

Education Management - Information Technology and School Autonomy

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Abstract

The educational system in Israel, like in some other societies is now in the midst of a decentralization process. An integral aspect of this process is to transform schools into autonomously managed units. Information technology is applied heavily to assist this development in a very similar way to processes in the economic sector.

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Keywords: Public Policy Issues, Social Issues, Organizational Impacts.

1. FOREWORD

This conference's topic is Information Technology in Educational Management. In my presentation I wish to refer also to some educational aspects and not to limit myself only to managerial aspects.

I.T. is developing into one of the main effective instruments, which influence schools and the way education is employed. I believe that due to these new technological options available, organizational, pedagogical as well as managerial changes are to be expected. Never before was the I.T. so directly involved into school's daily work as well as with its optional changes.

2. WHY TO CHANGE

In a sense education is knowledge transferring from old generations to young ones, from those who know a thing or two, to those who want to learn. Many reasons accumulate at present, so that there is a tremendous need to redefine school, education, socialization and their content in society [1,2,3,4]

In the last two decades ever more changes are introduced into the educational systems. Some of the reasons for this are the overwhelming criticism and a deep sense of disappointment with public standard education, as it failed to achieve main social goals like social integration and equality of opportunities on the one hand, excellence and higher quality of life on the other hand.

As this criticism is becoming widespread and articulate, some of the basic concepts of the educational systems are being put to the test. Two phenomena are always mentioned as the underlying causes. One is the impact of technology on society. Technology upset the well established divide between old and new, between experienced and unexperienced.

Together with the growing impact of the technological infrastructure is the penetration of what is called Neo-modernism and relativism which are major factors leading to obscurity and lack of agreement on standard criteria as what one has to study, what is a scientific discipline, what is the conventional target of education, etc. [5,6]

A generation in technology is narrowed nowadays in many cases to only about 4-5 years. New products are almost immediately obsolete as soon as they are released to the public. Developers are always going in new directions towards new products. The effects of this trend are so profound, that in many social areas, change becomes the rule rather than the exception. In many cases we don't have to explain why we need to change, on the contrary we must apologize for routine. Within the educational system the requirement for change has become the fashion, the belief in the benefits of change has become norm. In the last 15-20 years all Western educational systems have adjusted to new methods, to new concepts, to different teacher/student relationships and have practiced major reforms. Still we sense that the gap between technological time and between the concept of time built in education is widening to such a magnitude that it may threaten the capacity of schools to function as a socialization mechanism. [7,8,9].

The schools mission is to be a preparation for the future with postponing of rewards and satisfaction. During the school years the young generation is gradually socialized to be ready for the day they will replace the adults. Educational time is based on concepts such as development, psychologic maturation and moratorium. All these concepts share the same common idea: society is subdivided in young people and adults, those who know better and teach and protect the youngsters until they become mature and capable of fulfilling adult obligations and duties.

School curricula are designed in the same line. The grown-up experienced generation is transferring knowledge to the "new comers". Information is gradually released by the teachers to the students. Academic and classical paradigms are introduced step by step to the students. Schools provide an eclectic part of knowledge traditionally selected and traditionally instructed.

As a result schools find it harder and harder to practice legitimate authority over students. Technology has opened an omnibus of channels to information to the students as well as to the teachers. In many cases the students have easier access to I.T. The role of the teacher as "owner" of knowledge and know-how and in what quantities to release it, is being reduced. Simultaneously criteria for what is more important to the young generation and what less is losing consensus. More students and grown-ups alike are seeking relevance rather than substance. As to what is relevant no one has one answer, and what is worthwhile to study at school is being debated.

In this context we are witnessing a diffusion of democratization processes into the area of social services like health and education. In this context democracy means the right to have access to knowledge and information. No more monopoly on truth and knowledge, more influence on what I consume as well as more options to select from, according to my taste and my ideology.

In order to execute more influence on ones neighbourhood, to activate ones individual rights in a more meaningful way - central power must decrease. This raises the legitimization of clients to define the quality and the nature of the services each citizen is entitled to get. [10].

3. SCHOOL ORGANIZATION AND EDUCATION

Most of the planning concerned with the nature of schools in the future takes into account the nature of coming trends and emphasizes the following points:

changing teacher - student relationships due to the change in access to information and knowledge through the spread of technology, and due to the decrease of the teachers authority to confine and to determinate the hierarchy of importance or of relevance.

changing the focus on school education to less information as such as it is available and changing to the capacity of handling big quantities of information of all kind. What is learned becomes an area of negotiation between all concerned parties, such as students, teachers, parents and community representatives. Thus there is a parallel claim on establishing organizational changes as a necessary condition to any reform in school, and as an answer to the individualistic culture domineering our social life at the moment [11,12]. Such changes will promote a decrease in homogeneity and an increase of autonomous units, each of which is identified with a variant flavour in accordance to location, community interests and beliefs [13,14].

In particular school planners foresee an emerging educational market adjusting to liberal economy principles: much less central control, more individual choice, much more control via the market principle of supply and demand. Thus the individual and the group are often approached as clients of educational services, and have the legitimation to shape the product according to their needs and beliefs [15,16]. In this sense schools imitate and adopt very closely the jargon, structure and behaviour of any other economic organization [17,18]. Terms like input-output, head master as school manager & executive, customer satisfaction, costs and investment are penetrating the school climate emphasizing its organizational form,

Interconnection between school system and the economic system has spouted an intensive debate ever since.

During the 70ies, this debate accelerated, whereas the function of social allocation of schools becomes clear and sound. Though nobody doubts the need for the economic system to provide a substantive basis for economy as well as a suitable ground for the graduate, many scholars opposed the subordination of education to economy. In particular it was claimed that the school emphasizes criteria which are work oriented: punctuality, order, separation of tasks, being on time, in short passiveness, discipline and conformism (and at large justify capitalistic norms and thus serve the interests of the ruling classes.) [19,20,21,22,23].

A related problem is the concern over marketing and fund raising operations, used in the economic realm [24]. To be an organization in a competitive world means to make use of marketing strategies with all the attached meanings. School can find itself under an economic monopolistic interest rather than 'oldfashioned' scientific standards.

The process of school autonomy and decentralization of the educational system could rely on I.T. in a very sophisticated way. The dilemma between the school as providing some unification experience to all the youngsters in a society and between the school providing individually chosen recipies, can be handled by I.T., leaving sufficient control to the centre, whilst each school and district continue to plan according to their beliefs and interests. The possibility of organized control over student achievements, funds, staff etc. releases some opposition to decentralization trends and to loss of unity. (see f.e. the 1988 English reform).

School autonomy and decentralization of the educational system, influence also school organization. Until now the school organization was a loosely coupled organization. Each

class has its own cycle, each teacher was a "king" behind the closed doors, he could negotiate his terms with the students, or choose not to negotiate. [25]. The autonomous school will have to change into a more cohesive unit. A school which is based on his resources rather than tied firmly to a centre, must develop team work. Thus the school becomes more fixedly coupled, with much more interdependency, more meetings are required. The more a school becomes similar to any other workplace - I.T. can be of more use. Teachers can do team work even from a distance in time and place, students can discuss issues with teachers and colleagues, etc..

In this sense one can conceive of I.T. as enabling mechanisms to address various needs of the educational system. The decision of what the school is going to be and how it will be managed can easily be implemented when the I.T. options are taken for granted.

4 SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

I.T. is just in its initial impact stage on education and it is followed by a deep need for educational basic reform. In spite of many futuristic guesses about the 'new' educational system and the new school a lot of uncertainty still exists:

1. how technology, which was developed to serve the full fledged adult population can be adapted to young adults and to small children.
2. will I.T. lead to more or to less control? In which areas will it provide more autonomy and in which areas less?
3. what will be the relative position adult vis-a-vis young in schools?
4. what will be the translation of disciplinary knowledge to relevancy knowledge?
5. what will be the influence of extending the definition of class to further than just a unity in place and time?

To my opinion all these questions and many more are to be addressed not as they come, but according to new social definitions of education and schools.

Because reforms which stay within or emphasize organizational aspects, remain often in this stage without any real contextual benefits. I.T. might contribute to these procedures, but cannot in itself carry out educational reforms. Moreover, subordinating education to technological infrastructure will prevent it from acting as a foundation to critique, to lead to establishing criteria of selection, and to fluidity without any stability. Are we, human beings, prepared/able to live in such circumstances?

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