

Assessment in schools in Israel – Policies and Practices

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Abstract

The article provides perspectives on the assessment policies and practices in the Israeli educational system. It highlights the contested issues that the Israeli educational system is coping with, describes the national and international tests that students in schools have to take and provides some discussion and pointers for further consideration.

The educational system in Israel

Israel (founded in 1948) is a young country with a multicultural population. Among the 7.5 million citizens about 76% are Jews, 20% Arabs, and 4% minority groups. The official languages are Hebrew and Arabic, while the dominant language is Hebrew. Mostly, Arabs and Jews learn in separate schools, but in big cities where the population is mixed, Arab students learn also in Jewish schools. In the universities and colleges Arabs and Jews study together.

The educational system in Israel is a growing system. The following table shows the number of students in grades K-12 and in preschools over the last sixty years (Vurgan and Fiedelman, 2009; CBS, 2010):

Table 1: Number of students in Israel 1948-20

	1948/49	1959/60	1969/70	1979/80	1989/9	1999/00	2009/10
Students	137,886	551,854	749,533	1,076,194	1,306,000	1,654,822	1,979,633

As can be seen the number of students increased with every decade, and now it consists of about 25% of the whole population, a high percentage compared to other countries and a challenge for the Israeli Ministry of Education and Israeli government.

Educational frameworks in Israel are applied from a very young age. Many two-year-olds and almost all three and four-year-olds attend some kind of preschool framework. Preschools and kindergartens are supervised by the Ministry of Education. School attendance is mandatory, and in most schools is divided as follows: elementary school (grades 1-6), junior high school (grades 7-9) and high school (grades 10-12).

Schools are divided into four groups: state schools, attended by the majority of pupils; state religious schools; Arab and Druze schools, where the language of instruction is Arabic, and private or semi-private schools in both Arab and Jewish sectors.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for the national curricula as well as for the mentoring and supervision of teachers. Schools' maintenance is usually under the auspices of the local municipalities. The classes in Israel are considered 'crowded', in our terms, and also according to the OECD standards. The maximum number of students in class in grades 1-12 is 40 students and in preschool 35 students. The average number of students in class is: 27.6 at the elementary level - compared to an average of 21.6 in the OECD countries, and 32.5 at the junior high level – compared to 23.7 students in the OECD countries (OECD, 2010). Research studies are not conclusive about the effect of class size on students' achievement (e.g. Borland *et al.*, 2005). However, teachers in Israel point to

the density of classes as one of the major causes for discipline problems and inability to teach properly.

Assessment in Israeli schools

In 2004 there was a shift in the concept of school assessment in Israel. It was recommended that an assessment coordinator holding a Master's degree in evaluation, be incorporated into every school in Israel (Committee for Integration of Internal Evaluation in Schools, 2004). Another recommendation was to set up an independent evaluation body, the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation (NAME), responsible for both measurement and evaluation in the education system and for the certification of evaluators for that purpose (Levin-Rozalis & Lapidot, 2010). This sudden shift has led to a flood of study days and workshops on the subject of evaluation. Following the new recommendations, evaluation and measurement has become an issue in the educational system.

In the Israeli educational system students take part in national assessment tests during elementary and junior high school, in four subjects: language, mathematics, English, science and technology. They take international assessment tests: TIMMS, PISA and PIRLS, and the matriculation tests at the end of high school. The results obtained in each test (national and international) receive a great deal of publicity in Israel and raise controversial issues among many educationalists and the public in the country.

In order to obtain some background on the assessment field in Israel, the following sections examine the role of the National Authority for Evaluation and Measurement in Education (NAME) and provide a description of the national assessment tests, the matriculation tests, the international tests and the role of the assessment coordinators in schools. Each section is followed by brief discussion of issues for further consideration.

National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation (NAME)

The National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation (NAME) was founded about five years ago as a professional independent entity. Prior to this assessment and evaluation was a sector of the Ministry of Education. NAME leads and provides professional guidance to the education system with respect to measurement and evaluation¹. NAME describes its main purpose as being to improve education, to identify gaps between the ideal and the possible and to boost achievement and caring among weak populations – all by effective processes of assessment and evaluation. NAME believes that assessment and evaluation are only means to ends that should be on-going processes. The guiding principles are based on the perception that assessment (formative and summative) is *for learning* and thus it should align with the goals of the educational system. It should provide on-going feedback from the field.

NAME is part of the educational system and as such, maintains constant contact with principals, teachers, parents and municipalities in order to monitor processes and provide the necessary guidance for improvement. NAME conducts periodic evaluations of the education system and publishes its findings in an annual report submitted to The National Council for Education. Some of the activities of NAME are to develop national tests, surveys and questionnaires; developing resources for formative assessment; developing measurement and statistical methodologies; and providing counselling services for schools, communities and municipalities. NAME is also in charge of the international tests in which Israeli students participate.

<http://rama.education.gov.il> ¹

National assessment

Measures of School Growth and Effectiveness (MSGE)

The national assessment tests, *Measures of School Growth and Effectiveness* (MSGE) are conducted by NAME. The MSGE is a set of school measures intended to help the principal and the school staff to plan the use of school resources. The premise which underlies the development of MSGE is that school is a complex entity which comprises interrelated components (learning environment, curricula, achievements, teacher development, and multiple personal and interpersonal interactions). In order to gain an holistic perspective of school complexity, there is a need to examine these manifold aspects in a professional manner.

The MSGE aims to test achievements of elementary students and junior high students in four areas: language (Hebrew or Arabic), mathematics, English, science & technology. The test is administered to students in the 5th and 8th grades. Language is also tested in the 2nd grade. In addition to the achievement tests, NAME collects data on the school social and pedagogical climate by administering questionnaires to students and conducting interviews with teachers and principals.

Schools take the MSGE as an external or internal test, according to a particular mode of testing designed by NAME. Elementary and junior high schools in Israel are divided into four representative groups. In each of the four subjects there is an external test every four years administered in pairs – two subjects every two years. The School Climate and Pedagogical Environment questionnaires and interviews are conducted together with the external tests. Schools take an internal MSGE examination whenever the exam is not external and in all four subjects. For example, in 2009-2010 the external tests were administered to schools in group 2 and 4. Schools in group 4 took external exams in English, science & technology, and internal tests in math and language. Schools in group 2 took external tests in math and language and internal tests in English and in science & technology. Schools in groups 1 and 3 took internal tests in all 4 subjects. Each school which takes the external tests receives a report with the analysis of data. The MSGE School Report includes information on:

- Pedagogical environment in the school (based on questionnaires and interviews);
- School climate and work environment (based on questionnaires and interviews); and
- Student Achievements – based on results from the achievement tests in the subjects tested.

In addition, NAME issues a national report which includes data obtained from analyzing the results of all participating schools in the external exams. These reports should help the school team in planning the upcoming years, and might also assist the Ministry of Education in modifying and adapting national policies²

The national comparison of the achievement tests in fifth grade during the last four years shows (NAME, 2010):

- A gradual increase in math achievements among Hebrew speakers and Arabic speakers;
- A slight increase in Mother Language among Hebrew speakers and a huge increase among Arabic speakers;
- A slight increase in science & technology, more so among the Arabic speakers; and
- A slight increase in English for both sectors.

The comparison of the achievement tests in eighth grade during the last three years shows:

² <http://cms.education.gov.il/educationcms/units/rama/odotrama/odot.htm>

- A gradual increase in science & technology for Hebrew speakers and a non-consistent trend among the Arabic speakers;
- A slight increase in English for both sectors;
- A slight increase in math (non-consistent for Arabic speakers); and
- A huge increase in Mother Language for Hebrew speakers and a slight increase for Arabic speakers.

School Climate Assessment

School Climate and Pedagogical Environment questionnaires and interviews are part of the external MSGE. In 2010 these questionnaires and interviews were administered to students and teachers from 1073 schools.

and Some brief results from questions administered to students are listed below (NAME, 2010):

- students' overall feeling toward school (more than 2/3 reported positive feelings);
- care and kinship between teachers and students (students' reports show a decrease in teachers' care with increase in students' age);
- involvements in bullying incidents at school (about 15% of the students in elementary schools reported of being involved in bullying incidents in the month prior to the delivery of the questionnaires, and there was a decrease in such involvement with increase in students' age);
- proper behaviour of students in class (only about 1/3 of the students reported proper behaviour in their classes which enables proper teaching);
- students' perception of their teachers' expectations (more than 75% of the students reported high expectations from their teachers);
- use of technology in the learning process (about 1/3 of the students reported on the use of technology); and
- private tutors in one or more of the subjects tested (about 40% of the students reported being helped by a private tutor).

The questions administered to teachers and some brief results are listed below:

- their well-being at school (about 70% of the teachers expressed satisfaction from their well-being);
- relationship between school and parents (about 70% of the teachers in elementary school and about 50% in junior high reported of positive relationships with parents);
- involvement of parents in school life (about 18% of the teachers reported too much parent involvement); and
- how protected they feel at school (about 11% of the teachers reported they feel threatened by parents, 5% feel threatened by students in elementary school and 8% in junior high school).

Discussion

The results of the MSGE tests allow comparisons of different factors which are of great importance to the Israeli society. One of them is the comparison of achievements between the Hebrew speakers and the Arabic speakers. This comparison suggests a gap in favour of the Hebrew speakers. This gap is ongoing but seems to narrow down. Gaps were also found in both sectors due to socio-economic factors.

Another factor which is of interest is the gender factor. Comparisons show that among Hebrew speakers, girls were much better than boys in both fifth and eighth grades, in Mother Language. In math boys performed better than girls in fifth grade. In all other areas the discrepancies were quite

minor. Among the Arabic speakers girls performed better than boys in all areas and in both grade levels.

The data retrieved by the School Climate and Pedagogical Environment questionnaires and interviews provide the educational system with authentic information about everyday school-life of students and teachers. These tests, administered every year, highlight the importance that the Ministry of Education attributes not only to achievements but also to school climate. The data are also of benefit to school teams as they can gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of their school system and they can use this for future planning.

It should be mentioned that not everybody in Israel is happy with the fact that students have to attend the MSGE tests. Some criticize the tests saying that such tests initiated by the Ministry of Education are uncommon in other countries and this should raise some questions about their effectiveness. Their contention is that the main aim of the MSGE test is to supply schools with better and more objective data. However, in order to do so, each school needs to receive full information in real time. This means that the test should incorporate all students in all grades in almost all subjects every year. Since this is not the case, the MSGE tests do not really accomplish the aims attributed to them by NAME. They suggest that the MSGE tests, which require a huge budget, are unnecessary and that the decisions in each school should be made according to schools' internal assessments, while the MSGE tests can be a basis for national decisions. Some others criticize the tests saying that teachers in schools teach *for the test* and this comes at the expense of creativity and inspiration.

Matriculation tests

Matriculation exams are the primary nationwide, standard basis for evaluating achievement in Israeli high schools. The grades of the matriculation exams along with a Psychometric test are required for university admissions. The battery of tests is conducted centrally in compulsory core subjects including mathematics, literature, language, history, English, Bible, civil studies. There are other subjects having matriculation exams, depending on the track students choose to study (technology, music and more). Each subject scores different unit points (1-5) according to scope and level of difficulty. However, there are minimal points for each subject that are compulsory in order to gain a matriculation certificate; for example, a student would need at least a 3 unit exam in mathematics or a 3 unit exam in English in order to be eligible for a matriculation certificate. Overall, eligibility for a matriculation certificate requires 20 points. Students who would like to increase their chances to enter higher education, or to get accepted into more prestigious faculties, generally take additional exams in one or more 'accelerated subjects' (5 or 4 units) which receive bonuses in the final calculation of the grade. Usually the school chooses which subjects would be the accelerated subjects and schools differ in their choices. In some subjects, the exams are modular and are divided within the last 3 years of high school (English, mathematics).

The exams are the responsibility of the Ministry of Education (not NAME) which also determines the content and the criteria for grading with the consultation of a national committee. Final grades in some subjects are the average of the school grade: internal grades of exams' usually from the last two years of high school (50%), and the matriculation examination grade (50%). This applies to students who are high school graduates. However, there are students who do not take the exams when they are in high school, or do not graduate for all sorts of reasons and take the exams at other times, in order to obtain a matriculation certificate. These students are considered 'external students' and can take the exams at particular dates during the year determined by the Ministry of Education. Their grade is calculated according to an equation issued by the Ministry of Education and is accepted by all institutions.

The following table presents some data from the 2009 matriculation tests CBS (2010):

Table 2: Examinees in matriculation exams, by entitlement to a certificate and selected characteristics

2009	Not entitled %	Entitled %	Not entitled %	Entitled %
	Hebrew speakers		Arabic speakers	
Total	31.7	68.3	50.8	49.2
Boys	37.1	62.9	59.4	40.6
Girls	26.8	73.2	44.1	55.9
Grand Total	Not Entitled	35.8%	Entitled	64.2%

The total number of students entitled to a matriculation certificate in the country in both sectors (Jewish and Arab) is 64.2%. The results show that fewer students in the Arab sector gain a matriculation certificate (49.2%) and more in the Jewish sector (68.3%). In both sectors though, girls outshine boys in matriculation entitlement.

According to the CBS (Statistical Abstract of Israel, 2010) there has been an increase in students' matriculation eligibility in both the Jewish and the Arab sectors in the last ten years.

The advantage of the matriculation examinations is the high standards that the Ministry of Education sets throughout the country. This results in a high level of confidence on the part of the universities in Israel in the matriculation transcript grades, enabling these institutions to admit students without entry examinations in some faculties (Dori, 2003).

Discussion

There has been a great deal of criticism concerning the structure of matriculation exams and the system. It is claimed that it forces teachers to emphasize teaching topics that will maximize their students' likelihood of success in the examinations (Dori, 2003). It has also been contended that the exams entail recalling of information and that they involve less thinking and understanding. This might hamper meaningful learning and the development of students' higher-order thinking skills. Moreover, the fact that students have to pass a battery of tests is stressful and hinders students' ability to perform at their best (Dori, 2003).

This has been a known issue for quite some time and as early as in 1994 a committee headed by Ben Peretz (1994) reviewed the issue from a pedagogical and socio-cultural aspect, addressing quality of teaching, learning and assessment plus the distribution of entitlement among diverse communities. The committee found that many schools indeed devote a good deal of time to the processing of learning and to students' creativity but this is not reflected in the national standardized exams (Matriculation). They recommended providing more autonomy to schools to employ alternative assessment methods which include projects, portfolios laboratory research and assignments involving team work, instead of the traditional matriculation exam. At first, 22 schools participated in the project (Matriculation 2000) in selected subjects (chemistry, biology, English, literature, history, social studies, Bible, Jewish heritage).

This project provided the schools with full autonomy to determine 100% of the final matriculation grade. The grade reflected a 3 year learning process (10th – 12th grades) where the focus was on process and product using alternative assessment tools all along the process of learning and teaching. In a study conducted among science subjects (biology and chemistry), pupils who participated in the project achieved higher grades on tasks requiring high order thinking skills than their counterparts in the control group. The findings indicate that performance of students does improve when alternative teaching methods and assessment are implemented in the process of learning. This study also suggested that schools and staff who are given the support should change their testing mode from nation-wide standardized testing to school-based alternative assessment to improve students' performance (Dori, 2003).

In spite of different experiments and positive findings, not much has changed in the testing system and new attempts to adapt to high-order thinking have been made. The Ministry of Education has currently begun a process of introducing gradual changes in the matriculation exams to foster deep understanding, higher-order thinking skills and students' engagement through alternative assessment methods and teaching approaches. The changes entail increasing the proportion of written items that require higher order thinking and open-ended written items, by introducing testing with open books, by increasing the number of subjects in which the products of inquiry learning or individual projects are considered a component of the final scores, and by combining elements of on-going school-based assessment with the scores of external exams. These elements indicate that rote learning will not be sufficient for success in the matriculation exams. In addition, increasing the level of thinking in national tests designed for elementary school will indicate that thinking is a desired goal throughout the school system (Zohar, 2008).

In the matriculation exams of English as a Foreign Language, for example, a project component was added to the matriculation exams to reflect performance as well as product and multiple language domains (Steiner, 2002). In the last year a project of High Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) has been implemented in the teaching and assessing literature in English in high-schools. The programme is based on an innovative Ministry of Education policy to teach and assess higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) via either a matriculation examination or school-based assessment (Portfolio).

Thought has also been given on how to increase the successes in the matriculation exams. Ballas (2011) presents controversial opinions: some claim that the successes are due to lowering the level and requirements of the exams, whereas, the opponents to this contention believe that concessions in the structure and content of the exams would not necessarily reduce the level of difficulty, if the questions aim at profound understanding and not rote learning. Reducing the scope of content while experiencing deep and insightful teaching may contribute even more to the enhancement of achievements in the learning process. According to Ballas, there is also a claim that the anxiety and the cognitive overload of tests may be counterproductive; however, further rigorous research on the possible correlations described above is needed in order to come up with proposals based on definite data (Ballas, 2011).

International tests

One of the main concerns of the Ministry of Education, and of parents as well, is the scores of the Israeli students on the international tests. In recent years Israel has been ranked quite low in both PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) tests³. The following table shows the rank of Israel in the PISA 2009, 2006 and 2002. The PISA is administered to students at the age of 15 in science, reading and mathematics. As can be seen, Israel is located in low places in all the three subjects (Name & The Ministry of Education, 2010).

Table 3: The rank of Israel in the PISA tests

	2002 (out of 41 countries)	2006 (out of 57 countries)	2009 (out of 61 countries)
Science	33	39	41
Reading	30	40	36
Mathematics	31	40	41

In Reading, the results of the Israeli students between 2006 and 2009 increased by 35 points. These results place Israel as the third country in the rank of countries which improved their results. In 2009, the results of the Hebrew speakers compared to those of the Arabic speakers were much higher (498 vs. 392). These results would theoretically locate the Hebrew speakers in the 17th place and the Arabic speakers in the 36th place. The achievements of the girls were higher than those of the boys for both languages: 515 vs. 480 among the Hebrew speakers and 424 vs. 359 among the Arabic speakers.

In mathematics, there was a slight increase (5 points) between 2006 and 2009. Again, in the results of the 2009 tests, Hebrew speakers were much higher (470 vs. 367). These results would theoretically locate the Hebrew speakers in the 36th place and the Arabic speakers in the 61st place. The achievements of the boys were a little higher than that of the girls among Hebrew speakers, as in most of the countries which participated in the research, but among the Arabic speakers, the achievements of the girls were higher than that of the boys, 373 vs. 361.

In science, there was an increase of 1 point only between 2006 and 2009. Again in the results of the 2009 tests Hebrew speakers were much higher (476 vs. 372). These results would theoretically locate the Hebrew speakers in the 38th place and the Arabic speakers in the 59th place. The achievements of the boys were higher by 4 points than that of the girls among Hebrew speakers, but were much lower among the Arabic speakers, in reading and in math. The boys scored 371 and the girls 392.

The TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) broadly shows similar results to those of the PISA tests, as presented in Table . Students in the 8th grade participated in TIMSS.

Table 4: The rank of Israel in the TIMSS tests

	Mathematics	Science
2007	24 out of 49 countries	25 out of 49 countries
2003	19 out of 46 countries	23 out of 46 countries
1999	28 out of 38 countries	26 out of 38 countries

The comparison of the results obtained by the Hebrew speakers and by the Arabic speakers in 2007 (NAME & the Ministry of Education, 2008) show that in both mathematics and sciences the Hebrew speakers did better than their Arabic counter-parts. In math the average grade among Hebrew speakers was 484 (which theoretically corresponds to the 19th location among the 49 countries) and the grade among the Arabic speakers was 408 (which theoretically corresponds to the 34th location among the 49 countries). Analysis of the gap between Hebrew speakers and Arabic speakers in the 2003 tests suggests a narrowing down tendency (Zozovsky, 2008). This average of the Arabic speakers is lower than that of students in other Arabic countries which participated in the research, such as Lebanon, Jordan and Tunis. A similar pattern was demonstrated in sciences, where the average grade among Hebrew speakers was 485 (which theoretically correspond to the 19th location among the 49 countries) and the grade among the Arabic speakers was 422 (which theoretically correspond to the 37th location among the 49 countries). Again, this average of the Arabic speakers is lower than that of students in other Arabic countries which participated in the research, such as Syria and Iran, but is better than in Lebanon and Egypt (NAME & the Ministry of Education, 2008)

In about a half of the participating countries, and Israel among them, there was no significant difference between the achievements of boys and girls. However, among the Hebrew speakers there was a non-significant gap of 4 points in favour of the boys while among the Arabic speakers there was a significant difference of 17 points in favour of the girls. Similarly in sciences, there was no difference between boys and girls among Hebrew speakers but among the Arabic speakers there was a difference of 30 points in favour of the girls. This phenomenon is not unique to Arabic speakers in

Israel and can be seen also among other Arab countries such as Qatar, Oman and Bahrain and Jordan (NAME & The Ministry of Education, 2008).

The PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) research investigates reading abilities among 4th graders. Israel participated in PIRLS 2001 and 2006 and will participate again in 2011. In 2001 Hebrew speakers were in the 12th place (out of 35 countries) with a score of 538 and the Arabic speakers were in the 31st place with a score of 425. Girls did better than boys among both Hebrew and Arabic speakers. In 2006 there was a slight increase in the scores. The Hebrew speakers scored 548 (11th place out of 45 countries) and the Arabic speakers scored 428 (40th place). Again, girls scored better than boys. Among the Hebrew speakers the gap between girls and boys was 11 points, while the gap was much higher among the Arabic speakers – 30 points. (Zozovski & Olshtain, 2006).

Food for thought

The international tests have gained quite a prominence in the Israeli arena. Once results of international tests are published by NAME and the Ministry of Education, they gain top headlines in newspapers, press conferences and the media. The debatable issue is the low ranking of Israeli students compared to the sixties where Israel was ranked quite high on the international tests (although the sample then was different than at present). The concern of educationalists and the Ministry of Education is the causes that led to the downward trend and the steps that can be taken to restore the situation.

One of the main goals of the Ministry of Education described in a Position Paper for the years 2009-2012 is to improve achievements. However, as far as the international tests are concerned, the goal is quite explicit: improving the results in the PIRLS 2011 tests in fourth grade from place 20 to place 15; in TIMMS 2011 in math and science in eighth grade from place 24 to place 19; in PISA 2012 from place 40 to 30 and to place 20 in 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2009).

The question that is asked for: What is the effect of such goals on the educational system? On teachers? On students? On parents? Would teachers in schools teach test taking skills and devote precious time to cover material for the test on the expense of other important skills? What are the consequences in the long run?

The standardization of test results is a controversial issue among many educationalists and the public in the country. This is also fed back into colleges of education, either through the students who practice-teach in the schools, or through the teachers themselves who are sometimes the lecturers of the didactic courses in the colleges.

The results of the international tests show that the relative place of Israeli students decreased during the last ten years. Ballas (2011) argues that deeper analysis of TIMMS, PISA and PIRLS tests suggest that the absolute achievements did not decrease and that the lower place of Israel is due to the fact that new strong countries joined the international tests.

School assessment coordinator

As mentioned previously, the issue of evaluation in education has gained quite a significant presence due to the establishment of NAME and schools have started to appoint qualified assessment coordinators. The role of the coordinator is multifaceted.

One of their main goals is to be the source of knowledge to the school teachers and to provide them with the information that can help them learn and become more effective in setting goals for the future, achieving their goals and making informed decisions regarding policy and practice (Committee for Measurement and Evaluation, 2005). The coordinators' role is to develop within the school a culture of internal evaluation. It is assumed that members of the educational community must be proficient in the language, methods, and instruments used in assessment and evaluation, and must

acquire the knowledge and expertise needed to identify, produce, and interpret information relevant to monitoring, evaluating, and improving the methods, organization, and outcomes of learning and instruction (Committee for Measurement and Evaluation, 2005). The evaluation coordinator is expected to introduce changes within the school system and lead in school evaluation teams.

Universities and education colleges offer courses for evaluation coordinators and NAME's influence is quite noticeable in supervising and negotiating content of studies for evaluation coordinators (Levin-Rozalis & Lapidot, 2010).

Food for thought

According to Levin-Rozalis & Lapidot (2010) the training in evaluation in Israel has been relatively low. Most of the evaluators who are already working in the field learned how to evaluate from their work on the ground (IAPE, 2002; Shochot-Reich, 2006). In a research conducted among 15 teacher education colleges Levin-Rozalis & Lapidot concluded that there is no policy regarding evaluation, there is no structured training programme, there is a lack of skilled human resources, and the time dedicated to evaluation training is not sufficient (Levine-Rozalis & Lapidot, 2010, p. 23). Levine-Rozalis & Lapidot claim that 'in order to be an evaluatee without becoming a victim in Israel today, one needs cultural capital (considerable professional knowledge)' (p.25). The effects of evaluation influence not only the teachers, but also the students and the entire system and in order to be able to control and enforce changes, understanding of the field is inevitable. Thus the issue that is raised is not only the need for evaluation coordinators in schools, but also for teachers themselves to acquire the professional knowledge needed in order to understand better their own work and the evaluation processes that evaluate their work and their students. In this way they become significant partners to the process of evaluation and can work in cooperation with the evaluation coordinators as communities of learners. According to Levine-Rozalis & Lapidot the situation is still far from being satisfying at the moment, as the knowledge that is currently in the system is not sufficient to cope with the challenges of school evaluation coordinators (Levine-Rozalis & Lapidot, 2010).

Endnote

In this article we described some components of the assessment system in Israel. We mainly discussed the national tests in elementary and junior high school, the matriculation tests, the international test in which Israeli students participate and the school assessment coordinator, a new role in schools. We did not look at formative and alternative assessment practices, which are also prevalent in the educational system but are more local and school-specific and deserve an extensive account on their own. The issue of assessment has recently received prominence on the agendas of the Ministry of Education, different organizations, policy makers and the media. We believe that with the enforcement of the recommendation to incorporate certified professional school evaluators, the issue of evaluation and measurement will gain even more momentum.

There is no doubt that evaluation is a controversial issue in Israel. The National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation (NAME) has been very active and influential in the field of evaluation and the Ministry's interest is to show improvement in the achievements of Israeli students through evaluation processes. Thus schools are obliged to take part in the national and international tests. Opponents of the tests contend that in education not everything is measurable. They claim, for example, that Israel is one of the countries with the largest 'variety' of matriculation forms (150). There are other bodies that are involved in the public debate and the multiplicity of perceptions and agendas illustrate the contradictory roles of evaluation in education: Is the purpose evaluation or learning? Should we aim at standardization or diversity in evaluation? Should evaluation be process-oriented (alternative) or product oriented (grades)? Do we evaluate knowledge or do we evaluate skills? (Levine-Rozalis & Lapidot, 2010)

On a national scale, the tests administered by the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation (NAME) enable the bodies involved to identify issues that need attention and action planning. For example, the discrepancies in achievements between the Hebrew speaking students and the Arabic speaking students have sent clear messages to the Ministry of Education that these gaps have to be narrowed down. In the same vein, the tests also indicate the socio-economic gaps prevailing within both the Arab sector and the Jewish sector. The question which arises is whether we really need the tests to identify those discrepancies. The answer might be that the results collected every few years can provide the Ministry and the public with the real picture of either improvement or regression. However, do these tests really contribute to better planning in schools? This is a contested issue. Those who are against the tests claim that much more data is needed (more subjects and more students need to be tested) in order to achieve the goal of using the test results for better planning in individual schools. Moreover, another issue that has to be taken into consideration is the time teachers devote to test preparations instead of teaching the curriculum. The knock-on effect in those schools which received low ranking in the last tests is that a lot of time is devoted to teaching students for the tests. Is this really what we have to aim for in schools, and is this really the endeavour of the tests?

Advertisement of international test results sets a sort of restlessness in the country: What ranking will Israel receive this time? How are we compared to other countries? What does it really say? What is the significance of all that? What is it that the international tests really test? The media, which takes an active role in our lives, is present whenever results of national or international tests are obtained, increasing the palaver around the achievements of Israeli students.

It seems that assessment will continue to be a contentious issue. Israeli students will continue to take part in the national and international tests, the Ministry will try to show speedy improvements in all national and international tests, more committees will try to offer better or alternative solutions and the media will continue to follow the drama around it. How this will affect the educational system, the students and the teachers in the long run – only time will tell. The key issue for the system and the schools is to find the middle road –the equilibrium between measuring and assessing achievements and the practical consequences of this on the learning and teaching processes.

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