**Abstract**

State Religious Education (SRE) was established in 1953, as part of the legislation that regulated public education in Israel and merged several educational streams that had previously been active within the Zionist movement. By virtue of its legal authority, the SRE's leadership oversees religious state schools in Israel, while also attempting to shelter them – as well as the religious population more broadly – from Israel's secular hegemony. This dual purpose has characterized the SRE since its establishment and is expressed in an ongoing conflict between its religious identity and its identification with the State. This conflict reflects the dilemma facing the religious sector, which seeks to remain separate and maintain its unique way of life on the one hand, even as it integrates into modern Israeli society on the other hand.

Over the years, the SRE's social policy developed in light of this conflict, as its leadership faced educational trends and worldviews that became popular in Israel and globally. Two primary worldviews shaped the SRE’s social policy. The first is social integration, an approach that was adopted by Israel’s education system from the 1970s and onwards. This approach sought to reduce social gaps by actively integrating populations from diverse social backgrounds, and by creating heterogenous enrollment districts. The second approach is neoliberalism, which seeks to minimize the State’s involvement in providing social services, based on the belief that a free market and private entrepreneurship will lead to increased personal freedom and social prosperity. This approach involves introducing free market mechanisms into the education system, including individual choice, competition, and privatization of various aspects of the system.

Religious society in Israel is highly heterogenous and has a tradition of educational elitism. Together, these two attributes have proven challenging for the SRE. Parents from strong socioeconomic backgrounds opposed the integration that the State tried to compel upon the education system, and later adopted a neoliberal discourse to defend their right to choose and design religious schools according to their religious worldviews. Within this context, religious post-primary education emerged as a selective system characterized by social stratification and segregation. The struggle between different groups within the religious sector, each vying for their status within the social hierarchy of the SRE, has played out in the realm of SRE policy. The struggle has grown more pronounced in Israel’s geographic periphery in recent years, due to the demographic increase there. This growth has also witnessed the emergence of new players on the field, in the form of religious groups struggling for their place in the local social hierarchy.

With these points in mind, this study is situated at the crossroads between the critical study of education systems in the neoliberal age and the sociological study of religious education systems. Its purpose is to examine the SRE’s policy discourse over the years; specifically, the policy discourse of post-primary religious schools in Israel’s southern periphery, particularly pertaining to the selectivity of students and parental choice. This study is a critical policy study inspired by researchers such as בול (1994), who maintain that educational policy and its real-world expressions are fashioned by knowledge and discourse as defined by Foucault (1986, 2005a, 2005b). This is a micropolitical study that examines the power dynamics between multiple stakeholders, and the ways in which they use discourse (i.e., the ways in which reality is perceived and expressed) in ways that are socially advantageous.

The primary research question in this study is how are the religious and neoliberal discourses employed to shape social policy in the SRE, and how do post-primary schools and parents in the southern periphery construct themselves and the relationships between them with regards to this policy discourse? It is important to note that the study is not limited to an examination of the effects of the religious and neoliberal discourses on the field. Rather, its primary purpose is an attempt to understand how the existence of two parallel discourses (religious and neoliberal), and the interaction between them, shape the SRE’s social policy and the character of the post-primary religious education system in the southern periphery. To accomplish this, this study examines several issues, including: the way in which various historical conflicts shaped the SRE’s social policy; the way in which stakeholders in the southern periphery construct themselves and the struggles between them by means of the different discourses that are available; the way in which schools shape their identities and influence the social makeup of their student bodies; and finally, the way in which the religious and neoliberal discourses are expressed in the discourse surrounding parental choice in schools in the southern periphery.

The first part of the study is based on a systematic review and analysis of texts outlining the SRE’s policy that appear in SRE communiques and other official SRE publications. To reveal how the SRE’s social policy discourse was constructed, this part is based on an “archeological” analysis that seeks to identify the different layers of discourse within the official publications under review. This section’s findings shed light on the discourse techniques employed by some of the stakeholders to advance their status within the SRE.

Central to the discourse analysis is the concept “Torani-yut”, the meaning of which has changed according to changing periods in the history of the SRE. This concept has been used to define the boundaries of the populations served by religious schools, excluding weaker populations (primarily traditional-Mizrachi) from strong religious schools. Moreover, it has been used to determine the internal hierarchy of various religious groups, first and foremost “Torani” parents (such as Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva students) who gradually became dominant within the SRE. Moreover, the change in the “Torani-yut” discourse in the SRE demonstrates the historic fault lines that the SRE’s leadership has had to address, primarily: large waves of immigration in the 1950s; the transition from the melting pot policy to a policy of pluralistic education; the struggle with the integration plan; the rise to power of new groups within religious Zionism in response to political developments (Merkaz HaRav students and Gush Emunim) that posed a threat to the sectorial hegemony; and finally, the rise of neoliberal attitudes in the field of education.

In its second phase, this study focuses on the SRE in Israel’s southern periphery in the present day. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with some one hundred subjects from four post-primary religious schools in the field offer an overview of the different stakeholders and the complex power dynamics between them. The purpose of this overview is to examine how local micropolitics uses religious and neoliberal discourses to interpret and shape the educational policy according to the interests and worldviews of each group. Thus, the findings of this study describe the character and activity of three groups that wield power in the southern periphery: Ashkenazi religious Zionism (usually affiliated with a Garin Torani), religious Mizrachi, and a group that is traditional and educated, which has emerged in recent decade and wields significant power.

The third phase of the study deals with the social implications of SRE’s social policy discourse. It examines phenomena such as student selection and tracking in the SRE’s local institutions and regional boarding schools, as well as neoliberal practices such as marketing, competition, and parental choice. Throughout, there is a comparison between the way in which the religious post-primary education system in general is constructed as a competitive system that is polarized and stratified, and the way in which each school constructs its own identity and its relationship with its local environment. This study’s unique contribution lies in its clarification of the way in which multiple discourses and stakeholders construct power dynamics and educational practices as they maintain and widen social gaps. The study’s findings indicate that social inequality is justified by means of a neoliberal meritocratic discourse. This discourse assumes that an individual’s rewards and achievements are the result of effort and ability. However, this discourse conceals the religious discourse, which underneath the surface maintains social gaps based on ethnicity, class, religious affiliation, and other background attributes.

As a result of this discursive pattern, the findings of this study indicate that there is a distinction between two sub-systems within the religious education system: one intended for the middle- and upper-class, and the other for lower-class students. This distinction is maintained and justified by means of a neoliberal logic, which divides the population into those who can act rationally, take the initiative and make progress on their own, and those who cannot do so and require help and external disciplining. Thus, stronger schools aim to train rational graduates who take responsibility for their economic and religious future by providing a curriculum that is diverse and rich in Jewish content and social activities, as well as academically rigorous, encouraging students to enroll in prestigious and rewarding advanced learning tracks. The weaker schools, on the other hand, set a low bar for students, and envelop them in a suite of academic, emotional and social programs that reinforces their self-perception as lower down on the SRE’s social hierarchy.

The religious and neoliberal discourses thus unite time and again to justify social stratification within the SRE, based on a worldview that sees elite institutions as responsible for training the future leadership – of the religious sector and the entire country – whose primary purpose is to take responsibility for the weak. On the other hand, less prestigious institutions are perceived as a shelter that protects religious students from the dangers of modernism, including the influence of students who come from a background that is different in terms of its view of religion and values. The correlation between ethnicity and class is striking, and it is expressed through the different identities associated with the different types of institutions in the SRE, which are polarized according to status, as well as religious, ethnic and geographic factors. Post-primary religious education is thus clearly divided between weak and local institutions in the periphery that are highly heterogenous and organizationally and administratively weak, alongside elite institutions, typically regional boarding schools, which enjoy broad autonomy and are highly homogenous due to their selective nature.

On this backdrop, the final chapter of this study focuses on parental choice, which has a long history and is widely accepted in religious post-primary education. The findings portray parental choice as a privilege granted to the strongest parents, while middle- and low-class parents tend to send their children to local schools in the periphery. Thus, attending a selective boarding school is justified in terms of a parental discourse that values the temporary adoption of more extreme religious views during adolescence, as well as by means of a religious educational discourse that perceives educational and ethical conflicts as a means for advancing value-centered educational goals. Both of these require detaching the child from his or her home and family and are largely based on western religious educational views rooted in Jewish-European education of the early twentieth century. In addition, this selection pattern is compounded by the neoliberal choice discourse, according to which parents do not have the moral right to deny their children the future advantage of increased competitiveness that results from attending an elite institution.

Moreover, the study’s findings highlight the dominance of an ideological choice discourse in the field. This discourse, which appears among some of the stronger parents (usually from the “Garin Torani” social movement), characterizes the active (supposedly irrational) choice of many middle- and upper-class parents to send their children to local schools, which are weaker. While parental selection is presented in the study as a phenomenon that appears primarily at the transition from primary to high school, the findings show that parental choice discourse is in fact an ongoing dialogue between parents and the school. This dialogue touches on privilege and addresses the placement of middle- and upper-class students at the top of the social hierarchy within the institution, expressed through the school’s internal tracking mechanisms. In this context, this study interestingly found cases in which the ideological parental choice discourse was expressed by curbing selection and tracking processes and increasing integration in local institutions. In these cases, the parental discourse serves to strengthen the ideological and communal choice to attend the local institution, by means of a discourse of religious responsibility (*shlichut)*, which legitimizes the “cost” of selecting the local institution.

The study’s theoretical contribution lies first and foremost in the fact that it points to the way in which the interaction between a dominant neoliberal discourse and a local (in this case religious) discourse serve to deepen social gaps so that criticism of one discourse is repelled by use of the other discourse. In addition, this study contributes to our understanding of the ways in which these discourses construct the power dynamics, from both the micro- and macro-perspectives. For instance, the way in which powerful groups use the religious and neoliberal discourses to defend their status within the SRE, repeats itself in the local struggle between stakeholders in the southern periphery, who employ similar discourse techniques.

Moreover, the entirety of the findings of this study support the claim that the SRE is ahead of its time, as an example of neoliberal phenomena taking root. Therefore, this study contributes to our understanding of the way in which these processes emerge, how they are justified, and what long-term impact they might have. In this sense, the study could pave the path for future studies that seek to examine the effects of the neoliberal discourse on additional fields in which there are multiple discourses. In addition, the study makes a practical contribution, by focusing on the religious environment and the geographic periphery, which are underexplored in the existing literature. Specifically, with regards to the way in which social policy affects equal opportunity and social gaps in the field, as well as the use that can be made with discourse analysis techniques that have been reviewed, for the purpose of minimizing gaps and generating social integration by choice.

Keywords: neoliberalism; religious education; critical policy research; education in the periphery; micropolitics in education; parental selection; selectivity and tracking.