



# STILL IN FIRST GRADE

**GRAFTON, MASSACHUSETTS** – Some 2 million Israeli children – 2,194,931, to be precise – began the new school year on September 1, including 57,477 smiling fresh-faced and hopeful six-year-olds who began first grade. They showed up at 4,805 schools with backpacks, pencils, sandwiches and anticipation. But all too often, our children quickly learn that our schools are frozen perpetually in first grade.

“The only institutions in our society that are similar [to our schools], with the same focus and efficiency, are our prisons,” says Prof. Richard Elmore, a distinguished scholar at Harvard’s Graduate School of Educa-

tion. He was speaking at a conference on “Advanced Approaches in Education” at the beginning of the school year, sponsored by Amit, a network of more than 100 schools and youth villages that combine religious education with technology studies. The conference was held at Amit’s “Googiya” site in Kfar Batya, Ra’anana. His remarks referred to U.S. schools – but easily could apply to those in Israel.

“Our young people are wasting most of their time at dumb, repressive schools that are Stone Age in nature,” he said. “US schools mostly serve as babysitters. They were designed to keep children out of the

labor market and to prepare them for adult discipline and control.”

“What would happen,” asked Elmore, “if we simply opened our school doors and let our children go? Would that be so terrible? Would it be worse than what our children experience today in school? Would adults relate differently to children, if they met their children on the streets rather than imprison them in schools? Maybe that would force adults to think about what a healthy, humane learning environment should be.”

I’m absolutely convinced that all of Elmore’s comments apply to Israeli schools, as well.



Many schools remain dumb and repressive in nature, but things can and should be different

AVI KATZ

At times, you see things clearer from a distance. I'm writing about our schools from a distant perspective, 8,811 km from Tel Aviv, at an amazing Massachusetts institution, Touchstone Community School, here in Grafton, prekindergarten through Grade 8. My wife and I visited the school last year during our round-the-world trip that brought us to innovative schools in several countries.

Later, in May, while teaching entrepreneurship at Technion's joint venture in Shantou, China, one of my students, Jin, approached me after hearing my tirade against how schools everywhere are destroying our most precious resource, our children's cre-

ativity. He, too, was apprehensive about his little three-year-old daughter and what conventional Shantou schools might do to her imagination.

**AS A** direct result of that conversation, I arranged for Jin, his wife Yuen and little daughter Yue to visit Touchstone School for a week, together with myself and my wife, Sharona, a school psychologist, to make a documentary film and visually bring the Touchstone approach to schools back to our respective countries. I anticipated a tough battle to gain permission; instead, Touchstone and its head and teachers were

exceptionally welcoming.

Our goal: Leverage what we learned at Touchstone in China, and in Israel, to show how to get our schools out of first grade and into the higher levels of mastery combined with imagination and the love and joy of learning.

Of course, children must learn, and learn well, math, language, history, and science. While they master old things, they need to be stimulated to challenge everything and invent new things. And this must begin very early, in first grade or before. Five-year-olds are geniuses in creativity. By age 15, much of that genius is lost, and we believe it is

because of the rigid prison-like school systems where children are taught never to take risks, never to try things, because failure is unacceptable.

Touchstone School was founded in 1982 by concerned parents, long before magnet schools and charter schools became fashionable. Our visit at Touchstone began on October 1 with a “community meeting,” with all the children sitting on the carpet in a half circle. As the children greeted us, I read carefully the school’s mission statement on the wall: To cultivate a joy of lifelong learning through transformational intellectual, social and emotional growth.

Empty words? We soon learned they were not. The children love to come to school, love to learn, and radiate energy from the joy of discovery.

We joined a class as the teacher, Dave, led it on a nearby nature trail, to “tag” four varieties of trees and plants, typifying Touchstone’s “discovery” approach. Dave told us he had taught at a school in a poor South Bronx community in New York, where the playground was a slab of hard concrete.

We watched closely as another teacher, Emily, taught a class how to analyze a literary text, with eighth graders working in pairs, marking up flipchart pages and mapping stories. Emily, we learned, also teaches at a university. Her students matched her high energy. Like many of the teachers, she got involved with Touchstone when her own daughter was a pupil there. We chatted with another teacher, Kim, whose mother has taught at Touchstone for some 25 years; Kim herself was a Touchstone student. Tamara, who teaches first and second grade, has taught there for a quarter century.

Later, Jin and I spoke at length with Susan Diller, Touchstone Head of School for the past five years. She told us her school is not afraid of the label “progressive or transformative,” which is at times applied when parents claim that “discovery is not learning.” I asked her if Touchstone children felt maladjusted when they graduate from eighth grade and go on to conventional high schools.

“They love it,” she told me. “They love the fact they are self-motivated and self-directed learners and that they can influence other kids. They love their ability to enlighten other students about what is possible when learning is welcomed and embraced instead of being a burden. And teachers love our kids! Our children know who they are, and know how to talk to teachers. They connect

easily with others. Children in public schools [and, I interjected, in universities] ask, when given an assignment, how many pages? How long? What size font shall we use? Touchstone kids? They ask, can we extend this project? Can we try a different way? Can you recommend some books? And they do not need tests to know how they are doing. They know if their work is living up to their abilities and the work assigned. And they strive to do their best, always, without the lure of a grade, which only temporarily influences and rewards.”

WE HAVE  
CONFOUNDED  
SOCIETY’S ‘DUTY  
OF CARE’ TOWARD  
CHILDREN WITH  
COMPULSORY  
ATTENDANCE IN A  
SET OF MONOPOLY  
INSTITUTIONS CALLED  
‘SCHOOL’

So, why do so many schools, all over the world, look like, and feel like, prisons or factories, as Elmore claims? Why is Touchstone School such a rare exception? In his book *Out of Our Minds*, educator Sir Kenneth Robinson explains that “mass public education systems... were built after the [19th century] Industrial Revolution.” Schools were designed to supply literate workers to man assembly lines. Compulsory public education was perhaps the greatest social invention of all time but educational systems have not adapted to today’s knowledge economy. They are obsolete.

“THE CHALLENGE,” Robinson writes, “is to implement innovation on a wide scale, to meet the challenges of life and work in the 21st century.”

But schools are still stuck in the 19th century. They teach kids old stuff they could learn today on their own. Schools also should be teaching how to dream up new things.

Often, improving Israel’s educational system is trivialized to shekels and budgets. In

the 2016 budget, the Education Ministry will spend 51.7 billion shekels (\$13.3 billion) – 2.5 times more than in 2000. Some 86 percent will go to salaries and pensions. In elementary schools, Israeli children spend nearly 6,000 hours in school each year in school – about 30 percent more than the OECD average. The question is what do they do during those hours?

We need to create a culture of creativity in schools – especially in Israel, Start-up Nation, which makes its living from creativity. But how?

To find out, I posed some hard questions to Elmore.

*The Jerusalem Report:* How in the world does one crack the rigid bureaucracies that are education ministries and get some real change? The problem is not money. Israel’s education budget is almost as large as the bloated defense budget.

*Elmore:* For me, this is not a difficult question to understand. Education is, and has been since the late 19th century, a privileged public monopoly in most industrialized countries. This status was a more or less conscious choice to treat education as a “public good.” The benefits of education, the argument goes, can best be captured by giving certain institutions privileged status and by regulating the behavior of individuals and families to require their participation in those institutions.

“This view seemed to work [it actually had serious negative consequences that we ignored] as long as governmental institutions were relatively passive toward regulating and micro-managing. For the last 30 years in the US, policy makers and policy elites have discovered that there is status and income to be gained from sponsoring “reform,” and this discovery has led to a massive increase in the use of policy to produce political credit and income. With increased policy, comes increased bureaucracy.

With increased bureaucracy comes ever-increasing, broad-based constituencies with a political and economic interest in sustaining and increasing “reform”-based policies. In the US, we have reached a point where the institutional structure of education has become so rigid and over-regulated that it is impossible to exercise initiative and creativity.

Bureaucratic systems operate like genetic codes. Once they are established, they tend to replicate themselves, and select people whose dispositions and preferences are con-

sistent with their cultures. We are losing a whole generation of young people who might be interested in participating in the “learning sector” but are completely uninterested in participating in the schooling sector.”

*The Jerusalem Report:* What, in your view, is a “human and healthy learning environment” that you spoke about here?

*Elmore:* “Part of the struggle we are going through right now is that we have confounded society’s “duty of care” toward children with compulsory attendance in a set of monopoly institutions called “school.”

There are many, many ways in which society can exercise its duty of care toward children without confining them in rigid and privileged institutions. The reason schools often look like prisons and operate heavily as institutions of behavioral control is that their natural state, other things being equal, is to default to custody – the primary social function – rather than learning, their espoused function.

We know how to create humane and healthy learning environments, and the increasing development of the neuroscience of learning provide useful guidance for the future. A short list might include:

- a developmental view of social, emotional, and cognitive growth for young people where we don’t make categorical judgments about the worth of children, but carefully follow and enhance their individual growth.
- a larger role for individually initiated inquiry and learning for young people, developing their capacity for self-regulation rather than compliance with adult expectations.
- a physical environment that encourages movement, choice, inquiry, and exploring the boundaries between formal learning and the life of their communities and natural environments.”

*The Jerusalem Report:* In nature, a successful “mutation” quickly spreads. In schools, probably not. Why are there not more experiments in schools, and why do other schools not copy what clearly is a hugely successful model? In my experience, principals and teachers do very little best-practice benchmarking... as you do, in your weekly school visits. Why? Is this a way to launch reform? Open the doors and windows?

*Elmore:* Why don’t good ideas spread? Rigid, hierarchical, monopolistic systems depend on the existence of “exceptions” in order to maintain their control. Human ingenuity always exceeds the constraints of rigid

hierarchies, and individuals and groups are always capable of inventing new ideas and practices that demonstrate the shortcomings of the existing system.

The problem is that, because of monopoly control, the existing system doesn’t have to acknowledge the value of these exceptions, because it controls the resources, rules and points of access for the vast majority of participants in schools. In a way, exceptions act as a kind of pressure release valve that keeps the existing system in business – dissenters gather, develop interesting alternatives, drawing off dissatisfied customers, thereby relieving the system of the necessity to pay attention to its profound defects.”

*The Jerusalem Report:* What does the future hold for our schools, in your view?

*Elmore:* Something is happening in society at large that is worth paying attention to. Learning, as a social activity, has jumped the boundaries of schooling and has escaped into society at large. This movement is not the result of any intentional, prescriptive, policy-based “reform,” but simply a result of the availability of learning opportunities that were not previously available, largely as a consequence of the result of digital culture.

My prediction is that the “learning sector” will grow much faster than the “schooling sector” and, because of its efficiency and mobility in responding to individual and group preferences, it will become the dominant form of learning in society.

Will schools still exist? Probably, yes. The Post Office continues to exist, even though the movement of information, goods and services has largely escaped the bounds of the old-fashioned bureaucratic delivery of paper. If you were an ambitious young person with an interest in learning, would you want to go to work for the educational equivalent of the Post Office? The “bottom-up” rebellion is well underway, without any help from policy or political movements; the last people to recognize this will be the educational post office.”

**HOW DIFFICULT** is school reform? Ask Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. He donated a massive sum, \$100 million, contingent on an equal matching sum, to the Newark, New Jersey public school system, a desperately failing system, in 2010. In her book, “The Prize,” investigative journalist Dale Russakof did a post-mortem of Zuckerberg’s millions.

She found that the \$200 m. “iceberg slow-

ly melted into an ocean of recrimination” as the money evaporated in a sea of union politics. For example, Zuckerberg wanted to use funds to incentivize great teaching, but soon found that the New Jersey legislature banned such contracts, and changing the law ran into the Teachers’ Union, which controlled the legislature.

Once, long ago, becoming a school teacher was a worthy and socially respected goal. A study by the OECD, known as TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey), questioned more than 100,000 lower secondary school teachers and 6,500 principals from 34 countries. The study found that society no longer values the work of teachers in the perception of the teachers themselves.

Only about 5 percent of French and Swedish teachers said “society valued their work.” In the US and Israel, the proportion was only about one-third. This contrasts with 68% in Singapore. The head of the schools division at OECD, rarely blunt, said the results were “shocking.” Despite the fact that society does not seem to value what they do, many teachers love their jobs and would choose teaching again as a career, if they had to.

In our capitalist business-model approach to schools, where productivity is measured by test scores, teachers become trainers, rather than educators. No wonder we don’t respect them. According to the TALIS study, 93 percent of teachers report that “students should be allowed to think of solutions to a problem themselves before teachers show them the solution.” Few schools implement this.

At Touchstone, we learned that quality education is not principally about resources, budgets, or even class size. It is about teachers – finding motivated, creative people who choose education as a first choice, who love children and who thrive because they are respected and valued, above all, by their pupils. I saw a touching prolonged hug of a Touchstone teacher by a pupil, after an art class, and confess it brought a tear to my eye.

If our society truly values education, a core Jewish value, it should equally respect, even cherish, those who educate. But it does not. Perhaps this is the main reason our schools remain mired in first grade. ■

*The writer is senior research fellow at the S. Neaman Institute, Technion and blogs at [www.tinnovate.wordpress.com](http://www.tinnovate.wordpress.com)*