

# GLOBAL PROBLEM OF EDUCATIONAL FAILURE, IS THERE A PROBABLE REFORM FOR DEALING WITH THE CRITICAL ISSUE?

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**Abstract:** *Current paper examines reforms in educational systems around the world. Two main paradigms explain the growth of reforms in education systems: the balance paradigm and the conflict paradigm. By examining these paradigms, current paper describes the central reasons of reform failure. In parallel, the paper attempts supplying three principles for development of a successful reform in education systems. Over past hundred years, educational systems have constituted an integral part of the social services countries provide their citizens with. In addition, education is perceived as a critical variable to development of a modern economy and as a tool that promotes democratic values. This conception defines the role of a state as a protagonist that supplies a guiding hand in all matters of education. The rapid development of science and social changes challenges the system to reinvent itself in order to cope with the pace of various demands imposed on it. The question is: why are there so many attempts at educational reform and why do they fail? Reform depends on two basic organizational structures in modern society. The first is democracy, as reform is decided by people's elected representatives, the politicians, who follow a political agenda. The second is bureaucracy, those professionals who are specialists in the field and public administrators who are responsible for execution of the reform and implementation thereof. The combination of these two structures – which pursue different agendas and interests – is a basic difficulty facing reform (Gaziel, 1997). It might be possible to execute reforms in the educational system should three principles be followed: long-term policy, clear ways of measuring success, and integration of stakeholders. The sole hope of implementing a successful educational reform, therefore, lies in establishing an administrative or political body that would deal with outlining a long-term educational policy which implementation would be immune to frequent political changes (Zohar, 2013).*

**Keywords:** *educational policy; reform; change; balance paradigm; conflict paradigm.*

**JEL classification:** *I21.*

## 1. Introduction

Over past hundred years, educational systems have constituted an integral part of the social services countries provide their citizens with. In addition, education is perceived as a critical variable to development of a modern economy and as a tool that promotes democratic values. This conception defines the role of a state as a protagonist that supplies a guiding hand in all matters of education. The rapid development of science and social changes challenges the system to reinvent itself in order to cope with the pace of various demands imposed on it.

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 motivated usually from top to bottom – that is, from policy-makers to the executive echelon, upon which pressure is exerted to execute changes in the system and to adapt it to expectations of the policy-makers and the society at large. Accordingly, schools in Israeli educational system and those in rest of the world are subjected to comprehensive organizational reforms and changes on a regular basis. Big sums of money and effort are invested in these changes and they are similar in essence, to processes of change in other big organizations around the world (Abdullah & Kassim, 2011).

## **2. Theoretical Background of Growth of Reforms in Educational Systems Around the World**

Organizational changes reflect organizational reactions to changes in conditions of external or internal environment of an organization. Changes occur whenever significant gaps are created between a desired functioning of an organization and its actual functioning (Piderit, 2000). In the literature, we identify two paradigms taken from the field of sociology that explain the growth of educational reform: the balance paradigm and the conflict paradigm.

The balance paradigm claims that an education system is entrusted with protecting a balance of forces in society. When these balances are broken and a social (economic, demographic or other) need arises that is not satisfied, an imbalance is created between various parts of society. Usually, an expectation arises that the education system should be mobilized to return society to a more stable condition. The more societies modernize and their needs change, thus expectation increases that the education system should change in a similar direction. When the education system does not successfully respond to a gap between expectations and existing situation, pressure for a new reform emerges, one to succeed where the previous one did not. A cycle of repeated changes is created.

The conflict paradigm assumes that reform in education derives not from a natural process of protection of social balance, but rather from a constant conflict existing between various parts of society over targets, ideology, resources and power. A reform occurs when a conflict intensifies. The question then is how can a state resolve conflicting ideological commitments – for example, between commitment to effectiveness in a liberal capitalist society and commitment to creation of equality of opportunities and closure of social gaps. In order break through the impasse and gain political profit, policy-makers declare a reform that would remedy sickness of the education system. Afterwards, it limits the reform's implementation while as well minimizing damage (as educational reform costs a great deal of money and results are perceived only in the long term) (Gaziel, 1997).

## **3. Failures of Reforms in Education**

The question is: why are there so many attempts at educational reform and why do they fail? Reform depends on two basic organizational structures in modern society. The first is democracy, as reform is decided by people's elected representatives, the politicians, who follow a political agenda. The second is bureaucracy, those professionals who are specialists in the field and public administrators who are responsible for execution of the reform and implementation thereof. The combination

of these two structures – which pursue different agendas and interests – is a basic difficulty facing reform (Gaziel, 1997). These and other factors provide the reasons for failure in implementing educational reforms. It is possible to sum up the reasons for such failure by observing attempts at reforms in various countries.

First reason – political instability following frequent changes of government (in Africa and South America) or frequent changes of Minister of Education (in France and Israel). Every Minister of Education arrives with an agenda of their own, and they typically seek to leave their imprint on the system by proposing a reform. Even Ministers of Education from same political party, with similar ideologies, promote different reforms in order to be remembered by history – in France, for example, every reform is recorded by name of a Minister who proposed it. There is a similar situation in Israel: “the reform” is associated with the Minister of Education of the time, Zalman Aran; the foundation of regional colleges with Minister of Education Amnon Rubinstein; the Dovrat Committee with Minister of Education Limor Livnat; and “meaningful learning” with Minister of Education Shai Piron. The result is that no reform succeeds in achieving the targets that were set for it.

Second reason - Results now. The desire to do everything, fast and at once, is premised on the idea that this is the best way to resolve social and educational distresses. People expect the educational system to solve everything – it will bring about economic prosperity, close gaps, increase social mobility, encourage cultural integration, etc.

Third reason – bureaucracy. The educational system is a bureaucratic system and it holds within it the failures typical to these kind of system – not less, protection of vested interests. Each attempt at a reform is perceived as a threat to those with vested interest. So, for example, in 1980s, inspectors torpedoed attempts at making schools more autonomous. Alongside “bureaucratic inertia”, one should include the difficulty of freeing teachers of habits they feel providing them with security at work. There are organizational codes in schools helping a teacher to maintain a safe routine: discipline, keeping a timetable, structure of lessons, examination timetables, ceremonies, etc.

Fourth reason – importation of economic models and attempt to integrate them into the education system out of a belief that educational problems will thereby be resolved (Robertson & Woock, 1994). An example is a model that parents should choose the schools of their children. Supporters claim parents’ choice will bring about an improvement in educational achievements. It is known that the idea of parental choice is based on the principle of a market mechanism: schools would have to become more efficient in order to attract students and parents would then choose the best school for their child. But it is unclear how the model of parental choice solves the question of students’ achievements and prevention of their dropout from schools – two problems that are pedagogical in essence (Murillo, 1999).

Fifth reason - Reform in a complex system requires high budgetary investment. A complex system such as education requires big investment to carry out a reform. An investment of this scale often does not gain a wide public support. Additionally, the benefit of reform is seen only many years later. In absence of wide public support and a suitable budget, implementation of a proposed reform is partial or slow.

Sixth reason - attitudes towards teachers. Regular reforms have become a fact of life for teachers and in most cases reform is imposed from the top without their involvement in the process. The expectation is that they will change patterns of behavior and even their values and basic assumptions as part of the reform (Fullan,

2006; 2011). In terms of their role, teachers are required to adapt themselves to constant changes in society, to development of knowledge and to a growing accessibility of knowledge. They are perceived as responsible for welfare, education for citizenship and progress and achievements of their students (Day & Smethem, 2009). When teachers are perceived by policy-makers as solely responsible for implementing reforms, the implementation is likely to be superficial and to be characterized by passivity, by reduction in autonomy and by a limited motivation to effect improvement (Luttenberg, Carpay & Veugelers, 2013).

Seventh reason - ignoring stakeholders. "Any attempt at a reform is perceived as a threat to those with a vested interest" (Gaziel, 1997). The education system has many stakeholders and the main ones are: teachers and principals, who in practice are usually ordered to implement the reform, to operate a new curriculum and to change their teaching methods; inspectors, who are required to oversee the reform; teacher training and management institutions, which are entrusted with training teaching personnel and with providing knowledge and tools for work in a dynamic and changing system; and students and parents, who are consumers of the system. Reasons teaching personnel might oppose change include: misunderstanding of the sought-for change and ways to execute it; fear of failure; additional burden at work; questions about worthwhileness of change; undermining of familiar routines; lack of moral commitment to the required reform; and a feeling that it is being imposed from the top. Reasons consumers of the educational system might oppose reform include: misunderstanding of its possible contribution to them; exaggerated expectations; and desire to see results within a short period of time. Reasons inspectors might become an opposing party include: fear that the reform would weaken their status; and lack of practical knowledge about how to integrate the change.

#### **4. Is it Possible to Create a Successful Reform in Education?**

Is reform in the educational system a passive and unrealized goal? As concluded by several researchers (Clabaugh & Rozycki, 1989; Oplatka, 2010; Zohar, 2013), it might be possible to execute reforms in the educational system should three principles be followed: long-term policy, clear ways of measuring success, and integration of stakeholders.

Creating conditions for a long-term and stable policy: previous paragraph highlights the importance of a long-term policy and stable governmental and administrative mechanisms that would support policy consistently over many years. From its political and electoral make-up, it seems that a divisive and frantic political reality in Israel will not change in years to come. The sole hope of implementing a successful educational reform, therefore, lies in establishing an administrative or political body that would deal with outlining a long-term educational policy which implementation would be immune to frequent political changes (Zohar, 2013).

Measurement of reforms by quantitative and qualitative measures simultaneously: change focusing on teaching and learning is a process of qualitative change that is measurable only by complex indexes: these are educational processes of change which output is describable in dichotomous terms and by quantitative measures only. For example, in order to grasp the success of a reform concerning Junior-High schools in the Israeli educational system, one can check the proportion of students studying in 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grades in Junior-High schools in selected years. One could see that in the years 2001-2002, 70% of pupils in relevant age groups studied in Junior-

High schools, whereas 30% studied in eight-year Elementary schools (1<sup>st</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>). In other words, the variable of percentage of pupils who have gone through education in Junior-High schools is a dichotomous variable that can be measured by a single quantitative index.

However, pedagogical processes of change are significantly different from this example, as it is not appropriate to describe them in terms of “all or nothing” (Zohar, 2013). If one considers the example of education in thinking and comprehension, a dichotomous transition between two poles is not relevant. There are almost no teachers in classes of which educational interactions never take place in order to promote students’ understanding and thinking. On the other hand, there are no teachers in classes of which all of the time is spent on deep understanding and thinking – and rightly so. The need to formulate the goals of change solely with comprehensive quantitative measurable criteria can only damage the process of change itself. Hence, it follows that an assessment of a program dealing with processes of change in quality of teaching and learning has to be a complex assessment. It must include quantitative indexes, however additionally it must also include a string of qualitative indexes: that would be capable of containing the depth of discussed processes and the quality thereof, such as work files; and that would present special programs and would also document and analyze processes of change taking place in schools or in processes of professional development or in projects of a group of teachers.

Integration of stakeholders: Every group of stakeholders must be assured of their involvement and participation, both as a group and as individuals. It is important to act for recruiting them at the initial stages of a reform’s design, as targets are being defined and methods of implementation considered. It is especially important to ensure commitment of teaching personnel and one should place at their disposal the necessary professional tools as they are going to bear the main burden of execution of every significant pedagogic reform (Oplatka, 2010). A no-less important group is the pupils. A school must be relevant and meaningful place for pupils so that they would be able to develop educational and social self-sufficiency, to develop self-realization and a sense of belonging, and to be challenged. Their involvement in shaping the school is necessary. An additional group is pupils’ parents. Support of parents and their involvement enable a school to focus on the tasks ahead of it and free it from wasting efforts in dealing with parents’ opposition.

## 5. Conclusions

Current paper examined the reasons for failure of educational reforms around the world. There is no doubt that a problem exists in implementation of reforms in the educational system in all the countries. The clash between democracy (changes of Ministers) and bureaucracy (implementation of organizational change) are the central reasons for their failure (Gaziel, 1997). Despite that, additional researchers (Clabaugh & Rozycki, 1989; Oplatka, 2010; Zohar, 2013) remain optimistic about success of a future reform. Such reforms – should they take place in conditions of governmental stability, integration of stakeholders and existence of relevant measuring systems – can help the educational system to successfully implement reforms.

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