**The Educational System in Israel**

**History and Structure**

The education system in Israel is the product of long-term historical and political processes. Prior to the establishment of the state in 1948, several separate educational systems in the British Mandate of Palestine served the Arab majority and the Jewish minority. Most of the Arab population relied on public schools operated by the British Mandatory government, which mainly provided education at the elementary school level. Despite an impressive increase in the number of schools during the thirty years of British rule over the country, only about 30% of school-aged Arab children were enrolled in an educational institution. In addition to the schools operated by the colonial British government, there were also private schools for the Arab population that provided higher-level education and included options for secondary education. Although these were Christian private schools, they also attracted Muslim students from affluent families who considered them a preferable educational alternative, despite the economic cost of enrolling in them. Another educational option was schools established by local educators and intellectuals, which were aimed primarily at an urban and affluent Muslim population. Ideologically, these schools were aligned with the Palestinian national movement, and this stream of secondary education provided an important framework for developing national consciousness among the local elite.

Among the Jewish population, there were four main educational streams during the British Mandate, all of which were run by the local Jewish communities, not by the colonial government. Three of the four streams were affiliated with the Zionist movement. They constituted the educational arm of political parties with differing ideologies: bourgeois Zionism, socialist Zionism, and religious Zionism. Each of these streams offered education in the style of European education of that time. There was some collaboration on curriculum development among these streams, but teacher training was done in separate institutions. Additionally, there was a stream of Jewish ultra-Orthodox education. While administratively this was associated with the secular Jewish education system, its pedagogic perspective was based on traditional Jewish learning, and much of the secular curriculum was rejected.

The establishment of the State of Israel led to profound demographic changes, which were reflected in the development of the national education system. First, during the war between Jews and Arabs in 1947-1948, most of the local Arab population fled or was expelled. The remaining Arab residents became a minority within the newly established Jewish state. Thus, the Arab population went from being dependent on the educational system of the British colonial government to being dependent on the educational system administered by the Jewish-Israeli majority. They had no meaningful ability to design their own objectives or curricula. The Arab minority population suffered from persistent budgetary discrimination in the education sector, especially during the first decades following the establishment of the state. These conditions, in fact, perpetuated the significant educational gaps that existed between Jews and Arabs even before the establishment of the state (Al-Haj, 2012).

During the war and particularly in the subsequent years, new waves of immigrants arrived, rapidly increasing the population of the new state. This demographic growth led to considerable ethnic diversity. At the time of the founding of the state, the majority of the Jewish population was of European descent (Ashkenazi), but two decades later, Jews from the Middle East and North Africa (Mizrahi) constituted approximately half of the Jewish population. The absorption of Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries was a key issue that decision-makers in Israeli educational policy dealt with in the first decades of the state's existence. The educational leadership, the vast majority of whom were of European descent, perceived the Mizrahi immigrants as incapable of being integrated into secondary schools that taught theoretical subjects and operated in the style of the gymnasia of Central Europe. Instead, most of them were enrolled in vocational educational settings, which expanded rapidly during those years. This process formed the basis for persistent educational gaps between the two sectors of Jewish society. The secondary schools attended by most Ashkenazi students awarded them a high school diploma, which enabled their admission into institutes of higher education or professions in the government apparatus. In contrast, vocational education was primarily intended to integrate students into less prestigious occupations in the labor market (Swirski, 2002).

In the first years after the establishment of the State of Israel, two laws that formed the legal basis for the operation of the national education system were enacted. The 1949 Compulsory Education Act established the state's responsibility for funding public education, the local authorities’ responsibility for establishing schools and enrolling students, and parents’ obligation to send their children to school from age five (compulsory kindergarten) through age 14 (the end of elementary school at that time). Over the years, the Compulsory Education Act has been extended, and now pertains to children from ages three through 18 (completion of high school). The 1953 State Education Law established the structure of the Israeli education system. This law consolidated the various streams of Zionist education that had operated prior to the establishment of the state under the definition of ‘state education’ and added a stream of state schools for the Arab sector. Private Christian schools continued to operate, and maintained their independence. The Arab state schools taught in the Arabic language, but were required to implement the formal curricula used in the Jewish state schools. Over the years, various adjustments have been made to the curricula in the Arab-sector state schools, but even today leaders of Arab society in Israel continue to demand greater educational autonomy, which would allow them to design the curricula according to the needs and perspectives of the Arab minority, not those of the Jewish majority (Agbaria, 2015).

In contrast, within the system of state education, significant autonomy was given to religious Zionist groups, which continued to operate separately from the (essentially secular) state schools. The state-religious educational system enjoys the authority to set curricula, teacher recruitment and training, and maintain the religious character of the school. The state-religious education system maintains gender segregation, with separate classrooms or separate schools for boys and girls (Gross, 2003). This makes Israel a unique case in the Western world, as a country with state-religious education.

Alongside state education, the option of independent education was recognized and funded by the state, while allowing these schools to maintain broad autonomy. This type of education was enacted mainly for the benefit of the ultra-Orthodox population, which was interested in being integrated into the Jewish state-education system. The independence of ultra-Orthodox schools continues to be maintained today, and is at the heart of an ongoing political debate over their curricula. Broad segments of Israeli society demand that ultra-Orthodox schools integrate general educational subjects that will enable their graduates to be integrated into the labor market and higher education. However, the leaders of the various ultra-Orthodox streams continue to reject any connection between government funding for education and curricular oversight. They seek to reduce the exposure of students from this population, especially the boys, to any secular content, particularly foreign languages and mathematics. This view is based on the tradition of learning Jewish-religious subjects for many years, and fear that such exposure may lead to secularization (Finkelman, 2011).

Beginning in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, reforms in the Israeli education system redesigned the structure of secondary education. A reform instituted in 1968 shortened elementary school from eight years to six years (grades 1-6), created middle schools as a transitional phase between elementary and high school (grades 7-9), and shortened high school from four years to three years (grades 10-12). Alongside these structural changes, it was decided that secondary schools should be based on a comprehensive educational approach, offering a wide range of fields of study and serving a socially diverse population. The explicit goal of this reform was to integrate different strata of the Jewish population within the state-education system, especially Jews from Ashkenazi and Mizrahi backgrounds. This step was presented to the public as a way to reduce educational gaps and create a more cohesive (Jewish) society. Studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s on the impacts of this reform indicated its limited success in achieving its objectives. Further, public and political support for this initiative waned over the course of its implementation (Resh & Dar, 2012).

Towards the end of the 1970s, another reform was instituted, which addressed the high school curricula and the matriculation exams given at the end of this educational stage. These exams were created on the basis of the European model of secondary school exams, which constitute a condition for entry into higher education. As secondary education in Israel expanded, these exams became high school graduation exams that all students are expected to take. According to the model implemented since the late 1970s, the matriculation diploma includes a number of compulsory subjects (such as citizenship, mathematics, and English), along with electives from a wide range of subjects in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and technology, and other professional fields of study. There is no official hierarchy among these learning paths, as there had been previously a hierarchy between theoretical and vocational education. However, in practice, the different fields of study are seen as having varying levels of prestige, and students' options for learning them depend on the degree of selectivity associated with their perceived prestige. In general, the hard sciences, especially physics and computer science, are considered to be highly prestigious, while the social sciences and the humanities are seen as less prestigious. Even within the technological and vocational fields, there is a clear hierarchy whereby high-tech professions are given higher prestige than other professions. As we will see below, this prestige is closely associated with students’ social characteristics (Ayalon, 2006).

During the last decade of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the Israeli education system, like many other educational systems around the world, has been characterized by two seemingly contradictory trends. The first is a trend towards centralization, reflected in standardized tests, compulsory curricula, and the state's close supervision over studies in state schools. The second trend relates to processes of decentralization, reflected mainly in the broader choices of schools available to parents and students.

Since 2002, national tests have been administered in Israeli schools, which assess student achievement in their mother tongue (Hebrew or Arabic), English, mathematics, and science. The purpose of these tests is to monitor students' level of knowledge, identify gaps between population groups, and provide feedback to schools in order to encourage ongoing improvement. As in other countries, these tests have become a mechanism of supervision that have some negative consequences for schools, such as narrowing of the curriculum and teaching methods to fit the exams, intensive student preparation for exams, and increased pressure on teachers and administrators. Over the years, there has also been considerable evidence of widespread cheating on these tests (Feniger, Israeli, & Yehuda, 2016).

At the same time, the choice of available schools has been broadened by local authorities, especially in the two largest municipalities of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. This has been the result of campaigns by parent groups for the establishment of alternatives to schools that are perceived by some (generally well-established) populations as being pedagogically outdated and not meeting the students' needs. Although the percentage of students attending such schools is relatively low, the number has increased significantly over the last several decades. The Ministry of Education has opposed the establishment of many of these alternative schools, but Israeli legislation does recognize, as mentioned, the possibility of publicly-funded educational settings that are independently administered and enjoy extensive pedagogical autonomy. When cases pertaining to this issue have been brought to court, most decisions have been made in favor of the educational initiatives, and the Ministry of Education required to recognize the new schools. These new options represent a departure from the model on which the Israeli state-education system has been based since the 1950s, and have the potential of widening inequalities among the streams of state education (Gofen & Blomqvist, 2014).

**Educational Inequality in Israel**

Economic inequality in Israel is now among the most acute within the developed world, although in the first decades of its existence, it seemed to be developing as a state with a relatively high degree of economic equality. According to 2017 data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Israel has a relatively high level of income inequality and the highest relative poverty rates among OECD countries. Poverty rates are particularly high among the Arab minority and ultra-Orthodox Jewish populations (OECD, 2018). Economic inequality in Israel is reflected in educational inequality, which is the highest among the countries participating in the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a study measuring achievement in mathematics, science, and reading among 15-year-olds in some 70 countries (OECD, 2019a). Inequality in educational achievement is particularly evident between Jews and Arabs in Israel, and this has remained consistent over time (Feniger, 2018).

Many studies indicate that disparities in cognitive abilities between members of different social groups emerge in early childhood, even before they enter the formal education system, and these gaps tend to widen during childhood and adolescence. In a recent study conducted in Israel (Vaknin, Shavit, & Sasson 2019) the results on standardized tests taken by fifth-grade students who grew up in situations of poverty from birth through age two were compared with the test results of children who did not experience poverty at that age. The study found that belonging to the lower end of the statistical distribution in terms of disposable per capita family income negatively impacts children’s future educational achievement, even when controlling for disposable family income per capita in later childhood and other socio-demographic variables such as parental education and family size.

In Israel, the participation rate of children in early childhood educational services is higher than the OECD average. The participation rate of children from birth through two years in preschool educational institutions in Israel is 56%, compared with 35% on average among OECD countries. The participation rate of children aged three to five years old in Israel is also particularly high, at 99%, compared to an average of 87% among OECD countries and 89% in the European Union. This participation rate increased dramatically following the extension of the Compulsory Free Education Act to begin at age three (OECD, 2017). However, only 20% of children aged three and younger in Israel participate in early childhood settings that are under government supervision (Rabinovich, 2015).

In Israel, there is not one entity under which the provision of care, education, and services for preschool-aged children is centralized. Rather, this area is the responsibility of four different government ministries: the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Economy and Industry, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Labor, Welfare and Social Services. Therefore, a key trait of current Israeli policy is fragmentation and lack of coordination between the four government entities that determine the availability and quality of early childhood services and frameworks (Rabinovich, 2015).

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) conducted in kindergartens in 2018 (OECD, 2019b) examines, for the first time, various measures of quality assessment for early childhood education frameworks in Israel, employing a comparative perspective. Its findings indicate that the level of formal education among kindergarten teaching staff in Israel is relatively low, compared to the average in the other countries that participated in the survey. In Israel, 46% of kindergarten teaching staff members hold a college education, compared to 52% on average in other OECD countries. In addition, 39% of kindergarten teaching staff members in Israel hold only a high school diploma, twice the average of the other surveyed countries. These gaps between Israel and other countries are mainly due to the particularly poor education of assistant teachers.

Additionally, findings from the TALIS indicate that the average number of children in kindergarten classes in Israel is about 50% higher than in other countries participating in the study, while the number of teaching staff is 23% lower. Thus, although Israel has a particularly high participation rate in preschool education and care services, the quality of service appears to be low compared to that in other countries. As a result, these educational services fail to bridge social gaps.

Sorting and placing students into different learning tracks (curriculum differentiation) is a key means for modern education systems to deal with the diversity of the student population. It is therefore not surprising that the Israeli education system, characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity, has relied on diverse mechanisms of curriculum differentiation. These have changed over the years. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the main manifestation of curriculum differentiation was segregation between theoretical and vocational educational tracks in high school. In the 1970s, with the introduction of the middle schools into the education system and the implementation of the program of integration within Jewish education, the grouping of students with similar academic abilities became a significant component of secondary education. These groupings are currently used primarily in the subjects of mathematics and English (and sometimes in other subjects as well), enabling schools to deal with the wide range of students' learning abilities.

Studies conducted since the 1970s have consistently shown that in Israel, as in other countries where this practice is applied, grouping by ability is a major mechanism for perpetuating social inequalities in the educational realm. There is a high percentage of students from disadvantaged social populations in the groups for those with lower academic abilities. Thus, they are exposed to a lower level of educational requirements and lower teacher expectations. As a result, students develop poor self-esteem in the realm of learning, and their educational aspirations are limited. Those who are placed in groupings for “weak” students are more likely to enter study programs in high school that are geared towards low-status fields, and have a lower chance of acquiring a high school diploma (Ayalon, Blas, Feniger, & Shavit, 2019, see chapter 3).

Curriculum differentiation in middle school is another important mechanism for perpetuating gaps between students from different classes and social groups. This differentiation is based on an increased number of study subjects that includes a wide range of theoretical and professional / technological fields of study. Ayalon (2006) has shown that offering choice among an increased number of fields of study within the theoretical pathway is not an effective response to the problem of inequality. Her findings indicate that there are major gaps based on class, ethnicity, and gender in students' accessibility to high-status areas of learning. Blank, Shavit, and Yaish (2016) examine differentiation within professional / technological education, and show there are large gaps in the composition of classrooms of students learning different curricula. Fields of study that are similar in nature to the old-style vocational education, aimed at preparation for the labor market, are mainly populated by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Their chances of obtaining a full high school diploma are relatively low. In contrast, students in high-status technology courses tend to come from prosperous population strata, and their chances of obtaining a high school diploma are similar to those of students in the old-style, prestigious theoretical educational track. That is, efforts towards academization increased the number of students from all population strata who are eligible for a high school diploma, but failed to reduce gaps between high- and low-status educational tracks on this measure.

Alongside curriculum differentiation, reproduction of class and ethnic gaps in Israel are also related to the reproduction of gender gaps. Within Jewish-Israeli society, the same gender-based patterns that are common in many developed countries can be found; that is, male high school students are more likely to choose the disciplines of science and technology in high school, while females are more likely to study social sciences and humanities, as well as biology. This gap is particularly evident in the disciplines of physics and computer science; approximately 70% of Jewish high school students enrolled in courses in these two subjects are male. In contrast, in the high schools serving the Arab sector, there is gender equality, or even a slight predominance of females in these two academic areas (Friedman-Sokuler & Justman, 2019). This finding is all the more interesting in light of the generally conservative and traditional attitudes regarding gender roles among the Arab population in Israel. Ayalon (2002) proposes an explanation for the greater degree of gender equality in this realm: because of the limited range of study subjects offered in Arab high schools, students have fewer opportunities to choose according to gender stereotypes. A more recent study attributes this finding to differing school policies regarding students' choices in subjects to study (Pinson, Feniger, & Barak, 2020). While Jewish schools emphasize the students' self-actualization and free choice, Arab schools tend to be more authoritative and actively involved in the placement process. That is, in Arab schools, female students with high achievement in middle school are directed by the schools into the hard sciences, which narrows their choices.

**Segregation and Integration in the Israeli Education System**

There is considerable segregation within the Israeli educational system. Arabs are separated from Jews. The ultra-Orthodox are segregated from other populations of religious Jews. Both of these groups are segregated from secular and 'traditional' Jews, and each of these groups are, to some extent, segregated from each other. Although Israel is geographically extremely small, and although members of these groups and subpopulations live in close proximity to one another, the education system reinforces the considerable degree of segregation between them. Approximately 90% of Arab citizens of Israel live in localities populated by Arabs only, and the remainder live Arab-majority neighborhoods within Jewish-majority cities. Most Jews live in communities whose entire population is Jewish, and about 22% live in Jewish neighborhoods within mixed cities, such as Haifa, Jaffa, and Jerusalem. Residential segregation, differences in language spoken and religious affiliation, and hostility between the populations, are reflected in the degree of segregation in the education system.

Virtually all Arab students in Israel (98.5%) attend schools whose entire population is Arab. The remainder (about 7,000 students each year) attend Hebrew-language state schools or bilingual schools that integrate Jewish and Arab students in order to promote coexistence and social equality (Shwed, Shavit, Dellashi, & Ofek, 2014). Within the Arab-sector educational system, there is also a considerable separation between schools according to religion. Most of the students attend state schools that mainly serve the Muslim population, which constitutes a large majority of the Arab population in Israel. Two religious minorities within the Arabic-speaking population, Christians and Druze, attend separate schools from the Muslims. Most Christian-Arab students attend independent religious schools where classes are taught in Arabic. Their curriculum is generally similar to that of other state schools, but includes a component of religious classes. Some Muslim students are enrolled in these schools, especially those from well-established families who want to provide their children with education that is perceived to be of a higher quality than that available in general state-run schools for Arabs. The Druze minority maintains a system of state-funded education that is separate from that of the general Arab education system, as part of a broader policy of differentiating themselves from the rest of the Arabic-speaking population. This policy can be linked to cooperation between the Druze population of Israel and the Jewish majority since the inception of the state (for example, Druze men serve in the Israeli Defense Forces, while the rest of the Arab population is exempt from the draft). The Druze schools use the curriculum for the general Arab-sector state schools, with additional lessons related to Druze heritage. The Druze educational system enjoys larger budgets than that of the general Arab population. In recent years, its achievements have increased significantly, and the gap between them and Jewish schools and been reduced (Al-Haj, 2012; Blass, 2017).

In addition to the segregation according to nationality, religion, and degree of religiosity, there is significant segregation within the Israeli education system between socioeconomic strata and groups from different countries of origin. Segregation according to nationality and religiosity derives from deliberate policies of the State of Israel, and corresponds to the general tendency towards differentiation between the various national and religious groups. In contrast, segregation according to socioeconomic status and origin is related to spatial segregation. In a comprehensive study on segregation between secondary Hebrew-language schools in Israel, Fogel (2011) found that the degree of segregation between socioeconomic strata, as defined by the mother's level of education, is quite high in comparison to other Western countries: Israel was ranked fifth among the 28 countries surveyed. Research conducted in the 1990s on ethnic segregation within the Jewish population examined the separation between veteran Jewish-Israelis and immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. By 2004, high school students from the former Soviet Union still tended to study in classrooms with a high concentration of students from this population of immigrants. The average student affiliated with this subpopulation studied in a classroom in which the representation of this group was almost three times higher than their percentage in the population as a whole. The separation of Ethiopian-born immigrants was even more extreme. Although members of this group accounted for only 2% of the population according to the relevant census year, they studied in classrooms in which their proportion was six times higher (Fogel, 2011).

During the 1970s and 1980s, several studies assessed the success of social integration programs in Jewish schools. Resh and Dar (2012) reviewed this literature and concluded that the average learning abilities of school peers have a slight positive impact on students' achievement (according to their self-assessment of their abilities). Ayalon (2006) found that learning in schools with students from strong social and educational backgrounds improves the average achievement of all students in the school, although the composition of the school population does not reduce inequality in achievement according to social status. A more recent study found no impact of classroom socioeconomic composition on student achievement among eighth-grade students (Blank & Shavit, 2016).

Despite the large degree of segregation between the Arab and Jewish populations in the Israeli education system, about 5% of non-religious Jewish students attend schools with at least some presence of Arab students. Shwed, Kalish, and Shavit (2017) explored the patterns of socialization among Arab and Jewish students attending two types of mixed elementary schools: non-religious Hebrew-language schools and bilingual (Hebrew and Arabic) schools. Contrary to expectations, the study found that in the mixed Hebrew-language schools, the tendency to socialize with members of the 'other' group (Jews with Arabs and Arabs with Jews) was quite high, to the extent that the tendency for friendship between pairs of students in the classroom was almost unaffected by their nationality. This finding is surprising, given the impression that there is great hostility between these two populations in Israel. Further, the tendency to realize the opportunities for friendship between the two groups was found to be lower in the bilingual schools, even though their primary goal is to create opportunities for such inter-group encounters.

**Political Aspects of Curricula in Israel**

In the state educational system in Israel, uniform curricula are widely implemented, despite the internal division between Jewish-religious, Jewish-secular, and Arab educational streams. State-religious education operates under the auspices of an external advisory council, which oversees adaptation of curricula to the religious outlook of the population of religious Jews. In contrast, state education for the Arab sector does not enjoy a similar ability to influence curriculum design in the schools that serve this population. As a result, since the establishment of the state, Arab teachers who teach Arab students are forced to implement curricula that express the viewpoints of the Jewish majority, rather than those of the Arab minority. This is particularly evident in the subjects of history and citizenship, where there is a considerable gap between the hegemonic Jewish-Zionist narrative that shapes state curricula, and the way the Arab minority seeks to present the history of the Palestinian people and their aspirations for civil and cultural equality within the Jewish state. This situation, of course, creates conflicts for teachers and students. Studies show that one of the main methods teachers use to deal with this situation is focusing on teaching the material for the matriculation exams without any critical discussion of it, as would be expected among those teaching in a democratic society (Agbaria, 2018; Al-Haj, 2005; Pinson 2007).

Beyond the question of representing the Arab minority in civic education programs, citizenship studies has constituted a central arena of political and pedagogical controversies in recent decades. Citizenship curricula have undergone several stages of development since they were first formulated in the early 1970s. The focus on formal aspects of Israeli government structure shifted towards a greater focus on democratic values, and later on highlighting Israel's existence as a Jewish nation-state as well as a democratic state. The controversy in Israeli politics is clearly expressed in the most recent curriculum, approved in 2016. Its opponents see it as a retreat away from liberal and universal values and a move towards nationalist values emphasizing the Jewish character of the state over its democratic nature. Its supporters assert that it expresses a wide range of approaches to citizenship, and not only a liberal-individualistic view. The politicization of the citizenship curriculum is more prominent in the current public debate than it was in past disputes (Cohen, 2019).

The most prominent political dispute in the last two decades regarding the field of education in Israel has centered on the curricula for ultra-Orthodox schools, which operate outside the state system and enjoy a high degree of autonomy. The leadership of the ultra-Orthodox community demands full autonomy and a focus on Jewish studies, especially in schools for boys. The Ministry of Education, with the support of substantial parts of the Israeli public, has tried to standardize the curricula, especially regarding the introduction of mathematics and English to these schools. This debate over the structure of the curriculum was waged not only within the Ministry of Education, but also in the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), the courts, and the media. In practice, without making significant changes to existing legislation, the Ministry of Education can determine the structure of the curricula to be taught in ultra-Orthodox schools, but has no way of enforcing their implementation in the classrooms (Perry-Hazan, 2015).

As in many other countries, educational policy in Israel is embroiled in the tension between localization and globalization. This is clearly reflected in the curricula. On the one hand, the Israel Ministry of Education has adopted a global stance that emphasizes the importance of learning mathematics, the hard sciences, and technology, because these are perceived as being beneficial for the country's economic development. The Ministry of Education is consistently working to increase the number of school hours devoted to these subjects, and encourages schools to direct more students into these fields.

In Israel, as in other places, international tests play a major role in the adoption of this narrative, primarily by creating the perception among the public that there is an educational crisis. This has been a catalyst for curricular reform (Feniger, 2018). At the same time, in school subjects related to the shaping of the national and cultural identity of the Jewish majority, such as history, the centrality of local particulars can be seen, alongside a decline in the study of topics relating to other places and peoples. Paradoxically, this decline is reflected in a period when the Ministry of Education's policy documents declare the need to promote a broader understanding of globalization processes among students (Yemini, Bar-Nissan, & Shavit, 2014).

**Higher Education**

The roots of the higher education system in Israel may be traced back to the pre-state era. In the 1920s, two Jewish institutions were established that formed the foundation for research and teaching at the academic level: the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, specializing in the humanities alongside some of the natural sciences, and the Israel Institute of Technology (the Technion) in Haifa, specializing in the hard sciences and engineering. In the 1930s, another institution was established that had a significant impact on the development of academic research in Israel: the Weizmann Institute of Science, which specializes in research in the natural sciences and technological fields, and in training students to conduct such research. In the first half of the twentieth century, several teacher training colleges were opened, but in general these did not offer full academic degrees, at least until the last decade of the twentieth century. In the first two decades following the establishment of the State of Israel, four other research universities were opened, mainly funded by government budgets: Tel Aviv University, Bar-Ilan University, Haifa University, and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. The previously established academic institutions were absorbed into the state higher education system, and they expanded into more fields of study.

Despite the increase in the number of students attending these institutions and the founding of the Open University in the 1970s, it was clear to decision-makers that further significant expansion of the system was necessary, in view of the increasing demand for higher education and its low accessibility to disadvantaged social groups. Despite the major demographic changes that occurred during the first decades of the State of Israel, the higher education system continued to accept students mainly from the Ashkenazi Jewish population and affluent urban areas. Arabs and Mizrahi Jews, who mainly lived in peripheral areas, were absorbed into this system at a relatively low rate, compared to the dominant group. Contrary to the trends of increasing the academic supply through the establishment and expansion of public universities, in this case, the leaders of the educational system decided to expand it through the creation of internal differentiation and processes of privatization. In the mid-1990s, a reform was implemented that enabled the opening of local private colleges, the academization of existing private colleges, and the opening of branches of foreign universities in Israel. Additionally, public colleges that had not previously granted academic degrees, such as teaching colleges and technological colleges, were academized. New public colleges were opened throughout the nation, including in its northern and southern peripheral areas. Thus, much of the extension of the system of higher education was carried out in the realm of undergraduate studies and in institutions that focused on teaching, rather than on research. Currently, some of the colleges that were founded as a result of this reform do grant a master's degree, but it is usually a non-research degree. Like the first wave of expansion of the higher education system in the 1950s and 1960s, this subsequent reform brought no new opportunities for higher education taught in Arabic, with the exception of a few colleges for teacher training. Even today, there are no research-oriented institutions of higher education in Israel where the language of instruction is Arabic. This creates considerable difficulty for students from the Arab population in Israel, who attend Arabic-speaking schools through the end of high school, then transition to higher educational settings where they are forced to choose almost exclusively from institutions where the language of instruction is Hebrew.

Recent data indicate that the reforms implemented in the 1990s succeeded in significantly expanding the supply of higher educational institutions and increasing the number of students attending them. In 1990, approximately 75,000 students were enrolled in institutions of higher education in Israel, including seven research institutions and a small number of colleges. By 2018, approximately 270,000 students were enrolled in some sixty educational institutions (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019, Table 4.64). This growth rate far exceeds the rate of population growth during those years. Because this increase was primarily based on enrollment in colleges rather than universities, the proportion of undergraduates has grown rapidly since the mid-1990s. Today, close to 50% of undergraduate students attend academic (public and private) colleges, another 15% attend teaching colleges, and 35% are enrolled in the established research universities (ibid.). Alongside the success of the reform in increasing the overall supply of higher education, it also succeeded in increasing the participation of disadvantaged groups in Israeli society, thereby reducing social inequalities in access to higher education. Feniger, Mcdossi, and Ayalon (2015), show that even after this expansion, there were still gaps between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews (in favor of the Ashkenazi Jews) with regard to access to undergraduate education, but these gaps disappear when controlling for the families' socioeconomic status and previous academic achievements. However, gaps in accessibility remain between Ashkenazi Jews and Jews who immigrated to Israel since the late 1980s from the former Soviet Union, and between Ashkenazi Jews and Israeli Arabs, even after controlling for these variables.

Studies conducted in Israel in the last two decades show that disadvantaged social groups, especially Arabs and Mizrahi Jews, increased their participation in higher education primarily at institutions that are considered second tier in terms of academic prestige and employment opportunities. Feniger et al. (2015) show that among Arabs who entered the higher education system in the late 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, only a small minority chose to study fields such as engineering and economics. They attribute this to the structure of the Israeli labor market, which poses various barriers against the integration of Arabs into these fields of employment. Recent data published by the Israel Council on Higher Education indicate a significant increase in enrollment in the engineering and computer fields among the Arab population in the second decade of the twenty-first century, although this has not yet been verified through research.

Another significant development among Arab citizens of Israel in the last two decades is the phenomenon of leaving to study in the areas administered by the Palestinian Authority or in Jordan. The availability of higher education in these institutions enables Arab citizens of Israel to study academic subjects in the Arabic language and in their own cultural environment. They also offer more favorable conditions of admission in comparison to Israeli research universities (though not necessarily in comparison to Israeli colleges). However, studies in these institutions may cause difficulties in converting academic degrees into employment opportunities in the Israeli labor market (Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2016). Recent data show that young adults from the Arab population who study at higher education institutions in Israel are more likely than Jews to drop out of school, or to extend their studies beyond the usual time for necessary for graduation. A key explanation for this is their difficulties with the language (Feniger, Mcdossi, & Ayalon 2016).

As in many other countries, in Israel females are entering higher education at a greater rate than males. This phenomenon has been particularly pronounced in recent years among the Arab population. Recent data from Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics show that among the Jewish population, approximately 57% of females go on to higher education within eight years after high school graduation, compared to about 40% of males. Among the Arab population, approximately 42% of women continue their academic education during this period, compared with approximately 22% of males (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019, Table 4.59). Despite this greater rate accessing higher education overall, females still enter fields of study associated with high-income professions, especially engineering, at a lower rate than males (Feniger, et al., 2015).

The social group in Israel that has the lowest representation in post-secondary education is ultra-Orthodox Jews. Historically, this social group has almost completely avoided acquisition of a college or university education, which is seen as a threat to the traditional life of its members. However, at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, changes in this worldview began to emerge, leading to increased interest among the ultra-Orthodox public and its leadership regarding acquiring an academic education. One of the primary reasons behind this change is the difficulty ultra-Orthodox men and women face in entering the higher-paying strata of the Israeli employment market. The ability to do so is becoming essential, given that this community suffers from particularly high rates of poverty. Nevertheless, members of ultra-Orthodox society experience considerable difficulties in trying to integrate into higher educational settings. One cause for this is the different curricula taught in the branch of the Israeli education system they attended in previous educational stages. Another is the desire of ultra-Orthodox students to maintain gender segregation, even in academic institutions.

In the 1990s, academic programs, mainly within private academic institutions, began to reach out to ultra-Orthodox society. In 2012, for the first time, the Israel Council for Higher Education published a comprehensive plan for the integration of ultra-Orthodox in public institutions of higher education. This was were based on separate preparatory courses and study programs for this group. This program increased the number of ultra-Orthodox students, especially female students, enrolled in higher educational institutes in Israel. However, it faces considerable implementation difficulties due to the demand for gender segregation, to which there is widespread resistance in the Israeli academic community. Further, there is a high dropout rate due to lack of academic readiness resulting from disparities in their previous education (Israel State Comptroller, 2019).

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