

Israel

SAGE Sociology of Education: An A-to-Z Guide

The state of Israel is located at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Europe, on the Levant coast of the Mediterranean. There, a growing population from diverse societies converges in a slice of land the size of New Jersey. Territorial acquisitions and disengagements as a result of wars and treaties have altered the size of the Jewish state since its formal inception in 1948: Sinai (1952-1959, 1973-1979), Judea and Samaria (1967-present), Golan Heights (1973-present), Southern Lebanon (1978, 1982-2000), Gaza Strip (1973-2005), and East Jerusalem (1967-present). Despite its tumultuous history, Israel has steadily developed to become the 41st largest global economy in 2010 with a GDP of 217 billion USD. Approximately 7% of its GDP (15 billion USD) was spent on education.

Historical Context

Prior to Israel's Independence, the area was ruled by numerous empires: British, Ottomans, Mamluks, Crusaders, Umayyads, Byzantines, Romans, Israelites and Judeans, and others. Ancient Israel was a cradle of global religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Modern Israel remains a focal point for these religions as well as the Druze, Bahai, and Samaritan religions. The influence of prior empires remains in aspects of the population and social structure today, particularly since the remigration of Jews to their ancestral homeland.

Between 1881 and 1929 four waves of Aliyah (Jewish migration to Israel) occurred under the auspices of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). Under the Balfour Declaration (1917), the British accepted Jews' right to establish a homeland in Palestine. During the colonial period, the Jewish population grew dramatically, but local Arabs remained the majority until many were exiled after the independence war (1948-1949), an event known in Arabic as the Nakba (disaster).

Diverse waves of Aliyah have persisted to the present; Holocaust survivors, Yemenites, Moroccans, Iraqis, Iranians, Romanians, Ethiopians, and others have arrived in mass migrations. With the arrival of 976,988 immigrants from the former Soviet Union (1990-2008) Israel has surpassed the USA as the largest Jewish population in the world. In 2009 Israel's population stood at 7,552,000 (5,703,700 Jews, 1,286,500 Muslim Arabs, 312,800 Non-Jewish Non-Arabs, 249,100 Non-Muslim Arabs). This statistic does not include the current 2,448,433 Arabs in the West Bank, 1,486,816 Arabs in Gaza, and 220,000 foreign workers and refugees in Israel proper.

Educational History

Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, enacted the compulsory education law in 1949, providing free education for all children between the ages of 5 and 13. Arab schools faced difficulties resulting from an influx of students required to attend school, a lack of qualified teachers (as many had fled), and confusion from Jewish administrators. Jewish schools faced difficulties integrating the new immigrant populations.

Pre and post-independence Jewish schools became increasingly split along secular, religious, and other tracks. Each track set up its own curricula and standards. Mizrahim (Oriental Jews) gravitated toward religious-Zionist schools, Ashkenazim (European Jews) toward secular-Zionist schools, and Haredim (Ultra-Orthodox Jews) toward non-Zionist religious schools. Schools became a breeding ground for party politics. This led to a phenomenon called soul-stalking where schools actively campaigned for students. The Frumkin Commission (1950) was established to investigate soul-stalking after religious families complained their children were being secularized. Although the government signed the State Education Law (1953), in practice the law didn't impact the religious and independent schools dependent on religious parties.

The Mizrahi immigrants were frequently placed in peripheral areas of the country in Ma'abarot, makeshift tent villages, which later became Development Towns. These towns often offered sub-par schools, making it difficult for students to pass the Bagrut (matriculation exam). The government began an affirmative action policy, lowering the high school admission standards for specific ethnicities. Later, the Free Compulsory Education Law (1979) mandated public education for all children between the ages of 5 and 18. The Israeli Pupil's Rights Law (2000) allowed minorities to attend the school closest to their residence.

Educational Structure

The Israeli school system is divided into state-secular, state-religious, state-Arab, and Haredi sectors. 1,530,237 students were enrolled in primary and secondary schools in 2010 (43% secular, 27% Arab, 17% Haredi, and 13% religious). Typically, a student will attend 4 levels of school: pre-primary (ages 2-5), primary (grades 1-6), lower secondary (7-9), and upper secondary (grades 10-12) with a few local variations. The Ministry of Education and Culture administers all public schools, although Haredi schools maintain greater autonomy. All state schools are free and run from Sunday to Friday. Mandatory high school subjects include Bible, Math, English, Literature, History, Hebrew, and Citizenship with differing amounts of credit depending on the school's track.

Eight national universities are competitive at a global level, and a growing number of private colleges offer post-secondary education. University admission is dependent on performance on the Bagrut (matriculation exam). Students who do not receive sufficient matriculation scores for their selected course of studies often elect to take Mechina (a one-year college preparatory track) and/or a Psychometric examination. A Matnas (Center for Culture, Youth and Sport), usually run by local government with support from the Ministry of Education, offers supplemental educational programs for children and adults. In addition, Ulpans (Hebrew language programs) serve a crucial role in educating new immigrants.

Current Issues

Achieving educational equity between the different Jewish ethnicities and Arabs remains a major issue. Gaps have decreased between Jewish ethnicities but still persist. Besides the traditional Mizrahi-Ashkenazi comparison, recent research looks at Russian, Ethiopian, and other recent immigrants. Discrepancies in achievement between Jews and Muslims are more apparent. Only 49% of Muslims passed the 2010 matriculation exam, compared to 70% of Jews. Muslim students drop out of school more frequently and at a younger age, meaning less will take the exam. In 2010 10% of Muslims dropped out at grade 9, compared to 3% of Jews.

Lack of educational resources has been cited as a cause of the educational gap. Many Arab students are relegated to poor, overcrowded schools. In 1959 average class size in Arab schools was 63.1, compared to 32.3 in Jewish schools. By 2010 the situation had improved to 28.3 students in Arab schools and 26.0 in Jewish, with both groups still claiming overcrowding. Although Arabs make up 20% of the population, only 12% of undergraduate students were Arab in 2010. There are signs though that the situation is improving, as only 8% of undergraduate students were Arab in 2005.

The persistence of educational inequalities is often associated with cultural bias in the curricula and teaching standards. Arabic textbooks contain numerous grammatical errors and cultural biases favoring the Zionist narrative, such as excluding the word “Nakba” from textbooks. Likewise, Hebrew textbooks commonly present Arabs as instigators of conflict. In 1999 new history textbooks were introduced to promote multiculturalism between Jews and Arabs but are still criticized for their Zionist bias. Additional subjects for media and academic research include the curriculum and rules of Haredi schools, religious education in public schools, youth groups (scouts, etc.), teacher quality (Dovrat Commission 2004), teacher strikes, academic boycotts, Israeli-Arab educational projects, education in the occupied territories, and many other topics. Indeed for a country so small, Israel presents a large potential for studies on the sociology of education.

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See Also: Religious Education; Racial inequality: achievement; Racism in education; Class inequality: achievement; Textbooks; Jordan

Further Readings

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