

ISRAEL

Experiments and Entrepreneurship Division

Israel Ministry of Education

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Introduction

The present study is part of the OECD/CERI initiative on Innovative Learning Environments (ILE). There are twenty-one participating countries in the study including Austria, Chile, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Israel, South Korea, Mexico, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, Spain, Australia, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and the United States. The participating countries' representatives, all of whom are experienced researchers in the field of education, view the study as an opportunity to deepen understanding and knowledge of ILE that advance learning and thinking skills in the 21st century. The study has three stages: in the first, between 2008 and 2010, a comprehensive study was conducted on environments shaped for support of deep and effective learning. In the second stage, between 2009 and 2012, 150 examples of ILE were identified in the participating countries – three cases were submitted by Israel and 40 cases were analyzed in depth, of which two were from Israel (Tubin, 2011, 2012).

The present report is part of the study's third stage, conducted between 2011 and 2013, which is designed to identify systemic strategies and initiatives focusing on the dissemination and institutionalization of ILE. The objective is to widen the perspective and examine strategies for change taking place in a variety of locations, in all of which innovative educational approaches are being applied and operated. The most notable example in Israel of disseminating ILE is the Ministry of Education Experiments and Entrepreneurship Division, on which the present report focuses.

1. Aims

The Ministry of Education Experiments and Entrepreneurship Division began operating in 1996 with the aim of supporting changes and initiatives originating in the education field, and providing them with backing and support within the education system. The initiatives engage with a variety of aspects of enhancing education, including learning advancement, increasing motivation, developing alternative

teaching and learning methods, and designing ILE. The target audiences are learners and teachers in educational institutions from kindergarten to higher education. The central idea is to identify and develop innovative educational models adapted to the challenges of the present and the future, which will constitute inspiration for shaping Israel's education policy. In this way the Experiments and Entrepreneurship Division encourages the involvement of educators in shaping and enhancing education in Israel.

2. Leadership and Partners

The Experiments and Entrepreneurship Division is part of the Ministry of Education and acts on its behalf. The Division is headed by Ms. Ganit Weinstein, a former successful school principal, who established it seventeen years ago and still leads it. The Division's main partners are educational institutions from throughout the Israeli education system, from kindergartens, through schools, to teacher-training centers and colleges. Any such institution interested in developing and applying an educational initiative designed to advance learning among its students is invited to approach the Division, and operate with its support during the initiative's first five years.

3. Strategies and activities

The Division's main activity is identifying educators with a dream and a vision who believe that their place of work can be different, and enable them to develop it for the learners, the teachers, and the community. This is a five-year process in which the entrepreneurs are monitored during the implementation of their dreams, the suitability of the innovation for the institution is examined, and its assimilation into everyday educational processes is evaluated. The Division provides support, training, and R&D tools for the initiatives and their assimilation while holding a continuous dialogue between the field, the Division, and academe: the field is the institution in which the initiative is operated and applied, the Division provides support and backing, and an academic adviser liaises between the initiative and the research in the chosen sphere.

In the course of the five-year period the institution is required to apply the innovative initiative in ever-increasing scope within the school, with a Division supervisor and an academic adviser supporting it step by step. At the end of the five-year period the school is required to write the experiment book in which it details the experiment theory, the process, and its products. Schools demonstrating special success become dissemination centers in which their teachers teach teachers from other institutions interested in developing similar innovations. This is a process that advances and develops not only additional schools, but also the teachers who become instructors of the innovative initiative. To achieve this, the Division operates in five main spheres: it encourages R&D of innovative educational initiatives, examines proposals and requests for experiment, monitors the training and assimilation of innovation in educational institutions, encourages documentation and management of the knowledge accumulated in the course of the experiment, and disseminates the experiment's products throughout the education system.

4. Context

The Division was established on the basis of the experience of the Division's director, who in the past was an entrepreneurial school principal who waged numerous battles to preserve the innovation in her successful school. The Division's aims are to train educators as entrepreneurs and help them to act within an institutionalized and bureaucratic system. The Israeli education system is centralized and standard-oriented. It covers some 4,000 schools for which it sets curricula, pays teachers' salaries, approves the opening and closure of institutions, and oversees a complex system of procedures and examinations, including the matriculation examinations. Under these conditions, intentions of renewing and revitalizing the system and preparing it for the 21st century encounter numerous obstacles. The Division is designed to reinforce innovative initiatives and protect them until they become institutionalized and are integrated into the system.

5. Resources

Each year fifteen new institutions join the Division, while fifteen others complete their five-year experimental period and start functioning independently. All in all in any given year 80 experimental schools are operating simultaneously under the aegis of the Division. This complex system has at its disposal the Division's director and secretaries, offices in the Ministry of Education complex, 40 annual training days whereby a number of supervisors work with the schools, and a half-time teaching post for each school joining the experiment. Additionally, the local authorities fund an academic adviser who works with the experimental institute, and they also provide a physical environment or dedicated equipment required for the experiment.

6. Development over Time

With time, the Division, together with the experimental schools, changes in several directions: first, more and more schools join the experiment, and streamline the monitoring and evaluation of the experiments and initiatives. Second, the Division expands toward additional activities such as the advancement of special education schools, and community activities. Finally, both the Division's staff and its work processes are becoming increasingly specialized and professional.

The onus of the struggle in recent years was on institutionalization of the Division, which was very original and innovative within the bureaucratic system of the Ministry of Education and among educational institutions. From beginnings with a small number of schools, in recent years the Division has reached some 150 schools that have passed through it. The Division is currently working to deepen and enhance its activities and extend them in other directions, including:

- Change in the matriculation examination – the Division, in collaboration with the national inspectors, is working for approval of an experimental matriculation examination.
- Converting those institutions in which the experiment is worthy of dissemination into educational centers that train educational staff and teachers.
- Developing R&D teams in the experimental institution, enhancing the writing of the experiment theory, and advancing evaluation.
- Deepening the work of the networks, i.e., a number of schools working under the same experimental principles.

7. Evidence of effectiveness and efficiency

There are currently 60 experimental educational institutions active in the Division, from elementary schools to colleges, and some 30 kindergartens. There are also over 40 institutions and kindergartens that are Division “graduates”, which operated experiments and ILE in a variety of spheres, such as: inter-school collaboration and the creation of an educational space, development of teacher-student dialogue skills, bringing the community closer to the school, the advancement of special needs populations, closing gaps between different students population in Israeli society, deepening heritage, and increasing awareness of gender equality. Principals and central educators who worked with the Division have advanced to key Ministry of Education posts, carrying with them the Division’s entrepreneurial and innovativeness spirit. Additionally, the Division has gained both recognition and prestige, and the demand from schools to join attests to this. Each year only fifteen of the most suitable are accepted.

Additionally, 40 dissemination centers of institutions whose innovation experiment has matured operate in the Division’s framework, and they transfer it to other interested institutions. The dissemination centers form networks comprised of additional schools, generate publications, write the experiment books, recruit experts, and monitor entrepreneurs throughout the process, from developing the vision to monitoring and assimilation.

At the school level, the experiment and initiative processes created extraordinary learning environments, a large part of which continue and endure, and as noted above, this is disseminated to other schools through the dissemination centers. Numerous “experiment books” summarizing the innovative initiatives are disseminated to educators by the Division and arouse both inspiration and interest. For example, two ILE sample schools submitted in the second stage of the ILA study – Mevo’ot Hanegev and Makor Chaim (Tubin, 2011; 2012) – were part of the Division and continue working with it to this day.

8. Success Factors

The contributory factors in the establishment and consolidation of the Division are the director, the staff, and supporting factors in the Ministry of Education who believed and supported the dream every step of the way. The dream was adapted to the spirit of the system, but called for creativity and innovativeness to deal with the constraints of the education system over time.

In the field itself, the Division's success factors are the school principals who, for a small charge are prepared to embark on the innovative adventure proposed by the Division. With few resources and a great deal of inspiration and motivation, the principals and their staff are leading their schools toward developing a more meaningful and varied learning environment. Not only are they doing it, they are also writing and developing the experiment theory in experiment books, and they often establish dissemination centers, thus involving the whole community, not just themselves. Belonging to the Division is prestigious in itself and facilitates a support group that assists entrepreneurs to break out of their isolation and become a meaningful community that manages the risks of innovation in an informed manner, and influences the Israeli education system.

9. Tensions and impediments

Several blocks affect the Division's work, one of which is its budget. There is much school interest in joining and developing educational initiatives, but budgetary constraints dictate the number that will be accepted each year. The feeling is that the number of schools could be doubled, and even more than that, if only the required budget was available. Furthermore, this is not only about adding schools, but improving and deepening successful initiatives. Leaving the Division after five years sometimes impacts the experiments and forces them backward.

A further difficulty derives from the dictates and constraints imposed on schools by the Ministry of Education, which reduce principals' autonomy in forming ILEs, and restrict the freedom of action. An innovative environment requires innovative preparations, creative procedures, and different activity, and when they clash with Ministry of Education procedures a difficulty is created that impacts the realization and assimilation of the innovation over time. If it were possible to grant principals greater autonomy together with the innovative initiative, then the application would be more meaningful.

10. Sources

Ministry of Education Experiments and Entrepreneurship Division website:
<http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/UNITS/Nisuyim>

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