

Jewish–Arab schools in Israel: parents’ perspectives and children’s realities

*Hand in Hand Centre for Jewish–Arab
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The Hand in Hand Centre for Jewish–Arab Education in Israel was established in 1997 in order to promote a new education model of bilingual, multicultural education in which Jewish and Arab children can study together as equals.

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Cover:

‘Parents as partners’, a project led by the Arab Jewish Centre for Equality, Empowerment and Cooperation, at the Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development, Israel.

Photo: Barbara Rosenstein

Citation:

Hand in Hand Centre for Jewish–Arab Education in Israel, Bekerman, Z. and Shahdi, N. (2009) Jewish–Arab schools in Israel: parents’ perspectives and children’s realities. Online Outreach Paper 7. The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Editing, design, layout and proofreading: Green Ink (www.greenink.co.uk)

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Preface	1
1. Jewish parents speak	2
“You grow up understanding that there is more than one way to live your life”	2
“I wanted a school that would not impose patterns of behaviour on the children but would instead enable and encourage each child to develop in his own way”	3
“The fact that Jewish and Arab children who live in the same area study in the same school, seems to me to be the most natural situation in the world”	4
“In our meetings with the Arab parents, nobody tries to blur any lines or cover up anything in order to build a new world”	5
2. Arab parents speak	6
“I want my children to know the Palestinian story and the Israeli story. I want them to know the truth”	6
“Our aim is for the students to know about the reality on the ground and to be exposed to the narrative of the other”	7
“I am for Arab Jewish harmony. I also want my daughters to demand their rights and hold their heads high”	7
“My son is at the school and God willing, the rest of my children will go there also”	8
“No one knows how the students will do in higher education after school, especially after they collide with the reality of power and discrimination”	9
3. Anthropological researchers talk to children in the Jewish–Arab schools	9
References	13

Executive Summary

It takes courage to swim against the social and political current. Many Jewish and Arab parents in Israel exemplify such courage by sending their children to one of the five integrated Jewish–Arab schools in the country, rather than to the segregated schools that constitute the norm. Where do they find the courage and why do they challenge the existing reality? The perceptions and experiences of four Jewish parents and five Arab parents are presented in the first part of this paper. In the second part, anthropologist Zvi Bekerman describes some of his research with children who attend the Jewish–Arab schools. He commends this social experiment, at the same time as he urges the schools to push towards further transformation.

This paper was compiled by Bernard van Leer Foundation programme staff, based on documents from two pieces of research on the Jewish–Arab schools. The Foundation funded both pieces of research in order to study the effects of grants given by the Foundation for early childhood education at the Jewish–Arab schools.

Sections 1, 2 and 3 of the paper are extracted largely from *Hand in Hand – Jewish and Arab families in Israel*, produced by the Hand in Hand Centre for Jewish–Arab Education in Israel, 2006, Jerusalem, pp.112. (In English plus coloured photographs, also published in Hebrew and Arabic in the same volume.)

Section 4 of the paper is extracted largely from *Exploring the potential influence of integrated Arab–Jewish education on children’s cognitive, social and emotional development, 2004–2007*, a research report submitted to the Foundation in 2007 by Zvi Bekerman of the School of Education at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Preface

Some moving stories of Arab and Jewish individuals and families who live in Israel today are interwoven in the first part of this paper. Together these stories convey a powerful narrative of mutual recognition and acceptance, in the face of a painful past and a present characterised by separation and contradictions. The efforts of these individuals and families to forge a future of reconciliation and equality are not only personal strivings, they also represent a collective dynamic that is centred around the Jewish–Arab schools established by Hand in Hand, the Centre for Jewish–Arab Education in Israel.

The bilingual and multicultural schools coordinated by Hand in Hand make a vital contribution to society in Israel today, by pointing the way to a future that welds together the country’s Arab and Jewish communities by placing their languages, cultures and histories side by side, in mutual openness – just as their very different narratives are placed side by side below.

These schools (and the stories in this paper) give hope to the country, the region and the world that people who have been wrenched apart by history can still find each other and try to make history anew. The schools – like these stories – illustrate that reconciliation is not a simple fairy tale, but an ongoing struggle to negotiate, to see another very different perspective, and to translate the grand process of reconciliation into everyday mundane activity.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote (in the context of the Holocaust) about the banality of evil, that evil is not some force that strikes out of the sky at ordinary people’s lives, but that we – ordinary people ourselves – can

undermine the lives of those around us, whom we see as different from ourselves, through routine everyday acts of inhumanity.

The Jewish–Arab schools in Israel, on the other hand, exemplify what we can call the banality of good. They show how a positive future can be built from a difficult situation through simple, everyday interactions that recognise the shared humanity of others excluded by society. When parents send their children to these schools every morning, it is not with uplifting exhortations to work for peace and co-existence, but with banal exchanges about homework and lunch and after-school activities. The near impossibility of these schools' achievements is woven into everyday reality through countless such banal acts of affirmation by ordinary Arab and Jewish families.

These parents are motivated by a desire for a different future for their children from the lives that history shaped for them, as attested by the stories that follow. Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, distinguished between societies oriented towards the past that are presided over by elders, societies focused on the present that are dominated by young adults, and societies that address the future by looking to their children.

Anthropological research carried out at the Jewish–Arab schools – and reported in the second part of this paper – highlights the significant achievements of these schools. This research also underlines the constant struggle required to ensure that the Jewish–Arab schools continue to challenge the realities around them, rather than allowing those realities to shape the schools.

The Hand in Hand Centre for Jewish–Arab Education in Israel – originally the Centre for Bilingual and Multicultural Education – was established in 1997. Its aim was to initiate and foster egalitarian Arab Jewish cooperation in education through the development of bilingual and multicultural schools, teaching equal numbers of Jewish and Arab pupils, staffed by an Arab and a Jewish teacher in each classroom, and with equal use of Hebrew and Arabic languages. Christian, Jewish and Muslim festivals are celebrated, and days of national significance for both Jewish and Arab populations are commemorated. The first two schools guided by these principles were established in 1998, one in Jerusalem and the other in Misgav in the Galilee. The schools started small, with a single classroom; they grew into full, integrated elementary schools, and middle schools have now opened to follow on from the elementary education.

In 2004, the third Jewish–Arab school was set up in Kfur Qara, an Arab village north of Jerusalem: this was a truly revolutionary development for Jewish parents to send their children to school in an Arab location. The fourth integrated school opened in the southern city of Beersheva, in September 2007. In addition to these four schools associated with Hand in Hand, at which 900 Arab and Jewish children were registered by the end of 2007, a fifth school has been in existence since 1984: the Neve Shalom elementary school located in an integrated Arab Jewish settlement near Jerusalem.

1. Jewish parents speak

*“You grow up understanding that there is more than one way to live your life”
(Sigalit, Jewish mother)*

“My mother was raised and educated in a religious *kibbutz* and adheres to a religious way of life. My father is a secular person in both his views and lifestyle. When they were planning to marry, they decided that neither of

them would give up their belief nor change their way of life to suit the other. To that end, they determined a few basic rules for their lives. One rule was that their kitchen would be kosher and they would observe Shabbat in their home. However, outside of the home my father would be free to spend the Shabbat as he pleased. Another important rule was that their children would be observant and would receive their education in religious schools until the age of 18, at which time they would be free to choose their own lifestyle. I remained Orthodox, as did one of my brothers, the other chose the secular path.

“In a home like that, you grow up understanding that there is more than one way to live your life. You learn from firsthand experience that there are at least two ways and you become, of necessity, more open and tolerant towards the outlook and way of life of other people.

“Representatives of the Hand in Hand Association came to our area to introduce their school and it sounded interesting. At that stage, we had only two options: the regular state school or the Jewish–Arab school. In the choice between an ordinary secular school and a Jewish–Arab school, I thought that the latter would be preferable. I knew that in the regular secular schools they learn very little about Judaism because of the prevailing idea among the public that in order to be a Jew, all that is necessary is to live in Israel, speak Hebrew and celebrate all the Jewish festivals. I thought that in a Jewish–Arab school where one’s Jewishness cannot be taken for granted, that subject would be treated in a different way. My thought was that when the Jewish children were asked to define themselves to the Moslem and Christian children, the Jewish issue would be presented more clearly. Today, I am not sure that those hopes were fulfilled, but at that time I believed it might be so.

“My association with Arab parents at the school has had a great effect on me. I always had a tendency, learned in my parents’ house, to perceive and try to understand the needs and perceptions of the other side, but at the same time various quandaries that I was always aware of in principle, turned into burning problems for me that required solutions. If previously I only heard mention of ‘what the Arabs feel on our Remembrance Day’, I now think about what Sa’id and Sa’id’s father feel on that day. It is not the same anymore. Once I used to take for granted that singing patriotic songs on national holidays was the right thing to do. Now I am more aware of the problematic nature of those songs. Each year it has become more difficult for me to participate in the evening ceremony held at the end of the Remembrance Day for Israel’s fallen soldiers and the beginning of the Independence Day celebrations. I have uncomfortable feelings when I watch the stage performance where someone dresses up as an Arab, attacks the Jews while shouting garbled curses, then the Jews succeed in overcoming the attackers and the State of Israel is established. With my daughters studying in the same school with the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the people who ‘fought against us’ in 1936 or 1948, I am able to understand that matters are not quite so simple.”

***“I wanted a school that would not impose patterns of behaviour on the children but would instead enable and encourage each child to develop in his own way”
(Carmel, Jewish mother)***

Carmel grew up on one of the richest and most established *kibbutzim* in Israel. Her deep involvement in school matters and as a result, her encounter with the Arab population of Israel, has brought about a change in some of her views and has served as a ‘kind of corrective experience’. She explains that her experiences from the time she enrolled her children in a Jewish–Arab school have helped her rethink all that she learned and experienced among the ‘*kibbutz* aristocracy and the ruling establishment’ of the country during the first 30 years of the State of Israel. “When we were children, we never visited the neighbouring Arab villages.... The only reference made in

the *kibbutz* to them ended in the following words: ‘They are stealing our fish,’ or, ‘They are stealing our bananas’. Apart from that, there was no mention of our next-door neighbours. As children the only image that we had of them was as thieves, bad people, certainly not human beings like us! There was a great deal of arrogance in our attitude towards them, the source of which was deeply rooted in the education that we received. We children received a clear message from the *kibbutz* educators that Arab children are not our equals, they are inferior and there is no good reason to meet with them.”

Carmel has other criticisms of *kibbutz* education: “Only at the age of 14 did I come to realise that within the *kibbutz* framework, I am actually not able to be myself; I am only a reflection of myself in the eyes of my teachers, my peers, my house mothers in the children’s houses... Only then did I begin to understand that unusual behaviour was not tolerated. I also understood that in order to be accepted I had to be like the others and for me that meant not being honest with myself.”

When Carmel’s eldest son was born, she decided that her children would receive an entirely different education. One of the things that gives her pleasure is the fact that her children have a good rapport with their Arab friends in the Jewish–Arab school, in contrast to the relationship between the children of the *kibbutz* and the nearby Arab villages in her youth.

One morning, Carmen’s husband was sitting with his son in the Jewish–Arab school located in the Arab village Kfur Qara, when the windows shook violently from the deafening blast of an anti-missile exercise in the nearby army camp. Together with Carmen, he went to the army camp the following morning to lodge a complaint.

“The commander received us in his office, listened attentively to our complaints and seemed shocked by what he heard. After he recovered, he managed to say to us that he had no idea that Jewish children were studying in Kfur Qara. On that same day, all firing in the school vicinity ceased totally. And from then onwards, I have been able to better understand the feelings of the Arabs who live in Israel. I am now aware of the fact that the army is permitted to interfere with the lives of Arab children studying at the school whenever it pleases, totally ignoring the protests of their parents and of the local Arab councils, as though they do not exist. But the moment the army is made aware of the fact that there are Jewish children in the area, it ceases those abusive actions immediately.”

Carmen and her family live in a *moshav* with a reputation of being unsympathetic to Arabs. Thirty children from this *moshav* now attend the Jewish–Arab school in Kfur Qara. For the Purim festival in the spring of 2006, the local council of the *moshav* decided to invite a group of students from the school to participate in the annual Purim parade. “Even the most hardened of our old-time members was moved by the participation of Arab and Jewish parents and children in the event.”

“The fact that Jewish and Arab children who live in the same area study in the same school, seems to me to be the most natural situation in the world” (Eldad, Jewish father)

One day, Eldad was watching his son, Itai, and one of Itai’s Arab friends from school, Walid, sitting together, hunched over a computer in their house. “The thought occurred to me at that moment that Itai is already on the fast track in the high-tech world, but when I asked myself where this fast track will lead his friend Walid, I saw a future in agriculture, in the building trade.”

Eldad had recently left his career in photography in order to set up a computer company. He decided to discuss the idea of developing internet sites in Arabic with his partners. “There were very few internet sites in Arabic in Israel and they were just beginning to develop in other countries. My partners were not enthusiastic. I went ahead, setting up a new company to deal exclusively with the development of high-tech and modern commerce in the Israeli Arab society.”

The name of the new company was Alfanus.com. In Arabic, a *fanus* is a lamp that spreads light and knowledge. Eldad chose the name during Ramadan, after Itai returned from a visit to Walid’s house, bringing with him a toy *fanus*, customarily given to children as a gift during Ramadan.

Eldad approached almost every government body likely to be interested in Arabic internet sites, and some engaged him to design such sites for them. Other bodies still refuse to relate to Arabic as a legitimate language worthy of an internet site, despite the fact that Arabic is the language of 20 per cent of the Israeli population and is, by law, one of the two official languages of the state.

“The replies that I received from the institutions I approached were amazing,” says Eldad. “The first reaction is usually: ‘What do Arabs have to do with the internet?’ Most places agree that I should translate their site into Arabic, but that is not the idea. The idea is to develop sites that will be able to serve the Arab citizens in Arabic. An Israeli Arab citizen who goes on a pilgrimage to Mecca, for example, requires information about permits, inoculations and other papers that is available in seven different government offices, but there is no specific site that centralises all the necessary information for them. There is also no internet site for the Muslim religious court.”

Nevertheless, he thinks that recognition of the importance of setting up sites in Arabic is beginning to penetrate government offices, as well as some of the large commercial companies. Today, Alfanus.com employs a staff of six translators and computer experts, all Israeli Arabs.

“We have here a combination of business enterprise with ideological motivation,” says Eldad. “The ideological motivation to advance the civil status of the Israeli Arabs was part of us even before Itai began to study together with Arab children. The school did not change my outlook, it only changed me from being an onlooker to becoming personally involved. Before Itai began to study at the school I only saw the inequalities and injustices from afar. Now I see them up close and what I see has spurred me on to act, within my limited field, in order to improve the situation.”

“In our meetings with the Arab parents, nobody tries to blur any lines or cover up anything in order to build a new world” (Danny, Jewish father)

“At the beginning, I used to count how many Arab parents and Jewish parents were present at meetings. At some stage, I stopped. The meetings that we held were not for the purpose of discussing national identity, but rather to celebrate birthdays, decorate the classroom, solve mathematical exercises, be invited for meals at each other’s homes, celebrate the holidays; in fact, to live the daily life of the school, simply, as people normally do. Bridging the differences is much easier when you do things that way.

“In the early years some tension arose when certain controversial issues were discussed. There were many stormy deliberations on what to do on Nakba Day, Independence Day, Land Day. Many hours were spent on

these discussions; what to do, what not to do, which event to observe and which not to observe. It was not an easy process but when you come to a passionate discussion on such serious controversial issues after a long period of discussing daily issues like school fees, transportation, meals, school budgets, quality of teaching, etc., the burden of the more 'loaded' issues becomes lightened and the capacity to find solutions is increased. People know each other better, they feel closer and more relaxed in each other's company, and they have a greater ability to understand and accept different opinions. In the first year of our involvement in the school, we invested a great deal of time in social meetings, and today our most pleasurable moments are those spent in the company of both the Arab and the Jewish parents and children from our son's class.

"Two years ago, when Yasser Arafat died, there was a special meeting of the Steering Committee. Someone should have filmed it in order to show how a community is able to organise itself quickly in order to do what clearly should be done. On the one hand, it was impossible to ignore the person who was a symbol for the Palestinian people, and on the other hand, he was a villain in the eyes of some. At the meeting, despite the storm that arose, it was very clear what should be done. The prevailing feeling was: I can do this because I know these people and they are my real and true friends and we are partners in something that is the most important thing for me: my children's education.

"Slowly, through getting to know the people, learning to understand the enormous pain, a story with which it is impossible not to empathise, should not be a threat to me. It does not cancel the feelings that I have, it cannot annul my identity. I have no feelings of guilt or regret, I am happy that the State of Israel was established. I do not think that it was possible to achieve that in a more humane fashion. My mother was a Holocaust survivor and from my point of view, Israel is of primary importance and we should fight, if necessary, to preserve its existence. That is the only way, but today I understand that there is a nation that has paid an insufferably heavy price and we have to do everything in order to find a fair and honourable compromise in finding room for everyone. The fact that I have no guilt does not prevent me from having strong feelings of empathy towards the other side.

"I am able to identify with the parents of the Arab children, with their conflicts between their Israeli and Palestinian identities, family, friends. Today I understand it better than before."

2. Arab parents speak

"I want my children to know the Palestinian story and the Israeli story. I want them to know the truth" (Faisal, Arab father)

"When Amina was born, I started worrying about where she would study. I started looking for a good school. I was very concerned because I didn't like the educational level in the village. One day I was working with a Jewish friend of mine. He said: 'What do you think about starting an Arab Jewish school?' I said: 'I'd be the first to support it.' One day he invited me to a meeting to start a democratic school. Later we thought of establishing a bilingual school. We worked very hard on the idea, and there was a lot of discussion between the Arabs and the Jews. But we didn't give up, and started the school.

"I had fears about my daughter going to an Arab Jewish school. I was afraid that she would stop following our practices and customs. At the school, the opposite happened. I started emphasising teaching her Arabic. And my own ideas about Jews changed. I started making Jewish friends. My daughter started visiting her

Jewish classmates and they visited us. And we didn't find this unusual. It became normal. The school enriched Amina's sense of national belonging. She learns about the Nakba, the Kufr Qassem massacre and Land Day at school. When I was in school, they taught me only about the Jewish people and not my own history. They taught me the Torah and the poetry of Ibn Gabirol and Tchernichowsky. My daughter learns about her culture and her history.

"I speak with Amina only in Arabic. I went to an Arabic school but I didn't learn my people's history. This hedged us in. Today my daughter knows about the Nakba and talks about it freely and fearlessly. The encounter at school dissipates fear. When you talk about something you take the fear out of it. I talk about my struggles and this is legitimate. The Jewish person cannot ignore this suffering. He or she must know my history to know me, my reality, my heritage and my civilisation. They must look at me as an equal and not from above. If all the state leaders had graduated from schools like this, we'd all be in a better situation. I want my children to know the Palestinian story and the Israeli story. I want them to know the truth."

"Our aim is for the students to know about the reality on the ground and to be exposed to the narrative of the other" (Kamal, Arab father and co-principal of the Jewish–Arab school in Misgav)

Kamal was 15 years old on the day now commemorated as Land Day – 30 March 1976 – a day that ended with the deaths of six Arab citizens demonstrating against the confiscation of their lands. This day has become a national Arab day. Kamal revisits its details every year, not only for himself but also for his students at the Jewish–Arab school in Misgav. Kamal distributes a flyer, entitled *What I remember*, that shares his memories with his students. Afterwards, he answers their questions.

"My father said nothing about politics, nothing about the Nakba, but he would secretly listen to Jamal Abdul Nasser's speeches. He would lock the doors and listen to the radio. I remember a Jewish woman who used to ask me to turn on her lights on Shabbat. One day I was walking with her and I heard her say: 'May God overthrow Jamal Abdul Nasser.' This upset me, and after that I wouldn't turn on her lights on Shabbat. I never went to her house after that, because she had cursed Abdul Nasser."

One year, Kamal organised a trip to his childhood village for the school students and their parents. It was a powerful visit for all. Kamal revisited his childhood, although all the landmarks had changed, everything had been erased and factories built on the ruins. The church and the mosque were all that were left. The students and their parents were moved by the story of suffering told by a former resident. Some of the Jewish students expressed feelings of guilt. Kamal said: "Of course, this was not the aim of our visit to a destroyed village. Our aim was for the students to know about the reality on the ground and to be exposed to the narrative of the other. The Jewish parents thanked us for this programme."

How does the school commemorate Israel's Independence Day? "Of course that day the school is closed. But there is a programme for every grade, one through eight, on the previous Memorial Day. At 10:30 a.m., half an hour before the sirens sound, the students and the teachers divide into Arab and Jewish teams. The Jews conduct their commemorations in the library and the Arabs paint a mural to commemorate the Nakba, sing political songs and read literary works and stories about the destroyed villages and the Nakba. However, the Arab students do stand with the Jewish students to observe the moment of silence commemorating the victims of Nazism."

“I am for Arab Jewish harmony. I also want my daughters to demand their rights and hold their heads high” (Hatem, Arab father)

Like other Arabs who were born after Israel’s establishment, Hatem – who was born in 1964 – attended Israeli schools and studied Israeli curricula. The aim of these curricula, established by the Ministry of the Interior, was to construct a generation of Israeli Arabs severed from their past and dazzled by the new Israeli culture and politics. Yet many who were born after Israel’s establishment are more attached to their Arab past than they are to their Israeli present. Hatem tries, like others, to find a balance that will allow him to survive and negotiate between two contradictory, and sometimes conflicting, worlds.

“In my history classes in primary and secondary school, we studied only until Ottoman rule, then we studied Jewish history in World War II and the establishment of Israel. Palestine’s history was a missing link in our history lessons. Every year we celebrated Israel’s Independence Day, by order of the school’s administration. It was a big school project. The playground and classes were decorated, the flags of the state and of different army units were flown, pictures of political and military figures were hung. We performed plays and sang songs. We sang: ‘On the day of my country’s independence, the birds sing and the joy spreads over the country, from the river to the valley.’ I learned the truth not in school but outside of it. The truth was in my mother’s and father’s stories. My mother was born in one destroyed village and my father in another.”

Hatem talks about continuing discrimination: “I started working as a hotel manager. On the first day, a Jewish employee said to me: ‘You can’t be my superior, what, don’t we have enough Jewish managers?’ These events that anger you also inspire you to look for ways to fight racism and to find frameworks for coexistence. Ignorance and a patronising attitude lead to unnecessary conflict.

“I carry this difficult history. But there is another people here that we must co-exist with. On the one hand, it is important to me that my daughters know their true history. We visit our destroyed villages. We hold on to the house keys that their grandfather has kept for over 60 years. On the other hand, we look for ways to live alongside Jews respectfully and equally. I chose a bilingual school because I am for Arab Jewish harmony, and for changing racist positions among Jews who do not know Arabs. I also want my daughters to demand their rights and hold their heads high.”

“My son is at the school and God willing, the rest of my children will go there also” (Ibrahim, Arab father)

Ibrahim radiates calmness. Is this the disposition that an Arab taxi driver in Israel must adopt, in a country of checkpoints? Is he forced to be calm? Sometimes Ibrahim tells a story that provides insights into the wider conflict. The worst thing for Ibrahim as a taxi driver is when a customer asks him “Are you an Arab or a Jew?” and gets out when he learns that Ibrahim is an Arab. Or taking a customer to the airport:

“An American woman – a tourist – got in my taxi once. I took her to the airport. At the gate, they told me to stop at the side. I stopped. They took everything out of the car and told me to open the suitcases. I refused. I said they weren’t mine. They should ask her to open them. She started screaming. I told them to put everything back in the car. They stopped us for two hours for nothing.

“I am a taxi driver and I can’t put the radio on. Once I had Oum Kulthoum on, and a woman told me to turn it off. If I turn on a Hebrew station, the Arabs don’t like it, and if I turn on an Arabic station, the Jews don’t like it, and it leads to a war over music. It’s easier just not to turn it on.”

The war over music made Ibrahim silence the car speakers. But the war over life and culture made him send his son Amir to a Jewish–Arab school that solved the problem of music, culture and a shared life, by giving existential legitimacy to language, culture and life. That is what his son feels, as he talks about the school with ease and candour. “Yes, my son is at the school and God willing, the rest of my children will go there also.”

***“No one knows how the students will do in higher education after school, especially after they collide with the reality of power and discrimination”
(Ibrahim, Arab father)***

“On Land Day I was 9 years old: I was with those children who threw stones in protest at land being confiscated. After tenth grade, I moved to a vocational school and worked with my father as an ironsmith. When I received the vocational degree, I went to work in an industrial complex.

“I had a Jewish friend who decided to start a high-tech electronics company. He offered me work and partnership in the company. Today we have 50 workers, on over 2,000 metres of land. We work for big companies, high-tech institutions and heavy industries.

“I am a member of the Trustees Committee at the Jewish–Arab school. There are ten of us, five Arabs and five Jews. When we meet, we discuss everything to do with the school and its development. What we are busy with is moving the school. We have finished building the school and are still arguing about the road to it. We have to solve this issue before the coming school year. There is a short road that passes through an Arab area and a long road that passes through Jewish settlements. Some Jewish parents are afraid of the bus passing through an Arab area. It didn’t occur to us that the students could travel separately, the Arab students via the Arab area and the Jewish students via the settlements.

“No one knows how the students will do in higher education after school, especially after they collide with the reality of power and discrimination.”

3. Anthropological researchers talk to children in the Jewish–Arab schools

In an act of faith, the parents cited above sent their children to integrated Jewish–Arab schools, rather than to the segregated alternatives.

These integrated schools started as pre-schools, kindergartens and first grades, gradually adding a class a year as the students progressed in age. The Bernard van Leer Foundation is interested in what integrated education in early childhood has achieved within such a challenging environment. The Foundation commissioned an anthropologist, Zvi Bekerman, based at the School of Education in the Hebrew University, and an Arab psychologist, Nader Shahdi, to explore the longer-term effects of integrated Jewish–Arab education in early childhood.

The two researchers had already studied the first two Jewish–Arab schools in the schools’ initial years. They had also interviewed 32 Arab and Jewish children (16 of each) from one such school during their third and fourth grades, when they were aged 8 and 9 years, at the time when they were just leaving the stage generally recognised as early childhood. In addition, Bekerman and Shahdi interviewed 12 children of the same age from a segregated Arab school and ten children from a segregated Jewish school. Both sets of children had socio-economic backgrounds similar to the children interviewed in the integrated school.

The research was oriented towards the contact hypothesis, which holds that intergroup contact – when it takes place under the conditions of status equality and cooperative interdependence that allow for sustained interaction between participants and for the potential formation of friendships – might help alleviate conflict between different groups and encourage positive change in negative intergroup attitudes (for a detailed literature review, see Bekerman 2007). Many studies have addressed this hypothesis, and a recent meta-analysis (Pettigrew and Tropp 2000) provided striking evidence for the benefits of intergroup contact, especially when the contact situation is characterised by optimal positive conditions.

The interviews with children described above, at the age of 8 and 9 years, were summarised by Bekerman (2007) as follows:

“In short, the results of the study indicated that the bilingual (Arabic–Hebrew) programme was partially successful in helping to reduce prejudice and alleviate conflict. In general, the responses of children in the bilingual school to questions related to political or conflictual events were more moderate than those expressed by children in the regular monolingual (i.e. segregated) schools. Moreover, from an analysis of their responses to questions related to cultural or religious matters, it was apparent that the children’s understanding of one another’s cultures runs deeper than that found in the monolingual settings. Still, the minority Arab group represented in both the bilingual and monolingual schools appeared to have a better understanding of the majority group culture, with those participating in the bilingual programme having a more developed understanding than those in the monolingual school. Jews as a majority seemed to be able to be characterised by less awareness of the ‘other’s’ cultural religious interests.

“While the Jewish and Arab children in the bilingual school were similar to students in monolingual schools in that they still recognized themselves as ethnically or religiously or nationally divergent, they differed from students in monolingual schools in that they expressed less of a sense of social distance between the groups” (Bekerman 2007, pp. 52–53).

The research summarised above was conducted in 2002, and two years later the same children were interviewed again by the same researchers, in the fifth and sixth grades as they were coming to the end of their elementary school education. Some of the Jewish children interviewed in the integrated school had left because their parents’ professional obligations had led to family relocation. Others had left because there was no certainty that an integrated middle school would be opened; parents felt insecure about their children’s continuing education and so transferred them to conventional Jewish schools. For these reasons, all 16 Arab children were re-interviewed but only eight Jewish children. In the segregated schools too, Jewish families had moved to other school districts, so only eight Jewish children could be re-interviewed, whereas all 12 Arab children were interviewed again.

The following extracts are drawn from Bekerman (2007) who reports:

“We asked children about their experiences at school, what they enjoyed and what they did not enjoy, about their relationships to their Arab and Jewish teachers, about their language skills, etc. We asked about their relations with their peers in class, who their best friends were, how did they perceive the peer relations in class, possible tensions, etc.... Except for those questions, which were not applicable, similar questions were asked to children in the segregated monolingual schools... Arab children were interviewed in Arabic by the Arab researcher and Jewish children in Hebrew by the Jewish one. When we deemed it appropriate, we encouraged children to provide narratives about the issues raised” (pp. 54–55).

The second round of research showed that group relations had, indeed, improved over time and with stronger contact:

“In general, all children were conscious that, since third grade, there had been ongoing positive development regarding class cohesion and friendships. Both Arab and Jewish children mentioned that they were aware of and excited by this change in their relationships.... A Jewish boy mentioned ‘It all started when we started playing ‘catch’ together. The girls ‘catch’ and the boys run away. From there it all started and we played together.’ ... At times, there was a sense that gender issues enter the picture. From our previous studies, we were aware that girls, more than boys, play in mixed groups. Though gender in fifth and sixth grade has become less of a dividing line, there is still more mixing among girls than boys” (pp. 57–58).

“In their responses, the Jewish children seemed to downplay the difference which brought about the relative distance between the groups. In explaining their preferences, they mentioned the fact that they can communicate with the Jewish children with ease and that ‘we understand each other more...’ They also raised the fact that they live in segregated villages which makes it difficult to meet with children living in other locations. Arab children mentioned similar reasons but were much more articulate and forceful when presenting their arguments.... Lastly, the children were aware that language was also a possible barrier and mentioned that teachers were continuously encouraging them to play more together. All in all, the children mentioned that there had been much progress and that at times, some even found their best friends in the other group” (p. 58).

“All children were well aware that in spite of the great efforts invested by the bilingual school in creating a bilingual environment, the dominant language is Hebrew. Jewish children explained this fact by pointing at contextual factors: ‘Arabs hear Hebrew all around, they hear Hebrew wherever they go and we do not hear much Arabic.’ They were honest about their rather low motivation to learn Arabic. Arab children are also well aware of contextual influences on language functionality and, like their Jewish friends, mentioned that for Jews learning Arabic is difficult because it is not much used in their daily lives. They seem to feel pride in the fact that Jews find it difficult to learn Arabic because ‘Arabic is one of the most difficult languages in the world, Hebrew is easy.’ Others mentioned that the Jewish children are not interested in learning Arabic: ‘they do not concentrate in class, they talk to each other all the time... and if things are said in Arabic, they say “I do not understand... I do not understand.”’ Still, they are aware that their Jewish friends are more positive in their approach to Arabic than are Israeli Jews at large, and that some invest more effort than others in trying to master the language, although usually with little success. Nonetheless, they believe Jews should learn Arabic because it would help them to become better acquainted with the Arab population and culture” (pp. 58–59).

“When the children were questioned about their experience of how other children, outside of school, perceived Jews and Arabs, all seemed to be aware that though generalizations are not in place, both Jewish and Arab

children out of school, for the most part, hold more stereotypical views of each other. As for themselves and their views on their respective outgroups, they seem to be clear that they represent a different sector in the Israeli society. A Jewish boy stated: 'I think I do not call Arabs names because I study here, I play with them during breaks and learn together with them, and this strengthens our ties... if they bother me I curse them as I curse any other Jewish kid that bothers me... they are nice and they are like me; they just have a different language.' A Jewish girl mentioned that she had 'learned a lot about the history of the conflict and now I know many things I didn't know before... for example about the lands and that Arabs were evicted from them.' An Arab child says: 'The Arab children outside of school always say the Jews are bad, that they conquered the land. They say they are angry at the Jews because the government considers the Arabs second class citizens... I know that not all Jews are the same, not all Jews are racist.' Some mentioned that when friends from the group visited their homes, their friends received them warmly and played together and behaved towards them as if they were their own friends" (pp. 60–61).

"Throughout our interviews, almost all children underlined the importance of having an integrated school that offered an option of co-existence that was different from traditional segregated education in Israel. Jewish children mentioned that the school 'is the only way to better the State of Israel', 'the place where we understand that not only the Jews are right', 'the place where we get to know each other as a way to finding solutions to the problems in Israel'. Arab children said: 'We can live together... in spite of the fact that there is not yet peace', 'we are the example that coexistence is possible'" (p. 61).

"Our last questions related to the children's self definition. All Jewish children defined themselves mostly as Israelis (pointing at the roots in the Diaspora too when that was the case) and they emphasized many times that the Arabs are Israelis too. Arabs also tended to adopt (but for one instance) 'Israeli' as a definition that they shared, but Israeli was never the only category adopted. Their categories were hyphenated and included Arab or Palestinian Israeli with a strong emphasis on the Arab/Palestinian segment of the compound" (pp. 62–63).

"We will now report briefly on the two groups we interviewed for the sake of comparison in the Jewish and Arab monolingual segregated schools... All Jewish children defined themselves as Israelis, adding nothing to this definition. Arab children defined themselves simply as Palestinian (5) or Arabs (7) and only one as an Israeli. For the most part, they indicated that they had no interest in being Israeli while emphasizing that they were proud Palestinians" (p. 63).

This anthropological study concludes:

"Children in general are bright, and the ones we interviewed even more so. We were surprised by their sensitivities in reading the world in which they live, and even more by their articulation of these realities...

"The picture that we are presenting is not easy to judge for it is complex. It offers plenty of evidence, which can be turned in many directions. At this point, withholding judgement seems the right thing to do. As we mentioned, the bilingual project seems presently to open up spaces where some of the 'unsaid' of Israeli society can be stated in a sphere of trust. This fact in and of itself makes the bilingual schools a worthwhile educational initiative.

"We do believe that what might be dangerous is to remain at this stage... Creating spaces in which children are both allowed and encouraged to question their present situation is indeed laudable, but stopping at this point might be the greatest betrayal of all. The bilingual schools need to find a way to help these bright kids move

forward. They well understand the world in which they live. The older they become, the more they resemble their parents in the answers they give; they need to be offered the opportunity to explore these answers in search of solutions different from the ones their parents have been able to shape...

“Critical dialogical approaches, those committed to a pedagogy of articulation and risk, although difficult to establish, seem the only ones which might serve to uncover new options. As previously stated, proceeding otherwise might make us vulnerable to the trap of serving the nation-state ideology which bears much responsibility for the present inter-ethnic conflict. These steps in conflict-ridden areas such as the one under examination have to be taken with care. The groups involved have many reasons to prefer present understandings which, though painful, offer recognizable patterns rather than to adopt new paths whose transformative potential is yet unknown.

“The bilingual schools are indeed an extraordinary new experiment, one that carries the promise of a better future for Jewish–Arab relations in Israel. Their work is done on roads not yet travelled and – although always at risk – they carry the dream for a peaceful and more honourable world. It is yet to be seen if the foundational ideology that sustains them can survive the present escalating conflict and achieve its goals. There are no universal multicultural approaches that can be offered independent of socio-political contexts. Every multicultural endeavour involves new imaginings and difficult, hazardous work” (pp. 68–69).

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About the Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

- Through “Strengthening the Care Environment” we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable parents, families and communities to care for their children.
- Through “Successful Transitions” we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school.
- Through “Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity” we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

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