**Learning Hebrew in School from an Early Age:**

**Attitudes of Palestinian-Arab Parents in Israel**

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**Abstract**

Considering the current policy and the reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, teaching Hebrew from an early age to Palestinian-Arab pupils in Israel is a breakthrough in the Palestinian-Arab language education policy. It has far-reaching educational, cultural, political, and ideological consequences.

Hebrew language education among Palestinian-Arab pupils has undergone radical changes regarding when and why they should begin learning the language. These topics have not been treated sufficiently in the existing literature. This paper will examine the perceptions of the parents of young Palestinian-Arab pupils regarding learning Hebrew from kindergarten onwards. Using a semi-structured interview protocol carried out via Zoom, 18 parents were interviewed about various issues related to learning Hebrew from an early age, and the arising results were subsequently analyzed. The issues concerned pedagogical, social, economic, political, and ideological factors influencing the parents’ perceptions of the topic under analysis: a) a need - integrating into Israeli society; b) a difficulty - Hebrew as a burden on the learner; and c) impingement - maintenance of, and threats to Palestinian-Arab identities.

**Key Words**: Hebrew, Palestinians, Israel, language education policy, language attitudes, identity.

**Introduction**

In 2015, the Minister of Education, Naftali Bennett, decided that Palestinian-Arab[[1]](#footnote-1) pupils in Israel should begin learning Hebrew as a compulsory subject from kindergarten, beginning from the following year. He explained that “the improvement of Hebrew among Arab students will result in their ability to more easily integrate into the Israeli workforce, economy, and society at large” (The Jerusalem Post, August 14, 2015). On the Website of the Ministry of Education, it was further explained that learning the language from an early age helps to “form the identity of Arabic-speaking students as Israeli citizens and the importance of the language as a key to education and integration in society, academia and the world of employment in Israel” (Ministry of Education, 2020).

In this new Hebrew education policy, there is a radical change in terms of when and why to learn the language in comparison to the previous language education policy established in 1995 by Spolsky and Shohamy (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999a). The 1995 policy proposed to introduce Hebrew from the second grade onward, with the aim to reach a higher level of competence in written and spoken Hebrew, especially in professional, commercial, and academic Hebrew (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999a). However, the new policy has far-reaching educational and political implications, and it is intended to strengthen Hebrew and its culture among the Palestinian-Arab population.

The new policy seeks to enhance the status of Hebrew and improve its learning among Palestinian-Arab students, emphasizing the importance of Hebrew as a means of communication integrating Palestinian-Arabs into daily life in the country, and enabling social mobility– Hebrew is the dominant language in all of these domains (Ministry of Education, 2020). Though these are important issues and worthy goals for Palestinian-Arabs in Israel, the oversight of the centrality and importance of the link of Arabic to their national and cultural identities must be addressed. This paper will examine Palestinian-Arab parents’ perceptions of the teaching of Hebrew to Palestinian-Arab pupils from an early age. In what follows, a brief background of the language and identity among indigenous people is given, followed by an overview of Hebrew knowledge and use in Israel in general and among Palestinian-Arabs in Israel in particular. Then, the attitudes towards teaching Hebrew to Palestinian-Arabs in Israel will be sketched. Last, a critical interpretation and discussion of the findings will be presented.

**Language and Identity among Indigenous People**

Hebrew language education for Palestinian-Arab school children in Israel should be understood through the context of the settler-colonial Zionist project, seeking. In this section, the wider context of language hegemony and identity among indigenous people in settler-colonial societies is briefly introduced.

Linguistic hegemony is part of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized (Amara, 2018). This relationship frequently instigates the extinction of the language of the colonized as a result of the pervasion of the language of the colonizer. This occurred in South America, where the languages of the indigenous people disappeared with the advent of the Spanish conqueror; it also occurred among many language groups in Africa. There were cases in which the indigenous people maintained their language as part of their identity and cultural uniqueness, as in the case of ethnic minorities during the Soviet regime and many other minorities in Western Europe. Finally, there were cases in which colonization did not lead to language extinction but greatly affected the language of the colonized people (this influence remained even after independence), as was the case in North African countries (Benrabah, 2007).

The issue of language and identity acquisition and suppression among indigenous peoples is not unique to any one settler colonial society, but is a common experience among many indigenous communities worldwide. Colonization often involves the imposition of the colonizer's language and culture, leading to the marginalization, and, in some cases, to erasure of indigenous languages, cultures, and identities (Khawaja, 2021).

In many settler colonial societies, indigenous languages have been suppressed through policies of forced assimilation, such as residential schools, where indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities and forced to learn the colonizer's language and culture. Thus, many indigenous peoples lost their language and cultural heritage, leading to a loss of identity and a sense of disconnection from their history and traditions (Iyengar, 2014).

However, there has been a growing movement among indigenous communities to reclaim their languages and cultural heritage, recognizing the importance of language in preserving cultural identity and passing on traditional knowledge to future generations. This has led to language revitalization efforts, such as language immersion programs, language nests, and community-based language revitalization initiatives (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014).

Despite these efforts, indigenous languages continue to be threatened by ongoing colonization, globalization, and the dominance of English as a global language (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014). The struggle for language and cultural revitalization is therefore ongoing and requires continued support and recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples to their language, culture, and identity.

**Knowledge and use of Hebrew**

The British mandate 1922–48 recognized three official languages in mandatory Palestine: English, Arabic, and Hebrew, in that order. After the establishment of Israel as a state, all legislation of the mandate was retained except for a few laws (Saban & Amara, 2002). English was removed as an official language, and Hebrew and Arabic were retained as the official languages of the state (Kretzmer, 1990; Rubinstein & Medina, 1996). However, the situation changed in the aftermath of the Nationality Law, which, in July 2018, revoked the Basic Law Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, declaring that “[t]he Arabic language has a special status in the state; regulating the use of Arabic in state institutions or by them will be set in law.” (Amara, 2021).

Hebrew is not only the only official language of Israel but also the dominant language in all walks of life in Israeli society. Hebrew is the default language of bureaucracy, the medium of instruction in higher education, the dominant language of the domestic electronic media, and, most importantly, the language of the sectors of the labor market that are open to the Arabic-speaking minority (Saban & Amara, 2002). Consequently, Palestinian-Arabs, citizens of Israel, encounter significant barriers when it comes to accessing higher education, employment, and mobility in Israeli society. Hebrew is often used as a gatekeeper to these opportunities, with many positions requiring fluency in the language as a prerequisite, creating a significant disadvantage for Palestinian-Arabs who may not have had the opportunity to learn Hebrew due to systemic discrimination and lack of access to resources (Amara, 2007).

Hebrew among Palestinian-Arabs in Israel is interesting, not only from a linguistic perspective, but also because of its contact with the Arabic language and its effects on Palestinian-Arab culture and identity. Despite the similarities with other cases of language contact worldwide, Arabic-Hebrew contact has a unique socio-political context (Amara, 2018). Palestinian-Arabs comprise the largest non-Jewish, Hebrew-speaking minority within and outside of Israel. The Palestinian-Arab society in Israel is in conflict with the Jewish majority on two central issues: internally there is the problem of the definition and perception of Israel as a Jewish state, resulting in marginal civil and national status for Palestinian-Arab citizens in Israel; externally, there is the effect of the continued struggle between Arab states and Israel, influencing the nature of contact between Hebrew and Arabic.

Hebrew is learned by Palestinian-Arabs in Israel both formally and informally. Hebrew is taught in school as the language of the state (Hallel & Spolsky, 1993; Winter, 1981) from the first grade on[[2]](#footnote-2), but the influence of informal learning and regular external contacts is much greater. Hebrew words, phrases, and expressions are commonly used by Palestinian-Arabs in spoken Arabic (Reves, 1983; Mar’i, 2013a), and the extent of this use reflects the level of familiarity of Palestinian-Arabs in Israel with Israeli Jewish culture (Amara, 1986, 1995; Amara & Spolsky, 1986; Amara, 2018; Mar’i, 2020).

For most Palestinian-Arabs in Israel, Hebrew is the most important second language, even more important than English, and at times and in some domains even more than Arabic[[3]](#footnote-3) (Shohamy & Donitsa-Schmidt, 1998; Amara & Mar’i, 2002). Not knowing Hebrew hampers the contact of the Palestinian-Arab citizen with government offices, employment, and higher education.

Most of the earlier sociolinguistic studies concentrated on Palestinian-Arabs’ knowledge and usage of Hebrew (e.g., Amara, 1986, 1991, 1995, 1999, 2002, 2007; Amara & Spolsky, 1986, 1996; Badeir, 1990; Ben-Rafael, 1994; Daghash, 1993; Koplewitz, 1973, 1990; Mar’i, 1997, 1998; Shohamy & Donitsa-Schmidt, 1998; Spolsky & Amara, 1997), while more recent studies have focused on language education policies (e.g., Amara, 2018; Amara & Mar’i, 1999, 2002; Hamid, 2009; Mar’i, 2008, 2013b; Skaaraas, 2009; Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999a, 1999b). However, the issue of teaching Hebrew from an early age to Palestinian children has not received attention. This paper seeks to fill in this lacuna.

**Attitudes towards Teaching Hebrew to Palestinian-Arabs in Israel**

Arabic was one of three dominant languages in the mandate of Palestine, but, with the establishment of Israel, the language landscape within the Jewish state changed drastically as a result of political and demographic changes. Hebrew, supported by Zionist ideology, became the major language in all domains of life. What were the attitudes? There were four main positions towards teaching Hebrew to Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel (Cohen, 1968, pp. 663–666):

1. Some Palestinian-Arabs and some Jews *opposed* *teaching* Hebrew to Palestinian-Arabs in Israel. Among Jews, some from the right wing feared that Palestinian-Arabs who knew Hebrew would constitute a danger to Israel’s security; some from the extreme left-wing opposed its teaching as Israel is not defined or perceived as a bi-national state; and some religious Jews opposed teaching the Holy Language to gentiles. Palestinian-Arabs who opposed the teaching of Hebrew were fearful for the fate of the Arabic language, a holy language to Muslims, the major symbol of the Arab nation, and the most important factor uniting the Arab world. The study of Hebrew, they claimed, would lead to the assimilation of Palestinian-Arab youth into Israeli society and culture, and would distance Palestinian-Arabs from traditional Arab culture and the Arab nations.
2. Another group (of both Jews and Palestinian-Arabs) *supported* *the use* of Hebrew as the sole language of instruction in order to solve the problem of the Palestinian-Arab minority in a Jewish state. Assimilation was seen as the best solution.
3. A third, more pragmatic group (of both Jews and Palestinian-Arabs), *supported te*a*ching* in Hebrew for practical and pedagogical reasons, because Arab schools lacked qualified teachers and suitable textbooks in Arabic (Benor, 1951, p. 8).
4. A fourth group (of both Jews and Palestinian-Arabs) believed that teaching Hebrew in Palestinian-Arab schools constituted a *means of nurturing Israeli citizenship*, permitting the active participation of the Palestinian-Arabs in Israel, and assuring loyalty to the laws of the country.

The various attitudes reflected the perception of identity of, and the desired type of relation between, Jews and Palestinian-Arabs within the state of Israel. It was no accident that the fourth position became the prevailing one since it better reflects the gradually-emerging socio-political situation. In the new reality, neither assimilation nor separation were real options for Palestinian-Arabs in Israel (Amara & Mari, 2002).

Amara and Mari (2002) surveyed 999 respondents’ positions concerning the learning and use of Hebrew. The survey consisted of statements focused on various aspects of the language: the symbolic aspect, language mixing, language choice, language education, essentialness of the language in the eyes of the speaker, language usage for pragmatic purposes, linguistic knowledge, general knowledge, cultural importance of the language, political importance, and prestige that the language grants the user. The findings showed that the highest rating was given to the statements about studying Hebrew for practical and pragmatic purposes and most respondents agreed with the statement that maintains that Palestinian-Arabs must be fluent in Hebrew. Few respondents saw Hebrew as an easy language. A third of the respondents are prepared to study Hebrew not just for pragmatic purposes, but also to better understand the way of life of the Jewish people in Israel and to learn the culture to better integrate the country or to communicate with Jewish friends. Hebrew is perceived as a vital language for advancing peace with a majority of respondents who disagree with the idea that Hebrew is the language of the enemy. Furthermore, respondents stated that studying Hebrew does not contradict the religious beliefs of the learner, and disagree with the statement: ‘I do not like to study Hebrew’. Most respondents would not prefer to begin learning Hebrew as early as possible (even 1st grade) rather than in 5th grade.

Abu ‘Asba et. al (2011) studied Arab high school students from different religions showing that the mastery of the Hebrew language was important and of value to them because it helps them manage their daily lives as it constitutes a tool for social and economic mobility towards a better future.

As for Palestinian-Arab parents’ attitudes toward students studying in the Israeli public education system, the national survey conducted in 2018 by RAMA (National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education) asked parents to respond to a questionnaire that dealt with perceptions about the importance of spoken Hebrew taught in the education system in the Arab school sector. A total of 732 parents responded to this questionnaire, of which 304 were parents of primary school students, 252 were parents of middle school students, and 176 were parents of high school students. Parents were asked to address three issues: a) the level of importance they attributed to the Hebrew language; b) their perception regarding their children’s level of Hebrew; the importance of Hebrew studies in pre-primary education. (Ramah & Ministry of Education 2021).

The survey reveals that there is agreement among Arab parents regarding the need to promote knowledge of Hebrew in the education system in Arab society. The vast majority of students' parents attach great importance to learning to attain a high knowledge and performance in Hebrew. Furthermore, they report that their children's command of Hebrew is low and needs improvement. Moreover, they believe that it is important to start teaching Hebrew as early as possible. (Ramah & Ministry of Education 2021)

In short, parents of Palestinian-Arab pupils have a positive attitude towards their children’s learning of Hebrew albeit their motivation is driven by enabling communication with Israelis for pragmatic purposes in various areas of life and enhancing sustainability.In this study, we wish to unpack the motivation underlying the parents’ perceptions in order to answer the question: what are the perspectives of Palestinian-Arab parents towards learning Hebrew from an early age in Israel?

**Methodology**

A qualitative approach was employed using semi-structured Zoom interviews with 18 parents, seven men and nine women (not couples), coming from six localities in the Little Triangle[[4]](#footnote-4), aged 28 to 51 years old. Half the parents hold academic degrees, and the other half have a high school diploma. The interviews were recorded with the participants’ consent between March 2021 and April 2021. All the parents interviewed have (or had) children who learn (learned) Hebrew in kindergarten, first, or second grade. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and lasted for 25-35 minutes each. All interviews were videotaped, transcribed verbatim, and professionally translated from Arabic into English. The following questions constituted the semi-structured interview protocol:

* How is your proficiency in Hebrew?
* In what domains do you use Hebrew?
* Is Hebrew important to Palestinian-Arabs in Israel? If yes, in what ways?
* Is teaching Hebrew to Palestinian-Arabs in Israel important? Why?
* What do you think of teaching Hebrew from an early age (e.g. from kindergarten)?
* If you support teaching the language from an early age, can you elaborate on what the pupils can gain?
* If you do not support teaching it from an early age, can you elaborate on why not?

Interview data were analyzed for themes using “thematic analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which entails a systematic process to find patterned responses or themes within a data set. The 6 stage analysis provided by Braun & Clarke were used as follows: (1) *Familiarizing yourself with the data*: all data were read repeatedly by the researcher to obtain a sense of the breadth and depth of the data. (2) *Generating initial codes*: all relevant phrases, sentences, or paragraphs (text units) that related to the research question were extracted and given a code, which is a brief label that captures the essence of the text unit. (3) *Searching for themes*: the researcher divided the codes into broad overarching themes based on code similarities. (4) *Reviewing themes*: the themes were reviewed and revised by the researcher and organized into a coherent pattern. The researcher then reexamined the data set to ensure that all relevant data were captured by one of the themes. (5) *Defining and naming themes* (6) *Producing the report.* The researcher prepared a final report that provided a detailed account of each theme.

**Findings**

The current study set out to explore the perceptions of parents of young Palestinian-Arab pupils learning Hebrew from kindergarten on. Three major themes have emerged: a need, i.e., integrating into Israeli society; a difficulty, i.e., Hebrew as a burden on the learner; Impingement- Identity maintenance and threats.

The emerging themes range from supporting fully learning the Hebrew language from an early age to those who oppose it for pedagogical, sociocultural, political, ideological, and identity-based matters.

**A Need — Integrating into the Israeli society**

Nine interviewees support the teaching of Hebrew from kindergarten on. The main justification given is that the command of the language from an early age facilitates a smooth integration into Israeli society, as illustrated by one of the parents:

We are obligated to learn the Hebrew language to an advanced level from an early age at school in order to learn to integrate into Israeli society. (Parent SM)

Three parents claim that high competence in Hebrew is important to advance the Palestinian-Arabs’ rights as a minority in the state of Israel. Here the language is perceived as vital for, on one hand, the integration into Israeli society, and, on the other hand, as a means to achieve civil rights, as illustrated in the following quote:

As citizens of the state, we should defend our rights as an Arab minority. Therefore, familiarity with the Hebrew language from an early age will help our children in the future to adapt in the state and practice the language of the other easily and communicate with [Jews] more effectively, which removes an obstacle as a second language. (Parent RA)

Further benefits of learning Hebrew from an early age are the need to participate in vital domains such as the labor market opportunities or access to higher education, as explained by one of the parents:

This will help Arabs to join the labor market and universities at a later stage more effectively. (Parent AD)

Four participants even talked about how high competence in Hebrew could enhance dialogue with other Israelis.

Learning Hebrew from an early age enhances the acquisition of the various skills, providing opportunities to engage in dialogue with all strata of society. (Parent MJ)

In line with the statements by the Ministry of Education regarding the importance of teaching Hebrew to Palestinian-Arabs from an early age for economic as well as educational benefits, it was also deemed vital for their integration into Israeli society. In other words, it contributes to promoting coexistence and citizenship. Ten participants explain that this should be attained by building essential citizenship and eliminating racism, as illustrated in the following quote:

 [The Minister of Education’s] claims that learning Hebrew in kindergarten contributes to openness to society as a whole are flimsy and unrealistic. Our problem is not in opening up to Israeli society, but our problem is that we cannot understand it politically, not to mention the discrimination and racism practiced against us, the Arabs, and the language has never been an obstacle to communication. (Parent YH)

In a nutshell, a significant portion of the interviewees perceives learning Hebrew from an early age as vital for integrating into Israeli society. However, other parents, as the next theme clearly illustrates, see a difficulty in learning Hebrew from an early age, claiming that children have not yet acquired a strong command of Arabic.

**A Difficulty — Hebrew as a** **Burden on the Learner**

Nine parents do not support the teaching of Hebrew from an early age, providing practical, pedagogical, and diglossic reasons to justify their perception that it can be a burden on the child. For example, one practical reason given claimed that the Arabic language is not yet mastered at an early age as explained by one of the parents:

In terms of educational, psychological, and social aspects, the Arab child is not ready to start learning the Hebrew language from kindergarten. If the Arabic language is not yet mastered, how can s/he learn the Hebrew language? (Parent YH)

and also as Hebrew is an easy language to learn, there is no need to learn it from an early age, as reported by another parent:

Hebrew is an easy language compared to Arabic, a diglossic language. Consequently, there is no need to learn it from an early age. (Parent SA)

Moreover, parents also did not see value in an early Hebrew start and think that the teaching could be improved rather than the age of formal exposure, as a parent states:

Learning Hebrew from the third to the twelfth grade as in the old language education policy is the right one. With the right methods, they can reach a satisfactory level of the language and be able to practice the language smoothly and function well in academia and the labor market. (Parent FM)

Others find it too big of a cognitive load and thus a burden rather than a need, as it transpires from this parent’s statement:

In my opinion, it is not right for Arab children to learn Hebrew from kindergarten, because this matter will burden the kindergarten children. (Parent SK)

This burden can be detrimental as it may impede the children’s language development in Arabic, as explained in this parent’s vignette:

In his/her young age, especially in the nursery stage, between (3-6) years, which is the early childhood stage, there is a dire need to learn his/her mother tongue and train the muscles of the tongue and vocal cords at the beginning of their growth to be better able to use the language appropriately, both in speech and writing. However, if Hebrew is learnt alongside his/her mother tongue, this will impede his/her progress in learning it and delay his linguistic development (Parent YH)

While other parents believe that learning the language from an early age will lead to interference which will hamper the child’s Arabic acquisition, as in the following example:

When a child learns two languages ​​at the same time, this causes him/her what is known as “the interference of languages”. S/he thinks in one language and speaks another. (Parent SH)

or that the incomplete acquisition of Arabic will result in stagnation if the child has had sufficient practice with the Arabic language:

Teaching the Hebrew language is done at the expense of the first language, Arabic. The child has not mastered his/her first language yet, and has not received any sufficient training in it, so how can s/he study another language? [FM]

Four parents contend that the Arabic diglossia should be dealt with in the formal educational system in early childhood prior to Hebrew learning, as this parent explains:

Diglossia is in itself an obstacle facing the Arab pupil, and even in kindergarten, the Arab child does not have a command of the spoken variety of Arabic. Add to that the standard variety which presents a serious educational, social, and psychological obstacle, due to its diglossic nature. In other words, the two varieties, which are in my eyes, two languages, necessitate more time to learn. Adding a third language leads to confusion of language and identity. (Parent FM)

In short, this theme illustrates that parents oppose the teaching of Hebrew from an early age, due to practical as well as pedagogical considerations, believing that it hampers the learning of Arabic. However, as we will see in the next theme, opposition does not spring only from difficulty but from impingement– learning Hebrew from an early age is perceived by parents as a threat to the Arab identity.

**Impingement — Identity Maintenance and Threats**

Though the parents are aware of the benefits of learning Hebrew mentioned above, nine parents believe that Arab identity maintenance is extremely important, considering the unique situation of the Palestinian-Arab citizens in Israel. As five participants stated that in the current weak and marginalized status of the Arabic language, it is best to funnel efforts and resources to strengthen the native language of the children rather than foster another language. It is believed that the purpose of teaching Hebrew at this stage is to devalue the Arabic language in the eyes of its speakers. They suggest that great efforts must be made to restore the Arabic language to its former status; to make it a vibrant and essential language with a strong presence in all walks of life. As one of the parents explains:

Enhancing the Arabic language and the Arab identity at this age are more important than the future gains from learning Hebrew. (Parent FM)

Other participants claim that in addition to learning Hebrew, Arab children face other challenges that relate to globalization and technological advancements which are often mediated by other languages such as English, for example:

In addition to the challenges of Hebrew, the Arabic language is already in the stage of being lost in the era of globalization, the domination of technology, and the domination of languages ​​of countries with economic and global dominance, such as English and Chinese. (Parent RA)

In a broader sense, one of the parents argued for the preservation of the language and identity of the Arab culture given the radical changes the Arab countries are undergoing and the endangerment of the Arabic language.

Politically, the Arab world is torn apart, as it lives under revolutions and coups against the regimes. There is weakness and insecurity on the part of the citizens, so many citizens migrated from Arab countries to foreign countries in search of safety and a source of livelihood, and thus these immigrants try to learn a foreign language and integrate into the new society. As a result, there is limited use of the Arabic language by these immigrants. (Parent SM)

Preserving the Arabic language and not learning Hebrew from an early age ensures the preservation of Arabic as an indicator of Arab identity and thus ensures its de-marginalization in the Israeli society, as observed in the following quote:

In order to preserve our identity and our rights as a national minority in the country, we must stand like an impenetrable dam in order to prevent its marginalization. (Parent FM)

Moreover, enhancing the place of Arabic and Arab identity mediates the centrality of the language as the symbol of nationalism and the language of the Quran. Here is a detailed explanation:

The child sees the world through his/her language, and we are at a time when the Arabic language has become marginalized intentionally. Thus, we must confront the attempt to exclude and marginalize the Arabic language, and we must establish it in the minds of our children as the language of the Holy Qur’an and the language of our parents and grandparents, it is a symbol of our Arabism and it is an extension of our religious and national roots. And I see the world in my own language. (Parent SM).

Teaching Hebrew to Palestinians in Israel is perceived as being related to identity due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Arabic and Hebrew are associated with the minority-majority forces in Israel, the perception and attitude by parents are that of asymmetrical relation between a dominant and subjugated group, as one of the parents contends:

With regard to the Hebrew language, the matter is different. The relationship of the Arabic language with Hebrew, in my opinion, is not only a relationship of languages, but it is the relationship of two different societies, one of which is dominant and the other is subjugated. The Arabs in this country are subject to the rule of the majority, as is the case with the Arabic language. After it was dominant for centuries, it became marginalized. Learning Hebrew from an early age will create confusion for [Arab children’s] national identity, and early exposure to Jewish culture will lead to an identity crisis. Is this what we want for our children? How will they know about themselves? (Parent FM)

Four parents believe that teaching Hebrew entails the transference of the Jewish-Zionist narrative to Arab children concomitantly weakening the Palestinian narrative:

Learning Hebrew from an early age is distorting the identity of our children and confusing them. Otherwise, why not require Jewish students to learn Arabic from an early age? The educational curriculum has always been, and still is, imposing the Jewish-Zionist narrative on our children, and deliberately delegitimizing the Palestinian narrative, Palestinian history, and heritage, and [teaching Hebrew from an early age] is another innovative attempt to perpetuate that approach. (Parent YH)

One of these parents claim that the teaching of Hebrew is meant to enhance the Hebrew language among the Palestinians at the expense of the Arabic language and the Palestinian-Arab identity, illustrated in the following statement:

Since we are talking about the Arab society in Israel, which has a specific characteristic and its own narrative, such a decision has very systematic and dangerous political dimensions, more than educational and social ones. The purpose is to erase the Arabic language and the Arab identity. (Parent AJ)

This position is further emphasized by the abolishment of Arabic as an official language by the Nationality Law 2018 which reflects the banishment of the Arabic language and consequently Arab identity from the public sphere:

Revoking Arabic as an official language is not only a symbolic step, but its purpose is to erase the Arabic language and Arab identity. (Parent AH)

This will have serious repercussions on the education of the children and the values that are transmitted to them, as this excerpt shows:

The worst thing is teaching a second language, especially to a young generation of our children, considering all the political, cultural, and national problems and gaps. This may affect not only the mastery of the mother tongue in various basic fields, but will also have negative effects on social, religious, cultural, and national values. ​​(Parent SM)

In a nutshell, the parents emphasize that the Arabic language is not only their mother tongue but also a vehicle for maintaining their Palestinian identity in the face of Zionist colonialism. The Israeli establishment has long sought to erase Palestinian identity and culture by imposing Hebrew as the dominant language in the public linguistic landscape. However, the parents perceive the Arabic language as a powerful symbol of resistance and resilience for the Palestinian people, helping them maintain their connection to their land and identity. By preserving and viewing the Arabic language as an indigenous language, they can resist the cultural and linguistic erasure imposed on them by the Israeli establishment.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The Minister of Education, Neftali Bennett’s decision to impose the teaching of Hebrew from an early age stirred up a lot of disapproval among Arab intellectuals and activists, who questioned the ministry’s intentions (See Athamlah, 2015). The head of the Arab Education Follow-up Committee, Muhammad Haidara, commented on this decision as political and not educational, because the opinion of the stakeholders was not taken into consideration. He explains that;

[…] The problem of the Arab student lies in his mastery of the Arabic language. Until the age of ten, s/he learns four languages: Spoken Arabic, Standard Arabic, Hebrew, and English. The concern is that the student does not master any of these languages. Language is one of the foundations and components of identity, and the Minister’s new policy may negatively affect the students’ Arab identity. (Abdel-Fattah, 2015, p. X)

‘Alaa Al-Hajj, a member of the National Parents’ Union, described the decision as far from professional, as it considers the Arab masses an experimental field. Hence, he argues that it is more appropriate to examine the readiness of the student, the teacher, and the educational environment for such new programs and plans. This unfortunate step is questionable and it is nothing but a quest for control and power by means of Hebrew. (Abdel-Fattah, 2015).

Teaching Hebrew to Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel was and still is a controversial issue. The controversy is attributed to the conflict-ridden reality in Israel. The continuous Israeli-Palestinian conflict impacts all aspects of life, including the legitimacy of the use and presence of the language in the public and private space of Palestinian-Arabs. The unilateral decision to introduce the teaching of formal Hebrew in early childhood to Palestinian-Arab pupils in Israel has a radical impact on the Palestinian-Arab language education policy in terms of when, how, and for what purpose to learn the language in the Israel-Palestinian context.

The parents interviewed in this study are divided: those who support early Hebrew education and those who oppose it. Those who support teaching Hebrew from an early age perceive the language more as a language of communication for pragmatic purposes with Israelis in daily interactions. They hold positive attitudes in favor of learning Hebrew as early as possible, believing that it will enable their children to integrate more smoothly into the labor market and have equal access to higher education.Unsurprisingly, the support for learning Hebrew is driven by instrumental and integrative motivations. Some sections of the Palestinian-Arab population in Israel support the integration into Israeli society where the command of Hebrew plays an important role as a vehicle for Israelization (Smooha, 1989).

Palestinian-Arab society in Israel has undergone a seminal social transformation of modernization borne out of the contact with the Israeli population which constitutes an important agent for Palestinian-Arabs (Amara, 1999). At the same time, Palestinian-Arabs have undergone a deep process of bilingualism (Arabic-Hebrew) and biculturalism (i.e., familiarity with Israeli culture). This process has been associated with exposure to mass media in both Arabic (from the Arab world) and Hebrew (Al-Haj, 1996; Smooha, 1989).

 Hebrew in the Palestinian-Arab context could be explained by the link between language and economy as identified by Heller (2003). Indeed, the use of Hebrew is understood to be related to the effects of modernity (Smooha, 1989), as this is the arena where Palestinians mainly connect themselves to Israel and Israelization.

As for those parents who oppose learning Hebrew from an early age for practical reasons, they consider teaching Hebrew from an early age as a burden on the learner, emphasizing the unique diglossic situation of Arabic.

Indeed, the diglossia of Arabic – the spoken versus the written cannons – poses serious challenges for Arab learners. The richness of spoken varieties in Arabic in general and the usage of the locally spoken Palestinian-Arabic variety and the need to read and write using the standard Arabic variety pose a complex language and literacy challenge to these young pupils. They first encounter this problem when they enter first grade, where they have to learn a new variety, Standard Arabic, which differs from the one they use for speaking at home, in the community, and with friends (Amara, 2018). Diglossia, thus, not only poses a language and literacy internal challenge for Arabic acquisition and learning but also competes with the dominant presence of Hebrew in the public sphere which inevitably impinges on a limited use of Standard Arabic (See Amara & Mar’i 2002; Amara, 2018). This organic complexity of the internal forms and functions of the Arabic language combined with the nationality law revoking Arabic as an official language in Israel have further restricted the use of Arabic in public domains.

Parents of young Palestinian-Arabs in Israel have to grapple with this complexity on a daily basis. Those who oppose the teaching of the Hebrew language from an early age for political and ideological reasons are concerned about the loss or weakening of the Arabic language and concomitantly the Arab identity. They first want to ascertain that there is a full and robust (albeit age-appropriate) command of the Arabic language and an understanding of Arab culture and identity before their children begin learning Hebrew. They consider Hebrew a threat to the Arabic language and identity.

Since the establishment of the state of Israel, when it was decided to teach Hebrew to Palestinian-Arab students, Palestinian-Arabs expressed their concerns and opposed the decision (Amara & Mar’i, 2002). They were concerned about the fate of the Arabic language, the major symbol of the pan-Arab identity, and an extremely important component of Islam, as the language of the Quran - the holy book of Islam. It was claimed that the study of Hebrew might lead to the assimilation of Palestinian-Arab youth into Israeli society and culture and consequently weaken the Arabic language and the Arab culture as well as the link to the rest of the Arab nations (Amara & Mar’i, 2002). Moreover, many Palestinian-Arabs believe that teaching Hebrew to Palestinian-Arab pupils nurtures Israeli citizenship, leading to the active participation of Palestinian-Arabs in daily life in Israel, and guaranteeing loyalty to the laws of the Jewish-Zionist country, Israel (Al-Haj, 1996). The presence of Hebrew as an indicator of identity, impacted by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was addressed in research (e.g. Amara & Mari, 2002; Al-Haj, 1996) at large, and more specifically was attributed as a tool used by the Israeli establishment to impose the Zionist narrative on the Palestinian-Arabs and create a convenient Arab-Israeli identity suitable for the Jewish state (Rouhana, 1993).

When it comes to the symbolic aspect, Arabic is the most prominent language (Amara, 2019). This is possibly due to the conflict-ridden reality in Israel, in which Palestinian‒Jewish relationships in Israel are characterized by constant tension. In this reality, Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel emphasize their identity and preserve it in various ways (see, for instance, Amara & Kabaha, 1996; Riter, 1995; Rouhana, 1993). They consider Arabic to be an authentic language and a marker of their identity (Al-Haj, 1993; Amara, 2018). Arabic maintenance is perceived to be the shield against the erasure of their identity(Amara, 2021).

The promotion of the Hebrew language as the dominant language in Israeli society by the Israeli establishment is part of a broader effort to erase Palestinian identity and culture, as it has been recently evident in the nationality law, declaring that the Arabic language has a special status in the state, and is no longer an official language. By making Hebrew the gatekeeper for access to education, employment, mobility, and other relevant domains, Israel is able to exert control over the Palestinian-Arab minority's lives and limit their ability to participate in Israeli society. This enhances the systemic discrimination and marginalization that Palestinian-Arabs in Israel face.

As long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues, Hebrew language education among Palestinian-Arabs in Israel will be controversial. Language education seems to be closely related to political as well as ideological considerations, and not only to practical and pedagogical ones, as the policy-makers assume. This paper has argued that successful language education considers the various factors affecting it, and does not only introduce the factors convenient to policy-makers as a justification for the new Hebrew language education policy.

**Limitations and Further Studies**

Though the study shed interesting light on the topic at hand, there is a limitation that is worthy of further research Namely, the present work is based on interviews with parents from a homogenous area (all Muslim). Further studies need to first interview parents from various areas (such as the Galilee, the Negev, and the mixed cities); second, in the current study, only Muslim parents are interviewed, this should be extended to also include Christian and Druze parents; third, a quantitative study- based for instance on a questionnaire-, dealing with various aspects of the phenomenon, including the various areas of the Palestinian-Arab communities, and covering various demographic variables (e.g. age, education, occupation, religion), may shed new light on the topic examined.

1. Numerous labels have been used to refer to Palestinian society in Israel. Amara (2016) has counted forty-five such labels which define that society’s identity. Today, the most widely used labels by members of this society include, ‘Palestinian-Arabs in Israel’ or the ‘Palestinian citizens of Israel’. In this article, as in previous works, I adopt the label ‘Palestinian-Arabs in Israel’, which best reflects their reality in the state of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to Mr. Ali Wattad, a member of the professional committee of the Hebrew language in Arab schools, Hebrew was taught in kindergartens until 2017-2018. Its teaching stopped since less than 50% of Arab kindergartens taught the language. In the first and second grades they learn two hours per week; from the third to the ninth grades, five hours per week; in high school from ten to twelve grades, three pointers learn three hours and five pointers learn five hours per week (Personal communication, 20.8.2020).

The terms "three-pointers" and "five-pointers" refer to the level of achievement required to pass the test in a particular subject. The distinction between the two terms has significant implications for students, as it determines their eligibility for higher education and employment opportunities. Students who achieve "five-pointers" are more likely to be accepted into prestigious universities and gain access to high-paying jobs. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Arabic language is considered a diglossic language. Diglossia is a linguistic term used to describe a situation in which two different varieties of the same language are used by a single linguistic community. There is distinction between the ‘high’, written (literary) Arabic and the ‘low’ Arabic which is spoken in its different dialects (Ferguson, 1959). However, scholars have shown that the picture is more complicated than the dichotomy between ‘high’ and ‘low’ language. Take, for example, the research by the Egyptian scholar Badawi (1973), which described five levels of the Arabic language, while other researchers have shown that spoken and literary Arabic exist on a single plain and are not two separate languages (Hary, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Little Triangle is a geographic term and reality that was coined only after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. It is located between the West Bank of the Jordan River and the Coast region. In the cease-fire of Rhodes Agreement, the area was handed over to Israel by Jordan. Its borders were dictated by military events and political agreements (Amara, 1999, p. 150). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)