

HA'ARETZ

Bilingual education flourishes in Israel, but only in cities

'My first reaction to hearing Arabic on the streets was fear,' says one mother.

By [Or Kashti](#) | Oct. 7, 2013 | 2:23 PM |



A child at the Hebrew-Arabic kindergarten in Haifa. Photo by Avishag Sh'ar-Yashuv

In Haifa in just 10 days, after 44 children, Arabs and Jews between the ages of one and four, were signed up by their parents. Similar excitement was felt in Jaffa, as a bilingual preschool opened there earlier this year and filled up in similar fashion. The interest garnered by these preschools, run by the “Yad B’Yad” (hand in hand) foundation, is very high indeed. During pre-registration, roughly 550 families expressed interest in having their children learn in a bilingual, Arab-Jewish environment. These families might be the beginning of a new kind of community.

The success in Haifa and Tel Aviv, however, has not been matched by the foundation’s “Galil” school, which serves communities in the Misgav Regional Council, as well as in the city of Sakhnin, and the Arab town of Sha'ab. Among the 24 children who began first grade this year, only five are Jewish. Until a few years ago, the numbers of Jewish and Arab children were more or less equal, and while there are

many reasons behind this trend, one explanation that comes up again and again in talks with officials is the fact that many Jewish towns and moshavim are increasingly closing themselves off behind formidable entry gates.

The bilingual preschool in Haifa was opened last year with 13 students. That number more than tripled this year. The preschool caters to three age groups, from one-and-a-half to four year-olds. There are two certified preschool teachers assigned to each group, one Arab and one Jewish, as well as assistants from both backgrounds. Ofek tries to employ slightly more Arab assistants, in order for the children to hear and learn more Arabic in a primarily Hebrew-dominated environment.

Each staff member speaks in their native language, but no one seems to mind when words from either tongue are mixed in. Cooperation and community are what's most important. Children sign their names on drawings in both Arabic and Hebrew and the hooks on which they hang their bags and coats also feature two names. The same bilingual rule applies to the books – both Hebrew and Arabic offerings can be found in the classrooms. The children are exposed to both Hebrew and Arabic music, too. When the bigger children sit down for their mid-morning snack at 10:30, they say blessings before they eat, first in Arabic, then in Hebrew.

Arab and Jewish children from all parts of the city attend preschool in Haifa. In contrast to Yad B'Yad's other outlets, the school in Haifa is privately owned, though the organization hopes it will be taken over by the municipality. Parents pay between NIS 2,200 and 2,700 per month and the school is open six days a week, from 7 A.M. to 5.30 P.M. Parents send their children to the school for various reasons; some are ideological, others value the small, intimate environment and some are simply attracted by the convenient proximity of the school to their homes.

“A visitor from outer space would come here and ask why the education systems are separate,” says Joseph Atarsh, one of the parents. “We live in a joint [Jewish-Arab] city, we use the same gardens and parks. Joint preschools should be the norm. For me, it's very simple,” he says.

At the same time, Atarsh adds, “I don't think that any parent would send their child to the preschool if they didn't think it was a positive environment. We don't spend all our time dealing with the Arab-Jewish conflict.”

Adva Shay decided to send her son to the preschool so that “he will grow up differently to the way that I and my generation grew up. When I was 20-years-old, I realized that my first reaction to hearing Arabic on the streets was fear. I wanted it to be different for my son - that Arabic also be a language of joy, fun and coexistence. It's pretty easy for us to do it, as we go to the same parks in the afternoons and it's not as if the mothers that meet there only talk about the Nakba.”

Debates about past tragedies and discussions of conflicting historical narratives are usually set aside until the children are older. But bilingual education, especially from earlier ages, definitely fosters a more multicultural perspective, research has shown, as well as the ability to perceive the reality around us from many different points of view. Bilingual education finds a way to express the similarities – national,

religious, status, or ethnic – rather than the differences. One example of how this approach is reflected in a preschool is the celebration of Jewish, Muslim and Christian holidays.

“Dialogue is the foundation of our educational process,” says Ofek. “We were more than a little surprised by the very large amount of interest in bilingual education.” Recently, Ofek has received requests from families to enroll their children for the next school year. The birthdates listed on the registration forms were “early 2014.”

Reasons for Isolation

Haviva Ner-David’s son is one of five Jewish children in the first grade at the Galil school, where the number of Jewish children dropped drastically from 50% seven years ago to only 18% today. She recently published an article on the website “Dugrinet,” in which she wrote of her efforts to convince other parents to choose bilingual education. “It wasn’t an easy decision for our family and I’m not sure that it was the best decision for my son, in the short term,” she wrote. “Going from preschool to first grade is difficult enough, without suddenly throwing bilingual education into the mix, and especially without his friends. He’s definitely been pushed out of his comfort zone on many different levels, just as I have. But I’m afraid that staying in our comfort zones won’t get us anywhere.”

The Galil school, which opened in 1998, was one of Yad B’Yad’s first two bilingual frameworks. The other was a school in Jerusalem. Galil is a public school, which has been recognized as a special, multi-regional framework. There are 171 students in the elementary school – 31 of whom are Jewish. Yad B’Yad’s other schools (in Jerusalem, and Kfar Qara, a Bedouin village in Wadi Ara, which opened in 2004), house about 800 students.

“I believe in coexistence, so sending my son to the Galil school was not far-fetched,” says Ner-David, whose family moved from Jerusalem to Kibbutz Hanaton about four years ago. “I was surprised that among all of the communities in Misgav [of which there are about 30], only three families sent their children to Jewish-Arab schools. It’s sad and it seems unfair to me.”

Parents who send their children to the school point to various reasons for the low rate of Jewish enrollment. The Galil school is a 20-minute drive away and the bus costs a few hundred shekels per month. Parents are afraid their children will be excluded from the other children in their small communities if they learn at different schools. There are other alternative schools in the area as well, which serve the same population that is dissatisfied with the traditional education system.

There are also bitter arguments among the community members and the school regarding the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead. But hovering in the air during every conversation, sometimes expressed and sometimes not, is another explanation: the trend of Jewish communities in the area to close their doors to Arabs through acceptance committees.

“The decision to go to the Galil school comes with a high price, in terms of the resources and the time commitment necessary. It’s very difficult to go against the stream,” says Noa Tsuk, whose two daughters attend the school. “I believe that students get something here that cannot be measured, like tolerance and

the ability to settle conflicts. As a parent I think that a complex view of reality is a true gift, but there are many parents who disagree, who are uninterested in this complexity and want to continue painting Jews and Arabs in different colors, black and white. This fear of complexity stems from lots of things; from our Zionist DNA but also from ignorance. At least ignorance can be taken care of, and it must be.”

According to another parent, the isolation that characterizes some of the Jewish communities in the area is a result of the “coming of age of the second generation, which is seeking to educate its children with the good Zionist values of old - which include fear of Arabs. No one will say it outright, but the focus on ‘community’ is meant to keep the gates closed. There are many seemingly rational reasons not to choose the Galil school, but the most common one - and the one least named – is fear of the stranger.”

Shuli Dichter, head of Yad B’Yad since January 2011, says that the Jewish students at the Galil school come from small communities and their whole social world is based on the community and the region. “A bilingual school must be very attractive indeed in order to bring children in from places that foster such a strong sense of identity.” Despite the difficulty in Misgav, which is measured against the successes in Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv, Dichter is convinced that “we must not focus on pluralistic education only in cities. The suburbs too must be attended to. Otherwise reality will completely close off Arabs and Jews into separate lives.” This week, as many parents feared the closure of the Galil school due to low Jewish enrollment, Dichter said he is convinced that the trend will change.

“Today, there are many more Jews that like to keep their children close to home, among their friends,” says Rim Mi’ari, one of the heads of the parents committee at the Galil School. “Joint education must begin from a young age, before the children adopt stereotypes and begin to fear one another. Again and again, I’m surprised by Jews who think that coexistence means eating hummus in Sakhnin.”

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