TRYING TO BUILD SHARED EDUCATION IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY – JEWISH ARAB BILINGUAL SCHOOLS IN ISRAEL

Orit FREIBERG, Daniela COJOCARU

Trying to Build Shared Education in a Divided Society – Jewish Arab Bilingual Schools in Israel

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Abstract

This article describes an educational attempt to overcome an ongoing divide in Israel society. The Jewish - Arab or Israeli Palestinian divide in Israel is harsh and influences Israeli society in various realm such as social, political and economic. Israel's educational system reinforces this divide by separating Jewish and Arab schools. The Jewish Arab bilingual schools (JABS) in Israel attempt to change this segregation reality and create a shared and educational space for both Jews and Arabs. This article presents JABS principals, goals and model and a review of relevant recent research. It will suggest a new stream of study for the future

Keywords: divided society; Israel education system; Jewish Arab bilingual schools; integrated education; mixed neighborhoods.

Introduction

Ten years ago, my daughter was in her first grade on the Hagar Jewish Arab bilingual school in Beer Sheva. She came home and told me that a new girl had arrived at her class, and they played together during breaks. I asked her whether the girl was Jewish or Arab. My six years girl looked at me and asked me, "Why do you ask this question? What difference does it make?" At that moment I knew that the education and the environment where she was being raised was achieving its goal. I share this small anecdote to highlight the gap between children that are educated in shared Jewish Arab space, and those who are not. Like many contemporary societies, Israeli society is multicultural and multiethnic. Moreover, it is a divided society, a divide manifested in the Israeli education system

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(Samooha, 2009). The harshest divide is between Jews and Arabs and involves an ongoing violent conflict. This article will present the Jewish Arab bilingual schools in Israel that try to change this reality of segregation and fear.

Background

Former president of Israel, Reuven Rivlin's famous "four tribes" speech emphasized the dangers facing and price Israel has to pay due to its divisions. He argued that Israeli society is divided into four "tribes": ultra-Orthodox Jews, national religious Jews, secular Jews, and Arabs (Samooha, 2019). This constitutes a real danger to Israeli society because these tribes do not share common values nor identity and lack solidarity and cohesion. Societies can be categorized by their internal ethno-national division. Samooha (2004) defined a deep division as a case where the majority and the minority differ in culture, basic worldviews, institutions and goals. These divisions influence different aspects of society, such as economic, political and educational.

The self-identified Arab-Israeli population of Israel (Mandel, 2018) is estimated at 1.9 million, which represents approximately 21.0% of the total Israeli population, of which Jewish-Israelis represent 75% (Central Bureau of Statistics of Israel, 2019). The Arab population of Israel includes both people who lived in the region before 1948, as well as their descendants In 1948, the Israeli state was established, after an armed conflict between the Jews and the Arabs who occupied the region (Shpeizer & Freiberg, 2023).. During this conflict, approximately 700,000 Palestinians fled or were forced into exile, and hundreds of Palestinian communities were abandoned or destroyed (Morris, 2003). Therefore, the name of this conflict of 1848 is different: the Jews refer to the War of Independence, while the Palestinian citizens of Israel and the Arab world call it al-Nakba (the catastrophe). This dichotomy briefly expresses the tension and permanent conflict between the two ethno-cultural groups (Mori, 2009).

After the war only 180,000 Arabs remained in Israeli territory and got citizenship. They considered as hostile and placed under military government until 1966 (Ghanem, & Ozacky-Lazar, 2002). A fifth of them were internal refuges owing to their villages being demolished. They formed weak minority, mostly uneducated with large families and no organized leadership, they were forced to adapt to the ruling Jewish state. Moshe Lissak (2000) describes the changes in Jewish Arab relations. Until 1966 the Arabs were under a military government characterized by minimum contact between the two groups in all aspects but the political one was Jewish Political leaders wanted to gain the Arab vote. The years Between 1967-1992 are characterized by developments both towards Israel society and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (that Israel has occupied since the 1967 war). National awareness grew with an emphasis on Palestinian consciousness. Economically, some Arabs started to work in the Israeli economic

system (in low paid jobs) and at the same time the internal Arab economic system gradually flourished. Socially, politically and culturally segregation between Jews and Arabs continued. From 1992 to the present two opposite processes occur. One is a slow process of partial integration into Israel society as seen in the level of students in higher education, increased numbers of Arabs working in general society and a growing understanding of their political power in Israeli politics (in the current government an Arab party is part of the ruling coalition for the first time). On the other hand, Palestinazion processes have strengthened and Israeli Arabs identify themselves as Palestinian more than ever. Bar-Tal (2013) provided a sub-definition of the concept of conflict, *uncontrollable conflict*. Such conflict is ongoing, includes serious violence that has claimed thousands of lives on both sides. Many resources, economic as well as social, are invested in this conflict, which is always part of the public agenda. Both parties involved perceive this as fundamental to their existence and often as unresolvable.

It can be seen that relations between Arab and Jews in Israel have changed over the years and to a certain degree, the alienation between these two societies has lessened, however segregation continues in cities, neighborhoods, schools and culture. National tensions are even stronger owing to the Palestinization among Arabs side and Jewish tendency to right-wing ideology.

The Israeli education system reflects and, in some ways, reinforces this division. In 1949, the Compulsory Education Law was enacted, intending to ensure that all Israeli citizens would receive free primary education. The system was divided into ultra-Orthodox education was given autonomy (owing to their political parties' power) and the state education system, which was divided into three main streams: secular Jewish schools, religious Jewish schools and Arab schools, all of which are supervised and funded by the Ministry of Education. In addition to these three main streams, there are a number of unique schools, such as democratic schools or bilingual Jewish-Arab schools, which are, for the most part, also funded and supervised by the Ministry of Education but have permission to develop their own curricula and pedagogy. In 2021 of 2.412 million student (aged 3-18), 1.859 million (77%) study in the Jewish sector and 553,000 (23%) in the Arab sector (Ministry of Education, 2021). In the Jewish sector 51% study in state schools, 19% study in religious state schools, and 30% in ultra-Orthodox schools. 3% of all school in Israel are private or semi-private such as Anthroposophy schools or special Art schools. Approximately 2,300 students, comprising 0.1 % of all students, study in JABS.

According to Shwed *et al.* (2018), 67% of Jewish students in Israel attend schools without a single Arab student and 77% of Arab schools do not have a single Jewish student. Schools with mixed students are special education schools, JABS, Jewish schools in mixed neighborhoods with a low socio-economic status and average of 7.6 percent Arab students. The JABS in Israel mission and goal is to change this reality and create share and equal educational space.

Bilingual and share education

Traditionally bilingual education has been defined as the use of two or more languages in education (Baker 2011). For any program to be called bilingual, the medium of instruction and curricula must be in both languages (Andersson & Boyer, 1970). Bilingual education is spread all over the globe. Garcia *et al*. (2017) wrote in their book *Bilingual and Multilingual Education* "Bilingual education then takes on a social justice purpose, reinforcing the idea that language is used by people to communicate and participate in multiple contexts and societies" (p. 3). They continued and explained, "bilingual education has been always seen in interrelationship with social, political, and economic factors" (p. 3). They associated bilingual education with power relations in society and argued that a dominant language in society is also dominant in bilingual schools although their aim is to equalize the power of languages. Mor-Sommerfeld *et al*. (2007) described bilingualism as social and individual processes. From individuals' perspective bilingualism is the knowledge of more than one language, the ability to behave in certain circumstances with flexibility and understanding of another culture . "It reinforces emotions and creates opportunities, emotional and cognitive, for building a human entity that differs from a monolingual person an empowerment, contributing to or even changing society" (Mor-Sommerfeld *et al*. 2007, p. 15). From a social perspective bilingualism promotes tolerance, involvement and empathy in society. It is obvious that bilingualism is more than just knowing two languages, it is a social, individual and political matter.

In societies that have experienced long conflict such as Northern Ireland, South Africa and Israel, their education systems reflect the complexity of the situation and segregation characterizing society (Loader & Hughes, 2017). Some explanations provided for segregating educational systems are: residential segregation, language differences and a minority's attempt to protect identity and culture (Flint, 2007; Gallagher, 2004; Hromadžić, 2008; Weinstein *et al*., 2007). Some have argued that segregated schools can do both: maintain the uniqueness of each group and at the same time educate for social values and social cohesion. Others have claimed that segregated education increases social division, prejudice, and hostility (Berkeley, 2008; Cantle, 2001). Integrated education in a divided society aims to create an educational space for both groups and normalize desegregation. Northern Ireland's integrated schools and Israeli bilingual schools have been subjects of many studies focusing on students' attitudes toward the other group (Hayes *et al*., 2007; Hughes, 2014; Stringer., 2009). In Northern Ireland these studies showed that pupils from integrated schools have positive attitudes toward the other group, better understand their identity and culture and have more social relations than those who studied in segregated schools. In Israel, bilingual schools have shown reduced social distance and prejudice as well as development of a more complex cultural identity (Bekerman *et al*., 2011; Ben-Nun, 2013).

According to Allport's contact approach (1954), intergroup contact reduces negative attitudes, prejudice, fear, and hatred, while facilitating positive feelings, understanding and empathy. Allport defined four conditions necessary for intergroup contact to succeed: equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support from intuitional authorities. Over the years this hypothesis has been developed and researched. Zuma (2014) claimed that the effect of contact is particularly on prejudice and not intergroup relations. Some research has focused on the shift of attitudes regarding other group members and found a positive change (Hughes, 2014: Niens, 2009). Bilingual schools in Israel are based on the contact hypothesis, it is manifested in day-to day-life by creating an integrated educational space where children from both groups are interconnected in learning, celebrating holidays and national days, discussing religious and social issues.

Jewish Arab Bilingual Schools' in Israel

There are nine Jewish Arab bilingual schools in Israel, eight of which are elementary schools (1st to 6th or 8th grade) and only one school in Jerusalem includes a high school. The goals of schools are: to create an alternative educational model in which Jews and Arabs study together, to educate students in both languages – Hebrew and Arabic, to create an infrastructure of trust and hope. These goals are also associated with peace education and based on multicultural education and the contact hypothesis. Bilingual schools are usually described as integrated, multicultural and promoting peace education.

In 1984, the first Israeli bilingual school was established in Neve Shalom Wahat-al-Salam, a binational village, and between 1998 and today eight additional bilingual schools were established. Today, approximately 2,300 students study in these bilingual schools (this information was gathered from schools website). Seven of the nine JABS are part of the Hand in Hand association, located from the north to central Israel. The Hand in Hand school in Jerusalem was established in 1998 and is the only bilingual high school in Israel. In the south of Israel Jewish and Arab parents from the city of Beer Sheva established in 2006 Hagar, Jewish Arab Education for Equality association. The association established a kindergarten and in 2009, Degania elementary school.

The vision of JABS is to create an educational space based on bilingualism, multiculturism, equality, empathy, and social justice. A formal request submitted by the Hagar school to the Ministry of Education states that school creates a bilingual educational framework, anchored in the multicultural approach and the *culture of peace* approach in the broad and deep sense of the concept of peace which is not only anti-war but also includes equal rights, social and economic justice, gender equality and non-violence, communication, a common educational space that educates for social involvement in a variety of aspects (gender, economic, social and environmental) (Freiberg & Harzion, 2015). Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam school's visions sates that its educational mission is to foster a rational and

empathetic humanistic dialogue, in a common binational framework, to raise the younger generations a common life of equality, openness, brotherhood, peace and mutual respect (Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam school, n.d). Empathy, respect and equality are the fundamental values of these visions, they are connected to peace and multicultural education. JABS visions also include identity issues and goals "We strengthen each student's identity, helping them to feel pride and excitement in their heritage, while also communicating respect and knowledge about the other. " (Hand in Hand, n.d). The identity issue, especially in a divided society and society with ongoing conflict (where both parties are part of a school), is very complicated and addressed by: special curricula, building dialogue skills, values such as empathy and respect, facilitating special calendars that include all religious holidays and different national days.

Multiculturalism and identity issues are interwoven. Both are manifested in day to day life and in the curriculum. Schools' calendars are planned to include holidays and special days of different religions and nationalities (in Israeli state schools there are different calendars for Jewish, Muslim and Christian schools). During the year, students learn about and celebrate together holidays aware which holiday is their own and at which they are guests of their friends (Freiberg & Harzion, 2015). The curriculum is designed to introduce different cultures (not just Jewish and Arab cultures). Identity issues are discussed in religious studies, history and literature classes to acquire knowledge, different perspectives and self-awareness. Main national days in Israeli culture are almost sacred: Holocaust Memorial Day, Memorial Day for Israel's Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Hostile Acts and Independence Day. These days are commemorated in Israel with state ceremonies, sirens and in schools with special content and ceremonies. JABS are challenged by these days (especially Memorial Day for Israel's Fallen Soldiers and Independent Day), because one side's victory is the other side's disaster. Arabs have different national days such as Land day, and Naqba. These days are not commemorated by the state or schools. JABS have constructed special programs as exemplified at Hagar school. At the school are students from both nationalities and therefore school refer to all national days in Jewish-Israeli and Arab-Israeli society, while dealing with the difficult questions, controversies, national and historical dilemmas underlying the National Days. The reference that guides the choice of content and ways of learning is two folded, one is the constructions of national identity and the other is to promote change from a warlike relationship of enemies to peace and coexistence among the citizens of the state, while preserving the rights of all citizens. National days, like the above, invite the development of awareness, knowledge and thinking skills that are required when one wants a culture of peace (Freiberg & Harzion 2015). These days are particularly challenging in JABS because they address the very core of the conflict and division (Bekerman, 2017; Bekerman & Horenczyk 2004; Nasser & Abu-Nimer, 2007).

Bilingualism in Israel is a complex issue, the other language is the language of the 'enemy'; who is feared (in Israel society). Creating a bilingual space

where both Hebrew and Arabic are present is essential to breaking down these walls of fear and open a path for friendship. Bekerman and Horenczyk (2004) wrote about languages as socio-culturally powerful and resourceful. Language can unite nations or separate ethnic and national groups into distinct communities. Bilingualism is manifested in school life in a few ways; First, educational staff are from both nationalities and speak Hebrew, Arabic or both. It creates a space where both languages are present at all times during formal or unformal activities. Second, Hebrew and Arabic are taught as mother tongues or second languages and are used as languages of instruction. In some lessons co-teaching is practiced and discourse is in both languages combined. It is not simultaneous translation, but an attempt to move from language to language and use both naturally. Language is used as a tool to communicate and understand and more than that, as a path to the other's culture.

Teachers and staff are from both nationalities. Teachers undergo special training programs including pedagogical support, strategies for co-teaching and professionalization in teaching a second language (Hand in Hand, n.d.). Students at JABS in Israel come mostly from well-educated families and medium to high socio-economic status (Freiberg & Harzion, 2015). Students come from both nationalities, but the majority are Arab. In 2019, 37% of the students at JABS were Jewish and 58% were Arabs, 5% were form mix families (Viniger, 2019). The numeric gap between the two nationalities is on a downward trend.

Does It Work? – Research Status

Although low in numbers, many studies on JABS in Israel have been conducted over the past 25 years, because these schools challenge basic religious and national educational segregation (Resh. & Dar. 2012). Zvi Bekerman is one of the leading researchers of bilingual schools in Israel, particularly the school in Jerusalem. His research has focused on identity issues, intergroup relations, and perceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Bekerman, 2003). He found that children from bilingual schools have complex perceptions of ethnic, religious, and national identity. They see the importance of bilingual schools in promoting coexistence and intergroup relations (although in informal activities there are little mix between the two groups), and conflict as the main problem in Israel. In his research, Bekerman detected some differences in perceptions of both groups. Addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict most Jewish children blamed politicians from both sides for the unresolved conflict, they defined parties involved in the conflict as the Israeli government and people on one side and Palestinians outside Israel's borders (the present Palestinian Authority) as the other. Arab children can see that Palestinians bear some responsibility for the unresolved conflict but attribute main responsibility to the Israeli side. Furthermore, they perceive the problems

of Arab Israelis (Palestinians who live in and are citizens of Israel) as an outcome of discrimination against Arabs.

In another study, Bekerman (2003; 2003a) conducted a cross-sectional study with children from bilingual schools and children from standard segregated Jewish and Arab schools to learn about their cultural identity, and how they perceived the conflict and relations they have with the 'other'. It concluded that the response of bilingual school students to questions about political and conflictual events were more moderate than those from segregated Jewish or Arab schools. Addressing cultural and religious questions it was clear that children from bilingual schools had a better understanding of others' culture than children from segregated schools. In both cases, Arab children knew more about Jewish culture than vice versa, explained by majority-minority relations in Israel society. Another important result from the study regarded intergroup relations and attitudes. While participants from both groups identified themselves by religion, nationality and ethnicity and acknowledged differences, participants from bilingual schools expressed less prejudicial attitudes and social distance. These results support the contact hypotheses (Allport, 1954) regarding intergroup relations as a key to reducing prejudice and promoting tolerance, understanding and empathy. In contrast, Shwed, *et al.* (2018) researched friendship between Jewish and Arab children in bilingual schools and Jewish schools with a minority of Arab children (result of resident mix in schools' neighborhood), and found, contrary to expectations, in bilingual schools the number of friendships between children from different nationalities was lower than that in Jewish schools with a minority of Arab children. This raised some questions about the contact hypothesis. Nonetheless, they noted a geographic variable as an optional explanation. Bilingual schools are regional schools, children are transported from a variety of neighborhoods, villages and towns (usually only one nationality) so after school, encounters are usually with neighbors who share a nationality. In Jewish schools with a minority of Arab children, schools are located in mixed neighborhoods and children meet after school with their neighbors – Jewish or Arab.

In 2017, Bekerman interviewed graduates from the only bilingual high school in Israel, most of whom were Arabs (30 from 36 participants). His findings were encouraging for those supporting bilingual education. Graduates realized that belonging to one group does not imply denial of the other. They have, if at all, low levels of stereotype and prejudice, they have few expectations from the education system to promote change, but at the same time appreciated the opportunity to learn in a bilingual school. They mentioned their own complex identity and understanding that situations are complex and their "reluctance to judge difficult realities by identifying a clear 'only' enemy" (Bekerman, 2017: 9).

Another realm of research in bilingual schools was bilingualism and the existence of both languages in school practices, and the status of Hebrew or Arabic as a second language (Bekerman & Shhadi, 2003; Bekerman & Horeczyk, 2004; Bekerman & Tatar, 2009). Amara *et al.* (2009) investigated actual language

practices in a few Jewish-Arab bilingual schools. They revealed that although many efforts are done, Hebrew remains the dominant language in classrooms and the school environment. Arab teachers and students used both languages while Jewish staff and students mainly used Hebrew. Paul Benyamin & Jayusi (2017) examined, in a holistic perspective, how school intentions to promote equality and equal shared citizenship are manifested in school structure and curriculum. They found that school makes a lot of effort to promote equality and succeed in some levels, but different challenges prevent the desirable full outcome.

Conclusion

JABS aim is to build bridges between Jews and Arabs in Israel, to promote understanding and empathy. As seen, students and graduates are familiar with the 'other' religion, culture and narrative and are aware of the differences and the similarities between them. In many ways, the wall of fear appears to disintegrate in these schools. Another school aim that should be still explored pertains to social justice and social involvement. Are JABS students and graduates sensitive to different kinds of social, economic or political injustice? are they less prejudiced against different groups and minorities? Do they act to promote change in society? Social justice is a core value in JABS and in a society that wishes to be called a democracy. In Dewey's words, "it is not whether the schools shall or shall not influence the course of future social life, but in what direction they should do so and how" (Dewey, 1937: 411).

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