

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IJS - 26 EDUCATION IN ISRAEL III.  
TEACHERS AND TEACHING

44 Canfield Gardens  
London, NW6  
England  
26th June 1972.

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

It is a commonplace of most industrial societies to find the status of the classroom teacher to be quite low. This is undoubtedly the case in Israel, although during the Mandatory period in Palestine, the social and economic position of the classroom teacher was rather high.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the status of teachers in modern society is low, it is quite overwhelming to the American observer to confront the Israeli system, whose assumption is the incompetence of the teacher. The whole centralized educational process is designed to protect the students from the incompetence of the teachers. All curriculum materials are prepared with detailed instructions about implementation by the teacher and often the teacher is made marginal by the materials which are programmed to allow the child to use them himself.

The design system of the centralized curriculum control does have its advantages: for example, materials are carefully tested and related to specific objectives.<sup>2</sup> Also, Israel has been able to develop an educational television service whose programs are produced as an integral part of the learning system used in the schools, because the common curriculum throughout the country allows for the marshaling of expensive resources and the coordination of different media in the teaching systems.

But no matter how good these curriculum packages are, and there is a great deal of dispute about their quality, they cannot be teacher proof. And the cost of such an apparent goal in terms of teacher attitude to work and teacher self-image must be quite high.

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1. See A.K. Kleinberger, Society, Schools and Progress, in Israel, London, 1969.
  2. Benjamin Bloom is the great father figure for Israeli curriculum development; and his Chicago school of behavioural objectivists provides the chapter and verse for every day in the Israeli schools.

The Israelis have proved by their own admission about the continuing incompetence of teachers and the inadequacy of the quality of education throughout the system that this anticipation of incompetence is self-fulfilling. And the very system of curriculum design and central control which is organized to protect the system from incompetence actually encourages it. The teachers feel little responsibility for the quality of what happens in their classrooms. Although some teachers told me that they did not feel constrained by the central curriculum control, others were quite bitter about it.

To suggest this conclusion is not to report the results of extensive interviews on my part or the results of systematic survey research. It is only to interpret the impressions which I have.

There exists in the Israeli schools a phenomenon which emphasizes the negative costs of the centralized curriculum control system: extracurricular tutoring on a large scale. Especially in secondary schools it is the rule not the exception for teachers to recommend to parents of pupils who are having difficulty to have outside tutorials. There is a sophisticated system of back-scratching and referral among teachers so that the tutorial business is a lucrative part-time job. All of the tutorial services are for fees; so the tutoring system puts the lower economic groups at an added disadvantage.

The reasons given for this extensive tutoring program are: that the curriculum assigned by the Ministry is not adequate preparation for the examinations set by the Ministry and that the methods prescribed by the Ministry for classroom teaching are backward and impersonal. Since the tutoring system is more remunerative than the actual teaching, teachers lack any real incentive to overcome the barriers of central control. So the system itself engenders poor teaching.

There is some teacher participation in the central design system, but most of the actual work is done by university teachers and decisions are made by inspectors and Ministry bureaucrats.

Of course the teachers themselves are not blameless for their low estate. Their unions -- especially the Teachers Association, which is the organization for the primary school teachers -- are notoriously conservative in their approaches to educational problems. For example, the Teachers Association opposed the structural reform of the system until almost every other educational agency and even political parties had decided to support it.

After cataloging all of these problems with teaching and teachers in Israel, in order to maintain some balance I should note one aspect of Israeli educational policy which has made an important contribution to the openness of an otherwise closed system and probably has contributed to its improved quality -- the use of part-time teachers. Within the Israeli educational system the use of part-time teachers is

seen as a negative aspect of personnel policy and an expedient made necessary by the shortage of trained personnel. Therefore, I must indicate why I consider the use of part-time teachers to be good.

A number of the teachers in the system are people from other vocations who teach as a second job. One must appreciate the shortage of skilled labor in Israel. There are no more than about 1.5 million workers available for the work force. And there are many more jobs than workers in this developing economy. So it is quite usual for most Israelis to have at least two jobs. And teaching, in spite of its low status, is a popular second job for the white collar workers.

Although many Israeli educators decry the employment of part-time and often untrained teachers, my impression is that the part-time teachers are often quite good and usually bring to the classroom an enthusiasm and enjoyment of teaching.

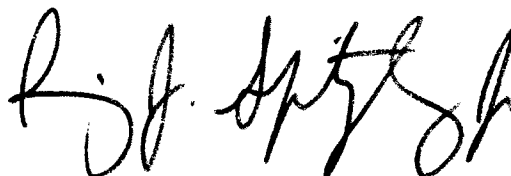
I believe that the manner in which the Israeli educational system has utilized part-time personnel may offer helpful lessons to other countries interested in opening up the sorts of classroom experiences enjoyed by their students. And in addition to being an example to developing countries with labor shortages, the use of part-time teachers may provide developing countries with labor surpluses with a technique for putting unemployed white collar (and also blue collar) workers to at least part-time work and at the same time opening up their educational systems.

My overall impression of teachers and teaching in Israel is that the system gets what it deserves: it cannot expect to have outstanding and committed teachers if it does not allow them autonomy and professional independence in the conduct of their classrooms. If one is nothing more than a very small cog in a very large set of wheels, then he is unlikely to be very enthusiastic in his contribution to their turning. And the best people are most unlikely to be interested in becoming part of the system.

In the past there has been a very rapid immigration of large numbers of teachers and larger numbers of pupils. Therefore, one can understand the anxiety about turning loose into the classroom without qualification or constraint the mixed bag of people of different cultures and abilities and then expecting efficient and effective teaching. But now the controls are themselves the biggest impediment to efficiency and effectiveness. As long as the Israeli educational system expects its teachers to do a poor job, it will not be disappointed. Even the best can be atrocious when they know such is expected of them.

Any future improvement in the caliber of teachers and the quality of teaching will require as a necessary condition the decentralization of curriculum control and the creation of a sense of responsibility in Israeli teachers. This future is not yet in sight.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "I. J. Spitzberg, Jr.", written in black ink.

Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

Received in New York on July 7, 1972.