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

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Item 20: Aim and Scope of the Project

Project Goals: In this project I seek to examine how, on a local level, Israeli state education reinforces, modifies and blurs ethnic, class and gender hierarchies, thus contributing to social reproduction and identity formation in that country. I will do so through a comparative ethnography of three schools in Israel, examining the processes by which non-dominant group students and teachers in Israel acquiesce to, or manipulate, the state educational system.

Project Issues: Israeli society is typically portrayed as polarized by the common-sense division of Arab and Jew. From this perspective, the European or Ashkinazi Jews belong to the upper strata of Israeli class structure, while 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, who constitute the majority of Jewish citizens of Israel. Like the Green-Line Palestinians, most Mizraḥi Jews are working-class and are a stigmatized ethnic community (Haidar 1995; Lustick 1980; Nahon 1984; Shohat 1988; Swirski 1989).

In spite of similar social and economic conditions, these communities are alienated, if not antagonistic to one another, and have vastly different political identities and ideologies. While several authors have pointed out the historical and economic roots of the hostility between these two groups (Bernstein and Swirski 1982; Shafir 1996), few have compared the social conditions of these two groups in any but a perfunctory manner (Smooha 1978; Giladi 1990). Even fewer authors have attempted to explain how the identities and ideologies which isolate and separate the Palestinians and Mizraḥim are reproduced on a local and day-to-day level. By attempting to ascertain if the different ideologies and identities which divide these groups are reproduced in similar ways, I hope to be able to look across the formidable barrier of Israeli and Palestinian identities, to the complex hegemony of the state. In doing so, I hope to suggest that the 'ethnic gap' in Israel is not resultant from a failure to 'modernize' (Eisenstadt 1967), but rather can be linked to the processes by which class, ethnic identity and inequality are reproduced within a state. Thus, I hope to explore the creation and reproduction of ideologies and identities which divide ethnic groups and the Israeli working class (Bonacich 1972). While this research project is primarily concerned with the relations between ethnicity and class, I will also examine gender. In Israel, as elsewhere, women experience intensified class and ethnic inequality, and are expected to be the 'bearers of tradition,' engendering in their children an appropriately

Ashkinazi, Mizraḥi or Palestinian identity (Swirski and Safir 1993). Therefore, increased exploitation and the demands of 'traditionalism' serve to reproduce ethnicity and class through gender inequalities.

Nowhere are these social divisions so clearly visible as within the educational system: They are marked by schools segregated by neighborhood and language, and thus by class and ethnicity, reflecting very different levels of educational success (Swirski 1990, 1991). Mizraḥi and Green-Line Palestinian communities have extremely high rates of educational failure (Al-Haj 1995a; Swirski 1990), having approximately twice the drop-out rate of the Ashkinazim (Central Bureau of Statistics 1996:483, 499) In spite of governmental and social programs designed to increase school attendance and improve performance, the per-capita rates of university matriculation of these populations remains significantly lower than that of the Ashkinazim (ibid: 512). What do these disparate rates of educational failure tell us about the education of persons of non-European descent in Israel?

The high rates of educational failure among the Green-Line Palestinian and Mizraḥi communities in Israel may not simply reflect shortcomings in technical skills, such as literacy or mathematics, they may also reflect a rejection of dominant group norms and ideologies. While learning supposedly neutral skills of mathematics and literacy, students learn to value specific forms of logic and specific dialects over others (Godfrey 1995; Heath 1983). Thus, they are expected to learn and internalize sociocultural norms and ideologies. For students who are outside of the dominant group, by virtue of their gender, ethnicity or class, the values learned in school may conflict with those learned at home or community. These technical and ideological barriers to educational success are further compounded by structural limitations which non-dominant group students may face, such as quotas, access to quality schooling, discrimination, and limited job opportunities. These barriers to education diversely affect different sectors of the population and thus serve to reproduce social hierarchies. I am interested in uncovering the differing processes by which students cope with these barriers and how teachers, concerned with their students' educational success, identity, and emotional well-being, maneuver around these hurdles.

Project Description: This project will investigate how differing relationships and expectations between teachers and students, as well as differing applications and interpretations of curricula and teaching materials by teachers, students, and administrators reproduces or changes the existing barriers to educational achievement, thus effecting social reproduction. I will examine how these factors differ between and among classes, genders and ethnic groups. Educational and social research in Israel, with few exceptions (e.g.; Deshen and Shokeid 1982; Eisikovits 1997; Smooha 1978; Shavit 1990), has focused on one or the other ethnic community, implicitly comparing them to the Ashkinazim. These omissions are significant; for only through a comparative framework can the processes and forces of inequality which are pervasive across Israel be isolated from those which affect members of an ethnic group, class or gender. School ethnography enables a 'local' exploration of educational practice which can reveal different approaches and barriers to education. Looking to the work of Apple (1990, 1995) Foley (1990), Ogbu (1978, 1982) Weis (1990) and Willis (1977) as theoretical and methodological models, I wish to examine how the relationships between teachers and students are predicated upon local and state-wide ethnic, class, and gendered inequalities. Further, by exploring the effects of the class location of teachers (Apple 1989; Harris 1982), as well as gendered and ethnic dynamics in the classroom, staff meetings, and social networks of teachers and students I hope to examine the effects of the Israeli political-economy upon academic achievement.

The relevance of curricula and teacher-student relations was brought home to me by an event I observed in an history class in a Green-Line Palestinian school. A teacher, fighting his students' waning interest while teaching a class on the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, made an abrupt turn-about, and proceeded to lecture on how the state-sanctioned history textbook was biased against Arabs and thus incorrect. The students began actively participating, suggesting other, more pro-Arab readings of the events which led to the war. Before dismissing them, the teacher reminded the students that they would be taking the *Bagrut*, the Israeli matriculation exam, and that the textbook version of history had to be recounted, not alternatives. The teacher later confessed to me that he was unsure whether or not this was an effective teaching method; while it interested his students and made them critical of received knowledge, he suspected that it also alienated them from the state educational system, and ultimately limited their ability to matriculate to university. In this case, the teacher, recognizing that the 'official knowledge' imposed by the state was antagonistic to his students' identities and self-worth, chose to value his students' emotional well-being over educational standards, the risk of his students' failure, and his job. Thus, teachers, who have so often been vilified as a source of social reproduction (Althusser 1971; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), face a serious dilemma: Do they 'teach for institutional success' or 'teach for their students'? This decision directly effects the future of their students. For a minority population, such as the Green-Line Palestinians, the 'official knowledge' taught in school is frequently of little relevance to their daily lives, or their history (Mar'i 1978). In spite of their numerical majority in Israel, Mizraḥi students and teachers also struggle against an alienating curricula. History and literature textbooks concentrate upon a European and Ashkinazi past, by and large ignoring the contributions of the Middle East to humanity and of the Mizraḥim to Israel (Alcalay 1993; Chetrit 1997).

Current Status: Despite optimistic predictions that the 'social gap' (Pa'ar Ḥevrati) would close with 'israelification' or intermarriage (Eisenstadt 1967), and that the coming of 'peace' would normalize relations between Arabs and Jews, many authors have argued that the educational gap between Arab and Jew, or Mizraḥi and Ashkinazi have not noticeably improved (Shavit 1990). In any case, as Israel's economy slowly shifts towards computer and information-based technologies, and the jobs created by this new economy are being filled by college-educated Ashkinazi youths, working-class Palestinian and Mizraḥi youths face an uncertain future. 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 Plan: This investigation will take place in three secular secondary schools located in three cities in the northern Negev region of Israel; the Green-Line Palestinian city of Rahaṭ, the primarily Mizraḥi city of Ofaqim, and the more integrated city of Be'er Sheva. Research is divided into three phases as follows, in chronological order; 1) Ethnographic research in the Rahaṭ Comprehensive High School, between September 1998 and May 1999 [*Completed*]. 2) Ethnographic research in the Ofaqim Comprehensive High School, between January and June 2000 [*Proposed*]. 3) Ethnographic research in a Be'er Sheva Comprehensive High School, between September 2000 and February 2001 [*Proposed*]

Item 21: Methodology

My fieldwork is planned as a 21 month ethnographic research project which will take place from September 1998 to May 1999, January to June 2000, and September 2000 to February 2001 in the environs of Be'er Sheva, Israel. I will address my central research questions through the collection and analysis of two sets of data: The first set will be collected through a comparative ethnographic analysis of three secondary schools in the northern Negev region of Israel. The primary method of data collection are school ethnography and interviews. This information will be contrasted with published materials on the development and implementation of state-wide educational goals and curricula.

School Ethnography: Ethnography allows for a local exploration of educational practice, allowing for a 'bottom up' view. Through the observation of behavior, in the classrooms, hallways, offices or faculty lounge, it may be determined what teachers, administrators, and students 'actually' do and how they interact, rather than what they or others report. It is these 'actual' acts which are of interest to me, for it is here that the differences between ethnic groups, classes and genders may be revealed, exposing differences in teacher-student relations, and disclosing how the processes and methods of implementing national educational goals and standards may vary within and between groups. My research will primarily consist of detailed observation of the classroom, faculty lounge, administration offices, as well as staff meetings and leisure time. All observations will, with consent, be recorded in descriptive fieldnotes, detailed photographic records, and on audio-tape.

     The Classroom: Drawing from Arnold Lewis' (1979) and Khalil Rinnawi's (1996) respective studies of teaching methods in Israel, I will look to the classroom as a site where state educational standards, curricula and goals are applied on a local level. Over the course of twenty-one months I will observe five classes in each school, spending approximately six months in each school. Classes will be selected in consultation with teachers and administrators, ensuring that the level, curriculum and subject remains constant across all schools. Specifically, I hope to observe how the same curricula is differently presented in each school, and how the relationships and expectations between teachers and students varies in different communities. In the classroom I will note the following; 1) Relationships between teachers and students: Which students the teacher calls upon, or volunteer and how they do so, how the teacher interacts with the students, reacts to various answers, and deals with or ignores misbehavior. 2) Teaching Methods: How does the teacher teach, which methods are used, and are they appropriate. 3) Variation of the curriculum: Which of the state approved textbooks are used, how they vary, which parts of the daily lesson the teacher emphasizes or ignores, how the teacher uses the textbook.

     Faculty Lounge: The faculty lounge is, next to the classroom, the location where teachers spend most of their time during school hours. Spending a few hours a day in the lounge presents the researcher with an opportunity for informal interviews and the observation of interactions and conversations between teachers, pupils, and administrators. Discussions between teachers in the faculty lounge are frequently about teaching, or about their relations with administrators and students. Anat Kainan (1996) demonstrates how participant-observation in a teacher's lounge reveals how teachers deal with their self-image, and their relations with administrators, parents, pupils, and other teachers.

     Leisure Time: Informal events around the school, or involving school teachers, administrators, or students are ideal opportunities for casual or spontaneous interviews, and the observation of behavior

and conversations during 'unguarded' moments. This may take place during visits to homes, local coffee shops, youth clubs, and parties, as well as reciprocal invitations on the researcher's part. In these settings the formality of the school may be dispensed with, and candid conversations may take place. These conversations far from the school allow for more realistic, and often critical perspectives on problems in the school, and other related difficulties. The work of Willis (1977) and Foley (1990) demonstrates how leisure time observation reveals much of what is invisible during school hours.

Administrative Offices: The offices of the principal, vice-principal, and secretarial offices are places where decisions effecting teachers and students are made. The process by which these decisions are made is of interest, particularly in light of teacher or student participation. Further, disciplinary decisions regarding specific pupils are made in these offices. Spending a few hours a week with the principal, vice-principal or secretary will provide some insights as to how these decisions are made.

Staff Meetings: Staff meetings usually occur bimonthly, or with the implementation of a new directive from the Ministry of Education or administrative decision. These meetings are good occasions for observing relations between administration and teachers, as well as how new decisions or directives are introduced, understood, and implemented by both administration and teaching staff. Other places of interest, in which time will be spent are the councilors' offices, teachers' council office (*Vad HaMorim*), hallways, 'study hall', and the library.

Interviews: Data derived from observation will be supplemented by in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews, administered to students, teachers and administrators in all three schools, in both home and school settings. In addition, when appropriate and circumstances permit, informal interviews will be conducted. I plan to complete a minimum of 35 formal interviews per school, allowing for an equal distribution within and between ethnic groups and genders.

Interviews will be structured on the same basic principles, varying according to the subject's position in the educational system (student, teacher, administrator) and the subject's gender and ethnic group, or that of his or her students. Interviews will be conducted in Colloquial Palestinian Arabic or Hebrew, depending upon the subject's home language. Detailed notes will be taken during the interviews, and will be audio-taped with consent. The subjects will be selected by me as members or administrators of the classes which I observe as well as through 'snowball' sampling, self-selection, and advice and assistance from other students, teachers, parents, researchers, activists or administrators. The following subjects will be broached in the interviews; 1) Perceived reasons for failure or success in school, particularly who or what is 'responsible'; 2) Satisfaction with school, particularly with student-teacher or teacher-administrator interaction, texts, curriculum and programs of study; 3) Specific goals and problems of education for the subject's ethnic group, class and gender; 4) Perceived similarities, differences and shared problems in education between ethnic groups and genders; 5) Family's history of and opinions on education; 6) Relations between teachers, students, administrators and community and how relations vary between and within communities; and 7) Potential for employment or future study.

Published Materials: The last set of data will be derived from materials published by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, as well as textbooks, academic publications, and interviews with administrators. These sources will be contrasted with the first data set, derived from fieldwork within the three schools. I will look to these sources as a means of determining how the Ministry of Education,

Culture and Sport expects its curriculum applied, and textbooks used. I will use this information as a vantage point from which I will be able to determine how the schools vary not only from one another, but from an 'ideal' vision of the Israeli school. Specifically, I will examine those publications pertaining to curricula, educational programs, goals, standards, teaching methods, and textbooks, which can be found in the publications of the Curriculum Department, the Textbook Approval Department, The Arab Education and Culture Office, and the Education and Social Services Division. These publications are easily accessible at the library of Ben Gurion University of the Negev, to which I have access.

Research Setting: The cities of Ofaqim and Rahaṭ offer demographically different, yet comparable, research sites, having roughly equivalent populations, mean incomes, unemployment levels, and levels of educational failure. They provide a window onto segregated Palestinian and Mizraḥi education, while Be'er Sheva provides a more integrated view. The Green-Line Palestinians students in Rahaṭ are from formerly nomadic Bedouin families, sedentarized by the Israeli military in the 1950s. The families of the Mizraḥi youths in Ofaqim immigrated to Israel primarily from Morocco, and Yemen during the 1950s. The Ashkinazi youths in Be'er Sheva have come mostly from the (ex)Soviet Union during the 1980s.

Timetable: In chronological order; 1) Ethnographic research in the Rahaṭ Comprehensive High School, September 1998 - June 1999 [*Completed*]. 2) Ethnographic research in the Ofaqim Comprehensive High School, January 1 - June 30, 2000 [*Proposed*]. 3) Ethnographic research in a Be'er Sheva Comprehensive High School, between September 1 2000 and February 28 2001 [*Proposed*]
This study relates to other anthropological or ethnographic studies of social reproduction in education, in Israel and elsewhere, particularly those which examine the reproduction of ethnicity and class. This project will contribute to anthropology and the research of others by examining the processes by which identities and ideologies which divide ethnic groups and the working class are reproduced within the school. In Israel, as elsewhere, these processes have not been well examined, thus in this research I hope to contribute to the research of others and to the field of anthropology through the continuation of the vital research into how ideologies and identities are created and reproduced.

Item 22: Relation and Contribution to Anthropology

Relation to Existing Research: Much of Israeli social research, for the past 51 years, has attempted to explain the existence of the 'social gap' between Ashkinazim, Mizraḥim, and Green-Line Palestinians, using a wide variety of paradigms (Ram 1995). In this project I look most notably to those researchers who have addressed educational inequalities in Israel through what Majid Al-Haj calls a 'conflict' or 'critical' approach (1995a:8-13), most notably these are Majid Al-Haj (1995a), Sami Mar'i (1978) and Shlomo Swirski (1990). These authors suggest that discrepancies in academic achievement between ethnic groups is rooted within the structural inequalities of Israeli society, which are reproduced by the educational system. This has led to new insights in Israeli education through analyses of institutional structures. However, in adopting a 'top-down' approach, these studies have overlooked the views and actions of both teachers and students in these communities. My project, while building upon this vital work, will be informed by the theoretical and methodological frameworks developed by anthropological and ethnographic studies of education and social reproduction. These approaches 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.

The dual role of education, both as gate-keeper and facilitator of social mobility, and as a site of contestation is well documented in several school ethnographies. For example, Willis (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, Foley (1990) and MacLeod (1995) seek to examine how racial and class based inequalities are reproduced through education, structural inequalities, and counter-culture. Weis (1990) examines the reproduction of gender and class identities in a failing steel-mill town, 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. For example, Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor* (1977) does not concern itself with 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 (1987) and Steedman (1987) argue, an analysis of class structure must take in account the inequalities of race and gender, which 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 these ethnic groups in isolation, viewing differences as cultural deficiencies or as structurally determined. 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 affect the members of one ethnic group. Thus, following the example of Alcalay (1993), Shohat (1989) and Smooha (1978), who advocate a relational understanding of inequality in Israel, this project investigates the similarities and differences in Green-Line Palestinian, Ashkinazi and Mizraḥi education.

This study also draws on theoretical frameworks developed by anthropological approaches to education and social reproduction. This project looks to the theoretical work of Michael Apple (1989, 1990, 1995), Pierre Bourdieu (1991), Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977), and Henry Giroux

(1981, 1983), but most notably, this project looks to John Ogbu's model of the social reproduction of ethnic groups who face persisting structural inequalities (Ogbu 1982:299). Ogbu suggests that three factors reproduce persisting educational under-achievement among ethnic communities; limited job opportunities, inappropriate and unequal educational structure, and 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 have been criticized in Israel and elsewhere (Eisikovits 1997; Gibson 1997:320-22). However, the real advantage to Ogbu's model 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.

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