

What solutions do education systems in selected countries offer for the challenge of diversity among pupils?

By Lilach Grunfeld-Yona

Abstract

This review presents the way the education systems of Finland, Sweden, Britain, Canada, Estonia and Holland cope with differences and gaps between pupils that stem from personal, socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity. Policymakers in these countries found that social disparities pose a threat to the country's strength thus assigning the education system a central role in reducing them. A key strategy in the process of reducing the disparities was to create an egalitarian and high-quality education system that is accessible and available to all. As the review shows, the countries were successful, each in its own way, in working to reduce disparities while maintaining a high level of education (or leading a significant process to raise the level of education). Another central strategy that comes to light is adopting a policy of integrating pupils who come from diverse socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

The review discusses perspectives and interpretations of the concept of diversity, presents central policy principles for addressing disparities between pupils, and describes the way in which policy is translated into intervention within the education system. This comparative review of policies identifies "inclusive education" as a key concept. This concept refers to the need to address all pupils by boosting cooperation between cultures and communities and reducing exclusion in the education system. This view also includes creating a shared vision for all pupils, and making changes to the content, approaches and structures of the system.

The review discusses many other subjects that stem from the desire to address the diversity among pupils, including: the various approaches and interpretations of the concepts of "multiculturalism" and "multicultural society," free versus restricted choice of schools by parents and pupils, social welfare policy in the education system (the funding of transportation, nutrition, school books), distribution of resources and differential allocation by indexes of need, the training of teachers and the autonomy of

teachers and principals, issues pertaining to the supervision of schools, policies of integrating pupils with special needs, solutions for children with social/emotional needs, and the role of parents.

Data on the education system in Israel appears at the end of the review, enabling comparison, albeit a partial one, with the data stemming from the different countries reviewed.