The weekend edition of *Haaretz* featured an article about bilingual schools in Israel. We would be the first to acknowledge that academic knowledge has an important role in designing activities that promote equality and social change. The problem is that sometimes this knowledge is interpreted narrowly, which can lead to simplistic conclusions. We therefore find it necessary to highlight other parts of the picture regarding bilingual education in Israel.

The article describes a study comparing bilingual schools, in which the social identities of Jews and Arabs are accentuated, with regular schools where Jews and Arabs study together but do not engage in issues of identity. The study found that in bilingual schools there are fewer friendships between Jewish and Arab children than in regular schools. According to the article, “paradoxically, the setting that promotes an ideology of coexistence and a commitment to the issue actually produces less social connection between the groups—less coexistence, if you will.” In this way the reporter, at the very least, raises readers’ doubts regarding the need for bilingual schools. The article is based on a study published by Prof. Yossi Shavit and colleagues in a prestigious sociological journal, an interesting, relevant scientific study in its own right, with an important, focused conclusion (see the link to the journal article at the end of this post). But viewing the entire issue of bilingual schools from the perspective of one scientific article can lead to overly simplistic conclusions regarding this important enterprise.

The article in *Haaretz* and its description of the findings ignores an essential aspect of relations between Jews and Arabs, namely, the power imbalance between the groups. In most “regular” schools, the language is Hebrew, history is approached from the perspective of the Jewish narrative, and the dominant culture of the school, in the classrooms, and in the children’s lives, is Jewish culture. Friendship can certainly exist within this context. But the question is: What is the aim of such friendship in the broader sense of Jewish-Arab relations? Gordon Allport, the originator of “contact theory,” argued that the context in which intergroup friendships form is of incredible importance. He provided examples from race relations in the United States, demonstrating, for example, that friendships could form even between a master and his servant, but that such friendships did not have the potential to generate more egalitarian and respectful relations between blacks and whites. One of his main arguments was that in order for intergroup friendship to be significant at the macro level, it must take place between equals. That is, according to Allport and the many who followed in his wake, intergroup friendship is not itself the goal, but rather a means of social change. Accordingly, it must also take place in the right context, which includes a structure that facilitates equality. Indeed, one of principles that guide many practical activities relating to contact is the attempt to create equality within the context in which the contact takes place.

Bilingual schools have made it their goal to balance the power relations between the Jews and Arabs who attend the school. This balance is at the structural level, applied “from above.” The language is not only Hebrew, but Hebrew and Arabic; the culture they study is not only Jewish; and the historical narrative on which they are raised honors and gives space both to that of the Jewish people and to that of the Palestinian people. Such a context provides a place and a voice for the Arab boy or girl who attends the school – including a place for their social identity, their culture, and their narrative. A meaningful place for them. It is true that this process also accentuates their separate identities. But identities must be accentuated in order to strive for equality. Arab children in bilingual schools have a place as the equals of the Jewish children. Such equality, and the understanding that it is important, can generate an abundance of positive processes. For example, studies show that children at bilingual schools perceive intergroup differences as less essential or stable ([https://www.researchgate.net/…/links/55bf31c008aed621de1223](https://www.researchgate.net/%E2%80%A6/links/55bf31c008aed621de1223)—that is, the accentuation of difference actually creates a more flexible perspective on groups). This perspective has far-reaching effects on intergroup relations. Of course, it would be wonderful if there were also more integration in the sense of acquaintances and friendships, but this is not the sole purpose for which these schools were established. They were established in order to create a different reality, one of integration based on deep respect for the other and recognition of the importance of equality. And this justifies their existence.

In sum, the type of encounters that bilingual schools provide does indeed have certain limitations (for example, separation based on the accentuation of identities, increased tension, and so forth), but also great advantages (such as reducing stereotypes, creating an egalitarian and honest discourse on power and inequality, and raising the banner of genuine egalitarianism in a society with an enormous power imbalance). Only a more comprehensive and multifaceted view of the phenomenon can link what the science says with what is happening in the field and convey the right message to readers.

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