

Tzemach David Research Findings and Next Steps

Introduction

The past six months Tzemach David Foundation has undertaken an intensive research process to see how best to support, yet transform, Israeli formal education. This process has included over 100 meetings with individuals from diverse backgrounds to understand the fundamental issues facing Israeli education. Along the way, we experienced areas of innovation and development that inspire us to learn, dream, and create. The research included meetings with government officials, staff within the Ministry of Education and other educational foundations, as well as with educators, parents, students, intellectuals and other experts and researchers within the educational landscape. We looked at hard research data to evaluate how what we learned from anecdotal meetings was manifested in Israeli schools, and we performed site visits to corroborate all of our information. We also reflected and compared our experiences with education and administration in other countries.

This White Paper will share our initial thoughts about some core challenges that the Israeli education system faces, our initial interventions, as well as the areas in which we hope to be involved in the future. Our initial focus is centered on the Anglo Olim experience and the Mamlachti Dati system. As we learn from our experience in this sector, we plan to conduct additional research and broaden the scope of our impact.

We are a grant giving and operational foundation. We aim to be both strategic and intentional with philanthropy in order to create sustainability and transferability within the Israeli education system. We intend to develop our scope of work; we will use the next few years to pilot different approaches on the ground and scale effectively as needed.

The Challenges and Points of Innovation

The Israeli education system faces many challenges. Although there are exceptions to the trends delineated below (which give us hope and excitement) there are some basic themes which are concerning. The discussion is divided into different categories for the sake of clarity, **yet** these categories are all interconnected and impact each other.

The System Itself:

- The education system is in many ways still a by-product of the founding of the State of Israel and has remnants of the kibbutz movement (for example the few hours of instruction time per week). Although there are many points of innovation that have peppered the system within the past 10 years, the

pedagogical system is very traditional and has not developed significantly. Israeli education is more about acquiring knowledge and less about meaning-making, relevancy and skill building. An example, cited as an issue specifically by Dati Olim, is that due to the traditional memorization-based, Bagrut-driven education, Judaic Studies classes are not centered around connection, which is one of the variables (among others) that can cause students to feel less engaged with Judaism, and result in a decline in religiously committed youth.

- It is a “public school system” run by the Ministry of Education. The MKs and the policies change so quickly that there is no real long-term planning. MKs are focused on their term in office. We know change happens in 5-10 years and change should be gradual in nature but the system does not allow for that.
- Bagrut-driven education in high school is a benchmark by which schools evaluate themselves and the Ministry assesses the schools; this strengthens the adherence to a knowledge-based approach as the Bagrut exams focus on testing for acquired knowledge. Therefore, the educational institutions are typically Bagrut focused and not mission driven. Although the Bagrut are an important benchmark, this should not stop schools from creating mission and intentionality within the schools and the system. We should be enhancing the curriculum, not teaching specifically to the Bagrut.
- There is a lack of trust within the educational system, so that even when the Misrad Hachinuch does something strategic, it is met with real criticism.
- The teacher union has a strong voice that also inhibits the ability for change. They are obviously looking to create a teaching atmosphere that will be better for the educators but they also have their own agenda which sometimes or often is not aligned with the Ministry.
- Overall, schools within a Reshet or a strong Amutah seem to have happier principals, teachers, and students. The scaling of the Reshet system allows the principals (at least in theory and often in practice) to have more freedom to create what they see is needed; it also generates a buffer between principals and the Misrad Hachinuch so that principals are not dealing with the technical issues.

The Schools and Leadership:

- The schools that are more innovative are ones with a courageous principal and a group of inspiring teachers. There is a real shortage of principals in the system and burnout is a real problem as principals are often dealing with bureaucratic demands which limits the time they have available to be educational leaders. When principals are “creative” and make the system work for them, they can support their teachers to become the best versions

of themselves and try new things, that is when you see schools that are able to flourish.

- Most schools have not created a mission and vision for their school and therefore there is a lack of intentionality in the overall ecosystem. Reshatot have been able to challenge this deficiency somewhat: they show more of focus which leads to clear priorities and development of the schools.

The Teachers:

- There is a huge shortage of teachers in Israel, with about a third that leave teaching after 3-7 years, compounded by a third fewer people not entering the teaching workforce after covid. Although there are many reasons for teacher retention issues, including salary, it is also clear that teachers did not go into teaching for the money. Teachers that leave feel like they are burned out and not valued. They have often commented that they are dealing more with classroom management than teaching what they are passionate about. This classroom management problem is partially due to the large class sizes but there are other variables like the antiquated teaching methods that lead to less student engagement and, therefore, discipline issues. Teachers feel discouraged and not supported so they leave.
- If teachers are in the system for more than 5 years, they are likely to stay in the system. Tenure as well as school hours (as it works with their family life) are often the main reasons teachers stay. If teachers are not being successful in the classroom, they are sometimes given leadership roles which introduces other issues.
- The Sabbatical year is a time that many teachers have the opportunity to grow and develop but that year is often used as recreational time or looking for another job, not for advancing or developing their teaching expertise. The teachers who choose to go on a Sabbatical feel like they need a break rather than viewing this as a gift of time for developing themselves as educators.
- Many of the teachers in Mamlachti Dati schools are more Chardal (i.e. affiliated with the Religious Zionist Jewish community but also inclined toward Charedi ideology) and Chareidi. Mamlachti Dati Israelis often do not see the value in becoming an educator so will go to other professions. This creates an ideological gap between the teachers and the students (and their families). This disparity is also given as a reason for why students might not feel connected to their Jewish studies as they do not see their teachers as role models.
- The teaching workforce is one of the lowest scoring on standardized tests (according to the OECD report on math and literacy). Talented individuals do not usually become teachers, and, if they do, they often take on many

roles in order to increase their salaries; sometimes these are roles for which they are not formally trained. Teachers are also not compensated for lesson planning and do not have enough time to adequately explore innovations in education.

The Students

- The students that seem to be doing well in the system are the ones that “fit into the box.” But students with any different needs, including Olim who are trying to integrate, or students that are advanced beyond their grade or who have uncommon interests, or students with special needs, all need extra support in order to learn and grow to their potential. They are often frustrated within the system and will either get support out of school (if their parents can financially fund that), miss some of the school hours in order to get what they need, or just fall through the cracks. This lack of needed support also leads to more students being at risk. The large class sizes contribute to this issue.
- Even at some of the best schools, student attendance is weak. Besides the problems created by the Moed Beit (second chance) mentality, students can be absent from school and miss very little work, which shows the low caliber of the education that they are receiving.
- Students often improve their work ethic, leadership skills, and self-discipline in the army. Students enter university at a later age having seen “real life” in the army. This allows them time to compensate for what they missed out in their formal K-12 schooling.
- The Mamlachti Dati system is currently very politically polarized. It has the opportunity to be the bridge between the Mamlachti and Charedi systems but, due to the political climate, people within the Mamlachti Dati system first need to find common ground and discourse internally before they can connect to individuals within the other systems.
- There is often not enough funding to add innovation within a school and there is a lack of programming for Olim, Special Ed, and Gifted Ed. In schools and programs that provide higher order thinking and an open minded approach, the differentiation in the classroom becomes less of an issue and students seem to be able to be more successful.

Areas of Innovation

- There are points of innovation throughout Israel which are inspiring and engaging for students. But these are often found outside of the formal school environment. Due to the shorter day chugim (club) and youth groups are very popular. This environment leads to more creativity and growth outside of the classroom and this is where there are many pockets of innovation.

- There are opportunities in the educational system where creativity shines through, but often as creativity for the teachers, not for the students. For example, it is very common that teachers create plays which students perform, rather than the students being in charge and the teachers playing a supporting role.
- There are several schools that are more innovative and student centered. Often the leadership of the school and/or the mission of the Reshet or Amutta have been responsible for that change.

Our Initiatives for 2023-2024

We will be continuing our research process while carrying out a few pilot projects in order to understand the system from within, so that we can make productive changes moving forward. These initiatives are a by-product of the research that we have conducted. And this is just the beginning! These initiatives are meant for us to get our feet wet and try some things out to see what best to develop and scale.

- Micro-grants for Integration of Olim within Schools: We will partner with principals to create a plan to help with integrating Olim. The principal and school decide how the goal of this initiative should be accomplished in their school community but we will be privy to those conversations to understand the education system from within. In addition, these principals will become a cohort that will meet about five times a year to discuss these and other ideas, challenges, and initiatives.
- Sabbatical Program for Teacher Leaders: An 8 month program for teachers during their Sabbatical year where they will spend about half their week in the program. The program will empower teachers and help them to develop professionally. It will also allow teachers to feel valued and supported. The program will be anchored by a project that the participants will create; they will use the project as a springboard for research and learning around change and innovation within their school community. There will be weekly off-site visits to points of innovation within Israel and a week-long trip to the United States to expose the participants to innovation in education, so that they can understand how theory translates into practice. The teachers will implement their projects when they return to their schools, hopefully feeling invigorated and inspired.

The program will officially launch for the 2024-2025 academic year but we will be hosting some networking events in the winter of 2023 and participant recruitment will begin February 2024.

- The Tzemach David Prize will be featuring, celebrating and awarding prizes for innovative educators. The publishing of innovative work by/for teachers will create a database of projects of innovative teaching. The projects created by participants in the Sabbatical Program will also be made available to the general public.

Conclusion

We are thrilled to begin addressing systemic flaws in Israel's education system that we identified, through the above initiatives. Support for principals and teacher training are two obvious areas where we can contribute, and therefore these are our first initiatives for the upcoming years.

There is a lot of enthusiasm for this project as the Ministry of Education, principals, teachers, and parents all recognize the need for change and understand the potential for success is great. Additional resources and support could stimulate a mindset shift and drive the creation of better intentional schools, and more engagement, relevant meaning-making, and skill building for students.