



Communal Education vs. The True Self Among Graduates of the Kibbutz Educational System

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the dialectic between the principles and application of communal education of the kibbutz movement and that of Winnicott's insights of the true self. The true self is characterized by its attention towards inner mental life and its demands to fulfill its needs. The communal kibbutz education prioritized the collective needs as supreme. Many communal values were pursued in the approach and education of young members of the kibbutz in order that they prioritize the needs of the group over that of the individual. This educational approach taught young members, to attend much less to their inner emotional needs and adapt them to the needs of the community. In this article, we attempt to address, elaborate on, understand these issues and their underlying motivations needs.

Key words: Communal, Children House, Community, Educational Approach.

COMMUNAL EDUCATION

Communal education was the system under which children belonging to the kibbutz movement in Israel, with its multiple streams, were schooled. The system was in force during the 1920s and 1980s. Spanning the toddler to teen years, it was regarded as a natural outcome of the egalitarian principles that were the guiding force in the kibbutz.

The economic welfare of kibbutz members was entirely in the hands of the kibbutz community, relieving the parents of this duty. The children's lives centred around three institutions: the children's house, the parents' homes, and the kibbutz community. Boys and girls lived in the children's house, spent nights there together, and visited their parents' homes for about two to three hours every afternoon.

The central concept in communal education was the establishment of a system that was non-selective (Golan, 1961 ; Dror, 2002). Without exception, all kibbutz children enjoyed the privilege of a 12-year course of study, with a curriculum that was slightly different from that put together by the Ministry of Education. No grades were assigned, nor were the children expected to sit for exams, including the state matriculation exams.

The intention of the communal system's founding fathers was to "create a new person" who would be a member of an "exemplary society".

CHILDREN'S HOUSE

The children's house was the abode for a specific group of children, such that all the children in one house were more or less of the same age. The group was assigned a permanent matron to see to their needs. The house included a dining room, a classroom, bedrooms and a shower room. The bedrooms held three to four children, boys and girls together (Lamdan, 2004; Elboim-Dror, 2006).

Kibbutz Society and Educators' Roles

The collaborative spirit that encompassed all facets of kibbutz life was part and parcel of the educational system as well. The kibbutz was concerned with the needs of all the children to an equal extent, providing health care according to special requirements as well as psychological therapy to those in need. The teachers and other staff were handpicked by the kibbutz members on the basis of their educational qualifications and personal attributes (Golan, 1961; Kaneti-Baruch, 1961).

The Family and Contact with Parents

The role of the traditional family as provider was denied the kibbutz family. Economic concerns were placed squarely on the shoulders of the kibbutz community. The founding fathers of the communal education system believed that the child's dependence on his family should not be influenced by economic and social factors, which in their opinion could interfere with his development (Palti, 2016).

The family was thus not the only focal point in the life of the kibbutz child, nor was it the sole educational factor guiding him. Partnering with the family were the educators and the kibbutz as a whole, with both educators and caregivers taking responsibility for the child's physical welfare, health, education, organization and cleanliness. Satisfaction of emotional needs, however, remained as far as possible, with the family (Talmon-Gerber, 1957; Sarell, 1961 ; Gerson & Schnabel, 1973).

The father's role in the context of the kibbutz family was also viewed differently. Freed of the status of provider, he was expected to devote much of his time and energy to his children with a view to developing a close relationship with them.

The architects behind the communal education system believed that with most of the responsibility for the children's education being transferred to the educators and caregivers, with the myriad demands, restrictions and prohibitions involved, relations between parents and children would be much more harmonious and would thus have a crucial impact on the children's personalities (Golan, 1961; Lifshitz, 1972).

Communal Education and Community Social Life

Communal education advocates attached great importance to public opinion in kibbutz society. From the earliest times they would provide feedback to the children and their parents on how they were being perceived by the kibbutz community members. Artistic talent – in writing, drawing, music – was cultivated and encouraged. However, the decision as to who would study what, which musical instrument would be assigned to which child, and which field of art would be suited or unsuited to which boy or girl, was made by the educators themselves rather than the children according to their own preferences (Author, 2021). It did transpire at times,

however, that the privilege of enrichment in one form or other was bestowed on a child according to his or her popularity in the kibbutz educational circles.

The End of the Communal Education Era

From the mid-1950s, and more so from the 1970s, multiple changes began to be felt in the kibbutz that affected communal education and its central position of influence in kibbutz society. On reaching maturity, kibbutz members did not want their children to be educated according to the system under which they had been raised.

Various processes were afoot which caused the place of collectivism to be usurped by individualism. In 1977, Baram was the last kibbutz to do away with communal education, thus sounding the death knell of the system throughout the kibbutz movement.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

In his book *The Basic Fault*, Balint (1968) talks at length about the central place occupied by the external environment in all matters relating to the healthy or pathological development of the human infant. According to him, practically no sense of persecution is aroused in the infant in the initial stages of development, assuming that he grows up in a painstakingly created stable and consistent maternal environment. To the best of our knowledge, an infant bred in good maternal hands is practically free of aggression and anxieties deriving from the mother. He is entirely immersed in "first object love"; this is clearly on condition that the mother is able to meet his needs sensitively, appropriately and harmoniously. Balint refers to three different mental zones in which humans exist according to the circumstances of their development. This article refers to one, the basic fault zone, to the exclusion of the other two – the Oedipal zone and the creative zone.

Balint treats the basic fault zone as an individual's mental state that is injured and bleeding. To his understanding the entire area is tinged with a profound yearning for missing initial responses. The fault is the result of a dissonance between the infant's needs and the mother's ability to satisfy them. Thus in the infant's mind a void is formed with respect to the first object love, an emotion that should be full and complete.

A person who withdraws to this zone is in need of a perfect harmonious relationship with others, one that cannot materialize. Missing in this zone too is an ability for verbal communication. Accordingly, such a person will seek perfect mutual understanding without the need for words – a product of his recurring disappointment with every real relationship he has known.

In accordance with the principles of early communal education, babies were consigned to the infants house immediately after birth. Mothers visited the house to nurse or feed and change the babies at appointed hours, following which they left the babies in the charge of a caregiver. A special duty security guard posted in the house at nights alerted the mother when it was time to nurse or feed the baby. However, not all nocturnal feeding was performed by the mother; at times the security guard substituted for the mother or offered the baby a bottle of porridge as a supplement to the meal provided by the mother.

The question is whether the baby's needs – being held in the mother's arms, being the object of her complete devotion, and experiencing permanence and mirroring – were met in this way. The mother came and went; many different caregiver hands fed the baby, changed him, put him to sleep and generally handled him in the infants house. One permanent and constant figure, that of the mother who had learned the special needs of the infant and gave him her innermost attention, was missing.

Were communal education children forced to adapt themselves to the different hands of people chosen by the system's founders? Were the youngsters made to acclimatize themselves and adjust to whoever happened to be in the infants house already from an early age, a habit that later carried over into adulthood?

Winnicott (1971) coined the expressions "true self" and "false self", juxtaposing two opposing streams in development of the self. The first, the true self, is based on the ability of the sufficiently good mother, by virtue of her primary maternal investment, to respond to spontaneous gestures on the part of the infant and child, react with empathy, and impart significance to his experiences with the help of facial expressions, and subsequently with words. In this stream the mother's response to the infant's special needs is virtually absolute, giving of herself almost totally to fulfilling this end. The second stream, the false self, is based on the difficulty the mother finds in adjusting herself to the child's needs in a sufficiently good manner, and the inability of both mother and family to meet the child in his present emotional place. In this stream, the expectation from him to obey, to be a "good child" according to accepted social norms, impel him – if he wishes to survive – to respond with submissive adaptation, and to develop and play out the false self (Berman, 2009).

Winnicott (1995, 2004, 2009) provides a sound description of the importance of maternal adaptation to her infant during his initial stages. He hones our understanding of the initial maternal investment and the necessity of resisting the tendency to present the demands of reality before their rightful time. Communal education's requirements of infants and toddlers to accustom themselves to caregivers operating in rotation, to the fact that the caregivers cannot be available to deal with the needs of each child as they arise, and to the presence of large numbers of people handling them in general, raise doubts about the ability of the system to provide the children with the special attention they deserve.

Ogden (2003) too refers to the role of the mother in providing for her infant an environment in which she at first defers his separation from the safe haven of the womb, and then carries out the act gradually. He maintains that the primary mother-infant dyad creates in the infant an illusion that the inner and outer reality are one and the same, an essential experience in the start of his life.

Testine (2008) emphasizes the fact that in addition to physical birth, there is also psychological birth. In the absence of a maternal environment that is suited to him, the infant will encounter a mental difficulty in being born and will throughout his lifetime experience difficulties with respect to separation and abandonment. Kohut (2002) emphasizes the importance of having an external environment that is compatible with the new-born, describing the true self as a figure experienced by the infant as an extension of himself. Development of the true self is

therefore possible only if the infant's primary environment nourishes his inner world, taking into consideration his subjective, special needs.

Miller (2008) claims that the sensitive, alert child who soon internalizes what his parents request of him, is responsive to them and adjusts himself to their demands at the expense of his own needs, sensing unconsciously that they do not love him for who he is but for the fact that he is meeting their expectations. The outcome is mute suffering on the part of the child and a shaky self-confidence. He is increasingly apt to lose his way in finding his true self. Miller also claims that based on her clinical experience, the early needs of the child for respect, resonance, response, understanding, devotion and reflection will be suppressed. One result of this is the inability of the adult person to consciously experience certain emotions of his own, such as envy, anger, loneliness, helplessness and anxiety. This stands out when adult patients describe childhood experiences that were free of pain and fear.

Further to the understanding reached by the above theoreticians, it is fairly clear that graduates of the communal education system were deprived of consistent handling by one specific figure who was available solely for them. A single caregiver was responsible for a number of children, a fact that caused her responses to be extremely patchy. Each child woke up at a different time, demanding feeding or changing. The caregiver was thus torn between the needs of the different babies as she clearly could not respond to all the children's needs at once.

Infants who grew up in the framework of the communal education system were required to adjust to the reality of a caregiver who worked in rotation with others, without being sufficiently available in the very early stage of their lives when their biological mother was at work and absent for most of the day.

Deprivation in Responses to Individual Emotional Needs Among Communal Education Children

Presented below are examples of areas in which children reared in the communal education system were severely deprived in terms of responses to individual needs.

The special needs of children were neither heard nor responded to, and any attempt on the part of the children or their parents to challenge the kibbutz hegemony were repaid with harsh sanctions imposed by the educators and the kibbutz community as a whole.

Nights in the children's houses (Author, 2021)

All boys and girls belonging to the communal education system slept nights in the children's houses. Generally three to four children slept in one room (girls and boys together), with no adult at their side. A security guard, who was a kibbutz member, would make the rounds of the children's houses to make sure that all the children were asleep. Thus, he would visit each house one to three times during the night.

Children would wake up in the middle of the night, trembling with fear, and try to awaken the others in the room; alternately, they would escape to their parents' home. Such a scenario was by no means rare. Parents would return the escapees to the children's house after refusing to let them spend the rest of the night with them.

It goes without saying that these children, as well as their parents, suffered the stigma of being "problematic" members of the kibbutz. Thus, they not only experienced deep fears and anxieties owing to the absence of their parents at night, but also denunciation by the educators and the kibbutz community as a whole for failing to adjust. The kibbutz educational system refused to yield to the special needs and difficulties of these children, who were regarded as spoilt.

Pressure to conform to kibbutz ideology (Author, 2021)

a. Uniform dress code

One of the fundamental principles of communal education was equality, based on which all children received the same education. All children had 12 full years of schooling, with hardly any concessions made for proclivities or talents that would come to the fore in individual children.

Mechanical equality of this type also typified the attitude to dress, the idea being to provide exactly the same kind of clothing to all. If the communal store supplied coats of a certain colour to the girls, it had to be the same coat for all. A girl who asked the clothing store manager to give her the cash equivalent of a coat in order to buy herself a coat of her own choice was greeted by a definitive refusal: "Under no circumstances! You're no different from the others, just make do like everyone else does! You're not special, you're the same as everyone else!"

Conformity was the operative word even when it came to the colour of the clothes. Red was out; it was a colour that called for attention and broke ranks. The claim was that a person who wore red wanted to stand out. All were equal so there was no justification for choosing that colour.

Conformity to a dress code was not quite as strict throughout the kibbutz movement. In several, however, as in those belonging to the Shomer Hatza'ir stream, it was the rule of law.

b. Attitude to religion and Jewish tradition

The pressure to conform in the kibbutz movement also applied to other values, including political leanings, which were generally leftist. Most kibbutz members identified more or less with the same values, namely, settling of the land by secular, socialist Israelis. Any disclosure of a traditional or religious bent in any form was condemned and prohibited, even though there were several among the kibbutz founders who had come from religious homes and religious tradition was dear to them. No religious ceremonies were allowed, while traditional Jewish festivals were modified to include secular, socialist content. Textbooks and school curricula were also altered in the same vein.

One cannot say today what that generation felt about kibbutz policy on religion since most of them are no longer alive. Clearly, however, the pressure to conform was so great that they might not have dared to express their real feelings even to themselves.

Suppression of personal talents and aptitudes (Author, 2021)

With respect to this particular area, the attitude was mixed, or more accurately, ambivalent. Certain gifts that were detected in a child, such as an ear for music, were strenuously encouraged. Others that were deemed decadent or bourgeois were summarily quashed. Every age group was given the opportunity to learn one musical instrument – the flute or mandolin –

and children who were found to be musically inclined were sent for lessons in an instrument suited to their talents, as determined by the music teacher.

Sports of all types were supported to the fullest extent. In contrast, girls who wished to learn ballet were rejected outright; the dance form was not felt to be in keeping with the pioneering socialist spirit of the kibbutz and had no place in the life of the "new person" the kibbutz was aspiring to create.

The requirement to conform and the deprivation with respect to special needs and talents trickled down to the level of the peer groups on the kibbutz. A girl or boy who dared to be "different" was cruelly denounced and taunted by others in the group.

The examples cited above point to massive social pressure on the individual to conform within the framework of his peer group. It was impossible to behave, dress or think differently from others in the kibbutz environment. Those who could not align themselves with the principles of communal education were forced to leave the kibbutz.

The requirement to conform was inculcated from infancy and throughout the development stages of children in the communal education system. Graduates of the system, some of whom no longer live on the kibbutz, attest to the fact that even today they feel the need to conform in almost every social situation to which they are exposed at the expense of their own subjective needs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The true self can only develop in a space where the subjective life is able to thrive and express itself spontaneously and authentically. It is a place in which every individual is free to experience emotions – pain, anger, desire – that are real and sincere. It is where a person can allow his full gamut of experiences to exist. The true self is a space that is open to discovery and inner knowledge, as opposed to outer knowledge, a place for understanding body and soul, a place for growth.

Every individual has a simple wish – to feel alive and real, and to experience life in an atmosphere of openness and freedom.

A good life is, in our opinion, one that allows a person to dare express his true self, but also to don masks from time to time in accordance with changing circumstances. For this to occur we need a large measure of freedom to think, feel and experience.

In the course of our professional occupation we have seen graduates of communal education seek help for a condition in which they suffer deep feelings of stagnation and missed opportunities. Though they will at times declare that all is well, they feel their lives have been mislaid somewhere along the way. One possible explanation for this distress is that they were not permitted in their early years to be themselves to the fullest extent. They were not allowed to be anxious, shy, fearful, special – in other words, different – or self-focused in the most subjective and personally appropriate way.

Those who were responsible for bringing up these individuals as children were overworked, unavailable, or subjected to environmental stresses to conform to norms that were not necessarily compatible with the children's needs. The children were then compelled to adjust to the adults instead of the adults meeting the children halfway and responding to their needs. An environment that does not provide validation for the subjective world of its children is one that forces the children to adapt to the environment, or else remain unloved and unaccepted. Such children are then driven to develop a false self in order to be accepted and belong. As adults, many of them will tailor themselves to fit their environs, fearing to express their subjective personalities and paying a heavy price for denying their own authenticity.

This article is written by two graduates of the communal education system, albeit of different generations. It may be said in this context that an unfamiliarity, but also an unduly close involvement, with the research subject can constitute an obstacle to conducting a social study that is reliable. It is therefore recommended to turn the attention to researchers who are strangers to kibbutz communal education as well as kibbutz members who are planning to carry out research on the system in the future. It will thus be possible to benefit from the relative advantages of each while avoiding as far as possible their pitfalls. It is also recommended that an empirical study of communal education graduates be carried out that will confirm or refute the conclusions derived herein.

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