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Primary education policy in Israel

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Orit Oved

Primary Education Policy in Israel

Abstract

Israel's primary education system reflects the country's complex and diverse social tapestry, which encompasses a wide range of cultural, religious, and national communities. The system serves nearly half of all students in the national education framework and plays a central role in shaping the foundations of citizenship, identity, and opportunity. Rooted in the ideological educational streams that developed during the late Ottoman period and the British Mandate, the structure of primary education further evolved following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. In its current form, the system is divided into two main sectors: Hebrew-Jewish education, comprising State (secular), State-Religious, and Ultra-Orthodox streams; and Arab education, which includes four recognised sub-sectors: Arab, Bedouin, Druze, and Circassian. It also includes a special education framework that operates across all sectors and serves students with disabilities or special needs across diverse backgrounds. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of Israel's primary education system, focusing on its legal foundations, sectoral division, and historical development. It also analyses two significant policy reforms that have reshaped the system: the Inclusion and Integration Policy for students with special needs, and the Self-Management Policy, which promotes school-level autonomy. Together, these elements highlight the structural and policy-driven complexities of primary education in Israel.

Keywords: Israeli Primary Education Policy, Sectoral Division, Special Education Policy, Self-Managed School Policy, Teacher Education and Professional Development.

1 Introduction

The primary school system in Israel reflects the nation's multifaceted society, characterised by social diversity and distinct educational sectors. In most schools in Israel, primary education includes grades 1-6 for children aged 6-11, though in some cases it extends to grades 1-8, accommodating children aged 6-13. Primary education is divided into two sectors: Hebrew-Jewish education, which consists of three sub-sectors: state (secular-general), state-religious, and ultra-orthodox – attended by Jews as well as most non-Jewish and non-Arab children (Wolff & Breit, 2012); and Arab education, which is subdivided into four national sub-sectors: Arab, Bedouin, Druze, and Circassian (Arar, 2012). The special education system operates parallel to the conventional primary school system, targeting students with disabilities or special needs, aged 3-21, who are enrolled in either specialised education institutions or special education classes within regular primary schools, facilitated through placement committees.

The foundations of the Hebrew education system in the region predate the establishment of the State of Israel by several decades. As early as the 1880s, during the late Ottoman period, organised efforts to establish Hebrew schools began to emerge. These efforts expanded significantly under the British Mandate (1920-1948), a period characterised by the establishment of educational institutions serving diverse age groups, communities, and ideological orientations. During this time, the ideological division of the Hebrew education system began to take shape, culminating in the formal emergence of distinct educational streams in the early 1920s: the "General Stream", which supported separating political and religious matters from education; the "Mizrahi Stream", which integrated traditional religious-Zionist education with modern Western educational practices from Europe and the U.S.; the "Workers' Stream", based on a combination of national and universal socialism and Zionism (Zameret, 2002). Within the Workers' Stream, the kibbutz education system operated autonomously (Dror, 2001). Concurrently, the Arab education system under the Mandate operated through three primary frameworks: a public education system operated by British Mandate authorities, separate religious schools for Muslim and Christian communities, and a network of "foreign" schools managed by European powers (Al-Haj, 1995; Raichel, 2008).

With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, responsibility for the Hebrew educational system was transferred to the state. At that time, the system was divided into ideological streams developed prior to the State's creation. Additionally, there was the ultra-Orthodox Stream, *Agudat Israel*, which was officially recognised by the government. No significant changes were made to teaching, management, or staff supervision (Zameret, 2002). Furthermore,

the Israeli-Hebrew educational system subsumed Arab schools across various sectors under State responsibilities (Agbaria, 2015).

In light of the system's complexity, it is of considerable importance to conduct a focused examination of the primary education system in Israel. Primary education encompasses approximately 46% of all students in the Israeli education system (https://infocenter.education.gov.il/all/extensions/Mabat_Rachav/Mabat_Rachav.html) and reflects the broader social, political, and cultural dynamics of the state. Despite the substantial proportion this system represents within the overall Israeli education system, no recent publication offers a comprehensive and systematic overview of primary education in Israel across its various sectors and sub-systems. Existing studies predominantly address specific issues, such as academic achievement, pedagogy, or particular population groups, without providing a structural and integrative perspective. Other works offer general descriptions of the Israeli education system as a whole (Feniger et al., 2022), but do not focus specifically on primary education. This study therefore seeks to fill this research gap by presenting a thorough and up-to-date overview of Israel's primary education system.

The article comprises two main parts. The first outlines the legal and administrative foundations of the primary education system, with a focus on the legislation enabling sectoral division, and on policies related to teacher education and professional development in primary education. The second part focuses on two major reforms that have significantly influenced the structure and functions of primary education in Israel: The Inclusion and Integration Policy – designed to integrate students with special needs into regular schools – and the Self-Management Policy, which seeks to increase the administrative autonomy of schools.

2 Primary Education: Legislation, Structure, and Teaching Personnel

2.1 Legislation and Regulation in Primary Education

With the establishment of the Ministry of Education (MoE) in March 1949, laws and regulations were crafted to guide the education system, define its responsibilities, and allocate authority. Much of the education system's activities are governed by administrative regulations, usually through “circular letters” published by the MoE's Director-General. Additionally, during Israel's early years, the government enacted two major education laws that continue to have a significant impact on the system today (Dror, 2007).

The first, the Compulsory Education Law (September 1949), reflects the state's responsibility to provide primary education for children aged 5-14. The law's

goal is to provide equal educational opportunities for all children in the country, without discriminating on an economic, ethnic, or sectoral basis. The law stipulates that parents are responsible for enrolling their children and ensuring their regular attendance at recognised educational institutions. Parents can choose which educational stream their children would join (Dror, 2007). According to the law, education is to be provided free of charge, though local authorities are allowed to charge fees for services they offer in addition to those provided by the MoE and Culture. The Compulsory Education Law did not specify the nature of these services nor the amount of fees that could be charged, leading to ongoing disputes (Raichel, 2008). Massive waves of immigration during Israel's early years significantly increased the number of students enrolled in the Hebrew education system, with over 247,000 students joining primary education during this period. The status of Arab compulsory education was unique, as most schools were in areas under military administration until 1966, and the responsibility for Arab education was shared between the military and the MoE (Tadmor Shimony, 2023).

The Compulsory Education Law led to competition over parents and students between the various streams, with each stream using persuasive tactics to attract students, resulting in political crises. This accelerated the dissolution of the ideological streams and led to the enactment of the State Education Law in 1953, which forms the foundation for the organisational structure of the education system. This law was aimed at shaping the primary education system, which was the focus in Israeli education during the state's first decade, as primary schools were considered the backbone of the education system due to their central importance to children subject to compulsory education. The law abolished the division in the education system into ideological streams and placed responsibility on the state to establish and provide education. According to the law, this education must be provided in accordance with an approved curriculum, free from political or ideological affiliation with external bodies or organisations. Its implementation is supervised by the MoE (Raichel, 2008; Zameret, 2002).

Building upon the foundations established by the State Education Law, the next major structural shift in primary education came with the 1968 education reform. The length of primary school was reduced from eight to six years (grades 1-6), and middle schools were created as a transitional phase between primary and high school (grades 7-9), with grades 10-12 designated as high school. Alongside this structural change, the reform aimed to promote integration within the state education system and bring together students from different economic, cultural, and social backgrounds (Dror, 2007; Peled, 1978). This step was presented to the public as a way of reducing educational disparities and creating a more unified (Jewish) society. This significant, compre-

hensive, and systemic change was not accompanied by legislation. Research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s on the effects of the reform pointed to its limited success in achieving its goals. Moreover, public and political support for this initiative waned during its implementation (Resh & Dar, 2012).

2.1.1 Hebrew State Education System

The State Education Law was one of Israel's solutions to achieving uniformity and equality in education. However, the law was never fully implemented, but rather adapted to the political circumstances at the time it was enacted. Following the legislation of this law, two main types of education emerged in Israel's official Hebrew education system, both managed and funded by the state: State Education (general) and State-Religious Education.

State education aims to develop the knowledge, skills, and values that align with state values, without any political, sectarian, or other affiliations. State Education is also referred to as secular state education, which unified the two secular streams: the General Stream and the Workers' Stream. It is the largest branch of Hebrew education. In the 2022/23 school year, 49.7% of students in the Hebrew primary education system were enrolled in state education institutions (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023a).

State-religious education operates separately from State education and is based on three principles: Traditional Orthodox religious education, which reflects a belief in God and an adherence to religious commandments; Modern education, which teaches the basic skills students need to function as citizens and live in a secular, democratic society; Nationalist education, which emphasises Zionism and the strengthening of Jewish identity. This educational system is autonomous and operates under the auspices of an advisory council within the MoE, with members appointed or approved by religious Zionist parties (Gross, 2003). The council is authorised to determine the religious life-style and character of the schools, design curricula, and train teachers according to Orthodox religious criteria. The state-religious education system maintains gender separation, with separate classes or schools for boys and girls. The state education budget covers additional hours for religious studies, the employment of rabbis as spiritual leaders in each school, infrastructure (such as synagogues in schools), and unique informal education frameworks (Gross, 2011). In recent years, there has been a decline in enrolment in state-religious education in favor of more ultra-Orthodox institutions, with pressure from parents to enhance religious curricula and cultivate a more Orthodox school environment. This has led to the establishment of school networks that emphasise religious studies. Critics argue that these schools tend to be elitist and undermine efforts to improve integration across different socioeconomic sectors (Maoz, 2012). In the 2022/23 school year, 18.8% of students in Hebrew

primary education were enrolled in state-religious education (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023a).

In light of the growing tensions and divisions between the general and religious state education sectors, the State Education Law was amended in 2008 to allow the Minister of Education, under certain conditions, to designate an official state school (whether general or religious) for grades 1-9 as a state-integrated school. The curriculum emphasises enhanced Jewish studies and Jewish identity, with the goal of narrowing the social and cultural gap between secular and religious communities in Israel and breaking the dichotomy between general and religious state education.

Within the framework of state education, kibbutz schools continued to shape education according to their guiding ideology and principles (Dror, 2001). Kibbutz education, rooted in Zionist-Socialist ideals, began to take shape in the early 20th century. It reflected progressive methodologies with a focus on a child-centred approach, aiming to maximise each student's potential within both their community and broader society (Dror, 2004). Kibbutz primary education is characterised by several principles (Dror, 2021): (1) The starting point consists of the personal and social education of the child within the educational group, including frameworks and methods for special education; (2) The kibbutz's responsibility for education; (3) Unity among the various partners of the educational process, including education agencies; (4) The integration of studies with community life and work: combining formal and informal elements; (5) Autonomy for teaching staff and educators.

Kibbutz education was characterised by significant administrative and educational autonomy. Over the years, the kibbutz experienced numerous social changes that affected both its character and the operation of kibbutz education, particularly in primary education. In the 1980s, a transition began from small, local primary schools to shared and regional schools. From the late 1990s, the MoE became increasingly involved in kibbutz education systems, especially in kindergartens and primary schools. However, a significant amount of pedagogical autonomy was preserved, even after the transition to shared and regional schools, as reflected in the unique curricula of kibbutz education (Dror & Prital, 2021).

2.1.2 Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Independent Education

Section 11 of the State Education Law allows the Minister of Education to designate unofficial educational institutions as recognised institutions. Based on this section, the government decided to recognise the ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) independent education institutions comprising *Agudat Israel*, which was one of the educational streams before the law was enacted. This stream sought to differentiate itself from the state-religious education system and maintain

its political and party affiliations. The primary schools serving grades 1-8 ("*Talmud Torah*") were designed to develop the knowledge, skills, and values suitable for an Orthodox religious lifestyle. Most of the Haredi-Recognised Unofficial Schools belong to two major ultra-Orthodox educational networks: the "Independent Education School Association" of the *Yahadut Hatorah* party and the "Wellspring of Torah Education School Association" of the *Shas* party (Maoz, 2012; Perry-Hazan, 2023).

The independent ultra-Orthodox education system enjoys broad autonomy and receives more than 60% of its funding from the state, even though the core curriculum required as a condition for funding is not implemented (Ichilov, 2009; Kingsbury, 2020). In most cases, core subjects are either taught partially or not at all in boys' ultra-Orthodox primary schools. In contrast, most girls receive a nearly full education on core subjects. This difference is tied to the religious role assigned to students: ultra-Orthodox boys are raised to study Torah throughout their lives, while girls are taught core subjects in addition to religious studies, so they can eventually take on the responsibility of supporting their families, thereby enabling their husbands to continue studying Torah (Perry-Hazan, 2023). As a result, ultra-Orthodox boys graduating from these schools face reduced opportunities to pursue higher education outside the religious sphere and struggle to successfully integrate into the workforce. In 2003, the MoE issued its first Director-General's circular letter that introduced a core curriculum for primary education (Ministry of Education, 2003). Subsequent circular letters further regulated the core curriculum for grades 1-8 in ultra-Orthodox schools (Ministry of Education, 2011). However, the policy governing ultra-Orthodox education remains vague, full of contradictions, and largely controlled by political influences. There are significant challenges in enforcing the Director-General's circular letters outlining the core curriculum, and the MoE rarely imposes sanctions on ultra-Orthodox institutions that violate the law (Perry-Hazan, 2015). Leaders of various ultra-Orthodox streams reject state supervision of their education systems and seek to minimise their students' exposure, especially boys, to secular content, including foreign languages and mathematics, fearing that such exposure may lead to secularization (Finkelman, 2011; Perry-Hazan et al., 2024). Moreover, since most ultra-Orthodox institutions do not participate in national standardised tests, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the core curriculum is taught (Perry-Hazan, 2023). In the 2022/23 school year, 31.5% of students in Hebrew primary education were enrolled in ultra-Orthodox schools (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023a).

In 2013, during the tenure of Minister of Education Shai Piron, the MoE established a framework for State Ultra-Orthodox Education. This policy allowed ultra-Orthodox schools to change their status from "recognised but unofficial"

to “official” and join the state education system as a separate stream. The goal of the reform was to increase the state’s control over the content taught in ultra-Orthodox schools and to formalise public responsibility for their operation. In exchange for full funding from the state and local authorities, schools were required to fully implement the core curriculum, offer enrichment programmes, undergo pedagogical and administrative supervision by the MoE, conduct school assessments, adhere to employment and salary conditions for principals and teachers, and avoid discrimination in student enrolment. Additionally, joining the state ultra-Orthodox system required that teachers obtain teaching certificates within a few years, and have at least a bachelor’s degree (Katzir & Perry-Hazan, 2019).

The number of ultra-Orthodox schools joining the state ultra-Orthodox education system has been gradually increasing. In 2022, there were 73 primary schools in this stream, serving 10,300 students in grades 1-8, with about 60% of them being boys (Zussman & Zupnik, 2024). Several barriers hinder the expansion of the state ultra-Orthodox system, mainly due to four reasons: (1) A lack of legislative regulation aimed at avoiding political conflicts and resistance from ultra-Orthodox communities and professionals within the MoE to the proposed regulations (Katzir & Perry-Hazan, 2024). In November 2022, the MoE published, for the first time, a circular letter defining the goals, regulations, and procedures for the state ultra-Orthodox education system (Ministry of Education, 2022a); (2) Some local authorities oppose the opening of state ultra-Orthodox schools, fearing an increase in the number of ultra-Orthodox families in their municipalities; (3) A shortage of ultra-Orthodox teachers with the required qualifications in secular subjects (e.g., English, mathematics, and sciences) and a lack of secular textbooks suitable for boys’ needs and designed for use in schools; (4) Parents’ fear of backlash from their communities (Perry-Hazan, 2023; Zussman & Zupnik, 2024).

Notably, the autonomy granted to ultra-Orthodox schools has also allowed other religious and ideological communities to operate their own independent educational systems under similar conditions. Arab Christian churches run several dozen independent schools that enjoy a degree of educational autonomy. Another notable example is bilingual Jewish schools that promote Arab-Jewish coexistence and demand autonomy to teach a unique curriculum reflecting both peoples (Feniger et al., 2022).

Over the years, recognised schools have provided an avenue for a departure from the state education system, contributing to its fragmentation and the establishment of semi-private schools that receive significant public funding while enjoying broad pedagogical autonomy (Ichilov, 2009). Additionally, by expanding parental choice, these schools have the potential to widen educational inequality between different social strata (Ayalon et al., 2019). In the last

two decades, all governments and public committees have warned against these trends but have either failed to address them or unwittingly proposed models and solutions that have reinforced the segregated, conflictual, and competitive qualities of schools in Israel (Gibton, 2011).

2.1.3 Arab Education System

With the establishment of the state, the education system prepared to absorb Arab students alongside the integration process of Arab citizens into the State of Israel. This process was slow, complex, sensitive, and marked by mutual suspicion (Raichel, 2008). The Arab population in Israel constitutes a religious and national minority. The term “Arab education” encompasses all non-Hebrew sectors in Israel, including Arab, Bedouin, Druze, and Circassian communities. Arab education is also divided by religion: Muslim, Christian, and Druze, with each sector having a curriculum that reflects its particular religious and sectoral characteristics. Most Arab education students in Israel attend official institutions, often referred to as state-Arab schools. The primary language of instruction in these schools is Arabic and the curriculum includes Arab culture (Agbaria, 2018). The use of Arabic represents a feature of cultural autonomy, as the language is tied to the cultural, historical, and religious characteristics of the Arab minority in Israel (Maoz, 2012).

In the 2022/23 school year, approximately 251,000 students were enrolled in Arab, Bedouin, and Druze primary education in Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023b). In recognised unofficial educational institutions (excluding Bedouin, Druze, and Circassian), which are less bound to the official curricula of the MoE, around 46,000 primary school students are enrolled in Arab education (Zered, 2023). About 5% of Arab students are Christians, most of whom study in parochial schools with a recognised unofficial status (Weissblei, 2017).

Although the Arab state education system is physically and linguistically separate from the Hebrew system, it is fully regulated by the MoE, which determines the curricula and grants teaching licences. Over the years, leaders of the Arab community in Israel and academics have argued that the Arab education system is marginalised within the broader Israeli education system, in terms of both policy consideration and implementation. It remains far-removed from core decision-making and suffers from an unequal resource allocation (Agbaria, 2018; Arar, 2012; Arar & Abu Nasra, 2018). According to Arab education leaders, this reality limits the autonomy of the Arab education system in Israel, preventing it from shaping curricula within the MoE according to the needs and perspectives of the Arab minority, rather than those of the Jewish majority (Agbaria, 2015). However, the MoE does not collaborate with this idea. The

Ministry's approach favours integrating the Arab minority into the system, rather than granting Arab education autonomy (Hadad Haj-Yehia, 2018). The 2023 report on Arab society by the Israel Democracy Institute revealed that the average cost per student in Arab primary education across all sectors increased steadily from 2012 to 2022. The highest average cost per student was in Druze and Bedouin education. Since 2012, the average cost per student in Bedouin and Druze education has been higher than in Hebrew education, and by 2015-2016, the cost per student in Arab education matched, and eventually surpassed, the cost in Hebrew education, a trend that continued through 2022 (Khalaily et al., 2023).

2.2 Teaching Personnel in Israel's Primary Schools: Reforms and Challenges

Teacher education for primary education takes place exclusively in academic colleges of education. In February 2021, the Council for Higher Education in Israel approved a reform in teacher education based on recommendations formulated in 2020 by a committee of experts led by Dr. Rivka Wadmany and Prof. Ofra Inbar. The new framework stipulates that adapting "primary education to the unique characteristics and needs of this age group requires pedagogical training focused on constructing, deepening, and expanding foundational knowledge, fostering a sense of competence, and developing cognitive, emotional, and social skills aligned with the students' developmental stage and diversity" (Council for Higher Education, 2020, p. 16).

One of the innovations in the reform is the introduction of an education programme that trains primary school educators, which includes four components: (1) Homeroom Teaching: creating personalised learning plans, shaping the classroom climate, building relationships with parents and the community, life skills, social education, and multicultural education; (2) Disciplinary Learning in line with the subjects taught in primary education; (3) Inclusion and Integration: providing pedagogical and emotional responses to multicultural differences and unique needs; (4) Language Literacy: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Specialised subject teachers, trained in multi-age tracks such as physical education, arts and crafts, English, and Arabic, will primarily focus on teaching their specific subject. Additionally, the number of practical training hours has been expanded, with an emphasis on clinical training and practice (Oved & Raichel, 2024). Furthermore, various programmes in education colleges offer retraining pathways for academic degree holders to become teachers in primary education.

Primary school students spend a significant portion of their school day with a single teacher, referred to in the Israeli education system as the "homeroom teacher". The homeroom teacher teaches their class most of the lessons and

is seen as a critical and central figure in primary education. These educators play a significant role in students' lives, addressing their academic achievements as well as their emotional and social needs. As students' progress to higher grades, the time spent with the classroom educator decreases. A Director-General's circular letter from 1994 outlined the duties of the homeroom teacher in primary education, both academically and socially: managing all the pedagogical aspects of the students, coordinating with subject teachers, monitoring students' academic progress, writing report cards, maintaining communication with parents, managing the class diary, ensuring regular attendance, fostering good behaviour, order, and cleanliness, facilitating students' social adjustment, and initiating extracurricular social activities (Ministry of Education, 1994). In state-religious education, the role of the homeroom teacher also includes fostering the students' religious growth and guiding them in observing religious commandments outside of school. It should be noted that no specific training beyond an academic degree or teaching certificate is required for this role. A survey conducted by the MoE ahead of the 2022/23 school year identified significant difficulties in filling homeroom teacher positions, particularly in primary education in the Tel Aviv and Central Districts (Weissblei, 2023a).

In light of struggles to improve the status and working conditions of teachers, the MoE and the Teachers' Union agreed in 2008 on a reform called "New Horizon" (*"Ofek Hadash"*) and began its implementation in early childhood education, primary schools, and middle schools. New Horizon is a new salary agreement model that redefines teachers' roles and focuses on school-based activities. The programme is based on the assumption that teachers deserve full compensation for their work, and therefore longer work hours at school are required to complete their various tasks. Additionally, the reform introduced an "individual hour" into the teachers' teaching schedule for the first time, aimed at providing personal support to students and regular instruction in small groups. According to the New Horizon agreement, full-time primary school teachers are required to work 26 hours of frontal teaching, 5 hours of individual teaching, and 5 additional work hours each week, for a total of 36 weekly hours (RAMA, 2010).

Various studies have found that teachers in both Hebrew and Arab education are satisfied with salary, teacher status, and improvements in student achievements. The individual hours deepen the relationship between teachers and students, strengthen commitment and motivation and help address students' emotional and social worlds. The additional hours are seen as beneficial to schoolwork by improving staff meetings and addressing student issues (Al-fahel et al., 2017; Reingewertz & Shany, 2016; Zach & Inglis, 2013). However, research shows that teachers still have to complete unpaid work hours at

home. The reform has also increased teachers' workload and administrative demands, such as preparing lesson plans, reporting to supervisors, and completing forms as part of their daily tasks, which delays the achievement of the reform's goals and hinders their ability to fulfil their educational mission (Avidov-Ungar, 2016; RAMA, 2010).

In the past two years, claims have emerged regarding a significant teacher shortage in Hebrew primary education, leading to a decline in teaching quality across educational institutions. According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics, by 2026, an additional 16,000 primary school teachers will be needed in state, state-religious, and ultra-Orthodox education. In Arab education, no increase in demand for teachers is expected at any grade level (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). On the other hand, some argue that the state of the education system in this regard is not fundamentally different from previous years. Between 2000 and 2018, the number of teachers in Hebrew primary education increased by 28%, a rate similar to the growth in the number of students. The average teacher employment rate rose from 73% in 2000 to 77% in 2018, indicating that fears of mass teacher departures following the "New Horizon" work agreement did not materialise. Another trend in Hebrew education is a slight decline in the feminisation of the system: the proportion of women in the teaching workforce fell from 90% in 2000 to 86% in 2017. In Arab education, the trend is the opposite, with the percentage of female teachers rising from 65% in 2000 to 78% in 2017. Regarding teacher education, it was found that the proportion of Hebrew education teachers with academic degrees increased from 50% in 2000 to 89% in 2018; in Arab education, the percentage rose from 37% in 2000 to 94% in 2018, meaning the proportion is now higher in Arab education than in Hebrew education (Blass, 2018). Following public protests over classroom overcrowding, known as the "Sardine Protest", in 2015, the MoE announced a plan to gradually reduce class sizes, aiming to limit them to a maximum of 32 students per class over a five-year period. The implementation of the reform did contribute somewhat to reducing the average number of students per class in regular primary education. By 2023, there were almost no primary school classes with more than 36 students, and only 3% of classes had between 32 and 36 students. The majority of primary school students were in classes with 24-32 students (83% of classes): 91% of classes in state Hebrew education, 85% in state-religious, 71% in ultra-Orthodox, 76% in Arab, and 83% in Bedouin. In Druze education, no classes had more than 28 students. The reduction in class sizes was also aided by the sharp decline in fertility rates in the Arab sector, which led to an almost complete halt in the growth of student numbers in this sector, as well as by the large-scale construction of new classrooms (Blass, 2023).

3 Selected Issues in Primary Education

The primary education system in Israel is characterised by two key reforms that impact the structure and organisation of primary education, whose implementation schools are currently dealing with: the special education system and the inclusion and integration policy implemented in schools, and the self-managed school policy.

3.1 The Special Education System: Inclusion and Integration Policy

Alongside the regular education system, Hebrew and Arab, the special education system operates under the Special Education Law (1988). This system educates students aged 3-21 with disabilities and impairments across all educational stages, sectors, social classes, and types of supervision. Special education students are divided based on the type and severity of their disabilities. They are classified into two categories: (1) Students in special education frameworks: these include students in special education schools and kindergartens, as well as students in special education classes within regular schools; (2) Students integrated into regular classrooms in regular schools with the help of individual or institutional support. Special education is characterised by small classes (5-12 students in special education schools; 6-14 students in special education classes in regular schools), more instructional hours, longer school days, para-medical treatments, extended school years (until July 30 or August 15), and classroom assistants. Services for special education students integrated into regular education include additional reinforcement hours, therapeutic and professional assistance (through the inclusion and integration programme), and integration assistants (Ari-Am & Gumpel, 2014). The MoE allocates significant budgets to finance services for special education students. The budget for special education has increased by 68% over the last decade, from 2016 to 2023, while the number of special education students has grown by about 35% during the same period (Blass, 2022; Weissblei, 2023b). In addition to the services provided to special education students, the education system also offers tools to assist students with learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, and hyperactivity, who are not necessarily eligible for special education services.

In recent years, the MoE has promoted a comprehensive reform in the special education system to integrate students with special needs into regular educational institutions. In 2018, the MoE enacted "Amendment No. 11 to the Special Education Law", known as the Special Education Reform (Ministry of Education, 2018), which was fully implemented in the 2020/21 school year. The reform and legislative amendment follow the principles outlined by

the Public Committee for the Examination of the Special Education System in 2009, headed by former justice of the Supreme Court Dalia Dorner, and are part of the implementation of the committee's recommendations. The amendment introduced changes to the placement process in special education. It established that parents have the right to choose the type of framework in which their child will study, either in a special education institution or with individual support in regular education (Huri & Shoshana, 2024). Additionally, between 2018 and 2021, budgets were allocated for building special education classrooms and providing regular education with additional resources to strengthen, expand, and deepen integration and inclusion activities (Blass, 2022).

In March 2022, the MoE published a Director-General's circular letter detailing and regulating the activities of special education committees operating under Amendment No. 11 of the Special Education Law. The circular emphasised that "the Ministry of Education's policy regarding students with disabilities prioritises their inclusion in general education as much as possible, while addressing their needs in kindergartens or classrooms within regular education" (Ministry of Education, 2022b). The circular further stated that "the basic understanding is that students with disabilities have the right to be integrated into general education frameworks, and that they can benefit in every aspect, including academically, socially, and emotionally" (Ministry of Education, 2022b). Data on parental choices for special education frameworks, following the decisions of eligibility and classification committees, indicate that in the three years since the reform's implementation, there has been an upward trend in parents choosing inclusion through individual support. However, most parents eligible to choose their child's educational framework still opt for separate special education settings (Weissblei, 2023b).

When presenting the reform, and during the discussions in the Education Committee about the law's amendment, criticism and concerns were raised regarding the impact on special education students. It was argued that the legislative changes would not improve equality of opportunity for special education students or increase the number of integrated students, as they perpetuate inequalities in resources between students in special education frameworks and those integrated into regular education. Critics also claim that the reforms do not sufficiently improve the capacity of special education frameworks to accommodate integrated students (Aderet-German, 2023; Weissblei, 2023b).

The National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (RAMA) conducted a follow-up study examining the attitudes of principals and teachers in primary and middle schools regarding the inclusion and integration of students with disabilities following the changes made by Amendment No. 11. The main findings indicate difficulties in implementing the reform and

changes in the perception of its benefits among principals and teachers. There has been a decrease in the perception of the benefits of inclusion for students both academically and socially, and support for it has declined: in the 2021/22 school year, 59% of principals in Hebrew education expressed support for the policy of including a broad range of students with special needs in schools, compared to 74% in the 2020/21 school year. Additionally, in 2021/22 only 32% of principals in Hebrew education expressed interest in increasing the number of students with special needs in their schools, compared to 36% in 2020/21. The decline in willingness to integrate students applies to all types of disabilities. Moreover, there has been an increase in the feeling that the burden on teachers impairs their ability to meet the academic and emotional needs of both special needs students and the rest of the class. 45% of principals felt that because teachers were busy assisting special needs students, they were unable to teach the rest of the class effectively. Among principals and teachers in Arab education, there were lower levels of concern that the burden prevented them from meeting the needs of special needs students, and these parameters remained stable over time (RAMA, 2023). Additionally, criticism of the reform pointed to the challenges and difficulties teachers face in accommodating students with disabilities in regular classrooms (Huri & Shoshana, 2024) and the lack of teacher training programmes that integrate special education courses to ease the teaching burden in regular education (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019).

In response to the difficulties in implementing the reform, in February 2023, the Minister of Education announced the establishment of an external committee led by Amos Shapira to examine the impact of the reform on services for special education students in various settings. The committee was also tasked with proposing long-term plans for the special education system in light of the increasing number of students, including legislative changes, if necessary (Ministry of Education, 2024).

3.2 Self-Management Policy

Starting in the 1970s, recognition began to grow regarding the need to increase the pedagogical and administrative independence of educational institutions. In the 1990s, the MoE began implementing a process to expand school autonomy, through the "Autonomy in Education" project, encouraging local educational initiatives and organised parent involvement (Eyal & Berkovich, 2011; Gaziel, 2010; Nir, 2003). Alongside decentralization processes, the ministry developed the "Self-Managing Schools" model, which centres on the student, the classroom, and the teacher, while granting principals and teaching staff a broad authority and responsibility for student achievements (Volansky, 2007).

The principles underpinning the self-management model include placing all responsibility and authority over educational planning, pedagogical resources, human resources, and material resources in the hands of the school's management team. The school's budget is managed as a closed financial system, wherein the school funds its activities and income (excluding teacher salaries). In the 1995/96 school year, the MoE began piloting the self-management model, and by 2000/01, the model was adopted as a system-wide policy. However, in 2004, the ministry abandoned its management of the issue, even though hundreds of schools continued operating under the self-management model. A 2009 State Comptroller's report concluded that the self-management policy had failed in terms of implementation, management, and decision-making processes. The schools that transitioned to self-management received no training or guidance from the MoE on how to implement the model. The ministry did not oversee the performance of self-managing schools or track the actions taken by local authorities to monitor them. Moreover, the MoE did not conduct an evaluation to determine whether the objectives of the self-management policy were achieved (The State Comptroller, 2009).

In a 2011 government decision, the MoE reintroduced the self-management policy in official primary schools. As part of the "National Significant Learning Programme" announced by the MoE in 2013, alongside promoting goals of reducing disparities and implementing differential budgeting, it was decided that the self-management programme would be expanded to all primary schools by the 2014/15 school year. The policy principles and implementation model were established in the Director-General's circular letter, issued in 2014 and updated in 2017, outlining the key foundations of the self-management model in its administrative, organisational, and pedagogical aspects. These include internal control, wherein the school functions as the decision-making centre; delegation of authority and empowerment; the school as a learning organisation; responsibility, commitment, and accountability; fostering school-community relations; and managing economic resources that combine the MoE's budget, local authority funding, and additional resource mobilization to enhance the school's financial stability (Ministry of Education, 2017). The transition to self-management is conducted at the local authority level, and the model is applied to all schools within the authority. By the 2017/18 school year, approximately 97% of local authorities had completed the transition to the self-management model (The State Comptroller, 2019). Notably, this key policy, which has significant organisational, budgetary, and pedagogical implications, and impacts the school's relationships with central systems – the MoE and the local authority – has no basis in primary or secondary legislation passed by the Knesset, The Israeli House of Representatives.

The policy, reintroduced in 2014, was accompanied by an evaluation study conducted by the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation, which examined the perceptions and attitudes of principals, secretaries, and teachers towards its implementation in schools that had participated since the programme's inception. The study found that significant progress had been made in terms of increasing autonomy and internal control within schools, but less so in other areas. Satisfaction with the transition to self-management is high and has even strengthened over time. Nearly all principals, and most teachers and secretaries, expressed satisfaction with the shift to self-management, with some even wanting to see it expanded (RAMA, 2016). Optimism about the transition to self-management is greater among principals in Arab education compared to Hebrew education (Arar & Abu-Romi, 2016). However, a State Comptroller's report (2019) revealed failures and difficulties in the implementation of self-management, which hinder its objectives. The report raised concerns that the MoE's approach of reducing its responsibility within the self-management framework would negatively affect the performance and goals of public schools. According to the report, the transition to self-management has strengthened the involvement of local authorities in schools, particularly in wealthier municipalities, which runs contrary to the self-management concept that the school principal should be the primary decision-maker responsible for achieving the school's educational goals. This could deepen disparities between strong and weak local authorities in the education system (The State Comptroller, 2019).

In the 2023/24 school year, the MoE emphasised a policy of granting greater administrative autonomy to school principals. Starting in the 2022/23 school year, managerial and pedagogical flexibility for school principals was significantly expanded through the "Flexible Framework for Autonomous Schools" programme, with substantial resources being transferred to their direct management. The aim is to provide tailored learning experiences for every student and to advance educational initiatives, including the ability to offer flexible and differentiated responses (Ministry of Education, 2023).

In conclusion, this article presented a brief overview of the primary education system in Israel, across its various groups. It can be stated with certainty that primary education, both Hebrew and Arab, is heterogeneous and reflects the diverse social and religious groups within Israeli society. In Hebrew education, there has been a shift from the "melting pot" policy, established with the enactment of the State Education Law in 1953, which aspired to create a unified, equal education system embodied in a common core, to an education system managed independently with broad pedagogical autonomy. On the one hand, this policy can be interpreted as pluralistic, allowing each social and religious group to raise their children according to their beliefs and values.

On the other hand, this policy carries the risk of exacerbating the polarization between the different groups in Israeli society. The retreat from a centralised model and the expansion of parental choice leave Israeli society without a common unifying core. Additionally, this policy may promote inequality and separatism between the groups, mainly because education policy is political, and each group seeks to advance its own interests.

The separation between the Jewish and Arab education systems also creates a division between the two ethnic groups in terms of curricula, schools, and language. Almost all Arab students in Israel attend schools where the entire population is Arab. Although the gaps in student funding and achievement between the Jewish and Arab education systems have narrowed, shared education may lead to the promotion of coexistence and social equality.

An education policy in primary schools that promotes a common core across all groups in Israeli society, Jews and Arabs, religious and secular, could lead to a shared identity and a cohesive Israeli society that upholds shared values and a common destiny.

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