

# Specialized (Magnet) Schools in Israel: A Critical Policy Analysis of the Past Three Decades (1985-2019)

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## Introduction

Although Israel aspires for equity, its students' academic achievement distribution is characterized by large gaps compared with other OECD countries (OECD, 2018). Moreover, there is an incremental trend of inequity. This large achievement gap is further challenged by the growing number of specialized schools in Israel, which characterized by hybrid financing (public and private), selective admission processes and supra-regional registration (Bialik, 2011; Corcoran & Baker-Smith 2015). This trend is a part of the quasi-market orientation, which stem from the growing influence of the neoliberal worldview, that may hinder equity or equality of opportunity, yet, might reinforce choice. This study researches the key aspects of the establishment and development of specialized schools from 1985-2019. This is done through the analysis of education policy issues in this context where there is an underlying conflict between the values of equity versus choice.

## The objective

To analyze the educational policy regarding specialized schools in Israel, within the accepted theoretical framework that emphasizes the trade-off between equity and freedom of choice, with reference to these question: whether and to what extent, if any, is there a tension between de jure policy and de facto policy with respect to specialized schools in Israel.

## The research questions:

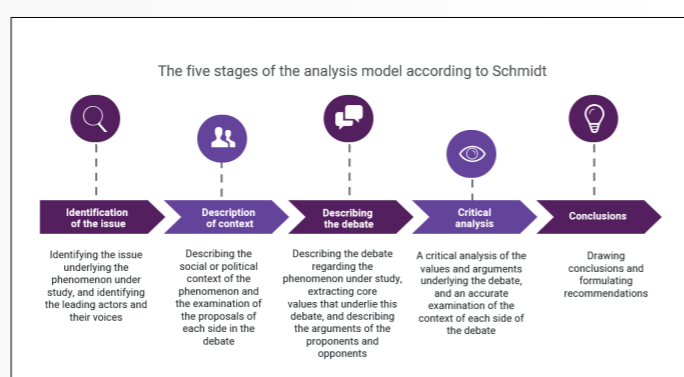
1. To what extent, if any, does educational policy in the context of Israel's specialized schools promotes equity?
2. To what extent, if any, does educational policy in this context promotes choice?
3. Which policy "actors" are dominant, and what are their "voices" in the dynamics of policy formulation?
4. In what way, if any, do these voices merge (dis)harmoniously with education policy in the context of specialized schools in Israel?

## Methodology

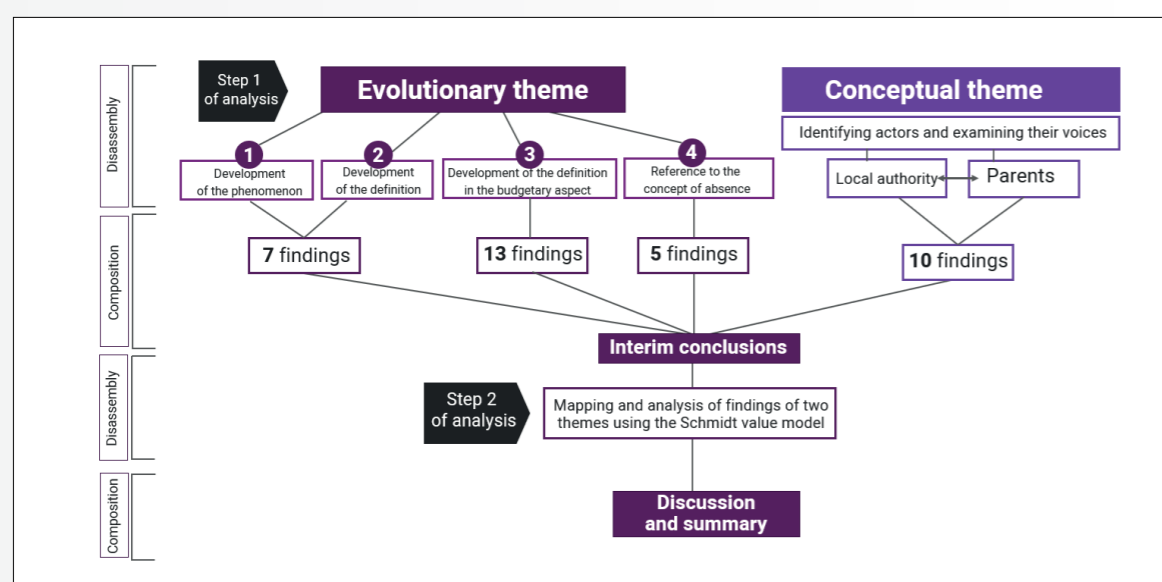
it was decided to make use of a critical focus methodology from the field of qualitative research. For this purpose, a research paradigm based on the critical hermeneutics methodology approach.

The method of analysis chosen is two-stage thematic content analysis, which consists mainly of a search for and identification of recurrent themes and patterns in a whole array of data.

The first stage involved a thematic analysis of policy documents and transcriptions of semi-structured in-depth interviews with senior officials in the Ministry of Education, selected from a sample of experts. In the second stage, the findings of the thematic analysis were mapped and analyzed according to the Value-Critical Policy Analysis model proposed by Schmidt (2006) and first formulated by Martin Rein (as quoted by Schmidt, 2006).



## Methodological work model - Investigation of the phenomenon



## Findings & conclusions

35 findings led to conclusions which are presented here in:

1. The reasons for the establishment of specialized schools as well as the characterization of the 'bottom up' phenomenon indicate the decline of the central government's power in parallel with the rise of the power of additional 'actors' (local authority + parents) whose entry has influenced the policy sphere and turned it into a reactive rather than a proactive policy.
  - > The value of choice and parental autonomy outweigh the value of equity.
2. Their later definition of establishment was identified as deficient and sometimes ambiguous. The lack of clarity regarding key concepts in their definition, the administrative component that addressed the registration areas, and the issue of the budget component which should have clearly addressed the issue of financing specialized schools, led to a situation of disinformation, incoherency, and high levels of freedom of action taken by the 'actors' in relation to the interpretation of what is permissible and forbidden with regard to the issue.
 

This conclusion indicates that the value of parental choice has gained greater weight, and even contradicted the equity value.
3. Their establishment preceded their definition by many years, enabling other 'actors' in the policy arena to establish different operating norms that were not always in line with the regulations and permits of official education policy. This is in contrast to their being 'locomotives' of pedagogical changes, innovation and diversity,
 

**a finding that leads to two main conclusions:**

  - a. With regard to the measure of power and tremendous influence of the enterprising actors' groups.
  - b. With regard to the degree of ambivalence in relation to the establishment of specialized schools by the central government. These conclusions reflect a picture of varying power relations, between the central government and groups of additional actors, where the leading value in this relationship arena is the value of parental autonomy which overcomes the value of equality of opportunities.
4. Budgeting the specializations of specialized schools is based solely on budgeting that does not come from the Ministry of Education, but rather from additional sources:
  - Local authority budgets
  - Parental payments
  - Donations

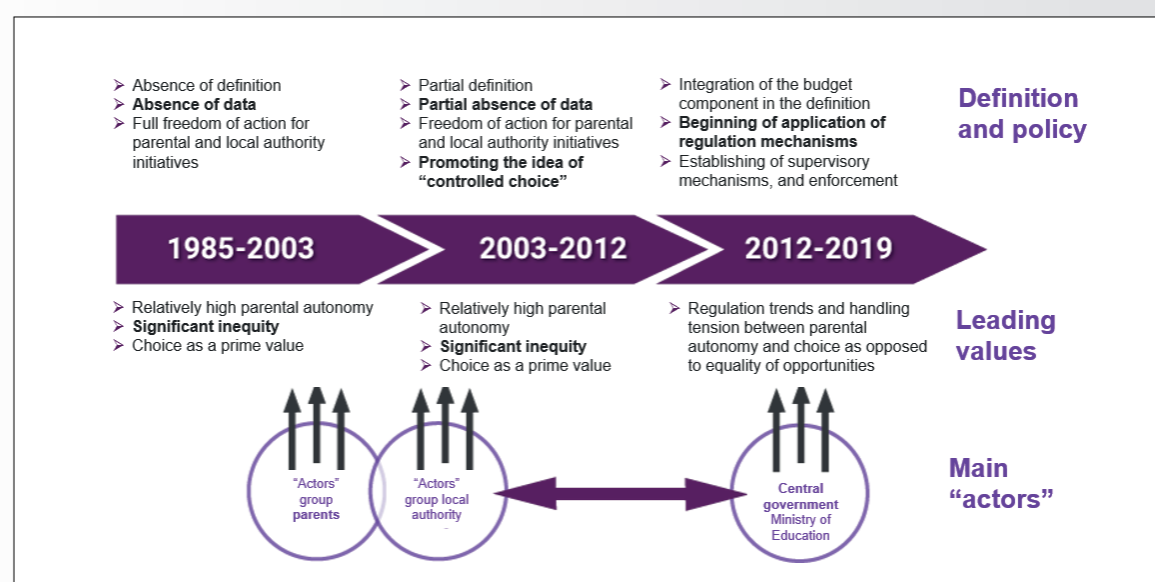
the actual act relating to the financing of specialized schools preceded the written directive which was found to be late, ambiguous and separate from the definition. The different groups of actors: The local authority and parents who accumulated power from the success of the phenomenon, and who were exclusive with regard to the supplementary budgets, and could establish exceptional collection norms, due to the lack of enforcement and a policy of turning a 'blind eye.'

In addition, the permit received from the Ministry of Education regarding the additional collection through donations, indicate that this has contributed to the establishment of a practice that enables private money to enter the system without any control.

From this conclusion it can be understood that in this reality there are huge gaps in resources invested in children from strong populations as opposed to those invested in children from weak populations, a phenomenon also identified in rich countries. (as quoted by Klees, 2008)

This finding indicates a situation in which the value of choice and parental autonomy outweigh the value of equality of opportunities.

## Summary of results of analysis of the phenomenon and its development



## Summary and debate

From the investigation, it can also be recognized that the de facto policy that has shaped the phenomenon is that these schools are a particularly successful educational model, but it has also been found that they also give a distinct advantage to the established strata. In light of this, the question arises: how and in what way it is desirable to narrow this gap?

According to Ben David-Hadar (Ben David-Hadar, 2018), as long as neoliberal assumptions demand cuts in central budgets and giving local actors more independence in policy formulation, as revealed in this study, the evident implications of a "learning society" will not be achieved. Thus the main aspiration of policy makers is:

**to work to balance the tension between de jure and de facto policies phenomenon, by rests on Rawls's Theory of Justice which proposes to resolve it:**

1. By the redistribution of wealth, with the source being monies raised from taxes, while limiting sources of supplementary budget through parental tuition fees
2. By affirmative allocation for talented individuals from disadvantaged population.

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