

## **Alternative Education in the Arab-Palestinian Society in Israel: a Panacea?**

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### **Abstract**

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of alternative schools in the Arab-Palestinian Society in Israel. This paper examines attempts to establish alternative education schools in the traditionally conservative Arab-Palestinian society in Israel and determine the reasons that led to groups of parents and social activists to implant the first seeds of liberal alternative educational frameworks. The paper sheds light on their educational practices and critically evaluates their chances of survival and success against the backdrop of the complex and mistrustful relationship between the State of Israel and its traditionally conservative Arab-Palestinian citizens. Implications for empirical research are considered.

**Keywords:** Alternative education, traditional education, democratic education, Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel, Arab-Israeli education system.

### **1. Introduction**

For nearly seven decades, Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel have never had control over their educational system as the Israeli Government has controlled it since 1948 (Makkawi, 2002). During the British Mandate, Palestinian teachers,

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who were mainly members of the leadership elite, were very active in raising Palestinian national awareness (Mari', 1978; Makkawi, 2002; Nashif, 1977). Under Israeli rule however, the Israeli authorities have been systematically using formal education in order to repress national awareness among Palestinian students (Al-Haj, 1995; Makkawi, 1999). Although nowadays Arab Palestinians make up 20% of population of Israel, their education remains under the tight control of Israeli authorities (Jabareen & Egbaria, 2011). However, recent years have witnessed attempts in the Arab Palestinian society in Israel to circumvent Israeli control over education in the form of Alternative education schools. The establishment of such schools aims at challenging existing norms and assumptions about education in Israel in general, and within the conservative Arab-Palestinian society in particular. While alternative education frameworks are not particularly new to Israel, their emergence in the Arab-Palestinian society is relatively recent. Leading research on education in the Arab-Palestinian society in Israel has given alternative education little to no serious attention (e.g. Al-Haj, 1995; Amara & Mar'i, 2002; Abu-Saad, 2006a, 2015; Jabareen & Egbaria, 2011). Therefore, this paper aims at providing a theoretical understanding of this phenomenon by reviewing the current literature on Arab education in Israel, to (a) identify the factors that led to the establishment of Alternative schools of various forms in the Arab-Palestinian society in Israel and, (b) to critically consider their prospects of surviving and achieving the societal and educational changes to which they aspire.

## **2. Alternative Education: A brief background**

A commonly accepted definition of alternative schools still does not exist, and the constantly evolving nature of alternative schools and the rules that govern them have made them something of a moving target and difficult to define (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Generally speaking, however, educators and researchers agree that the term refers to educational approaches that differ from

regular state-provided mainstream education. Such approaches are noted for their special and often innovative curricula, and flexible programs of study based, largely, on the individual students' interests and needs (Raywid, 1994; Aron, 2003; Carnie, 2003; Foley & Pang, 2006). Alternative education is often associated with innovation, more intimate and informal learning environments, and a departure from standard bureaucratic rules and procedures (Raywid, 1994). Furthermore, it is characterized by pluralistic learning commitment to constant self-examination and change, the creation of democratic structures and processes in schools, a cooperative learning process between students and teachers, and a learning community that acknowledges the student's uniqueness based on the view that every person has the right to his/her own self-expression (Kizel, 2012).

The ideology underpinning alternative education is based on the belief that a single uniform curriculum is not appropriate for all students and that some students might learn better in an environment structured differently than that of traditional public schools (Conley, 2002). Alternative schools subscribe to the belief that education should be first and foremost child-centered along with a heavy emphasis on experiential education or learning through experience. McGee (2001) argues that schools subscribing to this philosophy encourage creativity and focus on individual and personal freedom.

Comparisons of alternative education schools and their models of delivery reveal that these alternatives are as varied as the populations they serve (Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Nevertheless, Olive (2003) notes that alternative education schools were largely founded in order to serve a student population that required innovative and comprehensive techniques and methodologies that, at the time, were largely absent from traditional educational settings. In a study focusing on the diversity of alternative education programs, Lehr and Lange (2003) reported that although instructional materials and curriculum content may be the same as or very similar to those of regular education, the delivery method, student

involvement, and assessment tend to vary. Lange & Sletten (2002) outline a number of common characteristics among the diverse range of alternative education schools. These include a small classroom size; emphasis on one-on-one interaction between teachers and students; supportive environment that strengthen relationship between teachers and students; opportunities and curriculum relevant to students interests; structural flexibility and an emphasis on student decision-making. Therefore, while the schools encompass a wide variety of forms, some generalizations regarding their structure can be made.

One of the oldest alternative education initiatives is the Summerhill School. Established in 1921 in England by Alexander S. Neill, it continues to operate today. Alexander Neill was an educator who believed that traditional schools confined students and did not respect the personal freedom that students require in order to learn most effectively (Conley, 2002). The school clearly tried to break the mold; it has a distinctly anti-authoritarian and anti-theory bias (Raywid, 1983). The school has been heavily criticized for the questionable nature of some of its teaching practices, including voluntary attendance at lessons (Stronach & Piper, 2008).

In the United States, the alternative education movement gained steam with the civil rights movement. It served as a model for hundreds of free schools in the US in the 1960s and 1970s (Stronach & Piper, 2008), which were particularly popular among Afro-Americans in the American South. According to Miller (2002), Free schools refer to small educational communities (made of small groups of families and idealistic young educators) that were free from state control and the values of corporate capitalism, in which children and teachers were free to think and engage in interactions according to their own authentic needs and passions. Free schools believed that learning should be intimate, spontaneous, and joyful and not controlled by textbooks, curricula, instructional methods, testing or rigid rules of behavior.

The philosophy underlying Free schools was that traditional schools were not appropriate for Afro-American students because traditional schools produced "subjects, not citizens" (Conley, 2002, p. 63). The mainstream public educational system of the late 1950s and early 1960s came under heavy criticism and was accused of being racist and exclusively designed for the success of the few (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Schools associated with the traditional system were described as "cold, dehumanizing, irrelevant institutions, largely indifferent to the humanity and the 'personhood' of those within them" (Raywid, 1981, p. 551). Therefore, the mission of Free schools was to "initiate a mental revolution by teaching reading, writing, and speaking skills through discussion of black history, the power structure, and building a movement to struggle against the latter" (Conley, 2002, p. 63).

The movement to alternative education was, in many ways, a reaction against the traditional formal system. Alternative education came to symbolize a paradigm shift from the centralized and hierarchal structure of the traditional formal education system which was viewed as stripping school administrators and teachers of the power to create teaching methods and curriculum that fit the identities, needs and abilities of their students. The alternative education movement, accordingly, is congruent with the humanist model of education. It presented an alternative to the prevailing behaviorist (structured and industrialist) model of education (Doll, 1979).

The behaviorist model focuses on pre-determined standards which are uniform for all children regardless of their diverse interests, backgrounds, and talents. Assessing these pre-set targets is done via standardized test scores and grades. In the view of humanist education, these evaluation methodologies do not reflect growth but rather the gap between pre-determined objectives and the learner's deficit in terms of student performance (Doll, 1993, p. 172). The humanist model "sees the child as the starting-point, the center, and the end"

(Dewey, as cited in Doll, 1979). As such, self-actualization rather than knowledge is the goal of education. The means to accomplish self-actualization include involving students in planning and decision making, arranging for student-led activities, re-formulating the quality of interaction between pupils and teachers, and, rather than assigning grades and normative evaluations, engaging in descriptive reporting (Doll, 1979). These are some of the aspects of the innovative approaches employed by alternative schools worldwide including alternative schools in the Arab-Palestinian society as shall be discussed later in the paper.

The phenomenon of alternative education schools in the Arab-Palestinian society come to represent an attempt to promote a new educational space where Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel can enjoy greater control over their education. They aspire to promote spaces where students can develop their national identity awareness and self-assurance by anchoring the pedagogical process and the learning experience in their cultural and historical contexts. To get a better grasp of their motives, there is a need to highlight the socio-political and educational contexts that impelled social activists and parents into action.

### **3. Palestinian Arab education in Israel**

The indigenous Palestinian Arabs have involuntarily become members of Israeli society (Khattab, 2003). As a result of the war of 1948, and large-scale expulsion and fleeing, the Palestinian population in Israel's present day borders declined from approximately 1,100,000 to 156,000 (Al-Haj & Rosenfeld, 1990). Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Palestinians who found themselves within Israel's newly created borders have faced widespread and systematic discrimination in every major aspect of life (Haidar, 1994). Palestinians in Israel are mainly located in three geographical areas: the Galilee, the Little Triangle

and the Negev. Some 10% live in mixed cities including Haifa and Jaffa (Lewin-Epstein & Semyonov, 1994; Mazawi, 1998).

The residential segregation has also resulted in educational segregation in which Palestinian schools are separated from Jewish schools both spatially and administratively (Khattab, 2003; Amara et al., 2009). Although Israel's State Education Law (1953) recognizes the existence of separate and independent educational systems for secular and Jewish religious state schools, the law does not officially recognize the existence of an Arab-Palestinian education system (Jabareen, 2006). Therefore, the Palestinian Arabs, who are a distinct national and indigenous minority, lack a parallel autonomous educational system designed to meet the diverse national, cultural, and religious needs of the Palestinian Arab society (Al-Haj, 1995; Abu Saad, 2015). In reality, the Arab-Palestinian education system in Israel functions as a separate, subordinated and marginalized body within the state education system (Agbaria, 2013) and devoid of autonomy and Palestinian Arab cultural contents (Al-Haj, 1995; Abu Saad, 2006). Creating a separate educational system for Palestinian Arabs, allows Israel's central government to maintain close political control over the Arab minority (Al Haj, 1995; Swirski, 1999). This tight control is reflected in limitations imposed on curriculum taught in Arab schools - particularly in the social sciences and humanities (Al-Haj 1995, Gaziel 1996). Accordingly, Palestinian Arab educational leaders' influence on curricular policies and resource allocation is scant and sporadic (Jabareen & Agbaria 2010).

In the year 2000, the 1953 State Education Law was amended. Unlike the previous version, Article 2(11) in the current version decrees that the objectives of education include learning 'the language, culture, history, heritage, and unique tradition of the Arab population and of other population groups in Israel, and recognition of the equal rights of all citizens of Israel.' However, this positive development was criticized by the Palestinian Arab educational leadership for

two primary reasons: it did not address their desire for autonomy over their own education system nor did the legal amendment specify the ways and means of its implementation (Harbon, 2009). As such, Palestinian Arab pupils continue to study under a system which suppresses Palestinian Arab identity, culture, and political concerns (Abu-Saad, 2006a).

Research shows that the Palestinian Arab education system has always been at the margins of the overall Israeli education system and the subject of continuous control processes (Al-Haj, 1995; Sarsur, 1999; Arar, 2012). The Palestinian Arab education system suffers from wide discrimination in the allocation of resources, including modern physical infrastructure, facilities and equipment, and teaching hours (Eisikovits, 1997; Arar, 2012). Although the language of instruction in Arab schools is Arabic and the teachers are Palestinian Arabs who often come from the same society or locality as the students (Khattab, 2003), Palestinian Arab schools have little freedom in promoting a national Arab identity or to inculcate Palestinian Arab cultural values in their students (Yonah, 2000). More than four decades have passed since the establishment of the department of Arab education in 1970, and yet despite the many changes that occurred, the state remained averse to granting the Palestinian Arab society educational autonomy and room for manoeuvre in terms of either infrastructure or curriculum content (Al-Haj, 1995; Levy 2005; Abu-Saad, 2006b).

Furthermore, violence is a worrying concern from many state schools serving the Palestinian Arab society. A large national survey on school violence in Israel (Zeira, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2003), found that in comparison to Jewish students, Palestinian Arab students were more vulnerable to victimization by their peers. Palestinian Arab high school students reported being three times more likely to avoid school because of fear than their Jewish peers. The forms of violence differ as well; whereas Jewish students experienced more low-level forms of aggression, Palestinian Arabs encountered more severe forms of

violence such as threats by students brandishing weapons. Clearly, this creates an unhealthy academic atmosphere. Due to the heavy handed and top-down approach employed by the Ministry of Education, innovation, freedom of expression, creativity and reform in Arab education are extremely limited. Furthermore, Palestinian Arab students and faculty are prevented from actualizing on the social, cognitive and emotional levels. One of the only remaining avenues open to the system is academic excellence. Therefore, the system features an excessive emphasis on the value of academic excellence at the expense of cultural, educational and national values (Al-Haj, 1995; Amara & Mar'i, 2002; Abu Asbah, 2007). This practice allows the Israeli state to emphasize select narratives, particularly in civics, history, geography and literature classes, while obscuring, even eradicating others (Agbaria, 2013). As such, in exerting full control over Palestinian Arab education, the Israeli State aims to create a type of Arab educational system that produces shallow citizens that are devoid of history, personality and independence (Al-Haj, 1996; Amara & Mar'i, 2002).

Traditionally, private schools have been the primary refuge for parents dissatisfied with state-run schools. These schools tend to be church affiliated. Serving both Christian and Muslim children, they place a high value on academic excellence and traditional relatively rigid forms of discipline. However, spaces are limited and in response to increasing demand, these schools created higher financial and academic criteria for enrollment (Levy & Massalha, 2010). Massalha (2009) believes that these admission requirements are elitist and class-oriented. Furthermore, some parents view the schools as too expensive while others believe that their pedagogy is outdated, rigid and inadequate for their children's needs (Ichilov & Mazawai, 1997; Levy & Massalha, 2010).

Against this backdrop, a small number of parents, educators and social activists called for alternative educational frameworks that provide refuge from

the unruly, restrictive and uncreative curricula of state schools, and bring about a democratic and humanist alternative to the authoritative pedagogies of church schools (Levy & Massalha, 2010). Above all, they aspired to create school environments that welcome expressions of Arab-Palestinian identity and bring Palestinian Arab historical and cultural narratives to the fore (Amara et al. 2009; Massalha, 2009). In the following section, we will provide an overview of major alternative school initiatives, past and present, in the Arab-Palestinian society in Israel, highlighting some of the major challenges they face.

#### **4. Alternative education schools in the Arab-Palestinian Society in Israel**

Israel is considered a leading country in alternative education, in particular democratic education, boasting over 20 schools spread throughout the country (Kizel, 2012). Yaakov Hecht established the first democratic school in Israel in Hadera in 1987. Hecht, together with parents and educators, envisioned a school which would promote freedom of choice – the freedom to choose subjects based on pupils' interests and passions as well as their own rhythm and pace.

A number of factors precipitated the relatively rapid increase in democratic education in Israel. For instance, the Ministry of Education instituted reforms which turned education into a commodity (Levy & Massalha, 2012). Furthermore, Israeli society began to abandon its founding ethos of Zionism and socialism and adopt ideals of a more democratic and liberal nature (Inbar, 1993). With this shift came increased emphasis on individual freedom (Yonah, 2000). Perhaps most significantly, affluent and middle class Jewish parents became very dissatisfied with deteriorating levels of public education (Dahan & Yonah, 2007) and sought alternatives to secure the best educational opportunities for their children.

As with Jewish parents, groups of Arab-Palestinian parents, educators and social activists have also established some of the first alternative schools in the

Arab-Palestinian society in Israel, albeit, with varying degrees of success (see Levy & Massalha, 2010; 2012). Their motives, however, were somewhat different from those of their Jewish counterparts.

One of the earliest school initiatives is the *Kufr Qari Elementary Democratic School*, which was a regular elementary state school until 1993 when a new principal was appointed. Driven by the vision of democratic education, the new principal sought to transform the school from its debilitated and underperforming state to a school based on democratic education. The principal believed that democratic education could offer solutions to many of the chronic problems plaguing Arab schools including high dropout rates, poor educational achievement, and low self-image (Levy & Massalha, 2012). However, transforming the school into a democratic was not an easy task. Very quickly he found himself in direct confrontation with senior teachers who still held to “traditional patterns of thinking” (Levy & Massalha, 2012, p. 12). To overcome this obstacle and many others, he began by renovating the school. He believed that a change in physical environment would strengthen the teachers’ and students sense of belonging and, as a result, would increase their willingness to embrace pedagogic transformations.

However, changing the school pedagogy was more challenging than making changes to the physical appearance of the school. To deal with the resistance of the staff he turned directly to the mothers of the school’s children. They underwent special training to expose them to the principles of democratic alternative and its attributes in comparison with traditional education. The principal then turned to students and had them establish a democratic student council. The council was empowered to make decisions regarding the educational process, codes of behavior in the school, and extracurricular activities. The school placed the child at the center and viewed democracy as a procedural negotiation between seemingly equal parties namely, teachers,

parents and students. The school became part of a strong forum of democratic schools in Israel (Levy & Massalha, 2012). However, when the founding principal retired and a new principal took over, the school reverted to its original status as a state school and changed its name from the *Elementary Democratic School* to the *Elementary school for Science and Creativity*. (Personal communication, September 2016)

Another alternative school that came into prominence but eventually also shut its doors, is the *Arab Democratic School of Yaffa*. The school was founded in 2004 in the mixed city of Jaffa which comes under the jurisdiction of the City of Tel Aviv by a group of Palestinian Arab parents and political activists led by a well-known local educator. The school advocated democratic pedagogy and placed a strong emphasis on Arabic language and Arabic culture in the hope they would curb the deteriorating state of Arab education in Jaffa, and offer children a type of education that State and Church affiliated schools would not or could not offer (Levy & Massalha, 2012). Yaffa the school was a symbol of the historic Yaffa (Jaffa), the Palestinian Arab City. By linking learning to their sense of Arab identity, parents advocated for a rich vision of Arab identity as an alternative to the shallow narrative offered by the state. Moreover, the school believed in a child-centered approach and encouraged parental involvement (Levy & Massalha, 2010). However, the school was forced to close its doors in 2011 due to financial constraints and lack of funding resulting from the exhausting court battles for recognition with the Ministry of Education and the Education Department of Tel Aviv City Council.

It is evident thus far from the review above that Alternative schools' journey into being is one that is fraught with difficult challenges chiefly amongst them securing official recognition. However, parents' intervention could also be a significant derailing factor as in the case of *Deeritna: Al Nahda Al-Arabia* School. Translated as the School of Arabic Reawakening, this post-elementary

school was also established in Kufr Qari in 2009 by a small group of educators and parents. Parents envisioned an alternative educational environment for their children that “places the child at the center of the educational process in a relatively non-hierarchical educational space, and infused with extra-curricular programs” (Levy & Massalha, 2012, p. 13). Extra-curricular programs that include learning about Palestinian history, and going on excursions to the ruins of the Arab villages which were demolished by Zionist paramilitary groups during the 1948 war and military forces thereafter. These activities set the school on a path unique to existing Arab state schools which refrain from teaching the Palestinian Arab national narrative, or even discussing it unofficially (Abu Asbah, 2007).

In their struggle for recognition the school faced fierce opposition from local school head teachers, educators and the local Education Department who feared the new initiative would attract the educationally strong and the better-off students, leaving the formal system with the weaker students. To sidestep this opposition, the school opted for a policy of non-selective enrollment and opened up registration to students from the larger vicinity. This move triggered internal conflicts between groups of parents, until the school eventually dropped the idea of being alternative. Subsequently, the school changed ownership and is now operated by an Israeli for-profit network of schools called *Atid*. The network is known for its excessive focus on excellence and scholarly achievements (Levy & Massalha, 2012), an orientation dubbed as one of the fundamental flows in the Arab-Palestinian education system in Israel (e.g. Abu Asbah, 2007).

The schools reviewed thus far have either ceased to exist or dropped the alternative status and reverted back to conventional state control. The next two schools seem to have survived the state bureaucratic obstacle course and remain operational at the time of writing this article. The schools are *Masar* in the city of Nazareth and *Hewar* in the mixed city of Haifa. The information about these

two schools were obtained by the paper's authors as part of an ongoing study on alternative schools in the Arab-Palestinian context. *Masar* was established in 1998 by a group of social activists and parents, whom with the support of the Department of Education in the city opened the school's first pilot Kindergarten consisting only of 11 children. The school has expanded in size and levels since then and was officially recognized in 2006 by the Ministry of Education as a fully independent alternative school. Today the school is firmly established as a regional comprehensive school with over 250 Christian and Muslim students, and receives up to 75% of its funding from the Ministry of Education. The school supplements the rest from tuition fees

*Masar's* educational process is driven by the values of reflection and inquiry, holistic teaching methods, social interaction and communal involvement. *Masar* believes that educational visions must be created locally from direct reflection on teacher practices that are rooted in the specific values, culture and challenges of the Arab-Palestinian society. Among other things, the school employs alternative evaluation methods. According to the school, student evaluation aims at nurturing self-awareness and the ability to articulate and accept constructive criticism and self-criticism. Unlike the conventional grading system which reflects a pupil's progress in relation to a calculated numerical average, pupils in *Masar* are evaluated qualitatively in relation to their own abilities. Furthermore, *Masar* places greater emphasis on the creative arts, such as music, painting and drama.

The school *Hewar* shares a similar vision to *Masar*. *The* school is based in the mixed City of Haifa. The word *Hewar* means dialogue, which is one of the guiding principles of the school. Their philosophy is guided by the principles of democracy, dialogue, creativity and critical thinking. The school was first established in 2001, also by a group of parents, educators and social activists. In contrast to *Masar* however, *Hewar's* journey for recognition was long and was

met with fierce resistance from the Department of Education in the city and the Ministry of Education. It's only in 2012 and after a number of petitions to the Supreme Court that the school was finally granted a license to operate as an independent alternative school. However, the school does not receive any funding from the state and hence is fully private and charges full tuition fees. The school only caters for pupils in the elementary and secondary school levels and in total has 120 pupils (1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade) as well as 55 children preschool children aged three to five.

### **5. The viability of alternative schools in the Arab Palestinian society in Israel**

In reviewing the above alternative schools in the Arab-Palestinian society in Israel one can infer that their journey into being is an uphill struggle. The main obstacles include obtaining recognition and a license to operate from the Ministry of Education as well as funding. Schools that apply for recognition often face an lengthy legal battle against the Ministry of Education which appears to be deeply reluctant to grant Arab-Palestinian schools greater control over their curriculum, despite the large number of Jewish alternative schools of various types (e.g. Democratic, Montessori, Anthroposophy) that operate in Israel.

With no license to operate or an official recognition, alternative schools will undoubtedly struggle to secure the necessary funding to pay for the running costs of the school including paying teachers' salaries and their associated benefits as defined by law, maintenance costs, equipment, and pay rent for the school premises. That means they have to rely on charging full tuition fees from a highly committed group of parents who would be willing to take the risk of sending their children to schools with no official recognition or in the process of applying for one. This may inadvertently create a situation where mainly children from financially able families can afford to join.

In general, funding of schools in Israel vary according to their status: official institutions, non-official recognized institutions, and exempted institutions (Ultra-Orthodox Jewish institutions). Official institutions are educational institutions owned and maintained by the government or a local authority. Official institutions follow 100% of the core curriculum of the Ministry of Education and are supervised by it, and the teachers are employed by the state or the local authority. These institutions make up the state and state-religious streams of education and are fully funded by the Ministry of Education. The great majority of Palestinian Arab schools in Israel fall in this category. Non-official recognized institutions are educational institutions not owned or maintained by the state but recognized and supervised by the Ministry of Education and receive up to 75% in funding. By law they have to teach 75% of the core curriculum set by the Ministry of Education (See Ben-Shahar, 2009). Church affiliated private schools and alternative education schools fall into this category. To supplement funding these schools rely on tuition fees and donations. However, in the case of alternative schools in the Palestinian Arab society it is not taken for granted that once they obtain the recognition they will by default secure funding. To survive therefore, a school may resort to charging full tuition fees, as in the case of *Hewar* school - a sum which could be beyond the reach of the less well-off.

Alternative schools differentiate themselves from state schools and Church affiliated schools by espousing child-centered teaching practices and by shunning standardized academic assessment and evaluation (i.e. exams). Instead, they claim to employ alternative forms of assessment in the form of qualitative evaluations that focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the students. However, this poses a valid question concerning the recruitment of suitable teachers who are familiar with alternative teaching practices and most importantly endorse the philosophy and ideals of alternative education. None of Israel's 26 Teacher

Training Colleges offer courses or specializations in alternative education, but one that offers programs in Democratic education. The majority of Palestinian Arab teachers however, graduate from four Arab-Palestinian Teacher Training colleges, none of which offer training in alternative education pedagogies. This reality implies that teachers who join these schools may lack the necessary qualifications, skills and conviction that allow them to hit the ground running upon joining the schools. Hence, the burden of training prospective teachers in the ideals and principles of alternative education falls on the schools themselves.

Research on the Arab education system in Israel shows that it exists in isolation of the surrounding social and historical contexts and ignores Palestinian Arab sentiment (e.g. Abu Saad, 2006; Arar, 2012). This policy strips knowledge of any meaningful value, and deprives the learners of the opportunity to think critically about their educational, social and political realities.

For these reasons, the founders of alternative schools believe that schools should be more reflective of the Palestinian Arab culture and historical narrative. By establishing alternative schools, they seek to infuse new values into the Arab-Palestinian educational scene such as the commitment to self-examination, change and innovation, freedom of expression, tolerance of differences, social responsibility, dialogue and freedom of choice. Most of all, they endeavor to infuse the schools' curricula with Arab-Palestinian cultural and historical narratives. As such their efforts are a manifestation of what Mar'i (1987) described as "an attempt by Palestinians to preserve and reinforce Arab national identity particularly their Palestinian identity - and to instill pride in their own culture, heritage, and nationality" (p. 37). Nevertheless, while their efforts may undoubtedly be welcome by politically and socially active parents and activists, critics and the general public however, may be less convinced by the reforms being implemented in these schools or which historical narrative being adopted

and instead focus only on student academic achievement or what Barr and Parrett (2001) referred to as the “bottom-line”.

However, the philosophies and practices of these schools have not yet undergone thorough and rigorous examinations to determine their effectiveness in achieving their desired objectives, since alternative education schools remain a relatively new phenomenon in Israel’s Palestinian Arab society. The lack of evidence to support their effectiveness may hamper existing schools from expanding and discourage the establishment of new initiatives in a society which after all associates school effectiveness with academic excellence, a criterion that alternative schools vehemently reject. Hence, the question whether alternative schools can offer a viable alternative to the conventional Palestinian Arab school system is a relative one. Proponents of mainstream education often define effectiveness by virtue of academic excellence, whereas proponents of alternative schools reject this criterion and view it as invalid and outdated. Instead, alternative schools demand to be judged on the learning experience, school milieu, and the child-centered practices that for instance advocate freedom of choice. In this regard however, the absence of a system that monitors and supervises alternative education schools may produce intellectual poverty because the schools devote themselves to the choices of the students, who may not be exposed enough to broad areas of knowledge and ignore core subjects they have no interest in (Kizel, 2012).

In conclusion, the emerging phenomenon of alternative schools in the Arab-Palestinian society has not taken place in a vacuum. Years of neglect, deteriorating standards of state education and the narrow-mindedness outlook of the mainstream system has driven parents and educators to seek alternatives. While private and church affiliated schools may address many of the ills of state education, they are still seen by educational entrepreneurs as outdated, rigid and purely achievement orientated. Educational entrepreneurs believe that state and

church-affiliated schools are lacking an educational space where Palestinian Arabs in Israel can have more control over the pedagogical process.

The learning environment, teacher-student relationships, student-centered teaching methods, and use of a curriculum that reflects indigenous Palestinian Arab culture and history are desirable practices that very few Palestinian Arabs would object to. However, there should be a thorough examination of the pedagogical practices and values in these schools to determine their effectiveness and the extent to which they are applied throughout the schools, particularly values such as democracy, critical thinking and freedom of choice in a society which is often described as patriarchal and hierarchical (Haj-Yahia, 2003). Taken at face value, alternative schools could lead to positive changes in the state of education in the Palestinian Arab society in Israel, however, their effectiveness and true value could be hampered by red tape, lengthy legal battles, and lack of funding.

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