

**Israel National Defense College**

**46th Class 2018-2019**

**Israeli Society : The Role Of Educational System In Integrating Israeli Arabs**

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17 April 2019

**THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN INTEGRATING ISRAELI ARABS**

**Introduction**

The current public education system in Israel mirrors the wider divisions in society. It is divided into separate sectors: state-secular (Mamlachti), state-religious (Mamlachti dati), independent religious (Haredi or Ḥinuch Atzmai), and Arab. The State funds the Mamlachti sectors fully, including the Arabs, and the Haredi sector partially. In addition, private schools based on specific philosophies (Democratic Schools) or curriculum of a foreign country (e.g., The American International School in Israel) also function. The majority of Israeli children attend state schools. State-religious schools, catering to youngsters from the Orthodox sector (mainly Religious Zionist/Modern Orthodox), offer intensive Jewish studies programs, and emphasize tradition and observance. The Chinuch Atzmai schools, mainly for the male population, focus almost entirely on Torah study and offer very little in terms of secular subjects. Schools in the Arab sector teach in Arabic, and offer a curriculum that emphasizes Arab history, religion, and culture. The parallel tracks of education merely reflect separate societal existence, particularly with the Haredim and Arab sector. Both are underrepresented in the Israel Defense Forces and the workforce, since both groups are exempt from the otherwise compulsory military service, and in many Haredi sects men choose to focus only on religious studies throughout their life and rely financially on support from co-religionists, the State, etc. This segregation from cradle to the tomb ensures persistence of a gap in integration, even when numerous State sponsored and non-governmental programs are initiated to overcome the integration deficit.

The roots of separation lie in the complexities of the formulation of the Zionist vision. The Zionist enterprise, though secular in philosophy, conceded to the demands of the religious sector for autonomy in education, proportionality in budget and the convergence of State and Religion, in return for support. The Compulsory Education Law in 1949 allowed the right to choice by parents and therby instituted a segregation of the education system into an Arab-only system for Arabs and a segmented Jewish system of religious, secular and other streams for Jews. The 1953 State Education Law was meant to eliminate the various educational streams and consolidate them under the State, but fell short of it’s objective with the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) sector ensuring autonomy of their educational streams while the Arab education system remained under the central system but functioning as a separate unit within it. Arab citizenry being subject to military government until 1966 and blurring of spheres of the Ministry of Education only deepened the separation. Israel is a signatory of the Convention against Discrimination in Education, and ratified it in 1961, according it the status of law. The Israeli Pupils’ Rights Law of 2000 prohibits discrimination of students for sectarian reasons in admission to or expulsion from an educational institution, in establishment of separate educational curricula or holding of separate classes in the same educational institution, and addresses rights and obligations of pupils.

**Aim of the Paper**. The aim of this paper is to understand the approach and efforts in the field of education towards integration, with particular reference to the Arab sector. The dynamics of the Ultra-orthodox sector being different are beyond the scope of this paper and hence, not being delved into.

**Assessing The Framework**

**Historical Legacy**. The roots lie in a segregated society, not only as Jews and Arabs but most times within the Jewish community itself between Ultra-orthodox, religious and secular Jews and further within the secular communities and Ethiopian Jews concentrated in development towns. Arabs living primarily in Arab towns and Arab neighbourhoods of Jewish towns, and a similar pattern in the Jewish stream, underscores the nature of separation. Israeli society comprises of largely homogeneous localities for Jews, Arabs, Ultra-orthodox etc. with some changes in nature of separation over the years. The historical background of *Yishuv*, separate education system during the British Mandate and the circumstances of the establishment of the State of Israel are mere reflection of separation in education. Separated living in locales and councils exacerbates the deeply entrenched parallel tracks in society. Thus, any remedial measures in education invariably seek to aspire for ‘separate but equal’ status.

**Perpetuate Separation**. Despite existence of laws, Jewish and Arab children go to separate schools, play in different neighbourhood playgrounds, and have limited interaction with one other until, perhaps, university. By this stage, opinions and prejudices have taken deep roots. Moreover, the Jewish sector participates in the university only after having completed military service, thereby widening the gap of integration even more, adding to the complexities to be overcome. The parallel tracks in education and society continue, with limited convergence in the work place.

**Disparity in Resource Allocation**. The Arab education system caters to the Israeli-Arab minority in Arabic, about their history and culture. Claims of discrimination with the Jewish education system getting more resources reflect a divided reality. According to the Follow-Up Committee for Arab Education, the Israeli government spends an average of $192 per year on each Arab student, and $1,100 per Jewish student. It also notes that drop-out rate for Israeli Arab citizens is twice as high as that of their Jewish counterparts (12 percent versus 6 percent) and faces a shortage of 5,000-classroom. However, a study by Nachum Blass in 2017 finds the gaps between the two streams closing.[[1]](#footnote-1) It reports that the budget per student in the Arab education system (NIS 16,000) remains much lower than in the Hebrew education system (NIS 20,000 per primary school student). However, the per-student budget has increased more rapidly over time in the Arab stream than in the Hebrew stream. The teacher qualifications in the Arab stream having academic degree in the Arab education system actually exceeds the share in the Hebrew education system at every level of schooling. Counter claims of students in government-run Arab schools receiving inferior education due to fewer teachers, inadequate school construction, and lack of libraries and recreational space as against better resourced Jewish schools prevails. Notwithstanding the factual position, persistence of disparity and sense of victimhood allows the narrative to prevail. It attributes disparities in achievement between Jewish students and Arab Israeli students to socioeconomic backgrounds and recommends addressing socioeconomic issues between the two sectors.

**Integration – Short Term Measures**. Attempts to foster integration at the initial schooling level can be categorised as short-term but symbolic and long-term sustainable categories. Interventions, not backed by the State and community at large, invariably fall into the short-term category and any gains of integration programs being carried out in the larger vacuum of segregated society will make limited gains as ‘the children simply go back to their normal life after a dose of integration’. These measures invariably have a superficial veneer and window-dressing to project measures being undertaken to “break down barriers” and “reduce prejudice” amongst young people.

**Integrated Education – The Goal**

Integration of education is perhaps a first but crucial step towards achieving greater integration. An integrated education system in Israel should be a key pillar in the building of a peaceful State. The existing system needs to create a neutral space where children of varying and opposing groups are educated together based on the principle that contact established at the earliest ages will become the foundation for improving relations and coexistence. The path of striving for addressing the grievances of the Arab sector and converging towards the larger goal of achieving integration within Israel are visible in three distinct trends. They are focused on addressing parity of resources, encouraging co-existence but within the Jewish character and an approach seeking equality of lingual and cultural differences.

**Parity in Resource Allocation**. The 2015 Israeli government five-year plan (2016-2020) for the Arab population was adopted to provide for socioeconomic improvements and integration into the ecosphere.[[2]](#footnote-2) The primary component of the plan revolved around enhancing education with emphasis on teacher training and professional development, learning achievements, and expanded informal education besides goals for improving students’ command of Arabic and Hebrew and increase the rate of those passing higher level mathematics matriculation exams. The other components focused on employment and accessibility for populations with a low rate of participation in the workforce and to incentivize employers to hire minorities while according preferential status for women and Bedouins. The plan strives for parity of allocations to the Arab population and minority, recognising the fact that strengthening the Arab population (as well as the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community) is critical to Israel’s economic prosperity. The plan is not unique and partly resembles the one formulated during Ehud Barak’s tenure as PM. However, while **socio-economic development and equitable resource allocation** is an essential and critical step towards integration of the minority sector, this approach is likely to achieve little relating to integrated education and contact that children come into. On the contrary, it probably perpetuates a separation and **strives for ‘separate but equal’ status**. This is not to say that parity in resource allocation is not essential, and while it does contribute towards addressing alienation and disgruntlement to some degree, but the essential question is whether it positively impacts integration or not.

**Assimilation of Arabs in Jewish Schooling**. A slow change is occurring in bringing sectors together in the educational field and can be attributed to the emerging but limited mixed residential patterns, inefficiency of the Arab education system and efforts of NGOs. Schools featuring a high rate of integration are rare, but an integration trend appears to be slowly germinating. As per a TAUB Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel report, approximately 109,000 pupils – about 6 percent of all the pupils in Israel, and almost 15 percent of those in state-run Jewish education – attend schools in which some encounter between pupils from the two groups takes place.[[3]](#footnote-3) The rise over the past decade can be partially attributed to proliferation of mixed localities and neighbourhoods with growing numbers of Arabs moving into exclusively Jewish localities and Arab families choosing to send their children to Jewish schools. The motivations stem from aspiring for higher quality Jewish education and learning Hebrew which will help them integrate into Jewish-Israeli society. Solution to children’s special needs or as a refuge from hostility and vengeance for children of mixed couples, ‘collaborators’ etc are other motivations. The State, however, does not encourage mixed Jewish schools to adopt and integrate multicultural elements in the curriculum. Thus, Arabs attending Jewish schools accept the schools’ Jewish-Zionist character without demanding cultural concessions. It is evident that while these schools bring children together, they would be faced with challenges of accommodation of cultural differences which would likely manifest during phases of Arab-Israeli tensions and on national holidays of Israel and the Palestinian people (e.g., Independence Day, Remembrance Day and Nakba Day). The question to be asked is that does **assimilation of the Arab sector in the Jewish schools contribute more towards the Sammy Smooha ‘ethnic democracy’ model of Israel** or is the bilingual and bicultural education the desirable model.

**Integrated Schools - The First Step**. In 1984, the first integrated schools with Jewish and Arab students coexisting in a classroom were built by the residents of Neve Shalom – Wāħat as-Salām, a cooperative village founded by Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel. Today, this school receives some support from the state. Two more integrated schools were opened in Jerusalem and Galilee (Galil Jewish-Arab School) in 1997 by Hand in Hand: Center for Jewish Arab Education in Israel. The attempts of Hand in Hand towards building integration and equality through Jewish-Arab public schools bring thousands of Arab and Jewish students, teachers, and families together every day in multicultural, bilingual classrooms, and integrated communities. It can be the vehicle for transforming fear and mistrust into friendship and cooperation, proving the possibilities of co-existence. However, the six existing integrated schools reflect a paucity of efforts in this direction. The limited progress can be attributed to the lack of institutional support and deeply entrenched mutual suspicion between the communities, viewing integrated schools as being detrimental to preservation of cultural heritage. Moreover, chances of such measures succeeding within the larger vacuum in society are diminished. The interests of the State of Israel lie in reducing the residential, occupational and educational separation between Jews and Arabs. The alternate path undertaken by non-profit organizations such as Yad Beyad, Neve Shalom-Wahat el-Salaam, and Hagar seeks to **promote bilingual and bicultural education with the aim of advancing equality, understanding and social integration between the two national groups** which needs to be the ultimate goal.

A mixed population within the State of Israel is a reality of the present and the future, notwithstanding the nature of peace finally, if, achieved. An integrated Israeli society, as against one with alienated or segregated components, is in the best interests of the State. The apprehensions of threats to survival emanating from an integrated population will need to be addressed and evolve towards full equality rather than sperate but equal.

**Integration an Imperative**. The need to reform the segregated education system and create one which is cohesive and imbibes inter-community integration, and treats minorities as being equal and not separate, is an imperative and in the interests of the State of Israel. The education system benefits the citizens and the State and must ensure that a section does not become alienated or potentially a fifth column to be exploited by inimical forces. Success of integrated schooling has global examples to emulate. The Lagan College, in Northern Ireland, bringing Protestant and Catholic children together having commenced in 1989 with just 28 students has grown to approximately 18,000. It can be argued that animosity and differences continue to exist in these places despite integrated schooling. There can be no denial about that matter of fact, but societal schisms and dissonance are far more complex and can’t be resolved by a silver bullet. Integrated schooling is merely one cog in the wheel of numerous other necessary measures and conditions, albeit an important one with a key role in healing divisions and sectarian strife.

Given the complexities, strong historical animosity and sensitivities in matters of identity preservation, the assimilation of Arab schools within the general education system versus separation can be argued equally for both sides of the narrative. Integrated schools represent a glimmer of light to a segregated education system. They can offer an opportunity for sustainable contact that is critical for lasting relationships between the two groups to be built. The daily interaction is not merely restricted to children but the parents, teachers and administrators being in constant contact draws communities together through children. Children of varied cultural, socio-economic and political background being educated, learning and playing together is likely to make them more tolerant and accepting. This is not to imply that one side is more or less tolerant than the other, but mere recognition of the necessity of integration.

**Assessing the Example of the Indian Education System**

The education system in India highlights the success of measures to achieve national integration. The challenges faced by the educational system and Indian society are caste based and of a multi-cultural, multi-religious nature. The system, like any other, has it’s share of drawbacks and failings, but the purpose is to focus on the positive components which hold relevance and benefit, meriting consideration for imbibing in Israeli society, within the constraints of it’s complexities.

**Bi/Multi-Lingual Education**. In India, education in English medium does not result in losing their connect with the mother tongue due to communications at home. There is, of course, a clear difference since English is not perceived as a colonial legacy in a negative sense, generating memories of hatred, but was assimilated and accepted as the lingua franca for mobility and a necessary bridge with the wider world, besides being associated with elitism. Today, a child communicates seamlessly in English, Hindi and the mother tongue, depending on the region to which they belong. Generally, the backlash which any language faces is more often than not from the sections deprived of such facilities and the anger generated is couched in identity politics of threat to the mother tongue. Notwithstanding, the benefits of a bi or multi-lingual education is widely acknowledged. The desire for mobility and growth exists and many Arabs choose Jewish schools due to the better facilities as a result of funding, and an opportunity to learn Hebrew and English, opening educational and professional avenues which would not have otherwise been possible in their own educational stream. But this creates a problem of assimilation and identity. Within the Arab community, the children participating in the Jewish education system are likely to be treated as aliens with contempt, jealousy and possibly even as outcasts in their own community. As individuals they are likely to be faced with dilemmas of roots and identity, including possibly diminished abilities in their mother tongue. However, a strong support system should help overcome such complexities. Simultaneously, a starting point of teaching the Arabic language and Arab culture in Jewish schools and Arabic as the second official language would be an essential step towards integration.

**Historical Narrative**. The Indian public education curriculum covers history in all its hues ranging from the ancient civilisation to early Hindu kingdoms, arrival of the Mughals and establishment of Muslim rule, colonisation by the Europeans and British, communal clashes and the trauma of partition resulting in over a million deaths amongst Hindus and Muslims alike and so forth. The curriculum brings out the narratives of all communities and yet finds general acceptance, even though adverse to different communities at different points of history. This has been made possible due to the recognition of plurality and multi-culturalism as an essential facet of Indian culture and one which is enshrined in the Constitution. The essential question in Israel will be on contentious issues relating to Zionist and Jewish histories as against the Arab narratives. A convergence in Jewish history with the Arab narrative incorporating mythological and historical facts of all sectors within the curriculum would serve well in creating an environment of plurality.

**Identity Dilemma - Conflicting Narratives of Zionism and The Case to Review State Patronage of Sectoral Education.** The sticking point, of course, would be in dealing with the Zionist narrative which is a direct and opposite contradiction to the Arab-Palestinian narrative. Here too there is a lesson from the Indian system. The State of Pakistan and partition of the Indian subcontinent was primarily on the basis of religion with Pakistan choosing an Islamic identity and the home of Muslims. The partition resulted in migration of religious communities from both sides of the borders, accompanied with widespread violence and trauma. However, the Muslims who continued within India did so by choice and do not find their Muslim identity to be in conflict with the primacy of the Indian identity. The State is obligated to provide for protection and equality of religious denominations while maintaining it’s chosen identity. The Constitution guarantees equal rights and protection of religious autonomy **to freely profess, practice and propagate religion**, alongwith freedom to manage religious affairs establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes. The Indian educational system preserves individual and group identity, while at the same time ensuring that the public education system does not differentiate on the basis of religion. The public education is integrated and inclusive and simultaneously the system provides space for religious or identity-based institutions. The Jewish identity is *primus inter parius* – as is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. The need to strengthening the Jewish identity and protecting individual and group identity of all parts of the population raises the critical aspect of bringing convergence between the two. The matters of equitable resource allocation to all sectors of education are a *sine non qua* to maintain adherence to equality. The conflict of the public education system ensues from the States Jewish identity, even while recognising the identity of all parts of the population. An Israeli identity prevailing over a Jewish identity of the State, such a solution may be unworkable in the present trajectory.

The dilemma revolves around the opposing Palestinian Arab identity and the Israeli Jewish narrative. Assimilation of the culture may be acceptable, but not the political narrative which in a way would be delegitimising their own identity. This is an extremely complex question with multiple dimensions and cannot be addressed in a single essay or merely though integration of education. While the State must ensure equality, it is also incumbent on the minority groups to reconcile with the primacy of the States identity. The essence and test of a democratic framework lies in ensuring and reconciling the conflict and brings forth the central question of what fundamental changes are required to assimilate other communities within their fold **without compromising on the essential and core characteristic of a Jewish State**. Minorities exist in religious identity states (Iran an Islamic state, Ireland a Catholic state), but successful States are ones that endeavour to build upon foundations of equality and partnership that reinforce respecting both the distinct heritage and complete loyalty to the State. It needs to be committed to fully equal rights and obligations for all its citizens, irrespective of religion, race, and nationality. The debate on the Nation State Law finding opposition in balanced sections - not for what it states but for what it omits ie. democratic nature, equality of all citizens and recognition of Arabic as an official language, contributes in a healthy way towards integration. The Arab community probably does itself a disfavour when it waves the Palestinian flags during protests, unlike the Druze, as it serves to only widen the chasms generating questions on loyalty to the state. The responsibilities of the State in ensuring equality are uncompromisable, but so are the obligations of the individuals to assimilate within the identity of the State of choice.

**The Way Forward**

**The Dovrot Report**. The Dovrot Report recognises that there is no substitute for public education in successfully meeting the challenge of developing a world of values shared by the various groups in Israeli society, while preserving and fostering the unique heritage of each group – “In a society that suffers from numerous rifts and divisions, public education should be a comprehensive system that that encompasses as many segments as possible of the Israeli education system. It should build and reinforce what they have in common, bring together the different segments of society, and lower the walls of ignorance and mutual suspicion between the different communities. At the same time, the right of communities to a separate education should be recognized in the case of a different nationality and language, or in the case of a distinctive, separate way of life.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Recommendations of the Dovrot Report recognise the right to a separate education system of communities with a different nationality and language or a distinct and separate way of life (the religious, the haredi, the Arab, and the Druze including the Circassian population). The autonomy of educational institutions with respect to curriculum and upholding the way of life practiced in it would be guaranteed. However, the public education system, while ensuring the greatest feasible convergence on national curriculums should strive towards encouraging integrated schools. Notwithstanding the fact that this proposal essentially sets the compass bearing towards ‘separate but equal’, but public educational institutions pursuing goals of education, a policy of not screening students on the basis of ethnicity or race and a systematic program of study are a positive development. It points towards a middle path, striving and evolving towards integration.

**Conclusion**

**Desirable Goal**. An understanding that the public education needs to be the melting pot of inculcating cohesion in society is a must for the framework of the way forward. The arena where various segments of society interact must assume the role of integrating rather than segregating. At the same time, it will need to ensure that individual and group identity of all parts of the population are equally strengthened. A starting point of teaching the Arabic language and Arab culture in Jewish schools and Arabic as the second official language would be an essential step towards integration. Granting of a more independent standing to the Arab educational system, comparable to that of the national-religious education, versus equitable resource allocation to improve the quality of education while maintaining a distinct but controlled sector or a completely bi-lingual, bi-cultural character are various options. Evolving, rather than changing, towards a more desirable goal is prudent in an extremely complex environment where emotions often prevail over sound judgement.

The essential aspect revolves on what is required to be done to ensure that public education encourages integrated participation. Can the unique goals of a community be incorporated within the public education system? Of course, while focusing on the Arab sector, this aspect opens up the more difficult component of the Haredi sector. It throws great challenges, for implementation. Even if schools were made integrated, disassociating from sectors, they would still result in identity specific majority as the living patterns within Israel are a reflection of homogeneous locales – Haredi, Arab etc. The challenge of integrations is therefore manifold, but a beginning for a slow evolution is necessary.

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