

# American Curriculum Abroad

Some American curriculum theories have  
lasting impact in other countries.

DAVID ZISENWINE



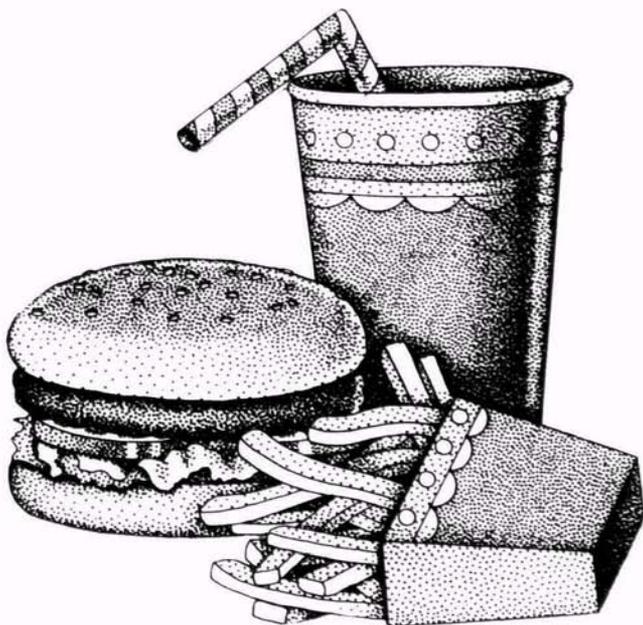
Photo: Upper Galilee

The sound of American music, the taste of fast foods, and the look of blue jeans are hallmarks of "Americanization" in the world community, but American influence goes far beyond superficial cultural signposts. American education directly and decisively affects other countries such as Israel, where I have been living for the past four years. What may be a passing fad in American education often becomes a critical issue in Israeli educational circles.

Why this "Americanization" process? Well, many educators who do their graduate studies in the United States bring back current issues, theories, and strategies. Their life in the U.S. influences their thoughts about school-community relations, formal school organizational structure, staff development, and curriculum theory and practice. In addition educators move back and forth across the ocean to participate in professional conferences and visits. Professional publications in America raise issues and offer theoretical and practical options.

To illustrate my point, let's look at Israeli curriculum development. First, you must know, the Israeli educational system is highly centralized with the Minister of Education, a political appointee, its chief policy maker. The real nuts and bolts work is handled by civil servants who are nonpolitical tenured professional educators. The director-general of the ministry of education is a

*David Zisenwine is Lecturer, Tel-Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Israel.*



civil servant with educational field experience. This structure, created by the Israel Education Act of 1952, is maintained today with minor modifications.

American curriculum theory has contributed directly to Israeli curriculum development. One branch of the central ministry is known as the Center for Curriculum Development. Because its founding director Shevach Eden studied in the United States at the University of Chicago where he worked with Benjamin Bloom and Ralph Tyler, the Curriculum Development Center is an almost direct implementation of the theories of Tyler and Bloom. In Tyler's classic approach curriculum development consists of a series of well defined stages in a pre-determined sequence, all carried out by professionals. This is supplemented by careful and deliberate attention to formulation of learning objectives as presented by Bloom and his followers. This model, developed in America by a definite school of thought, found its way in an almost pure form to Israel

through a student who later assumed responsibility for all curriculum development in Israel.<sup>1</sup> The model meshes well with an overall centralized educational system and has proven successful in efficient use of personnel, production of high quality materials, and ability to disseminate new programs.

Although this model has worked effectively for almost 20 years, it has also shown an inherent weakness—effectiveness of materials in the field. The curriculum development center is remote from the field, and the central curriculum group tends not to be involved in direct and constant contact with teachers who must roll up their sleeves and teach. The need to tap into the experience and wisdom of classroom teachers has been a major shortcoming of an American theory at work in Israel. Of course, the influence of the American curriculum scene is not monolithic and changes in emphasis and direction that originate in America are shaped by the Israeli educational environment as they find their way into Israel.

One section of the Israel Education Act allows the local school to determine 25 percent of curriculum in conjunction with the needs of its community. This law, on record for the greater part of Israel's history, had not been widely utilized by local schools who were content to allow the Education Ministry to provide pre-determined packages and programs. When the American curriculum scene began to move away from the classical models of curriculum development and call for different forms of curriculum initiative at the local level, within one to two years the Israeli educational establishment also began to challenge the hegemony of the central curriculum authority. This took the form of articles published by the Israeli educational academic community, as well as initiation of projects at the local and regional level.

Examples of projects include *MATAL*, a Hebrew acronym for Israel elementary science project, which was initiated in 1968 in Israel following the U.S. science awakening after Sputnik. *NETA*, an acronym for Secondary School Curriculum fostering project, was founded to develop curricula for the culturally disadvantaged, and *Perach* was a peer tutoring project in mathematics.

All three projects began in university curriculum programs—*MATAL* and *NETA* at Tel Aviv University and *Perach* at Weizmann Institute. The *MATAL*, originally an early childhood



project, now encompasses grades one to eight. Field contact and teacher involvement are a critical part of each project. With full support of the central agency, each project has relied on direct contact with teachers and the local school scene.

The central authority, aware of curriculum trends in the U.S., has moved in new directions as needed. As the

American curriculum establishment began to move from a focus on knowledge of subject matter disciplines to a greater arena of "learners' needs and society's demands," so too in Israel. As American curriculum development shifted from central development teams to a greater role for teachers as reflected in an increasing number of teacher cen-

ters, so too in Israel. In fact, the opening of teacher centers and academic research in that field were significant developments in Israel. Teacher centers now exist in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, a direct result of American influence.

Two other projects also represent active teacher participation in determining curriculum, and curriculum as the "art of the practical."<sup>2</sup> One, a successful workshop for biology teachers in the Lake Kinneret region<sup>3</sup> of Israel, yielded materials and ideas for an elementary school biology course. The workshop not only produced materials, but according to an Israeli researcher's report, "enabled teachers to act autonomously and gave them opportunity for self-expression in using the materials."

Another project, this time in the humanities, involved all the humanities faculty of an Israeli kibbutz high school. The theme was "Leadership in Crisis" and involved the development of an eleventh grade class unit needed by that high school. Here too, the initiator applied literature and ideas from the United States in an eager Israeli setting. These two projects have spawned others, and schools are making increased use of locally developed curriculum (within the 25 percent allowed by law).

### Conclusion

American curriculum ideas do find their way into the Israeli educational establishment, many in a purer form than in the theorists' own backyard. I feel we need to be aware of how American ideas affect countries abroad and exchange ideas on a formal basis in curriculum



Photo credit: State of Israel Government Press Office. Thanks to the Israeli Embassy, Washington, D.C., for their cooperation.

journals and conferences. America is really more than blue jeans and a Big Mac! ■

<sup>1</sup>Shevach Eden, "Curriculum Development in Israel," In *Curriculum Development, a Comparative Study*, P. H. Taylor and M. Johnson, eds., NFER Publishing Company, Ltd. Windsor & Berks, 1974.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Schwab, "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum," *School Review* 81 4 (1973): 501-522.

<sup>3</sup>N. Sabar and N. Shafirri, "Teachers as Curriculum Developers and Implementors," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 11, 1 (1979): 87-89.

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