

POLICY PAPER SERIES

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE
AND SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT IN ISRAEL

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Policy Paper No. 2011.11

משמעת בית-ספרית והישגים לימודיים בישראל

יוסי שביט וכרמל בלנק

נייר מדיניות מס' 2011.11

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School Discipline and Scholastic Achievement in Israel

Yossi Shavit and Carmel Blank*

Abstract

Israel's reputation as an unruly society has made school discipline a concern among educators, policymakers and the public at large. The current paper briefly summarizes a larger study on school discipline in Israel, its determinants, and its relation to pupil achievement based on TIMSS 2003 data. The fuller study is part of a nine-country international study on the relation between school discipline and pupil achievement. Its findings show Israeli pupils to be less disciplined than their international counterparts. Moreover, Israeli pupils have been found to be lower achievers despite higher levels of parental education than in the other participating countries. Can poor discipline explain the relatively low achievements? The study's conclusion is that if discipline among Israeli pupils matched the international average, the achievement gap between Israel and the other participating countries would diminish considerably but not completely vanish.

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Our thanks to Yulia Cogan at the Taub Center for preparing the graphs.

In recent years school discipline has come to the forefront of public, academic, and even political discourse in Israel. Researchers from various disciplines have expressed concern about the rising violence and poor discipline in schools (Amar, 2008; Benbenishty and Astor, 2005). The leaders of Israel's education system share this concern, not only because they consider discipline an intrinsically important educational value crucial to children's socialization, but also because they believe discipline problems are among the causes of Israel's low scores on international tests such as the TIMSS and PISA (*Knesset* Education, Culture, and Sports Committee, Nov. 19, 2003, Jan. 28, 2004, July 15, 2009; Sa'ar, March 18, 2009). Neither is the public in Israel indifferent to the poor discipline in the country's education system, especially in the form of school (and, more generally, juvenile) violence. Seventy-seven percent of respondents to surveys on this issue have expressed dissatisfaction with the level of discipline in the education system, while approximately 80 percent believe that Israel's education system is incapable of handling discipline and drug- and alcohol-related problems (Katz and Yablon, 2001). The Taub Center's Social Survey suggests that almost half the Israeli public (46 percent) consider violence the primary problem facing the education system, while the problem of academic achievement is of less importance to Israelis (Nachshon-Sharon and Blass, 2011).

The present article briefly summarizes a longer study on school discipline in Israel, its causes, and its relation to pupils' academic achievement (Shavit and Blank, forthcoming). The longer study is part of a comparative international study, headed by Professor Richard Arum of New York University, on the relation between school discipline and academic achievement in nine countries: Canada, Chile, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. In what follows, the focus will be on the relation between school discipline and academic achievement in mathematics and science.

1. *Background: An Undisciplined Culture*

Israeli society is considered undisciplined in many respects. Kfir (1997) and Smooha (in Mendel, 2007) claim that diaspora Jews living under hostile governments developed a sense of alienation from law and authority, tending to rely on special favors and informal “short-cuts” to achieve their aims. Such norms, brought by the Jewish immigrants to Israel, combined with the iconic figure of the Israeli *sabra* – sweet on the inside but thorny on the outside, flagrantly independent, rebellious, daring, and brazen – formed an ethos derisive of formality (Almog, 2004). From these cultural roots grew the prevalent Israeli patterns of irreverence for formal practices and noncompliance with the law, along with the tendency to act informally in order to “work things out” (Kfir, 1997). Other likely contributing factors to the lack of discipline in Israel are the country’s great ethnic and national diversity and its large income gap (which exceeds that of most Western countries). These significant cultural and economic gaps are likely to decrease agreement on social rules, making it even more difficult to enforce existing laws and regulations.

Exacerbating these cultural and social factors are certain features of Israeli schools which contribute to discipline problems among pupils. Classes are usually large, and their (poorly paid) teachers often complain about the difficulty of imposing order and discipline in the classroom. Teachers, like the general public, rate violence and discipline-related issues as the education system’s most serious problems (Smith and Paniel, 2003). Prior to 2009 the Israeli education system, seeking to protect its pupils’ dignity, imposed various restrictions on teachers’ punitive authority in dealing with discipline and violence problems (Student’s Rights Law, 2000; Circular of the Director General of the Ministry of Education, 4(A), 2000; Vilnai Commission Report, 2001). Ironically, by protecting the pupils’ right to avoid inappropriate punishment, such progressive legislation failed to protect the right of both students and teachers to a quiet, safe, and orderly learning environment.

This trend was reversed to some extent in 2009 (Sa'ar, March 18, 2010; Circular of the Director General of the Ministry of Education 2009 (A)). This study, however, focuses on the preceding period.

2. Findings: Discipline and Achievement in Mathematics and Science Tests

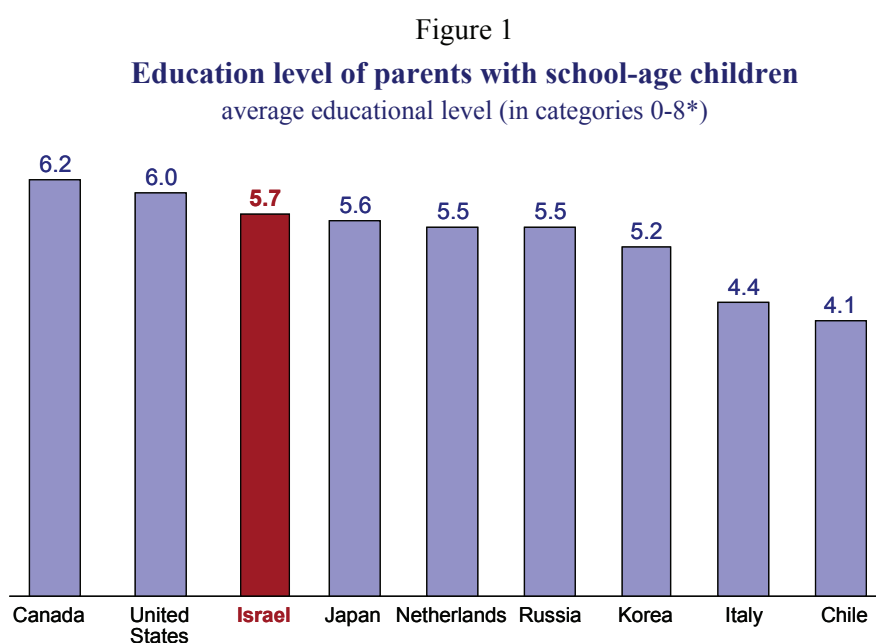
Data gathering process: The current study is based on data from TIMSS 2003, an international survey of achievement in literacy, mathematics, and science among eighth grade pupils. Israel was represented by 4,318 pupils from 146 schools (including 69 State schools, 39 State-Religious schools, and 38 schools in the Arab sector). Pupils in all schools were given self-administered questionnaires in their science and mathematics classes. Additional data were gathered from 390 science and mathematics teachers and school principals. The questionnaires completed by principals, teachers, and pupils were used to measure school discipline, pupils' personal victimization, and various background variables.

School principals were asked to report on various aspects of discipline at their respective schools, including the frequency of late arrivals, full-day absences, and skipped classes. "Disciplinary infraction" scores were given on the basis of these reports. Teachers were asked to report the frequency of classroom disruptions that interfere with their ability to teach. Pupils were asked to answer a series of questions designed to reveal to what extent they had been victimized by violence in the preceding month (e.g., whether anything was stolen from them, whether they were beaten-up, etc.) High scores on the above measures represented poor discipline and high victimization levels.

Achievement in science and mathematics was measured by tests administered as part of the science and mathematics curriculum. For the purposes of the study, a pupil's achievement was measured by his or her average test score in both subjects. Pupils' background variables included gender, age, parental education, and country of origin (Israel or other).

School variables included percent of immigrant pupils, percent of female pupils, average parental education, number of pupils, and population of the school's community (for complete details, see the full article).

The findings: A comparison between Israel and the other participating countries reveals a striking result. Though parental education in Israel was higher than the average in the nine countries (see Figure 1), the achievements of Israeli pupils were lower than average. Studies have shown parental education to be a central determinant of pupils' achievement, leading us to expect that Israel's high level of parental



* parents' education level is standardized into 8 categories for comparisons between countries (0 represents primary education or less; 8 is an academic education).

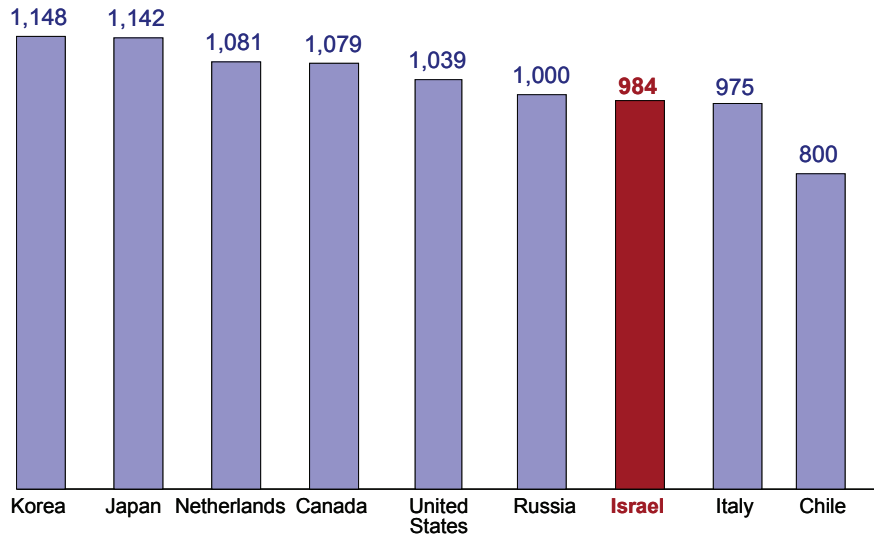
Source: Shavit and Blank, Taub Center and Tel-Aviv University.

Data: TIMSS 2003.

education would be accompanied by high academic achievement.¹ Figure 2, which compares average science and mathematics scores in the various countries, shows a picture contrary to expectations: academic achievement in Israel was lower relative to the other countries and lower than the international average by some 1028 points. What explains this gap between Israeli pupils' relatively favorable educational background and their average achievements relative to other countries?

Figure 2

Average score in mathematics and science



Source: Shavit and Blank, Taub Center and Tel-Aviv University.

Data: TIMSS 2003.

¹ Parent's education was determined by the highest course of study completed by the pupil's father or mother (or other adult guardian or "parent substitute"), standardized on an eight-category scale to enable international comparisons,

As Figure 3 shows, discipline among Israeli pupils, as measured by pupils' reports on victimization and by teachers' reports on classroom disruptions, is lower relative to the other participating countries. Discipline problems were more frequent than in most of the other countries. (Principals' reports on disciplinary infractions yielded similar findings not included in the figure to avoid confusion.)²

These findings may reinforce the concerns among Israeli policy makers that poor discipline in schools is among the causes of poor academic achievement. More complex analysis is required, however, to determine the extent to which discipline problems affect pupils' achievements.

Further analysis, not presented in this brief paper, examined the contribution of various factors to the level of school discipline. A correlation was found between discipline and certain features of school population: the percentage of female pupils and the average level of parental education were negatively correlated with discipline problems (i.e., discipline problems fell as the percentage of female pupils and the average level of parent's education rose). State and State-religious schools had similar discipline levels. Schools in the Arab sector had lower rates of disciplinary infractions and classroom disruptions than

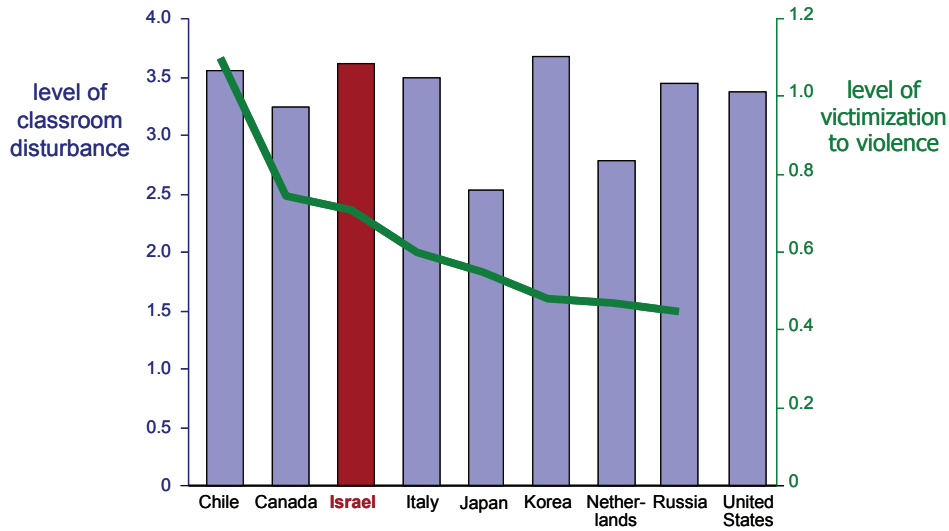
where 0 = "no or incomplete primary education" and 8 = "education beyond a first degree (B.A.)."

² Victimization levels were calculated by summing up the pupil's answers to the relevant questions (i.e., whether anything was stolen from him or her, whether he or she was beaten-up or harmed by another pupil, and whether he or she was mocked or called names by another pupil in the preceding month. Answers were given on a scale of 0-3, with $\alpha=0.56$ for all the participating countries.) Higher scores represented higher victimization levels. The frequency of classroom disruptions was measured on the basis of teachers' reports on the frequency of disruptions interfering with their ability to teach (none, few, some, much). School averages were calculated both separately for mathematics and science classes, and jointly for the entire school. Higher scores represented higher frequencies of classroom disruptions.

Jewish ones, although the levels of violent victimization were similar. (For more information, see the full study.)

Figure 3

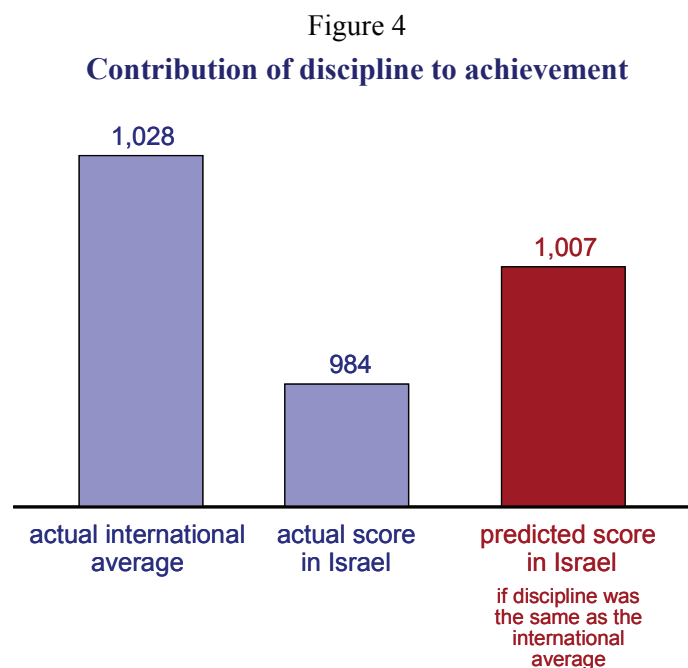
Frequency of classroom disturbances and level of victimization



Source: Shavit and Blank, Taub Center and Tel-Aviv University.
Data: TIMSS 2003.

Statistical analysis was used to assess the effect of school discipline, classroom discipline, and personal victimization on pupils' achievements, after statistically controlling for pupils' background and other school variables. Discipline problems were found to contribute negatively to achievement: higher rates of school-wide disciplinary infractions and classroom disruptions and higher victimization levels were found to be correlated with lower academic achievement.

Figure 4 presents a simulation based on the current analysis and shows how improved discipline among Israeli pupils may affect their average academic achievement. The middle column shows Israel's average science and mathematics scores on TIMSS 2003. The left-hand column shows the average scores for each of the nine countries participating in the study. The right-hand column indicates the scores Israel would obtain if discipline levels were at the same level as the international average and not lower than it.



Source: Shavit and Blank, Taub Center and Tel-Aviv University.
Data: TIMSS 2003.

The average score for Israeli pupils on TIMSS 2003 was 984, while Israel's discipline level was lower than the international average. The simulation indicates that even if Israel's discipline level matched the international average of the nine participating countries, Israeli pupils would score 23 points higher on average. While this improvement may seem insignificant to some, it would half the 44-point gap between the average Israeli and the average international scores.

3. Summary and Conclusions

School discipline in Israel is poor relative to the other countries participating in the study. Israeli pupils are also lower achievers than pupils in the other countries, despite their parents' comparatively high level of education. Israeli policymakers and the Israeli public are concerned with Israel's relatively poor achievements on international tests, tending to attribute them to poor school discipline. Based on the results of TIMSS 2003, this study indicates that improved discipline would indeed lead to significantly higher achievements.

The present study examined whether Israeli pupils' low achievements are the result of poor school discipline in light of the clear correlation between the two. The findings suggest that if Israeli discipline levels were similar to the average discipline levels in the other participating countries, Israeli achievements would come significantly closer to (while remaining lower than) the average achievement in those countries.

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