looks beyond what is said by the research subjects. It examines what has been written and even what has not been written and has been suppressed in documents of the policy corpus, the compatibility or lack of compatibility between what is written and declared, and the actions of key actors in the creation of educational policy, and thus evaluates the great weight of social, cultural, historical and political factors, which are not just background elements, but an active force through which it is possible to understand the phenomenon and its evolution.

The method of analysis chosen for this study is thematic analysis, which consists mainly of a search for and identification of recurrent themes and patterns in a whole array of data. The first stage involved a thematic analysis of policy documents and transcriptions of semi-structured in-depth interviews with senior officials in the Ministry of Education, selected from a sample of experts. The thematic analysis refers to the evolution of the phenomenon and the development of the definition of its various aspects, as they are reflected in various policy documents along the time axis. This revealed the policy that was formulated in view of the phenomenon's development, and also identified groups of other key actors in the policy arena and examined their voices. In the second stage, the findings of the thematic analysis were mapped and analyzed according to the Value-Critical Policy Analysis model proposed by Schmidt (2006) and first formulated by Martin Rein (as quoted by Schmidt, 2006).

The main findings of this two-stage content analysis reveal a complex picture of a central educational regime, whose hegemonic status has been eroded in the wake

of political changes, and it has begun to lose a significant portion of its organizational ability to initiate, establish and enforce broad moves. In the face of this reality, and against a background of budget cuts during and after these years, an implied educational policy began to emerge in Israel, counter to official policy and with vague intentions. Following pressure from parents, mainly from more established segments of society who became significant actors in the arena of changing policy, it became possible to set up specialized schools, one of whose salient features is their license to charge tuition fees. This situation, according to Klees (2008), creates enormous gaps in the resources invested in children from stronger populations compared with weaker ones. The phenomenon has been identified in rich countries as well, where there are clearly destructive effects on the children who are neglected due to what Kozol (as quoted by Klees, 2008) calls “savage inequalities”.

One of the recommendations of the current study will be directed at educational policy-makers, recommending the formulation of open, institutional policy in all matters regarding the allocation of resources and budgeting of specialized schools, so that it will be possible to limit the portion of tuition fees imposed on parents, while increasing public funding. Furthermore, instead of continuing the trend of privatizing the entire system, the study will recommend strengthening public education and updating educational legislation, which in this context is found to be inadequate in view of the damage caused by the neoliberal reality.