

NGO INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY: THE PERCEPTIONS OF NGO EXECUTIVES

This study focuses on the perceptions of NGO senior executives regarding their involvement in the design and implementation of education policy in Israel. We applied a qualitative research method, conducting in-depth interviews with NGO senior executives who provided rich and comprehensive descriptions of their perceptions. Data analysis revealed the following themes: (a) policy of cross-sector partnership in education (b) mutual responsibility for education, and (c) the benefit of NGO involvement in education. This study provides theoretical contributions and practical implications of NGO involvement in shaping and implementing education policies.

Keywords: NGO, privatization, education policy, cross-sector partnership.

Introduction

NGOs have become major factors in Western education systems these last few decades, employing their economic, social, and political power (Bulkley & Burch, 2011) and impacting education structures and content (Shiffer, Berkovich, Bar-Yehuda, & Almog-Bareket, 2010). NGOs across the West now participate in varying degrees in efforts to meet education goals set by the government (Vishwakarma & Sthapak, 2017), involved both in policy formation and policy implementation (Ball & Youdell, 2008). This involvement may prove advantageous, helping schools meet new demands, expanding the scope of educational activities in various subjects and levels through external funding and budgeting, and even facilitating principals and teachers in establishing their autonomy regarding internal processes and decision making in schools (Yemini & Sagic, 2015).

Be that as it may, the dramatic rise in NGOs is a global phenomenon associated with the expansion of neoliberal ideology, privatization, and commercialization of education. A phenomenon that has provoked a worldwide debate, and many questions arise from this new dynamic: Who is responsible for making decisions on education policy issues? What powers should NGOs wield? Do they benefit schools, students, and parents, and if so - how? How do they influence the making in this field? Who exercises power over whom and with what outcomes? To whom should schools be accountable? How will currently popular market-oriented reforms reflect the gaping divide between public and private sectors? What

components of 21st century education systems may change as a result of NGO involvement? What are the implications of these trends for the democratic processes of public education?

Research into NGO involvement in Israeli education is multifaceted (Weinheber, Ben Nun, & Shiffman, 2008; Paz-Fuchs & Ben-Simchon-Peleg, 2014). OECD figures (Table B3.1 2013) detail numerous education programs operated by external bodies in Israel, a fact made more complex due to the two primary laws - the 1949 Compulsory Education Law and the 1953 State Education Law – both placing the responsibility for education and its funding squarely on the shoulders of the State and excluding education provided by non-governmental bodies not under the supervision of the Education Ministry (Ichilov, 2010). The challenge of upholding these laws has been a top public and professional priority since the establishment of the State of Israel, a guiding principle of the welfare state model, combining economic considerations and the obligation to provide public services to citizens (Berkovich & Foldes, 2012). However, in the mid-1970s, shortly after the neoliberal state model emerged as an alternative to the welfare model, the Israeli government embraced a new approach. NGOs were ushered into the education system without any corresponding legislative changes, resulting in a great loss of governance (Ichilov, 2010), presenting challenges to both policy makers and policy implementers and changing views on the role of public institutions.

The purpose of this study is to use in-depth interviews to explore the attitudes of senior NGO executives regarding their role in education policy implementation, providing an inside perspective on how NGOs function in public Israeli education. This paper begins with a literature review, then we describe the research design and the findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings as well as implications and further research avenues.

Theoretical Background

The Privatization of Education

Throughout human history, education often relied on private funding, and even in recent centuries, with modern governments operating systemized forms of education, private institutions and philanthropic organizations are still involved in allocating funding, shaping curricula, and playing an important role in education governance (Ball & Youdell, 2008). However, in the last three decades the privatization of global education has constituted the next step in this development. This process is influenced by neoliberal policies, and far-reaching global changes in the economic, political, and social environments that have shifted priorities in education policy toward an emphasis on skills needed to participate in the global knowledge economy (Vishwakarma & Sthapak, 2017). One aspect of this

has been governance that emphasizes the principles of privatization, commercialization, and choice in education, as well as the adoption of an audit culture focused on performance contracts and different testing and accountability regimes for a variety of organizations and individuals actively participating in education (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016).

However, there is evidence from US, Europe and also Latin America that the neoliberal education policy legitimizes the transformation of education from one of a "public good" that the state is responsible for funding and distributing equally, to a privatized and commercial product that increases competition and reduces the state's oversight abilities (Robertson & Dale, 2002). Opponents of neoliberal policies warn against a growing trend of reduced government spending and a progressively increased share of the local echelon, one that only deepens inequality and social gaps (Ozga & Lingard, 2007). Hence, unequal geographical allocation of resources, as well as the possibility for organizations to charge for the services they provide, will impair the ability of low socioeconomic populations to purchase the services they provide, even basic and essential services (Berkovich & Foldes, 2012).

This economic perspective eschews a simplistic "human capital" view of education focused solely on employer labor market interests. Instead, it attempts to connect learning to economic development, social progress, and overall national wellbeing. This perspective can be seen as emerging from a crisis in thinking on the relationship between education and economy. Stiglitz and Greenwald (2014) take a position that the role of education is to contribute to a narrowing of economic inequality within nations and that fairness is a precursor to international economic performance (Rawls & Kelly, 2013).

Education NGOs in an Era of Privatization

Allowing the private sector into the public education field is founded on the belief that NGOs can provide services more efficiently than government institutions. NGOs are generally defined as non-profit organizations of individuals or groups acting as a framework of corporate activity on a range of non-profit issues (Gidron & Hall, 2017). They function outside the government body and its direct authority (HM Treasury and Cabinet Office, 2007), are not required to adhere to public administration rules, do not divide their assets into a private company (nonprofit distribution), and are essentially independent (self-governing entities) working for the public good. NGOs promote social values, such as volunteering, building products and services for public wellbeing, or other causes aimed at improving conditions for the public (welfare, health, and education) (Anheier, 2005). A review of relevant literature provides little consistency in the characterization of NGOs beyond this generalization, a lack made starkly apparent with the increasing involvement and wide diversity of business

organizations in education (Ichilov, 2010; Verger et al., 2016).

The Relationship Between NGOs and the State

Depending on their capabilities and the suitability of their goals, education policy today does allow NGOs to initiate services and influence public education in one of three avenues (Young, 2000). In the first, inclusion, organizations provide public education services not provided by the government; and in the second, completion, organizations support education policy and assisting established institutions through a formal and regulated position (outsourcing or partnership) or informally (Greve & Ejerbo, 2005). The government remains the central authority in education, but agreements with contractors reflects a shared responsibility for planning and defining services, determining those entitled to it, financing it, and supervising its supply (Paz-Fuchs et al., 2014; Shiffer et al., 2010). In the third, cross-sector partnerships, collaborations and reciprocal exchanges between the state and NGOs (information sharing, knowledge, resources, activities, programs, customer service and organizational/professional capabilities), achieve common education goals by maximizing the unique advantages of each and offering access to previously inaccessible assets (Wohlstetter, Courtney, Hentschke, & Smith, 2004).

Studies examining NGO views on their participation in education reveal a clear commitment to promote social-educational issues, realizing economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic goals aimed at impacting education decision makers, encouraging initiatives, and increasing accountability (Momin, 2013). Other studies focus on how NGOs in education deal with their benefactors and the expectations of them to meet objectives. One position is that responsible practices, most particularly in education, should not only be aimed at service recipients but should primarily focus on changing NGO conduct and amending their reliance on benefactors. Although positive reactions to benefactor interests may indicate commitment to their causes, it may also prompt NGOs to be more assertive in managing their institutional environments. This may ease their dependency on contributors (AbouAssi & Trent, 2016), as well as their dependency on state funding, as beyond their overall progressive approach to social responsibility, they are also required to function as a business (Skouloudis, Evangelinos, & Malesios, 2015).

Research Context

In the last three decades, the trend of privatization in the Israeli education system has been growing, and the weight of parents, associations, and business entities has intensified. Consequently, there is a disintegration of the perception of public education as a fundamental right that the state must provide, one that occurs without change in legislation and in

fact stems from the state's failure to provide its citizens with services. The transfer of responsibility from the state to voluntary or private organizations is an expression of the loss of governance and the removal of responsibility from the state to voluntary or private organizations.

NGO involvement in the Israeli education system is complex and multifaceted, and therefore of interest to Israeli researchers who examine the causes and extent of the phenomenon, its interventions, and its characteristics (Dagan-Buzaglo, 2010; Paz-Fuchs et al., 2014; Weinheber et al., 2008; Yemini & Sagie, 2015). In recent years, the significant growth of NGO numbers in Israeli education has also motivated education leaders and other state bodies to thoroughly examine the nature of this involvement and formulate practical positions and recommendations for coping with the phenomenon. despite the growing dominance of the third sector in various areas of educational work (Schiffer et al., 2010). The scope of non-governmental factors penetrating the system in different ways is still relatively small when considering overall education, and the majority of study hours and system funding are still public (Dagan-Buzaglo, 2010). In 2012, for example, 98% of primary school expenditure was publically funded. In contrast, the NGOs operating in Israeli education represent a diverse group; their motives range from traditional philanthropy of organizations and private individuals from Israel and abroad, to organizations focused on specific corporate-social initiatives, and to foundations/associations seeking to actively shape education (Weinheber et al., 2008). NGOs also manage curricular programs in various areas omitted from official curricula, such as enrichment programs, social programs, and holistic or systemic intervention programs (Weber, 2012; Weinheber et al., 2008).

Research Design

We have chosen a qualitative methodology to allow for the collection of rich textual descriptions. In particular, this study is a narrative inquiry into meaning, highly attentive to what NGO executives are experiencing (Patton, 2002). This research approach acknowledges the existence of structured, fluid, subjective, flexible, and dynamic realities that are attributed different meanings and interpretations and are shaped within political, cultural, and social contexts (Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2016).

Seeking to maximize the depth and richness of our data, we used maximal differentiation sampling (Creswell, 2014), also known as heterogeneous sampling. The research population included representatives of various NGOs involved in elementary schools of low socioeconomic backgrounds focusing on various subjects related to the advancement of scholastic achievements and student welfare. The NGO senior managers also varied in years in post (10-25 years in their role). Thus, interviews were held with senior executives of NGOs with different characteristics -

size of operation, budget, goals, team, field of work - in order to reach the broadest possible spectrum (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Data for this study were collected during the first semester of the 2016-2017 academic year and are comprised of 10 in-depth interviews with NGO senior executives. The interviews were coordinated independently in their offices, in schools, or in different venues and lasted 60-90 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. All participants were fully informed on the purpose of the study and were promised complete confidentiality as well as full retreat options. Pseudonyms were assigned to all interviewees to preserve their privacy and prevent identification.

The interview began with a general introductory question: Tell me about your professional career. This gained us demographic information about interviewees and created a sense of trust and openness. Then, as part of a more comprehensive interview, NGO executives were asked questions regarding the purpose of the current study, for example: What is your opinion on how NGOs are involved in the education system? How do you see your potential/actual contribution to the education system? What are the unique elements that exist in extracurricular programs that influence, change, and contribute to the improvement of scholastic and social achievements?

Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously in an ongoing process throughout the inquiry, with analysis being a three-stage process – condensing, coding, and categorizing. Once data were collected, we found that not all the material collected could serve the purpose of the study, and that the material required sorting (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Thus, in the first stage of analysis (condensing), we looked for the portions of data that related to the topic of this study. In the second stage (coding), each segment of relevant data (utterance) was coded by the aspect it expressed (Gibbs, 2007). In contrast to the previous stage, this stage was data-driven and not theory-driven because we did not use a priori codes but rather inductive ones, developed by direct examination of the perspectives articulated by participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). After capturing the essence of utterances in the second stage, in the third stage (categorizing), we clustered similar utterances to generalize their meanings and derive categories. At this point, we reworked categories to reconcile disconfirming data with the emerging analysis (Richards & Morse, 2013). Thus, the dimensions of categories were explored, identifying relationships between categories and testing categories against the full range of data. Moreover, the analysis was performed in two phases: First, NGO executives' voices were each analyzed separately, and next, their voices were analyzed to generate common themes and elucidate the differences between the voices. In this way, generating themes was an inductive process, grounded in the various perspectives articulated by participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

In a qualitative exploration, researchers should pay attention to how their backgrounds and personal experiences inform the theoretical and methodological perceptions concerning the inquiry. As the researchers of this study, we come from different backgrounds: one of us was working in policy development and implementation at the Ministry of Education and is currently an educational leadership researcher, and the second gained extensive experience in educational leadership research. Our joint work, which includes ongoing mutual reflection, allowed us to become more aware of the conceptual and methodological issues pertaining to the current research.

Findings

Data analysis revealed three main themes reflecting NGO manager perceptions: (1) a policy of cross-sector partnership in education; (2) mutual responsibility for education; and (3) the benefit of NGO involvement in education. These themes are interrelated and impact education policy implementation.

Policy of Cross-Sector Partnership

Cross-sector partnerships refer to clearly established and ongoing organizational frameworks for interaction and exchange between the public, third, and business sectors. Their objective is the attainment of public goals through joint allocation of resources (Wohlstette et al., 2004). NGO managers see such partnerships as indicative of an organizational culture that combines human and financial assets of two systems to promote values, goals, and objectives in education, as Lewis describes:

One very important understanding and guiding principle...and one I very much hoped remains, is that there is a place and significance to these programs...the Ministry recognizes our value, powers, and resources...sees us contributors to schools.

In their view, these partnerships and their various components constitute a fundamental shift in the conceptual and ideological foundations of education policy, thereby enabling the Education Ministry to join forces with factors outside the system, as based on the particular advantages of each prospective partner. For example, Daniel states:

To her credit, the director general of the Ministry has invested a great deal and is very oriented towards this connection and partnership between philanthropy and education...this is a significant change...they see and acknowledge the benefits and crucial role we play in the system.

Moreover, NGO managers describe this partnership as a way to greatly influence the formulation of work processes and goal attain-

ment, as Jack explains: "The director general said...let's finally sit down to organize the hundreds of joint education programs, define them together, instead of the Ministry deciding alone who is in and who isn't...." NGO managers are profoundly appreciative of being allowed to be significant partners in shaping and implementing education policy. Also, in their view, the Ministry is a key promoter initiating this policy change, as described by Dean: "Regarding the importance of a policy that endorses cross-sectoral partnerships in education, we see the Ministry as the initiator, the guiding force. They were the ones to create this platform for dialogue, listening, and trust building." From an NGO standpoint, the Ministry was wise to strategically lead a process that allows for an egalitarian structure, one that provides equal representation for every sector with the goal of raising issues of education relevant to all.

Accordingly, given the traditional, outdated, bureaucratic, and institutionalized nature of the formal education system, this shift to partnerships is a catalyst for systemic reform. This marks the progress towards a new form of governance, one that signifies innovation, entrepreneurship, and prudent utilization of existing potential in the public sphere for a better and more diversified education system. For NGOs, the Ministry plays the key role, "orchestrating" partnerships aimed at creating an equitable structure, contributing to meaningful discourse that promotes common education goals. Thus, the Ministry is not seen by NGOs as an overseer ruling through a mandate of laws and enforcement powers, but as an enterprising, open-minded government body that understands their contribution to the formulation and implementation of an education policy that regulates its engagement with them. However, data analysis reveals rich descriptions regarding the motives, power relations, and interests NGO managers believe are at the root of this policy shift, as well as reservations and critique of the official partnership policy.

Motivations for Cross-Sector Partnerships

The main motivation driving this policy change is the belief that such a partnership may be the way to address complex social issues that cannot be solved by any single sector (Crosby & Bryson, 2010). NGO executives described several motives for their decision to begin working in a cross-sector framework. One motivation stems from informal developments in politics and education, as Max described: "Frequently, NGOs enter the system using political ties ... which means we are contacted and asked to conduct interventions in schools." As they see it, the first motive for turning to them are interests in the political and education fields that reveal reliance and belief in their ability to resolve education problems that no single sector is capable of tackling, and reducing the risks of one factor acting alone.

A second motive arising from the interviews addresses the direct

intervention of Ministry senior officials in school funding, as Julie explains: "The Ministry director general asked that our program be implemented in several schools she wanted to promote. But how were they selected? What were the criteria? Considerations? There was no set policy ... and if there was a policy, the process did not reflect it." In the NGO view, this unclear top-down policy dictated over the years has failed to manage relations, leading to unchecked involvement and independent interpretations of policy in education, producing a haphazard distribution of resources.

A third and central motive for partnership in education is the fulfilment of value concepts and administrative initiatives that promote partnerships in the education field, as NGO executive, Selena, describes it: "Philanthropy works collaboratively, without collaboration it does not exist and has no power...." Brad adds that: "One guiding principle of our work model is partnering with people in the field, a point that must be put front and center...believing that most knowledge and experience is in the field ... you need to assemble, organize, and unite a work plan together with local factors and leadership." This stance of NGO managers could be described as a belief and recognition in the powers of local factors and leadership that can work together to achieve a synergetic result with a unique added value impossible to achieve by one sector.

Demand for Recognition in Core Curricula

NGO executives working in education demand taking this partnership to the next level, now pushing for their programs to be officially included in the core curricula and the Ministry's strategic plan. For them, this would signify further dissemination of the partnership. As John describes:

Many of our programs could provide a contribution, saving the Ministry the work involved. For example, the mathematics program we are developing...we are spending a fortune and investing a great deal already. Why shouldn't the Ministry use it in the core curricula? It's important that they be recognized...as it is, they are already being implemented in the field.

NGO executives believe that the policy must be amended to now incorporate their programs in the Education Ministry core curricula as their syllabus and teaching materials meet professional standards, are the product of great investment, and are already in use and benefiting many school administrators and students. They believe this combination will help blur sectoral differences, save time and financial costs, and break down structural barriers that may prevent the full realization of this partnership. Therefore, including NGO programs in the core curricula and the Ministry's strategic plan is a step towards systemic changes, as described

by Barry, an NGO manager in the education field:

It's problematic when planning isn't linked to execution...we need to be included in the strategic plan, to the overall master plan outlining goals, objectives, and so forth...to avoid investment costs in maintenance mechanisms, thereby reducing gaps between the various organizations.

Moreover, in their view, a true partnership entails emphasizing the unique contribution of each factor involved in education work, identifying the professional benefit each brings to the system. As Freddie states: "Optimal partnerships require a recognition of the diverse knowledge, expertise, and experience in teaching that help improve learning...." Meaningful cross-sector collaboration is founded on an acknowledgment of the domain and specific know-how of each sector, due respect for its professional history, and acceptance of its approach to teaching methodology.

Focus on Learning Processes

NGO executives are aware that the partnership in education promotes changes in the knowledge, skills, and standard conduct of education teams in both systems, as Brad describes: "As an organization, we are constantly learning, helping transform schools into inspiring places to learn together, to exchange information, tools, skills, learning alternatives ... to improve and expand existing knowledge." They are aware that their involvement nurtures reciprocal learning, contributing to both systems, and enabling a measure of administrative flexibility by freeing up resources for continued professional teacher training. As Lacy describes: "There are a lot of teaching hours in the system ... the problem is that teachers aren't good enough. So, what's the point in giving that teacher more hours, if they don't know how to work with children? Teachers must be reared in schools." They understand that the professional development of teachers and continued involvement in the education field is essential to further growth and improvement of teaching, learning and assessment processes. NGOs instigate internal organizational processes that provide systemic flexibility, advancing a school autonomy that promotes organizational excellence, as Dean reports: "This is a professional association... the standards the NGOs hold themselves, the principals, and the schools too are meticulous, and so this is a system that continuously pushes higher, raising the bar."

Nevertheless, their most compelling critique focuses on official policy which offer no solutions or alternatives to education programs terminated due to budgetary shortages or disinterest of the Ministry. In their view, this violates educational and learning continuity in schools, as Selena attests: "Part of the difficulty of our venture is that you invest, and there's no follow-through in terms of budget or other resources from the

Ministry...we are constantly looking for budgetary alternatives...providing solutions to keep the programs going." Interviewees describe the many hours invested in searching for local or systematic solutions to keep programs in operation that may be discontinued due to lack of budget or their failure to enlist the Ministry or the town/city to keep implementing them.

Mutual Responsibility for Education

The policy of cross-sector partnerships in education is based on an aspiration to establish collaboration that assigns responsibilities and areas of authority among partners working towards a common goal, advancing an initiative or resolving a problem (Gidron & Hall, 2017). NGO executives attest to the renewed scrutiny into the mutual responsibilities and authorities in education this partnership generates. The following sub-categories present relevant study findings.

Inherent Tensions of Cross-Sector Relations

Interviews reveal an inherent tension regarding responsibilities and authority in education, arising from NGOs' proactive approach, subsequent success, and the demand for their programs. As stated by Michael: "The dilemma that often arises is whether the State needs or wants philanthropy ... we operate in schools very successfully, and there is a great demand [for our programs] ... The education system keeps saying that this success indicates our failure ... that we are responsible for privatization." NGO executives maintain that their involvement creates a mixed picture of the education system's commitment and responsibility to meeting needs and realizing goals in education. As described by Daniel: "The Education Ministry policy outlines many of its actions ... On the one hand, declaring the partnership provides legitimacy ... on the other, we are seen as overwhelming the system, even a threat to the cross-sector partnership." The duality to be dealt with by decision makers is that a privatization policy expands the independent and autonomous leadership of the private sector while the partnerships legitimize their actions as they interpret how to implement that partnership in education.

The majority of their energies are dedicated to managing crises that occur due to the inconsistency between stated policy and actual conduct, as Lewis attests:

The ego displayed by the [Ministry] officials...there are frequent differences between the various Ministry units and their stated policy...no decisions [are made]. So, most of our energies are directed to the synergy between us and the different Ministry bodies and units.

In the opinion of the interviewees, mutual responsibility works better thanks to the personal relationships they have cultivated with min-

istry officials, as described by Lacy: "We are close to the minister ... we present plans, and he recommends where we should start. There is a range, from a joint venture with the Ministry or operating alone with Ministry sanction." Interviews reveal that through personal contacts they receive recommendations on preferred areas for their operations. In doing so, they promote joint initiatives with the Ministry while sharing responsibilities, as Freddie explains: "All our ties to projects with the Ministry are based on personal relationships with high-ranking Ministry people, and we jointly decide on priorities, sharing resources." Interviewees explain that personal relationships still form the foundation for cross-sector partnerships behind the scenes. These attitudes and conduct, by NGOs and Ministry alike, pose obstacles to formulating a collaborative policy.

Recognizing the Authority of the Education Ministry

Findings reveal that, in general, NGO executives assign overall responsibility and authority in education to the State, a fact that reduces tensions in cross-sector relations. This marks a change from previous years in which NGO executives tried to dictate, exert pressure, and compel the State to cede to their demands, as Max describes:

Some problems stem from past attitudes when we thought we ruled the roost...instead of 'dancing the tango' with the State, philanthropy experimented with its money with the State's knowledge, then thought of ways to drag the State into a Waltz.

Interviewees explain that their initiatives and involvement in education established de facto their presence in the field. Meaning, their presence challenged and even pressured the Ministry to take on budgetary and educational responsibilities. Barry states: "We operated programs using our budgets...there was a great demand for them...the State adopted the concept...expanded its monetary investment in it...as a business model...we basically 'impregnated' the State."

Today, NGOs claim they do not want to "replace the State" or "take over its role," that the State is "functioning well," and that public partners now have the power to approve or reject initiatives, serving to "protect" citizens through the provision of education services. As Jack attests: "Our agenda today is cooperating with the State, not replacing it...." In their view, their new stance began with a renewed look into their identity and specific rationale for social value-oriented commitment, helping them reach broad agreements with the Ministry, as evidenced by their awareness of organizational and budgetary constraints. Tom articulates this point: "We are aware of the limits. For example, subsidized school lunches are the responsibility of the State. In such cases, we understand our limitations and adhere to State decisions."

Such sentiments clarify their demarcation of territorial boundar-

ies, and their limitation in the provision of services on a large scale. This marks their acknowledgment on the Ministry's importance and its role in preserving the public interest. While the State must address the needs of the entire national population, NGOs have the privilege of investing in designated areas or populations. Their role is to support, extend, and maximize the broad span of Ministry activities. Moreover, they claim this is the main message conveyed by contributors, as Julie describes: "There is a functioning State here...we know it has a good and functional system... we aren't here to replace it...only to support, accompany, maximize...this is a key point of our benefactors – working with the State... We have been careful since the State Comptroller's report."

NGO executives report a profound change in attitude. Today they are more careful, "treading lightly" as they put it, attempting no move to determine policy alone but rather in collaboration. Their recognition of the State's authority is based on their awareness that the majority of education funding is provided by the State, as presented in detail in the following.

Acknowledgment of Responsibilities for Budgeting and Maintaining a Reputation

Analysis of the interviews exposes a clear recognition that the Ministry of Education still bears central budgetary responsibility for education when compared to the relatively low financial investment of NGOs, as Max describes: "With all due respect to friends and donors, and the millions they bring in, the State of Israel still puts in a hundred times more... We are also reliant on funding by the State." They see the State as the major actor and investor in education. Although their contribution is still vital, they must cease competing with the Ministry, show respect for its role, and humbly accept the Ministry's authority. Their partnership depends on the rich systems in the public sector, and equally on the image of this dependency, as required by donors. Freddie explains:

We have an obligation to contributors, they want to know they have significant partners to work with...contributors say – my approach to Israel is different, it's not an 'Uncle Sam' approach where you just hand over the money...it's empowering to know you are partnering with factors providing a lot more money than you...it improves the public image.

Also, initiatives in the education field are driven by contributors' demands that NGOs enlist the Ministry in programs and match private funding, as Michael described: "We like matching ... our initiatives as education-focused philanthropy energizes the Ministry, leveraging NGO abilities to further promote the public sector ... we work to include it in public service." In other words, NGOs do not operate in a vacuum, and they function within the parameters and requirements of the benefactors that fund

their programs who require the presence of stakeholders to promote both budgetary interests and their prestige.

Moreover, NGO entrepreneurship stems from an interest in combining resources. This simultaneously influences the Ministry to change its policies and increase its accountability in specific populations while also attesting to their understanding that they exist in a constantly changing and uncertain environment, suffer from a persistent scarcity of resources, and must vie for resources, including national resources. Thus, their involvement in the public sphere hinges on their recognition and acceptance of the Ministry as the key player, with overall responsibility for determining education, pedagogical policies, and budget allocation.

The Benefit of Involvement

The attitudes of NGO executives regarding the benefit, contribution, and success of cross-sector partnerships in education is reflected in programs financed by matching funding with the Ministry, as Susie describes: "The programs operating on matching funding are a success...we like working this way...seeing many advantages in combining forces with the Education Ministry...the benefit is that everyone gets something from cooperating."

As they see it, while the education system transfers responsibility of service provision to organizations, doing so in this manner (i.e., through partial privatization of matched funding programs) is a recipe for a successful partnership, as Selina eloquently explains:

The secret to the success of these matched funding programs is evident in three things: 1) scope – the philanthropic fund decides on the size of investment and who to invest in; 2) topic and quality – once you are no longer committed to size, and the scope is smaller, program quality increases; 3) focus on younger ages – assuming impact is higher in these age groups.

NGOs see resource-sharing as an opportunity, with the Ministry enabling them to choose how much to invest and the ability to focus on younger ages in elementary schools, recognizing their experience in education and their understanding of education needs. As Daniel states: "We are known for our familiarity with the education field ... therefore, there is a chance that philanthropy will produce a more accessible, available, quality program."

Additionally, matching funding allows for a holistic approach to learning, meaning an attitude that perceives pupils as entire beings that benefit from emotional and social address as a basis for their scholastic achievements, as Johanna describes: "Study in small groups allows for children to receive emotional treatment...treatment using animals, arts, therapy... it's something different...a more holistic view that sees all of

the child's needs...opening and removing obstacles."

In their view, addressing these needs is essential to scholastic success, as Freddie explains: "Academic achievements are the by-product... but not the immediate goal...as we see it...a child that is well-fed and calm and receives the envelope of services they need can then start thinking about how to improve scholastic outcomes." Jackie also expressed his view on the great benefit these cross-sector programs have on academic success: "Improvement is not immediately evident...but you can say that thanks to these partnering programs...grade average rose from 56% to 70% in core subjects."

Thus, NGO executives working in education perceive the importance of programs that combine their resources with those of the Ministry. From their perspective, this combination gives voice to unique populations by expanding scope of services and implementing them in specifically chosen sites, pooling resources, enriching and diversifying curricula, enabling study in small groups, and providing social, emotional, and academic support to promote scholastic achievement. They see this collaboration as a form of partial privatization, an effective model that allows the Ministry to partially fund some activities, and therefore retain its responsibility for programs and continue to monitor NGO conduct. As clarified in the interviews, these executives believe this partnership with the Ministry forms the foundation for their commitment to support and complement a policy aimed at providing a range of education services to meet the needs and mindset of each actor as all strive to fulfil their public responsibilities.

Discussion

NGO executives constitute powerful players in education, directly influencing the nature, content, interpretation, and implementation of education policy. They expressed the belief that cross-sector partnerships are designed to instigate reforms, injecting the system with innovation and harnessing proactivity as a joint tool to optimize and capitalize on existing potential in the public sphere (Wohlstetter et al., 2004). Executives saw their presence as a facilitating factor, bringing the professional ties and resources necessary to advance academic and social outcomes, along with establishing the moral obligation to work for the public good (Anheier, 2005).

NGO executives agree that formulating education policy is crucially important as it involves adopting a worldview, assigning responsibilities, and offering possible solutions. So, determining a policy of cross-sector partnerships and their characteristics establishes a conceptual and ideological infrastructure that combines the education services of the Ministry with those of outside factors, opening the door for NGOs to greatly influence education policy design and implementation. Collaboration,

mutual interactions, and exchange of "assets" (i.e., sharing information, knowledge, resources, activities, programs), make it possible to promote common public goals (Bryson et al., 2006; Gazley & Brudney, 2007; McQuaid, 2000). Therefore, in this model the Education Ministry retains its power, authority, and responsibility for setting boundaries in education, overseeing NGOs in their implementation of its policies (Salamon et al., 2013) while also reducing the regulatory mechanisms of the Ministry that hinder initiatives that may improve the system.

Senior NGOs have expressed the view that the vague policies imposed over the years have failed to regulate relations between the various sectors, leading to uncontrolled involvement, independent interpretations of policies in the political and educational arena, and the creation of a chaotic distribution of resources. This does not meet the original expectation of the transition to inter-sectoral policy in education, a move made by the Ministry of Education in recognition of the limitations of traditional policies it pursued over the years, and the hope that organizations would benefit Israeli education. Thus, relying on inter-sectoral partnership policies makes it possible to address challenges, and make better policy decisions that include extensive coverage of partners, challenges, different needs, and constraints.

NGO executives expressed the view that the vague policy imposed over the years has failed to regulate relations between the various sectors, leading to unchecked involvement, independent interpretations of policy in the political and education arenas, and generating chaotic distribution of resources. Hence, cross-sector partnerships constitute revolutionary progress, allowing institutionalized education to make the necessary changes needed to regulate relations. This could serve as a catalyst for policy design and planning (Ball, 2013) that effectively utilizes existing potential in the education field (Crosby & Bryson, 2010).

In addition to the attitude and understanding of NGO executives that official policy must be amended, they also expressed their view that cross-sector partnerships are already an established reality "in practice," and all that remains is to acknowledge this state of affairs. Interviews reveal how they categorize the organizational, structural, and process-based factors that promote optimal conditions for cross-sector partnerships: the familiarity and involvement of NGOs in education, their flexibility and ability to rapidly adapt, and their ability to operate in various scopes and locations. They believe the advantage they bring lies in the fact that they are less hierarchical, more efficient, and democratic, establishing their public image as efficient in terms of cost/benefit (Patrinos et al., 2009). Moreover, they consider cross-sector partnerships in education to be their forte, a doctrine of values and administrative approach unique to them, one that stems, among other things, from their recognition and belief in local powers and leadership to help achieve a better synergy with an added value and a unique contribution to education processes beyond the capa-

bilities of any one sector (Bryson et al., 2006).

Accordingly, NGO executives attach great importance to raising awareness regarding innovative and attractive programs for the education system (Weinheber et al., 2008). They focus on looking for new opportunities to make schools more attractive to all populations, thereby developing and transforming civil society into an active, vibrant, and dynamic domain (Yemini & Sagie, 2015). This study also reveals their opinion that the success of cross-sector partnerships is most clearly evident in programs of matching funding. They believe partial privatization is more efficient, more rational, and a better use of each system's budgetary, social, educational, and organizational resources, while also allowing the Ministry to keep overseeing their actions. The partnership is a platform for them to support and address the needs of many populations, and complement a policy aimed at providing and promoting social, academic, and education services.

It can therefore be said that NGO executives recognize that the cross-sectoral partnership should define the regulatory role of the Education Ministry, enabling them to collaborate when determining the limits imposed on organizations promoting policy change. Concurrently, their participation in deciding limits of responsibility and authority also produces an inherent tension and duality. This tension undermines relations as the State still seeks to strengthen its control and struggles to accept privatization trends while the methods and procedures to manage mutual responsibility for education are still far from established. Findings indicate executives see privatization in Israeli education, including how mutual responsibilities are defined, as a long, dynamic, complex, and ongoing process.

NGO executives focused on the cross-sector partnership as a framework to regulate the relationship with the Ministry as they believe that education cannot be expropriated, regardless of individual or private involvement (Ichilov, 2010). Delaying the regulation of this partnership may jeopardize the independent organizational identity of each partner, diverting them from their goals, core values, and service receivers (De Quinn, 2000). They understand how their involvement in the public sphere requires their acceptance of the Ministry's authority as a key player, with the overall responsibility of determining and leading policy. This new NGO attitude reduces cross-sector tensions, increases the chance of reaching general agreements, and enhances their public image in the education field, deepening their understanding of budgetary constraints, (Rose, 2010) and even their dependence on the rich systems of public education already in existence.

Implications, Limitations and Future Research

Changes in education policy and the shift to cross-sector part-

nerships between the education system and third sector and civil society NGOs are only effective when taking into consideration variance in views, structures, and needs – meaning the uniqueness of each sector. This new approach must delicately balance meeting Education Ministry requirements and the aspiration to reduce the bureaucratic burdens that strangle external education initiatives for improvement. On the one hand, maintaining an open policy, inclusive of factors outside formal education in debating, determining, applying policy (Ball, 2013) and the reservations raised about this effectiveness. On the other hand, accepting this cross-sector partnership expands resources for schools and communities, providing flexibility and “other” learning forms that refresh the system, even regenerating and facilitating educational, scholastic, social, and organizational aims.

Promoting and institutionalizing a policy of partnership between formal education and NGOs is a complex, protracted, dynamic, and ongoing process subject to constant change, thus requiring extensive efforts to develop, preserve, and continuously maintain how policies are implemented. Therefore, policy makers leading this partnership play a vital role in navigating this new relationship as external players become increasingly involved in this field. Thus, policy makers (HQ and district superintendents), implementers (NGO directors, school principals, teachers), and recipients (families and students) must remain attentive to each other, coordinating activities to meet social and educational goals of communities and reducing sectoral tensions.

This study provides new data regarding NGO executives' perceptions of their involvement in design and implementation of educational policy in Israel. One of the main conclusions that resonates with the findings of the study concerns the perceptions and attitudes of NGOs in the growing policy of inter-sectoral partnership in education. From their point of view, this inter-sectoral partnership is a step towards new public governance that expresses innovation, entrepreneurship and an informed fulfillment of the potential that exists in the public sphere. At the same time, their assumptions about the concept of mutual responsibility pose complex challenges and expectations of themselves and of all actors involved in a new education policy.

Having said that, this study has several limitations. First, this study only reflects the perception of NGO executives and participants' responses pertain to the specific Israeli educational context. Therefore, we recommend conducting similar studies while broadening the perspective of all stakeholders to enable further study of such findings, including policymakers, school principals, teachers, family and community members, and students. Second, we recommend examining the findings in various sociocultural contexts that underpin their international validity. Third, the study mentions the impact of government decisions on government relations, civil society, and the business sector on the design of inter-sectoral

partnership policies in education. We propose carrying out studies that examine how recommendations and government decisions are reflected in the inter-sectoral partnership in education. Fourth, the interviews with the NGO executives took place in the 2015-2016 academic year. Longitudinal research is needed to examine whether and how NGO executives change their perceptions as they continue working with the Ministry of Education in various projects. Finally, this study was limited to senior executive NGOs' perceptions only which does not explain the more expansive understanding of partnership and collaboration between formal education and NGOs. Thus, there is a need to explore the perceptions of principals, superintendents, policymakers, and schoolteachers. Based on this study, we also suggest exploring whether, how, and under which conditions principals could cultivate partnerships with NGOs as a platform for entrepreneurship, particularly at times of external policy demands.

The main contribution of the study is to broaden the understanding and knowledge of the nature, components and meanings of NGO involvement in shaping and implementing educational policy which provides a theoretical framework for understanding the motivations, forces, and challenges that this engagement poses to the system. This study adds that NGOs perceive inter-sectoral policy in education as a stated and explicit organizational arrangement that legitimizes them for continuing their activities as well as recognizing their vitality, importance, and contribution to achieving educational goals.

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