

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS
IJS - 24 EDUCATION IN ISRAEL I.:
A BUREAUCRATIC ANACHRONISM IN A
DECENTRALIZED SOCIETY

THE DANEMARK COMPREHENSIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL
IN JERUSALEM: SHOWPLACE OF ISRAEL'S PROBLEMS
AND PROMISES FOR ITS EDUCATIONAL FUTURE.

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IJS - 24 EDUCATION IN ISRAEL I.:
A BUREAUCRATIC ANACHRONISM
IN A DECENTRALIZED SOCIETY

44 Canfield Gardens,
London, N.W.6.
England
24th June, 1972

Mr. Richard Nolte
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10017
U S A

Dear Mr. Nolte:

After landing at Lydda Airport in Israel and starting my cheroot¹ journey to Jerusalem, I had an uneasy feeling. Perhaps, unbeknown to me, Sam Yorty -- the peripatetic mayor of Los Angeles, who regularly visits LA's sister cities around the world -- had commandeered my jet and landed us in Southern California instead of Israel. The rolling hills, the desert, the occasional fertile fields, and, most strikingly, the ugly rows of "new" pill box, multi-storeyed apartment housing on the outskirts of Jerusalem created visions of Los Angeles and its suburbs. Only the demonstration by Russian Jews against the use of airport buses on Saturday and the lack of endless rows of single family housing kept me from succumbing to this fantasy-nightmare.

However, again and again during my visit to Israel in February 1972, I was struck by the manner in which the Israelis seem committed to recreate most American mistakes in all areas of social policy. And I can easily see in ten years time all of Israel degenerating to the physical and social conditions of Southern California². Economic development is what the Israelis call this process.

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1. An inter-city taxi system which provides very reasonable and flexible transportation for Israelis.
 2. Some Israeli friends challenge this analogy to Southern California and the pessimistic prediction. They cite an important current difference between Israel and Southern California: in present day Israel, there is a great deal of social solidarity among the citizenry; whereas in Southern California the sprawling suburban expanse has created an isolated and anomic society. I do not disagree with this criticism as a present distinction which limits the analogy; but I would guess on the basis of my present impressions that 1) if there is a settlement of the Arab/Israeli conflict in the next ten years, that this particular limit on the analogy will disappear and that the consumption life style which appears to be the goal of most Israelis will quickly have an impact

My purpose in visiting Israel was to have a "Cook's tour" of the Israeli educational system. I went because my reading had led me to believe that the Israelis might have something to teach the rest of the world about dealing with the academically disadvantaged child and also about assimilating pupils from very different backgrounds into a new educational system. As seems to be my fate, I believe I have learned more from the Israelis' failures than their successes; but this does not make me admire their efforts any less.

Before turning my attention to the problems of education in Israel, I must put what will be critical comments in proper personal perspective. This visit was my second to Israel. In 1964, while a student at Oxford, I visited Israel. My impression then was best summarized in the following aphorism from my report on that visit: "Israel is what I would have imagined the American Wild West to have been under Papal Rule." Perhaps now I would rephrase the remark: "Israel is what I would have imagined Los Angeles County in the 1950s to have been under Papal rule." It is remarkable to think that the appropriate historical analogy may have shifted one hundred years in less than ten.³

I must qualify the context of my general impressions by accepting an observation which Dr. Dan Horowitz of the Hebrew University made when he heard an oral report of my visit: "Last time you were in Israel, you enjoyed your meals in the dining room. This time before you even ate you were taken back into the kitchen to see how the meal was prepared." His comment is quite correct, because on this trip I was given a unique opportunity to transcend the constraints of language and time and learn enough about education in Israel to have a critical impression of it. However, I certainly acknowledge the constraints of time and language and recognize the limitations of the experiences on which my observations are based. But like any other amateur chef, once you let me in the kitchen, I am going to have my own ideas about how the food ought to be prepared and therefore will be quite sensitive to the quality of the product. Criticism from the visitor is the thanks which overly generous hosts often get; but this does not mean that, in this case, I did not enjoy the visit and appreciate the quality and variety of what I saw.

2 continued ...

similar to the dissolution of life in Southern California; or that 2) if there is no settlement to the conflict but the continuation of present social policies, the dissolution will still occur but at a slower rate. Needless to say but said anyway: the trend is a contingent and not a necessary process; therefore enlightened political leadership could change the direction of all present social forces.

3. I would support this historical analogy with the arguments offered in Footnote 1, but with the acceptance of the qualification of the difference in personal relationships within Israel and California.

And I must state at the outset that I was impressed with the basic quality of what I saw. Indeed, I think the service and quality of the product is better than do many of the regular customers.

But before I provide a detailed evaluation of what I saw, I must first put the present in the context of the past, for the history of Israeli education is quite relevant to an understanding of its present problems.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The most important historical fact in the development of the Israeli educational system is that it was divided into three distinct systems -- or "Trends", as they were called by the Jews in Palestine -- under the overall authority of the executive body (Va'ad Le'umi) of the Jewish Community (Knesset Israel) in the Palestine Mandate in the 1920s. In order to avoid a fight between the secular and religious Zionists and between socialist and non-socialist factions, three different educational systems were organized -- the Mizrachi Trend for the religious parties; the Labour Trend for the Histadrut, the labor and socialist parties; and the General Trend for the rest. Each trend developed separately. And although the Knesset Israel had no power in the Mandate to require school attendance, over 90% of the children attended the primary schools (ages 6-14).

The important point to keep in mind is that Israeli education has been inextricably linked with different political parties since its organized founding, so that the development of educational policy has always been part of a fragmented, wider political process. But the Zionist ideology has been a common component of the curriculum of each sector of the system.

The second most important fact in the history of Israeli education is that the Trend system ended in a political compromise. After a major political battle, the system was reorganized into a State system with two branches: a religious and a general branch. The two systems now operate side by side within the Ministry of Education and Culture but with separate bureaucracies. The conflicting demands on resources made by the two systems are a continuing source of wider political conflict; as is the attempt by the religious parties to influence decisions in the general system.

There is a third system -- the Arab system -- which will be the subject of description and comment in a later newsletter (see IJS-28).

3 continued ...

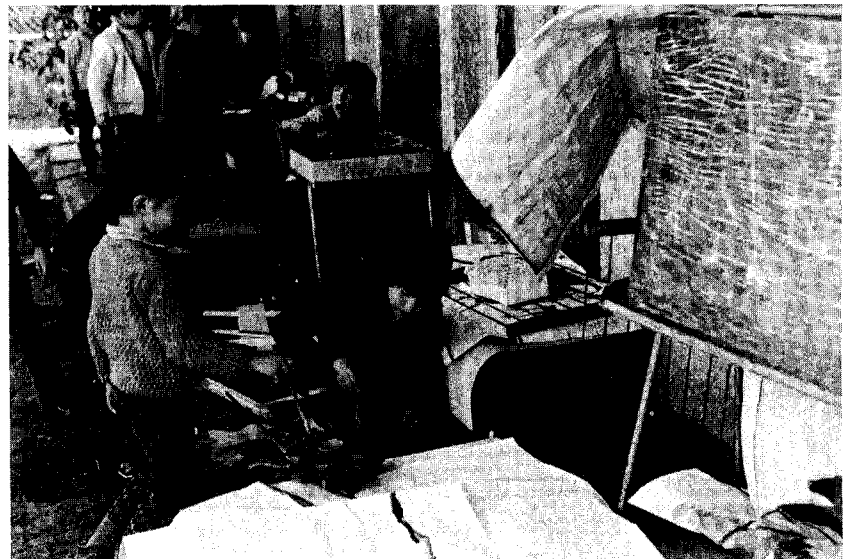
The social solidarity of present-day Israel is nearer to the Wild West than the '50s Los Angeles example. However, I think that the life style -- especially the development of bourgeois consumption ideals -- of the latter example is appropriate for contemporary Israel.

THE KINDERGARTEN AT
RAMAT HASARON NEAR
TEL AVIV...



WHERE CHILDREN CAN CHOOSE
BETWEEN PLAYING HELICOPTER
PILOT WITH A "REAL" BUT
DECOMMISSIONED HELICOPTER...

AND INDULGING IN MORE
TRADITIONAL PRESCHOOL
WATERCOLOR PAINTING.



For present purposes, the historical legacy of importance in understanding Israeli education is that of the intimate involvement of various political groupings in the life of the schools and the importance of educational policy in the political life of Israel.

II. AN OUTLINE OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

In order to understand my interpretative remarks about the problems of Israeli education, we must briefly survey the structure of the system. This description will be specifically about the Jewish State System, not the State Religious System, which took up the religious trends. The State system serves the vast majority of the pupils in the system; and the structure of the State Religious System at least in the required primary years is not so different from the State System. It is the content which is different. Also, the Arab system is similar in structure but quite different in content.

A. PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

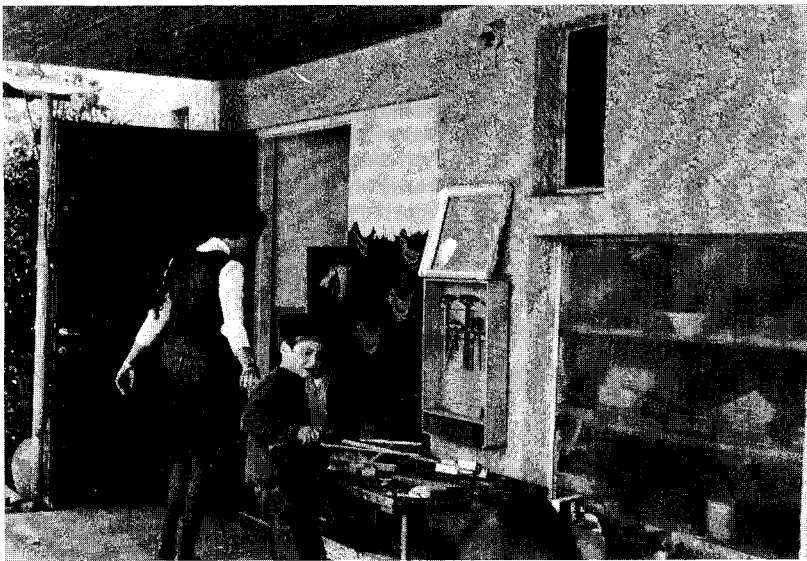
The Israeli educational system offers extensive programs for very young children. Forty per cent of the children aged three and seventy per cent of the children aged four attend half-day pre-kindergarten classes. Public pre-kindergartens are maintained by local educational authorities or voluntary organizations. There are special programs and subsidies for immigrants and children from lower socio-economic groups. All other children must pay fees.

The Ministry of Education and Culture, through the Henrietta Szold Institute, a social science research organization, and various universities, has invested substantial sums in research concerning early childhood education. This research seems to have contributed to preschool experiences of a fairly high standard for many of the children who participate in these programs.

All children are required by law to attend kindergarten at age five. These classes are free.

I visited a pre-kindergarten and kindergarten facility at Ramat Hasharon, a middle class suburb of Tel Aviv. This kindergarten was reputed to be one of the best in Tel Aviv. My own impressions would support any judgment which ascribed high quality to this program, although I must qualify my observations by admitting that whenever I visit classes of very young children, I get so involved with them that my views about the overall operation of the facility may lose their critical perspective.

The physical facilities at Ramat Hasharon were airy, large, and light. The play equipment on the grounds was superb: there was an old helicopter for children to play on. Although my radical



MS. RAPHAEL, ALWAYS
IN MOTION, ENCOURAGES
YOUNG CARPENTERS...

TO COME INSIDE THE
KINDERGARTEN AT RAMAT
HASHARON AND ENJOY
A PUNCH AND JUDY SHOW...



AND A CONVERSATION
AFTERWARDS WITH THE
PUPPETEER.

instincts make me shudder at the martial implications of this instrument of war, my childhood inclinations make me envious of this toy.

The head teacher in the kindergarten, Ms. Ety Raphael, was a vivacious and intelligent woman. When I arrived Ms. Raphael was leading the children in a group exercise involving singing and then listening to a story by one of the teachers. After the story the teachers put on a Punch-and-Judy show which actively involved the children in the action and dialogue.

The children seemed quite enthusiastic. I was immediately involved in a conversation with the children, even though they knew only a few words of English and I even fewer words of Hebrew. However, we had no trouble communicating with each other. Their alertness and receptivity to challenges spoke well for the kindergarten. Also the creative art work on display indicated the success of the activities there.

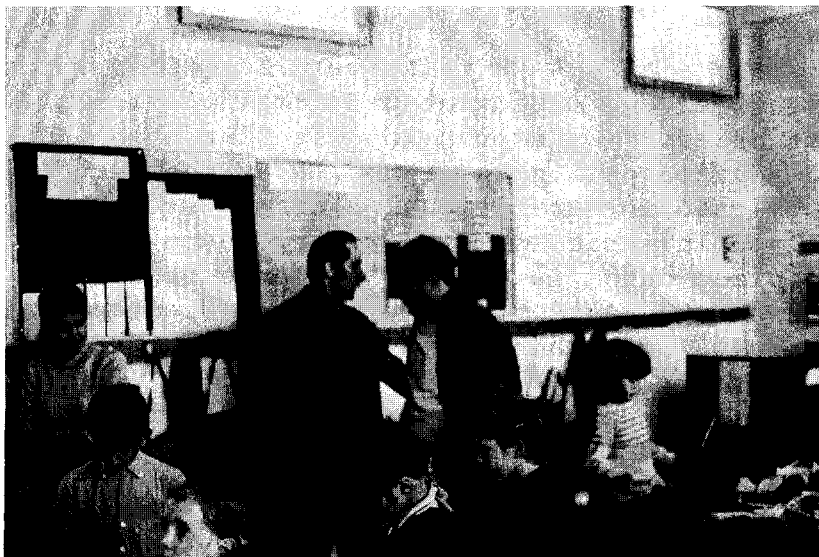
I must reiterate that this kindergarten was reputedly one of the best in Tel Aviv: indeed, the day I was there it was presented as an example for study by the Tel Aviv Inspector of Kindergartens, Dr. N. Nir. Therefore, we cannot take it as representative. However, given the statistics about the extensive provision of kindergarten and pre-kindergarten classes in Israel and the not unwarranted expectation that many of them will be at least half as good as the one in Ramat Hasharon, one must conclude that the Israelis have done a good job in providing early childhood education.

B. PRIMARY EDUCATION

Education is compulsory and free in Israel from age five to fourteen plus. Presently the eight years from six to fourteen are considered to be the primary school years. However, this division is changing to a six year primary school program and two three year sequences for the next six post-primary years, which will incorporate two additional mandatory and free years of schooling for all pupils.

In the primary schools of the State and State Religious systems the language of tuition is Hebrew. Children study reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, nature, physical training, handicraft, agriculture, drawing and singing. Also each child starts the study of English or French as his first foreign language. And the Bible takes a prominent place in the primary curriculum.

Presently at the end of the eighth grade each child takes an exam, the Seker, to determine whether he can attend and if so which sort of secondary schooling is appropriate for him. However, with the transition to a six/three-three organization of the schools and a policy to move toward comprehensive secondary schools, the Seker is being discontinued.



FATHERS DISCUSS
THEIR CHILDRENS' WORK...



WHILE MOTHERS OBSERVE
THE TEACHERS WITH THEIR
CHILDREN...



DURING A PARENTS' DAY
IN A JERUSALEM PRIMARY
SCHOOL, WHICH DRAWS
A LARGE ASIAN AND
AFRICAN JEWISH POPULATION.

I only visited one primary school -- a relatively large one which integrates pupils from advantaged and disadvantaged areas of Jerusalem -- and this visit was quite brief. My impression was that the classes were being conducted in a modified open plan manner, even though the physical facilities were designed for traditional classrooms. The children seemed to be involved in their work; however, there was an atmosphere of imposed discipline which is usually not present in most open classrooms. The class of about thirty five which I spent most time in was conducted by a full time teacher and a part-time assistant.

If one looks at entry to secondary education, it is clear that the primary schools have not been successful in providing an education which allows their pupils to overcome the accidents of birth: for example, even though 63% of the pupils in the first grade of primary school are Jews of Asian or African family origin, by the first year of secondary school this percentage has dropped to 49.9%. And the percentage of Afro-Asian Jews who enter academic secondary education is even smaller: 30.29%⁴. These statistics present a prima facie case for the conclusion that those who need the benefit of education most are the worst served by the primary school system. However, as we shall see, the record of the primary schools is still better than that of the secondary system.

C. POST PRIMARY EDUCATION

With the change in organization of the chronological divisions in the schools, the post primary sequence has changed from a unified four years to two divisions of three years each. By 1975-76, four out of the total of six post primary years will be compulsory and free. Presently only two are compulsory and free; for the rest fees are charged on a sliding scale -- about sixty per cent of the children who stay on pay no fees at all and only twenty per cent the full fees.

Slightly more than half the pupils in post primary education attend vocational and agricultural schools. Most of the rest attend either comprehensive schools or selective academic secondary schools.

Those who complete secondary school and who want to attend university must take a matriculation exam called the Bargrut. Those who attend academic schools can prepare for the Bagrut; those attending vocational schools can do so only if they are in the top stream and then they prepare for a special technological Bargrut.

4. All statistics are drawn from Table T/16 of No. 22, Reprint from the Statistical Abstract of Israel, 1971.

There is a great disparity in most measures of academic performance between those in academic secondary schools and those in the vocational, agricultural and comprehensive schools. This disparity reflects the history of selection based on the Seker and also on the residential segregation of most urban areas in Israel and differences between urban areas and the development towns. It should be noted that until the last couple of years the only comprehensive schools had been in development towns where the newest immigrants are sent and where the range of ability in the population has not been typical of the country as a whole.

I briefly visited one of the first urban comprehensive schools in Israel: the Danemark School in Jerusalem. This school has only just opened in a lower socio-economic neighborhood and draws its students from the neighborhood and farther away through busing. It is much too early to make any judgments about the academic success of the Danemark School. But it is quite clear that the program of establishing comprehensive schools in Israel is meeting and will continue to meet a great deal of resistance.

The past post primary school system rested on an assumption of naive meritocracy: the academic sieve would fairly filter out the undifferentiated primary mass into the educational streams appropriate for each component type. This assumption, which neglected the continuing effects of socio-economic differences in family background, is now being challenged by the groups detrimentally affected by it. And the attempts to cope with this challenge -- which is both educational and political -- has prompted the reform of the secondary school into the three year/three year, semi-comprehensive pattern. But the significance of this reform in terms of greater equality for the disadvantaged -- those who need nurture -- is not clear to this foreign observer. Nor, I might add, to the Oriental Jews in Israel. I shall return to this problem in the next newsletter (IJS-25).

D. HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education in Israel is first and foremost that provided by the universities. Other forms of post-secondary education are quite limited. The largest additional sector is that of teacher training colleges. Although presently the government is establishing a network of technical colleges and regional colleges for vocationally oriented advanced work after secondary school, which will become in the future a large sector of higher education. Also, there is a plan, presently under discussion, to create a broadcast university modelled after the British Open University but, unlike the Open University, coordinated with the technical and regional college system.

Among the universities the Hebrew University is the flagship of the fleet. In addition, there is the Technion in Haifa, the technical

university for Israel, which was founded in 1924, one year before the Hebrew University. Also, the Weizman Institute of Science, a graduate research Institute of great prestige in the sciences, has been a force in Israeli higher education since 1934.

In the 1950s and 1960s there was a great expansion of university opportunities through the creation of new universities: the Bar Illan University (a religious institution) in 1955, Tel Aviv University in 1956, the University of Haifa in 1963, and the University of the Negev in 1969.

All of the newer universities have followed the example set by the Hebrew University, which is itself modeled on the Germanic research oriented university as presently corrupted by the American multiversity experience. Indeed most of the shortcomings in the American multiversity have been elevated to canons of life in Israeli universities. Israel is one of the few states in the world where "publish or perish" is encapsuled in the basic Higher Education Law, section 1: "In this law, higher education includes teaching, science and research." Any ambiguity about the implication of this provision -- especially "science and research" -- is removed by one of the first rules of the Council for Higher Education, which authorizes the right to grant degrees, in Rule ~~7~~ 3: "An institution of higher education shall have a permanent academic staff The academic staff shall generally be composed of ⁵ men of science and research who publish reports of their work."

By the standards which the universities have set for themselves, they have been quite successful. The academic quality -- that is the quality of "men of science and research" in terms of the publication of their reports -- of the Hebrew University and even some of the newer universities is of international standards. The faculty members with whom I had contact were men with international reputations.

But conversations with students indicate that the "teaching" component of the mandate for universities has been given short shrift in the past. Yet it has only been in the recent past that there have been any organized complaints by university students in Israel. The relative quiet on Israeli campuses probably reflects the maturity (in terms of age) of most university students, who come to university only after having served from one and a half to three years in the Army, depending upon sex and assignment.

The universities are the most privileged sector of Israeli education. This observation may seem quite trivial to the foreigner, but the force

5. My underlining. See Higher Education Law, informal English translation, Ministry of Education and Culture.

of the position of universities and those who are a part of them cannot be overstated; it is even more privileged than in other countries. Although in the present generation of Israeli leaders university education has not been a condition for political power, it is a condition of status and some economic power; and there is no doubt that the next generation of political leaders will be made up of university educated men and women.

The status of the universities is reflected in the large numbers of the usual age group in attendance at the universities. About 8000 students enroll in universities out of an entry age group of about 50,000. Although by American standards the percentage, about 16%, would not be high, by most European standards it is staggering. But even with this percentage, only about 10% in the 18-34 age group are following an educational course of some kind. So there is a great deal of room for expansion.⁶

In Israel, as in most countries, the universities set the standards for the whole educational system but are only marginally involved in the life of that system. In fact the disjunction between universities and the rest of the educational system may be even greater than elsewhere, because of the importance of status to the universities, which do not want to compromise their position by involvement with low status concerns such as the rest of the educational system.

Part of the separation between universities and the rest of the system may be due to the universities' privileged position in regard to finance and their insulation from government control. This suggestion raises the issue of the governmental role in the educational system, to which I now turn.

III. THE CONTROL OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM.

The control of the educational system is vested in two different locations, depending upon the level under analysis.

The universities are quite autonomous: each has its own governing board. There is a Council for Higher Education which approves institutions for purposes of granting degrees, but once the approval is given it retains no real authority over the institutions.

Universities are financed mainly from private sources through the Jewish Agency, which is a semi-private money raising foundation active in Jewish communities overseas. Presently the only governmental

6. See TIMES HIGHER EDUCATIONAL SUPPLEMENT 9.6.72. (London) p.11, "Opening of new Open University," by Dr. Peter Farago, editor of "Chemistry in Britain."

contribution comes in the form of capital aid; but this represents no more than 40% of the annual capital budgets of the universities. Each university deals with the government and Jewish Agency individually.

Although the universities are now quite independent, the Government, through the Council for Higher Education, is seriously considering the establishment of a higher education agency to make overall financial decisions about government support of universities and allocation of limited resources among the universities. In the present Israeli political climate, it is likely that such an agency will closely follow the model of the British University Grants Committee in protecting the independence of the universities by giving them control collectively over its activities. But the creation of such an agency will be a constraint on the almost unlimited freedom of universities in Israel.

The university sector is unique in its independence from government control. All other public educational institutions are under the direct and strict control of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The whole system is built upon the Continental model, where all decisions -- administrative or substantive -- are taken by the central government.

All decisions about curriculum in the State Schools are taken by a Pedagogical Secretariat in the Ministry of Education, which is served by a Curriculum Development Center. This Center is responsible for developing all courses taught in the State schools in Israel. The Secretariat, through a system of Inspectors, closely monitors the classroom performances of teachers throughout the system. It also sets, gives, and grades the major examinations.

Curriculum materials prepared by the Center and approved by the Secretariat are quite detailed and complete. Directions about class content and teaching plans are provided and expected to be followed. The detail of these directions does vary somewhat from level to level -- e.g. primary school teachers have much less leeway than do secondary school teachers -- but at all levels very little discretion is left to the classroom teachers.

This centralized system is administered by bureaucrats whose reputation inside the educational system and out is subject to question. Because of the history of the party key system in bureaucratic appointments -- certain percentages of appointments in various ministries went to members of the various parties in proportion to their electoral strength -- many of the men with senior appointments were said to have their positions for reasons of party power rather than competence. Although one hears this complaint about many civil servants in various countries, the strength and consistency of it in Israel lends it some credibility. And the history

of the involvement of the various political parties in the actual operation of the school Trends gives added support to the criticism.

The partisan characteristics of the Ministry of Education seem to be somewhat less at present than in the past. Yet many observers still suggest that the educational decisions are being made on political not educational grounds. And the current Minister, Mr. Alon, who is also Deputy Prime Minister and perhaps heir apparent to Golda Meir, is said by some not to be devoting adequate attention to educational problems because of the demands of his other duties.

I can only report these various comments without evaluation, for I am in no position to provide informed commentary. I can just indicate my own impression that those who must work under what appears to me to be oppressive centralization of substantive educational decision-making believe that they must bear both the burden of acting without control and also of suffering the directives of politically oversensitive and incompetent bureaucrats. And many observers outside of the system believe these views to be correct. However, I must hasten to add that all of the officials I met seemed to be men and women of competence and integrity. But no matter what the facts are, the perceptions of those in the system about the Ministry make these criticisms important.

Also, this centralized system does not seem to incorporate the aspects of centralized systems which sometimes accrue to their advantage: for example, high powered policy analysis and forward planning. Educational decisions seem to be taken in an ad hoc manner and with a short term perspective. The demands of conflicting party political interests seem to have ruled out any systematic attempts at long range planning. Not only does there appear not to have been substantive policy planning, but there is no ongoing institutional framework for providing it in the future. I shall return to this issue in a later newsletter. (See IJS-27). For the present suffice it to say that the political character of the Ministry has meant that all possible advantages of centralized decision-making have been lost and all disadvantages exaggerated.

Even if the Ministry is politically neutral and administratively competent, there are problems inherent in the centralized organisation as it now exists. The greatest disadvantage of the centralized decision-making system is that it has deprived the teachers in the classroom of any sense of personal power and moral responsibility in

7. There is an Assistant to the Minister for Planning, but no section to provide it.

the education of their students. The premise of this centralized system is that the teachers are incompetent and cannot be trusted with power and authority: this premise creates a self-fulfilling prophesy.

And the cultural characteristics of Israeli society magnify the negative impact of the centralized decision-making system. Israelis are a very independent, ambitious, and individually assertive people. A centralized system of governance in any sector cuts directly against these characteristics. Indeed, the only sector of government known for its special effectiveness is the one which has decentralized the most and in a way which is usually thought inconsistent with its essential nature: the Israeli military.

All Israeli military strategy is based upon a command system which only sets objectives and then decentralizes decisions about how to achieve those objectives down to the lowest level of command -- the platoon leader. Of course the objectives become more specific as they go down the command structure, but the autonomy of decision is a crucial component of the Israeli military activities. And its success is quite evident from recent history.

It seems clear to me that the Ministry of Education and Culture could learn much about organizing education from the model of the Israeli military. An unusual lesson to be taught by an army.

It is time for the Israeli educational system to shed the constraints of its Germanic-Continental heritage and create a structure which is more consistent with the strong points of Israeli society. Then the promise of the system will be in a position to overcome its problems. And it is to some specific problems of the Israeli educational system that I shall turn in my next newsletters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'I. J. Spitzberg, Jr.', with a stylized, cursive script.

Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

Received in New York on July 7, 1972.