Comparing Failure: Social Reproduction and Change in the Israeli Educational System

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My goal in this proposed dissertation research is to investigate how the Israeli state educational system both reproduces and transforms the social structure of that country. To accomplish this, I will undertake a comparative ethnographic study of three secular secondary schools in Israel, determining how state education reinforces and reproduces ethnic, class, and gender differences. To this end, I will consider what role state-wide educational curricula, materials, standards, structure, teaching methods, vocational tracking, quotas, and resistance play in educational achievement. I will also investigate how differing applications of these educational standards, materials and procedures by teachers, students and administrators reproduces or changes the existing social structure. I want to examine how school personnel, the government, and members of different social categories define educational success or failure, and under what circumstances they deploy their definitions. Finally, I wish to examine how the historical legacy of the Israeli State, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Middle East reflect, and are reflected by the current status of education in Israel.

Research Questions: Israeli society is typically portrayed as polarized by the common-sense division of Arab and Jew. From this perspective, the European or Ashkinazi Jews, the dominant ethnic group, belong to the upper strata of Israeli class structure, and the majority of its Palestinian citizens (Green-Line Palestinians) exist on its lowest levels (Haidar 1995; Lustick 1980; Zureik 1993). However, a picture of Israeli society taken from the vantage point of the slums of south Tel Aviv or of lower Haifa, and from the development towns of the Negev Desert or the poor cooperative villages straddling the national borders reveals a 'second' Jewish Israel. It is composed of Mizraḥim, the 'Oriental' or Sephardi Jewish immigrants from Morocco, Yemen, Iraq, and other non-European countries. This population constitutes the majority of Jewish citizens of Israel. Like the Green-Line Palestinians, most Mizraḥi Jews are working-class, living on or below the poverty line, and are a stigmatized ethnic community (Giladi 1990; Shohat 1988; Swirski 1989).

These social divisions are marked by different levels of educational achievement. Like the Green-Line Palestinians, the Mizraḥi communities have an extremely high rate of educational failure (Al-Haj 1995; Swirski 1990). Both groups have approximately twice the school drop-out rate of the Ashkinazim (*Statistical Abstract of Israel* 1995). What do these disparate rates of educational failure tell us about the education of persons of non-European descent in Israel? Why, in spite of governmental and social programs designed to increase school attendance and improve school performance, have the per-capita rates of university attendance of Green-Line Palestinian and Mizraḥi populations remained significantly lower than that of the Ashkinazim? In this project I will focus on two inter-related questions in an attempt to understand how the persisting educational under-achievement of Palestinians and Mizraḥim in Israel contributes to social reproduction;

1. *By what processes are the social inequalities of Mizraḥi Jews and Green-Line Palestinians reproduced or transformed through the state educational system?*

2. *How are the social and educational opportunities of Mizraḥi Jews and Green-Line Palestinians to be understood in relation to one another and to those of the Ashkinazim?*

Guided by these two questions, I hope to explain the process by which the educational system actively reproduces and transforms Israeli society and culture. By examining the shared characteristics of two subordinate ethnic groups, Mizraḥi Jews and Green-Line Palestinians, and their respective relations to the dominant ethnic group in Israel, the Ashkinazim, I propose to examine not only Israeli education, but also the structure of Israeli society.

Significance and Theoretical Background of Research Questions: Several Israeli educational researchers have addressed aspects of the first question outlined above, most notably Majid Al-Haj (1995), Sami Mar'i (1978) and Shlomo Swirski (1990). Their contributions provide the groundwork which makes my study possible. These authors suggest that discrepancies in educational achievement between ethnic groups is rooted within the structural inequalities of Israeli society. Moreover, they suggest that ethnic, class and gendered inequalities are reproduced by the Israeli educational system. This research has led to new insights in studies of Israeli education through analyses of institutional structures. However, these studies have often overlooked the views and actions of both teachers and students of these different communities. My project, while building upon the vital work of these researchers, will be informed by the theoretical and methodological frameworks developed by anthropological and ethnographic approaches to education and social reproduction. These studies examine the views and actions of both teachers and students, regarding education as a site of contestation where social inequalities are both resisted and reproduced. In this view, both teachers and students are active participants in education, rather than passive victims of pre-determined structural inequalities.

This dual role of education, both as gate-keeper and facilitator of social mobility, and as a site of contestation is well document in several ethnographic studies of educational inequality. For example, Paul Willis' pioneering school ethnography, *Learning to Labor* (1977) examines the factors which persuade working-class 'lads' to leave school, and accept, reluctantly or not, working-class jobs. Willis concludes that the youths' rebellion against mainstream society serves, ironically, to reproduce themselves as workers. Similarly, Douglas Foley's *Learning Capitalist Culture* (1990) argues that through classroom rebellion, participation in high-school sports, and other typical American adolescent behaviors, youths in a small town in south Texas both learn and reproduce their class position. Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1995) seeks to examine in a comparative framework how 'racial' and class based inequalities are reproduced through education, structural inequalities, and counter-culture. Lois Weis' *Working Class without Work* (1990) examines the reproduction of gender and class identities in a failing steel-mill town. Weis adopts a comparative framework, showing how women and men of diverse class and ethnic backgrounds understand and use the educational system in different ways.

Unlike Weis' ethnography, most educational research has isolated its subject, avoiding comparisons which involve the reproduction of more than one form of inequality. For example, Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor* (1977) does not concern itself with those working-class youths who are not 'one of the lads,' meaning the working-class 'lasses' who compose at least half of the population, and those youths who are not of Anglo origin, a sizable minority in 1970s England. As Gilroy (1991) and

Steedman (1987) argue, an analysis of class structure must take in account the inequalities of 'race' and gender, for these inequalities depend, to a great extent, upon one-another for their reproduction. Similarly, current explanations for the persistent inequalities between Mizraḥim or Green-Line Palestinians and the Ashkinazim usually treat the three ethnic groups in isolation and view the differences as cultural deficiencies or as structurally determined. Thus, educational research in Israel, with few exceptions (e.g.; Shavit 1989, 1990; Eisikovits 1997), is narrowly comparative at best, focusing on one or the other ethnic group in comparison with the Ashkinazim, and by-passing the role played by gender. A broader ethnographic framework will allow me to identify those processes and forces of inequality which are pervasive across the Israeli educational system and those which impact the members of a particular ethnic group.

This study draws on theoretical frameworks developed by anthropological approaches to education, socioeconomic inequality, and social reproduction. Most notably, this project looks to John Ogbu's model of the social reproduction of ethnic groups who face persisting structural inequalities in access to high-status jobs and education (Ogbu 1982:299). Ogbu suggests that three factors reproduce persisting educational under-achievement among ethnic communities; limited opportunities and job ceilings, inappropriate teaching methods and unequal educational structure, and cultural strategies of resistance through the rejection of dominant models of behavior (Ogbu 1987:151). Parts of Ogbu's theory, such as his analogy between the initial condition of immigration and educational achievement has been criticized in Israel and elsewhere (see Eisikovits 1997; Gibson 1997:320-22). However, it is my contention that Ogbu's theory offers a unique perspective for the investigation of educational achievement within the Israeli social scene. The real advantage to Ogbu's model, similar to the ethnographies discussed above, is that education is seen as a site of contestation, where social inequalities are both resisted and reproduced. Most importantly, Ogbu's framework facilitates a comparative analysis of ethnic and class hierarchies, economy, and resistance in the educational system.

In this research I aim to contribute to both Israeli and Middle Eastern studies and the anthropology of education. I believe that my research will strengthen these dynamic fields though a comparative analysis of ethnic inequality, and by interrogating the viability of both school ethnography and John Ogbu's theoretical model outside of Europe or America. Further, following Ammiel Alcalay (1993), Gershon Shafir (1996), and Ella Shohat (1989), this project seeks to suggest that the educational, economic and social inequalities of Green-Line Palestinians and Mizraḥi Jews need to be understood not as the isolated results of 'modernization' or 'westernization.' Rather, investigating the process by which these inequalities are produced, reproduced and resisted across these different communities will enable me to re-evaluate Israeli social structure in light of the shared characteristics of class status and social hierarchy across the formidable barrier of Israeli and Palestinian identities.

Research Methods: I propose to address these questions through a comparative ethnographic analysis across three secular secondary schools located in the northern Negev region. I will collect data in the schools using the ethnographic methods of in-depth open-ended interviews, life-histories, and detailed observation of the classroom, staff meetings during work and leisure time. This data will be contrasted with materials published by the Israeli government, scholarly writings on the development and implementation of state-wide educational goals and curricula, and interviews with administrators, providing a contrast between governmental or administrative claims and what actually takes place in the

three schools.

The order of ethnographic research will be; 1) initial interviews of students, teachers and administrators for the purpose of locating and situating problems and questions, as well as for gathering general information and for identifying important subjects of future inquiry. This will allow for a framework which is both flexible and data-driven; 2) observation of classrooms and faculty meetings. This will provide data which can be contrasted with governmental positions, thus providing data for the analysis of how inter-personal relations and classroom dynamics influence and illuminate student achievement; 3) life-histories and final interviews with key informants which will examine the effects of education and inequality upon individuals. This will allow for a local level analysis of the impact of school achievement.

Interviews and life-histories will be administered to students, teachers and administrators in all three ethnic communities, in both home and school settings. The subjects will be selected by me as members of those classes which I observe, as well as by 'snowball' sampling, through self-selection as well as advice and assistance from other students, teachers, parents, researchers, activists or administrators. There will be an equal distribution in and between each ethnic group and gender. Interviews will be in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended, and taped with consent, concentrating on the ethnic group in question and the general problems of education in Israel. Interviews will be administered in either Colloquial Palestinian Arabic or Hebrew, depending on the home-language of the subject and kept strictly confidential. The following subjects, among others, will be broached in the interviews; a) perceived reasons for failure or success in school, including familial or social pressure, as well as economic and structural reasons with detailed description; b) satisfaction with school, particularly with student-teacher interaction, texts, programs of study, and general atmosphere; c) the goals and particular problems of education for the subject's ethnic group, class and gender; d) the perceived similarities, differences and shared problems in education between ethnic groups and genders; e) the family's history of and opinions on education; and f) potential for employment or future study.

Drawing from Arnold Lewis' (1979) and Khalil Rinnawi's (1996) respective studies of teaching methods in Israel, I will look to the classroom as the site where inter-personal relations effect social reproduction and change. I will attempt to investigate how the state educational system works on a local level, how it influences educational achievement in different communities, and how Mizraḥi and Palestinian teachers and students respond, through acquiescence and/or resistance to structures of power. In the classroom I will pay particular attention to how the applications of educational goals, delivery of state-wide educational curriculum, and uses of teaching methods and materials differs from school to school. This will allow for an appraisal of the applicability and effects of national educational goals and standards on different social groups in Israel. In addition, a detailed examination of both texts and programs will allow me to make a critical evaluation of their suitability for each group. Finally, classroom observation will facilitate the identification of key informants, the subjects for the final set of interviews and life-histories.

Availability and Quality of Data: This project is dependent upon data derived from four sources; governmental publications, other academic research, classroom observation, as well as interviews with and life-histories of students, teachers and administrators. All four of these methods of investigation will provide ample and significant data. Government and academic publications on education in Israel are

abundant, and will furnish readily available and high quality data. Classroom observation will allow for the collection of significant qualities and quantities of data, particularly since I will be collecting data in three schools. Other research using this method in Israel (Lewis 1979; Rinnawi 1996) or the US (Foley 1990; Weis 1990) substantiates this claim. I found during my preliminary research that interviews and life-histories provide accessible and high caliber data. All of the methods will provide data which will establish the effects of educational structure, curricula, teaching methods, et cetera on both individuals and ethnic communities. While interviews and life-histories will provide a forum for teachers, students and administrators to voice their opinions about education, they will also provide relevant data which can be used to compare across schools and ethnic groups. This will allow me to assess if, and in what ways, inequality is present, and how it contributes to social reproduction, and how inequality differs across ethic communities.

Preliminary Research: To this point my research has primarily been concerned with contacting educational researchers in Israel, familiarizing myself with previous studies on education in Israel, and establishing the historical background of not only education, but also regional history of Israel and the Middle East.

During a two month trip to Israel last summer (1997) I met with a several educational researchers. With their help and advice I have selected three secondary schools, have met with their principles, interviewed five key educators, and have initiated the process of obtaining the Israeli Ministry of Education and Culture's permission to do research in these schools. Through consultation with Professors Ismael Abu-Saad, Salman Elbedour, and Ron Hoz of Ben Gurion University's Education Department, Dr. Shlomo Swirski of the Adva center in Tel Aviv, Dr. Anat Kanan of Kaye College of Education's Research Department, and Prof. Majid Al-Haj of Haifa University's Department of Anthropology and Sociology I have selected three research sites which are an adequate representation of the different class, regional and ethnic differences in Israel. These scholars have also have agreed to act as advisors and support my research, enabling me to enter these schools.

I have examined the historical development of education in Israel and its relationship to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (Miller 1985; Tibawi 1956), Green-Line Palestinians (Al-Haj 1995; Mar'i 1978), and the Mizraḥi-Ashkinazi conflict (Lewis 1979; Swirski 1990). I have also studied the history of Ottoman, British and Israeli state sponsored schools, as well as missionary (primarily Protestant and Catholic), church (primarily Eastern Orthodox), Islamic (the *kuttab*) and Zionist sponsored secondary schools in Palestine since 1860. In addition, I have examined European-Jewish educators such as the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (Laskier 1983; Miller 1996; Rodrigue 1990, 1993). In all cases, it is clear that educational policy was and is highly contested, politicized, and understood as an important part of the formation of the national identity of the Palestinian, Mizraḥi and Ashkinazi communities in Israel. As I suggested previously, the historical relations of the Palestinians and Mizraḥim are tenuously understood at best, and have not been interrogated within educational studies. Therefore, the historical research I have conducted thus far has raised questions regarding the current relationship between these groups which only ethnographic research in Israel can address. Through ethnographic research, I will be able to examine the continuities between historical developments and the contemporary Israeli educational structure. Further, I hope to examine the connections between the present state of social relations between Mizraḥi and Ashkinazi Jews, Palestinians and Israelis, and the Middle East and

Europe.

In addition to undertaking research directly connected to my proposed dissertation, I have spent a significant amount of time in Israel, living in the Bedouin-Palestinian Village of Al-Laqiyya in the northern Negev Desert, Be'er Sheva and Jerusalem. In 1981 my family took a sabbatical in Israel. Ten years later, I returned to Israel to photograph and assist in data collection for a cross-cultural study of children's reactions to the Persian Gulf War. At this time I began my study of the Palestinian Arabic Dialect, which I have continued studying during travel to Israel, with tutors and on my own. I also renewed my acquaintance with Hebrew, which I had studied intensively in 1981. Since then I have traveled to Israel four times. During the summers of 1992 and 1994 I worked as a volunteer English teacher in the Al-Laqiyya Intermediate School. The experience of teaching in a Green-Line Palestinian school engendered my interest in education, and introduced me a large number of local administrators and teachers. During July and August of 1995 I investigated the representation of a group of Bedouin-Palestinians in the 'Col. Joe Alon Museum of Bedouin Culture.' This research produced a paper which was presented and later published. All of these experiences have furthered my understanding of both the history and culture of the different ethnic groups in Israel and have prepared me for my dissertation.

Location: The northern Negev region provides a unique and viable location for this research. Most notably, it offers access to sizable Green-Line Palestinian and Mizraḥi populations. While these communities exist in larger, or more integrated communities elsewhere in Israel (e.g.; the city of Haifa) the cities of Ofaqim and Rahaṭ offer demographically different, yet comparable, research sites. Both cities have roughly equivalent populations, mean incomes, unemployment levels, and levels of dependence upon outside employment (e.g.; local Kibbutzim or industry in Be'er Sheva). However, as is the norm in Israel, these cities are predominantly populated by one ethnic group: No Jews live in Rahaṭ, and no Palestinians and few Ashkinazim live in Ofaqim. Be'er Sheva, on the other hand, as the capital of the northern Negev region, is populated by both Ashkinazi and Mizraḥi Jews, albeit primarily in segregated neighborhoods. Few Arabs live in Be'er Sheva permanently. Thus, Rahaṭ and Ofaqim provide a typical window into education in working-class Palestinian and Mizraḥi communities, while Be'er Sheva provides a more integrated, but primarily Ashkinazi, view of middle-class education. These cities offer unparalleled locations for my study; not only are they typical of southern Israel, they are microcosms of the Israeli social scene. It is imperative that this research take place in Israel; only through direct observation of the classroom, life-histories and interviews can the necessary data be collected.

Of the three schools I will investigate, the first is located in the city of Rahaṭ and is attended only by Green-Line Palestinians. The students are primarily working-class from nomadic Bedouin families that were sedentarized by the Israeli military in the 1950s. The second school is predominantly Mizraḥi in the city of Ofaqim. It is attended by working-class youths whose families immigrated to Israel primarily from Morocco, Yemen and Iraq during the 1950s, and more recently from Ethiopia. The third school is largely Ashkinazi in Be'er Sheva, the seat of regional government and a declining industrial center. These Ashkinazi youths come largely from middle-class, college-educated families who came to Israel from the Soviet Union over the past fifteen years. The working-class Mizraḥi and Palestinian youths face an uncertain future because southern Israel is facing a major economic crisis; the textile mills, cement factories, flour mills, machine shops, and mineral-purification plants which once

promised jobs for all are slowly closing, diminishing the already scant possibility of finding employment. Recently, kibbutzim and other agriculturalists have introduced migrant laborers from Thailand, who work for half the wage of an Israeli citizen. For Israeli youths, this has made agricultural labor impossible to live on and difficult to obtain. The northern Negev's economy is slowly shifting towards computer and information-based technologies. The jobs created by this new economy are being filled by the better-educated Ashkinazi youths. In light of decreasing rewards for secondary-school diplomas, and increasing competition for employment requiring higher education, the working-class youths of this region face a bleak future, one in which education is both a promise and a barrier.

Research Schedule: I plan upon spending one academic year (nine months) moving between the three schools, and collecting government documents. Due to the large scope of this project, I do not believe that it could be completed on a reduced schedule. I hope to begin my research in Israel by September 1998, and by July of 1999 I hope to be back in the United States, writing my thesis.

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