

REASONS FOR FAILURE OR SUCCESS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IMPLEMENTED IN ISRAEL

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Abstract: *In recent years, many a factor has contributed to raising the issue of changes and reforms in education. The declared goal of reforms in the educational system is to raise the achievement level of an ever-increasing number of students, and to enable them to integrate better in the society. Just as reforms often being a necessity for survival of organizations, and a way in which systems can remain in the center of public interest, they as well constitute an incentive for constant innovation and express a desire to change the face of education (Adler, 2000). The educational system is dynamic and that changes take place from time to time in schools. Whether these changes are minor or profound, reforms do take place over time (Ranson, 2008). Reform acts as a process for change in a democratic society. It involves changes to routines, undermining of what is already in place, identification of needs, opportunity for public discussion of values, examination of alternatives, building of agreements on priorities, involvement of stakeholders, need to cope with opposition, development of action strategies and more. On the other hand, there certainly are opposing forces: open and covert resistance on the part of various stakeholders, political struggles for power and influence, weakness of a reform from the point of view of those who have most need of it, clashing interest groups, socio-political mechanisms and structures, failures in execution, etc. (Oplatka, 2010). However, reforms in education take place too frequently (Oplatka, 2010). This survey gives a historical review of these reforms, it defines the central reasons for failure of reforms (organizational structure, setting of short-term targets, long-term policy, and involvement of stakeholders) and proposes more effective ways to implement reforms in the educational system in the future. Attention to stakeholders, determining qualitative and quantitative measures and long-term policy supporting the reform are keystones of success.*

Keywords: *change; stakeholders; structure; goals; reforms; education; obstacles to reforms; success of reforms.*

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1. Introduction

In recent years, many a factor has contributed to raising the issue of changes and reforms in education. In literature on education administration, it is now possible to find lots of information on subjects studied at school. New subjects were introduced to curricula, new learning theories were developed, psychological and sociological theories of a pupil's language were carried out, changes were made to organizational structure of schools under inspection and management science models were used to understand the dynamics between principals and teachers.

All these factors show that the educational system is dynamic and that changes take place from time to time in schools. Whether these changes are minor or profound,

reforms do take place over time (Ranson, 2008). In Israel, many reforms have been introduced and implemented over the years. On one hand, there is some doubt regarding the effectiveness of these changes in the educational system and capacity for assimilation of these changes over time (Silins, Mulford & Zarnis, 2002), however, on the other hand, evidence exists of successful assimilation of reforms building a step-by-step system to guide the leaders of change in implementation of a reform (Bryk et al., 2010; Ranson, 2008).

So what are the reforms, and what is the basis for their success or failure? Current paper surveys the central reforms in the educational system in Israel and proposes ways to make the implementation of future reforms more effective.

2. Reforms

The declared goal of reforms in education is to raise the achievements of an increasing number of students (and to enable them to integrate better into society). In addition to the reforms often being a necessity for survival of organizations and also a way to keep the subject at the center of public interest, they also act as an incentive to constant innovation and reflect a desire to change the face of education (Adler, 2000).

Reform acts as a process for change in a democratic society. It involves changes to routines, undermining of what is already in place, identification of needs, opportunity for public discussion of values, examination of alternatives, building of agreements on priorities, involvement of stakeholders, need to cope with opposition, development of action strategies and more. On the other hand, there certainly are opposing forces: open and covert resistance on the part of various stakeholders, political struggles for power and influence, weakness of a reform from the point of view of those who have most need of it, clashing interest groups, socio-political mechanisms and structures, failures in execution, etc. (Oplatka, 2010).

Grimmett and Wideen (1997) define reform in the field of education as a planned process of change aimed at achievement of praiseworthy objectives from the viewpoint of its initiators. Reform in education is, therefore, a change usually motivated from top to bottom, i.e. from policy-makers to the executive level, upon which pressure is being exerted to execute changes in the system and to adapt it to expectation of those in charge and to the environment.

In Israel, we can see that reforms in the educational system have observed three principles in recent years. In order to understand the reasons for success I will first survey the essence of main reforms which were carried out in the system.

3. Background of Educational Reforms in Israel

Education began in Israel prior to foundation of the State, and was shaped by a process which has continued for many years. From time to time layers were added and steps were taken to match the system's structure to new needs, as in Israel, compulsory education was introduced at the time of foundation of the State in 1948, and this continues constituting the basis for education. It provides free education for ages spanning from 5 to 14, for both the Jewish sector and the Arab sector. The norm was established of children requiring to study and for a school to provide Elementary education.

The first reform was in the year 1968, when following recommendations of Rimlet Committee it was decided to found separate Junior-High schools for ages 13 to 15. These junior high schools were supposed to create “an educational integration” by absorbing students from a number of feeding Elementary schools, distinguished from one another by social composition of their students’ population. It was decided to reinforce the law of compulsory education up to the age of 15.

Implementation of this reform was rapidly accepted and with no vigorous opposition. However, during the deployment, the Ministry of Education encountered elements of ambivalence, due to either a background of conservatism or identification with opposition from Teachers’ Association. Despite these delaying factors, the Junior-High school reform registered successes (Adler, 2000). Most of the public cooperated with the re-organization of education into integrated Junior-High schools until the 1980s, and the rate of pupils gaining a matriculation certificate was rising.

The second reform was the self-managing reform of 1992. In order to change the level of responsibility of schools, a committee was appointed by Minister of Education, Shulamit Aloni, to encourage transition of schools to self-managing. The transition to self-managing was designed, primarily, to define the school itself as bearing central responsibility for results. This re-definition took the authority for execution from those who had held it and delegated it to the educational institution. The basic assumption was that a person closest to evaluating the needs of pupils is the one to take the decision as to how to supply him or her with educational services. As teachers have the closest contact with pupils, one should transfer the authority to them to make decisions on subjects which were entrusted until that time unto the inspector, head of education department, or education personnel or organization that was not part of the school itself. In light of this move, schools were required to implement orderly work schedules by means of a school curriculum (Vidislavsky, 2004) which is guided by values based on, and aimed at targets. In order to support this change, professional materials were distributed to inspectors, principals and school officials.

Another reform, which was accepted in 2002, was in teaching of reading. In October 2000, the Shapira Committee was established to examine the topic of reading. Recommendations of the committee led to a reform which included change in methods of teaching of reading in Israel, from Elementary to High school age (Zohar, 2013).

In 2003, additional reform was proposed by the Ministry of Education following the Shoshani Committee report: the reform for equality in education. The committee was set to examine the allocation of resources as applied to Elementary school education in Israel, following a ruling by the Supreme Court of Justice relating to education, in order to respond to complaints of unreasonable differences in standards. This being related to allocation of resources to recognized schools not being registered, as opposed to “exempt” institutions. The reformed standard method was based on a principle of equality, on a social commitment to reduce differences in Elementary education and to resolve educational and social differences, whilst recognising the capability of each child.

This step necessitated a just and honest distribution of resources which would enable every boy and girl in Israel to reach their optimal level of achievement, deal with the socio-economic gap which they are found in and enable them to develop according to their abilities. The reform was designed to create an opportunity to construct a partnership between the school and the community around mutual

values of equality and social solidarity, to mobilize a different, more egalitarian, distribution of material and spiritual resources: knowledge, capacity, commitment, trust in pupils and in their capacity and a new observation of position of social values, that guide educators in both teaching and learning (Vidislavsky, 2003).

The New Horizon reform, and the so-called OZ reform for teachers, were accepted in Israel in 2008. These reforms were systemic and budgeted. They have relevance to a wide variety of organization frames for learners (a class, an individual teacher, pupil-teaching, and a small group with a teacher) in order to achieve educational and teaching goals. The reform recognizes the complexity of the teaching profession and a need for constant professional development. At the center of the New Horizon reform lies advancement of teaching-learning and development of the socio-ethical and emotional aspect by means of these main principles: (1) teaching-learning focused on an individual by means of "individual hours"; (2) strengthening the professionalism and quality of teaching by means of assessment of work of teachers, professional development along lines of career and allocation of time to teachers ("hours of stay") to carry out different tasks at school in addition to teaching in class; (3) reinforcement of management and the quality thereof. These reforms generate changes which encourage a school to re-examine its organizational culture, while emphasizing the advancement of every pupil in their mental (cognitive) aspects, their motion (motor) aspects and their intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. The changes increase as well the number of opportunities at the disposal of teachers to bring every pupil up to the required standards (Adler, 2000).

Meaningful learning reform was adopted by the Ministry of Education in 2014. The program's target is to change methodology of classroom studies. Instead of memorizing material, there should be a combination of more creative methods and positive experiences of learning, for example, by encouraging profound teaching and learning processes involving both a teacher and a learner and increasing interest and desire for learning – which the Ministry of Education hopes will result, over time, in higher achievements. A big part of realization of the program for meaningful learning depends on schools, that is, on principals and on teachers. The Ministry of Education allows for a relatively wide freedom of action of principals and teaching staff as well, in shaping "meaningful learning" in every school – even in development of study contents. In order to enable principals to implement the program, the Ministry gives them greater independence than before, both in managing and in allocation of the Ministry's budgets.

4. Obstacles and Reasons for Failure of Reforms in Education

Above survey of background of the reforms shows that they are frequent, which might indicate that a new reform reflects failure of a previous reform. However, one should judge each reform against its goals, while taking into account the by-products of the reform, both positive and negative, as indexes for success.

Researchers Gaziel (2007) and Oplatka (2010) identify four factors constituting obstacles to reform in an educational system which can result in failure.

The first reason depends on character, structure and leadership of a school. Character of a school as a social institution and the character of teaching, are insufficiently grounded in school structure for it to be possible to describe a school as an immune system (Eisner, 2010) and it follows for the fact that it is very difficult for a reform to be accepted throughout a school.

The second reason is content of a reform. Reforms invent simple and limited solutions to complex problems which require investment of resources of time and professional knowledge. Even the goals of a reform are often vague, which make its execution difficult (Gaziel, 2007). As a result, it is occasionally difficult to create understanding of how to execute the reform (Oplatka, 2010)

The third reason is political considerations that determine policy. Meaningful reform requires ongoing support and commitment of all political parties. When governments frequently change, as they often do in Israel, Ministers of Education tend to cancel or to feel lack of identification with the planned reform and consequently lack of commitment. Allocation of resources decreases and Ministers look for a new solution. In Israel, any systemic change inevitably takes longer than the average term of a Minister of Education (between the years 1990 and 2006 Ministers of Education served, on average, for one and a half years). Frequent changes of leadership of the Ministry of Education, usually at least the positions of Minister, Director General and chairman of the secretariat, result in changes in priorities and in new policy decisions which replace those of their predecessors. Even if the new policy is more preferable than its preceding policy, the frequent change inevitably causes huge damage.

The last reason is stakeholders in the educational system, teachers and principals, inspectors, institutions for teacher training and additionally, parents often do not reach agreement regarding the proposed reform and constitute an obstacle to its execution. For example, education personnel oppose change from fear of additional burdens upon the system, from undermining of recognized routines and from lack of moral commitment to the reform (Oplatka, 2010). Inspectors often oppose reforms due to fear of losing their power and status and parents might oppose change due to lack of understanding of the contribution to be made by the reform on a professional level.

5. Is it Possible to Create Successful reforms in an Educational System?

The question to be asked is what should, and can, be done differently. As a background to search for an answer to this question, several characteristics of the process of educational change, will be delineated, focusing on teaching and learning. Change over time: a central component in every process of change is a process of learning. All adults involved, need to undergo a learning process that combines theoretical and practical knowledge, pedagogic tools, a change of attitudes and conceptions about the essence of teaching and learning, and as well emotional aspects (Strauss & Shiloni, 1994). A complex and profound developmental process, which can be done gradually and only over time, is involved.

Systemic implementation of the change requires work on attitudes of parents, on study materials, on development of innovative assessment methods and on training of educators in several organizational levels: inspectors, principals, instructors, teacher trainers, authors of study and examination materials and, naturally, tens of thousands of teachers. In processes of professional training, such as these, no shortcuts are possible. Development of new study and assessment materials is a long-term exercise, demanding several cycles of implementation, field tests, formative assessment and correction. Work is as well required on private design and planning of details of the process of change, both on general systemic levels and within multiple specific contexts (such as school, class or a specific lesson). Each

process of educational change focusing on teaching and learning cannot be a speedy process yielding results within just a single year, or even two or three years, but rather has to continue for several years. This does not stem from negligence or inefficiency of those doing the work, but rather from the essence of the process and its complexity, and particularly from developmental dimensions of human processes of learning – which by their very nature are unlikely to offer shortcuts (Zohar, 2013). Creating conditions for a long term and stable policy: the previous paragraph argues for importance of a long-term policy and a stable governmental and managerial mechanism which will be able to support the policy continually for many years. It seems unlikely that the frantic nature of political reality in Israel is going to change in the coming years. The sole hope of bringing success to processes of change lies therefore, in the foundation of an apolitical governmental entity which can and will outline a long-term educational policy which implementation is immune to frequent political change.

Measurement of reform is by quantitative and qualitative measures simultaneously. Change of focus on teaching and learning is a qualitative process of change which can be measured only by complex indexes. There are processes of change in the Israeli educational system. For example, one should test the proportion of students studying in 7th to 9th grades in Junior High schools in the chosen years. We saw that in the years 2001-2002, 70% of the pupils studied in the relevant age groups in the Junior High schools, whereas 30% studied in eight-year Elementary schools (1st-8th). In other words, the percentage of pupils who studied in Junior High schools is a dichotomous variable measurable by a single quantitative index. However, other processes of change are significantly different from this example – and it is incorrect to describe them in terms of “all or nothing” (Zohar, 2013). If we consider the role of education is in thinking and understanding, two distinct approaches are involved. There are few teachers in whose class educational interactions never take place for advancing pupils’ understanding and thinking. On the other hand, there are no teachers whose classes deal solely with profound understanding and thinking and it is logical that this is the case. A need to formulate the goals of change just by comprehensive, measurable steps can only damage the process of change itself. Hence, it is clear that assessment of a program dealing with processes of change in quality of teaching and learning is necessarily complicated. It must indeed include quantitative indexes, however, qualitative indexes as well that are capable of reflecting profundity of processes and the quality thereof. These may include work files, using special programs to document and analyze processes of change taking place in schools, or processes of professional development, or projects involving groups of teachers.

Integration of stakeholders: It is essential to deal with each group of stakeholders and to encourage their involvement and participation both as a group and as individuals as well. It is advised to put pressure for their involvement from the outset, starting from design stages of the reform, definition of targets and method of implementation. It is particularly important to assure the commitment of teaching personnel and one should place at their disposal the required professional tools, as, in practice, they are the bearers of main burden of execution of every significant reform (Oplatka, 2010). Not a less important group is pupils. A school must be a relevant and meaningful place for pupils so that they will be able to develop educational and social self-sufficiency, a sense of self-realization and belonging, be challenged, etc. Their involvement in shaping the school is essential. A further group

is pupils' parents. Support of parents and their involvement enables a school to focus on the tasks it faces and releases it from wasting resources involved in dealing with parental opposition.

6. Conclusions

This survey of educational reforms in Israel defines the central reasons for failure of reforms (organizational structure, setting of short-term targets, long-term policy, and involvement of stakeholders) and proposes more effective ways to implement reforms in the educational system in the future. Attention to stakeholders, determining qualitative and quantitative measures and long-term policy supporting the reform are keystones of success. Determining the conditions required for success as they are presented in current paper would enable successful implementation of an updated reform of "meaningful learning" by the Israeli Ministry of Education and pave the way for subsequent reforms.

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