

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IJS - 28 EDUCATION IN ISRAEL V. ARAB EDUCATION AND SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS



MR. SHIHADI ASSAD JABER,
HEADMASTER OF THE AKAHVA
GOVERNMENT SCHOOL IN HAIFA.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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ARAB EDUCATION AND SOME
CONCLUDING REMARKS

44 Canfield Gardens,
London, NW6
England
28th June 1972.

Mr. Richard Nolte
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10017
USA

Dear Mr. Nolte:

It is difficult for the visitor to Israel to establish an adequate perspective within which to view Arab education. I had only a limited opportunity to observe Arab education and at that only the opportunity to see Israeli Arabs of long standing. I visited only one Arab school and talked to a handful of Arabs about their educational problems. However, I believe that I do have some impressions which are worth sharing.

If one looks at the statistics about Arab education and compares them with Hebrew education in Israel, he gets a relatively grim impression: for example, it appears that in 1969/70, 8,771 Jewish pupils passed the Bagrut, the secondary school matriculation exam which is the condition for entry to university, out of a population of 12,149 Jewish pupils in the 12th Grade; whereas only 210 Arabs passed the Bagrut out of a 12th Grade population of 895. About 3/4s of the Jewish students passed, while only 2/9s of the Arabs did.¹

It would also be helpful to compare the percentages of children of school age in school at primary and post-primary levels among the Jewish and Arab populations, but these figures are not available in the Statistical Abstract. Since one cannot find much hard information on which to base judgments, he must turn to other sources for information.

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1. See Table T/20, which lists graduates of the Matriculation exam, and Table T/19, which lists the numbers of pupils in post primary education in the 1971 Statistical Abstract of the Ministry of Education. These figures could be factually incorrect and/or incommensurable, but the uninformative presentation of statistics in the 1971 Statistical Abstract does not help the critic in using the statistics.

My visit to the Akahva Government School in Haifa gave me some illustrative though not necessarily representative impressions of Arab primary education, for this school is reputed to be one of the best Arab schools in Israel. The school has 440 students and 19 teachers, though some of them are part-time. The pupils are drawn from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, although most are children of middle class businessmen in Haifa.

This school offers some insight into the possibilities of Arab education in Israel, because it and the Arab community it serves are old and established in Israel. One does not have the organizational problems which one finds in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and other areas occupied after the Six Day War. But one still finds many of the problems which one would expect among the Arab minority.

The Headmaster of the Akahva Government School is Mr. Shihadi Assad Jaber, who brings to his post an interesting and in many ways typical Israeli Arab biography. He was born and raised in a small village called Taibeh near Natanya and was a teacher in the old British Arab schools during Mandatory times. He became a headmaster in his village school after the Israelis declared independence in 1948. But in 1960 he decided that in order for his nine children to get an adequate education he would have to move to a city. So the Ministry of Education and Culture moved him to the Akahva school; but as a teacher, not a headmaster. He regretted leaving his village, for he was a landowner as well as a headmaster. Although he had lost some of his land when the Israelis appropriated it in 1948, he still had enough to sell some recently to finance university education abroad for two of his children. Now Jaber obviously enjoys his present role in Haifa, where his position as Headmaster seems to carry a great deal of status.

Presently the Akahva School is an eight grade school plus kindergarten. But with the reform of the structure of the Israeli schools -- and its development of middle schools -- next year Akahva will become a six grade school, with the top two grades going to a middle school, which will be both Arab and Jewish.

The children in the Akahva school seem to have typical middle class academic attitudes: they have high expectations and they perform fairly well academically. Jaber had just received the results of the Seker for this 8th grade students when I saw him: two thirds had passed and thereby gained entry to academic secondary schools, a record which he said was quite comparable with neighboring Jewish schools. Jaber said that about 80% of the students would finally go on to academic secondary education, about 15% to vocational schools, and only about 5% would drop out of education at the end of their primary schooling. A large number of students from his school have gone on later to universities, although many of them have had to go to

THE AKAHVA PRIMARY
SCHOOL, SET HALF WAY
DOWN THE HIGH HILLS
WHICH ARE HAIFA, WITH
BOYS PLAYING SOCCER IN
THE COURTYARD,...



OFFERS AN EXTENSIVE
METALWORK CURRICULUM...



WHICH THE BOYS IN THE
SCHOOL SEEM TO ENJOY.



Jaber said that children in the school had very few learning difficulties. Reading was rarely a problem. He thought there were no more than half a dozen pupils in the entire school who were experiencing reading difficulties. He accounted for the learning abilities of the children in his school in terms of the family backgrounds. He said the middle class families of most of the children encouraged the children to study.

Jaber's account of the ability of the children in the school was supported by impressions of the classrooms in the school which I visited. The language of instruction in Arab schools is Arabic. But from the 3rd grade the pupils also learn Hebrew. And from the 4th they learn English as well. So when I visited an 8th grade English class, the pupils were able to carry on a conversation with me. And from the class I learned something about the pupils in the school.

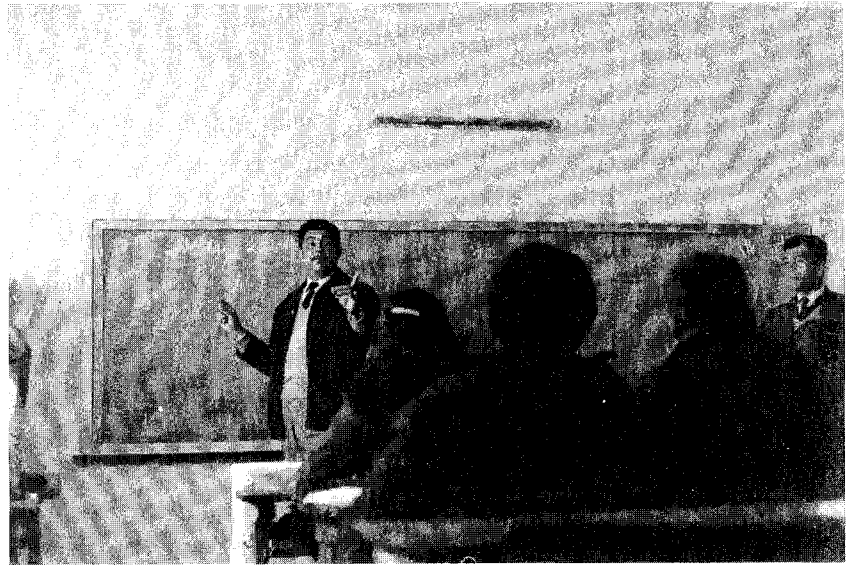
The English class was being taught by Mr. George Asmar, a gregarious man who obviously enjoyed what he was doing. The class was conducted in a traditional but question-and-answer format, which was quite typical of every other class I visited in the school. There were no open classrooms here. But the class was exceptionally lively. The pupils were aggressive in their participation in discussion, and Mr. Asmar encouraged them through his use of the Socratic method of teaching.

As usually happens when I visit an English class in a non-English speaking country, I was quickly involved in a conversation with the class. I told the pupils where I was from, where I was living, and where I intended to live. I then asked them to give me the same information about themselves. A number of them started volunteering. And in their answers they practiced using the various tenses which I had used in my initial statement. After this exchange I told them I was willing to answer any questions they wanted to ask me, so long as they asked the questions in good English.

The first question I was asked was: what do you do? A simple question for most; an extraordinarily complex one for a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs. (No, dear Reader, the appropriate answer in my case is not "nothing.") I told them as best I could what I did, and then I asked them what they wanted to be doing when they were as ancient as I was. I got a very interesting set of replies. Some students wanted to be engineers. Others doctors and nurses. Some wanted to be lawyers. But all of them wanted to leave Israel. Most of them wanted to go to the United States, at least to receive their higher education. One student even asked me if I would help him get

2. In fact, his own children have attended universities abroad. Two of his children are presently studying out of Israel. He indicated that it was almost impossible for Israeli Arabs to get scholarships to study abroad. He said that the many scholarships open to Jews were not available to Israeli Arab candidates. He had paid for his sons' education abroad by collecting some of his own

MR. GEORGE ASMAR, THE
AMIABLE ENGLISH TEACHER,
EXHORTS HIS CLASS...



WHILE THE STUDENTS
THERE ENTHUSIASTICALLY--
WELL, AT LEAST SOME OF
THEM--RESPOND TO HIS
QUESTIONS AND...

WHILE IN THE NEXT CLASS
SOME YOUNGER STUDENTS
VIGOROUSLY SEEK THE
TEACHER'S APPROVING
WAVE.



a place to study in California when he was ready to go to university. Of course I said I would. My most vivid impression of this exchange was the students' ambitions for professional careers and their universal desire to leave Israel. The latter impression is especially significant for Israel's future: young Arabs may vote with their feet against Israeli policies.

I cannot help but compare the performance of these students with the performance of pupils in their last year of mandatory secondary schooling in a school which I visited in Denmark. (See IJS-7) These pupils had been studying English for only three or four years, whereas the Danish students had been studying English for at least eight years. But the performance of Mr. Asmar's Israeli Arabs was far superior. In fairness to the Danish class, I should indicate that that class was made up of students in the lowest stream of Danish secondary education, whereas Mr. Asmar's pupils are probably among the best that Israeli Arabs can produce. However the contrast is still important and a testament to both the ability of the Arab pupils and the competence of their teacher.

So Mr. Jaber's pride in his school seems quite well founded. He and his mainly young teachers seem to be doing a fine job using very traditional classroom methods and following the syllabus dictated by the Ministry of Education and Culture. But this dictation raises the important point about the control of the Arab Curriculum in Israel.

There is a separate section of the Ministry of Education and Culture, headed by a Jew, which oversees the curriculum for Arab schools. This Arab section sets the curriculum for all Arab schools in Israel. There seems to be no formal involvement of the Arab community in decisions about the curriculum for its schools. Of course this lack of involvement of the community does not distinguish the Arab from the Hebrew schools, but the social and political situation of the Arabs makes this lack of involvement even worse.

On the basis of my brief visit and conversations, I do not feel qualified to make any detailed judgments about Israeli policy concerning Arab education. However, I do believe it would be useful for me to report the views of some Israeli Arab intellectuals about the education of Arabs in this Jewish state. I shall report these views without identifying my sources, for I was given these views in private on the condition of a promise of anonymity. These sources requested this anonymity because they said they feared reprisals for their views. I personally doubt that there would be any reprisals whatsoever for what I am about to report, but in order to abide by my promise, I shall create a fictitious Mr. Hassan, who shall be my composite Arab intellectual representing all those I talked to.

Mr. Hassan is a man with a great deal of experience with the Israeli Arab school system, first as student, later as teacher. He is not a post-1967 Israeli Arab. He has received his graduate



THE YOUNG TEACHERS AT
THE AKAHVA SCHOOL SEEM
TO BE INTELLIGENT, CAPABLE,.



ATTRACTIVE, BUT QUITE
TRADITIONAL IN
CLASSROOM TEACHING;...



HOWEVER, THE NUMBER
OF WOMEN TEACHERS IN
THIS ARAB SCHOOL INDICATES
THAT THE EMANCIPATION OF
WOMEN IS IN FULL FLOWER
HERE.

education in an Anglo-American setting.³

Mr. Hassan was extremely critical of the education for Arabs in Israel. His first point was that the Arab in Israel is caught in a very difficult position: he must operate in a state which is taking aggressive actions against his people. Therefore, the Israeli Arab is always in an ambiguous position vis-a-vis the Jews and his fellow Arabs in Israel and in other lands; thus he is always in a state of tension. The difficulties created by the international Arab/Israeli conflict are an everyday part of his life.

As an example of the problems faced by the Israeli Arab as teacher or student in the Israeli schools, Mr. Hassan offered the case of teaching about good citizenship, which is part of the curriculum in Israeli Arab schools. How can an Arab teacher, he asked, tell Arab students to be good citizens of Israel when the role of being a good citizen in Israel conflicts with his Arab identity? Mr. Hassan himself said that he construed the demands for good citizenship to require that he not actively subvert the security of the State of Israel; but it did not require him to abet the State in its activities against the Arabs. And this is what he told his students. Another example of the problem is that of Israeli Independence Day, which is supposed to be celebrated in Israeli Arab schools: this, he said, was a joke; but black humour at best.

Hassan went on to complain that the curriculum in Arab schools mandated by the Ministry of Education and Culture created a negative self-image in the eyes of the Arab children. He said that the history of Palestine was taught from a Zionist perspective. Approximately a quarter of the history of Palestine as taught in Arab schools focused on the Arab contribution; the rest looked at the waves of Zionists coming to Palestine. As well, general history was required to be taught from the Zionist point of view. The stereotype of the Arab, according to Hassan, which emerged from the history books as well as other course materials, was that of the Arab whose role in life was to chop wood and then shave with his axe once the chore was done.

The Israeli Arab school system has lagged behind the social development of Arab society, in Hassan's view. Most Arab schools in Israel are segregated by sex (Akahva was not!). The place of women in Israeli Arab education is subservient, whereas the emancipation of women in the Arab family has progressed far past these official institutional positions.

3. Let me clearly state that the views represented through the fiction of Mr. Hassan were not offered to me by anyone at the Akahva School or anyone in any way associated with it. These views are those of Arab intellectuals presently outside of the state school system of Israel.

Hassan said that the Arab teacher training college in Haifa, which is the major source of teachers for the Arab schools in Israel, is a very conservative school. According to some long time Arab teachers, the current graduates of the teacher training college, which is headed by a Jew, are more conservative than the older experienced teachers.

What upset Hassan most is the way in which decisions are made for the Arab schools in Israel. Since the curriculum is subject to centralized control, the Ministry of Education makes the decisions. And, as was said earlier, the head of the Arab section is a Jew. Hassan admitted that a few Arabs worked in the Ministry, but he said they were the Arab equivalent of American Black Uncle Toms.

Hassan suggested that Arabs ought to control the curriculum for their own schools in Israel. But interestingly enough he did not want curriculum control decentralized to the individual school. He only wanted Arabs in charge of the Arab curriculum in the Ministry. He had a very negative view of the ability of teachers and headmasters in Arab schools: so at least he would have no difficulty on this point in communicating with the Ministry of Education officials. (See IJS-26 on "Teachers and Teaching in Israel")

Hassan said that he wanted a curriculum which would emphasize the cultural pluralism of the history of Palestine and which would acknowledge the Arab contribution to Israeli and indeed modern Western culture. He felt it was important for Arab schools in Israel to create a positive self-image for Israeli Arab students, because most of them had grown up without the example of an intellectual middle class to show them what they could accomplish. Most of the intellectual Arabs left Israel in 1948.

Hassan carried his multi-culturalist position even further than just a critique of Arab education in Israel. He said that he wanted the Jewish children to have a multi-cultural education as well instead of the Zionist indoctrination which is part and parcel of the current curriculum in the Jewish schools.

The comments of Hassan, my fictitious but representative Arab intellectual, must stand on their own. I cannot evaluate them except to indicate that, whatever exaggeration there might have been in them for me as the visiting American who might carry the message to someone who would listen, he offers a viewpoint which must be taken seriously by the Israeli Government and which today does not seem to be presented.

The multicultural vision of Israeli society is directly in conflict with Zionist ideology. But the reality of a multi-cultural society which does in fact exist in Israel demands a respect for constituent cultures which is not reflected in the educational systems dominated by the Zionist ideology. Zionist ideology as manifested through the Israeli educational system has been an important force in assimilating many diverse Jewish communities into a Jewish State. But what has

worked to create a sense of Jewish community in Israel will not work to resolve conflict between the societies which must coexist in the political state of Israel.

The problems of Arab education will not truly be solved until there is a resolution to the Arab/Israeli conflict. But improvement in the present situation in education, through the mutual respect it could breed, might contribute to that more far-reaching solution.

CONCLUDING IMPRESSIONS

In this newsletter and those immediately preceding it, I have reported my experiences during an American fortnight in Israel. In such a limited time period, it would be foolhardy for me to draw any fast conclusions. At most I can offer concluding impressions.

Israeli education has not served its Jewish society half as badly as its internal critics might lead one to believe. Indeed the system as a whole has proved itself to be quite flexible and responsive to changing needs and changing ideas about the conduct of education. It can claim fair share of the credit for turning the desert sand into milk and honey.

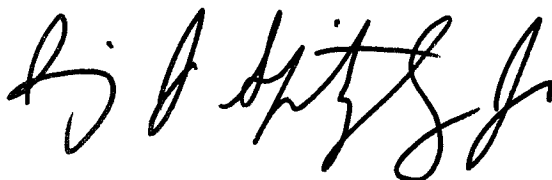
Of course the system has not worked as well as it could. Undoubtedly its teachers are not the best in the world (See IJS-25). It seems clear that the Ministry has not indulged in systematic thinking and long term planning. (See IJS-27) But it has muddled through well enough to make this foreign observer expect to see it improve on all fronts.

The most difficult problem facing Israeli education is that facing Israel itself: coming to terms with the Arabs inside and outside of its borders. If there could be a mutually honorable (and I choose this word advisedly, because honor is what seems to be most important to both sides) settlement, there would be more resources available to deal with Israel's social problems, including and especially education for the children who need nurture. And also, there would be the added dividend of new human resources in both Arab and Jewish communities which would be created by an atmosphere of mutual cooperation instead of mutual suspicion.

However, it would be foolhardy for the Israelis to wait for some future settlement of the conflict to begin to improve their relationships with their Arabs within. In the sphere of education there is obvious opportunity for improvement. And only if the Israeli Jews can show through their attitude to the Israeli Arabs that they are willing to live in a society where each accepts the other as an equal can one expect to see much progress made toward solution of problems which lie outside of (or on) the borders.

Of course one cannot settle a many-sided problem on one side; but the majority has a responsibility to take the first step when dealing with a minority within its own borders. The first step in education is a dialogue about the problem. And this has not yet begun. The beginning of this dialogue -- the internal negotiations -- must rank high on Israel's social agenda. But my impression is that this item has not even been listed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.', written in a cursive style.

Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

Received in New York on July 7, 1972.