

Educational Reforms and Teachers Unions in Israel (2001-2011)

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Abstract

This study examines educational reforms and programs in educational systems in the world in general, and in Israel in particular, in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It focuses on a unique program named "Ofek Hadash" (New Horizon) (2006-) – composed by the Israel Teachers' Union in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and other national ministries and agencies. This program is compared with "The National Task Force for the Advancement of Education in Israel" (Dovrat Report) (2003-2005) and "Oz LeTmura" (Courage to Change) (2000-). The study focuses on the place of the Teachers' Unions in such educational reforms and programs.

The following questions stand at the center of the study: What is the role of Teachers' Unions in such educational reforms and programs? Do such unions solely respond, or also initiate educational reforms and programs of their own? Do they hinder or advance educational reforms and programs? What is the influence of Teachers' Unions on the crystallization and successful implementation of educational reforms and programs? To what extent are the patterns of Teachers' Unions and their activities similar in Israel and in other countries?

The study begins with the following thesis: while programs such as "Dovrat" are based on the operative aspects of a *neo-liberal capitalist approach* at least, programs such as "Ofek Hadash" are based on a *social-democratic welfare state approach*. Hence, the apparent differences between the programs, and the reasons why the first program ("Dovrat") was archived, while the other ("Ofek Hadash") was the only one ever fully implemented. In the first case, the leaders of the educational system did not view teachers and their unions as partners for thinking and planning, and certainly not for implementation, while here the Teachers' Unions by themselves initiated and led the program.

The study utilizes "qualitative research methods" and the "constructivist approach." The research genre adopted here is "multiple case description." The observations were derived from direct personal research involvement in the actual events ("participant as observer"), and validated by external tools such as "evaluative research." "Semi-structured in-depth interviews" were conducted with a variety of policy – and decision-makers: Government ministers of education; general managers of the ministry; leaders

of programs; heads of professional unions; experts and scholars in education and industrial relations.

The study reveals that Teachers' Unions do not resist changes in principle but wish to ascertain that such changes will promote the actual goals and objectives of the educational system, acting to ensure that teachers will be able to fulfill the changing and developing tasks deriving from a particular reform or program. Therefore, there is no basis to the claim – prevalent in the last few decades – that teachers hamper the progress of the educational system by opposing any change in the status-quo. Teachers and their Unions are obviously not the enemies of change and innovation.

Using more precise phrasing, Teachers' Unions are wary of neo-liberal tendencies and of decentralization and privatization programs which include in their evaluation the undermining of the fundamental values of the Israeli educational system: equality and social justice; on the contrary, the Unions are natural partners in any educational reform or program; as such, one should preserve their role and foster it.

Teachers' Unions have an essential role in the educational system. They require reevaluation and special attention in order to make them an active, influential and constructive agent for the benefit of the educational system at large – the pupils as well as the teachers.

The advantage of Teachers' Unions in Israel is based on the fact that it is not enough to add tasks to the teachers in order to improve the education system – but to simultaneously ensure that they will receive the appropriate sources for their implementation