Parental Action in the Encounter between Educational Risk-taking and Social Status:

Anthropological Research on Private Initiatives

to Establish Alternative Schools in Israel

Abstract

This work deals with campaigns conducted by parents, in conjunction with educators, to establish alternative educational institutions. It explores the worldviews and modes of action implemented by parents from hegemonic backgrounds in the Israeli middle class, in relation to their perceptions about the characteristics and role of proper education,for their children, and with respect to their role as parents in securing such education. To this end, I carried out anthropological fieldwork in the years 2013-2017. The core of this research was the documentation of two educational initiatives. The first was an initiative of parents and educators who tried to establish a democratic school. The second was an initiative of parents who tried to establish a school in the Sudbury model, a particular type of democratic education that is perceived as radical in nature.

The parents in the study were mostly parents of children in compulsory kindergarten or lower grades of elementary school, as is typical of the founding groups of private initiative institutions in Israel. They all came from affluent socio-economic backgrounds: they were Jews, mostly of Ashkenazic ethnicity, and all were in the middle or upper-middle class. By joining the founding groups, they sought to shape the nature of the education that their children would encounter, with an emphasis on creating an alternative to public education. The fieldwork focused on close-up and long-term documentation of the initiatives’ members’ positions and their modes of operation, and on the documentation of the educational environment in which they operated. The ethnographic research is based on participatory observation of group meetings and activities, in-depth interviews and conversations with parents and educators involved in the initiatives, and content analysis of relevant documents, social media posts, articles in the local and national press, and the internal correspondence of the work teams.

In an age of increasing privatization in public services and processes of change fueled by neoliberal and individualistic ideologies, the data collected throughout the fieldwork were examined with reference to the social, cultural, economic and political context within which parents’ worldviews and strategies were shaped. In order to implement this approach, the study interacts with bodies of knowledge that deal with the characteristics of the Israeli education system and the processes by which it undergoes change. It also engages with literature from the field of educational anthropology, which deals with the characteristics of intensive parenting in at-risk societies and the relationship between parenting patterns, social belonging and identity building. The work presents a description of parenting culture that is reflected in the worldviews and behaviors of the respondents, with reference to the local and global influences that shape what is happening in the field, within the context of the distinctiveness of the Israeli case of the establishment of private schools through private initiatives.