My own scholarship is related to policy making in education in response to global changes. It focuses on political debates and the professional practice of curriculum makers and teachers in a global world. Israel is typified by a plethora of political views in an increasingly diverse democracy is well known—educational change in Israel is no exception.

Looking back at the history of the Israeli educational system, I identified three different periods of change in the Israeli curriculum development: “the pre-scientific period” leading up to the establishment of the Center for Curriculum Development; the scientific period from the late 1960s till the early 1980s, when curriculum development was centralized; and the open period, since the 1980s, when school-based curriculum development became an acceptable and even desirable alternative.” (Ben-Peretz & Zaidman, 1986). Similar changes might be identified in other countries as well, although the movement might be from a completely open period to a centralized national curriculum as was the case in England in the late 20th century.

Throughout the years, Israel has set up committees to explore ways of improvements in education. I chaired several committees instituted by the Ministry of Education including the matriculation reform committee and the committee on teacher education reform. During the deliberation of the matriculation reform committee, for example, contradictory voices were heard by members of the teacher unions, representatives of universities, as well as parent representatives. Each demanded considerations of their respective perspectives and visions. Whereas teacher unions were concerned about teacher layoffs that might result from a reduction of hours devoted to different teaching domains; representatives of universities expressed concerns about the quality of preparation of students for higher education especially in math, science, and languages; and parents were worried about
the heavy load of study for their children. As a consequence, the report of the committee, submitted to the Minister of Education, represented ideological and practical compromises. Though the number of subjects to be included in the matriculation certificate was not reduced, the nature of the exam was adapted to specific student populations and school systems.

Basically, matriculation exams in Israel require seven different subject domains, but there is room for adaptation to specific populations such as Talmudic studies in the Jewish religious schools and studies of the Koran in the Muslim Arab schools.

These issues are articulated in my book Policy Making in Education—A Holistic Approach in Response to Global Changes (Ben-Peretz, 2009) where I also argue for a holistic approach to policy making in education that integrates and coordinates three major systemic aspects: curriculum that encompasses, among other things, socio-economic gaps and demographic changes within and between different communities; teaching that includes the implementation of mandated curricula; and teacher education where teachers consider what I dub the curriculum potential which references intended as well as unintended uses of curriculum materials. I talk about it in The Teacher-Curriculum Encounter: Freeing Teachers from the Tyranny of Texts (Ben-Peretz, 1990). The junctions between curriculum, teaching, and teacher education constitute spaces for political debate, on the one hand, and professional practice, on the other hand.

The Holocaust, for example, is, obviously, a crucial event in the history of Israel, and as such it is at the center of many educational dilemmas that bring together aspects of curriculum, teaching, and teacher education. One of the debated issues was the appropriate time and way to present this part of human history to students. On the one hand, teaching about human tragedy and cruelty could impose on the students a sense of being a victim, but, on the other hand, it could be an opportunity for learning about human strength and universal values of moral clarity, equality, justice, and compassion. These deliberations resulted in special curricular units that were introduced in teacher education programs and implemented in schools. The way the teacher interprets these materials shapes, and is shaped by, students’ historical awareness.

Drawing on your experience shaping the Israeli educational system, what were some of the main changes incorporated into the Israeli system and the rationale behind them and what do you think are some of the key educational challenges facing the Israeli education system today?

Some of the key changes incorporated into the Israeli system resulted from the structural reform that was implemented in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This structural reform entailed the establishment of comprehensive junior high schools for grades 7 to 9. Up to then the Israeli school system was divided into two parts: an elementary level from age six to 14, and a post-elementary level from age 14 to 18 culminating in students’ efforts in obtaining a matriculation certificate. Before the structural reform, only about 25% achieved a matriculation certificate. The structural reform was introduced to address concerns about equity and fair division of educational resources among students of different socio-economic backgrounds.

Moreover, there was dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching during the final two years of elementary school and there were deep concerns emanating from the high percentage of failure and dropout at the post elementary stage.

As part and parcel of this policy change and the creation of the junior high-school system, changes were introduced into teacher education
programs in order to prepare teachers for the new school form. A special department for curriculum development was created in the Ministry of Education. Now, one of the numerous educational challenges facing the Israeli educational system is it being comprised of politically, socially, and culturally diverse populations. Because of this diversity, several separate education systems exist side by side: the general public system, the religious Jewish public system, the religious Arab public system, the private system of ultra-orthodox Jews, and the private Christian-Arab system. Other ethnic groups such as Bedouins and Druze operate their own education systems. Most systems are funded by the state, but some are funded by other organizations such as the Catholic Church, for example.

The outcome of this myriad of political, cultural, and religious perspectives takes form in the lack of a core education for all citizens that can ensure equal opportunities for prosperity and social mobility for all. To address this challenge, the general education system is highly reform-oriented.

The committee on the matriculation reform, for example, recommended the reduction in external examinations, a recommendation that was not implemented as planned because of the contesting perspectives of the large number of stakeholders involved. For instance, the religious sector insisted on the inclusion of Talmudic (a central text of Rabbinic Judaism) studies in the matriculation exams. Another example is the demand of minority populations like the Druze to include their own history in the required topics of study.

As to teacher education programs, the diverse nature of the Israeli educational system created a demand for diversity in teacher education, in spite of the need for a common framework. At present I am involved in an attempt to adapt teacher education to the changing nature of present day schooling. But going back to the issue of the challenges in the Israeli context, I believe that some of the key educational challenges facing the Israeli education system are: expanding public education to segments of society that are not, as of yet, part of it such as the ultra-orthodox Jewish community. Another important key issue concerns the expansion and improvement of educational facilities that are offered to the Arab population. Finally, the growing fragmentation of the Israeli society calls for a focused attempt to introduce more commonality and unity in educational opportunities for all members of society. At present, there are only few ultra-orthodox schools where students sit for the general matriculation exam. This is a new phenomenon in the Israeli educational system.

Young people (students) are the focus of educational change for improvement. From your perspective, what are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?

It seems to me that the key needs of young people as identified by young people are somewhat different than what I think the key needs of young people are. Young people might declare that they need a kind of learning that provides meaningful experiences, developing motivation to learning, as well as adaptation to different needs, abilities, and interests of individual students. Young people might also express a need to have teachers who are personal and positive models who facilitate students’ deeper understanding of worlds of knowledge related to their individual orientation and talents. My own understanding of the key needs of young people goes beyond the above stated and concerns knowledge about the other. The other might be a member of a different nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender or way of life. Children used to read books about children in other cultures, this is, in my view, an
important component of education which is neglected today. Beyond knowledge about the other, there is a need for the development of acceptance and empathy towards the other.

The field of educational change might prioritize studying of literature of different cultures, being involved in dramatic presentations of different lifestyles or personal biographies of people of other backgrounds. These might create a sense of understanding and a feeling with other people. Such educational activities have to start at a very early age—from kindergarten and onwards—and be part of the overall policy of educating people in the global world. The internet and present day modes of communication provide venues that did not exist before for getting to know other people thus addressing the impoverished nature of educational resources.

**What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about educational change today?**

One of the drawbacks in the official curricula determined by central agencies of education like Ministries or Board of Educations is the difficulties of adapting them to local conditions or individual needs and interests of students. External examinations are a powerful tool for ensuring adherence to centrally determined curriculum. More flexibility that not only allows options for local and personal choice of content and of process of teaching but also reduces the power of external examinations is a much-required change considering the present-day diversity of populations in schools.

I hope, as well, that notions of diversity will be expanded to include diversity of timing in schooling. The notion of timing in education is so ingrained in the system that it has become a constraint. Reconceptualizing timing may bring to a burst of opportunities and growth to many more individuals. Disrupting the linear timeline of the experience of education by allowing students’ learning in multiple types of places including work places and in multi-age classes may enhance opportunities of growth. For example, allocating a certain number of study years to each citizen in the form of vouchers that are provided and funded by the state can also be a way to allow more individuals to continually learn, acquire new skills, and expand horizons. When to use these vouchers and in which context is left in the hands of the citizens themselves.

Present day political fragmentation among different populations in Israel, Jewish and Arabs, Newcomers, and Natives is a barrier for a more inclusive educational framework that accepts a commonality in overarching issues. This diversity is ever growing especially nowadays as issues confronting humanity take the form of waves of migration of people from their home countries to other countries. This movement creates more heterogeneous populations but also the forming of closed, ghetto-like communities that have little contact with each other. It is difficult to imagine, today, an educational system which strives to unify people and educate students committed to a general conception of the public good in Israel. That is, it is difficult to imagine Israeli citizens who are not committed only to their particular community (Jewish, Arab, religious, secular). On the one hand, the very existence of different systems precludes such a development. On the other hand, it is important to keep the dream of an open, inclusive, and accepting society alive through the work of educators.

**Given your focus on educational change, what would be some major lessons we can learn from educational change in Israel?**

Educational change in a country like Israel has shown that change has to be all encompassing,
implemented by institutional forces such as the Ministry of Education or a board of education in a community. Without the impact of institutional recognition, no state-wide educational change can be implemented, certainly not over time. The structural reform in Israel, in the form of the creation of the junior high school was accompanied by decisions taken in the Israeli parliament and by large-scale investment of funding. It involved even construction of buildings to house the new schools.

Another important lesson is that teacher education programs need to adopt educational change and include it in the preparation of teachers. This happened in Israel when the creation of the junior high school necessitated the academization of teaching so that teachers are better prepared to teach using teaching techniques that work better than others. At present, teachers earn a B.Ed. with their teaching certificate, when graduating from teacher education programs.

The academization of teacher education programs in the colleges of education necessitated large-scale investment in hiring faculty, planning of programs, as well as offering physical sites to accommodate the growing number of teacher education programs. On the one hand, this investment paid off because individuals who are interested in becoming teachers can find appropriate institutional frames. On the other hand, the great diversity of institutional frames that provide teacher-education programs makes it difficult to safeguard the appropriate academic standard of teacher education programs thus potentially compromising the quality of teaching. Whatever the case, educational change is a constant in Israel because she is continuously working to improve the educational system thus provide a continually improved education in the face of diversity.

ENDNOTES


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Among her numerous publications are The Teacher-Curriculum Encounter: Freeing Teachers from the Tyranny of Texts (SUNY, 1990), Learning from Experience: Memory and the Teacher’s Account of Teaching (SUNY, 1995), and Policy-making in Education: a Holistic Approach in Response to Global Changes (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009). Miriam can be reached at: mperetz@edu.haifa.ac.il