

The Transition from Primary School to Junior High School

From the literature review it turns out that Junior High schools are common learning environments in various educational systems. In Israel, as well, 75% of the pupils study in Junior High schools which absorb pupils in their early adolescence stage. At this stage, an individual experiences physiological, cognitive, psychological and social changes all at the same time. However, Junior High school does not necessarily supply the unique and complex needs of pupils¹. The social bonds in Junior High school, between pupils and teachers and between pupils and the peer group, are loose. These characteristics expose pupils to school experiences that are not compatible with the unique needs characterizing the early adolescence age. Moreover, the literature indicates the fact that the capability of Junior High school to cope with the unique characteristics of its pupils is limited, as well, due to a decrease in teaching resources available to teachers – inside the school (for example, the size of classes) and outside the school (the weakening of connection between the school and the parents' community). This lack of accord, that makes the adaptation of pupils to Junior High school difficult, is related to a descent in the level of achievements and study motivation, and the increase of undesirable behavior amongst the school pupils.

In the reviewed literature, there is a vast supply of intervention programs which purpose is to cope with this situation. These programs, which have been supposed to answer up the difficulties and challenges pupils have to deal with in Junior High school, is focused mainly on pupils or the school as a system. A majority of the interventions were intended to promote study achievements and improve the behavior of pupils. Accordingly, the programs strive at the development and reinforcement of social relations within a school and between a school and its environment. They also encourage the involvement of all partners of the educational process (teachers, pupils, management and teachers), with the purpose of creating a foundation for

¹ Edi-Rokah, A., Biran, H. & Fridman-Goldberg, S., (2011). Junior High school: characteristics and challenges, p. 2.

effective learning and promotion of personal welfare of pupils. In this sense, intervention programs try to integrate components in the Junior High school that have enough in them to establish a school environment that is more suitable for pupils' needs.

On the matter of promotion of achievements, here as well it has been found that the programs are diverse; some are focused on development of study strategies that are meant to contribute to improvement of pupils' skills, some on training of pupils and some on overall system change. All the programs require intensive work on the part of teachers and pupils over time, and pupils' achievements have to be constantly and systematically monitored.

In general, Junior High school is a study environment that directs toward study achievements, an environment with a prominent academic accent, and compared to a Primary school, is based on loose and less supportive relationships between the team partners in school: management, teachers, pupils and parents. And, in addition, in Junior High school there are presently teaching and studying processes taking place in difficult conditions, especially in terms of school size, class size and teacher-pupil relationships.

Junior High school puts study achievements at the top of school's priorities, and confronts pupils with stresses that are typical of High school, but in a situation where there are less resources and more difficult teaching and learning conditions. It is doubtful if this is justified in age of adolescence.

1.1 The Junior High school

The Junior High school is the second step in the educational career for pupils, an intermediate stage between primary and High schools. Junior High school is part of the formal educational system in Israel, where pupils study from 7th to 9th grade (ages 12-15). Junior High schools have been established in the Israeli educational system in 1968, with the introduction of an educational system reform. As part of this reform, is the number of study years included in the mandatory study law up to the 9th grade, and it has been decided on

an establishment of Junior High school, which first two years have been taken from Primary school and the top grade has been taken from High school.

The Junior High school is usually operated as an independent institution, and occasionally, the Junior High and the High school are in a single campus that is termed "a six-year school". Accordingly, in the majority of cases the composition of educational establishments for ages 6-17 is as follows: primary school (grades 1-6), following that the Junior High school – 3-year (grades 7-9) and then finally the High school – 3-year (grades 10-12). In observing the reasons for pupils dropping out of studies in High school, it has been found that one of the reasons for pupils leaving the orderly educational environment as early as age 14-15 is the harsh transition of an adolescent from the framework of a Primary school to that of a Junior High school. When the studying period has been prolonged according to the Mandatory Study Law, until the 9th grade and the establishment of Junior High school, a decrease has been expected in dropping out of pupils from studying or at least a postponing of the drop-out generally until the 9th grade – age 15.

Junior High school is perceived as an organizational environment where significant social changes are supposed to take place: reduction of social gaps in study achievements, social merging and integration and the promotion of achievements of pupils in general. Studies have proven that a transition to Junior High school does entail a fair amount of anxieties, fears, concerns and a decline in achievements².

1.2 The establishment of Junior High school

According to the recommendations of Rimalt's Committee, the Knesset confirmed the recommendations in 1971 and decided upon a comprehensive reform in the Israeli educational system: a transition from a two-stage structure (8 years of Primary school and 4 years of High school) to a three-dimensional structure (Primary school – grades 1-6, Junior High school – grades 7-9 and High school – grades 10-12). The change in school structure

² From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia - <http://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

has brought about an extensive definition of the mandatory education years. The highlights of the reform that has been decided upon were the enacting of a directed social-educational merging program (integration)³.

The structural reform that gave birth to a Junior High school as a mediating step between Primary and post-Primary schools, and the decision to adopt a policy of integration in its midst, has made Junior High school into the actual center of operation of directed merging and has created a complete identification between the reform and integration in a public and educational discourse⁴.

The primary purposes, which the change has been done for, have been:

1. Raising the level of teaching and learning and educational achievements in all stages of education.
2. Reducing the existing gap between Israeli children in educational level and in the chances for integrating in society and the advanced economy.

1.3. Estimation of the change

The creation of Junior High school as a transition stage seemed to be important from psychological and social development of pupils as well. Members of the age group that is supposed to study in Junior High school have unique pedagogical needs that stem from adolescence; therefore, a unique framework has to be created for them distinguished from the age group of Primary school on one hand and from the age group of High school on the other hand⁵.

Presently, 40 years after the recommendation to implement the reform, the question of division and its benefits still occupies researchers and educational

³ Junior High schools in Israel: problems, difficulties and possible solution, a framework for analysis of directions of resolution. The Von-Lir Institute, in Jerusalem; 2008).

⁴ From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia - <http://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

⁵ Report of a parliamentary committee on the examination of the structure of Primary and post-Primary education in Israel 1966-1967 (Rimalt's committee report: Israeli Knesset, 1971).

policy makers⁶. Indeed, since the reform has been adopted, there are discussions of the advantages, the shortcomings and the contribution of this set-up.

In an intermediate report of the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry on the subject of social gaps in Israel, headed by member of the Knesset, Ran Cohen, the school efficiency and growth indexes – the Meizav (in Hebrew acronyms) – have been reviewed in subjects of math, English, science and reading, as conducted by the Ministry of Education in 2001. The tests have been conducted amongst about 10,000 out of about 80,000 ⁷ pupils in each age group. The results have showed that in grades 4-9 a steep rise in gaps in the 7th grade has been revealed, during the transition from Primary to Junior High school⁸. This indicates the differences in study levels between Primary schools that have been revealed only when the pupils have arrived to a Junior High school framework.

Preference in computerization programs, given to Junior High school, is being done, amongst other things, to assist in catching up the gap between Primary school pupils upon arrival to a Junior High school. Thus, in the school computerization program in the state of Israel that has begun to be executed following the Harari committee report on promotion of science and technology, a preference has been given to distress areas and to Junior High schools. Schools are offered a low cost internet connection infrastructure, which includes installation and storage for sites and study materials⁹.

1.4 Transition timing as a problem

The transition from primary to a Junior High school entails a significant change of the study environment. In comparison to Primary school, this is a

⁶ Oplatka & Tovin, 2008; national task force for promotion of education in Israel, 2005; Resh (2008).

⁷ Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry on the subject of social gaps in Israel.

⁹ The computerization program in Primary education.

transition to a larger and more heterogeneous environment that is comprised of a variety of minority groups and social classes¹⁰.

Until the beginning of implementation of the reform, the educational system's pupils have been required to a transition from Primary school they have been studying for 8 years to a High school. With the establishment of the Junior High school, pupils have been required to another transition and an earlier one. No more one transition, but two. It has been proven that the early is a transition the more problematic it is for pupils and has a higher probability of disorder than a later transition. The timing of the transition in the 7th grade constitutes a greater harassment to pupils than the transition in 9th grade.

The pupils arrive to Primary school from the nearest area of residence and thus a rather homogenous, intimate class framework is being created, in which most of the children belong to the same socio-economic status. Junior High school is a much larger and heterogeneous environment that brings together different groups of pupils. A transition to Junior High school is a positive event and a step towards a life of maturity and a process of adolescence. The transition includes changes that require adjustment from most pupils.

Pupils that transfer from Primary school to Junior High school are being exposed to many changes as a result of the transition, including:

- A new school.
- New teachers.
- New expectations.
- New educational climate.
- Social bonds (new friends, teacher-pupil relationships).
- Belonging to an institution where older pupils study and which number greatly exceeds the number of pupils in the Primary school.

¹⁰ Byrnes, V., & Ruby, A. (2007). Comparing achievement between k-8 and middle schools: A large-scale empirical study. *American journal of Education* 114' 101-135.

- Study programs and study sequence.
- Motivation and study achievements.

The Ministry of Education has established a Consulting Committee to the CEO, for the examination of educational sequence from various perspectives – pedagogical, legal, infrastructural and budgetary. The committee has recommended to retain the existing structure and to create a unified structure in the educational system in which a single transition will be remained after 6 years of study in the primary education to the post-Primary education, and accordingly, there will be allowed an opening of educational frameworks only on the basis of a six-year structure, and the educational system will have to find ways to deal with the challenges it faces¹¹.

1.5 A new school

The transition from a Primary school, 6th grade to 7th grade, which is the first school year in the Junior High school, casts a difficult job of adjustment upon the pupils. The transition from Primary school to Junior High school is a double transition, meaning, from one study framework to another and parallel to this a transition from childhood to the beginning of adolescence. It is a transition from a relatively small system to a very large system; the school structure is different, the physical structure is bigger than what they have been used to previously.

Junior High school is a common study framework in many countries around the world as well as in Israel, which main characteristic is a pupils' population that is in a stage of adolescence. From international literature and that which has been located in Israel, it can be seen very clearly that the transition from

¹¹ State of Israel, Ministry of Education, the national authority for measurement and evaluation in education, (2007, a), Meizav: a national situation report in Junior High school and post-Primary schools, RAMA.

Primary to Junior High school exposes the adolescent pupils to a different and more complex study environment than that of a Primary school¹².

On average, Junior High school is bigger than Primary school and High school¹³, although there are sectorial differences. The transition from Primary to Junior High school includes a change in the structural level, a transition to a larger and more established institution than the Primary school. The Junior High school is less private and more complex. Regarding the class size, in general, in Junior High school the population density is more prominent than in Primary and High schools¹⁴. In international comparisons, as well, there has been found that the average number of pupils in a class in a Junior High school in Israel (32.5 in average) is higher than the average in OECD¹⁵ countries.

Ben-Hanoch¹⁶ states that pupils fear the transition to a "big and monstrous" school. Primary and Junior High schools are different in terms of organizational structure, and Junior High schools are structurally different than Primary schools. The pupils are required to be "swamped" in the new school that is usually characterized by larger and more extensive size than a Primary school. There are more classes; a pupil undergoes a change that is described as a transition from a class that stands on its own to a school with multitude of classes.

¹² Edi-Rokah, A., Biran, H. & Fridman-Goldberg, S., (2011), Junior High school: characteristics and challenges, an ordered review as a background material for a language and literacy committee, p. 57. <http://education.academy.ac.il>

¹³ State of Israel, Ministry of Education, the national authority for measurement and evaluation in education, (2007, a), Meizav: a national situation report in Junior High school and post-Primary schools, RAMA.

¹⁴ State of Israel, Ministry of Education, the national authority for measurement and evaluation in education, (2007, a), Meizav: a national situation report in Junior High school and post-Primary schools, RAMA.

¹⁵ Edi-Rokah, A., Biran, H. & Fridman-Goldberg, S., (2011), Junior High school: characteristics and challenges, an ordered review as a background material for a language and literacy committee, p. 28. <http://education.academy.ac.il>

Klinov, R., 2010. Israeli educational system in a comparative international perspective according to Education At a Glance (EAG) 2010, the national authority for measurement and evaluation in education.

¹⁶ Ben-Hanoch, A., (1989). Rise for a rise (transition from primary to Junior High and High schools). Education, booklet 134, p. 33-42.

According to a concise summary of the advantages and shortcomings of school structures, by the research and information center¹⁷:

Advantages	Primary 8-year school	Independent Junior High school	Junior High school from a six-year comprehensive school
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High achievements • Small school • Personal relation • Safe climate and less violence • Development time and preparation to high school • Suitable teachers' training • Canceling the need for additional transition between the educational stages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postponing selection for study courses • Increasing the rate of participation in post-Primary education • Integration • Adjustment to adolescence challenges • Specialist professional teachers • Descent in self-esteem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minority of transitions • Better preparation for matriculation • Rich equipment and a variety of opportunities and elaboration

¹⁷ The Knesset, research and information center, Junior High schools and their position in the post-primary education structure in the educational system, June 2010, Jerusalem, p. 17.

Short-comings

Primary 8-year school

- Make the selection and tracking for 8th grade earlier
- Social tagging for 8 years
- Absence of professional disciplinary response and response to cognitive abilities
- A limited variety of study subjects

Independent Junior High school

- Decrease in achievements
- Violence and badgering
- Additional transition to High school

Junior High school from a six-year comprehensive school

- Early tracking
- Friction with older pupils (especially regarding young pupils)

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