

Executive Summary

The modern education system was formed at a time when access to information was limited, thus impeding the development of individuals and society and preventing social mobility. Today, the limiting factor is not accessibility to information; on the contrary, in practice, at any given moment students have access to free-flowing information. Following this dramatic change in accessibility, schools and educational systems must prepare for reorganization - not necessarily as sources of knowledge for students, but as mentors and facilitators who stress and develop higher-order thinking abilities. The education system must meet the new challenges of the 21st century – characterized by dynamism, rapid technological development, new professional fields being created and others abandoned, globalization processes and frequent social and economic change. In recent years, these challenges are of concern to many countries (including the US, UK, Singapore, Finland, Australia), most of which are in the midst of long-term processes of change.

During the last decade, Israeli students' performance on international tests has been poor as compared to students tested in other Western countries, and educational gaps in Israel are among the widest. Israel's education system seeks transformation, yet there are many unanswered questions to be resolved. Is the purpose of change to raise performance scores on international tests? Do these types of achievements represent the work of an education system that prepares graduates for life in the 21st century? Should all students study the same educational content, or should there be a personalized curriculum reflecting individual abilities, interests and areas of potential for every student? What should the common denominator be and what should be optional in terms of the curriculum, and who gets to choose? Is there an ideal balance between external and internal evaluation and assessment frameworks?

The number of possible solutions is as large the number of societies worldwide, as reflected by their educational and ethical beliefs. For example, one solution focuses on globalization processes and offers educational programs that include content designed to prepare students to address these processes, relying on 21st century skills. Another solution focuses on economic processes and discusses the privatization of the education system and the transfer of fiscal control to the schools. A third solution focuses on multiculturalism, ethnic diversity and the importance of the community and its values, and proposes handing school curriculum planning over to local authorities. Likewise, there are different approaches to implementing curriculum planning in the 21st century.

One approach is to bring about radical reform of the curriculum, while creating a new conception of knowledge, skills, abilities, comprehension and values. This type of reform requires integration between disciplines, based on the assumption that a considerable portion of curriculum development takes place at school and in the classroom. Another option is to accept the traditional concept of knowledge - determining the core components of the curriculum and omitting irrelevant elements, while permitting, minimal local input on pedagogy and assessment methods. A third possibility is a middle road – clarity and accuracy regarding the different types of knowledge and skills essential for every student, with the required depth of understanding of the 21st century. That is, there is a formal core curriculum for each discipline which, at the local level could be expanded and enriched to include higher-order thinking abilities. A different and somewhat radical perspective, suggests concentrating curriculum development within the school itself, where teachers and students continually interact and have relationships based on trust. This proposal enables independent activity and greater autonomy to be granted to schools.

The issue of uniformity of requirements arising from national and international standards is an issue relevant to countries routinely evaluated by testing. Standardization also raises great objection: it emphasizes the weakness of schools serving disadvantaged populations; teachers believe they are measured by students' results on standardized tests and feel threatened; excessive testing impacts upon so-called "test integrity;" schools spend most of their time teaching subjects on which students are tested and neglecting other vital areas of education. The test in and of itself becomes the goal of education, and a single standardized curriculum is meant to accommodate all students, despite the fact that the 21st century economy demands a varied work force with a wide range of abilities. In light of the growing demand for accountability, it would appear that the formative function of assessment has been neglected in recent years in favor of the production of general, summarizing information regarding academic achievements that allows local, national and international comparisons to be made while abandoning the individual learner and the local system.

Today, the world believes in the importance of education and aspires to better education, yet the question remains – how. It seems that education systems are held captive under strict perceptions of regulations and frequent testing, with no consideration of the individual student, and many even express a sense of discomfort and lack of trust in the system. To attain the goal of better education, there is need for radical systemic change, rather than temporary “magic solutions.” This change may include on the one hand, reducing the number of matriculation exams and the

number of subjects taught concurrently across the system, and on the other, adding humanistic, scientific and artistic content to the curriculum and successfully integrating them all; teaching that stresses knowledge building by the learners themselves, who are supervised and mentored; an integration of individual learning and collective learning; alternative assessment that emphasizes the engagement of the student in the process, and includes self-assessment and assessment by class peers. The above changes have been implemented in limited arenas throughout Israel, mostly under the supervision of the Ministry of Education Experiments Division. Perhaps the experiment should be expanded and applied to the entire system.