

Current Issues in Israeli Education: I

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The Israeli educational system is a centralized administrative framework. In practical terms, this means that the decision-making process at almost all levels — administrative, curricular, and ideological — take place primarily at the Ministry of Education. The Minister of Education is the chief policy maker. He/she is a political figure, and generally reflects the political orientation of a coalition party that is part of the government. Day-to-day operations are handled by a professional educator, the Director-General, who implements the Minister's policies. The political orientation of the Minister is a crucial aspect of Israeli education. There have been Ministers of Education who felt that the issues of the "culturally disadvantaged" and the "social gap" in the society were to be the central concerns of schools. There were others who felt that the "Jewishness" of the schools was to be a main issue. These policies were translated into practical programs by the central Ministry for all the schools in Israel. This meant that budgets and resources were directed to these areas at the expense of other subjects of the school program. This educational structure explains why many political parties see the Ministry of Education with its huge budgets as a desired portfolio.

The Israeli school system is divided into several divisions, the secular-general, religious, independent-ultra Orthodox, and Arab. These divisions were established by law in the National Education Act of 1953. It allows for very different world views to coexist in the Jewish state. The directors of these divisions report to the Minister and Director-General. From 1953 until the present day the first two divisions remained statistically the same. Seventy five to eighty per cent of school-age children are enrolled in the secular-general system and twenty to under thirty per cent in the state religious and independent schools. The 1995 statistics are 73.2% in the general-secular system, 18.6% in the state religious schools, and 8.2% in the ultra-Orthodox independent school system. The Arab school system statistics are listed separately.¹ Budgets of the divisions are allocated by the percentage of students enrolled in them. The 1995 budget was three hundred million dollars.

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¹ The Central Bureau of Statistics publishes an annual report of these figures.

Over most of the past four years, the Minister of Education was Amnon Rubenstein, a member of the Israeli left-of-center Meretz Party. Rubenstein is a professor of law, and his party advocates separation of religion and state as well as advancing liberal policies in education. One of the themes of his administration has been a concern for Jewish education and Jewish-Israeli identity. This was reflected in the appointment during the earlier Mafdal reign at the Ministry, of a special government commission under the chairmanship of Professor Aliza Shenhar, then Rector of Haifa University, to make recommendations for the teaching of Judaica in the general school system. The commission published its report in 1994, entitled *Jewish Culture in a Changing World*. It advocated an increased emphasis on Jewish subject matter, pre- and in-service teacher training, and teaching about the varieties of expression of Jewish culture. Pluralism in Jewish life is the hallmark of the report.

This policy reflects the philosophy of the Meretz party, with its emphasis on secular-humanistic Judaism as well as its support, in principle, of non-Orthodox streams in Judaism. However, the concern for the Jewish identity of Israeli youth is not a new issue in Israeli education. As early as the nineteen twenties there was a public debate on the issue that involved giants of the Yishuv — Chaim N. Bialik, Ahad Ha'am, and Joseph Klausner. They all advocated teaching classical Jewish texts as the heart of a Jewish curriculum. Since statehood, there has been the Ben-Yehuda Commission of 1964, appointed by the then Labor Party Minister of Education, Zalman Aranne, to investigate "Jewish consciousness" among Israeli-Jewish school children. Its recommendations seem very much like the Shenhar commission report. They emphasized increased textual study with special concern for the differing folkways of the Jewish people and of the various communities in Israeli society. What is missing in all of the reports is a policy statement about educational ideology and religious practice. Each of these categories was deliberately avoided.

The Education Ministry has encouraged the writing of new curricular materials, and has somewhat widened the scope of in-service teacher training in Jewish studies. It has also been an advocate of the Minister's pluralism policy. However, these intentions are not new, original, or unique in the history of Jewish education in Israel.

A regular feature of the Israeli school system is an annual "theme" selected by the Ministry of Education to highlight a direction, subject, or value for a particular year. The selection of the themes is an indicator of current moods and trends in society and government, and their study is material for a social historian of Israeli education. Special programs and materials are prepared to teach the yearly theme. This past school year, the theme was "Industry and Technology". The main thrust of the

program was to introduce children to career possibilities in these expanding fields. An analysis of this selection also illustrates the effect of the political climate on the lives of children. The Rabin-Peres government had constantly emphasized that one of the major rewards of the "Peace Process" was the new role of Israel in the world of business and high tech. The yearly theme continued this idea, and stressed the role that the next generation might play in the new Middle East. While these themes are introduced throughout the country, they are mainly taught in the elementary schools. The junior high schools and high schools have a highly structured subject-matter curriculum that allows little room for the frills of an annual theme.

MATRICULATION EXAMS

Bagrut exams, as they are known in the corridors of Israeli high schools, are based on the curriculum that is planned centrally, and are almost the total preoccupation of students in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. These exams in effect are a summary of the tests in all the subjects studied in high school. The scores on *bagrut* exams are the key to post-secondary study. They are set and administered by the Ministry of Education, and are similar to matriculation exams world-wide. The one global exception is the highly de-centralized American educational system, though there is much being currently written and discussed in American educational journals about the possibility of establishing a national curriculum and a national exam program. The United States has never had a centralized curriculum; the SAT exams for college entrance are administered by a private company and, while widely used, are not exclusively the basis for college admission.

The advantages and disadvantages of the *bagrut* system has been debated in Israel's educational community for the past decade. The pressure of the exams, their value in general, the claim that they hamper serious inquiry and intellectual interest, have been balanced against the claim of providing a wide and testable base for advanced study, and creating the discipline and rigor needed in the university world. Scores are the key to entering the state university system (that consists of seven institutions in the entire country). The Rubenstein ministry has been the most aggressive in trying to balance the pros and cons of the argument, and did change the format this year. Heretofore, there were a required number of *bagrut* exams that included: math, English, Jewish history, general history, Bible, and Hebrew language. In addition, each student could opt for a wide range of exams depending on his/her future university intentions, e.g., physics, piano, or Talmud. This year, the ministry announced that it would arbitrarily choose several subjects from the required list and cancel the *bagrut* exams in those

areas. It held a public drawing to select the exemptions, and in this random manner, Jewish history, Hebrew literature, and Bible were exempted. Each student will receive the grade he earned in his high school, and will not be required to take *bagrut* exams in these subjects. Needless to say, this method of dealing with a complex issue has stirred much public debate and controversy among parents, teachers, and Ministry of Education officials.

In an era when university education is available to a large percentage of Jewish high school graduates throughout the world, Israel's university system is centralized and state operated. The Committee for Higher Education sets all policy. Currently, between 24%-25% of graduates of all secondary school graduates in any year enter the system. Of those admitted, about one third come from Afro-Asian (Sephardi) homes. Israeli universities are still elite institutions with a definite Ashkenazi tilt, but with an ever increasing Sephardi population. The *bagrut* exams are, therefore, of major concern for students who want to move into higher education.

In recent years, there has been increased pressure by parent groups to make undergraduate education available to a wider circle of high school graduates. This has resulted in the opening of private degree-granting colleges which have a more flexible admission policy. While many of them have received accreditation from the Committee for Higher Education, they do not receive government financial support, as do the universities. The result is that these private schools are quite expensive by Israeli standards. The enrollment figures in these colleges indicate that the B.A. is of such importance, that many students will enroll despite obvious personal financial hardships. The early Zionist myth of the Jewish farmer requiring hardly any higher education has become just that — a myth. □