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Parents are the Source of Success: The Influence of Parents on Learning and Employment

Rina Cohen

Introduction: the importance of asking the right questions

In the modern era, an era of knowledge and information, technology and globalization, ongoing learning and integration into a changing employment environment constitute the necessity for lifelong development and for coping with its challenges.

The UNESCO report, "Learning: The Treasure Within" (2001), discusses education in the 21st century, and considers education as a central element in the task of preparing people, young and adult, women and men, for meeting this challenging and demanding reality. As such, the report presents education for all and literacy, in their narrowest and broadest meaning, as being a passport for life. It analyzes learning and education data from both developed and developing countries and, based on this data, discusses the important questions faced by nations and education systems: The report deals with the question of "how?" How do we provide for and meet the needs of the idea of "education for all" that is

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continually being updated? How do we promote access to the workplace for people of different skills, different needs and diverse cultural behavior? The report also deals with the question of "who?" – Who is the learner? Who is responsible for learning? Who influences learning? Who generates educational and learning processes as well as integration in the workplace? It collates these questions and offers recommendations that merge the "how" and the "who" to create a blueprint for dealing with learning processes and integration in the workplace on the one hand for policy-makers and for their operators on the other.

Public systems in Israel, in particular educational and economic systems and various frameworks, have been dealing in recent years with these questions, particularly from the perspective of learning achievements and the status of teachers of how to integrate populations into economic and employment frameworks, while addressing the question of inequality and cultural gaps. Much of the discourse, discussions and activities, as well as financial investment in this domain, are directed at adjustments required in programs and frameworks, and in training professionals, i.e. educators and practitioners of all types. This is in accordance with the recommendations put forward in the UNESCO report and partially with the practices of western countries, which constitute the criteria for comparisons used by the OECD and by other economic and educational organizations.

Despite considerable investment and wide-ranging programs, Israel faces educational-learning problems and complex cultural-economic issues for which appropriate, satisfactory solutions remain to be found.

The following question continues to be consistently asked: what strategies and other actions are required in order to generate the necessary change? A change that will enhance fulfillment of human capital potential, contribute to population integration and narrow the growing cultural gaps in Israeli society.

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The hidden potential of parents

As someone who has dealt for decades with the issue of parents, parenting and parental guidance from the perspective of lifelong learning, I believe and know that parents possess great, significant and long-term influence on learning and access to the workplace. It is appropriate to include here the slogan: "It won't work without parents." Even though parents do not possess a role or status in any educational and/or occupational framework, they form the infrastructure for personal and social growth, education and strength. There is no substitute for parents and without them and efforts put into an activity that does not include them will not maximize the effort put in and its benefit won't be felt.

It should be noted that educational, economic and social programs have touched on the subjects of parents and parenting to a very small degree and only in a minor way. This article aims to incorporate parents and their educational significance into the domain of promoting issues of learning and access to the workplace that are on the educational, economic and social agenda. It also aims to propose and recommend actions necessary to empower parents and parenting in order to cope with these issues.

Accordingly, I chose to examine documented academic knowledge from multi-disciplinary research based on opinions and positions formulated by professionals and public policy makers and present them in this article. An important point to be remembered in order not to be misleading is "A parent is not just a tool for raising children who will have to face the challenge of being successful" (Cohen, 2007). Parents are human beings and unique subjects in themselves and they are people with dreams, hopes, ambitions, pains and disappointments, general and personal human needs. This article, which is devoted to the influence of parents on the success of children, youth and adults, emphasizes aspects of parents as child-raisers, educators, helpers and supporters, but it does

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not detract from the human and individual aspect of parents as human beings who undergo varied experiences in parenthood and in the broad spectrum of life.

Sources of knowledge and attitudes on the contribution of parents to learning and employment

I will begin with a new reading of the UNESCO report from the perspective of parents, parenting and life-long learning and connect its findings to the main issues related to the influence of parents on their children's success. I will continue by presenting knowledge from numerous sources in Israel and around the world on the subject of parents, learning and education, and will conclude by presenting innovative information from brain research and epigenetics on the influence of parenting on learning and the employment behavior of adults. In addition, I will describe actions and steps that have been taken by developed countries and have made a positive contribution to the handling of present day issues. The innovative aspect of this article is that it collates what we already know regarding the criterion of success and directs the spotlight of success at parents and at the influence parenting has on learning and access to employment in a multi-cultural, dynamic reality.

A.   UNESCO Report – Learning: the treasure within

A precise examination of the UNESCO report based on a criterion of success shows that the report clearly identifies success-inducing factors. The predominant approach is embedded within the report's subject – Education for the 21st Century, Learning Throughout Life. The basic assumption is that learning is the key to coping with life challenges and we should therefore promote a "learning society." Consequently "a school should impart passion and joy for learning, the ability to learn how to learn, and arouse intellectual curiosity" (*ibid*.: 20). The question posed is which schools do this successfully? The answer given states that

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schools which had introduced and carried out educational reform.

> "The principal factors that contribute to the success of educational reforms are: in first place, the local community, which includes parents, school administrations and teachers, in second place, public authorities and in third, the international community… countries where the process was relatively successful are those that obtained a decisive commitment from teachers and parents in local communities, a commitment supported by ongoing dialogue and by various forms of external financial, technical or professional support. It is obvious that local authorities play a highly important role in every successful remedial strategy" (*ibid.:* 25).

Two key factors are presented here as promoters of success. In general, these are factors not commonly noted in discussions and practical steps on the subject of education and success in education being parents and the community. The report clearly notes: "when communities assume a larger share of responsibility for their self-development, they learn to appreciate the role of education – both as a tool for achieving social goals and to improve quality of life (*(ibid.: 20)*." Thus, as the report emphasizes, it is vital to develop and strengthen the dialogue between teachers and parents and broaden the frameworks of community and public dialogue on educational and learning subjects. Resources should therefore be invested in instructing parents, teachers and public officials in the community and in training them to establish a relationship of connectivity, dialogue and discussion and to develop a culture of educational partnership and practice. There is no doubt that this is a complex but vital and possible task, as noted in the report.

B.   *Parents and the education system – the reality in Israel*

The Israeli aspect of the subject of parents, teachers and their inter-

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relationship has been discussed in the professional educational and organizational literature over the years (for example: Feitelson, 1969; Frankenstein, 1977; Friedman, 1990; Yisraelshivli, 1995; Noy, 1999; Fisher, 2010). Most researchers agree that the parental involvement in education positively influences children's successful academic achievements. The question asked by researchers, educators and parents is what are the limits of intervention? A question dubbed: "intervention or involvement?" and that received the answer: "involvement yes, intervention no", following considerable discussion and deliberation over what constitutes involvement and what constitutes intervention. The centrality of this issue in the education system and its significance in ensuring success led the Ministry of Education to establish a committee of inquiry under the aegis of the Israel Academy of Sciences: "A committee for examining the relationship between families and the educational framework in respect of children (kindergarten-grade 3) and its connection to the development of the child and his success in the education system." The committee conducted its enquiry, reached conclusions and proposed recommendations for action. All this was summarized in a groundbreaking paper published in 2011.

> "The committee members are convinced of the primary importance of promoting a close relationship between families and the education system in respect of infants and they view this relationship as a central factor of influence on the child's developmental process and his success in the education system…a partnership between parents and the education system has a positive and significant impact on the child's achievements in school. This is also evident in the learning-academic sphere, in appropriate behavior in school and in satisfaction with the education system" (*ibid.:* 4).

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The basic principle is:

> "The first responsibility for a child's development and education lies with the parents. When a child enters the education system, this responsibility becomes a partnership between parents and the education system, with each side making its own special contribution to the child's development and welfare. This relationship should be established through the active initiative of the education system, from a position of equality and partnership with each parent population and in accordance with the various needs of each population group" (*ibid.:* 29).

On the basis of this approach, the committee members formulated recommendations for action that also focused on promoting the status of parents in the education system through a variety of means, from legislation to training, including the establishment of organizational structures enabling interchange and dialogue.

In addition, a book has been published this year on the subject of the relationship between educators and parents in the Israeli education system. Following a comprehensive review which also covers this relationship at the classroom level up to the state level, the writer, Dr. Bilha Noy, collates the recommendations for vigorous educational action aimed at developing a partnership and dialogue with parents within the education system for the promotion of success.

C.   *Parents and parenting – educational and economic aspects*

Parents' critical influence on the development and functioning of children and youth as learners, and on their behavior as working adults and active citizens has become clearer over the years. Findings on this subject can be gleaned from studies in different and wide-ranging disciplines; I will present here a few of the most prominent. As early as in 2002, the Van Leer Institute published important findings on the influence

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of parents on eligibility for a high school matriculation certificate by students from various sectors and socio-economic backgrounds. As is well-known, the matriculation certificate has represented, for many years, a definitive measurement of a student's success and the success of the education system, since it constitutes a central key to acquiring an academic education. Similarly, eligibility for a matriculation certificate has emerged as a major variable in social-economic welfare (*ibid.:* 20). The study states: "The gates of higher education can be closed to children of poor families due to the scant resources and means available to these families. The barrier can be even higher in view of the fact that heads of poor families possess, for the most part, a low level of education" (*ibid.:* 7-8). However, the study does not limit itself to a factual description of the differences between various socio-economic groups and various ethnic or national groups: it identifies four factors that contribute to attaining a matriculation certificate:

1. General welfare
2. Quality of life
3. Academic background
4. Investment

> The study sets out the factors that influence eligibility for a matriculation certificate, using the Faceted Smallest Space Analysis method (FSSA), through which it reveals the finding that is hidden behind a solid socio-economic status: "Parents' education is the most important factor in predicting a student's chances of matriculation eligibility: the higher the level of the parent's education, the higher the probability that a student will complete his studies with a matriculation certificate. The rate of matriculation eligibility for a student whose parents both possess more than 13 years of schooling stands at 81% compared to 34% for a student whose parents possess 0 to

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8 years of schooling" (*ibid.*: 35). "The parents' education variable is so dominant that there is practically no difference between the rate of matriculation eligibility of a Jewish student compared to a non-Jewish student when both their parents possess an equal level of education….the equality in parental education almost erases the ethnic gap among students of all generations…and even of all ethnicities" (*ibid.*). That is, if all students were positioned at an equal starting point, in terms of family background, they would reach the finish line with equal achievements.

The findings of studies conducted over the past decade reinforce the notion of the parental education variable as a critical, dominant variable that influences the success of children and youth in the domain of learning. Nevertheless, the public education system, its investments and activities, do not take this variable into account. It would appear that the keys to educational success will remain outside the education system, as long as parents are not perceived as an integral part of the system and are not integrated into it.

D. Parents and parenting and their influence on the welfare of children and youth – increasing opportunities and reducing risks

One of the most common definitions of the role of parents is: to increase opportunities and reduce risks in the lives of their children. This means training parents to cope with the challenges that life places before them, in the present, and with those they will face in a future that is difficult to anticipate. Furthermore, professionals and scientists share the same general belief that life will be full of changes and there is therefore a need for adaptation and flexibility skills, social skills and team work and, above all, developed learning skills. Against this background, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been examining, for the last two

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decades, the resilience and mental health of children and youth. The main questions are "what are the factors that influence the resilience and ability of children and youth to cope with growing dangers and temptations and with the challenges of study and employment? What are the factors that impart to them resilience and strength in the face of demanding and even dangerous realities? Above all, what are the factors that leave their impression on the mental welfare of children and youth?"

Dr. Yossi Harel-Fish (2014), an Israeli researcher and member of the WHO team of researchers brought to our attention that a review of the findings of studies around the world led to a precise answer to these questions. As noted above, the findings pointed to four main, universal strengthening factors considered as the strongest, most consistent predictors of the lives of children and youth in the world.

The four predictors are the four pillars on which the wellbeing of children rests, the principal infrastructure assuring the resilience of youth and the mental and social stability they require in order to function properly. We have called them the four wellbeing generators:

1. The presence of a significant adult in the life of a child
2. A positive daily school experience
3. A sense of self-worth
4. A feeling of having healthy social connectivity.

According to the "youth resilience" model a child who experiences the four resilience factors in a positive manner is a child who possesses a high level of mental, social and behavioral wellbeing and thus the probability that he will experience mental distress or will develop dangerous behavioral patterns and indices of hidden dropout is very low. In addition, the "youth resilience" model claims that strengthening the four wellbeing generators in the life of a child will substantially strengthen the child's mental and social well-being directly reducing his involvement in risk behavior. In other words, the most efficient way

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of reducing phenomena such as violence, consumption of addictive substances and covert dropout is by strengthening the social and mental wellbeing of a child through the four wellbeing generators. This differs from the approach that prevailed for many years, which held that prevention factors are developed through prevention programs.

This conceptual model evolved over the years into an applied-strategic model. The "youth resilience" strategic model focuses on strengthening the four resilience factors as an efficient base for reducing violence, risk behavior and hidden dropout while improving the social and mental wellbeing of students, teachers and parents. Studies carried out by Meizles (2010) and Gilat (2012) demonstrate that children and youth view their parents as the most significant adults in their lives and they turn to them in times of distress and difficulty, rely on them and ask them for help and support.

E. The influence of parents on the health and development of children, youth and adults

Since Harlow's celebrated study on nursing babies' need for touch and warmth, followed by Bowlby's studies and work (1951) on the vital attachment between a baby and its mother, through Winnicott (1970) who coined the phrase "there is no such thing as a baby, only a baby-mother couple," numerous articles have been written on the vital relationship between parents and children and on its influence on growth, health and development.

Dr. Tamar Erez wrote an exhaustive article on "parents as a resource for the healthy development of children and youth: a review of the research literature" (2011-2012), in which she put forward the main points of this subject. I will quote from her article in order to highlight the critical and determining influence of the parent-child relationship on children's health and development. "Bowlby reached the conclusion that

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a sense of safety in a child's attachment to his parent is the basis of the child's mental health and the loss of a parental figure at a young age or separation from the parental figure is the source of difficulties and pathologies." "Bowlby and Ainsworth determined that the quality of the care given by the primary caregiver during infancy, primarily the mother, is characterized by warmth and sensitivity to the infant's signals and assures a secure attachment and creates the basis for the future cognitive, emotional and social development of the child" (Erez, 2012: 25).

This is the fundamental approach and, based on this, researchers are analyzing the relationship between parents and children and how it impacts on the behavior of even older youth and adults. For example: "Social skills at age 16 are built on skills acquired during the preceding period." This research also showed that the quality of parental care during infancy (at age 6 months and at 42 months) has a higher correlation with social skills than the quality of concurrent parental care…school adaptation and learning achievements also accord with this predictor" (*ibid.:* 26-27).

Erez connects development, health and resilience when she quotes from Winnicott (1986, 1995): "Psychoanalysis shows that the basis of mental health is not just genetic or fortuitous: the infrastructure for mental health is actively laid in infancy, when the good enough mother carries out her function, and when, during childhood, the family functions normally" (*ibid.:* 147).

It is unnecessary to expand on this further. Researchers and professionals agree that a child's normal health and development serve as the foundation of the child's academic-learning behaviors and the adult's work adaptation, and these are grounded in the parental relationship and care from birth onward.

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F.   Parenting, genetics and the environment – epigenetics

Support from an unexpected quarter for the importance and significance of parenting and its influence comes from biology, from the new paradigm on the influence of the environment on biological genes – epigenetics. The timeworn debate over which is the dominant factor that influences man – nature or nurture – receives a surprising new makeover in an innovative field of knowledge that shows, among other things, how emotional, belief and consciousness systems influence expression of the hereditary genetic code. In his exciting book "The Biology of Belief," Dr. Bruce Lipton emphasizes, backed by scientific studies, the influencing power of parenting. Under the heading "Conscious Parenting: Parents as Genetic Engineers," Lipton writes: "…babies require a nurturing environment in order for genes to be activated and for a healthy brain to develop. Up-to-date scientific findings demonstrate that parents continue to act as genetic engineers even after birth" (Lipton: 156). Furthermore, Lipton notes that young children scrutinize meticulously their environment and download knowledge signals provided by their parents straight to their unconscious memory. In this way, they acquire their parents' behaviors and beliefs (*ibid.:* 161). New brain studies demonstrate the extent, depth and breadth of parental influence on the consciousness and unconsciousness of children and youth before and after birth throughout the years of growth, adolescence and even adulthood. Beliefs, opinions and behaviors of parents are transmitted consciously and unconsciously to their children and they form the basis on which children form their perceptions, attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, they have a great, wide-ranging influence on the way their children deal with learning and finding employment throughout their lives. In practice, parents mediate and interpret the world to their children and determine how they look at themselves, their abilities, strengths as well as weaknesses. In this manner, they construct, post factum, their children's sense of self-worth

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and self-confidence and shape their expectations of themselves and their environment and the way they cope with developmental and life tasks. In the course of their lives, children will certainly encounter additional adults who will influence them to a certain extent for better or for worse. However, parental influence is increasingly proving itself as the critical, dominant one.

Insights and implications

From the findings of the six different disciplines that were examined, parenting is portrayed as highly significant and influential on the success of children, youth and adults as they deal with developmental tasks and adopt a style of life and patterns of behavior.

The main insights related to the connection between parenting and success in learning and finding employment, that emerge from the findings are:

1. Parents are the most significant figures and the ones who have the greatest influence on children, youth and adults. Thus, they are the primary, natural educators.

2. In their role as parents raising children and as role models, parents construct the foundation of success. The components for a foundation of success are: trust, self-confidence, sense of worth, positive self-image, a sense of ability and the need to achieve; these components develop via the parent-child relationship and the messages transmitted by parents to their children.

3. Parents shape the broadband of the relationship and attachment to their children and, through it, they serve as the genetic engineers of their children.

4. Parents transmit values and culture through their behavior, responses and the family environment that they create.

5. Parents are the intermediary between their children, throughout

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their lives, and the world and they serve as mediators who make accessible, interpret and give meaning to phenomena and behaviors.

6. Parents are involved and partners in the domain of education and create a success-oriented learning and employment atmosphere.

In order to serve as educators, role models, genetic engineers, transmitters of values and culture, serve as efficient mediators and be involved and partners in educational practice, parents have to be aware of their role and their parental responsibility and wisely use parental components and resources. Parental components are:

Potency, strength – the paternal component – the guiding power and authority that a parent possesses from his role and standing, and compassion – reinforcement, encouragement, support and containment – the maternal component. In reality, each parent, both mother and father, possesses these two components. The combination of strength and compassion enables the formation of the child and, simultaneously, the formation of parenting and the actualization of its role. In addition to the two parental components, parents are equipped with parental resources of love and wisdom. Love is the major parental engine. Love is the human force which raises children. It builds trust, promotes recognition of goodness, ability and capability, and creates a reinforcing, encouraging dialogue. Parental wisdom is wisdom of life, accumulated knowledge and experience which enables parents to lead, direct and influence during the parental process of raising and educating a child (Cohen, 2010).

Thus, in practice, parents are expected to function as leaders who use their own parental language: power, compassion, love and wisdom in order to perform their parental functions. However, an examination of parental reality shows that a substantial part of parental leadership is not expressed in contemporary parenting and, in many cases, parents do not, or only partly, perform all their parental functions. Weak parental leadership reduces and even impinges the success of children and youth

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and access of adults to employment. Professionals, therefore, believe that it is important to take urgent action towards "rehabilitation of parental authority" (Omer, 2004).

The need for leadership and a new policy

It appears, therefore, that there is a vital need to develop social and learning solutions for a new target population – parents. The growing gap between parental weakness and parental responsibility and its scope of influence makes it necessary to empower parenting and strengthen parents. To this aim, a broad range of strategies needs to be activated – from developing parenting learning programs and by establishing relevant learning frameworks to introducing legislation such as that passed in developed countries. Therefore, there is a need for a national policy that will promote parental responsibility and leadership.

The principle of parental responsibility was recognized for the first time in Israel in former judge Savyona Rotlevy's report, which discussed application of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Rotlevy, 2006). Despite public awareness and broad agreement on the issue of parental responsibility, there is still a large gap between the provision of solutions for parental needs in order to ensure efficient parental functioning and the State's readiness to recognize such needs and anchor them in legislation and in a compulsory national policy. Today, parents feel "invisible" in the eyes of policy-makers and state institutions since they lack recognition, respect, and attention to their parental needs. Recognizing this need, the honorable former judge determined that the state is responsible for helping parents to fulfill their role and for providing them with relevant solutions. But she, too, did not elaborate on the method through which the State should apply its responsibility for parental responsibility.

The Public Council of Parents in Israel, which comprises parent, professional and social organizations, identified this lacuna and proposed

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an outline for a national policy on the subject: "from invisible parents to parent-leaders."

The proposed policy outline includes:

- establishment of a national parent and parenting authority;
- establishment of a lobby and Knesset committee on the subject of parents;
- appointment of a parents commissioner to serve as a liaison and resource for parents;
- promotion of legislation recognizing the right of parents to receive training, advice and guidance;
- appointment of a parents counselor in places of employment and educational establishments;
- establishment of "parent houses" as multi-cultural parenting training centers accessible to all parent populations in local authorities;
- training special professionals on how to guide parents;
- training professionals on how to develop a professional relationship with parents;
- appointing parents to parental positions in educational, social, health and cultural decision-making centers.

The Public Council of Parents in Israel also recently called on policy and decision makers to establish a governmental mechanism aimed at strengthening the family with the emphasis on parents and infancy.

Conclusion: the keys to success

Having seen the importance and significance of parents in promoting successful learning and finding employment and having identified the keys to success possessed by parents, it is important for us to "see" parents and to set out our recommendations for empowering parents so that they can fulfill their role in the broadest possible manner.

Since parents constitute the primary natural and cultural resource

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in the task of educating and raising children and youth, and thus in developing personal, social and national human capital, it is important to invest in them significant, empowering resources. The effort to develop and upgrade resources is customary for all natural resources beginning with the energy of the sun, water, gas, etc. Parents, as an irreplaceable human resource, also have the right to be on the agenda of a state that aspires to promote its health and resilience and be the recipient of national investments. Numerous studies have shown that investment in parents leads to positive results as well as optimal economic and social benefits in the long-term.

The time has come for parents and the time has come to invest in parents. The state, as the entity responsible for security and development, resilience and strength, has an obligation to empower parents and parenting in order to enable them to fulfill their parental obligations, and to reinforce the infrastructures that guarantee national resilience – resilient children, parents and families. Parents are no longer invisible: parents lead and have an impact on all of us, for the benefit of all.

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