

On the Threshold: the Story of School Security Guards in Israel

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Abstract

We often talk about the ways in which education should change society. However, we should also be sensitive to the ways by which social reality – sometimes harsh and unjust – influences education, and the intricate interplay between these two spheres. Under the conditions of neoliberalism, in Israel, as in many other countries, the practices of outsourcing and subcontracting are spreading rapidly. Simultaneously, private security services, which rely on them, are flourishing. Moreover, in Israel there is a unique security climate, and one of its consequences is the development of a sub-sector of private security in the form of school security. Thus, a tangible meeting point is emerging among educational, socio-economic and political factors, where school security guards play the role of mediators.

But who are these guards? What does their world consist of and what do they bring to school life? In this paper, I share some of the findings from a qualitative research project that aimed to answer these questions by exploring the world of school security guards and their relations with school pupils, staff and educational processes. The findings suggest that the overall experience of school security guards stands in tension with the security they are supposed to ensure, and that, from their position at the school gate, they act as educational agents, infusing aspects of the socio-economic and political reality into school life while at the same time being influenced by school's educational tendencies, which, at least in some schools, strive to cultivate a commitment to social justice in their students.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Education, School Security Guards, Israel

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Prologue

A few months ago, I visited a school – a primary school – at whose gate stands a security guard whom I know (in Israel all schools have security guards). My visit corresponded with the end of the school day, and pupils gathered at the school gate, waiting for their parents to come collect them. One of the children asked his friend a question, and his friend answered, "Ask the guard." "Don't call me a guard," said the person who stands all day every day and watches the school from the gate. And I, thinking that I understood the situation, said: "Call him a security guard not just a guard." "No," replied the man at the gate, "not a guard and not a security guard, just call me Dan – that is my name."

The context

Dan is only one of millions of people around the globe and one of hundreds of thousands in Israel whose story dramatizes the repercussions of the economic-political policies of neoliberalism, while, at the same time, are also effects of those policies. Neoliberalism is built – at least ostensibly – on the concepts of personal and economic freedom, while advocating for minimal state intervention in economic and social processes. Many countries, today, are increasingly under the influence of neoliberal principles, as is the global economy more generally. As a result, some profound changes have occurred in the economic-political conduct of many states. Among the most conspicuous of these are:

- Reduction of government regulation
- Limiting welfare spending
- Intensified Privatization

One of the consequences of this intensified privatization is the huge increase in "indirect" employment, namely, employment mediated by a third party, which, in Israel, usually consists of sub-contractors, from whom the customer purchase required services. It is now a common knowledge that this kind of employment hurts both the services and the employees who deliver such services, since indirect employees suffer from substandard employment conditions (Davidov, 2013). Another consequence of this privatization is the growth of the private security market, which swallows more and more security areas that used to be under state control. And, thus, we arrive at workers like Dan.

Similar to many other countries around the world, in Israel, neoliberal economic policies are flourishing. Indeed, some (e.g. Dahan, 2012) claim that Israel is undergoing neoliberal transformation at a faster rate than most other countries. This trend, together with Israel's unique security situation, has led to a gradual and vast increase in the private security sector. This, in turn, has contributed to the creation of a unique Israeli sub-sector, namely, school private security guarding, a phenomenon that is quite rare in other parts of the world. School security guarding is inherently unique due not only to the kind of population under protection, but also due to the role, conduct and goals of educational institutions. It thus seems that by introducing private security into school life, an overlap between two different realms has been created, with likely implications for both of them. It also important to note – and some

would say that this alone is evidence of the profound penetration of neoliberalism into Israeli society, that educational institutions in Israel are among the most conspicuous consumers of indirect employment, using it in the fields of guarding, maintenance and even teaching.

Research situation

The massive spread of private security services around the globe has led to an increase in research on the subject. While most of the studies deal with the social and economic aspects of the phenomenon, only a few have turned their gaze toward the guards themselves – their personal world, their experiences and their perceptions. This dearth of research is even more conspicuous with respect to Israel. The research that does discuss Israel focuses almost exclusively on the problematic working conditions of the private security sector, and there are virtually no qualitative studies that examine the point of view of the guards themselves in any depth. The population of school security guards in Israel is thus a disadvantaged population, not only due to their harsh working conditions, but also in terms of research, and it is this lacuna that the present study wishes to narrow.

Research objectives and questions

The main objectives of the study are (1) to bring forth the voice of school security guards, and (2) to learn about them: Their experiences, their world, and their perceptions. All of this, it is important to note, while paying close attention to the context in which they live and act, namely, in the context of school life and the Israeli educational system.

Accordingly, three main research questions were developed:

- What are the self-perceptions of school security guards?
- How do the school security guards perceive their job?
- How do the school security guards perceive their place and role in the school and in the educational system?

Research design

Answering such research objectives entails a qualitative research approach, namely, an approach that focuses on the sphere of human experience and the ways that people understand and interpret it and the world around them (Merriam, 2002). The particular research type I have chosen is the *basic (generic) interpretive qualitative research*, which includes all of the essential components of qualitative research but does so without a rigid methodological structure, what makes it most suitable for the present study, that is looking for a new and flexible perspective on its subject.

The main data collection tool was in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were supported by observations and document analysis. The varied questions, which emerged from the three main research questions, were open, without specific order or wording, and were accompanied by maximum openness and flexibility in order to respond to any content brought up by the participants.

The technique of purposive sampling was used for choosing participants. Since the purpose of the research was to learn about people who share similar experiences, some homogeneity among the participants was required, such as, for example, a minimum of a year's experience on the job. On the other hand, in order to obtain as many diverse voices and perspectives as possible, I did look for diversity of location, gender and age. Nine school security guards were interviewed, and the average interview length was 75 minutes.

For the data analysis I used a version of the constant comparative method, developing and comparing categories from the very beginning of the field work, and extracting patterns and shared meanings, but without aiming to reach the final end of a complete theory.

Findings

To date, three main categories, or themes, were found, all of which characterize the world of school security guards and which are relevant to the research questions. These categories are:

- Temporariness
- Loneliness
- Relations with school attendees

Temporariness (theme 1): All participants, even the veterans who have worked as school security guards for more than 5 years, emphasize the uncertain and temporary nature of their job. As one researcher puts it: The guards are always "in transition" (Briken, 2011: p. 135), and one of the participants highlighted this point when he said: "This is not a lifetime job. As I told you, it is not job at all. If I want to build a family, and more, I have to find a more reasonable job."

In conformity with earlier research (e.g. Barrett & Sargeant, 2011), it is clear that the problematic employment conditions, to which all the participants referred, and which include low wages, forced non-paid vacations (during school vacations), and the absence of any job security, all contribute to the experience of ongoing instability and insecurity. However, there are other factors that intensify this experience.

There is also the feeling of *loneliness* (theme 2). The loneliness of school security guards relates to the physical nature of their work: They are alone at the school gate for up to 8-10 hours a day. All participants complained of the loneliness involved in their work and usually added complaints about loneliness's close companions: routine and boredom. Yet the loneliness does not only emerge as a result of the physical aspect of the job, but also as a result of the participants' feeling of not-belonging, of being on the threshold between one place and another but not belonging to or in any of them. Thus, on the one hand, school security guards do not feel that they are part of the security companies that employ them: "[As a school security guard] nobody ever backs you up;" but, on the other hand, they do not feel like an integral part of the school:

Sometimes I feel that I am part of school and sometimes that I am not. Because there are all kind of events which you are not invited to, but to some events you

are invited. So they, like, tell you that you are part and not part of school at the same time.

Loneliness and not-belonging also relate to the theme of security guards' *relations with school attendees* (theme 3). The study found three sub-categories of this theme: relations with school staff, with parents and with students. All of these are characterized by a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty, but this sense is most prominent in the relations with the pupils. Most participants, especially the men, said that they rather avoid relationships with the students: "I rather not to speak with pupils, not to be in contact with them." Because, for example, "As a father, what would you think if you saw a guard talking to your kid? Immediately you'd think that something is going on. These kinds of things happen in our country." Yet many of the guards also spoke of the special connection that they have with the students: "The positive side of this job is the children. The love they show you."

The ambiguous status of the relations between guards and students was also revealed through observation. For example, the interview with the security guard who said that he tries to avoid contact with the students took place near the guard booth, which is located at the gate of the school. At the end of the interview, I saw the guard heading toward the school building, and I asked him where he was going. He told me that he had lent his football to a student and that he was now going to get it back. When he told me this, a smile of joy appeared on his face.

Discussion

When examining the findings of the current study from a broader perspective, they seem to conform to many other studies that suggest that the world of workers in the neoliberal era is one characterized by instability as well as a lack of safety and clarity (Kalleberg, 2008). Moreover, this study suggests that the experience of such a world is even more acute with respect to "indirect employees," who are employed through sub-contractors. Indeed, to work under these conditions, trapped between the company that hires their services and the one to which they supply it, means – by definition – to swing between belonging and not-belonging, between employment and the threat of unemployment, between the need for economic safety and the inability to satisfy it.

However, the world of school security guards has some unique features that differentiate it from the worlds of other neoliberal workers. These features include, mainly, being the guardians of children and youth in the special environment of an educational institution. The study suggests that while providing the security guards some sense of consolation, the human and institutional environment of the schools in which they work also intensifies the experience of unease and detachment, which characterizes the neoliberal worker more generally. For it is important to keep in mind that in contrast to a mall, a parking lot or a stadium, a school is a community, where intimate, intricate and dynamic relations are the fabric of life. And against this particular background, the need to belong as well as the feeling of being an outsider are reinforced and highlighted.

On the other hand, school security guards also influence the school community. Indeed, how could they not? Their place in the life of the school makes them – unwittingly – agents, educational agents, who inject into school life and the whole

educational system the real world that we all try to hide, at least partially, from our children, particularly within the quasi-closed and protected system of school. But the guard with the gun – and the children always ask about the gun – who sits or stands at the school gate, who belongs to school but does not really belong, who from time to time disappears or is replaced – perhaps because the company which hired him has lost its contract – is a part from the world in which the children are being educated. Moreover, he is part of these children's educational process. Since education acts not only through what we tell our children or what we want them to hear, but also, and maybe mainly, through what they see and experience, and thus being imprinted on them, becoming to be obvious, to obvious, part of their world.

Further research

In order to complete the picture depicted in this study, further research is needed in at least three more areas: First, to deepen the understanding of the self-perception and self-image of the school security guards, especially their sense of professional identity. Second, to study how school attendees – parents, school staff and students, perceive the school security guards and the role they play in school life. Third, to deepen our understanding of the connection between the pedagogical approach of the school (i.e. democratic school, religious school, etc.) and the overall experience and perspective of the school security guards. While it was mentioned in the study, this link requires more data and analysis.

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