

Arab Education in Israel: Between the Discourse of Struggling Identity and Low Achievement

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In many articles in which the issue of Arab education in Israel has been raised, it has been shown that the educational system is not fulfilling its desired role. This is said not to confront those responsible, directly or indirectly, for the system and its performance (despite my belief in the need for accountability), or to be critical in an intellectual way (which would be scientifically and academically acceptable), but because the output of this system has created a grim reality, evidenced during and at the end of each academic year when the official results for all grade levels are published.

One can also notice the results and implications of the system's failure in the reality of the Palestinian Arab population compared with the majority of Jews in the country, whether at the organizational and practiced level of political culture or when considering their low socio-economic status.

Some may claim that the educational system is burdened with what it has no capacity to fix, and that it is excessively relied upon to reform all of the moral failures and crises of society. The educational process, however, is the cornerstone of any social and economic development, and is considered the essential human, cultural and developmental project of any society. Every educational system, in any country, and under any political and socio-economic situation, strives to achieve three objectives. The first objective is the upbringing of the future generation; drawing on the historical and cultural heritage of the identity and belonging to religion, nation and homeland, while providing the opportunity for the possibility of change and adjustment in accordance with the generally accepted value system. The second objective is to enable students to exercise their right to build their personalities, and help guide them to grow up on virtue and good morals, armed with the values of moderation and tolerance so that they can achieve their social role and status according to their abilities and accomplishments and not according to their ancestry and lineage (e.g., their family, tribal, class and sectarian affiliations). The third objective is to give each pupil the opportunity to exploit their maximum intellectual capabilities and personal skills so that they may take advantage of social and economic opportunities available to them and enrich their lives as well as contribute to the community as a whole.

In light of the current political reality and based on how the Arab educational system works and the application of its objectives (the legislator and political decision maker's aims) the system is clearly unable to achieve the three objectives presented above. Therefore, Arab citizens in Israel must turn to our institutions (the Follow-up Committee for Arab Education), to our academic and professional intellectuals, to our local as well as national political leaders, and to our civil society institutions and demand that they join forces in order to propose a model of synergy that is able to support the formal and informal educational system in overcoming its ordeal so as to reach the intended objectives of education.

This proposed model of synergy must work to address a set of challenges that are subjected to extensive constraints and limitations. Before they begin to work together, and before the partners start to take on their responsibilities, they must agree on what these challenges are. They must identify the goals and objectives that they seek to reach, because the criteria for success in such a

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situation lies in achieving the goal and objective, and not being satisfied with the quality of the process.

The challenges faced by the Arab educational system and the educational process are many, but they can be reduced to two main challenges: nurturing the young students to strengthen their identity and national and religious affiliations by depending on the community's historical and cultural heritage; and giving students the knowledge, mechanisms and scientific skills to be able to pursue higher education or vocational professions according to their respective abilities, so that they may live in dignity. This demand is based on their rights as citizens in obtaining individual and communal civil equality. There is no dispute that there are great disparities between Arab and Jewish students in Israel in educational achievements. This disparity is based on the students' ethnicity and class and is a direct product of a clear-cut set policy in which qualitative and quantitative progress is favored over bridging the gap between groups and various social strata. This means that a policy of discrimination is being implemented for the benefit of a certain national group and class. The great gaps in investment by the state at the individual level indicate that such a policy is being followed at the expense of the policy of the welfare state which has become a thing of the past in the successive Israeli government policies of the last twenty years.

I believe that the challenges posed by the educational system in the Palestinian Arab community in Israel have gone beyond the knowledge stage. Data and information on the system are available in official and unofficial publications and studies. They have also surpassed the diagnostic phase (see, for example the Education paper of the Future Vision document²). Thus the situation calls for the proposal of solutions. This means progressing to a stage of presenting work models. These models must guarantee that the current critical situation is transformed into one in which education meets the ethical, historical and professional function assigned to it.

Any proposed model must take into account the concept of identity in its various forms as an essential, indispensable and inevitable factor. It is not possible to deal with education in the absence of this basic and central factor, because it is unreasonable and illogical to consider the educational process neutral. Not only is the fear of tackling the issue of identity and belonging as one of the main branches of the educational process prevalent, but there is even fear of dealing with the identity discourse itself. As the debate on matters pertaining to the discourse on identity pushes towards overlap and synergy between the political and cultural position, the tension between the State as a political system and society as a socioeconomic and cultural system is continually growing. In the current reality of the Palestinian Arab community in Israel, the conflict between the State and society on the definition of the educational system, which is considered the guiding compass for formation of identity and belonging, goes unaddressed. As the system currently operates, the State, wielding its power and influence, puts its strategies, programs, institutions and ideology, or the ideology of its leaders, in place, in order to produce a society favorable to it alone.

Educational institutions take on this task because of their impact, especially on the targeted emerging youth, who will serve as the firm nucleus of any future society. The formation of the identity of youth is parallel to the formation of the entire society's identity. Thus, one can understand the dramatic impact of the State on the formation of political identity. In addition, it has the same amount of influence on the formation of cultural identity in the public space in which the Arab

² Abu-Asbeh, K. (2006). "Educational Vision and Strategic Planning of the Arab Educational System in Israel". *The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel*, Rinawie- Zoabi, G. The National Committee for the Heads of the Arab Local Authorities in Israel. Pp: 27-29.

community in Israel lives. This space defines all requirements of life for all segments of society, starting with the need for social and economic mobility and ending with the possibilities and methods of leisure. Nevertheless, identity formation is not a process that is subject to the whims of the State and influences from outside or within the group; even individuals within the group cannot change it whenever they want. Although identity is built and not given or fixed, this structure must be based on a cultural, historical heritage, allowing for a level of consistency that acts as a founding factor for the required and desired change.

In summation, despite the inability of the system to deal with the three goals outlined above, there are many successes at the achievement level for the Palestinian Arab community in the country. Some have been able, despite what we know about the scarcity of budgets and investment, to breakthrough the glass (even steel) ceiling and reach occupational and economic mobility. However, such achievements remain individual and their returns remain confined to the individual level. Therefore, the synergy model should work to find a practical formula that converts the enormous human potential in our Palestinian Arab community in Israel into a social resource owned by everyone, so that through it, a value-directed group, supportive of scientific orientation is formed, preparing our children to keep up with their sound development as well as their interaction with the universal human culture.