
Another Lesson in Educational Integrity

by

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It is most unfortunate that there is no precise Hebrew translation for the expression “they just don’t get it.” Of all the explanations that could possibly explain the recent behavior of the heads of Israeli’s educational system, minister Limor Livnat and director general Ronit Tirosh, this one is the most favorable to them – though there are several others that are probably more accurate.

They gave their first lesson in public integrity during a press conference in which they announced substantial improvements in the achievements of Israeli pupils in the recent TIMSS math and science tests. The second lesson was provided when they reacted to my article (Haaretz, Dec 23, 2003) on their assertions.

As written in the article, the improvement was attained when Israel excluded 22.5% of the population from the sample (among others, the entire ultra-orthodox population was excluded). Ronit Tirosh, in a radio interview with Rafi Reshef: “The doctor did not bother [...] to check if his data is correct. Are his claims correct? Well, they are completely groundless!” Reshef: “Were 22.5% excluded?” Tirosh: “No way. 15% were excluded, and incidentally, I don’t have the exact data.”

So maybe it is time for the exact data to reach the director general of the education ministry before she reaches a microphone again. They can be found on page 352 of the TIMSS 2003 mathematics report. As stated in table A6, Israel excluded 22.5% of the population – compared with an average of 2.8% for all the other countries for whom test results were published.

Professor Ruth Zuzovsky, who heads the TIMSS project in Israel, responded in an Haaretz oped: “There was no difference between 1999 and 2003 in the degree of sample representativeness. [...] In other words, Israel did not ‘exclude’ the ultra-orthodox in order to extract itself from a low ranking and it did not ‘raise the rate of exclusion by 41%’.”

It might be useful for Prof. Zuzovsky to refresh her memory with the help of page 325 in the TIMSS 1999 mathematics report. An exclusion rate of 16% appears only alongside Israel’s name. Outside of the educational system, it is not uncommon to calculate the change from 16 to 22.5 as an increase of 41% in the exclusion rate. Since there was no comparable growth in any of the relevant populations – ultra-orthodox, immigrants, etc. – then what exactly occurred differently with this particular exam? That is the first important problem that arises.

The director general and the professor do not understand what all the fuss is about. As Zuzovsky writes, after all “the desired population of the TIMSS survey are all of the 8th grade students in the regular education, who study the complete official educational program (in math and science).”

But that is exactly the crux of the second major problem. The important issue is not whether the results reflect the chosen sample, but that the sample itself does not reflect Israel’s population. What kind of a response is it that pupils who do not learn the necessary material should not be included in the sample? The essence of the problem is the fact that no one required them to study a national core curriculum (while the impending coalition agreement releasing the ultraorthodox from Dovrat educational reform indicates a thorough lack of governmental internalization of the problem’s seriousness).

It isn’t a coincidence that in lieu of a proper education in the core fields, they lack the proper tools that could ensure economic survival in a modern and competitive labor market, and as a result, too many mature into lives of unemployment and poverty – from which their deletion from the national statistics is still not viewed as a legitimate option.

It is time to stop skirting the main issue and to quit diverting the debate from the heart of the problem. Until proven otherwise by a truly representative sample that includes all of the children of Israel, it is a fact that the education provided in this country is the absolute worst in the western world and no statistical manipulations can change this. The fact that the percentage

of new Israeli-born conscripts into the army knowing how to read at a sufficient level fell from 60% fifteen years ago to just 32% in 2003 should have turned on every red light in the education ministry as to the reliability of the abnormal TIMSS 2003 results from that same year.

It isn't clear whether the desire to boast about the misleading achievements reflects the degree of non-professionalism or the degree of non-integrity within the ministry of education. Neither case is a cause for celebration – and what is certain is that only our children will pay the price of these two phenomenon. The primary person responsible for the misrepresentation of the results is not Prof. Zuzovsky but the minister of education, Limor Livnat. It is high time that she personally face the public to try and clarify the unexplainable.

There is an important lesson here for the Dovrat committee regarding the need for putting as much distance as possible between the planned new authority for measurement and evaluation, which is a central part of the proposed educational reform, and the interested parties in the education ministry.