

Palestinian-Jewish Bilingual Education in Israel: Its Influence on Cultural Identities and its Impact on Intergroup Conflict

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This paper reports on a rather small cross-sectional study conducted with students studying in an integrated bilingual Palestinian-Jewish school and with similar age students studying in standard segregated Palestinian-Jewish schools in Israel.

The interviews performed allow us to become acquainted with the children's conceptions of issues regarding their own Jewish and Palestinian cultural identity as these are shaped through the interaction in school and the larger communal context and how they envision the conflict and their present and future relations with the 'other'.

The study was conceived as a first step towards a longitudinal study on the long-term influence of bilingual education on students, their cultural identities and their perceptions of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

All in all we believe our study contributes valuable information on the potential of bilingual education to shape identities in conflict-ridden environments and the possibility of healing through these educational efforts.

Keywords: bilingual education, peace education, intergroup encounters, identity, culture, coexistence

Introduction

Modern society has looked to formal educational efforts to cure many of its ills: social and economic gaps, lax value commitments, prejudice, as well as ethnic conflicts. However, even massive educational efforts cannot solve every social problem. Yet, sometimes, even the smallest of educational initiatives holds great promise.

In recent years a new bilingual integrated educational initiative has been started in Israel. Its main purpose is to offer dignity and equality to the two Israeli groups who have for the last one hundred years denied each other's humanity: Palestinians and Jews. For the last 50 years Palestinians ('Palestinian Israelis' in recent years has become the preferred denomination for people who were traditionally known as 'Arab Israelis'; the present paper deals only with these Palestinians and not with those in the recently created Palestinian Authority) have been at the losing end, a minority in an ethnocratic Jewish state (Rouhana, 1997; Smootha, 1996). The basic idea behind the initiative is to create fully egalitarian bilingual educational environments. The desired outcome is youth who can acknowledge and respect one another, while at the same time cultivating loyalty to their own cultural heritage.

Intergroup Contact and Bilingual Education

There is a rather long history of the attempts through intergroup encounters to partially overcome intergroup conflicts. Psychological premises have in one way or another guided for the most part all this activity (for a review see Abu-Nimer, 1999; Stephan & Stephan, 2001; Weiner, 1998). The Contact Hypothesis, in its various formulations and elaborations, suggests that intergroup contact – which takes place under the conditions of status equality and cooperative interdependence while allowing for sustained interaction between participants and allowing for the potential forming of friendships – might help alleviate conflict between groups and encourage change in negative intergroup attitudes (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1976; Pettigrew, 1998). A recent meta-analysis provided marked evidence for the benefits of intergroup contact, especially when the contact situation maximises most or all of its optimal conditions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

An additional strategy that has been suggested for the improvement of intergroup relations is bilingual education. Language has been used historically in various educational settings to produce different linguistic outcomes, fostering monolingual and/or bilingual speech communities (Garcia, 1997). However, language education has been shown to entail sociocultural products beyond purely linguistic outcomes.

Language plays a crucial role in social interaction and the transmission of cultural and social values (Fishman, 1970, 1997; Safran, 1999). As a symbolic system, language not only constructs social identity but also may solidify or revitalise national or ethnic identities and loyalties (Fishman, 1989; Haarmann, 1986; Smith, 1998). One may thus consider language to be a sociocultural resource with which nations may unify and separate national or ethnic groups into discrete speech communities, each with its own level of access to concomitant social resources and each loyal to its own divergent, linguistically constructed culture (Haslett, 1989; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). On the other hand, one may ask if the promotion of linguistic pluralism may not transform language education into a societal resource capable of achieving alternative sociopolitical goals. In other words, rather than mobilising the link between identity and nationality, can multilingual education allow language to act as a boundary solvent, bridging between two previously alienated cultural groups (Daoust, 1997; Giles & Coupland, 1991; Giles & Johnson, 1987).

Bilingual education can serve as empowerment pedagogy through the incorporation of home language and culture in school community participation, increasing the self-esteem of minority students (Garcia, 1997; Giles & Weimann, 1987). As far as the majority group is concerned, bilingualism would not only allow for greater intellectual enrichment, but the elite would also benefit from the social consequences of greater cultural integration and pluralism.

Two comprehensive reviews (Genesee & Gandara, 1999; Slavin & Cooper, 1999) have examined the influence of bilingual and cooperative learning on prejudice, discrimination and the acquisition of new cultural paradigms. Genesee and Gandara emphasise the importance of paying explicit attention to societally based intergroup factors if bilingual education is to improve

intergroup attitudes and relationships. Slavin and Cooper point at the relevance of stressing pedagogical factors, such as cooperative educational approaches, so as to create the needed conditions for reframing cultural relations.

Our present preliminary study wishes to add to the potential contribution of bilingual integrated education in the shaping of identities in conflict-ridden environments and the possibility of healing through this educational effort. In the following sections, and after briefly recounting the sociopolitical background within which the educational initiative develops, we will describe only in broad strokes the research tools developed, the methodology used, and the preliminary results of our research, briefly commenting on the importance of the findings in their own right and their relevance to the fields of bilingual and multicultural education.

Sociopolitical background

Considering the sociopolitical context in Israel (Ghanem, 1998; Smooha, 1996), it is clear to all that the idea of creating Palestinian–Jewish coeducation is a daring enterprise. The Center for Bilingual Education in Israel (CBE) was established in 1997 with the aim of initiating and fostering egalitarian Palestinian–Jewish cooperation in education, mainly through the development of bilingual, binational and multicultural integrated educational institutions. Since 1977, the Center has been involved in the establishment of the two schools guided by these principles, one in Jerusalem and one in northern Galilee.

From its inception, the CBE has adhered to an ideology that emphasises the need to sustain symmetry at all organisational, curricular and practical levels. They have been successful in sustaining this goal by securing the services of a well-balanced educational staff, both a Palestinian and a Jewish teacher in each class and a Palestinian and a Jewish school principal.

The schools at the time of the study include students up to the fourth grade and are recognised as state schools supported by the Israeli Ministry of Education. They teach according to the regular curriculum of the state school system but differ in that both Hebrew and Arabic are used as languages of instruction. The schools have adopted what has been characterised as a strong additive bilingual approach, which emphasises symmetry between both languages in all aspects of instruction (Garcia, 1997). In terms of aims and processes, it is to be assumed that the initiators of the bilingual project would agree with Skutnabb-Kangas and Garcia's (1995) three main benefits of an effective bilingual educational project: (1) a high level of multilingualism; (2) equal opportunity for academic achievement; and (3) a strong, positive multilingual and multicultural identity including positive attitudes toward self and others.

The rather optimistic political outlook following the Oslo agreements that characterised the atmosphere in which the bilingual schools were created has changed radically since the events of Yom Ha Adama (i.e. Day of the Land – remembering six Arab Israelis who lost their lives in 1976 while protesting against the confiscation of Arab lands by the Israeli Government) and the violent clashes between Arab demonstrators and Israeli police during the outburst of the Palestinian uprising in October 2000. These events shattered the already fragile Palestinian-Jewish relations within Israel and shocked both

schools' populations. The development of the schools, however, has not stopped and they are continuously growing.

Methodology and population

We conducted a cross-sectional study designed to allow us to become acquainted with the children's conceptions of issues regarding their own Jewish and Palestinian cultural identity, as these are shaped through the interaction in school and the larger communal context and how they envision the conflict and their present and future relations with the 'other'. The approach offered the possibility of uncovering central features of human growth and development while producing quicker findings, and better securing the cooperation of respondents (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Cole & Cole, 1999; McMillan & Schumacher, 1984).

Though cross-sectional research has its disadvantages, this approach was assumed to be fitted to reveal the potential of a future longitudinal cohort study, while allowing its results to be easily incorporated into the wider scheme. Being a preliminary study we conducted it only in the bilingual school in the Galilee, for we had easy accessibility to it through its involvement in an ethnographic study for two previous consecutive years. Coming as we did from qualitative perspectives the choice of interviews seemed natural.

The art of interviewing children has been mostly developed in the legal and mental health professional spheres (Morrison & Anders, 1999). Of two fundamental styles of interviewing that have been described – the directive and non-directive interviews – children usually respond better to more directed simple structured questions. Though individual specific questions in investigative settings elicit much less information than individual open-ended prompts, researchers have consistently shown that children provide fewer details in response to open-ended questions than in response to a series of specific questions (Lamb *et al.*, 1996; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Moreover conversational analysis research has pointed out that the discourse of younger children is typically loosely organised, and incorporates unrelated topics and abrupt topic shifts not always abiding to adult known principles of conversation (Warren & McCloskey, 1997).

After much consideration we decided on the use of an initial directive style of interviewing based on children's comments and reactions to a set of photographs representing a variety of historical and cultural events, and daily school activities. This approach was first described by Collier (1967) as 'photo elicitation'. Bunster (1977) has used photography not only to understand children's explicit, conscious or implicit behavioural rules of conduct but also to uncover their inner world including the significances which they attach to their life experience. Photos have also been used in attempts at measuring ethnic identity and attitudes within a cognitive developmental scheme (Aboud & Doyle, 1993).

The set of photos prepared for the study consisted of a total of 51 pictures divided into three sections. The first included pictures of historical/political figures and events (e.g. Itzhak Rabin, Yasser Arafat, The signing of the peace treaty between Saadat, Carter and Begin, etc.), events related to the

Palestinian-Jewish conflict (political demonstrations, acts of terror on both sides – always careful not to use too explicit pictures of war atrocities), and national paraphernalia (e.g. the Israeli and Palestinian flag). The second section consisted of pictures of public cultural/religious sites (e.g. The Al-Aksa Mosque, The Western Wall, a nearby Church) and paraphernalia representing the three religious groups present in the school (e.g. a shofar, a Christmas tree, a traditional Moslem praying carpet). The third and last section included photos taken in the school of ceremonial events (e.g. Naqbe and Memorial Day ceremonies) and photos showing daily life events in class and during breaks. Since we wanted the analysis also to allow us to look for patterns that emerged within a particular group (e.g. Palestinian students) and to compare patterns from one group to another, the interviews were carefully organised in such a way as to allow for this type of information to be compiled. The number of photographs used and the order in which they were presented were decided upon on the basis of consultations with teachers and a limited number of test interviews.

We expected the tool we developed to afford rich data on the eight/nine-year-old population we were about to interview. We hoped that their familiarity with us plus the mediating element of the photographs would assist in overcoming their natural shortcut approach to conversation. In a sense what we were doing was asking the young children to become our teachers and to help us grasp the complexities of the world we were trying to understand. We also hoped that the subjects would point at what might be missing and to what should be included the next time we had the opportunity to meet them again.

In order to be sensitive to the many culturally prescribed aspects of conversation (Poole & Lamb, 1998), Palestinian children were interviewed in Arabic by the Palestinian researcher and Jewish children in Hebrew by the Jewish researcher. The research team included a bilingual Moslem woman who was present at all interviews, which helped ease possible gender apprehensions. For the first part of our interviews with the children, we used strategies for raising topics without asking direct questions (Yuille *et al.*, 1993) and refrained from using hypothetical questions (MacFarlene, 1986). When we deemed it appropriate, we encouraged children to provide narratives about the issues raised (Morgan, 1995).

The music room was chosen for the interviews, it being a very comfortable environment well known to the children and usually available for our use without many interruptions. Nevertheless, some of the youngsters were, at times, reluctant to participate in the interview situation. With previous permission we audiotaped all interviews. The audiotapes were fully transcribed and the Arabic ones translated into Hebrew to enable analysis. Back translation was performed on a limited number of Arabic transcripts to secure reliability of the contents being expressed. The interviews lasted around a half an hour each. In total we conducted 54 interviews. We interviewed 32 children in the bilingual school. These students were equally divided into Palestinians (16) and Jews (16) as well as equally divided into those studying in the third and fourth grade. Thus we interviewed eight Palestinian and eight Jewish children in the third grade and eight Palestinian children and eight Jewish

children in the fourth grade. For both grades we interviewed over 60% of the total population.

The remaining 22 children interviewed for comparative purposes, came from those studying in parallel grades at the Sachnin Palestinian school and the Misgav Jewish school, both state monolingual schools in Israel. Twelve children were interviewed at the Palestinian school and ten at the Jewish school. These schools were chosen for the demographic and socioeconomic factors their participants shared with the participants in the bilingual programme.

The transcripts were then analysed according to conventional qualitative methods (Mason, 1996; Silverman, 1993). We monitored our first interpretative efforts through peer debriefing, paying special attention to the ways in which we as researchers allowed or did not allow for the preliminary coding to be influenced by our prior expectations or theoretical inclinations. We carefully analysed the data, looking for patterns and thematic issues of relevance, which were then coded to allow for further analysis. The first codification, prepared independently by each of the researchers involved, raised multiple categories which needed to be narrowed down for further analysis. A second reading of all the recorded materials allowed us to systematically reduce the categories by combining like terms and eliminating redundant ones. High levels of agreement between the coders were reached after thorough discussions (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987).

First results

In general, the interviews with the bilingual students were longer than the ones carried out in the monolingual schools, and the children in these schools were the most articulate in their responses. Those who offered the least articulate responses to the items and questions presented were the children at the Sachnin Palestinian school. This finding might be explained by the low educational standards characteristic of Palestinian education in Israel (Rouhana, 1997), the product of many years of discriminatory policies by the central Israeli Government

Children's responses to historical/political/conflictual events

As in other studies (Wineburg, 2001) our respondents evidenced little historical recollection and, for the most part, failed to recognise photos as popular as the one of the signing of the Oslo agreements by President Clinton, Prime Minister Rabin and President Arafat. Jewish children in the bilingual school and in the Misgav Jewish schools recognised historical/political events less than their Palestinian counterparts in the bilingual school but more than Palestinian children in the monolingual Arabic school. This pattern repeats itself throughout most of the pictures in this section, indicating that the Palestinian children in the bilingual school have a relatively greater knowledge of, and involvement in, political issues.

When presented with the photograph of Ariel Sharon, the current Israeli Prime Minister of Israel, Palestinian children in both schools recognise him with ease, attributing to him blame for the present war situation, and connecting the present conflict to Sharon's visit to Al-Aksa in October 2000. Jewish

children recognise the figure of Sharon relatively less and, in general, those attending the bilingual school see him as a politically negative figure ('He is the Prime Minister of Israel and I think he is bad because he went into places that belong to the Arabs in Jerusalem'), while those attending the monolingual Jewish school identify him as a more positive one ('He is Sharon the present Prime Minister and he is good... though I do not take to much interest in him...'). Almost all Palestinian children in both schools identify the President of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat. Most participants in the monolingual school identify him as a positive figure ('He is the President of Palestine and he is good because he helps the Palestinians in their war...'), while a few from the bilingual programme mention negative aspects of his political activity ('He looks good... but you see he fights the Jews to bring peace to the Palestinians... good President needs to bring peace'). Jewish children recognise President Arafat with relative ease and for the most part relate to him negatively, ('Arafat... he is bad... he is something in the Arab army... he kills Jews...') but the children in the bilingual school mention at times some positive aspects regarding his involvement in the peace talks or offer interpretations related to Israeli domination of the Palestinians as a way of moderating their judgment ('He is not doing peace, he is not acting smart... I do not know why... he must not be thinking about it enough... it must be because what Israelis do...'). In general children's political perceptions seem naturally to reflect their parents' political preferences. Jewish children in the bilingual school present the most moderate perceptions regarding political issues and Palestinian children in the school seem also to be somewhat more restrained in their judgements than their monolingual counterparts (i.e. both Jewish and Palestinian children in the bilingual school have more moderate and complex perceptions and judgements).

When presented with a photo of the Israeli and the Palestinian flags Jewish children in both schools easily recognise the Israeli one while many fail to recognise the Palestinian one. Palestinian children in both schools recognise both flags with no effort. In follow-up questions, through which we tried to tap into issues related to national identity, both groups in all schools expressed a strong affiliation to the one ascribed to them (i.e. Jewish children and Palestinian children identified themselves respectively as Jewish and Palestinians solely). Jewish children in the bilingual school more than Jewish children in the monolingual school were able to include in their Jewish/Israeli perspectives the presence of Israeli non-Jews ('The Arabs have a little bit of both... they belong to both places Israel and Palestine'); this in spite of clearly expressing an overlap between their Israeli and their Jewish identities. They were also for the most part able to differentiate between the perceived Palestinian enemy outside of the recognised borders of Israel, Israeli Palestinians, and Israeli Palestinian children and their families in the bilingual school. These last were considered to be different in that at no point were they included in descriptions carrying possible meanings of enemy or alterity. Palestinian children in the bilingual school for the most part made no analogy between their identity and their place of residence – Israel ('I live in Israel... but the Palestinian flag is our flag'). They consider themselves Palestinians identified with a future Palestinian state and living in Israel. They also differentiated

between regular Israeli/Jews and their Israeli/Jewish friends at school, 'There are Jews who want war and Jews who want peace. . . in our school they want peace and we are friends'). Such a differentiation between bad/good Jews was not identified in the interviews we carried out in the Sachnin Palestinian school.

Children's responses to cultural/religious sites

When confronted with pictures of central cultural/religious sites of both groups, such as photos of the Al-Aksa Mosque and the Wailing Wall, some Palestinian children in the bilingual school identify the Wailing Wall as a Jewish site of importance while no Palestinian children in the monolingual school identified it at all. All Palestinian children identified the Al-Aksa Mosque as a site central to the Palestinian people and fully connected to the political conflict. Jewish children in both schools have difficulty identifying the Al-Aksa Mosque and when they do they assume it to be a Jewish religious site. The Walling Wall is easily identified by all who also point to an ingroup differentiation that relates the Wall mostly to the religious Jewish population with which they do not identify. Jewish kids in both schools identify Palestinians praying in the (unrecognised or wrongly identified) Al-Aksa Mosque. The identification is made on the bases of both the people's dress, including their 'Kafiah' (Traditional Moslem head cover) and the colour of their skin – a rather prejudiced comment. Through analysis of the responses to these and other photos, it becomes apparent that the minority Palestinian group represented in both the bilingual and monolingual school have a better appreciation of the majority group culture, with those participating in the bilingual programme having a more developed understanding than those in the monolingual school. Jews in both schools have a less developed understanding of Palestinian culture. As a majority they seem to be able to afford to be unaware of the 'other's' cultural religious interests.

Children's responses to ceremonial and daily events in the bilingual programme

This section of the photos was, naturally, only presented to the Palestinian and Jewish children studying in the bilingual programme. In relation to pictures of ceremonial events (Naqbe and Memorial Day ceremonies, the Hannukka/Idel-Fitter/Christmas celebration), most statements referred to the schools' activities and their important contribution to coexistence ('At the school we get to learn about each others cultures'). When considering the large amount of effort invested by teachers in developing such events it is not surprising that they are so highly valued by the children. Pictures representing daily life events at school in class and in breaks are an opportunity for children to demonstrate their profound social understandings. Both groups admit, with some reluctance, that though under a same roof, interactions between the groups, when not guided by teachers, are sparse. For the most part they refuse to interpret this fact as representing any failure in the goals of the bilingual school, rather they prefer to mention the different inclinations of the two groups in their game preferences. Palestinians like football and Jews like catch. Only when questioned further did they admit that these pass-time

preferences also express differences they perceive between the groups: Jews mostly admit that they have a sense that Palestinians are at times aggressive in their games. Girls are somewhat less divided but still, during unsupervised times, they split into ethnic subgroups and play separately, with Palestinian girls preferring to stay in the classroom during breaks.

Another area in which students demonstrated their thoughtful insights related to language skills. All are aware that Hebrew is learned by all, while Arabic remains predominantly a language only known by Palestinians ('I speak Arabic better than Hebrew and the Jewish kids speak Hebrew better than me. But my Hebrew is much better than their Arabic'). Palestinian and Jewish children recognise that given the present Israeli context, with a strong Jewish majority and a mostly only Hebrew-speaking infrastructure, the chances of changing the present situation are small.

Conclusion

At this point the bilingual programme seems to be partially successful in helping to reduce prejudice and alleviating conflict. The responses of children in the bilingual school to questions related to political/conflictual events are in general more moderate than those expressed by children in the regular monolingual schools. Moreover from an analysis of their responses to questions related to cultural/religious matters, it is apparent that the children's understanding of one another's cultures runs deeper than that found in the monolingual settings. Still, the minority Palestinian group represented in both the bilingual and monolingual school have a better appreciation of the majority group culture, with those participating in the bilingual programme having a more developed understanding than those in the monolingual school. Central to this success is the opportunity the school provides for close, sustained, and cooperative contact in a context that is anxiety-reduced and equitable for all participating groups. Jews as a majority seem to be able to afford less awareness of the 'other's' cultural religious interests. At this stage, while both participating groups are similar to students in monolingual schools in that they still recognise themselves as ethnically/religiously/nationally divergent, they differ from students in monolingual schools in that they express less of a sense of social distance between the groups. At this point it is apparent that these positive effects are not necessarily transferable to representatives of the groups outside the immediate educational environment. We will need a sustained research effort to uncover the potential of sustaining these effects in the future when/if these children join mainstream educational tracks.

These preliminary results enrich the findings of our earlier ethnographic studies (Bekerman, 2002, 2003; Bekerman & Horenczyk, 2004) and support other previous findings regarding the influence of bilingual education on intergroup perceptions and self identity (Genesee & Gandara, 1999), language in contact and intergroup conflict (Cleghorn & Genesee, 1984), and the potential risks of implementing uncritical multicultural educational programmes (Freeman, 2000; Lustig, 1997). These results are also supportive of 'contact hypothesis' (Allport, 1954) theorising regarding the potential of inter-group contact in helping to alleviate conflict between groups and reduce mutual

prejudices (Gaertner *et al.*, 1996; Horenczyk, 1997; Wood & Soleitner, 1996); a potential that is enhanced when 'contact' takes place under the conditions of status equality and cooperative interdependence while allowing both for sustained interaction between participants and for the potential forming of friendships (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1976; Pettigrew, 1998). The bilingual school studied might very well be an outstanding example of 'contact' implementation at its best, and its emphasis on status equality, mutuality, and cooperative interdependence might very well be emulated in other, similar, educational initiatives.

In the future we believe it to be of importance to try and identify other integrated educational efforts in conflict-ridden areas (Smith, 2001) and encourage comparative studies which would be able to shed light on the future potential of these programmes to reduce conflict and support coexistence.

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