Comparing Failure: Social Reproduction and Change in the Israeli Educational System
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<u>Research Interests</u>: Formal education, or schooling, is almost universally understood as one means of transmitting knowledge between generations. While the specificities of knowledge may vary from one society to the next, the basic purpose remains constant; enabling a society to reproduce itself over the course of many generations. Social reproduction however, is not simply the transmission of specific technical skills, such as literacy or mathematics; students are also expected to learn sociocultural norms and ideologies. Thus, along with the supposedly neutral skills of mathematics and literacy, students learn to value specific forms of logic and specific dialects over others. Educational failure then, is not simply a matter of not mastering technical skills, it may also reflect a rejection of dominant group norms and ideologies. For students who are outside of the dominant group, by virtue of their gender, ethnic, or class identities, the values learned in school may conflict with those learned at home or in their community. These technical and ideological barriers to educational success are further compounded by structural limitations which minority or non-dominant group students may face, such as quotas, access to quality schooling, and discrimination. These barriers to educational success diversely affect different sectors of the population and thus serve to reproduce the social hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, and class. I am interested in uncovering the processes by which minority or non-dominant group students cope with these barriers and how teachers, concerned with their students' educational success, identity, and emotional well-being, maneuver around these hurdles.

<u>Proposed Research Project</u>: In this project I seek to investigate the processes by which non-dominant group students and teachers in Israel acquiesce to, or manipulate, an educational system which appears to impede their success. To accomplish this task, I will undertake comparative ethnographic studies of three secular secondary schools in Israel, each populated predominantly by students from one distinct type of ethnic group or social class. The goal is to determine how, on a local level, state education reinforces, modifies, and blurs ethnic, class, and gender hierarchies, and the mechanisms by which teachers and students struggle against these inequalities. Specifically, I will investigate how, among three different ethnic groups, differing applications and interpretations of curricula and teaching materials by teachers, students, and administrators as well as differing relationships and expectations between teachers and students reproduce or change the existing barriers to educational achievement.

The relevance of curricula to both students and teachers was brought home to me by an event I observed in an academically-tracked history class in a Palestinian city in Israel. A teacher, fighting his students' waning interest while teaching a class on the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, made an abrupt turn-about, and proceeded to lecture on how the state sanctioned history text book was biased against Arabs and thus incorrect. The students, their interest peaked, began actively participating, suggesting other, more pro-Arab readings of the events which led to the war. Before dismissing them, the teacher

reminded the students that they would be taking the *Bagrut*, the Israeli baccalaureate exam, and that the textbook version of history had to be recounted, not alternatives. The teacher later confessed to me that he was unsure whether or not this was an effective teaching method. While this technique clearly interested his students and made them critical of received knowledge, he suspected that it also alienated them from the state educational system, and ultimately limited their ability to matriculate on the university level. In this case, the teacher, recognizing that the 'official knowledge' imposed by the state was antagonistic to his students' identities and sense of self-worth, chose to value the students' emotional well-being over educational standards, the risk of his students' failure, and his job.

As the event described above illuminates, for a minority population, such as the Palestinian citizens of Israel (Green-Line Palestinians), the 'official knowledge' taught in school is frequently of little relevance to their daily lives, or their history (Mar'i 1978). These problems however, are not limited to Palestinians in Israel. Despite radically different political identities, Mizraḥi Jews, the 'Oriental' Jews from the Middle East and other non-European locales, share similar social and economic circumstances. Like the Palestinians, most Mizraḥi Jews are working-class and are a stigmatized ethnic community (Haidar 1995; Lustick 1980; Shohat 1988; Swirski 1989). Both communities have an extremely high rate of educational failure, approximately twice that of the Ashkinazim (Jews of European origin), the dominant group in Israel (Al-Haj 1995; Swirski 1990). In spite of their numerical majority in Israel, Mizraḥi students and teachers also struggle against an alienating curricula. History and literature textbooks concentrate upon a European and Ashkinazi past, by and large ignoring the contributions of the Middle East to humanity, and of the Mizraḥim to Israel (Alcalay 1993). One Mizraḥi teacher writes: "I divided the blackboard into two, and told the students on one side we would study 'the material for the examination,' and on the other side I would attempt to teach the history which the state refuses to teach" (Chetrit 1997:30).

Differing delivery of educational programs and curricula, and relationships between teachers and students affect rates of failure and school-leaving. This project seeks to investigate how these factors differ between and among classes, genders and ethnic communities. Educational research in Israel, with few exceptions (e.g.; Shavit 1990; Eisikovits 1997), focuses on one or the other ethnic community, implicitly comparing them to the Ashkinazim, usually by-passing the role played by gender. These omissions are significant: Only through a comparative framework can the processes and forces of inequality which are pervasive across the entire Israeli educational system be isolated from those which affect the members of a particular ethnic group, class or gender. An ethnographic approach enables a 'local' exploration of educational practice which can expose these barriers to education. Looking to the work of Foley (1990), Ogbu (1978, 1982) Weis (1990) and Willis (1977) as theoretical and methodological models, and drawing from Lewis (1979) and Rinnawi's (1996) respective studies of teaching methods in Israel, I wish to examine how the relationships between teachers and students are predicated upon local and state-wide ethnic, class, and gendered inequalities. Further, by exploring the effects of the "contradictory class location" of teachers (Apple 1989:32), as well as gendered and ethnic dynamics in the classroom, staff meetings, and social networks of teachers and students I hope to examine the effects of the Israeli political-economy upon academic achievement, looking across the formidable barrier of Israeli and Palestinian identities, to the complex hegemony of the state.

I propose to investigate these questions through a comparative ethnographic study of three

secular secondary schools in Israel. I have chosen three cities as research sites in the northern Negev region of Israel: The Green-Line Palestinian city of Raḥaṭ, The primarily Mizraḥi city of Ofaqim, and the more integrated city of Be'er Sheva. As is the norm in Israel, Raḥaṭ and Ofaqim are predominantly segregated cities. Be'er Sheva, on the other hand, as the capital of the northern Negev region, is populated by both Ashkinazi and Mizraḥi Jews, albeit in semi-segregated neighborhoods. Raḥaṭ and Ofaqim have roughly equivalent populations, mean incomes, unemployment levels, and levels of educational failure. They provide a window onto working-class Palestinian and Mizraḥi education, while Be'er Sheva offers a more integrated view. Two sets of data will be collected and compared: The first set will be collected through a comparative ethnographic analysis of the three schools between October 1998 and June 1999. I will look to the classroom as a site where state educational standards, curricula and goals are applied on a local level. Over the course of an entire school year I will observe five classes in each school, spending two days a week in each of the three schools. Classes will be selected in consultation with teachers and administrators, ensuring that the level, curriculum and subject remains constant across all schools. Specifically, I hope to observe how the same curricula is differently presented in each school, and how the relationships and expectations between teachers and students varies according to gender, class and ethnicity. I also hope to examine how the social networks of students, teachers, and administrators affects these relationships. Data derived from classroom observation will be supplemented by in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews, administered to students, teachers and administrators in all three schools. This information will be contrasted with the second data-set; materials published by the Israeli government pertaining to curricula, educational programs, goals, standards, teaching methods, and textbooks as well as scholarly writings on the development and implementation of goals and curricula, collected between July and September 1999.

Current Status: To this point my research has primarily been concerned with contacting educational researchers in Israel, familiarizing myself with previous studies on education in Israel, and establishing the historical background of this region. I have met and consulted with Professors Ismael Abu-Saad, Salman Elbedour, and Ron Hoz of Ben Gurion University's Education Department, Dr. Shlomo Swirski of the Adva center, and Dr. Anat Kanan of Kaye College of Education's Research Department. With their advice I have selected three secondary schools, and have initiated the process of obtaining permission to do research in these schools. As of March 1998 I have been living in Israel, teaching English in the Raḥaṭ Secondary school and living with two teachers. The AERA/Spencer dissertation grant will enable me to begin my research full time in October 1998, the beginning of the school year.

Future Research: I plan to continue this research through an examination of the historical roots of education in Israel, providing a dynamic background in which to place the proposed ethnographic research. An historical analysis allows for an examination of the changing characteristics and goals of education, revealing how educational policy, goals and outcomes reflect the historical development of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Israeli state. Further, an examination of the historical continuities between the Israeli educational structure and those of European-Jewish educators such as the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* may demonstrate how the present social relations between Mizraḥi and Ashkinazi Jews can be situated in educational institutions and the processes of European expansionism.

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