

# **Social and Ethnical Stereotypes and their influence on the schoolchildren status in Israel''**

By Marian Nwoye

## **Abstract**

This article pinpoints a few factors that prophecies the level of inelegance the Israeli schoolchild has. The socio-economical ethnical background of the schoolchild and the stereotypes that follow him/her have a great influence on the self-esteem of the child towards him/herself and determines the expectations of the others from them. It is expected from Jews that emigrated from Europe to excel in their studies, while the Jews that emigrated from countries of North Africa and the Middle East are expected to have low academic achievements.

**Terminology:** social status, stereotypes, academic achievements, self-esteem,

Many educational sociological methods that aim to improve the status role of the schoolchildren has developed in the last ten years<sup>1</sup>. The first method focuses on the need on the *academic achievements* of the schoolchildren claiming that the high academic achievement puts the child in a high status in the class especially if the teacher reinforces these achievements. The second method focuses on improving the *self-confidence* of the schoolchildren by directing their way of thinking through advice or personal talks or even in taking some actions in the class that will guarantee that the other children give that child respect and appreciation, actions such as giving responsibilities and power positions.

The term "*Good schoolchild*" automatically contains either a student that has high academic achievements or has a strong personality and status in class; while the term "*Bad schoolchild*" automatically means a child that comes from a low socio-economic background and has low academic achievements<sup>2</sup>.

The international educational researches realized that it is important to do two major things in order to develop the status-role of the schoolchildren: on the one hand, schools and parents should help them improve their academic achievement; on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Giroux, H., and P. Mcleren. (1989). (eds.) *Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

<sup>2</sup> Burke, P. (2006). Men accessing education: Gendered aspiration. *British Educational Research Journal*. 32, (5): 716-733.

other hand, parents should enhance the self-confidence of their children. Many researches were written to prove this ideology and to its practical effect on the teaching methods; testing wither it can bring out the potential that each schoolchild has within, enhance their academic achievement and help pass the international level check exams<sup>3</sup>? Freire concluded that increasing the schoolchild's self-confidence leads to academic success. He also concluded that changing the cultural, social and political conditions of the schoolchildren leads to the enhancement on their academic achievements<sup>4</sup>. Unfortunately, there are external components that effect the schoolchildren: among them stereotype are the strongest component because they play an important role in determining the social status of the schoolchild. Social pressure influences the way the schoolchild looks at him/herself and the way other children look at him/her.

Nevertheless, a small number of schoolchildren survive these stereotypes and social pressure and they determine for themselves their own social- status. However, Hook<sup>5</sup> and Mizrachi<sup>6</sup> claim, that those children are considered biased and rare. Huge jumps between the exact, clear social statues are nothing but a good story for books or scripts for movies. Making this huge jump requests: first awareness of the reality, second, strong determination; to make the internal identity and building up strong will to reach higher academic achievements despite all odds is not an easy task!

The school plays a very important role in making jumps between the social statuses easy. Therefor positive attitude towards the school and appreciation for its capacities definitely is definitely important in making this change possible. The school strengthens the connection between the academic achievement and the self-image and the self-identity. Once the school staff believes in the capacity of humans and believe that all children have the potential to improve their academic achievements, it is most probably that these children will start to think in the same way and the staff will be working hard with the children to achieve this goal<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Rowan, B. (2002). Large-scale, cross-national surveys of educational achievement: Promises, Pitfall, and possibilities. In A. Gamoran (Eds.), *Methodological Advances in Cross-National Surveys of Educational Achievement* (pp. 321-349). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>4</sup> Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of Hope*. New York.

<sup>5</sup> Hood, B. (2000). *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> Mizrachi, N., Goodman. Y., Y. Feniger. (2010). ' I don't want to see it: Decoupling ethnicity from social structure Jewish Israeli high schools. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 7, (33): 1203-1225.

<sup>7</sup> יונה, א' (2002). קולות משכונת הקטמונים. אנדלוס. (Sounds from The Katamon Neighborhood).

"Strong" or "Weak" schoolchild are terms invented by the bureaucratic, hierarchic, acceptable ideals in the society and the school is the instrument used to implement these ideas. The "strong" or "weak" schoolchild usually meant objective measurements done by grades or behavior that the school staff witnesses. What the school staff is not aware of is that the objective measurement exist in the minds of the children since their first day at school when their social construction becomes known to the other children and their ethnical background becomes clear; at that time exactly their social-status in class is determined. This status includes within it the expected academic achievements and the level and kind of social activity that is expected from them. Breaking these stereotypes and changing the determined social-status seem to be extremely hard or even impossible. Sometimes a few schoolchildren from such "low" social-status turn out to be successful in some subjects, unfortunately these success experiences are not able to support the child in his/her struggle to overcome these stickily determined norms and stereotypes<sup>8</sup>.

Dictating the social-status of the child happens in a short time because of the dynamics of the social hierarchy is rooted in the knowledge and understanding of the children, they bring it with them from home. Every child knows exactly to which social-status and ethnical background he/she belongs, and this dictated the expectations of the others from him/her and what he/she should be expecting from the others<sup>9</sup>.

The relation between the socio-economic background of the schoolchildren, their ethnical and their self-esteem predict wither the schoolchild would have high or low academic achievements; these components can also predict wither the schoolchild has low or high self-esteem, finally they can predict wither the schoolchild would drop off school before finishing the school years and will receive no graduation certificate<sup>10</sup>.

---

Hakatomoonim is a neighborhood in Jerusalem- the capital of Israel. It residence there are mainly Jewish immigrants from eastern countries such as North Africa and The Middle East. It is known for the low socio-economic situation.

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu, P. (1986) the forms of capital. In J. Richardson (ed.) ,*Handbook of theory and research for the society of education (pp.241-258)*. New York: Greenwood Press.

<sup>9</sup> Burke, P. (2006). Men accessing education: Gendered aspirations. *British Educational Research Journal*, 32, (5): 716-733.

<sup>10</sup> Ramey C.T., and T.M. Suarez. (1985). Early intervention ad early experience paradigm: Toward a better framework of social policy. *Journal of Children in Contemporary Society*, 7,(1):3-13.

This phenomenon spreads among ethnical minorities<sup>11</sup> or among the group of people treated in a racist way<sup>12</sup>.

The policy of the Israeli ministry of education is very aware of the school dropping problem or the low self-esteem of schoolchildren or the low academic achievement of the schoolchildren. The schoolchildren in Israel create a huge mosaic in the class since the children immigrated to Israel from various multicultural countries<sup>13</sup>.

The importance of identity details of children comes from the fact that its effect is inevitable, and effects the way these children look at their academic potential, capacity and self-esteem depends on their identity. Low academic achievement as well as the unacceptable behaviors are a reflection of this understanding.

Researches showed that the immigrants from the eastern countries such as North Africa and the Middle East have social problems, so the teachers characterize them as naughty, slow learner, dumb, foolish, "suffers" from learning difficulties. Physically, they have behavioral problems such as nervousness, uncontrolled temper, extreme sexuality, violence, brutality, crudeness, impulsivity etc.<sup>14</sup>. All these components make it hard for Eastern schoolchildren to become successful in school. They reach the level when they prefer to learn "low level" subject like crafts and arts, rather than to aim for a career that requires academic study in the universities<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, when the ministry of education marks the Eastern schoolchildren as the "low" academic achievers, eventually, these children start to believe that it is true! In sociology, this is "A self- fulfilling prophecy", they would lose any hope to advance one day, and they even suppress any attempt of schoolchildren to prove high academic potential or capability, they would rather put pressure on them because being "smart" in they consider them bias or strange<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Tomlinson, S. (1982). *Sociology of Special Education*. London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul.

<sup>12</sup> Ogbu, J.U. (1990) Minority education in comparative perspective. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 59, (1): 45-57.

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes the children are the second generation in Israel, they were born in Israel; and in other times they immigrated along with their families when they were young.

<sup>14</sup> אורת, ג' (1969). ניתוח השוואתי של עדות מבחינת הרכב האינטליגנציה. בתוך מ' ליסק, ב' מזרחי וע' בן-דוד (עורכים), **עולים בישראל** (עמ' 575-592). ירושלים: אקדמון, האוניברסיטה העברית. Arther G. Coperative analysis between communities according to their inelegance. Inside a the journal Immigrants in Israel..

<sup>15</sup> ספורטא, א', ויונה, י' (2003). לאומיות, מגדר ואתניות בחינוך המקצועי בישראל. **תיאוריה וביקורת** Sporta A. and Yona Y. Nationality , Gender and Ethnicity in professional education in Israel. In journal Theory and Criticism.

<sup>16</sup> חסין, י' (1975). התלמיד טעון הטיפוח- קרבן התיוג. **מגמות** כ"א (2): 140-156. Husin Y. The Unprivileged schoolchildren – the victims of labeling.

The western schoolchildren (Ashkenazi) on the opposite side look at their eastern classmates from a superior perspective, they stereotype them as losers or unprivileged, so they look down at them and the Eastern schoolchildren look up at their Western classmates, appreciate and respect them. The Western children enjoy this patent and enjoy the social- status that their eastern classmates granted and they play the role to its fulfillment<sup>17</sup>. The Ashkenazi schoolchildren will have high self-esteem and no discipline problems; they would rather choose "high level" subjects that will prepare them for their future in the academic world.

Strauss and Corbin studied the results of this clear distinguishing between the statuses and how it's reflection in the children's attitude towards themselves and the attitude of the external society towards them<sup>18</sup>. They focused of three main categories: **Equal, Different, Equal but Different.**

#### The First Category: Equal

The Eastern schoolchildren are raised and educated to think that they are equal to their fellow Western schoolchildren. They have the same learning capabilities, they believe in their potential to reach high academic achievements yet, sometimes this ideology is interrupted by external forces and negative ideals coming from their own Eastern society which underestimates these capacities hence draw them back to the point of the stereotypes claimed against them.

In some cases, the personal struggle to prove that these stereotypes are wrong can take a collective manner when all the families of the schoolchildren go into the street and fight for their children's equal rights. In such case, a great pressure is working upon the shoulders of the schoolchildren to prove their ability to reach equal academic achievements. Even though they deserve equality like their Western fellows.

In this case the schools of the eastern population is totally separated from the schools of the western population or "Ashkenazi"<sup>19</sup> and they only meet in national

---

<sup>17</sup> אמיר, ב', ובלס, נ' (1985). "התפתחותה של מדיניות משרד החינוך והתרבות בתחום האינטגרציה החברתית במערכת החינוך בישראל". בתוך: י' אמיר, ש' שרון ור' בן ארי (עורכים) **אינטגרציה בחינוך**. תל אביב: עם עובד, עמ' 69-99.  
Ameer B. and Bals Sh. The development of the ministry of education in the matter of social integration in the ministry of education in Israel. In the journal *Integration in education*.

<sup>18</sup> Strauss, A., and J. M. Corbin (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. London: Sage.

<sup>19</sup> Ashkenazi means Jews from Europe.

competitions or local ones. The result of all the schools national exams<sup>20</sup> is published in the media, this means that the game of comparison has begun.

In case of high academic achievements in an Eastern school, there are usually two main explanations: either there was cheating in the exams or it is just once in a life case, a bias<sup>21</sup>. This "bias" is illogical or unreliable because it is contradicting the majority of the results these ethnic socio-economic background children received for a long time. Therefore, even if the eastern schoolchildren reach high academic achievement one day, still their background will be limiting them- an obstacle in their way to success, or even it would be the excuse for others to under estimate them.

### The Second Category: Different

The majority of the eastern population and the minorities in Israel prefer to have their schools separated from any other population, and the Western Ashkenazi or even the conservative Jewish population prefer to have their own schools separated from other population that come from a different socio-economic and ethnical background- another social-status.

The Eastern schoolchildren who learn in their own community schools feel that they do not have to prove anything to anyone outside; they have a strong feeling of identity or belonging. They simply feel "safe" in their schools. They do not have to compare themselves to the others. Their success or failure does not mean anything because of this separation. Sometimes this separation causes frustration to some schoolchildren, especially the ones that have high potential and believe they can score high academic

---

<sup>20</sup> Three main national exams take place all over Israel in primary, junior and high school. In the elementary school- 5<sup>th</sup> grades: in math, English, sciences and L1. In junior school, 8<sup>th</sup> grade in English, math only. In the last two years of the high school 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, they have Bagrute national exam- Bagrut means reaching the level of being a grown up. There is a big competition between all the schools in Israel attempting to reach high scores, it is an honor. On the other hand schools that get low grades have to go through a long process of questioning, the headmaster, the teacher, the coordinator... they are warned, they are given all the help they need, they are given extra hours for intensive lessons:

<http://edu.gov.il/owlHeb/Tichon/BechinotVbagrutyot/BechinotAbagrut/Pages/entitlement-data-2014.aspx>

<sup>21</sup> עמותת הידידים שליד בית ספר קדמה (2001). פרסום עצמי. Hyedideem Organization – personal publication... it is a local neighborhood publication of an organization that was publishing negative things about a school for "week" students named Kidma- which means improvement. You can read about this school in Magamot journal, and in the researches of Professor Yona Yosi.

levels. Their success would mean nothing due to their socio-economic, cultural background; this negative attitude is a reflection of the way the whole community sees itself. The "good" schoolchildren will live in a conflict between two things: results that they are sure that they can achieve and the stereotypes sticking in them and refusing to let them be. Worse is when such success becomes negative in the eyes of their community. In fact, this might urge them to go and look for another alternative identity. They feel trapped in their background, therefore, no matter how "good" they might become, there is no way out of the stereotypes, and again they feel that they are biased and exceptional<sup>22</sup>.

### The Third Category: Equal but Different

In Israel there are schools dedicated for Eastern people or minorities that reach every year high academic achievements in the national scale. The schoolchildren would create a completely different identity in which school's name takes an integral part. They realize that they have become successful because they had the chance to learn in such high standard school<sup>23</sup>. The schools staff in these private schools work hard with these children and the parents support the school in every manner, not only financially but also politically, socially and ideologically. The schoolchildren in these schools would feel separated from the Askenazi high level schools, yet they can reach exactly the same academic achievement like them in the national exams. Eventually these schoolchildren begin to feel that they elevated from the social status of their community, they were accepted in be enrolled in the universities which will guarantee a well- paid job in their future, which will eventually bring the whole family to a higher social status<sup>24</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup>Leonardo, Z.( 2004). The unhappy marriage between Marxism and race critique: Political economy and the production of the racialized knowledge. *Policy Futures in Education*, 2, (3): 483-493.

<sup>23</sup> Most of the schools in Israel are public schools which mean that they are sponsored by the ministry of education especially after constituting the obligatory education law in the year 1973. There are schools that are not sponsored by the ministry but by the families of the schoolchildren, these have the freedom to select the children that would be enrolled in them, they have high standard entrance exams and throughout the school years the children that prove to have high academic achievement would continue but if they fail they are kicked out of the private and is sent back to the local public school.

<http://edu.gov.il/owlHeb/AboutUs/FreedomOfInformation/Pages/russian-contact.aspx>

<sup>24</sup> שטאל, א' (1983). הדור השני, דפוסי גידול בנים בעדות המזרח. תל אביב: עם עובד. Shatl, A, 1983, The second generation, different types o education in eastern communities.

## Conclusion

The stereotypes and the socio-economic backgrounds effect schoolchildren's academic results and behavior in Israeli schools; the Jews that have European background reach high academic achievements and rarely have behavioral problems, so they are educated to have high self-esteem and receive the right preparation to reach high-level career. While Jews that have Middle-Eastern background live under negative stereotypes, which effects their self-esteem and behaviors. This causes them to score low academic achievements and eventually look forwards to a low-level career.

In my opinion, it is important that the teacher work with the Eastern schoolchildren on raising their self-esteem and pride in their identity in order to help them reach higher academic achievements. Teachers and parents should receive the right tools to educate the schoolchildren that come from the low socio-economic background to love and appreciate themselves and appreciate their school since it can help them and their community to reach a higher socio-economic standard.