

Disparity and Education

by

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Israel's founding generations gathered here from all corners of the Diaspora to rebuild the Jewish homeland – and the country that they succeeded in building has given new meaning to the word “success”. But how closely does this country, that celebrated its jubilee a couple of years ago, resemble the visions of its founders? While the specifics of the individual visions certainly varied from founder to founder, would it be realistic to assume that they probably did not envision that 52 years after the birth of Israel, their grandchildren would still be viewed as “Moroccans”, “Poles”, “Iraqis”, etc.? What possible relationship do second and third generation sabras have with the countries that their grandparents left, were evicted from – or worse?

The gathering of exiles during the country's initial years was not always an entirely pleasant affair for all those involved. The process was carried out under particularly difficult circumstances, from the standpoint of both defense and economics, and long-term scars were deeply imbedded in many an immigrant (as many of my own relatives will certainly attest). Difficulties imposed by the situation were only exacerbated by thick-skinned and sometimes racist public officials. But at some point – and 52 years after independence is probably long past the point where we should have collectively drawn the line – there arises a great need to put the past behind us, to consider the kind of country that we have and to envision the kind of country that we would like to leave for our children.

The social gaps in Israel's society are widened by the economic fractures at their core – and these are determined in no small part by the immense variation in educational levels that determine each individual's point of entry into the global job market that we are now a part of. An example from the States (by Murphy, Juhn and Pierce) provides a good indication of education's benefits from an economic perspective. The number of U.S. college graduates doubled during the seventies and eighties, resulting in a massive increase in supply. But instead of causing the incomes of graduates to fall, their incomes rose just as dramatically. The reason? Technological progress in the U.S. created an even larger increase in the demand for skilled workers, at the expense of falling demand for unskilled workers. Higher education alone yielded a 25% increase in the salaries of college graduates – and a simultaneous decline in the salaries of workers without a college education. Between 1963 and 1989, the wage gap between skilled and unskilled workers in the States rose by 72%.

These days are now upon us in Israel as our technological frontier approaches the international envelope. But instead of providing adequate preparation for the heightening economic competition within the country and from abroad, indications are that our children are faltering. They fared poorly in comparison with children from other countries on basic math and science exams administered by TIMSS in 1995. These are the same kids with whom ours will have to compete in several years when all will join the job market.

Not all of Israel's children receive a poor education. The fortunate ones have parents who can buy them what public education does not provide. Guess what this bodes as far as future gaps between us are concerned.

Putting together two facts – that our good students are among the world's best, while the national average is relatively low – yields some very unpleasant arithmetic. It implies that the bottom half of the Israeli population is faring very poorly on the international scale. The implications of this educational gap on subsequent income disparity within Israel are obvious.

As in all other countries, the educational attainment of children in Israel is determined in no small part by the educational attainment of their parents. But in light of the fact that we are a nation of immigrants with widely ranging backgrounds, the role of public basic education is paramount for leveling the economic playing field. The fact that only some parents can afford to supplement an apparently deficient public school system is certainly not an omen of good things to come.

Our income gaps are already among the highest in the industrialized world – and they are continuing to rise. In light of the tight link between these income gaps and the social gaps, is it any wonder that social tensions here are reaching the boiling point? Fortunately, there is a way to both turn back this tide and to re-enforce the common thread that ties us together.

The wish to accommodate our many varied lifestyles resulted in the creation of a number of different school systems: for the religious, for the ultra-religious, for the Arabs, and for the rest. In and of itself, this is not necessarily a bad resolution for reconciling obvious differences in lifestyle preferences. However, there is only one economic market in which we all have to live and work. Hence, the obvious solution: the basic education offered in each of the educational systems must be identical. Primary and secondary education in basic fields (such as the three "R's", English, science and computer skills) must be provided at much higher levels that are identical across educational systems and – no less importantly – identical in all of the neighborhoods, towns and villages.

An Israeli is an Israeli is an Israeli, without any relationship to his or her ethnic or religious background. Each must be allowed the most basic right to build their personal futures, and to partake in the building of our collective future. The education of our children – each and every one of them – must become a national priority second to none. Both the economy and the country are at one of the most important cross-roads since 1948. The socio-economic choices that we make today will determine whether or not we will have to apologize again, this time to our children's generation.

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