

Civic Education in Israel

By Mikhal Barak*

Israeli daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* recently published an article about an experimental curriculum for matriculation on the subject of multiculturalism. The new curriculum, prepared by the Education Administration in Jerusalem, was intended for tenth-graders in schools throughout Jerusalem, including Jewish religious and secular and Arab schools. The students were to study this curriculum for three years, at a weighting of five matriculation units. The *Ha'aretz* article noted that the list of articles, upon which the curriculum is based, included pieces by Edward Said and Arab Member of Knesset (MK) Dr. Azmi Bishara.

Less than a week after the publication of this article in *Ha'aretz*, the Minister of Education and the Director of the Ministry's Pedagogical Secretariat decided to cancel the program. The reason for the cancellation, according to a follow-up article published in *Ha'aretz*, was the inclusion of the aforementioned pieces by Said and Bishara. This minor case typifies the government's approach toward civic education in Israel in general – civic education is perceived as a controversial, political topic. Pedatzur and Perliger (2004) contend that there is an inherent paradox in civic education in Israel (73):

The fact that all of the political streams in Israel have prominent and extensive interests in determining the character of civic education in Israel has turned the conflict about its content into a political conflict ... The fact that education for citizenship (in fact, its ineffectiveness) touches upon the foundations of the political dispute in Israeli society and is influenced by and influences the underlying values connected to the fashioning of Israel's image, has turned it into a central tool in the continuing struggle between two political streams that see the future image of the state in a contradictory way.

Not only does the educational establishment in Israel regard civic education as a political subject, but it is also perceived as a field which competes with Jewish-values education. Bluntly speaking, education for civic identity is seen as a threat to education for national, Zionist and Jewish identity. For these reasons, the education system in Israel suffers from a great deficiency in the field of civic education. An obvious example of this deficiency occurred recently during the course of the Dovrat Committee's discussions over which matriculation examinations should be included within the mandatory framework, and which should be left to the discretion of schools to select. In general, the Report of the Dovrat Committee on educational reform supports the expansion of civic education in Israel. However, in its initial proposal, civics was not included in the list of mandatory subjects. Only after a public campaign was it decided to add civics to the mandatory list.

In this paper, I will review several of the problems associated with civic education in Israel in general and in Arab schools in particular. As I go on to explain, the difficulties students and teachers in Arab schools face in this field derive from the fact that the educational establishment regards civic education as a danger to Jewish-national education and regards a common civic identity as a threat to Jewish-national identity.

Civic education is a term which encompasses a range of educational programs and activities. It is customary to distinguish between civics, which teaches the basic principles of citizenship in a democratic state, and civic education, which also includes extracurricular educational programs and activities.

* The author is the program coordinator at the Gilo Center for Citizenship, Democracy and Civic Education at Hebrew University. The Center's Internet address is: <http://gilocenter.mscc.huji.ac.il>.

The goal of civic education is to prepare tomorrow's citizens in a democratic state. This aim, as I see it, includes education for a number of characteristics required of a mature citizen: this is a person who knows and understands the basic concepts of democratic rule, shows an interest in what is taking place around him or her and takes a stand on issues of concern, has a sense of belonging to the state and society, is a critical thinker, is aware of his or her ability to make an impact on reality, and is familiar with the tools available for doing so. He or she is motivated and seeks to make an impact, and is a critical consumer of information, capable of understanding the significance and complexity of life in a democratic society.

It seems to me that although the rhetoric of the establishment, as expressed in official documents of the Ministry of Education and the civics curriculum, also adopts this list of goals (more or less) nonetheless the educational system in Israel has not internalized them. The perception of civic education as a political issue places it in conflict with Zionist-nationalist education and is inconsistent with the notion that civic education is designed to train critically-thinking and educated citizens endowed with a solid civic identity.

Generally speaking, there are two main approaches toward the content of civic education: a formal approach and a substantive approach. The formal approach emphasizes teaching the structure of the democratic regime and knowledge of its institutions, authorities and functions, as well as the reciprocal relations between them. The substantive approach emphasizes democratic values and deals with human rights, moral and social values, and the structure of society. The civics curriculum in Israel has undergone several changes and reforms, which will be described briefly below.

Since the establishment of the state in 1948, civic education has suffered from a lack of investment. The main problem stems from the small amount of time devoted to the teaching of civics. The average Israeli pupil receives three hours per week of civics lessons for only one year in the framework of studies for the matriculation examination in civics (one unit). In recent years, a limited number of schools have experimented with offering civics for matriculation at a higher weighting (two or five units). There is also a one-year elective curriculum at the level of junior high school.

Since most high school students are exposed to civics lessons only during their year of preparation for the matriculation examinations (as opposed to all other subjects of study, which are followed for several years prior to preparation for matriculation), the achievements of students in this subject are relatively low. Until recently, the educational system suffered from an additional problem in this area: a lack of specific training for teaching civics. In schools and colleges for teacher training, there were no special tracks for teaching civics, and most of the teachers in this field were teachers whose field of specialization was history or the social sciences. Today, there are a number of tracks of specialization in civic education, especially for master's degrees.

In the years prior to the establishment of the state and during its initial decades, civic education in Israel focused on Zionist education for building the nation. Universal or democratic values were not included in the curriculum (Ichilov, 1993). In 1976, civics was added for the first time as a separate, mandatory subject of study for Jewish high schools, and several years later in Arab schools. The curriculum in each of the educational sectors was different. In general, though, all of these curricula suffice with formal content, including dealing with democratic procedures, the institutions of government and their roles and the relations between them.

The concerns over the dangers to Israeli democracy which followed the murder of peace activist Emil Greenzweig, who was killed during a demonstration against the war in Lebanon, in 1983 and the entry of the extreme right-wing Kach movement into the Knesset in 1984, led to

the strengthening of the civics program in the educational system. In the wake of these events, the Unit for Democracy and Coexistence was established in the Ministry of Education in 1985. This unit was responsible for a number of programs of study, all of them extra-curricular. In the following years, the unit's status and roles were gradually curtailed, and at a certain point it was made subordinate to the Administration for Values Education, which was also assigned responsibility for the study of Judaism. The unit was shut down completely in 1999 (Pedatzur and Perliger, 2004:76).

In 1995, then-Minister of Education Amnon Rubinstein appointed a committee headed by Professor Mordechai Kremnitzer to assess civic education in Israel and to recommend a comprehensive program for the instilling of democratic and civic values. The committee submitted a detailed report with recommendations for wide-ranging reform in civics in general and in civic education lessons in particular. Following Kremnitzer's report, the civics curriculum for matriculation was modified. In 2001, a new curriculum was introduced, based on the textbook "To Be Citizens in Israel: A Jewish and Democratic State." This book was also translated into Arabic. A joint taskforce was also formed to implement the Kremnitzer and Shenhar reports. (The Shenhar report, entitled "People and World – Jewish Culture in a Changing World," deals with Jewish culture and heritage). Pedatzur and Perliger (2004) note that both the Unit for Democracy and Coexistence and the taskforce for implementing Kremnitzer's report ultimately found themselves subordinate to or partners with the units dealing with education for Jewish values. They argue that this reality derives from the views of various Ministers of Education that civic education is liberal, leftist education that must be limited by a reinforcement of education for Jewish values.

The title of the new textbook – "To Be Citizens in Israel: A Jewish and Democratic State" – testifies to its orientation: citizenship in a Jewish and democratic state. The book is divided into three parts: (1) What is a Jewish state?; (2) What is democracy?; and (3) Government and politics in Israel. Following the recommendations of the Kremnitzer Committee, the subject matter deals both with the formal aspect of governing institutions and their activities, and with the values of democracy, human rights and minority rights, the limits of democracy and rifts within Israeli society (including the national rift between the Jewish majority and Arab minority; the religious rift between religious and non-religious Jews; the ethnic rift between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews; the ideological-political rift between right and left; and the class-socioeconomic rift between rich and poor).

Pinson (2005) concludes that the new civics curriculum does not achieve its goal of becoming a tool for developing a common citizenship for all citizens of Israel. She argues that the state of Israel is defined in the book as a Jewish-national state. Other definitions of the state (for example, as a state of all its citizens) are portrayed as marginal. Though the book presents several possible approaches to defining the state of Israel,

... the way this discussion is structured shows that the book, under the guise of adopting a pluralistic outlook and presenting a range of opinions that exist in Israeli society, takes a clear stand on the question of whether or not the definition of the state of Israel is desirable. By presenting an imaginary continuum, the book creates a distinction between the Zionist approaches – the desirable approaches – located at the center of this imaginary line, and the approaches that reject the definition of the state of Israel as Jewish or democratic, which are therefore found on the margins of this imaginary continuum – at the end. (Pinson, 2005, p.15).

Although there is a significant improvement in the content of civics studies in the new curriculum, its implementation was not accompanied by an increase in the number of classroom hours or additional programs in the field of civic education. Moreover, this curriculum also fails to meet the goals of civic education that I outlined at the beginning of this paper, and does not

put into practice the set of recommendations from Kremnitzer's report. This is not a program that teaches students to be critical citizens. In light of its ethnocentric outlook (its being based on the definition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state), it does not provide education in common civic identity and does not include a genuine deliberation on the conflict between a Jewish national state and democratic values.

In summary, civic education in Israel is generally deficient in terms of the number of classroom hours and official extracurricular programs. In the Israeli education system, civic education is perceived as a field which competes with Jewish-Zionist education. The units and taskforces formed to improve this field ultimately found themselves attached to departments dealing with Jewish-values education. While the new curriculum for civics represents a significant improvement over the programs used in the past, it is an ethnocentric program focusing on Israel as a Jewish and democratic state; it does not challenge students to think critically or discuss the inherently problematic character of a Jewish and democratic state. This situation stems from the conception that civic education is a political field competing with education in Zionist and national values.

Students and teachers in Arab schools encounter particular difficulties in the field of civic education. As stated above, the civics curriculum does not encourage education for common civic identity for all citizens of the state. The attitude toward the Arab minority in the new curriculum is that Arab citizens constitute a national minority, and there is also reference to the tensions which stem from the existence of a Palestinian national minority in a Jewish nation state. However, Pinson (2005) claims that these difficulties are not understood as a challenge confronting Israeli democracy and Israeli citizenship, but rather as a unique challenge for the Palestinian minority.

The failure to confront the problems of an ethnic democracy and, in particular, the failure to seriously confront the attitude toward minorities who have a different ethnic identity from the majority's, places the civics teachers in the Arab sector in an impossible situation: they are obliged to instill the principles of democracy in students whose situation in life is not consistent with these principles. The curriculum does not provide Arab teachers with a real opportunity to discuss with their students the conflicts stemming from the clash between the Jewishness of the state and their citizenship in it.

In a unique seminar conducted in Arabic, civics teachers in Arab schools discuss the challenges and difficulties of teaching civics in Arab schools. The seminar is held within the framework of the Gilo Center for Citizenship, Democracy and Civic Education, under the auspices of the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The participants are studying for their master's degrees in political science, with a concentration in "Civic Education and Democracy." Dr. Asam Abu Raya led the program during its initial year and Dr. Amal Jamal has coordinated the program for the past two years.

The seminar provides the students with a guided framework for clarifying issues in democratic citizenship and civic education, and for discussing the difficulties and challenges in teaching civics and instilling the values of democracy within the Arab education system. The central question of the seminar is whether and how it is possible to teach civics and instill the values of democracy in Arab pupils in light of the pupils' own life experiences, while frankly confronting the contradictions between universal messages, national longings, everyday reality and relations with the establishment.

This is how one of the master's students in the Arabic-language seminar described her experience of teaching civics at an Arab school in Israel (Abu Raya, 2004):

A problem I always encounter is the strong resistance [on the part of the pupils] to defining the regime in Israel as a democracy. I try to explain to the pupils that, while democracy in Israel is limited (usually attributed to security constraints), there is democracy in many areas, such as equality before the law. The pupils argue that democracy in Israel is restricted in accordance with the interests of the government. For example, the events of October 2000 are always mentioned when the right to demonstrate comes up. After the events of October 2000, one of the pupils asked me why the police behaved in that way toward Arab citizens. Why didn't it ever behave in this way toward Jews? I agreed with the pupil. Indeed, the state sometimes behaves in a way that is opposed to democracy and acts violently against citizens, particularly Arab citizens. In my opinion, the state sometimes doesn't know how to cope and acts this way out of fear.

Life in a democratic society in general, and particularly in a nation state such as Israel, is characterized by a multitude of dilemmas and conflict situations. In my view, it is important to teach students how to deal with conflict situations, to analyze complex situations, and to take and express a firm stance. They should be taught how to crystallize a critical and well-based view on governmental decisions. It would be beneficial to develop a civic and democratic identity among Israel's pupils, Jews and Arabs.

In this paper, I underlined the problematic character of the educational system in Israel in the field of civic education, which does not teach pupils to confront dilemmas and conflict situations. I argued that this state of affairs stems from the fact that civic education is perceived of as competing with education for Zionist and Jewish identities. These problems are especially acute in Arab schools: the curriculum does not provide education in a common civic identity and does not seriously confront the problems of the Arab minority in a Jewish and democratic state.

The pupils in Israel, Jews and Arabs, are not receiving proper training as the citizens of tomorrow.

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