

The New World of Education in Israel

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I have just returned from Jerusalem and I would like to share with you a bit of what I have written about my experiences there working with the Ministry of Education on Social and Emotional Learning. While I was there, I witnessed the vanguard of *Olam Chadash*, a new world of education, with Israel as a leading bloom in a worldwide flowering of concern with how children grow up as people, as *mensches*. What I saw has resulted in part from a realization that the pendulum has swung too far toward emphasizing IQ, intellectual skills, over EQ-- Emotional Intelligence, the set of abilities, attitudes, and values that allow us to live and work with each other in peace, mutual responsibility, synergy, and directedness.

Another impetus for this approach is the recent upsurge of violence in Israeli schools. They had two incidents there of school-based or school-related violence, one of which resulted in injury, the other in death. They undertook serious data gathering and their findings show, surprisingly, that levels of violence are highest now in elementary schools. Thus, it is imperative to address this issue before the current cohorts of students move into the greater volatility of adolescence. How to do it? Fortunately, Israel already has a structure for bringing preventive efforts into their schools. Some leaders in education have placed such efforts at a lower priority recently, but as subsequent events have shown, ignoring the way in which children relate to one another is to invite calamity. The Ministry of Education had previously made Respect the national education theme for the year. Violence is the ultimate form of disrespectful expression; the schools can intervene earlier, and in a way that builds children's interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and sense of togetherness. This is the point of view that is gaining momentum in Israeli education.

A Visit to Tel Aviv Schools

I visited schools in the Metropolitan Tel Aviv School district, particularly those in a suburb called Kiryat Ono. I am a practiced school visitor; I know what is there for show, and I know how to find out what is real. I spoke to many children, from

Kindergarten age upward. I will never forget one boy taking my hand to proudly show me his class; another child explained in detail why she is a bridge-builder in her school, learning and using the techniques of peacemaking with her peers. She intends to be a lawyer. I spoke with a group of students who are part of a program called Kosher-Sheat-Kosher-- Ability and Time of Ability, a creation of Dr. Josef Levi. This program creates in the school day, for each child, something we might label as an oasis, but in these schools, it is often one of many gardens in the landscape.

Educators and members of SHEFI-- the Ministry of Education's Division of Counseling and Psychological Services, experts on life skills development and prevention of such things as violence and substance abuse--work with each student to identify that hidden interest or talent that has yet to be given adequate expression in school. As these are identified, programs are created for students, usually in groups but sometimes individually, that will allow them to work on special projects that bring these talents to light. Hence, Ability and Time of Ability.

One group to which I spoke was concerned about how people with various physical challenges manage in everyday life. Through a multi-week process of researching these challenges and writing and discussion, the children decided that they would focus on creating an airport restaurant that would be set up to serve people regardless of their physical condition. And then they proceeded to make a scale model of the establishment! It was on display for me to see, and also to have the children tell me-- in English, which most of them know well-- what they did and how and why they did it.

There was a display, including pictures and written work, from kindergarten students who decided they wanted to invent activities that would allow boys and girls to play together and get along. In two schools, there were displays involving every student as soon as one enters the door. In one case, every student's name stands at the center of a four-petaled flower. On the petals are listed strengths that four classmates have said the student has. In the Shiloh School, students from the Religious and secular communities come together to learn, play, and work together on projects with a strong literacy focus. And the Israeli Arab sector schools are no less involved. Their common ground? Binat Halev, translated as the Wisdom of the Heart, that which religious leaders and child development specialists and enlightened educators concur is the essence of our humanity,

our capacity for empathy, to reach out and work with those different from ourselves, to balance the intellect and the emotions in synergy.

For Israel to heal, just as for our own violent society to heal, its children must be equipped with the skills and experiences they need to work as one people. The Ministry of Education, led by a focused effort in Tel Aviv and a national effort undertaken by SHEFI, is at the forefront of an education revolution that is likely to spread, as so many nations have embraced the ideas of emotional intelligence and the necessity to cultivate it in our children and their parents and their teachers. I never seen a more beautiful flower than *Binat Halev*, and it warms my heart that this flower can grow virtually anyplace that it is planted and seriously nourished.