

## **Applying Educational Reform – A Practical Perspective**

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The original title of this lecture was supposed to be "applying educational reform – a historical perspective". I had this idea in mind of reviewing some famous educational reforms – notably those associated with the French Revolution – and comparing them to those which are suggested today in Israel. While working on this issue I realized it was too broad to cover in the time I had. In any case, I thought, such historical comparisons were not always valid because of the problematic nature of cross cultural comparison as well as assessing similarities between different historical ages.

While thinking about these historical issues, there was one thing that struck me: educational reforms start with a negative view of the past, but at the same time seek to reconstruct it. This may be termed "**the historical paradox of reform**", which makes it difficult for us to decide whether the change proposed by the reformers is innovative or conservative. In educational history the past is often viewed with hostility, as a series of problems and failures to be corrected by novel educational ideas. On the other side, the past is often observed nostalgically: reports of esteemed committees proposing educational reform often begin with a lamentation of the "good old days", when values were clear, when educators knew what they were doing, and children's work at school was not interrupted by modern trendy theories. As Hargreaves says, "stronger orientation towards the future creates greater nostalgia for the past. [...] In the face of [the complexities of our postmodern era] many people long for a golden age of traditional subjects, basic skills and singular values, moral absolutes and scientific certainties" (Hargreaves and Evans 1997: 108). So between the rejection of the past and the espousal of an imaginary ideal past we have to educate our students at this college to be teachers.

A further paradox of reform is this: **educational reform begins with a mistrust of teachers, but it is teachers who are expected to carry it out.** The origins of most educational reforms are not academic but political, and their leaders are not educators, but politicians and administrators (in the case of Israel, also businessmen and ex-military officers). As for the teachers, it is they who are responsible for the dismal

failures of their students, are they not? Should they not be excluded from designing the educational improvement?

In this situation, in which teachers are being severely criticized for being conservative, anti-intellectual and in fact total failures, we have to recruit new students to this profession and prepare them to be teachers.

The final problem I want to raise concerns the paradoxical situation of the teacher education colleges. I can term this "**a paradox of identity**": what are we? Are we professional schools subordinated to the state's ministry of education, or sovereign academic institutions with all the freedoms to which such institutions are entitled?

These three paradoxes determine the practice of reform and define its limits. From that point of view, the way to achieve educational reform is to try to deal with these paradoxes and minimize their effects. This can be summarized under three headings:

- Understand the historical setting of reform and work within it;
- Trust the teachers – they are the ones who will have to carry out the reform;
- Support the teacher education system which provides both the theoretical and the practical foundations of the public educational system.

It seems to me that the reform recommended by the National Task Force (the Dovrat Committee) has failed on each of these points.

### **The historical perspective**

What is the purpose of reform? In theory (writes e.g. Michael Fullan 1991), the purpose of educational change is to help schools accomplish their goals more effectively. But we all know it is impossible to reform the educational system as if it were a closed system, isolated from other social issues. Does the educational system merely respond to social change, or can it lead up to change? Historically speaking, **educational change almost always followed social change**. Public educational systems are usually **a result** of historical processes and not their causes; the immediate effects of education upon social change is minimal or at least extremely

slow (e.g., the effect of the French Revolution upon the French educational system could be observed more than a century after the revolution; the educational revolution achieved by the Protestant Reformation took at least 200 years to make its imprint).

In other words, the notion (or pretension) that a reform of the educational system will solve the problems of Israel (or even solve Israel's educational problems, i.e. the failure of Israeli schoolchildren in international tests) **stands against historical evidence**. Educational reform cannot be advanced before taking care of several other aspects which are a **precondition** for good education. Among these we can mention economic stability, military security, and especially the presence of a collective consciousness which enables society to express common values, which public education is supposed to support. Because all these components are missing at this time in Israel, **it is mistaken to suppose that a structural change (or even a curricular change) in the educational system will bring about rapid social improvement.**

### **The teaching profession**

**Committees can only suggest a general framework for reform, but it is teachers who must make that reform happen.** Teachers are indispensable agents of educational change – if teachers cannot or will not do it, it won't happen.

Indeed, the Dovrat Report – just like other national reform-texts of its kind – seems to speak highly of teachers. In chapter 3 the committee declares in festive words that "kindergarten and school teachers are those who bear the major responsibility for educational work. [...] they are at the forefront of educational practice and they are the ones who perform almost all educational tasks. Their professionalism, enthusiasm and motivation for success at their job, as well as their obligation to the moral (ethical) and social education of their students and to the advancement of their scholarly achievements, are a necessary condition for the success of the educational system" (Dovrat Report 2005: 123).

Unfortunately, the rhetoric and the reality of educational reform are completely opposed. While paying lip service to teachers as apparent leaders of the reform, the report actually condemns them and blames them for being ineffective and inefficient.

The immediate **practical** result of the attempt to apply the reform in Israel was to lay away thousands of teachers who were defined by the ministry as "having low productivity". Dismissing these teachers was supposed to free some funds in order to raise the salaries of those left in the system (I will not deal here with the curious economics of this reform, which was based upon the premise that it could be achieved without adding anything to the ministry's budget but merely by transferring funds from one section to another).

The Dovrat committee has failed to call upon the professional wisdom of teachers and in fact excluded teachers from its sessions; it has discarded much of the expertise of educational research. Thus the reform proposed by the committee actually contributes to the deprofessionalisation of teachers, by overloading them with work, making them subject of inspection and imposing upon them a stricter discipline (e.g., they must sign in when starting their workday) in order to achieve the desired results by the government. They are expected to achieve results, as if the teachers, not the students, are those who are being tested for their proficiency in reading and mathematics. As Hargreaves (1997: 5) has shown in his analysis of the results of educational reforms in Britain, teachers subjected to this state of things experience "fear, anguish, anger, despair, depression, humiliation, grief and guilt...they showed signs of loss of confidence in the fully professional role, feelings of inadequacy, diminution of status, dehumanisation, reduced autonomy, weakened commitment." We can see similar phenomena here in Israel. In this situation, isn't it a wonder that we have teacher candidates at all?

### **Teacher education**

In the late 1970s, the future for teacher education in this country looked bright. Teacher training institutions were to undergo a process which would transform them into academic institutions. It was expected that academic colleges would recruit quality students, and that these choice students would receive higher level preparation for their careers in education. It was logically supposed that the academization of teacher preparation would raise the professional status of teachers in Israel.

History is all about the gap between the expected and unexpected. People plan, but historical situations foil their plans, and the results are almost never anticipated. The

case of the academization of teacher education is proof of that. Regardless of the original plans, teacher education colleges in Israel are in an unstable state for more than a decade. The reason for this constant turbulence is the fact that the promise of academization of teacher education has never been fulfilled in this country, and in fact doubted from its very beginning. While the academic quality of teacher education no doubt made impressive advancements, the level of incoming students was not raised (because of other social processes). Most importantly, the institutions and organizations which were supposed to support the academization of teacher education acted without the generosity which is so necessary in order to transform teacher seminars into academic colleges. The Council of Higher Education indeed granted the colleges the permission to award an academic degree (the B.Ed.), but at the same time separated that degree from "standard" university degrees (B.A., B.Sc.). The Ministry of Education did not give up its control over the budget of these colleges, which in fact meant heavy control over the curriculum. The ministry never made long-term plans to stabilize the colleges as mainstream academic institutions. Finally, the Teachers Union never gave up its claim to determine the salaries, the rank and the working conditions of the lecturers of the teacher education colleges, and thus to separate them from the faculty of all other academic institutions in Israel.

The result of all this was an endless process of academization with no clear goals and no systematic planning as to how these goals might be achieved. Moreover, an impression was created among the general public (and sometimes even within academic circles) that the colleges of education are not real academic institutions. This perspective is evident in the Dovrat Report, which speaks of "upgrading" the colleges by granting them permission to award the B.A. degree – as if the colleges do not have the authorization to grant academic degrees!

The teacher education colleges are in fact confused about their mission and their academic identity. We are posing as if we are a small university, but we are not. Several departments and schools of our own college make intense attempts to cover up their focus upon teacher education and members of the faculty appearing in public often do not mention their institutional affiliation.

Curiously enough, the Dovrat Report relates only very briefly to teacher education. In the 300+ page report, there are merely 2-3 pages regarding teacher training. Apart from the "upgrading" of degrees outlined above, the report mentions that there are "too many" colleges of education, and recommends closing some of them, thus cutting the teacher education budget by 300 million NIS – which are earmarked for school development. Thus it is the teacher education colleges which are the first to pay the heavy financial price of the reform.

### **What can be done?**

We know from historical experience that educational reforms are equally likely to succeed as to fail. Educational reforms, drawn out by committees of non-educators are frequently ill-conceived and underdeveloped. And most unfortunately, insufficient funds are allotted to their implementation. Too many questions are left open, so there is a process of constituting additional sub-committees in order to take care of specific issues (some of which are very critical). Thus the reform in fact expands over many years. The first "grand" committee is only a beginning of a process which can go on for years.

From my point of view as dean of the School of Education, reform means severe budget cuts, dismissal of dozens of faculty members, and exceedingly smaller numbers of incoming students. The School of Education at Beit Berl College now has about half the students it had a decade ago. People simply do not want to become teachers. We are making a pathetic attempt to create a false impression of business as usual, but in fact we are in a deep crisis which can be overcome only if some drastic measures are taken. Here are some suggestions.

### **History**

The Dovrat report states in the introduction that the reform should be seen as a whole, and that the program should be accepted as a complete structure. It is implied that the reform would work only if no concession is made, and that all parties concerned should therefore accept it en bloc. The text is full of imperatives, as if there are no arguments or major disagreements about educational issues. In order to correct this, everybody must understand that **change is a process, not an event**. In other words, **reform must be negotiated, not dictated**. From that point of view the attempt to put

into operation a complete "one and indivisible" reform immediately, "once and for all", will fail. The fact is that this attempt was given up especially regarding the ultra-orthodox sector (where the Ministry of Education has almost no influence). Reform has to be taken step by step, with points of exit (or points where one can stop and rethink the reform and adjust it to the changing circumstances).

### **Teachers**

If educational change depends on teachers, it requires that teachers be understood by others. It's important to create among the teachers a sense of mastery, excitement and accomplishment – as incentives for supporting change. It is important (to use Hargreaves' expression) to **"bring teachers back in"**, or to place them, rather than the students, at the center of reform (e.g., "for every child deserves more" – the motto of the Dovrat Report; and indeed the report begins by defining the basic conditions which each child deserves. The teachers only appear on pp. 123ff.). It is important to take seriously the idea of "working together for change", which the Dovrat report emphasizes in its introduction. **Do not isolate teachers – plan the reform with them.**

### **Colleges**

The following steps must be taken in order to make the teacher education colleges viable:

**Restructure teacher education programs:** The inflexible model for teacher education, dating from about 1980, must be discarded in favor of updated, flexible and interdisciplinary curricula. It is necessary to promote as much as possible individual learning courses for teacher-candidates, and to enable the acquisition of several professional diplomas, in addition to the teacher diploma. Restructuring should also shorten the duration (in hours and years) of teacher preparation programs, and permit exit-points along the way. The B.Ed. degree is equal in the number of annual hours to about 2 full bachelors programs. It is impossible for a student, found unsuitable for teaching (for whatever reason), to complete degree requirements at the college. Such a student must leave and complete his academic studies at a university. The siamese twins of degree + teacher diploma should be separated. I include in this

restructuring also enabling the quick development and accreditation of masters programs (M.Ed.).

**Restructure college organization:** Break boundaries between departments, subjects, etc., and create an environment promoting innovation and productivity.

**Reculture teacher education:** We must create a climate in which we can share resources and ideas, promote intellectual exchange, and advance an atmosphere of trust and moral support. This will enable us as leaders of change to dare to take risks and our faculty to deal with complex and unanticipated situations. This will create a situation of **organizational learning** – something that we always recommend to our students and to our professional development schools, but seem not to apply to ourselves. With these steps I would also include **overcoming the isolation of teacher education colleges** and merging them with the mainstream of the Israeli academic system. This could be done by encouraging collaboration at several levels between colleges of education and other academic institutions, especially regional colleges, which will enable us to develop departments into different avenues, not always associated with teacher education.

#### References

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