

**Neo-liberal Islamic Education: The Case of Arab Education in Israel.**

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**Background**

Arab education in Israel is a unique case of a separated educational sector that serves a distinct minority group which is located at the margins of the Israeli education system. Arab education in Israel, since the establishment of the state of Israel, suffers from inequality in state investments as well as lack of recognition of the cultural, religious and national needs of the group it serves. Arab education in Israel is found in constant tension between the desire of the Arab society in Israel to use it as a tool for socio-economic mobility and the use of education by the state as a means of controlling the Arab minority.

During the past two decades, neo-liberal reforms in education have become a dominant discourse in educational policy in Israel. As in the case of other national contexts, the Israeli education system has increasingly moved from the 'public good' based rational and services model to a quasi-market economic model where principles such as choice, diversity, competition, effectiveness and accountability replaced the discourse of common and comprehensive schooling.

Research on neo-liberal reforms in education in other national context have shown that these might be particularly damaging for those groups who are, as it is, at the margins of the education system. Nonetheless the neo-liberal meritocratic logic is often conformed to by those who are most disadvantaged by it, namely working class and ethnic minorities.

Arab education in Israel today is captured between three discursive fields. First it operates within the context of its marginalization, both in terms of equality and recognition. However, it is also affected by the neo-liberal discourse in education and especially the meritocratic approach, which gives the illusion of social mobility based on academic merits. A third discursive field in which Arab schools make sense of their role is the emergence and dominance in recent years of political religious Muslim discourses. In the context of the marginal position of the Arab minority in Israel, many chose to emphasize their religious affiliations as an identification which provides a more inclusive sense of belonging. Yet, when the Muslim religious discourses meets the neo-liberal discourse in the context of education it brings with it new tensions between tradition and liberalism that Arab schools, teachers and parents now have to face.

**Research Questions**

This paper is based on a project which was designed to examine the ways in which neo-liberal policies in education were interpreted and shaped in Arab education in Israel. It also sought to examine the interplay between these policies and other discursive fields especially political Islamic discourses. The project offered a micro-politics analysis of one case-study of an Arab municipal education system. It focused on how schools, headteachers, parents and the Local Education Authority responded to the marketization of education, to political Islamic discourse and the interplay between the two.

**Methods**

This paper presents findings from a qualitative case-study research of one local Arab education authority in Israel - Um El-Fahim which is one of the largest Arab towns in Israel and known as an important political and religious center of the Arab minority. The case-study project included interviews with Headteachers, Consolers and chairs of parents' boards as well as observations in all

three Junior High-schools and five high-schools in that locality. We also interviewed key figures of the Education Local Authority and the Islamic Movement.

Specifically, this paper focuses on the dynamics triggered by the establishment of a new all science-based, highly selective high-school for academic excellence. We examine how this school works as a disciplinary power within the local politics of education. We demonstrate how this school has influenced the education discourses and practices in the other schools in the town. We also discuss the interplay between political Islamic discourses, and neo-liberal policies by exploring how the Islamic Movement in Israel, who ideologically and financially sponsors this school, approaches education as a means for social mobility and for preserving traditional religious values.

## **Frame**

The proposed study adopts a critical sociological perspective for the analysis of education policy. Such an approach as Ball (1994:10) puts it suggests that policies are texts, discourses and actions which produce a plurality of responses. Therefore, while the study of education policy must take into account the role of the state and the wider social, political and economic contexts in which policies are shaped, the analysis should not be limited to the macro level. Policies are shaped and struggled over also in local settings. Hence, alongside the analysis of the state's perspectives we should offer a micro-politics analysis of local responses (Ball, 1994). A micro-politics of education policy examines the ways in which schools, local education departments, teachers, headteachers and parents respond to a specific state policy and interpreted it. Such an analysis focuses on values, language, institutional identities, discourses and practices that emerge at the local level. The project this paper draws on follows this path by offering a micro-politics analysis of one case study of Arab education in Israel.

## **Research findings**

The significance of this study is threefold: First it expands the relatively small body of educational research on Arab education in Israel while employing a bottom-up perspective that takes into account local realities and agency. Secondly it contextualizes Arab education within broader policy trends that are taken place in the Israeli education system and globally. As such this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which minorities adopt, respond and re-interpreted dominant discourses. Finally, by looking at the interplay between neo-liberal and political Islamic discourses this study also challenges simplistic, Eurocentric account of political Islam. We seek to provide an understanding of how political Islam contextualizes and mobilizes neo-liberal ethics and practices in education in service of the agenda of creating devoted and highly educated elites of believers and normalizes political Islam within Israel. Most importantly, we want to argue that the role political Islam plays vis-à-vis neo-liberal policies and practices in education is indeed imbues political Islam with new forms of religiosity, new perceptions of the role of education in the context of the Palestinian minority in Israel, and new meanings of being Muslim in Israel.