

***The 'Eradicating
Ignorance Campaign':
Evaluation and
Summary from a Fifty-
Year Perspective***

First Steps:

Operation Eradicate Ignorance: A Fifty Years Perspective

Esther Schely-Newman

Introduction: The Operation and its Evaluation

The photograph of a soldier with a child in her arms, standing alongside a sitting woman holding a pencil became a symbol of "Operation Eradicate Ignorance" (OEI), a nationwide adult literacy campaign in Israel using female soldiers to teach reading and writing in Hebrew conducted between 1964 and 1976. The effectiveness of the campaign was not evaluated, among other reasons, because the concept of "success" was unclear. What level of familiarity with the Hebrew alphabet makes a person "literate?" Is the number of years spent in school proof of acquiring basic skills? Is "success" measured only by acquisition of specific skills? Were there other goals; and if so, what measures were taken for accomplishing them?

These are some of the questions I encountered when I began my research on Operation Eradicate Ignorance ten years ago.¹ As the study

Prof. Esther Shelly-Newman is an Associate professor, Department of Communication and Journalism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

progressed more theoretical and methodological questions were added including those relating to concerns regarding the position of the

¹ "Literacy and Ideology: An Israeli Case Study," supported by a grant from the Israeli Science Foundation, ISF 375/05. Further support provided by the Eshkol Institute and the Smart Family Institute of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

researcher and her influence on the study and its outcomes. This paper refers to the process of studying a volatile social subject, and its insights expand the assessment of the campaign in terms of its primary and secondary aims and achievements.

A brief description of OEI will be followed by an overview of questions and concerns that arose during the research. Discussion of achievements in the double perspective of the historic time of the events, and the present time when the research was conducted, will provide insights into the difficulties and achievements of the literacy campaign.

Review: Operation Eradicate Ignorance

The results of the 1961 national census served as the impetus for the OEI literacy campaign. The census revealed that among the Israeli Jewish population 12.1% had 4 years of schooling or less, amounting to quarter of a million adults in absolute numbers.² That these results worried the establishment is evidenced in newspapers of the time: "One figure given at the meeting was scorched in everybody's mind: We have quarter of a million illiterates in Israel!" (Shamir, 1963).³ The Minister of Education presented a similar attitude in his opening speech for the campaign, "It is a shame and disgrace to the People of the Book that more than two hundred thousand adults in the State of Israel cannot read or write in any language, and we have to do all we can to remove this disgrace and erase this stain." (quoted in the *Haaretz* daily newspaper, December 19, 1963).

Two thirds of this population were women; two thirds were immigrants from Asia and Africa. Shlomo Kodesh of the Ministry of Education, a major figure in adult education programs, explained the

2 The percentage of illiterates among the non-Jewish population was much higher at the time. The current literacy rate among the entire Israeli population is 97.1%. <http://www.indexmundi.com/israel/literacy.html>. Retrieved April 18, 2016.

3 Ami Shamir, *Lamerhav* daily, November 22, 1963. Translations from Hebrew by author.

reasons for this particular situation:

The mass immigration to Israel from developing countries after the establishment of the State encompassed a large number of adults with complete or partial illiteracy. In their countries of origin, mostly Asia and Africa, formal education was not available to many, particularly to girls (Kodesh, 1972: 11).

The geographical dispersion of the target population once in Israel increased the difficulties of finding a general solution to the problem. The percentage of illiterate adults ranged from 10% to 70% in dispersed communities. The major problem, according to the Ministry of Education, existed in immigrant moshavim [small agricultural communities] which had 40% or more illiterate adults among their residents, and so had a greater impact upon the community than did illiteracy in large cities, where the absolute number of the uneducated was higher. This led the Ministry to focus on clusters of moshavim in the peripheries where there was a shortage of teachers who could assist teaching adults. An experimental program in the southern Negev area demonstrated that a focused program tailored to students' schedules was successful. A group of forty women in moshav Zimrat learned to read and write with the help of teacher-soldiers within one year (Weinberg 1992:43). The results led to a green light to implement the nationwide OEI program in January 1964.⁴

OEI was based on cooperation between three institutional parties: teacher-soldiers were recruited from the Women's Corp of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF); the Ministry of Education trained them and supervised their work; and the local authorities provided the teacher-soldiers with housing and logistic support. The program was soon expanded to development towns and specific urban neighborhoods.

⁴ Interview with Mr. Itzhak Navon, *Dvar Hapoelet* January 1964. Repeated in a personal interview conducted in 2003.

Despite these efforts, a survey conducted in 1976 showed no significant improvement in the overall adult literacy level. Avraham Zivion, the director of adult education department, devised a different program for adult education utilizing professional teaching personnel, with various levels of classes conducted in regional learning centers (Tokatly and Grabelsky, 2008).

Methodological and Theoretical Issues in researching OEI

The purpose of this study was to analyze the results of the OEI campaign within its sociocultural contexts, not from an applied pedagogical perspective. Specifically, the aim was to analyze how participants viewed the experience forty years later, rather than evaluating methods of teaching and learning material. The emphasis was placed on understanding the encounter between teachers and students and its impact as viewed in retrospect. The reason for this approach is the inability to measure what was learned forty years earlier: former students now live in a literary environment, some participated in other adult literacy programs, their children and grandchildren attend compulsory education. It is, therefore, not possible to assign specific achievements to an individual program. The incomplete documentation of the campaign and the lack of evaluation tools from the time of the campaign support the proposed methodological choice. Partial data about the campaign is found in the National Archives and in the IDF Archives. These include newspaper articles and interviews, short reports of supervisors who visited classes, and written minutes from meetings. No evaluations of achievements or feedback of teacher-soldiers about their work exist. Additional sources from the time include leaflets distributed to prospective soldiers, and issues of "The Grey Lanyard," a bulletin of the soldier-teachers' unit which appeared irregularly. The anthology, Adult Education in Israel, edited by Shlomo Kodesh (1972), is a major primary source of data.

As director of the Department of Language Teaching in the Ministry of Education, Kodesh included in the anthology evaluations and discussions about adult education at the time of OEI. A 14 minutes documentary, *Biur Ha-Baarut* [Eradication of Ignorance], produced by the government is a visual representation of OEI, accompanied by an authoritative voice-over (Yeshurun, 1966). Later publications treating adult education in Israel speak only briefly about OEI (Weinberg, 1992; Tokatly and Grabelsky, 2008).

Data for the current study originate from open-ended interviews conducted both with former teacher-soldiers and students, as well as with officials in the IDF and the Ministry of Education who were involved in OEI. Former students were located in day centers in moshavim and development towns, and a "grapevine" was used to locate former teachers. I opened an Internet site where I posted archival materials and photographs, and asked people to register and to answer a questionnaire. The data received includes 100 questionnaires, 35 interviews with former teacher-soldiers, and 35 interviews with former students.

Each category of data presented its own methodological questions: archival materials required attention to the political and ideological concerns of OEI initiators and leaders at that time (or are incomplete), and it is possible to assess the style of publicity/fundraising used in the documentary film that was made for this purpose. Contemporary personal interviews lack historical precision due to the nature of human memory. However, the lack of factual accuracy can be compensated for by importance of a point of view; past events described from the present perspective emphasize what most impacted, and continue to impact, the narrator. The way in which narrators tie events together and organize them into a coherent story gives it meaning. Furthermore, the way interviewees position themselves vis-à-vis others in the story, e.g., the choice of the active or passive voice enables a nuanced assessment

not only of the narrated events themselves, but also of their impact on the participants' present lives (De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg, 2006; Koven 2014; Tuavl-Masisch and Spector-Marzel, 2011). Such a qualitative analysis requires attention to the context in which the interview takes place, both in terms of the interaction between the researcher to the informants, but also in terms of the socio-political-cultural changes that have transpired in Israel since the 1960's -1970's to the time when the study was conducted (2005-2008).⁵

While it is not possible to evaluate the success of the OEI at its conclusion, it is possible to assess how the former participants now view its success. Accordingly, I will present the goals of the campaign and testimonies of its successes as noted at the time, and in parallel report them from a contemporary perspective based on what former teachers and students related to me.

The success of OEI is based on the perspectives of the participants, students and teachers alike. Expectations and achievements do not always correlate, particularly when considering the views of three different parties: the government agencies, the students, and the teachers. The next section will discuss aims and purposes of OEI in the double perspective of time, then and now.

Aims and Purposes: Knowledge and Social Change

The Hebrew name for the campaign, Biur Ha-Baarut, means eradication of ignorance. Official statements reveal the nature of the ignorance that should be eradicated. Mr. Yitzhak Navon, the head of the Culture Division in the Ministry of Education in 1963, declared that the purpose of the campaign was to eliminate illiteracy within two-three years. According to him, literacy has individual importance (to free the

5 For further discussion on these changes see Schely-Newman, 2009a, 2011.

illiterate from dependency upon others), national-security significance (to maintain Israel's qualitative supremacy relative to neighboring states); and social-national importance (by promoting the younger generation that is dependent upon its parents' level of education. He stated that promulgation of literacy should be a national priority, since "the overall development of a state depends on the level of education of the population and their civic responsibility."⁶

Literacy promotes civic engagement. To be an active citizen of a modern state requires literacy because, "limiting the activities of the citizen due to his ignorance, tendency to accept rumors rather than checking the fact, minimizes the contribution of the ignorant citizen to the society and to the state."⁷ Or, as stated by the Deputy Minister of Education in a 1969 symposium, marking the fifth anniversary of OEI, reported by Kodesh (1972):

In this campaign you are dealing with the spiritual healing of the people. The adult students are reborn, reborn as citizens of the State of Israel, as free citizens. There is no need to say to many words in order to explain the fact that learning Hebrew and understanding of basic concepts of Israeli citizenship are interrelated.

Literacy itself encompasses additional values that need to be instilled by the teacher-soldiers to impart by: "Initial social interactions of collegiality and friendship between ethnic groups," and even "interethnic marriages." (Kodesh 1972: 203). The head of the IDF Women's Corp Colonel Stella Levi, who participated in the symposium, adds yet another sociocultural mission to the female soldiers: "... we knew that bringing

6 The quote is from a undated pamphlet for female IDF recruits. Similar reasons appeared in newspaper interviews and in Kodesh (1972). Navon repeated this position in a personal interview.

7 Ministry of Education pamphlet distributed to soldiers, dated July 22, 1966. National Archives document 4832/11.

women in uniform to the new immigrants would lead to two results: ingathering of the exiles...and dissipating the fear of uniforms for girls." She continues to explain: "You are situated in communities where girls do not always serve in the military and therefore, the presence of female teacher-soldiers will demonstrate that enlisting in the military is not something negative." For Col. Levi the purpose of OEI was more than reading literacy, she told her teacher-soldiers, "you were sent not just to teach, but also to introduce a new life without changing too much of their existing customs and ways." (Kodesh 1972: 204-6).

The amalgamation of sociocultural values and literacy skills is more pronounced in another gathering of female teacher-soldiers and educational personnel that took place in Kodesh's home in July 1970 (Kodesh 1972:222-61). Consider his introductory statement and the questions he addressed to the female teacher-soldiers.

After all, the problem is not only how many illiterate persons are in Israel. The question is how will yesterday's illiterate live with yesterday's literate? ... the problem is how to eradicate, actually remove, the line that distinguishes between those raised in an educational environment since childhood and those who tasted knowledge only at an older age... Have you easily adjusted to different hygienic and aesthetic norms you were not familiar with? ...Do you also deal with this part of ignorance?

The answers given by the young women indicate their confusion:

- "They taught me how to teach reading and writing ... but they did not teach me how to speak to them, how to approach them."

On dealing with physical conditions they were not accustomed to:

- "When we arrived to the house it was surrounded by weeds and thorns. We had a visitor the first night, a large mouse."

The physical conditions the young women encountered are mentioned in other texts of the time. In a letter from December 1965

Dina⁸ shares with her parents her initial impressions about the moshav she was assigned to:

The poverty is appalling. One large room, a dirty concrete floor, and the entire family sits around a kerosene burner, huddled and shivering in the cold. This is the situation for most families. And if there is a house with a picture and a kitschy jar decorated with gaudy gold, it is the most respected and rich family in the village.

To a friend Dina blames the government for the situation:

- "The houses there are horrible. It seems to me this is a village that the establishment (literally: "high windows") just skipped over. It is so neglected."

The mixture of inadequate physical conditions, unfamiliar cultural values and poor literacy skills can be found in other texts from the time. Note the following text from a column entitled "What's deeply inscribed in memory" published in the teacher-soldiers' unit bulletin (The Grey Lanyard, first issue, undated):

What really bothered me in the house of my students were the children that were always in the way, the blasting sound of the radio and the artificial flowers in jars. I decided to get rid of these disturbing elements ... after a while the mothers started to send the kids out, promising candy and a story by the teacher. The radio was just turned off, and wild flowers begin to appear in the jars, sometimes brought by a young daughter. My satisfaction was immense. The next step was cleaning the house and its surroundings, and improving personal hygiene.

8 All names have been changed, except names of public figures appearing in written sources. Dina graciously allowed me to use her personal letters for the purpose of the study.

The use of teaching literacy as means for modernization and personal improvement appears in other texts, as well as in the documentary film. The picture of a woman leafing through a book with maps in the light of an electric lamp is accompanied by an authoritative male voice-over: "At night, by the light of the lamp, the wide world sneaks into the small houses stuck to the mountain slope" (Yeshurun, 1966, minute 8:20).

Evaluation and Reevaluation of the Literacy Teaching Experience

Quotes from statements of officials in the previous section equating illiteracy with "unacceptable" behavior and life styles were not deemed acceptable by all the teacher-soldiers at the time. One young woman objected, "The radio and the noise are part of the culture in these homes, it is not necessarily uncivilized," while another supported behavioral change saying, "If you are not allowed to insult them, then you are not able to change people. If this is the case, why are we teaching them?" (Kodesh, 1972: 257-8).

With the passage of time and changes in relationships between differing ethnic groups in Israel, the equation of literacy skills with sociocultural norms is addressed with much more sensitivity. The shock of encountering different cultures is still evident in recollection, e.g., realizing that basic, familiar items are missing in the local store. Contemporary sensitivity to multiculturalism and acceptance of others may be detected in the ways the former teacher-soldiers speak of the past. Statements such as, "All and all, we were middleclass kids from functioning families who had had a typical education," are encountered in the descriptions of the encounters with unfamiliar cultures, sometimes as a sort of anthropological experience, comparable to treks contemporary Israeli youth take after their military service (Noy and Cohen, 2005). Sometimes former teacher- soldiers mitigated their ethnocentrism by

describing stereotypical attitude with a conditional phrase, such as, "They had some customs that you might call primitive" in the words of a former teacher (Shelly- Newman, 2009b).

Despite the cultural gaps reported by the teachers, the data indicate changes in attitudes resulting from growing familiarity with the students. This change is obvious in Dina's letters that document one year of living and teaching in a small moshav. In June 1966, half a year after arriving in the community she reports to her parents: "I noticed how my relations with the students have changed. Once they were students and all I was interested in was their learning progress, to get them interested in the books. Now, the relationship is much more multifaceted."

Juggling between Baby and Book

Familiarity with the students' way of life increased teachers' understanding of the challenges their female students faced. The daily routine of teaching needed to be adjusted and flexibility was required.

The tension between women students' domestic chores and their studies led to other problems. The former teachers speak of unending attempts to convince women to set aside time for studying:

- "I felt that I was in the way... I always told her that these chores won't go away, they can wait. Let's sit for ten-fifteen minutes. I shortened class time so we could do it."

Another teacher recalls:

- "Most of the time the women were busy. She would be in the middle of cleaning and I had to argue, 'don't wash the floor now, don't wash it.'"

Dina's letters reflect the frustration:

- "It is so humiliating and degrading to beg the woman to study while she turns her back and deals with laundry or with the chickens in the coop."

Even forty years later Dina remembers:

- "It always involved begging, always. It was, do me a favor and leave the pots for a while. Do me a favor, nothing will happen if you don't change his diaper right now, do me a favor, and stop serving us refreshments."

A different type of tension arose from the objection of husbands, who did not always accept the intrusion of the soldiers in their homes and changes in daily routine. Miri, one of the few teachers of non-European origin (Mizrachi)⁹ elucidated this point by describing what the men might say about the literacy campaign:

Look, the moment a women learns, you (the male) already feel that she may threaten you later on...maybe I want to maintain the hierarchy in which I am master of the house, and there is a division of labor, and the role of my wife is to prepare what I need and serve me, and that she be available at night. But then suddenly, if another woman tries to tell her things and open her eyes, who knows where this will lead? So I am concerned, and it's reasonable that I should be, because I understand [the potential threat to me].

Husbands' concerns appears in one of Dina's letters (April 1966):

It is a respite for Chaya, as well. There is one hour a day in which her husband has no say (and her husband is a terrible person!), which is when she and the children huddle around a book and the large flash cards they hide from the angry father. Angry because in his home there is a strange female soldier who doesn't pay attention to what he says (mostly curses and profanities!) but only wants his wife to have a better life!

Tension also arose from the authority of the teachers, who were soldiers in uniform, as one interviewee reflected:

⁹ Most solidier teachers were of European descent or Israeli born, while the majority of students were Mizrahi.

- "What was that invasion into the private homes of women? What was that? I mean, we really disturbed them many times. Really interrupted their cooking, cleaning, their daily routine."

Interviews with former students reflect a different picture. None of the women said they did not want to learn (as some teachers intimated), but blamed other factors for not being able to study. Perhaps living in a literate environment for many years has altered their attitude towards the importance of knowledge for women:

- "When I need to wait for a granddaughter or a daughter-in-law to read a letter I received, this letter is lying on my heart, not on the table," said Rachel, an elderly active and eloquent woman who did not participate in the campaign.

Time and Space: Negotiating the Learning Framework

The constant negotiations about the spatiotemporal learning frame is expressed differently in the recollections of teachers and students. The comments of teachers indicate that they saw the female students' focus on domestic chores as obstructions to learning, as excuses. The students, on the other hand, feel they did all they could to clear their heavy schedule in the home and the farm responsibilities to enable learning:

- "We tried, each one has six seven children and she is pregnant and so on, and there are no good conditions, and despite it all we found time."
- "I am real quick. I do everything fast. With a child on my lap, when I want to study, I do."

Others mentioned ways of "stealing time," despite everything, and were helped by older children who cared for the younger ones.

The different perspectives of students and teachers are linked to their social roles. Teachers had a specific task - to teach – and so they remember the difficulties of fulfilling it. The students were first and foremost wives

and mothers, for them learning was an additional task to be fitted into their daily round. They emphasized the success of combining the two, rather than actual achievements. An additional difference in perspective stems from the location where classes took place. The teacher was not only single and younger than the student, but she was also a guest in the latter's home, and needed to engage in an interaction informed by unfamiliar cultural rules. For example, refreshments and small talk are not a waste of time, but [in the eyes of the students], they are an acknowledgement of status and social expectations.

Thus, inadvertently, the class turns the kitchen or the dining room into a site of struggle between teacher and student: can small talk over a cup of tea and cookies be considered a "lesson?" At what point in time does the woman stop being a host and become a student -- an altogether different role and interaction? Negotiation over the spatiotemporal frame of the lesson can also be interpreted as a struggle over symbolic power: conducting a social dialogue with the teachers positioned the students as equals. Furthermore, classes gave students a respite from daily chores (e.g., Dina's letter quoted above), regardless of the specific educational achievements. Developing social relations between the teacher-soldier and her students were advantageous to both. The teachers emphasized they benefitted by learning about "the other Israel." They also believed that the students benefitted as well, not just because they (may have) learned to read and write. Note the ongoing distinction between "us" and "them", as Leah put it:

We learned from them too, not just they from us. I saw a mission in teaching; that they feel we are interested in knowing them, not just making them like us [...] I think we did a very important thing, we made contact with them. We as representatives of veteran Israel, second generation in the country.

Or as Ruthi said:

- "I think that at least I, personally, was able to remove some of their fears of Israeli society."

Dina, the letter writer, had a less romantic view as to the contribution of the teacher-soldiers. To my question, "Do you think you were successful?" she responded:

In my opinion, yes. In this respect, yes. Although I am not sure who benefitted more. Because the teacher-soldiers who arrived for an hour a week, with all due respect, was not the entity responsible that took care of these people. Their absorption was the responsibility of the Jewish Agency. So we were, you know, like a band-aid, maybe just the Mickey Mouse on the band-aid. For Mickey Mouse this was very significant, but I am not sure it was the same for them. All we did was dress some wounds.

The soldiers who volunteered to teach in moshavim saw it as a significant role, particularly in comparison to other positions available to women in the IDF at the time. The young women who went to the moshavim full of goodwill and good intentions to improve Israeli society found themselves between a rock and a hard place. The daily routine was characterized by lack of organization, insufficient training, and inadequate awareness of cultural differences. However, perhaps these characteristics enabled a process of unmediated mutual learning and sincere familiarity between teachers and students who became partners and friends, at least for the duration of the former's military service. On the one hand, the government mobilized its resources (via the IDF!) to educate the adults; but on the other hand the young female teacher-soldiers found themselves in an unfamiliar and strange world, in intimate contact with cultures with different social rules and without sufficient preparation and training. As one of the former teachers who became a professional adult educator said, "we built the boat while sailing it".

The teacher-soldiers' enthusiasm for playing a significant role in the nation-building of the nascent Israeli society did not always compensate for their ineffectiveness. Despite their knowledge, education, and uniforms, after all they were only guests in their students' homes. The results were not just how many words the women students were now able to copy and read. As Judith noted:

- "On the other hand, there was some value, that possibly shifted women's status a little bit.

This small change, small as it was, did empower the women, because it enabled them to move the boundaries between the private to the public sphere. Even a basic literacy fosters independent activity in the public sphere, e.g., being able to identify the correct bus destination sign, to complete forms, and even to read the mail.

Conclusion

Returning to the poster with the photograph of the female soldier holding the baby, and the woman struggling with pencil and paper, or the scene of a woman smiling in embarrassment in an attempt to hold a pencil correctly in the documentary film (minute 4.20), we may ask what is the soldier, a representative of the establishment, doing? Is she removing the traditional burden from the woman's hands to be replaced by a tool of modernity? Or perhaps she is helping the student, by temporarily freeing her hands so that she will be able to hold the pencil? Private photographs by former students and teachers reject the paternalistic interpretation. A photograph of a teacher visiting her student in the hospital, or another that includes the teacher, holding the youngest child, during a family celebration, indicates a willingness to share, participate and help, not a mise-en-scene of an official photographer.

Focusing on a variety of data and on the stories of individual women facilitates a nuanced analysis of the literacy campaign and leads

to insights that do not conform with binary structures of hegemonic or antihegemonic narrative, of ethnic and gender cooptation or subversion. Instead of one story of success or failure, we , discover three different narratives:

- The establishment sought to provide students with a modern survival kit to replace traditional knowledge, i.e., the pencil replaces the washboard.
- For the former teachers the term "ignorance" was, and is, unacceptable. They did not see the students as ignorant, rather lacking some skills and specific knowledge. Many teachers described what they had learned as, "eradicating our own ignorance."
- As for the students, they never saw a contradiction between their traditional roles and acquiring knowledge. Instead of exchanging the washboard for the pencil, they attempted (with different degrees of success) to add the pencil to their own toolkit.

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