

Equality and Multiculturalism in Public Education

Thoughts About the Present, Proposals for the Future

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Although the past ten years have been relatively good years for the education system, the prevailing feeling is that education, especially public education, is in crisis. The education system in Israel is mostly public, and is based on the Compulsory Education Law (enacted immediately upon the establishment of the state with amendments over time) and on the State Education Law (1953). The two laws are intended to ensure equal education, giving all of Israel's children a common basis of knowledge and values, with funding and oversight by the state. This education is intended to teach contents determined and approved by the Ministry of Education, and in parallel to grant various communities — religious, national and cultural-ideological — the opportunity to preserve and strengthen their uniqueness.

In Israel, however, public education has never been uniform in all sectors, nor has it been equal. Public education in Israel, like education systems in other diverse societies, is attempting to resolve the contradiction between principles of equality and uniformity in the public education system and the principle of multiculturalism, which grants autonomy to each group in shaping the education system that serves its children.

However, not all social groups benefit from autonomy to the same extent. Four distinct frameworks have operated in the Israeli education system since its beginning: Jewish state education, religious state education, Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) education with its frameworks, and Arab state education. These four sub-systems enjoy different levels of autonomy in preserving a distinctive character, differing also with regard to their source of pedagogical authority, supervision and budgeting.

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In the 1960s, the core of public education consisted of Jewish and state religious education. They included about 85 percent of all the pupils (and about 90 percent without Arab Israeli education), and other streams (Arab Israeli and Haredi education) were marginal in the system. Today, the share of those attending these other streams is approaching 50 percent, and the degree of difference between them has grown. These differences are reflected not only in the curriculum, autonomy and budgeting, but also in their pupil selection and admission practices, their educational achievements, and their dropout rates.

The dramatic change in the demographic composition of the pupil population and its increasing variance by religion, ideology and sector intensify the challenges inherent in the conflict between the role of education in promoting social cohesion, and the principle of multiculturalism. This is nowhere more apparent than in the difficulty to create a common curricula and a just distribution of resources among the four educational frameworks.

These challenges demand a rethinking of the education system and the ideology at its core. The time has come to admit that public education is not today, nor has it ever been, equal and uniform.

In our view, equality should be the guiding goal of the education system. However, this goal cannot be held aloft as long as the rights of communities to educate their children according to their beliefs and worldviews are denied. It should be acknowledged that cultural-ideological, religious and national communities are interested in promoting different values from each other, and the right to do so should not be restricted to religious Jewish communities.

Today, the education system allows the operation of educational institutions that are not subject to the operating rules that apply to public schools. The price of “exemption” from regulation by the state is a fine of a reduction in state budgeting of 25 percent (in some cases the fine is even higher) relative to the budget of public educational institutions.

This issue hit the headlines recently due to the much reported strike by Church schools serving about 33,000 Arab Israeli pupils (both Muslim and Christian), the struggle of the Reali school in Haifa against the Ministry of Education’s decision to slash its budget because of its high tuition fees, and the ministry’s battle with Haredi institutions that refuse to admit Sephardi girls. Some of these schools teach either part or all of the State of Israel’s official school curriculum, but they have selective admissions policies. In contrast, some of the state religious schools (which are public according to their official definition) have selective admissions policies and are not sanctioned for it.

We suggest allowing special groups, be they religious, national or cultural-ideological, have the right to maintain education systems as they see fit, and that these systems be supported identically, if the following conditions are met:

- 1. Budgeting will be equal and progressive.** Each educational institution will be budgeted on the basis of a uniform but socioeconomically differential standard regardless of national, religious or cultural-ideological identity. This standard will grant a significant advantage¹ to pupils from weaker socioeconomic backgrounds over pupils with more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. The principle of differential budgeting will apply to all levels of education (from preschool to the end of high school), and will include all the components of educational expenditure.

- 2. Budgeting of each framework's educational institutions will be conditional on:**
 - Employment of teachers and other educational staff must meet the educational and training requirements determined by the Ministry of Education, and in the framework of national labor agreements;

 - Absolute prohibition of the selection of pupils to schools on the basis of ethnic background, gender, ability to pay, or prior learning achievements.

 - Pupils who choose to attend schools that are distinct from a religious, cultural or ideological aspect will be expected to conduct themselves in accordance to the norms corresponding of the school.

 - The inclusion in the school's curriculum of core subjects at a level to be decided by the Ministry of Education, which will not exceed 30 percent of the basic curriculum.

¹ Studies in the United States, in lawsuits about the budgeting required to bring pupils from a weak socioeconomic background up to the level of pupils from more advantaged backgrounds, have shown that the addition is at least 50 percent, and perhaps more.

Not meeting these conditions will result in a budgetary reduction at a level to be determined in advance by the Ministry of Education.

In addition to and beyond the core curriculum, each educational framework will be free to determine the curricula, teaching methods, evaluation standards, and rules of behavior in its institutions, as long as they do not encourage violence, racism or stand in contradiction to the laws of the state. Each framework will be able to decide for itself on the establishment of a steering committee with powers to implement decisions in these matters.