

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IJS - 25 EDUCATION IN ISRAEL II.:
THE CHILDREN WHO NEED NURTURE

44 Canfield Gardens,
London, NW6.
England.
25th June 1972.

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The Hebrew term for those children who in other countries are called socially disadvantaged or culturally deprived is: "te'oney tipu'ah", which means "those in need of nurture." It has no negative connotations in the language; it only expresses the positive conviction that, with the help of special aid to the family, the children from culturally impoverished backgrounds can develop their innate abilities. So the Hebrew concept focuses on the family background and emphasizes the potential of the children involved.

Although the concept of children who need nurture may seem to offer some advantages over its brothers in other languages, especially the concept of "disadvantaged" children, these advantages do not seem to have spared Israel from the problems which conflicting values create in dealing with this issue in other societies.

Israel is purported to be a socialist state; however, in no other country in the world is the competitive ethos more apparent. And the concept of equality which has been developing in Israel during the last two decades is a weak liberal conception of equality of opportunity, not the stronger socialist conception of equality of attainment claimed by the socialist ideologues in Israeli public life.

In the educational context, equality as it applied to those who were obviously in an unequal situation -- the children who need nurture -- was first conceived to be: receiving the same education as those who come from more favored backgrounds -- no more, no less. After more than a decade of this approach and its obvious failure in creating more equality or even more equality of opportunity in Israeli society, the emphasis shifted to providing additional and especially designed programs for children who need nurture. This is the present state of public policy toward these children.

The state of Israel has demonstrated as much imagination and commitment in the development of special programs for children who need

nurture as any country in the world. Special curriculum materials have been developed. Many of these children attend school for two hours more per day and one month more per year than the average child. Additional remedial teachers are assigned to schools with large numbers of children who need nurture. All new teachers are initially assigned to development towns where large numbers of the children are concentrated.¹ There are special training programs for teachers in schools with large numbers of these children. Special pre-kindergartens and kindergartens are made available free to the very young children who need nurture. At the secondary level, a system of tutors is established for them. Also, the children who show signs of special academic ability are sent to special boarding schools. The list of programs is extensive.

And the numbers of students involved in the various programs are large: e.g. 71,660 pupils were involved in the long school day in 1971; 64,670 pupils had special classes; and 20,000 participated in the long school year.

However, the results of all of these programs have only been marginally encouraging. And it is a credit to the Ministry of Education and Culture that it knows and admits the marginality of the results of its efforts, for it has systematically evaluated most of the programs for these children.

One reason that the results have not matched the effort may be that there was no coherent program for dealing with the whole range of the problems of children who need nurture. Each program seems to have been the result of an ad hoc policy decision, which may have been necessary but from which no coherent program emerged.

Only recently has the Ministry undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the problems of these children. The Ministry commissioned recently an Israeli equivalent of the U.S. Coleman Report, which analyzed the exact character and number of the American disadvantaged and their experiences in the educational system. This report, which will probably not be completed for a couple of years, will provide the Israeli government with its first comprehensive data on the children who need nurture.

Without waiting on the results of the commissioned report, the Government has taken a major, system-wide step to deal with the problems of the children who need nurture: "the Reform", as it is called, which is the change from the eight year primary school to six years of primary and six years of post-primary, with four of these post primary years to be compulsory and free by 1975-76. "The Reform"

1. This particular policy is a mixed blessing: it means that large numbers of inexperienced teachers are teaching the children who need the most experienced assistance.

was supposedly undertaken to improve the education of the children who need nurture throughout the system. But the substance of the structural change does not seem to bear any special relationship to the needs of these children. What is relevant to their needs is the parallel step of creating comprehensive secondary schools.

The move to comprehensive secondary schools through the demise of the Seker examination at the end of the eighth grade and the creation of larger secondary schools containing academic and technical programs has been the result of a new and stronger conception of equality of educational opportunity. Taking the lesson from the American Coleman Report that children seem to learn more from their peers than their teachers, the Ministry has adopted a comprehensive strategy. However, constraints of money and political opposition have slowed the process.

Also, the Danemark Comprehensive School in Jerusalem, which I visited, leads me to believe that the comprehensiveness of the school in terms of student population may not lead to the comprehensiveness of the classroom, because there appeared to be a great deal of streaming within the school.

In addition, the Danemark School illustrates the problems of becoming comprehensive in Israel: there was virulent opposition to the school by the middle class parents whose children were to be bused from more affluent neighborhoods in Jerusalem to the school in a lower socio-economic area. The newspaper reports and personal stories which I heard about this episode could be transposed to any city in the United States.

However, it is apparent that the Government itself has now adopted a stronger conception of equality which looks to actual results as a measure of equality of opportunity instead of the formality of programs. But it is not at all clear that the Ministry has carried the society at large along with it in its commitment to equality. Again and again I heard from middle class parents their fears that comprehensive schools would ruin the quality of education. Israeli society considers itself to be a meritocratic society where ability breeds success. The moral right of the elite to be the elite seems to be a self-evident truth to the elite, because it is made up of people who have come from relatively poor backgrounds in Europe and Israel who have, nevertheless, "made it."

Yet the elite is hard pressed to justify the fact that there are few Asian and African Jews among its members. And of course Arabs are not even considered people for this purpose. But the threat to quality, which is the construction placed on the threat to the elite through comprehensive schools, is considered to outweigh the advantages of helping those who need nurture. Even within the Ministry of Education, many of those dealing at the policy level with comprehensive schools are quite sensitive to maintaining the quality of the elite and hesitate to take any action which might threaten it.

In spite of the opposition, it appears that in the near future the Ministry will submit to the Knesset a bill which will require enforced attendance at comprehensive schools.

To conclude this commentary on Israeli programs for children who need nurture, I should like to offer the responses which I gave the Israelis who opposed the policy of comprehensive schools, because these comments, though directed to the Israeli situation, are relevant to the common issue in Britain and the United States.

First, the assumption that comprehensive schools necessarily mean lower quality education for the better students is yet to be proved. The empirical research into this question is still to be completed. And my own personal experience in an American comprehensive high school, which was of minimal quality, leads me to doubt whether too many high flyers are grounded. (This particular observation from the perspective of my own experiences was, of course, often taken to be clear proof of the anti-comprehensive case.)

Second, and more persuasive, one must ask of those who oppose comprehensive schools the question which John Rawls asks in his essay "Justice as Fairness" and his new book, A THEORY OF JUSTICE: If you did not know whether you were going to be an Asian-African Jew or a middle class European Jew in the Israeli school system, which system would you choose as being in your interest -- a comprehensive or a selective/tracked system? The actual answer received from Israelis to this question was either evasive or phrased in terms of the quality of society's leadership still being important enough to justify the drawbacks of a selective system to the Oriental Jew, which are his strictly because of the accident of birth. This sort of response misses the point of the question in that it balances the supposed advantage to the system against and over the disadvantage to particular individuals, which is a position quite consistent with grave individual injustice: a problem of seemingly little concern to middle classes all over the world, and of especially little significance to the Israeli middle classes.

Because of the elitism of the Israeli middle class and especially its intelligentsia, if the Ministry of Education and Culture is committed to a comprehensive system in the interest of justice and quality, then it is quite necessary for the Ministry to deal directly with the claim that comprehensiveness entails detriment to quality through research and substantive programs in the classroom designed to challenge this claim.

Also, it might be helpful to point out the hypocrisy of a powerful middle class mouthing socialist ideology and then crying when put to the test of actually accepting equality of education and social opportunity with and for the children who need nurture.

Sincerely,


Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.