Challenging the Power Relations between Jews and Arabs / Ayelet Roth

Last Friday, in its weekend magazine, *Haaretz* published an article by Smadar Reisfeld about a study, conducted by Prof. Shavit of Tel Aviv University, on the friendships formed between Jewish and Arab children at schools where the two population groups study together. The study found that there are fewer social connections between Jews and Arabs at bilingual and bicultural schools (such as those we operate at Hand in Hand (Yad B’Yad)) than at schools where Jews and Arabs study together without being defined as such.

Shavit examined approximately 40 schools throughout Israel in which Jews and Arabs studied together: seven of these were bilingual and bicultural, and the rest were Jewish schools with an Arab minority (about 10%-15% of the students). The study, conducted six years ago, only examined the patterns of friendship among students. It did not, for example, examine the degree of intergroup equality at the various schools, the power relations at the school, or the experience of the Arab student at a Jewish high school where Hebrew is the only language of instruction, history is taught from a Jewish perspective, the literature studied is Hebrew and Western, and only Jewish holidays are commemorated.

A comparison of bilingual schools with Jewish schools that have an Arab minority ignores the aims of bilingual education, given that its central aim is to produce a model of shared and egalitarian living for Arabs and Jews, a model that will challenge the intergroup power balance in Israel. We teach our students humanism, openness, and tolerance, and aspire to turn them into adults who are fully aware that they can maintain their own identity without denying the identity of the other.

Bilingual schools cultivate the personal, cultural, and national identity of students, Arabs and Jews alike. At times this goal requires periods of separation, in order to solidify each student’s distinct sense of self-determination. After their national, cultural, and linguistic identity has sufficiently solidified, the friendships that develop between Jewish and Arabs students constitute meaningful relationships that do not depend on one side relinquishing elements of its identity. From our perspective, this is a more important and significant indicator than the measurement obtained by counting the number of interactions between Jews and Arabs while ignoring the context and power dynamics between them.

Jewish schools with an Arab minority teach only the curriculum of the Jewish sector. The Arab student’s presence at these schools is subject to a condition: he or she is expected to adopt the Hebrew language and the Jewish culture and tradition, and to erase those elements that define them as Arab. This condition makes the comparison between Jewish schools and bilingual schools – whose very essence is the strive for full civil equality, with respect for the full mix of identities, cultures and perspectives among all members of society in Israel – quite problematic.

Manar Chiadri, Principal of the Hand in Hand Galilee School, who had attended a Jewish high school in Tel Aviv, told me about her sense of loneliness during those years: “Beyond the difficulty of learning history from a solely Jewish perspective, I felt that I did not belong culturally – for example when everyone in the class talked about recreational activities and sex. In political debates the dynamic was one in which the entire class was against me, because I was the only one of the four Arabs students in our grade who dared to speak up. Today I have the power to enable my students, Arabs and Jews, to take pride in their identity and be critical of the group to which they belong as well as the other.”

At Hand in Hand we encourage social connections and view them as an expression and model of shared living. Since 2012 we have been working to create shared adult communities of Jews and Arabs around our various schools, with an understanding that the responsibility for social change rests not only on the children’s shoulders but also on the shoulders of their parents, who are meant to provide an educational model of the manner in which a shared society can and should exist. Community activities include cultural events and dialogue, shared learning, hikes, and additional initiatives aimed at strengthening and developing the schools. The relations at these community encounters, like the interaction among students at the schools, are based on mutual recognition and equality between Jews and Arabs.

Unlike Manar Chiadri, who was hesitant about expressing her opinion in political debates at the Jewish high school she attended, the students at bilingual schools are encouraged to speak up and voice their opinions. Social interaction, however pleasant, is not a goal in itself if it denies the power and identity of the other. In a country where Jews and Arabs study completely separately or, alternatively, share a Jewish school while requiring Arabs to leave their identity at the entrance to the building, it is extremely important to understand that identity is not a zero-sum game.