

## Golden Child – Education for a Changing World by Jessica Wapner

When asked what makes the Golden Education Template (GET) school in Israel unique, former principal Edith Kimchi tells a simple story. The parents of a fifth grader had some administrative business to attend to in the city that required the presence of their son. They had to go in the morning, and their son would have to be late for school. But he absolutely refused to go. There was no way he was going to miss even just an hour of school. Parent after parent reports this modern miracle: after years of listening to complaints, their own reasoning grown thin, their children finally look forward to going to school.

The anecdote is simple, but hints at something extraordinary. “One of the purposes of school is that children should love learning,” says Kimchi. As she explains, only if they love learning will children become the responsible adults needed for the future. They will inherit our world’s enormous quantity of information, which continues to expand at a breakneck pace. “The question is,” says Kimchi, “are the children prepared to make intelligent use of it, and for what purpose?”

An approach that balances academic learning with the development of values and essential qualities – the “golden path” of education – for pre-kindergarten through high school, the GET system stands out as offering an original response to the intense dissatisfaction surrounding so much of education these days. Now, after 12 years of pioneering in Israel, the GET is going international. A few months ago, Kimchi exchanged her role as principal for that of international director and began a world tour, meeting with educators in four countries who are now starting GET schools – including one in Westchester County, New York.

The GET’s “lump learning” approach to teaching is among its most striking aspects. Rather than switching from subject to subject every 45 minutes or so, children learn in lumps of up to four weeks. But it’s not just a lump of time. Learning about the Renaissance, students listen to music of the period, study its flourishing arts and sciences, interview experts, read books written during and about that time, and engage in activities that enable them to not just gain knowledge about the Renaissance, but soak up the experience of what it was like to be alive then, and discover how that era relates to their own lives. The

variety enables each student to fall in love with the subject, since some will be more drawn to books, others to art or music. “Children should fall in love with a subject, with the world, with the mystery of the world, with things to discover,” says Kimchi, “and with their own lives.”

Kindergarten lumps include patterns and puzzles, numbers, and a period of time dedicated to learning about the place where they live – meeting store owners, getting tours of local cafés and other familiar places. “This has a huge impact on the children,” says Barbara Sarbin, who teaches at the GET school here (and whose column appears in these pages). “They are so excited about what they have learned, because this is life, and children are naturally curious about the world around them.”

The teachers love teaching in lumps because the material also becomes more interesting for them, as they forage for the relevance of a period in history, a law of physics, an aspect of language, all in relation to real life. “A teacher in the GET is a scholar, a researcher, a discoverer,” says Kimchi. This approach makes the job far less stressful. With the teachers more relaxed, the children more open, and everyone more inspired about the subject matter at hand, behavioral problems are minimized. With less time spent on discipline or general frustration, the net hours of learning are greater, enabling the students to attain a very high academic level.

The GET philosophy considers an education in values to be just as important as academic learning. Therefore, the curriculum also encompasses what are called “vitamins,” a name given to the range of universal human qualities that are essential to living, such as respect, adaptability, independent thinking, versatility, firmness, and the ability to overcome problems. As Kimchi explains, these qualities are like physical vitamins, nutrients that we need to obtain through experience and education. A highly systematic program created in accordance with the many stages of development, not unlike Jean Piaget’s approach, is offered for each age group at the GET.

“I’ll give you an example,” says Kimchi, who possesses an extraordinary ability to make concepts tangible and practical. As she

explains, the essence quality of “nation” is a necessary vitamin for children. “‘Nation’ is really the first encounter with community, with collectiveness, with being aware that it’s not only me in the world,” she says. This awareness is a part of emotional development, and has precise timings. To acquire this vitamin, children learn about their country and heritage, and the high intentions of their nation. The students can continue to develop a relationship with their country, and of course they may later become critical of some aspects. But Kimchi cautions that if this vitamin is not introduced at the right time, the basic, very nourishing sense of community will be missing. “We see the result of this in today’s society,” she says, “in an attitude that is hyper-individualistic, with a rejection of any authority in an extreme manner.” Just as a body suffers from a lack of essential vitamins, so can a person’s character suffer from a lack of essential qualities.

Another vitamin seeks to prevent the low self-view so pervasive in our society. “This of course is due to a lack of the vitamin of identity,” says Kimchi. The GET schools start working on this vitamin as early as six years old, to help ensure its abundance, “to guarantee that a person will love their capabilities, their ability to improve and learn and try, and will not feel victimized by the derision of others,” says Kimchi.

The design of the GET classroom is integral to the learning process. The use of wood, as opposed to metal or linoleum, the gentle, non-fluorescent lighting, and the colors selected specifically to induce warmth, curiosity, and settlement create a pleasing environment that is conducive to learning. Small touches, like the sheer window shades to prevent sharp sunlight from hurting the eyes, are plentiful. “Repeat sentences” – wisdoms come to by the efforts of the class – are placed around the room for a student to pause with whenever the need arises. Facilities for working in pairs and groups are favored over solo desks. The furniture is easily moveable, and cushions are available for children to use if they prefer. “It’s not very natural to spend five or six hours a day sitting,” says Kimchi, a statement of the obvious taken to heart by the GET educators. “Children shouldn’t be misled into thinking that learning requires



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT **INSIDE** an architecturally specific classroom at the GET school in Israel designed with soft walls, wooden furniture, and many other components to regulate the atmosphere. Shape, materials and lighting all work toward assisting the processes of



learning, absorption, attention span, and making the classroom a pleasant and comfortable place to be.

**EIGHTH** graders taking care of public



land as part of learning respect for the environment.

**SECOND** graders pick olives as part of learning about natural processes and what is needed in order to reach a result (preparing olives for eating).

**FUNDAMENTAL** to the GET educa-



tion system is working together, often in pairs. Students learn to learn from each other, and to ask for help from one another. The natural urge that children have to help one another is fostered, and essential team-work skills and thinking are developed.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT **EIGHTH** graders in a science lab in the school's kitchen. Here, they are extracting aromatic oils from plants as part of their learning respect for the environment.



**PART** of the GET curriculum involves visits from professionals and experts



in their field of endeavor. Here the GET school in Croton-on-Hudson, NY, cooks with a visiting professional chef.

**CHILDREN** wear letters of the alphabet as part of early language acquisition training. The children become familiar with the letters of the alphabet by playing them.



**A CHILD** from the Garden Road school and his mother tend to the garden on a weekend workday.



this kind of effort." The classroom is cleaned by the students who use it each day, and the overall atmosphere is vibrantly alive with the love of learning.

**T**he Israeli GET school is located in Ma'ale Tzvia, an elegantly landscaped communal village in northern Israel that was once an army training ground. As the village's first settlers started families, they realized they were not happy with any of the limited options available for their children's education. So, in typical pioneer style, they started their own, working with consultants to design a curriculum encompassing academics and human values in the way they saw to be so sorely needed. Families from the region began sending their children, and after 12 years, the school has 250 students, ages 4 through 15, and a staff of 25 teachers and administrators.

Kimchi, who lives in Ma'ale Tzvia with her husband and two children, was part of the original team of educators there, and served as principal for six years, until the inception of the schools abroad. Education seems to run in her blood: her mother, Leah Zaidenberg, managed several schools in Israel and Buenos Aires, Argentina, where Kimchi was raised. Zaidenberg became a top educator in Israel and was hired frequently to train teachers in Central America. Kimchi embodies the fiery nature of both lands, with an urgency that wastes no time on formality or fluff. Yet there is a gentleness about her that bestows a sense of safety, and you easily find yourself wishing you could have been her student.

The quality of the students attending the GET, in terms of both academics and character, has garnered national attention in Israel. The school receives applications from families around the country who are willing to relocate so that their children can enroll there. Also noteworthy is the fact that several Arab children from the area attend the GET school. "This is a great achievement," says Kimchi, "because we feel that true organic change can only start at the root level, by the people."

As word traveled about the GET school, educators from around the world began contacting the GET team in Israel. Over the past few years, GET schools have sprung up in several countries, including England, Holland, Canada, and the United States.

**I**n New York, the Garden Road school in Croton-on-Hudson now offers the GET curriculum for pre-K through first grade. After working with children for many years, Donna Mikkelsen, founder of the Garden Road, had a chance to visit the GET school in Israel. Forty-five minutes with the kindergarteners changed her life. "I couldn't even understand the language, but it didn't matter," she says. "It was so beautiful, the atmosphere was rich with encouragement and freedom, and the children were so full of confidence and a sense of themselves." Mikkelsen decided then and there to start a GET school in America.

That was in 1996. Driven by that vision, Mikkelsen relocated from Brooklyn to Westchester in order to work with educators in the area who also wanted a local GET school. The school's grand opening took place three years ago, with five children and in a room offered by the parents of one of the children attending. At its present location in the first floor of a two-story house since 2002 (Mikkelsen and her husband live upstairs), the Garden Road has 30 children enrolled for the 04/05 school year and a waiting list. The backyard has been landscaped into an ecologically minded play space, built by the teachers, the GET families, and the large network of friends the school has grown over the years. Five full- or part-time teachers and several other staff members offering specialized activities and administrative oversight have magnetized to the cause. In addition to the school, the educators involved with the GET offer several other programs, such as a youth group and a storytelling troupe, which they've united

under the umbrella of Something Good in the World, Inc., a not-for-profit organization.

Sarbin, who has been teaching for over 20 years at all kinds of schools in Westchester and New York City, began working at the GET in 2002. Already, she is able to see the positive effects of the curriculum. "The children are less afraid of making mistakes, less stressed, and less competitive," she says. The small class sizes allow for more personal attention from the teacher, thus enabling each student to proceed at their own pace. The different age groups spend time together during snack breaks and other activities, which is very beneficial for both older and younger children.

Because the teachers must educate themselves in the GET curriculum in order to teach it, the training is rigorous, and often challenging. "When I was 5 years old, I didn't know any of this," says Sarbin, referring to the curriculum for that age group, which includes geography and the vitamin of nation. The teachers end up re-educating themselves while they teach. "It's a journey of self-discovery, through which the teachers become more themselves, and therefore more able to lead the children into becoming more themselves," says Kimchi.

**A** couple of years ago, the GET educators in Israel looked at their teenage students and realized that they needed some exposure to competition, to be able to withstand that type of pressure and as preparation for when they left the school. The students entered a regional volleyball competition. They did very well, but didn't win first place, so everyone



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT **PERSONAL** shields created by seventh graders. This art exercise accompanies their journey of puberty in relation to their self identity.



**ONCE** a year, there is an art exhibition of work from all students. Every student has at least one work exhibited.

was surprised when they were given an award. The judges had decided on the spot to create a new award category for the unusual sportsman-ship the team from the GET had displayed. Never before had they seen a team cheering for the other side, encouraging their opponents to do well.

It's another simple but profound story (of which Kimchi has an endless supply), and it epitomizes the GET attitude toward competition and teamwork. "Competition is not a good method for education," says Kimchi. "When we compete with others, the idea is that we should come to similar results, and this is simply a misconception." As Kimchi explains, the overuse of competition in the educational process is causing a great deal of damage to children's self view, and to the natural genius inherent to each individual. "The real competition should be that a person wants to be better and improve in a skill or quality because they want to fulfill their life to the best of their abilities," says Kimchi. Conversely, the emphasis on teamwork is intended to prepare students for the future needs of our world. "We believe that teamwork will become a crucial component of society — of any success, really — in the very near future," says Kimchi.

Herein lies the heart of the GET — a steadfast dedication to finding the best system of education for the future. "Education is part of society," says Kimchi. "It's a tool with which society can fashion its tomorrows." Thus the question at the core of the GET system is: What are the needs of society now, and over the coming decades? The answer involves not limiting education to the needs of developing a professional life. Rather, as Kimchi explains, "it means taking an encompassing view of the many difficult situations we are facing in relation to ecology, politics, climate, violence, drugs, human values, art, and on and on."

Can these enormous problems really be solved through more effective schooling? Perhaps, if that school turns out young adults who have the combination of skills and character required. I quote extensively from Kimchi's vision of a GET high school graduate:

"The GET prepares people for real life. This means much more than knowing how to solve an exercise in mathematics, or the names of the ships of Christopher Columbus. It means preparing adults to be responsible, to be able to learn, and admit their mistakes, to want to continue, by being in the inner circle of their

own life, of their community, and even internationally. These are people who know how to cooperate with each other, and who understand that teamwork is part of our future, that it cannot exist without it. They know what they believe in, and why, not because they've been indoctrinated, but because they choose to. These young adults have great versatility and can apply themselves into life without fear — not without carefulness, but without the irrational fear that prevents us from trying. These are the doers of the world, who are able to move things. These are people that can feel other people's pain, and can solve problems without being stopped by each and every difficulty. They are people who can commit, in terms of relationships and in terms of mission."

Ultimately, the GET envisions schools around the world, each in the nature of its home country. Programs will be offered for every age, starting with a tutor working with infants using advanced methods of communication to stimulate their capabilities, and extending all the way through high school. Specially designed classrooms, called "generation pods" are being planned. This experimental ecology applies expert understandings of architecture and design in order to create the best environment for teachers and students. While a GET university is not yet being developed, there is certainly room for one in the vision of the future, "with new disciplines, of course, that belong to the future needs of society," says Kimchi.

For now, the schools are growing one step at a time. Small children are wearing letters of the alphabet as part of early language acquisition training. Teenagers are sweeping the classroom after school. Second-graders are out on the basketball court learning geometry by drawing shapes in chalk on the pavement, while the third-graders visit with the grandparents of one student as part of their coursework on their country's waves of immigration. A children's book artist is teaching six-year-olds how to draw and telling them about how books are made. Later, the teachers will go home exhausted, but relentlessly inspired. \*



THE NINTH and tenth graders draw images from ancient Greece as part of their lump learning of that time period.



EDITH KIMCHI

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## Events Schedule

### Music and the Natural Laws

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Saturday, October 16, 7:00-9:30pm / \$20

After having played the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland and toured in the UK, "Music and the Natural Laws" comes to New York. Combining scientific experiments with classical and new musical pieces, it offers a dynamic look at the basic natural principles that govern life.

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### Self-Healing through Color

Tuesdays in October, 8:00-10:30pm

Oct 5 The Three Cosmic Rays of Color in the Natural Worlds (Seen and Unseen)

Oct 12 The Five Color Vibrations of the Soul

Oct 19 Promoting Balance and Creativity through the Spectrum

Oct 26 The Colors of Illumination and Evolution, The Mysteries of Silver and Gold

\$15 per workshop

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Sunday, Oct 24 & Nov 28, 12:00-5:00pm

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### The Human Aura

Sunday, November 14, 1:30-5:30pm / \$40

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