

The Philosophy of Social Segregation in Israel's Democratic Schools

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Democratic private schools in Israel are a part of the neo-liberal discourse. They champion the dialogic philosophy associated with its most prominent advocates—Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas—together with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, the humanistic psychology propounded by Carl Rogers, Nel Noddings's pedagogy of care and concern, and even Gadamer's integrative hermeneutic perspective. Democratic schools form one of the greatest challenges to State education and most vocal and active critique of the focus conservative education places on exams and achievement. This article describes the dual discourse connected to the schools. The first is the inner dialogical, which is devoted to student freedom and progress, the child being placed at the center. The second is the exterior discourse, which represents the school as a place of counter-education that provides personal and group development and comprises a site of liberty and choice. The schools in Israel are described as test case and indicating the existence of a sophisticated form of deception via the use of alluring terminology. The democratic private schools should be recognized for what they really are—agents of commodification that undermine democracy rather than enhance it.

Keywords: philosophy of educational segregation, emancipatory pedagogical project, democratic schools

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, parents of children attending public schools have begun reacting to what they regard as the conservative of nature of these "state" schools by calling for the establishment of private "democratic" schools governed by the principles of free choice, student and parental participation, and openness to everything related to the determination of the school curriculum. This article examines the democratic-school system in Israel as a test case of a philosophy of educational segregation: while these schools seek to democratize school life and the educational curriculum as far as possible, they also espouse a radical neo-liberal discourse that endorses the establishment of separate schools for those with financial means, students whose parents are unable to afford the fees thereby being excluded. In this paper, I shall address the way in which the neo-liberal discourse has begun to permeate the education system under a mask of deception and expose the concealed mechanisms of power via which the philosophy of social separatism discourse operates within the education system.

2. Democratic Private Schools as an Emancipatory Pedagogical Project

Over the years, the establishment of democratic private schools has been championed most strongly by the

middle class, as part of the neo-liberal discourse that seeks to promote publically-funded private education. Since the 1980s, dozens of such non-public schools have been established in Israel, funded by parents who object to the educational philosophy adopted by the State and its strict supervisory administrative system. Seeking to give the student and his/her selective abilities/desires top priority, together with an attempt to cultivate the school as a community epitomizing democratic-pedagogic principles, these schools are committed to instituting school parliaments, setting up executive authorities, and implementing practical steps that will liberate the students from the constraints of the State establishment.

The state educational system is based upon stringent regulation and a central supervisory body that—like every national-state system—employs various means and methods. Its goals are largely governed by a monolithic meta-narrative that informs both the national and pedagogic aspects of schooling. The Zionist narrative being set forth as the sole legitimate and reigning narrative, this demand-model narrative requires students to study texts that are ranked and classified in accordance with a curriculum that privileges the center over the periphery, being examined via an internal and external school exam system. This system precludes individual self-expression and discourages student freedom and a learning community marked by dialogic inquiry.

Private democratic schools thus clearly represent an attempt to “emancipate” and “democratize” education so that it serves the needs of the individual/child rather than those of the State. The system is characterized by a pluralistic learning commitment to constant self-examination and change, the creation of democratic structures and processes in schools, a curriculum that promotes democratic experiences, a cooperative learning process between students and teachers, and a learning community that acknowledges the student’s uniqueness based on the view that every person has the right to his/her own self-expression.

3. Democratic Education in Global Perspective

The 20th century has witnessed three distinct waves of alternative education. The first, which occurred during the twenties and the thirties, is known as “new” or “progressive education.” The second took place during the seventies, being referred to as “open and free education.” The present wave, which began in the nineties, bears the name “democratic education.”

The ideology of progressive education—as exemplified par excellence in the “open school” format—is dedicated to freeing the individual from social constraints, which it regards as oppressive and technocratic. In the eyes of its proponents, learning being a natural part of growth, it calls for no adult intervention. Believing profoundly in the individual human and having little faith in public institutions, these progressive educators have frequently been defined as radicals—despite claiming that the principles they espouse best suit society (Miller 2007).

The democratic approach to education is not an isolated experiment limited to one or two schools but constitutes a dynamic, growing international network that forms part of an evolving movement devoted to teaching children democratic values and responsibilities by immersing them in a democratic environment (Gutmann 1987). Certain facets of these schools setting them apart from other types, they are known as “democratic schools” or “free schools” (Sadofsky and Greenberg 1994). The oldest existing democratic school is Summerhill, established in Germany in 1921 and currently located in Suffolk, England, which follows a philosophy propounded by Alexander Sutherland Neil—who argued that the child’s happiness is paramount (Neil 1996; Croall 1983). Another example is Sudbury Valley School, founded in Framingham, Massachusetts, in 1968. This continues to be a model for dozens of Sudbury Schools around the world.

The influence of democracy in education has spread rapidly (Kelly 1995). In Japan, the “free-school system” boasts nearly one hundred institutions, at least 250 such or similar schools also existing in the USA—where home schooling forms a common response to the disciplinarian and punitive nature of the regular American school system. In Israel, over 22 private institutions call themselves “democratic schools,” the system also boasting an academic department at Hakibbutzim College in Tel Aviv, which conducts research and development, trains new teachers in democratic methods, and publishes books in the field (Hecht 2005).

4. A Dual Discourse

Israeli private democratic schools are marked by two discourses. The first is the inner dialogical, which is devoted to student freedom and progress, the child being placed at the center. The second is the exterior discourse, which represents the school as a place of counter-education that provides personal and group development and comprises a site of liberty and choice. The outer discourse is characterized by its opposition to educational monologism on the grounds that “knowledge is never independent of social, historical and biological contexts that give it meaning. One aspect of the contextual background required to interpret knowledge claims is their position within conversations, including what could be described as the long-term conversations of a culture” (Wegerif 2008, 274).

Despite the difficulties involved in defining “dialogic” in educational terms, a number of approaches can be identified as related to this concept. An expansionary trend rests primarily on postmodern, anti-authoritarian tendencies in its opposition to hierarchies and dichotomies within education. This approach is highly inclusive and relates dialogue to such domains as inter-personal communication, non-violent communication, interpersonal respect, the encouragement of creativity, and the strengthening of school-community collaboration. Democratic schools as a concept and philosophy of education exemplify this stance.

The second approach is reductive in nature, concerned solely with defining—in narrow terms—the disparity between dialogical and authoritarian methods. This position does not question school hierarchies but seeks to establish criteria capable of transferring philosophic dialogue from the theoretical to the methodological domain, thereby facilitating its application in educational practice. It is thus committed to defining the optimal form of dialogue between teacher and pupil, lesson planning, and ways of conducting dialogic teaching-learning processes.

Democratic schools champion the dialogic philosophy associated with its most prominent advocates—Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas—together with Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, the humanistic psychology propounded by Carl Rogers, Nel Noddings’ pedagogy of care and concern, and even Gadamer’s integrative hermeneutic perspective (Aloni 2008). They also incorporate four components of the method developed by Nelson and Hackmann that are implemented in dialogue within group learning—the importance of: (1) producing results; (2) participation in process; (3) enriching an individual’s deep understanding; and (4) dialogue as a practice in shaping educational life (Saran and Neisser 2004).

As with democracy itself, democratic schools do not develop randomly but are the product of explicit endeavors on the part of educators to establish arrangements and opportunities designed to bring democracy to life (Bastian et al. 1986; Wood 1988, 1992). These configurations and contingencies are marked by two features—the formation of democratic structures and processes intended to govern school life; and the creation of a curriculum designed to expose young people to democratic experiences. As Maxine Greene (1985) notes,

the “obligation of education in a democracy [is] to empower the young to become members of the public, to participate, and play articulate roles in the public space” (4).

Participants in the democratic system agree that Article 26 (2) of the International Declaration of Children's Rights—which promotes freedom, tolerance, and understanding—constitutes a working framework for daily practice in democratic learning environments. Under such circumstances, students are given a vote in the curricular and administrative decisions that affect their lives.

These are the components which comprise the discourse I have termed the “external discourse” practiced by democratic private schools. The second—and more disturbing—discourse circle, however, is the hidden agenda. Parents—the majority of whom are middle- or upper middle- class—have created segregated, well-protected, and separatist institutions in which those who attend them are freed from the necessity of dealing with the difficult daily task of coping with the society in which they will subsequently live and—most significantly—from certain specific populations within it (Kizel 2003).

Under the guise of opposing the oppressive nature of the existing system, these parents erect “reserves” of social separatism and segregation that conceal messages of non-acceptance—and even rejection and detachment from—the other, both physically and conceptually. Resisting social integration and seeking to create protected institutions governed by strict segregationist admission policies, these schools refrain from posting clear or explicit “No entry” signs. The key segregationist tool is the demand for payment that forms part of the tuition fee. Officially, the parents claim that because the State does not fund these schools the parents must be asked to pay. In practice, this policy promotes a situation in which those students whose parents cannot afford the payment will not be accepted—an exclusion explicitly endorsed by those who seek to send their children to such schools.

5. Good Intentions in the Service of a Separatist Agenda

The confusion created by the private democratic schools project in Israel is due in large part to the fact that it is committed to providing the best possible education for parents for whom this is of paramount importance. In an age in which many parents merely voice their criticism of the education system—either verbally or in written form—and thereby deepen the cracks already apparent in it—this is a positive development. Groups of parents for whom their children's education forms their top priorities are speaking out about education, making education, collaborating in the task, and suggesting an alternative.

Democratic schools also promote the principles of freedom and commitment rather than simply making declarations regarding an “easy” world or lamenting the purism that marks modern man's flight from nature. The parents who stand behind the establishment of the democratic private schools thus offer a significant alternative in an age of politico-economic discourse—one that includes the will to change the current agenda rather than merely sitting on the sidelines.

Democratic private schools view the State and traditional public schools as being closed institutions that deny children intellectual stimuli, constrict their personal development, overregulate their sociability, and equip them with covertly violent tools. The competitive nature of the achievement-dominated exam system, these parents maintain, stifles the students' creativity—while simultaneously maintaining achievement gaps and neglecting the values of educational aesthetics and social pedagogy in favor of following educational vogues and fashions. By failing to equip students with the tools, they will require as actors within the democratic field, they argue that the current education system warrants the establishment of alternative frameworks.

During the course of their struggle with the Israeli Ministry of Education, as well as in their media exposure, these parents have consistently argued that they refuse to sacrifice their children on the altar of failed public education. They also claim that their children cannot wait until the Ministry of Education introduces the changes necessary to improve the public school system. Others contend that the education system requires a locomotive to pull the train and that the Ministry of Education should foster gifted pupils, asserting that room exists for a form of pluralism that will encourage the teachers in public and democratic schools to compete for excellence.

What these parents ignore, however, is the fact that their children's separation and segregation from others weakens public education (Kizel 2004). Despite their declaration that they are willing to provide scholarships for those who cannot afford the kind of education they seek to establish, the fact remains that they are dedicated to the idea of privately-funded schools.

In his book *Social Class, Social Action and Education: The Failure of Progressive Democracy*, Aaron Schutz (2010) alleges that the attempts made by middle-class progressives in the early 20th century to transform a corrupt and chaotic industrial America into an "authentic" democracy were confounded by their privileged status. Intent on enhancing the voice of the individual, generations of progressives remained blind to the rich culture of "democratic solidarity" demonstrated by the labor unions and operating in poor communities. While tracing the problematic evolution of progressive democracy in America—focusing on schools as a key locus of progressive practice—he also examines alternative strategies for developing more empowering approaches to democratic education and collective action (Schutz 2010).

In this regard, he argues that progressives of all stripes have consistently shied away from models of democracy drawn from the experiences of other classes. This has been especially true of models originating in the working class—which they have customarily regarded as base and primitive, rejecting the working-class tendency to emphasize the inevitability of aggressive social conflict and dismissing the practical demands of mass solidarity reflected in the strategies of labor unions and—more recently—community-organization groups (Schutz 2010).

As a counterweight to the progressive visions of democracy, Schutz outlines a working-class alternative he calls "democratic solidarity." While versions of this model have been prevalent in a range of working-class-dominated settings—especially labor unions—for a number of years, Schutz appeals to what is generally called the field of "community organization" à la Saul Alinsky as a key example of how "solidarity" can be made "democratic" in ways classic progressives appear to have been unable to recognize (Schutz 2010, 5).

As Apple and Beane, note, however, it must be remembered that local decision-making always requires commitment to democratic values, one of the internal inconsistencies of democracy being that local populist politics do not always serve democratic ends. If left entirely to local discretion, our schools might still be characterized by legal racial segregation and denial of access to all but the wealthy. The realization of democratic private schools thus remains partially dependent on selective State intervention—in particular when the process and content of local decision-making serves to disenfranchise and oppress certain groups of people. While such intervention is usually unpopular amongst those who seek exclusive power, it serves as a reminder that the wide distribution of rights and other democratic values are intended to be more than theoretical principles (Apple and Beane 2007).

6. The External Shell and Inner Core of Democratic Schools

I wish to suggest here that the parental initiative to establish democratic private schools on pedagogical grounds forms the external shell of a double-faced philosophy. While it is striking in its visibility, this is precisely what forms its guise, sophisticatedly concealing the inner content of that same parental discourse that, like every neo-liberal capitalistic process, is the more disturbing factor. Capitalist forces have brought the neo-liberal discourse into the education system in various ways—some open and some covert—the agenda being to promote values such as “success,” “transparency,” “accountability,” and “learning achievements” via diverse means and with the use of such alluring terms as “indices,” “assessment,” “parental involvement,” and “teacher evaluation.” The challenge to capitalistic dominance comes precisely from the ability of powerful and influential groups of parents and parental communities to establish their own schools for their own children—on the basis of democratic, judicial, and media tools and by building funding coalitions, power, and influence.

In their report regarding the state of education in Israel, Shlomo Swirski and Noga Dagan-Buzaglo (2009) assert that “the most striking expression of the hegemony of market forces is the large number of new schools that are the fruit of private parental initiatives that seek to create separatist schools” (6).

These endeavors ineluctably discriminate against certain students, most frequently those from specific ethnic backgrounds or lower-class families (Swirski and Dagan-Buzaglo 2009, 7). The key reason for this circumstance lies in the fact that the “established classes know how to exploit the State’s withdrawal by setting up alternative, segregationist schools” (Swirski and Dagan-Buzaglo 2009, 9).

In another report, entitled “Aspects of Privatization in the Israeli Education System,” Dagan-Buzaglo (2010) remark that:

Privatization is both the result of the weakening of the public education system and the factor responsible for it [...] the activity of private bodies based on family, sector, or commercial interests impinges even further on the State’s ability to run the public education system. Privatization reflects the process of the commodification of education—the application of market rules replacing the idea that education is a fundamental civic right that the concept of education as a necessity that can be produced by the person of means and purchased by the highest bidder that of education as a means of creating equal opportunities. Privatization undermines the universalistic infrastructure of public education by [...] promoting class, ethnic, and cultural segregation. (4)

This report thus contends that “established groups create selective, elitist schools and unique and innovative educational tracks via private funding” (6).

The private democratic school represents a culture of isolation that does not change the education system from within and is unwilling to deal with the democratic rules of the game in whose name it was created. As Nir Michaeli (2008) points out, exclusive schools sharing common features—selection and admission policies, tuition fees, and hiring of teachers outside the regular employment-agreement framework—some people “fear that this process will have serious social ramifications, enlarging the gap between the weak and strong populations [...]. Ultimately, those who benefit are the non-profit and private organizations who, in the name of equality and autonomy, reap huge profits while leaving students from lower classes to attend the relatively weaker State schools” (32).

My focus in this article on the Israeli situation serves as a test case for other countries. With regard to the United States, Jonathan Kozol (2005) argues that introducing private funds into public schools not only preserves but also strengthens the inequality that characterizes the system. Inequality has two aspects: budgetary, when gaps arise among students from diverse sectors; and substantive, which creates tracking based

on prior expectations. A correlation exists, he maintains, among the percentage of white students and the budget allocated to each student, the higher the rate of Hispanic and African-American students the less the budget per child. He also alleges that the State's withdrawal possesses serious implications regarding the curriculum, schools becoming places that prepare students to be integrated into the work market rather than seeking to increase equality and diminish social gaps. Schools whose student population is primarily white become hothouses for initiative and excellence while those whose students are primarily Hispanic and African-American become workshops for technical training alone. He thus argues that adopting the logic of the "market" constitutes a form of privatization of education.

Other concepts from the literature on education define privatization in a broader sense, as liberalization—or liberation from government plans or charters and the granting of broad content and pedagogic freedom of action—and marketization or commodification—i.e., the introduction of economic market rules into education (Levin and Belfield 2002).

Another argument against progressive education has been made by Benjamin Barber (1989), who claims that before an individual can grow into a member and citizen in a democratic society he must first learn several important things, no one being born democratic. According to Barber, treating a child as an adult equal is a form of ageism. Significantly, Dewey himself opposed stripping the educator of responsibility for the education process, frequently openly opposing progressive educators who regarded "freedom" as all: "instruction provided by a teacher to train a child's intelligence is an aid to freedom, not a cancellation" (Dewey 1963, 71).

One of the serious threats already evident in some democratic schools is the presence of adults who perceive their role as "serving the child" by making the child's agenda their top priority and surrendering not only to his/her wishes but also to his/her whims. While this circumstance may reflect the desire to make learning fun, the child is given no guidance as to how to train him/herself not to impose his/her own idiosyncratic and serendipitous desires on the curriculum or undermine the teaching program. Lack of regulation also allows teachers to interpolate their personal political or ideological agendas into the classroom. Although discipline should not come at the expense of personal wishes, curiosity, or even fun, a curriculum focused solely on these components is likely to be dull and intellectually impoverished rather than rich and profound.

According to Goldman (2009)—whose work is based on the approach proposed by Yaacov Hecht, the founder of democratic schools in Israel—the advocates of open and democratic schools are unconcerned with democracy and fail to perceive any link between democracy and education. Arguing that while the goals of private democratic schools are worthy they are only very tenuously linked to democracy, Goldman (2009) alleges that:

We must acknowledge that democratic schools, as also democratic teacher-training programs, devote virtually no theoretical discussion to the content, philosophy, or history of democracy or its conflicts or problematic. What do they deal with? Principally, choice—lots and lots of choice. Personal choice (what to study, whether to study, when and how to study) and institutional elections (school parliaments). According to democratic education, democracy is not a subject that requires studying but an experience. Moreover, the important and vital elements of democracy—the sense of belonging to a collective, responsibility for others, the willingness to compromise, and involvement in public affairs—recede into the background or disappear entirely. Individual free choice takes precedence over virtually everything else. The proponents of democratic education thus need to understand that they have confused democracy and liberalism and that while the education they seek to bestow may be liberal its democratic nature is very much in doubt. (2)

The parents who support democratic schools and are motivated by neo-liberal systems that seek to undermine social solidarity and the values held by the public education system deny the public system's capacity to improve itself. They also preclude the promotion of parental participation in the public school system through parent councils. The claims they make that the public education system is closed to them are dissociated from reality. Many public educational frameworks contain quite strikingly democratic features that facilitate the fostering of decision-making abilities—and certainly choice—amongst the students by relating to them as young people with great abilities and seeking to turn them into involved adults on both the public and personal plane.

This capitalistic concept seeks to undermine the foundations of existence of public education as a place for the expression of solidarity, frequently suffering from snootiness (Dagan-Buzaglo 2010). Its central goal is to lead the privatization of education, an aim fueled by a powerful desire for the State to remove/wash its hands of the education system so that it can be transferred to organizations—initially responsible people and subsequently, of course, economic bodies capable of determining who will teach, what will be studied, and—perhaps most significantly—the student population (Ravitch 2010). This allows the emergence of a supply-and-demand market—generally speaking, of teachers who do not belong to a union and thus form a vulnerable sector—that, while affording “fashionable” decisions concerning curricula content, devote time to nothing beyond the students' choice or his/her parents' ability to influence (Bracey 2002).

To deal with this circumstance, democratic schools have created numerous enforcement and penalty-imposing bodies that implement sentences within very short periods of time. While the names of these bodies may be appealing, however, their activities can be draconian, preoccupation with them frequently turning them into the most important feature of the school. Hereby, democratic and other similar types of school become part of the privatization industry—within whose framework students learn that if they do not like a subject they can choose another (Inbar 1989). In this way, grey independent health systems and law-enforcement agencies—private civil guard units in prestigious neighborhoods, for example—and other “reserves” are created.

The endeavor to raise a generation of young individualists on the basis of a sense of “togetherness” will not solve the plight of contemporary education. Those who establish democratic schools are simply crossing to the other side of the street and promoting an educational philosophy of segregation. To be truly democratic, they must accept the rules of the game and operate within the general public sphere. By removing themselves and endorsing a form of segregation based on admission preconditions generally founded on economic factors they are at risk of destroying democracy itself. They cannot boast of the fact that they have tried to change the system from inside and despaired but must acknowledge that they have made no serious attempt to correct it but abandoned ship. We cannot beat about the bush, but must call them for what they are—not democratic but private and prestigious.

7. Conclusion

Democratic schools form one of the greatest challenges to State education and most vocal and active critique of the focus conservative education places on exams and achievement. This paper contributes to the discussion regarding democratic schools by taking Israel as a test case and indicating the existence of a sophisticated form of deception whereby the neo-liberal discourse has begun to permeate the education system via the use of alluring terminology. It concludes that the democratic schools in Israel should be recognized for what they really are—agents of commodification that undermine democracy rather than enhance it.

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