

Research Article

The main problems of the early age Israeli education system: some comparisons with European and non-European countries

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Abstract

Israel has a serious problem of early age education, which is usually explained by budget problems. However, when comparing the rate of the national education expenses as a percentage of the GDO to that of other GDP countries, tis fact seems to be hard to understand. Furthermore, a very high percentage of early age education expenses in Israel are public, as compulsory education starts at age 3, the earliest of all OECD countries. This fact situation can be explained by the very high birthrate in Israel, its lack of professional educators – especially for age 0-2 and also for 3-5-year old's, by the high percentage of children participating in ECE, mainly due to the short maternal leave, and by the 15-year duration of compulsory education in Israel, which requires a substantial part of its workforce to be educators in order to cover all needs of a country with a large young population. It is customary to blame financial difficulties of the poor educational achievements, unsatisfactory conditions for learning – both from the point of view of the educational staff and the students, and inability to recruit teachers of all stages, headmistresses and headmasters. That has been the Israeli situation years before the covid-19 had first burst into our lives. This is to show that there are some substantial obstacles – independent or at least – not solely dependent on budget difficulties, that are the main cause of Israel's law educational achievements and the status of Israel as a country with a very high birthrate, in need of good teachers and learning conditions but is far from reaching any of these aims. This situation starts in early age situation, and influences Israeli children, youths and adults.

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Introduction

Israel can be perceived as a riddle regarding its educational achievements. On one hand, it is a well-developed country, modernized, with a central education system, and a long history of literacy. The Jewish mother, the subject of many books – and no less jokes, has been known as one who pushes her offspring – especially the male ones – to do excellent in school, to choose the most prestigious professions, to "make it" in the work world [1-4]. The Jewish mother's stereotype, with its two main characteristics, demanding, even pushing, and not hesitation to cross borders of privacy or independence, has been valid quite long in literature (e.g. [5], in Television (e.g. [6]), and in research (e.g. [7, 8, 9]).

The Israeli education system includes compulsory 15 years of school: from age 3 to 18, and the educational level of its teachers is comparatively high: a 4-year teachers' college track concluded by the degree of Bachelor of Education is the minimal requirement for a teaching license. On the other hand, Israel scores at the lower half of all international tests for more than two decades, and it has a lower rate of students scoring at the highest level in spite of the fact that it is the only

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country that identifies its whole student population for giftedness, the only country with a special department of gifted and excellent students as a part of the ministry of education (e.g. [10].)

This presentation will introduce the main causes of the poor situation of early age education in Israel.

Main Problems

The Limited Budget

The educational budget problem starts in Israel well before the birth of the child, accompanies them during their very first months of life follows by the period of the need of child-care, pre-school, elementary school and does on to tertiary education. Let us look into the challenges typical to the early educational stages, namely until the formal beginning of school.

Early education in Israel has been one of the main problems for young families with children: as the Israeli birthrate is much higher than that of all European, as well as OECD countries, resolving the financial and other burden of raising young children takes much longer than in other countries. However, while in most OECD countries.

The annual expenditure per child enrolled in early childhood educational development services is substantially higher than for pre-primary education ([11], p. 179). Australia, Chile, Hungary and Israel are the only OECD countries with data available where spending per child in early childhood development services is lower than at pre-primary level (Ibid, Table B2.3).

Furthermore, in most OECD countries

Annual expenditure per child enrolled in early childhood educational development services is substantially higher than for pre-primary education, averaging about USD 15 600 across OECD countries with available data. However, this masks wide variation in spending between these levels of education across countries: in Lithuania, spending on early childhood educational development services is at most USD 1 000 more per child than at preprimary level, compared to a difference of at least USD 11 000 more in Denmark, Finland and Norway (ibid, p. 179).

Teachers' Salaries

Teachers' salaries – at all levels of education – are influenced by the expenditure on education. In Israel, where maternity leave is comparatively short, and women consist of a massive share of the work force, it should have been expected that both in public and private settings this should be reasonable. The situation is far from being satisfactory: with an annual expenditure of 5,936\$ expenditure on all children aged 3 to 5 enrolled in ECE and primary education, and 3,208\$ annual expenditure per child in USD, converted using PPPs, Israel is far behind the average: 10,025\$ per child in OECD countries in 2020, ranging from less than USD 5 000 in Colombia, Romania and Turkey to more than USD 16 000 in Iceland, Luxembourg and Norway for children 3-5 year old, and 10,181\$ for children under 3 (Table B2.3).

The budget problem influences both levels of ECE stages. The minimum salary of pre-prime educators in Israel is quite low, especially when taking into account the high cost of living in Israel. Indeed, the salary of early age educators with the most prevalent qualification is more than twice than that of the beginners, but the dropout rate is very high and due to the very low salary of the young workforce it is very hard to recruit new early age educators (e.g. [12]).

Time and again two contrary claims are made regarding the financial situation that is blamed for the deteriorating level of the Israeli education system. On the one hand, teachers, headmasters and all-rank officials complain quite often about financial difficulties, causing lack of necessary resources in order to improve Israeli education. In 2023, as in many previous years, less than 24 hours before September 1, the first school day, high school teachers were still threatening to strike as their financial demands were not answered by the ministry of education (e.g. [13], [14]).

On the other hand, according to OECD ([11], p. 22):

Most OECD countries invest 3-4% of their GDP in primary and secondary education, rising to at least 5% of GDP in Colombia and Israel. In contrast, six OECD countries invest less than 3% of GDP in primary and secondary education.

The investment of Israel in education as a percentage of GDP (updated to 2020): 6.4% Primary to tertiary; 6.0% primary to tertiary excluding R&D) is the second highest among the 37 OECD countries and the 11 Partner and/or accession countries (Table C2.1.: Total expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (2020) Direct expenditure within educational institutions, by level of education ([11], p. 292).

Furthermore, when including the private sources of education expenditure, this rate is much higher:

In the year 2021 the national education expenses were 124.6 million Shekel (~35 Milliard dollars) (8.0% from the [Israeli] GDP [...]. 88.9% was publicly financed (government, local authorities, and nonprofit organizations); 11.1% was privately financed (households and from abroad) ([15] Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022, p. 92) (my translation – H.D.).

These two facts can be easily explained by the high birth rate in Israel, which currently places it as the highest in the developed world (e.g. Europe Birth Rate 1950-2023, 2023). According to Ettinger ([17], 2023),

In 2023 (based on the latest data of 2021), the Jewish fertility rate of 3.13 births per woman is higher than the 2.85 Arab fertility rate [as it has been since 2016] and the 3.01 Arab-Muslim fertility rate (as it has been since 2020).

According to Fleck ([18], 2023), the European birth rate is just about a half of it: it was 1.53 in 2021 and has been stable for the last decade. When looking at the number of births per 1000 people, the picture is similar: in Israel it has been 18.957 in 2023 ([19] Israeli Birth rate 1950-2023, 2023) while in Europe it has been 9.805 [16].

Israel's population is younger than that of all other developed countries. In France, for example, about 20.5% of the population is under 17 [20]. According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) in Israel it is about 32.6% [21].

High Rate of 0-2 Year-Olds in Public and Private Institutions

The load on both young families with newborn and the staff members of workers in the institutions for 0-2-year olds in Israel is extremely high. There are many reasons for this situation, but two of them can be changed by the government which is central Israeli government. The first is the length of paid maternity leave and the second is the poor situation in a substantial number of day care places, ranging between shortage of kindergarten teachers and helpers, inadequate education of many of the helpers, and the inadequate physical environment – the buildings, the gardens, the equipment in many public and private institutes for 0-2 year olds.

Let us first look at the data regarding the rate of 0-2-year olds enrolled in early education and care (ECEC) and primary education.

According to table B2.1 in OECD ([11], p. 187), in 2021 44% of Israeli under 2 enrolled in such public and private frames. Korea had the record, with 48%, while the average was just 17%.

Though the difference between Israel and South Korea's enrollment in ECEC of under 2 children is small, the conditions of mothers in the work place are very much different. Here are some of the differences of Korean parents which either do not apply or are reduced in Israel:

Public or private institutes for children aged 0-2 are subsidized only for children from underprivileged background, ➤ while in south Korea such institutes are free [22].

"A wide range of health services are available for young children and their families through the National Health Insurance Service, which covers almost 100 percent of the population". In Israel, which also has a national health insurance, the average expenses of a pregnancy are very high, but that has to do with the fact that Israeli mothers hold a high record in pre-birth examinations REMMENICK [23], [RONANO 24], Especially the non-Jews (e.g. [24, 25, 26]) and the Ultra-Orthodox Jews (e.g. [27]). ➤

Both Korea and Israel grant the mother of the new baby with a comparatively small present: in Korea it is the "Citizen-Happiness Vouchers" [22], and in Israel it is a birth grant. But while in Korea this modest sum is given to all pregnant women, in Israel the sum is cut by about 50% after the second child is born and by another third with the birth of the third child [28]. ➤

The length of the mother's maternity leave is similar in Israel and South Korea, as well as the 5-day paternity leave. ➤

However, while in Israel a mother is entitled to decrease her working hours by just one hour in the first four months following her returning from maternal leave, in South Korea "a one-year paid parental leave is available to all parents of children under age 8" [11].

Updated summary of maternity and paternity leave in Europe (2023) can be found in EuroDev [14] – a blog based on data from over 75 multilingual professionals, who process information about European countries in 28 categories for North American companies wishing to expand their market to Europe. In the post: "Maternity leave in Europe: Exploring policies & benefits by counties" [14] there is concise information about 24 European countries

A more concise information about parental leave in the 26 member countries of the European union reveal an extremely unflattering picture when comparing the data to the Israeli one: while in all these countries the minimal period of parental leave is 14 weeks, in Israel, where the birth rate is twice as the European average, it is also just 14 weeks. This situation challenges the work/home juggling (e.g. [28], [29]), common to all working mothers, even more, as the workload of taking care of the other children, in addition to the new born, does not decrease when the family is larger; sometimes it substantially increases as a newborn baby is not always welcome by its siblings (e.g. [30]).

In Iceland both parents are entitled to parental allowance if they had been active in the work market for at least 6 consecutive months prior to the baby's birth. In addition, they both can take temporary unpaid leave until the child is 8. In Finland each of the parents gets 164 days of paid parental leave; each of them can "pass" up to 69 days to the other parent; a single parent gets 328 paid leave. Sweden grants 240 paid leave for each of the parents, namely, 16 months paid parental leave for both.

Israel, on the other hand, has the shortest period of week of paid maternity leave + Paid parental and home care leave available to mothers: 15. The OECD average is 50.8 weeks, which is 29.5%. When taking into account the additional European countries, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Malta and Romania, who are not included in the OECD, this percentage is much lower, as the length of paid maternity leave + paid parental and home care leave available to mothers in two of these non-member countries, Bulgaria and Romania, is well over two years (110.4 and 108.7 weeks, consequently) (see OECD Family Database, 2022, table PF2.1.A).

15 Years of Compulsory Education

Israel has the world record in the duration of compulsory education. Among OECD countries, Israel is one of the 4 countries where compulsory education starts at age 3 – the others are France, Hungary, and Mexico [8]. It should be noted, though, that while both in France and Israel 100% of 3-year olds participate in ECE, in Hungary and Mexico that rate is lower, as the formal school age is higher than 6. Both in Israel and France it is 6, so in order to complete 3 years of pre-school education children are obliged by law to start kindergarten at age 3. In the UK formal school starts at age 5, so even though children do not have to complete 3 years of formal ECE, 100% of 3-year olds are enrolled in ECE and primary education (ibid, Table B2).

It should be noted, though, that while in France education has been the main tool for achieving equal opportunities for the underprivileged – especially immigrants from North Africa, this has not been the case in Israel. There is a vast literature – both research and life stories of North African Jewish families, who, in the 50ies and 60ies immigrated mainly to Israel and France. The high status – in science, literature, philosophy and politics, typical to immigrant French Jews lightens, in many cases, the situation of the others, many a time their close family members, who did not achieve a status equal to that of Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. (e.g. [31-35]).

High Enrolment in ECE of 0-2- and 3-5-Year Old Children

Israel is one of 4 OECD countries where compulsory education starts at age 3, or for 3 years before school.: the others are France, Hungary, and Mexico. There are other 4 countries where education is compulsory for 2 years before school begins: Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica and Luxembourg ([11], Annex 1, Table X1.5). In nine countries compulsory education starts just a year before the beginning of school; in some others – it starts with school, at age six or seven (ibid). But even in countries where there is no obligation to attend ECE, there are provisions for young children. For example:

both in Lithuania and Sweden, only one year of pre-primary education is mandatory, but all children can be placed in ECE for up to six years, from age 1 to 7 (ibid, Annex 1, Table X1.5).

High Rate of Children Enrolled in Pre-Primary Education for an Additional Year

The phenomenon of children staying an extra year in kindergarten has been practiced quite often in Israel (e.g. [36]. In the 2019/20 school year 130,000 5-year old children in the Jewish sector attended public compulsory education kindergartens, along with 40,461 6-7-year olds who should have attended school according to their age. which was about 31.12%. It is quite interesting that the proportion of 6-7-year olds who were still in kindergarten was much lower in the Arab sector: 36,120 5-year olds and 7160 6-7-year olds, which is 19.82% (CBS, 2021, No. 72, table 4.3, Children in pre-primary education and in day care centers, by ownership, child's age, and population group, 2019/2020). Given the fact that the educational level, as well as the socioeconomic level of Arabs in Israel is lower than that of the Jews [37] and the acquisition of the Arabic language is much harder than that of Hebrew [37, 39], and that learning to read in Arabic is more challenging than in Hebrew [40].

According to the instructions of the Israeli Ministry of education, the postponement of starting school and remaining an extra year in compulsory kindergarten [41] is “one of many options given to compulsory kindergarten children when there are doubts about their ability to adapt to school”. However, in spite of the fact that these instructions include the warning that “in some circumstances an extra year in kindergarten is the right step, but in others it will not result in the expected change and might have [negative] consequences in the long run”, this practice is still considered the most popular one in Israel in general and in high socio-economic areas in particular.

The main reason for this situation is that both the parents and the kindergarten teacher, whose opinion is highly considered in making the decision so crucial in the child's life, are usually prejudiced against “starting school too late” and hold, in many cases, the belief that “the later – the better”, namely, that if the child starts school when older, she or he has better prospects to achieve academic and social success.

Making the decision about an extra year in kindergarten requires a continuous process including many participants: the teacher, the kindergarten psychologist, the parents, as well as all relevant educational and therapeutic staff members involved, e.g. the shadow teacher, or the physical- or speech therapist. But in almost all cases the parents have “the final word”, namely, even if the professional opinion of the team is against an extra year in kindergarten but the parents insist on it, the parents' opinion is accepted.

Conclusions

Israel had reached the top of the achievements in mathematics and science among 12 European countries, the US and Australia in the first international examinations [42]. Since then the level of education has been deteriorating constantly and substantially as has been shown in many studies. (e.g. [43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48]).

In order to understand the reasons for this deterioration, hundreds of scientific works as well as journal articles had been written, most of them in Hebrew but many also in English (e.g. [49, 50, 51]).

But as has been shown, the problems the educational system in Israel has to deal with start at the very first steps of the track Israelis must go through. The first obstacle is in fact that of parents, mainly mothers: Israel has a world record of birthrate among all developed countries. But while in almost all European countries maternity leave is longer than in Israel, in many other countries paternal leave is obligatory, and the load on child care places for children under 3 is reasonable, in Israel public investigation in children aged 102 is even more meager than in 3-5 year olds, which – in its turn – is quite small, especially when compared to countries with similar GDP. In addition, salaries of kindergarten teacher, needless to mention their help, is very low, especially at the beginning of their entry to the work-market. Thus, there is always a lack of staff members in institutes for all under primary school age children, and the work of the teachers becomes more difficult, more challenging, causing burnout more often.

Education must be built on a strong basis, and such a basis requires governmental and other public money, as well as strong demand of families for better work conditions both for mothers and educators – the majority of them serve in

the highly demanding double role. Until this change is done it is going to be almost impossible to improve the failing Israeli education system.

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