
Introduction

Shall the Crooked Be Made Straight?

The Education Plateau and the Challenge of Inequality

Yulie Tamir

We live in the most education-rich era in human history, an era when more and more people are spending more and more time studying a greater number of subjects, acquiring a comprehensive scholastic background, and pursuing academic studies. This ought to be the best of all possible worlds, a world where everyone receives an appropriate education and translates that education into social and economic power. Yet despite this, ever-larger segments of society feel that they are being marginalized, that their options are dwindling, and that their future is looking less and less bright.

For the first time in modern Western history, there is an awareness that the quality of life and life expectancies of large groups of people are declining. More people are suffering from health problems, obesity, and addiction to prescription drugs or controlled substances. Most worrisome of all is the fact that it is unlikely that future generations will be able to improve their status. A large-scale study conducted by the McKinsey & Company consulting firm in 25 OECD countries clearly shows that the coming generations will be poorer than their predecessors.

In a society that venerates economic success and power, education is evolving from a tool for individual development into a socioeconomic positioning apparatus. The appropriate answer to the question “How are your children?” is, therefore, “Compared to whom?” The value of personal achievement is calculated in terms of the power such achievement confers on the individual, and that power is calculated relative to the power wielded by others. Social competition drives not only the will to personal development, but also defensive processes that may be classed under two

* Professor Yulie Tamir served as Minister of Education from 2006 until 2009.

main strategies whose purpose is to perpetuate disparities. One of these strategies preserves the class structure and the gaps embodied in it while improving the education level; the other preserves the class structure even at the price of lowering the general education level.

It is commonly thought that disparities can be remedied by extensive investment in education for the lower socioeconomic strata. It is, therefore, interesting to note that Israeli social gaps have widened despite the fact that, over the decades of Israeli statehood, the education level of the populace as a whole, and of the country's less-affluent citizens in particular, has risen. Between 1955 and 1972, many young Israelis from disadvantaged backgrounds were sifted out of the education system by screening exams that were administered at the end of the eighth grade. However, since the early 1970s, the vast majority of Israeli children have been receiving post-primary education, while the share of those studying for thirteen years or more has climbed from less than 10 percent to nearly 50 percent. In other words, disparities have not been reduced, despite the fact that the lower socioeconomic strata have been participating in educational frameworks at ever-higher rates — from the preschools operated in low-income localities since the Compulsory Education Law was extended in 1992 to ages three and four, to post-primary and academic education.

One could argue that the education provided in Israel's periphery is of inferior quality, and attribute the persistent gaps to that. Still, when we move from a situation where a certain social group suffers total exclusion from the education system to one where it becomes an active participant in that system (even if the education received is of low quality), we can reasonably expect the gaps to narrow, not widen. The fact that social disparities worsened just at a time when public education frameworks were being made available to previously under-served communities indicates the efficacy of the forces that work to perpetuate such disparities. It also suggests that expectations of a cumulative effect from educational processes, i.e., that improving the situation for A, B, and C will translate into an overall improvement for the class or social sector to which A, B, and C belong, are not being fulfilled. On the face of it, this seems strange: if we devote special efforts to improving the health of people from the lower classes, their health status will improve and the gap between the classes will narrow (in infant-mortality or longevity terms). But if we improve the education level of the lower classes, chances are still high that the gap will remain the same or widen. When the stronger segments of society feel that new segments are joining the ranks of the highly-educated, they make supreme efforts to preserve their children's privileged status. They make use of private and

public resources for this purpose, and channel their best energies toward increasing the competitive advantage enjoyed by their children.

The economic crises that have erupted around the world since the early 2000s have further intensified competition. Over the past two decades, we have learned that increasing the availability of education frameworks and improving the quality of education do not ensure a brighter future for our descendants. The vision of a well-educated, working, thriving society to which the Western world has become addicted, is now fading. The post-World War II period led us to believe that growth in general, and educational, economic, and societal growth in particular, would never end; whenever we would look at the education graph we would see it climbing and pointing toward perpetually improving knowledge levels, earning ability, and quality of life for future generations. And then, to our astonishment, came the plateau, followed by the decline.

The education plateau was born of far-reaching societal success, coupled with an unexpected economic slowdown. Most Western societies are close to the educational saturation point. The majority of citizens attend school for many years, learning basic skills and reasoning skills that should guarantee them meaningful social mobility; in many cases, they go on to post-secondary studies. One might have expected that educational saturation would ensure unlimited mobility, as all individuals in a given society are provided with the means needed to move up. But it soon emerged that the market did not adapt to the new educational abundance. Competition intensified, and rivalry over jobs and high-powered positions intensified along with it. Under these conditions of partial scarcity, class power and a desire to preserve the hierarchical social structure underscored the importance of the mechanisms that keep the class structure in place.

An education plateau is a situation where increased quantity of education creates an oversupply that the market does not know how to utilize. This leads to a lower return on educational investment, and to brisk competition for a dwindling variety of quality opportunities. And yet, because the education “product” is becoming more readily and abundantly available, efforts to brand and distinguish between different types of this product are intensifying. Higher education effectively exemplifies this process: rising levels of participation in higher education have coincided with a decline in the economic value of the academic degree. Of course, a person without an academic degree will usually have lower earning ability than someone with a degree, but the return on one’s investment in higher education is determined not by the mere fact of having earned a degree, by the state of the market, or by demand for education, but also — and perhaps primarily —

by the prestige of the institution that awarded the degree. Since the demand for higher education has risen less rapidly than the increase in degree acquisition, a situation of educational abundance has emerged for which there is no corresponding demand. This does not mean that those without education are better off; rather, it means that there are distinctions between different types of education, and this preserves the status of affluent people who can buy the most expensive and highest-quality education available. The rest are tempted by educational options that may appear to be of similar quality, but do not confer the advantage they are seeking.

The student loan crisis in the United States proves that higher education does not provide an adequate return on investment, though the return is still perceived as substantial; young people still take out loans in order to finance their degree studies. In today's America, lower-income people are better educated than before, but also poorer, as they are encumbering their future incomes with student loan debt. In Israel, the cost of higher education is relatively low and a similar crisis should not be expected; but because the return on higher education is declining here as well, a new stratum of "educated poor" is emerging — people who have acquired academic degrees but are not earning a decent livelihood, whether because the fields they studied are not in demand (music, art, philosophy) or pay poorly (teaching, social work, nursing), or because the institutions they attended lack prestige, or because there is a glut of graduates in their chosen professions (law, for example).

Regarding educational quality, in Israel, as in the US, the class disparity remains. Admission to a high-demand, potentially lucrative course of study, at one of the more prestigious institutions, entails high matriculation scores, a high psychometric exam score, and, often, service in an elite IDF unit. Since all of these things are largely dependent on parental education levels and income, the class structure is perpetuated and existing social stratification is left undisturbed. It turns out that making education available to more and more people does not, in and of itself, bridge social gaps — it actually widens them. In other words, society as a whole becomes more "educated," but the disparities remain and even worsen.

Even in our present education-saturated world, maternal education level is the best predictor of a young person's success — a fact that suggests how hard it is to counterbalance the effect of the home environment through systemic intervention. The fact that highly-educated mothers tend to bring children into the world with similarly-educated partners means that parental advantage generally reinforces itself. One can actually discern the emergence of educated classes that are replicating the socioeconomic power structure.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Hanna Ayalon, Nachum Blass, Yariv Feniger, and Yossi Shavit conclude, in this compelling book, that there are no simple solutions to the inequality problem. A single, well-known insight resounds from every chapter: educational inequality is a reflection of the academic and general inequality of the parents. In an inequitable social system, the drive to perpetuate class power is one of the strongest forces in operation. What this means is that parents will do whatever they can to assure their children of the advantages that they themselves enjoy. The outcome is an exacerbation of existing inequalities, and the creation of a social hierarchy in which the strong safeguard their status from all possible threats.

We need to admit that we know very little about how to bridge gaps effectively and promote equality of opportunity. In competitive societies, the education race has no finish line. The desire to climb within the socioeconomic hierarchy (or at least to stay where one already is) perpetually stokes consumer anxiety among parents, and makes it impossible to reach a state of educational satiety. In other words, as long as class competition fulfills a central social function and plays a major role in identity-consciousness, attempts to row against the current are almost always doomed to failure. Thus, the place to launch the struggle for educational equality lies far from the classroom. What is needed is a change in the prevailing discourse on society and status. This is not meant to imply that bridging gaps is a lost cause. The opposite is true. There is a growing awareness of the damage caused by socioeconomic disparities, of the distress in which the middle class is mired, and of middle-class people's growing fear of sliding into poverty. There are also early signs of concern on the part of the ultra-wealthy, who feel a moral duty to bequeath their wealth to society. These things testify to change and to the beginnings of a discourse favoring decisions oriented toward equitable distribution.

The attempt to separate education from society, to make local educational corrections without reorganizing the existing value and social systems, perpetuates the problem: the strong will make full use of the advantages the system confers upon them while adding a little extra of their own, while the weak will make limited use of their own advantages and remain weak. Education and class separatism will remain intact, as will society's division into subgroups linked by ever-weakening ties.

Education and teachers cannot be made to bear the full responsibility for problems of economic growth and the persistence of social disparities. Focusing on education makes it easier for governments to leave the social order in its existing materialistic, inequitable, insular, and solidarity-poor

state. It also obviates the need to figure out how to create a social system that is fair and that inspires sufficient trust that we can fund it willingly, even if it serves broader interests than our own and those of our children; or how to divide up resources so as to bridge social gaps and ensure that social opportunities are distributed more equitably. Barring change of this magnitude, what looks like a process of educational change is merely local correction destined to preserve the existing unjust, class-based social structure, and to create a professional work force capable of participating in the labor market and strengthening it, but not of generating societal change. This does not mean that we should release the education system from all commitment to continuous improvement or constant effort to actualize social values and advance the goals set for it. But we should refrain from charging teachers, or the education system as a whole, with tasks that are beyond their powers. The desired change will come only if we learn how to situate the relevant educational processes along a continuum of political, social, legislative, and economic change that will place the demands being made of the system in the proper context, and provide the system with the set of conditions needed to fulfill those demands.

Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts. Without change in the value system or the way in which Israeli citizens make decisions and manage their affairs, the education system will continue to reflect what we would prefer not to see — the lack of social and class solidarity, the veneration of personal success, and the selfish priorities that characterize contemporary Israeli society. Janusz Korczak said that “to repair the world is to repair education,” but in our current reality that aphorism needs to be turned on its head: we will be able to repair education only if we aspire to repair the world. Only then will education cease to be a tool for perpetuating the existing state of affairs and become a means of changing and improving society.

A realization that the free market cannot cope with today’s social and political challenges is seeping into Western societies, and there is a growing recognition that the state — as a defense apparatus and security net — is crucial both for the homeless sleeping in the street, and for the large banks. In times of crisis, there is no substitute for the state. The societal changes required are systemic ones that can be made only via governmental tools. We must, therefore, ask how the state can build social and educational support systems that will advance educational and social objectives, and how, based on an understanding of the present crisis, we can strengthen the public systems generally, and the education system specifically, and give them the support they need.

Cooperation between the various systems, and societal willingness to take the value-system that education represents and implement it in the renewed political and social space, can provide an alternative to the current social vision in which the strong are the winners and the weak are marginalized. This kind of systemic change will entail a recognition of the huge gap between the values that society openly embraces, and those that guide its actual behavior; it will require that the corrective and legislative entities, including the courts, take into consideration the values that the education system represents and cultivates; and it will oblige the middle and upper classes to relinquish a small share of the advantages that they are amassing for their children, in the form of money and human capital. In order for such change to occur, it will be necessary to bolster trust in the public education and economic systems; to curtail the constant supervision to which the public sector is subjected via endless tests, evaluations, forms, criteria, and rules; and to allow public services to do their work – to serve the public. The benefit reaped from such change could potentially be great. It could encourage dialogue between members of different communities and classes, soothe middle-class anxieties about being crushed under the wheels of the global economy, strengthen community and national relations, and quell the desire to perpetuate or widen existing gaps.

The past decade has taught us that overly-competitive societies, where each individual is concerned solely for themselves, can be expected to be the main losers of the coming decades. Perhaps the fear of losing what one has (the main driver of human action) will cause those with the power to effect change to halt the race for personal success and to think about group success as the key to a better life. Understanding that the education system has only limited impact and requires cooperation on the part of the political and legal systems, as well as large-scale public support, does not constitute giving up. The road to change is grueling and arduous, but not impassable. Change entails collaboration between various social and public systems, and an understanding that we have no alternative but to try and formulate a new social contract, one with costs for the individual but tremendous profits as well.