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Practice and Policy in the face of the Crisis in Education



In November 2007, Prof. David Cohen, expert in the Policy of Education and member of the Mandel Foundation International Academic Advisory Committee, paid a timely visit to Israel. As Israel's education system appeared to be melting in the current climate of crisis, teachers were in turmoil and many professionals in the field were interested to hear what Prof. Cohen had to say, and if he had any solutions to offer. The Mandel Leadership Institute hosted two public forums focusing on Policy and Practice in Education in which Prof. Cohen presented his ideas to an audience of professionals and academics in the field of education, amongst them Israel Prize recipients, Prof. Haim Adler and Prof. Miriam Ben Peretz, who also took part in the preceding discussion.

Both forums focused in part on the relationship between practitioner and policy-maker, the communication between them and how this can affect the improvement of education.

“One of the most problematic features of this communication,” highlighted Cohen, “is that the practitioners themselves do not always have enough knowledge of what makes good teaching, therefore have very little authority to speak truth to power. In order to communicate effectively with policy-makers and parents, they need much more knowledge than that which they have currently. Greater knowledge and a more autonomous practitioner organization would greatly enhance the capability of relation of practitioners with policy-makers.”

Criticizing outcome-oriented policies, Cohen claimed that ‘accountability’, the new watchword for teaching quality, is “creating a downward spiral; a race to the bottom”, while only a trivial amount of money is spent on development and research to improve education.

What is the solution?

Cohen claims that assumptions have been made in the past regarding money, incentives and organization as key instruments for the improvement of education, but the past 20 to 30 years have demonstrated that there are deep-rooted problems in public education that do not yield easily to those instruments.

He therefore places emphasis on research, stressing that the research needs to be greatly expanded in practice itself. Nonetheless, Cohen noted, that research alone is not the solution and could never solve the problem of underdevelopment of the 'micro world' in schools.

In his second lecture, which focused more specifically on the recent crisis in education in Israel, Cohen asserted, "Improvement is dependent upon practitioners;" claiming that the most effective change would involve professionals in education organizing themselves to be the principal agents of school improvement. "Without professional, practical knowledge and structures that can support and sustain this knowledge, macro-policy will not work," said Prof. Cohen. He mentioned organizations such as 'Ovnayim', initiated and run by Mandel graduates and 'Lesson Study' in Japan, as examples of such supportive structures.

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David K. Cohen is John Dewey Collegiate Professor of Education, and Walter H. Annenberg Professor of Education Policy at The University of Michigan.

His current research interests include educational policy, the relations between policy and instruction, and the improvement of teaching. His past work includes studies of the effects of schooling, efforts to reform schools and teaching, the evaluation of educational experiments and large-scale intervention programs, and the relations between research and policy.

His publications include: Usable Knowledge: Social Science and Social Problem Solving (with C. E. Lindblom), The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace (with A. G. Powell and

E. Farrar), and *Learning Policy: When State Education Reform Works* (with Heather C. Hill).

He has received the American Educational Research Association's Award for Distinguished Contributions to Educational Research, and has been a member of several panels of the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences.