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Diagnosing and schooling of gifted children: The example of Israel

Introduction

Formal gifted education started in 1973 when the Israeli Ministry of Education opened the first two classes for the gifted, functioning 6 days a week: a grade 3 class in Tel Aviv and a grade 4 class in Haifa, as well as the first enrichment program in Jerusalem. In the next four decades only 3 more elementary schools had gifted classes – altogether three schools had grade 3-6 classes, one – grade 4-6 and one grade 3-8. In the 2015/16 school years two more schools had gifted classes, one had grade 3 and 4 and the other just grade 3 classes for the gifted (Special classes in elementary schools, 2016). In addition, in the 2015/6 school year 56 enrichment program from the gifted operated in the Jewish and in the Arab sectors (38 and 18 respectively) (Enrichment programs for the gifted, 2016)

In Israel the government provides generously for the gifted (e.g. Freeman, 2002). Furthermore, a later report (Freeman et al, 2010) "found that of all surveyed countries only Israel provided gifted education for all children, Jewish and Arab and had a special department for gifted children in the ministry of education" (David, 2017). This means that despite the full coverage of identification results in identifying about 5000 students every year as "gifted" or "excelling" only about 125 – 0.25% – have had the opportunity to enroll in a gifted class operating 6 days a week. In 2015, 15 schools had gifted junior high school classes – all in the Jewish sector (Special classes in junior high schools, 2015). Fifteen Jewish high schools as well as three Arab schools also had gifted classes (Special classes in high schools, 2015).

I shall hereby describe the process of diagnosing of giftedness in Israel, give a short summary of all the main existing programs for schooling of the gifted, and conclude with a critique of this system which might be most useful for a growing up system, such as the future Swiss gifted education.

Diagnosing the gifted in Israel

I. How are gifted students diagnosed in Israel?

All elementary school students in Israel are eligible to a free screening for giftedness. The Henrietta Szold Institute, The National Institute for Research in the Behavioral Sciences, administers the selection examinations for the special programs for gifted and excelling students for the Ministry of Education. These examinations are given in grade 2 or 3 and they have two stages: in stage 1 all students take an initial 'filtering' examination in literacy and arithmetic. The top 15% achieving students of each class are invited to take the stage 2 examinations which aim to assess the general cognitive ability of the students. After stage 2 of the examinations is performed, the top 1.5-5% of students are invited to participate in a variety of programs for the gifted and excelling, taking place in about 50 Israeli centers (David, 2014c, p. 89).

Students who were enrolled in one of the 5 elementary school whole-week gifted programs are entitled to join a gifted class in a junior high school at their home-town; students who participated in an enrichment program must take another screening for giftedness examination at the end of elementary school in order to start studying in such a class (Being accepted to a gifted class in high school, 2016).

In addition, as stated by Freeman et al. (2010, Box 1, p. 12), "Israel identifies the top 10% with a combination of cognitive tests and teachers' 'gut feelings'. The top 0.5% are seen as different and termed 'super-gifted' or 'geniuses.'" Unlike other countries, where gifted education started much later (e.g. David & Wu, 2012) but which have already developed suitable teachers for the gifted, Israel suffers, as many other Middle Eastern countries, from a lack of good teachers in general and of teachers for the gifted in particular (e.g. David, 2011, 2015, 2016).

II. Problems of the diagnosing for giftedness system in Israel

Here is a list of the main problems in the Israeli system of diagnosing the gifted.

* The only way to be accepted into one of the programs for gifted students is by passing the Szold examinations. However, **the Szold examinations have neither reliability nor validity.** There are many cases of children with IQ's in the 150 and 160 range who have not "passed" the giftedness screening (e.g. David, 2012). According to the publication of the Ministry of Education "There is evidence of gender and culture bias in this test (A survey of cognitive ability tests, 2006, p. 39).

* **The giftedness tests have never been exposed to the public**. The data regarding them is not available to the general public (ibid). According to the Israeli Ministry of education these examinations are revised every year but there is no proof that this is the case. In the last 4 decades no attempt to publish an example of these examinations has been successful.

* In the last two decades the Israeli Ministry of Education has announced on numerous occasions the implementation of an improved version of the identification exams. Unfortunately, **the promise of "new tools" for identification of the gifted in Israel** (e.g. Burg, 1988; Identifying and nurturing giftedness, 1989; Vorgan, 2006) **has not been realized**; no new assessment tools have been adopted.

According to David (2014d) the main additional problems in identifying the gifted in Israel are of divided to:

* **Problems stemming from the tests themselves**. Among them are: Under-identification of the gifted, as the rate of false positives found is low and the rate of false negatives is high; Low ceiling. The 1960/1973 version of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence scale had an "inadequate ceiling for adolescents and highly gifted examinees" (Becker, 2013, p. 7), the revised Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale: Fourth Edition (Thorndike et al., 1986) had a ceiling of IQ=148 (David, 2014d); it was translated into Arabic only in 1998. However, it was still too low for those with IQ>150, a sub-population estimated as 1:1000. The Stanford-Binet fifth edition was published in English in 2003; it was translated neither to Hebrew nor to Arabic, which is a main problem as 20% of Israeli students are Arabs and they are examined in Arabic.

* **Lack of proper identification and support of gifted students with learning disabilities** (e.g. Al-Amiri, 2011; Al-Hroub, & Whitebread, 2008; Al-Hroub, 2013).

Schooling of gifted students in Israel

I. How are gifted students taught in Israel?

Special Programs for the Gifted Student

Each student identified as gifted in Israel is entitled to some gifted education. However, gifted classes in elementary school give a full answer, 6 days a week, to less than 2% of those identified

as gifted, while the enrichment programs have a social aim: as means for getting to know other gifted children, as a place of refuge for many gifted students who are bored in their regular classes 5 days a week and for one day have a more interested place to go to, or as a place where students can be introduced to subjects not learnt in school.

AS already mentioned, there are many more junior- and high school classes for the gifted, but in many cases the material taught there is neither on a ghi enough level or does not challenge the students who wishes to learn in a much more accelerated track than the one offered even in the gifted class, While some of teachers in the gifted classes are excellent regarding both their knowledge and their attitude towards the students, mores are not. Thus, leaning in a gifted junior high school or high school class does not give the student a full answer to her or his academic needs.

The fact that many highly gifted students – mainly boys – are not accepted to the governmental programs is partially compensated by other programs – initiated by private schools, higher education institutions, private organizations and non-profit organizations. Here is a short description of some of the most successful such programs.

Programs for the mathematically gifted

Two of the most demanding programs for mathematically gifted students are acceleration programs: 1. The Program for Youth Talented in Mathematics (2016) located at the Bar Ilan University and at the Tel Aviv University (David, 2008). The first includes currently about 5000 students in grades 6-10 from all over Israel who are placed in 3 tracks: Math enrichment; math acceleration, where the students take the challenging matriculation math exam in grad 10 rather than at the end of grade 12; and academic education for 16-year olds. 2. The Beno Arbel Program for Outstanding Mathematics Students (2016), formerly the Mathematics Acceleration Program, Tel Aviv University, is for mathematically precocious 13-15- year-old students in Tel Aviv and its adjoining cities. During one school year, eligible students are exposed to subjects such as set theory or basic calculus, and then start their mathematical education as first-year university students while still in high-school. Many of these students receive their Bachelor degree – some even their Master's – before their 19th birthday.

Science programs for the gifted

There are also various programs both in Hebrew and Arabic for youth interested in science at The Dov Lautman Unit for Science Oriented Youth, Tel Aviv University (2016), founded in 1981; The Students' Unit: Davidson Institute (2016), Weizmann Institute of Science programs, including distance learning, e-learning, science summer camps and other tools of integrating technology into science education; Science activities for children and youth (2015) organized by the Hebrew University both in Jerusalem and in Rechovot (at the faculty of agriculture); The Ilan Ramon Youth Physics Center (2015), and the newly opened Jusidman center for youths (2015) at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheba, for science and arts.

Special high level schools

Unlike the special gifted classes described above, the special schools are not labeled as "schools for the gifted." What follows is a description of five such exemplary Israeli institutes.

Israel Arts and Science Academy (IASA) (2016). Founded in 1990 for grades 10-12 outstanding students – not necessarily identified as gifted; a boarding school with a unique educational environment for the nurture of exceptional talent in science, mathematics, music and the graphic arts. The target population has been youth from the entire State, Orthodox and secular Jews, Muslim, Christian, and Druze Arabs who have shown exceptional talent or potential. Every year this school sends delegations to various national and international competitions and Olympiads.

The MOFET Association (2015), formerly Amuta Jerusalem School of Physics and Mathematics (Passow, 1995). The Amuta Jerusalem was founded in 1992, following the massive immigration of about 700,000 Jews from the Ex-USSR countries to Israel. Its aim was to help high school gifted children-repatriates adjust to the Israeli system of education. In its current form, which started in 1997, The MOFET Association (2015) has spread its unique science classes to hundreds of grade 7-12 classes in no less than 12 major cities, offering math, physics, computer science and English high level classes, as well as personal empowerment for the students, their parents, and their teachers.

The Young Persons' Institute for the Promotion of Excellence and Creativity (currently: The Erika Landau Institute). The late Dr. Erika Landau was the founder and CEO at The Young Person's Institute for the Promotion of Creativity and Excellence, Tel Aviv Israel since 1969. Erika Landau Institute for Youth Advancement of creativity and excellence (2016), operating at

Tel Aviv University, is the oldest and largest framework in the country to promote talented and gifted children. Since its establishment as an association, more than 40,000 students have taken enrichment classes at the Institute.

Future scientists and inventors of Israel. This program develops and nurtures grade 9-12 motivated students with high abilities and scientific aptitude who have not realized their potential (Future scientists and inventors, 2016). The Dov Lautman Unit for Science Oriented Youth (2016) was the first higher education institution that adopted this program in 2009; today its partners are also the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Technion, the Ben Gurion University of the Negev and the Tel Chai academic college, as well as 8 additional institutions.

Noam Center: Mathematics for Talented Youth at the Technion (2016) is in charge of four different mathematics programs aimed primarily for high school students.

Gifted education in Israel does not necessarily help the gifted materialize their gifts (David, 2013). Achievements of Israelis are far less than would have been expected for a population that includes almost half of the Jews in the world.

II. Problems in the schooling of gifted students in Israel

One of the main problems in the schooling of gifted students in Israel is inequity**.**

*** Arab-Jewish inequity:**

Until the 2013/4 school year there was no gifted education for Arab high school students in the general education system (David, 2014a, p. 21). By 2014 the number of gifted classes for high school children in the Jewish sector was about 90 (Special classes in Junior high schools, 2016; Special classes in high schools, 2016).

*** Boys-girls inequity:**

The affirmative action favoring girls in acceptance to the gifted programs means discrimination against boys. When at least 40% of those accepted to them are girls in some municipalities the prospects of a girl to get accepted is twice as high as that of a boy. In addition of being unfair this policy results in a very high rate of dropout of gifted girls from the gifted classes.

*** Geographical inequity:**

The geographical component in accepting children to gifted programs (David et al., 2009) should not be adopted per se. While it is it quite logical that in order to have a fair criteria for the gifted enrichment program in Hura (Arabic: حورة), a Bedouin village in the South District of Israel, the criterion of IQ higher than 125 is both logical and fair, it is not fair that children with measured IQ of 150 and 160 would not be accepted as has been the case in some Jewish municipalities (David, 2012).

*** Age inequity:**

Age should not be a component in diagnosing the gifted. As has been found, both in the US (e.g. Huang, 2015) and in Israel (Segev & Cahan, 2014) that older children are more likely to be accepted to gifted programs. In Israel the findings of the whole population screened in 2011 – 67,366 second grade students, 1.4% of whom were enrolled in a gifted program, reveal an almost perfect correlation between chronological age and the probability of being selected for a gifted program ($r2 = 0.92$): older students have approximately 3.5 times greater chance of acceptance than younger students.

Lack of main means for supporting the gifted

*** Grade-skipping** is both complicate and rare in Israel (Dracup, 201b); Grade-skipping should be easier to decide upon and used more frequently as means to help gifted children both academically and socially (e.g. Larsen McClarty, 2015)

* The substantial gap between the use of the term **creativity** in practically all programs for the gifted and the actuality of its limited place. The nurturing of creativity is not to be found in the programs of the Israeli Ministry of Education – though it is implemented at the Erika Landau Institute (2016), which is a non-profit organization.

*** Dynamic assessment,** a preferred means of diagnosis (David, 2016), is not a part of the diagnosing process in Israel neither is it applied for the children identified as gifted.

Conclusion: There is **no evidence of any advantages that graduates of the activities of the Ministry of Education have over other students**. In addition, the students with the highest achievements in the matriculation examinations, acceptance rate to high prestigious universities

in Israel and abroad are the graduates of Christian schools – with at least half of its population being Muslim (e.g. David, 2002, 2014a, b). These schools do not participate in the Israeli programs for the gifted initiated by the Ministry of Education. Let us look at some of these best schools and program.

In summa: We can thus conclude that many gifted Israeli children do not fulfill their potential.

The main reasons are:

1. The inappropriate identification system,
2. The affirmative action that contributes to many highly gifted boys not to be accepted to the programs while many accepted girls either choose not to participate or dropout;
3. The lack of suitable teachers (e.g. David, 2011, 2015);
4. The lack of psychological and social support of professionals who are experts in psychology of the gifted and didactics for the gifted,
5. The very limited variety of educational programs for the gifted;
6. The lack of research about the efficiency of gifted education in Israel.

What to do and what not to:

Lessons from the Israeli diagnosing and nurturing-the gifted system

1. The main lesson that can be learnt from the diagnosing and teaching the gifted Israeli system is that the label "gifted" attached to grade 2 students is potentially harmful, and not only does it not assure materializing the high potential it is expected to predict – in many cases being "more gifted" predicted less success in adulthood, as Mudrak, & Zabrodska (2015) have summarized (p. 55):

> Bloom (1985), in his now classic study Developing Talent in Young People, found that only a relatively small percentage of successful professionals in various domains had been considered gifted as children. These professionals were usually outperformed by some "more gifted" peers during childhood and only later, typically during adolescence, began to strive for high levels of adult performance.

2. Gifted learners should be both accelerated and enriched in the three main areas: mathematics, science, and languages – including their mother tongue (Hebrew or Arabic). This has not been

done in the Jewish sector but has been successfully implied in the Arab. As it is quite difficult for gifted Arab students to compete with gifted Jews regarding admission to prestigious higher education institutes, the three main solutions Arab parents have developed include sending their children to high quality Christian institutions if available, even when the students are Muslim; send their high ability high school graduates to study abroad; and/or demand that their gifted children learn Mathematics, English, Hebrew, and Arabic in the enrichment programs unlike in the Jewish enrichment for the gifted centers, where only enrichment courses are available (David, 2014a).

3. Joining a gifted program for junior- and high school students should be **conditioned by actual achievements** in academic or non-academic areas, such as sports, arts, music, chess, etc.

4. Identification for giftedness does not guarantee suitable gifted education for the needs of the gifted.

5. No single criterion for assessment. In a study of 14 of the most influential American test-writers, who developed 22 tests it was found that most test authors in the sample embraced a multi-dimensional approach to gifted assessment (Valler et al., 2016).

6. Re-assessing students participating in gifted programs. Giftedness is a changing concept; if a child is identified as gifted at age 7, as is the case in Israel, it should be unfair both for his and for other children who have not been labeled as gifted to keep him in a gifted program when it is not suitable for him, while denying other children the opportunity to join such an opportunity (Valler et al., 2016).

7. Only **high level professionals who like working with children will be the teachers** of the gifted. The existing programs for teachers' training has been proven as a failure as has been shown by Vidergor (2010). There has not been a curriculum developed for gifted students learning either in regular or in special classes (Vidergor & Eilam, 2010). On the other hand, enrichment programs, which had in the past hired high level professionals without any pedagogical training proved to be very successful (David, 2015). Vidergor (2010) has summarized this phenomenon:

> […] the teachers of the gifted in this program [=the enrichment program for the gifted weekly program] that have not studied in any of the training programs enlarged their knowledge, based on field experience, similarly to those studies in one of the training programs (p. 9).

8. When starting a new program for the gifted **psychological support** must be guaranteed to the students, their parents and the teaching teams.

9. Any program aimed for the gifted should be accompanied by **research** – before, during and after each time-period of its functioning. In spite of the full identification of giftedness in Israel, the very small percentage of gifted students who actually get any gifted education, the fact that gifted education is centralized, so collection of data should be uncomplicated, the small size of Israel, its being the only country surveyed by Freeman et al. (2010) who has a department of gifted education there is almost no Israeli research about potential influences of education for the gifted and achievements in Israel.

In summa: in spite of the fact that all Israeli students are entitled for free screening for giftedness, Israel being the only country with a department of gifted education, gifted education in Israel lacks professionalism and does not serve its goals. No study proves – or even shows – that the 43-year huge investment in gifted education in Israel has resulted in any achievements. Unless the conditions described are fulfilled there are no visible prospects of a change in the current situation.

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