**The Role of Arab School Superintendents in Israel in Empowering Schools to Reduce Achievement Gaps during Turbulent Periods**

**Abstract**

This study examined the performance of superintendents and leaders of the Arab education system in Israel in reducing achievement gaps and promoting curricula that empower and advance students. In-depth interviews were conducted with school governance officials in an attempt to address these key issues: (1) The steps administrators in the Arab education system take to reduce underachievement and empower change agents during crises; (2) Arab school superintendents’ and local government education officers’ assessment of government policies as empowering or disempowering; (3) The extent to which superintendents believe that cultural change is required within existing administrative structures before they can empower school communities to become societal innovators for equity, peace and renewal.

The findings were analyzed according to themes and categories, and examined through the lens of the Turbulence Theory (Gross, 2014). Results revealed that Arab educational leaders strive to reduce achievement gaps by increasing the curriculum’s relevance to the school community, and balancing the community’s demands for quality education with technocratic policy demands by the Ministry of Education. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

*Keywords*: governance systems, superintendents, governance, achievement

gaps, Arab education

**Introduction**

Economic processes of globalization continue to affect the globalization of acquired knowledge and to underscore the gaps in global education systems (Brooks & Normore, 2010). This trend allows us to become familiar with the intra-system differences in nation states and the differences between states (Arnova, Torres & Franz, 2013; Waite, Rodríguez & Wadende, 2015). In particular, the globalization of education is having a tremendous impact on what is taught and tested in less developed countries and on organizational forms of schooling (Moloi, Gravett, & Petersen, 2009). Many scholars have tried to view the functioning and output of national education systems through a global lens and examine the degree of their correspondence with the international community, while others have warned against intellectual and cultural colonization and the potential commodification of education (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012; Waite, Rodríguez & Wadende, 2015).

Furthermore, school superintendents play a key role in mobilizing school performance, especially when dealing with centralization and accountability systems (Early et al., 2016). Schools and governing bodies operate in constantly changing and challenging environments (Wait et al., 2015). Such a macro lens is helpful in examining the controversial role of the Arab education system, which serves a controlled native minority (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013; Jabareen & Agbaria, 2010), and faces a number of major challenges. These challenges include its structural and content-related subordination to the Jewish education system (Abu-Saad, 2006); the absence of Arab representatives at policymaking levels and the ensuing content; its economic dependence on the Jewish education system; the constant demand for ‘loyalty’ in exchange for support (Abu-Saad, 2006; Arar, 2012); and finally, the scholastic achievements of the Arab education system, which reflect the gaps between Arab and Jewish societies. Despite increased proportions of children in Arab schools since 1948, Arab students’ achievements are 28.5% lower in Grade 4, and 29% lower in Grade 8. In 2012, 67% of Jewish public school students, but only 42% of Arab public school students, achieved full matriculation certificates (Balas, 2014).

On the structural level, the state education system in Israel, to which the Arab education system belongs, is divided horizontally into geographic districts; each district has a district manager and subordinate superintendents (administrators or managers in charge of a number of public schools or a school district). The Jewish system is served by Jewish superintendents, and the Arab system by Arab superintendents (Arar, 2014). At the same time, on the vertical level, under the Minister of Education there are Jewish senior civil servants – director-general, deputy-director-general, etc., to whom the supervisors of Arab, Druze and Bedouin education – usually only symbolic roles – report (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013).

Education in Israel is segregated, with separate educational sectors for religious and secular Jewish children and for Arab children. Because of the segregation, the likelihood of encounters between Jewish and Arab children is very low. Each sector includes both state and non-state schools. The language of instruction for Jewish children is Hebrew, and for Arab children – Arabic (Gibton, 2011). 73.9% of the Israeli state education system is Jewish education, divided into state secular (45.1%) and religious (28.8%) systems. The Arab education system serves 26.1% of the children in Israel (CBS, 2015), and is state-funded and supervised. It is subject to government control of educational content, resources and organizational structure. Balas (2014) showed how Israel’s centralized education system effectively controls, unifies and critiques activity in schools, maintaining a shortage of equal education opportunities for the Arab minority, due to a ‘concentration of disadvantage’. Arab and Jewish education are separate and unequal in both means and outputs. A turbulent reality such as this requires leadership efforts that affect the organization, its functioning and its output (Harvey et al., 2013).

**Turbulence Theory**

Turbulence Theory (Gross, 2014) is a metaphor from the world of aviation used to describe upheaval and turbulence in educational organizations. It defines how and why organizational conditions become volatile, and provides explanations for the world of educational innovation in which change always brings with it opposition. Gross tried to understand educational innovation and change through four key questions: (1) How might the levels of disturbance facing innovating schools be described so that different degrees of challenge could be compared? (2) How might the emotional strength of that disturbance be more thoroughly understood? (3) How might the school look at its own disturbance in a measured way so that reasoned action could be more likely? (4) Might there be a positive aspect to the disturbances facing schools that decide to innovate, or was turbulence always a detrimental force to be avoided or at least diminished?

Flight turbulence is generally described by four levels, which the theory applies to instability in educational organizations: *Light*: little or no movement of the craft, translated into ongoing operations, little or no interruption to regular work, and minor signs of stress. *Moderate*: noticeable waves, translated into widespread awareness of the issue and specific sources. *Severe*: strong gusts that threaten control of the craft, translated into fear for the organization, widespread community protests, and a sense of crisis. *Extreme*: forces so great that control is lost and structural damage to the craft occurs, is translated into structural damage to the very functioning of the organization.

Light or moderate levels of turbulence allow for detailed speculation, data gathering and analysis as means of working through the problems, whereas severe or extreme turbulence extends no such opportunity, since the need for a speedy, well-considered response is crucial.

The disparities between the Arab and Jewish education systems prompted us to examine them through the lens of the Turbulence Theory, in an effort to understand how the leaders of Arab education cope with this unsettling reality and attempt to position the Arab education system in comparison to the Jewish one.

**The Arab School System in Israel**

Israel has a total population of about eight million, of which 79.3% are Jewish and 20.7% are Arab. The Arab population is comprised of 82.1% Muslims, 9.4% Christians and 8.4% Druze (CBS, 2015). Israeli society is divided into social, national and political enclaves. This is also reflected in the educational system, best described as a tribal education system (Gibton, 2011). The Arab population of Israel contends with a constant identity conflict as citizens of what is officially defined as a Jewish state. The Jewish population is largely an urban population, and includes all socio-economic strata. Average income per family is significantly higher for Jewish families than for Arab families (Ben-David & Bleikh, 2013). In 2011, Israel was ranked fifth in unequal income distribution among the 34 OECD countries (Association for Civil Rights in Israel, 2011).

The education system in Israel is divided into five main types of schools: (1) state schools, attended by the majority of the pupils; (2) state religious schools, which emphasize Jewish studies, tradition and observance; (3) state Arab schools; (4) state-recognized but unofficial schools – partly funded by the state. This last category includes both Arab and Jewish schools, which are funded to a lesser extent by the state than official state institutes of education (75%). These institutions have greater freedom with regard to acceptance criteria, employment of teachers, and determining learning content, and include part of the ultra-orthodox Jewish education system, Christian Arab schools, and schools belonging to private associations in the Jewish and Arab sectors. (5) There are also a few independent private Arab and Jewish schools exempt from state supervision.

Most Arab schools are public schools, under the full supervision and funding of the Ministry of Education, and thus belong to some extent to the stream of state education. These schools are the focus of this research (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013).

On the national level, globalization and privatization, accompanied by the values of individualism and diversity, have wrought many changes in the three main educational systems since the early 1990s. The Ministry of Education has begun to encourage schools to specialize and offer unique subjects from a predetermined list of subjects taught for matriculation exams. Furthermore, many secondary schools have increasingly become autonomous and self-managed, providing some freedom for school staff to build a vision and mission for their schools, based on their values, communal needs, and the ethnic characteristics of their students (Gibton, 2011).

Several problems and shortcomings persist in the educational system (e.g., scholastic disparities, low achievement, low teachers' salaries, major deficits in the fields of knowledge, inefficient utilization of resources), and have led to the introduction of two major reforms – ‘New Horizons’ and ‘Power to Change’ (Arar, 2012; Gibton, 2011). These reforms restructured the teacher's role and introduced new teaching methods into schools (e.g., more teaching hours, one teacher-five pupil classrooms, and a check-in clock in every school). Likewise, an Authority for Research and Assessment was established as part of the Ministry of Education, and several national and international examinations have been introduced into schools, such as the national Meitzav exam for 4th and 8th grades, and the PISA and Perls exams, which have increased pressure on those working in the Israeli education system (Balas, 2014).

Table1 shows the distribution of the students in Jewish and Arab schools, by level of education. Arab students consist of 25.7% of the total students in primary education, compared with 27.1% in secondary education.

Table 1. Students in schools, by level of education and nationality

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Total** | **Hebrew education** | **Arab education** | **% Arab** |
| **Primary education** | 883,881 | 656,692 | 227,189 | 25.7 |
| **Secondary education** | 685,658 | 500,146 | 185,512 | 27.1 |
| **Total** | 1,569,539 | 1,156,838 | 412,701 | 26.3 |

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, Annual Data 2015, table 8.20

It should be noted that Arab education developed as a by-product of the Israeli education system. The Compulsory Education Law (1949) and the State Education Law (1953) made education resources more accessible to the Arab population in Israel (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013). However, comparative analysis of the inputs to the Arab education system vs. those to the Jewish system clearly shows ongoing structural discrimination since the State of Israel was established (Balas, 2014) – in buildings, in differential funding allocations that increase the gap, in number of pupils per classroom, and more (Winninger, 2012). The funding allocation triangle, consisting of the state, the local councils and the parents, widens the gap between the two systems. Furthermore, Arab localities are typically positioned in a low economic cluster, and the financial situation of most Arab localities is precarious, which further exacerbates the functioning of the Arab education system (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013). To close this gap, at least 1,700 additional teaching positions are required in the Arab education system. In addition, there is a shortage of educational psychologists, guidance counselors, regular attendance officers, speech therapists, and other paramedical professions (Follow-up Committee, 2010).

The implications of the unequal allocation of resources are expressed in the Arab education system’s achievements. The percentage of success in matriculation exams in Jewish schools was 67% vs. 42% in Arab schools; a gap of 25% (Balas, 2014). The results of ‘school climate’ assessment (Meitzav) indicate that Arab pupils are more involved in violence than Jewish pupils are, and a higher rate of them report insecurity at school and physical abuse by teachers (National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation, 2014). PISA results also indicate considerable gaps of over 100 points between pupils in the Arab vs. Jewish education system (Weissblai, 2013). Tables 2 and 3 illustrate some of these gaps.

Table 2. Gaps between Jewish and Arab education under Israel’s education policy (2013-2014)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Aspect compared** | **Jewish population** | **Arab population** |
| Percentage of infants registered in pre-school at age 2 | 61.3% | 13.7% |
| Average number of pupils in primary school classrooms | 24 | 25 |
| Percentage of pupils with learning disabilities that are not treated properly | 39% | 71% |
| Percentage of school dropouts from 9th to 12th grade | 13.5% | 21.3% |
| Percentage of success in matriculation exams | 67 % | 42 % |
| Percentage of pupils eligible for matriculation certificates (suitable for university entrance threshold requirements) | 66.9% | 32.8% |
| Percentage of applicants for university, rejected for first year of academic studies for a first degree | 16.2% | 26.9% |

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015 Annual Yearbook

**Table 3: Average and percentages of excellent and challenged pupils over the years**

**(Israel, OECD average, Hebrew speakers and Arabic speakers)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **2015 Reading Literacy** | **2015 Mathematical Literacy** | **2015 Scientific Literacy** |
| Hebrew Speakers | Average | 507 | 496 | 488 |
| Excellent (levels 5 & 6) | 12% | 11% | 8% |
| Challenged (below level 2) | 17% | 22% | 24% |
| Arabic Speakers | Average | 391 | 391 | 401 |
| Excellent (levels 5 & 6) | 0% | 1% | 0% |
| Challenged (below level 2) | 56% | 64% | 56% |

National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education, Ministry of Education, ***<http://rama.education.gov.il>***

In addition to the imbalanced allocation of resources, the core content of Arab education is instrumental and alien to the pupils’ national-historic narrative, often distorting this narrative as part of dulling their national identity and sense of belonging (Arar, 2012). Furthermore, educated Arabs’ choice of the teaching profession is often determined by the lack of accessibility of the Israeli labor market to Arab academics. Since the labor market and employment opportunities are more welcoming to Jewish academics, a considerable number of Arab academics choose teaching as an ‘involuntary’ option. At the same time, challenges faced by female Arab students is twofold – they face discriminatory expectations vis-a-vis Jews and vis-a-vis Arab men, so they tend to choose the teaching profession, which suits the traditional expectations of Arab society. This may explain the significant increase in the percentage of female teachers in Arab education in recent years: 77% of elementary schoolteachers are women, 66% in middle schools, and about half in high schools (Balas, 2014). Moreover, the appointment procedures for teachers and principals have been severely criticized, and these procedures affect the motivation of teachers in the Arab education system (Agbaria, 2011).

During the 2011-2012 school year, Arab students comprised 33.1% of students in education and teaching colleges compared to 15.9% of the general population (Winninger, 2012). This trend created a surplus of teachers, resulting in more trained teachers than available teaching positions in Arab schools. During the 2012-2013 school year, in contrast to the Jewish education system, there was a surplus of teachers in the Arab system, and the number of assigned teachers was 25%-41% of all assignment applications (Winninger, 2012). It should be noted that the pressure to be employed has created a situation in which more and more teachers are employed part-time, because the Ministry of Education endeavors to employ as many teachers as possible (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013).

In addition, over a long period, potential employees in the Arab education system in Israel were subject to investigation and approval by the General Security Service. This meant that many educated and qualified educators who took part on any level in political activity that was deemed ‘disloyal’ to government policy were disqualified (Abu-Saad, 2006).

School principals in the Arab education system operate in a conflict-ridden reality: On one hand, intense regulation by superintendents and on the other hand, pressure by local government motivated by socio-economic considerations. Actually, *hamula* (clan) politics dictate the performance patterns of school principals, often under threat of bodily harm (Arar et al., 2013). Consequently, this impacts patterns of parents’ involvement in schools, characterized by dissatisfaction and passive involvement, as a result of the schools’ and the staff’s inaccessibility (Arar et al., 2013).

The above challenges all the more forcefully affect the organizational culture of Arab schools. Furthermore, Arar and Abu-Rome’s (2016) research has shown that principals in the Arab education system tend to share with teachers decisions about pedagogic matters (such as determining teaching methods and materials) but less about school policy decisions.

In light of the above review, it seems that the Arab education system faces an intricate web of problems and obstacles that hinder its educational activity and detrimentally influence its climate and achievements. This study developed from the background described in this review, with the understanding that educational leadership in the Arab education system faces three main categories of challenges: 1) Ministry of Education policy and governance; 2) Lack of resources in the education system in general and the Arab system in particular; 3) Cultural management patterns on the local level – the balance of power between the local municipality and the school and principal.

The complexity of these challenges forces Arab educational leaders to cope with ethical dilemmas. In this study we attempt to understand their coping methods by means of the Turbulence Theory suggested by Gross (2004). This theory may explain the action patterns of educational leaders in the Arab education system as they cope with conflicting powers and stakeholders with contradictory or converging interests. According to Gross (ibid), change initiatives in this kind of system resemble turbulence, and change involves different levels of coping by the individual school and the diversity it represents, the school community, Ministry of Education policy, and demands of local leadership such as the Follow-up Committee for Arab Education. Turbulence Theory maintains that change can be categorized into different difficulty levels: easy – such as diverse (socioeconomic) community services at school; intermediate – like integrating reform at school; and difficult – such as parents’ intense objection to a certain study program, vis-à-vis which the school must regain control before chaos reigns (Harvey et al., 2013). The degree of turbulence is determined by the stakeholders’ positionality regarding the proposed change, the flow of change in the organization (that is, the stakeholders’ reaction to the future change may intensify the turbulence or flow with it), and the organization’s struggle for equilibrium or stasis (Gross, 2004).

The description of this complexity formed the background and inspiration for the present investigation of the unique role of the Arab education system’s leadership in reducing achievement gaps while facing a situation of constant turmoil.

Given the constraints on educational leaders described above, this research aimed to examine perceptions of senior administrators who have succeeded within a troubled education system, and consequently are able to lead curriculum reform to enhance Arab students’ achievements. More specifically, the following three questions were posed: (1) What steps do education administrators in the Arab education system take to reduce underachievement among their students, widen circles of cooperation and empower change agents during crises that tend to deepen achievement gaps between Arab and Jewish students? (2) Do Arab school superintendents and local government education offices perceive government policies as empowering or disempowering of their efforts to improve exam scores and cultural relevancy of curricula? (3) To what extent do the superintendents believe that cultural change is required to empower them to help their school communities become societal innovators for equity, peace and renewal?

Despite the abundance of studies that have addressed the challenges of the Arab education system in Israel, the issue of how the system’s leaders address achievement gaps has yet to be comprehensively studied. The aim of this paper is to clarify educational administrators’ actions to reduce gaps in achievements between Jewish and Arab students in national and international exams. The study therefore examines perceptions of administrative officers who have succeeded within an education system with an Arab-Jewish achievement gap, and are consequently able to lead curriculum reform to enhance Arab students’ achievements.

**Methodology & Method**

Qualitative methodology is appropriate for this research, as it provides detailed understating of perceptions, meanings and intentions of administrative stakeholders (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

In-depth semi-structured interviews (Plowright, 2011) were held with the government’s chief education officer for Arab education, Arab superintendents, members of the Follow-Up Committee for Arab Education, and three managers of local Arab education departments, who can potentially alter the Arab education system. Data were collected in 2016, analyzed according to themes and categories (Creswell, 2009) and read through the lens of the Turbulence Theory (Gross, 2014).

The interviews were conducted in Arabic by two MA students; each interview lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Table 4 describes the characteristics of the interviewees. The average age of the respondents was 51 (ranging from 45 to 59), and most had more than six years of role experience.

Table 4. Profile of study participants (N= 8)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name (pseudonym)** | **Function** | **Age** | **Gender** | **Qualifications** | **Years of experience in the role** |
| Ahmad | Arab Chief Education Officer | 46 | Male | MA | 13 |
| Naem | Member of follow-up committee | 54 | Male | MA | 18 |
| Awny | Superintendent | 56 | Male | MA | 6 |
| Eman | Superintendent | 46 | Female | PhD | 8 |
| Rafea | Superintendent | 51 | Male | MSc | 14 |
| Shereen | Head of education department | 45 | Female | PhD | 8 |
| Sami | Head of education department | 52 | Male | MA | 11 |
| Adnan | Head of education department | 59 | Male | MA | 17 |

Each interviewee was given an explanation of the objective of the study and was assured anonymity and consensual participation. They could terminate the interview if they chose to. Interview questions included open-ended questions, for example: "Can you complete the sentence: Closing the achievement gap in Arab education is …"; questions aimed at clarifying the interviewee's descriptions such as “Can you expand slightly on the steps you take in order to reduce the achievement gap?”; and interpretative questions such as “If I have understood you correctly, in your view, the aim of Arab education policy is…, is that correct?"

***Data Analysis***

The collected data consisted of recorded interview transcripts, including varied responses to open-ended questions. Content analysis procedures were used to organize the data and allow inferences to be drawn concerning the characteristics and meanings of the data. The interview transcripts underwent the four stages of content analysis delineated by Marshall and Rossman (2012): ‘organization of ﬁndings’, ‘construction of categories and themes, and associations between themes’, ‘examination of emergent hypotheses’ and ‘a search for different meanings of the themes’. The ﬁndings were organized and coded by comparative analysis including comparison within categories between component themes and between different categories as expressed in the interviewees’ words. A comparison of all ﬁndings was conducted by the author in discussion with the interviewer, providing perceptions and meaning regarding the findings. Crosschecking of interpretations was employed to reinforce the reliability and internal validity of the findings, and eventually led to the formation of a set of inter-related categories (Marshall and Rossman, 2012). In order to articulate and highlight the major themes, representative quotes that most accurately represent the themes are reported in the research findings. As the study is based on a small sample from a specific group of respondents, the reader should be aware of the limited applicability of the findings to other social and educational arenas.

**Findings**

The analysis produced three central themes, as follows:

1. ***Responsibility and consideration to reduce achievement gaps***

Analysis of the interviews reveals severe gaps between Arab and Jewish education, expressed on various levels, as described by Naem (a member of the follow-up committee):

The gaps in the Arab education system are as deep as the years of the state, primarily expressed in unequal allocation of education resources, and lack of appropriate physical structures and of classrooms, which we deal with every year; teacher-pupils ratio; [lack of] enrichment hours; and weakened local authorities that a priori are unable to support the education system.

On the functional level, the findings show that the main activity of Arab education leadership is marking the objective of reducing gaps and operational sub-objectives with school principals. For their part, the principal is the school’s backbone, and is expected to make every effort to improve pupils’ achievements and constantly increase the school’s success, because this minority society has no resource other than education to provide access to economic and social resources. Ahmad, the chief Arab education officer, described how he deals with superintendents in this context:

We analyse the pupils’ results on the district level, and then try to reach conclusions about the character of the achievement gap, its source, reasons and manifestations […] I take these results to the Ministry of Education management and try on one hand, to raise funds, and on the other hand, to pool resources according to the targets we set […] In relation to the superintendents, we try to outline district policies, modes of action, support and control generators to achieve these objectives.

Ahmad’s remarks were corroborated by Awny (a superintendent) who described slight turbulence when attempting to implement education policy (see: Gross, 2004):

At a superintendent-principals meeting, I laid out the goals and objectives of the district on two levels – narrowing achievement gaps and developing an optimal educational climate […] In each local municipality I tried to map the schools as follows: Each principal undertakes one compulsory subject longitudinally, for instance Arabic language, maps the pupils’ achievements and the teachers’ profiles, and together with them starts to build a strategy and follow its operation. The principal works with the regional supervisor for the specific subject. At the forum, they present the progress in one compulsory subject for all of the schools, so the forum becomes a professional dialogue circle, through which we lead the pedagogy in all the schools of the local council for both basic subjects and optimal school climate…

This testimony was validated by Eman, a superintendent, who underlined her actions to reinforce a policy of reducing achievement gaps in the schools she oversaw.

One principal established dialogue circles with parents from a disadvantaged neighbourhood. To that end, she enlisted parents in a ‘coffee and cake’ project (she always made the coffee and cake). They discussed issues concerning them and their children, and she managed to improve the children’s achievements and behaviour with the parents’ support.

The abovementioned principal’s actions were guided by her concern for the pupils. Like the superintendent, Rafea, head of a local education department, emphasized the importance of the principal’s responsibility to improve the pupils’ achievements. He said, “My principal accepted responsibility for the pupils’ progress, by repeated examination and various selections to assess the pupils and their achievements throughout the year”.

Most respondents – superintendents and heads of education departments – reflected mild turbulence (in Gross’ terminology), believing that closing gaps and establishing a beneficial climate was not an easy task, especially for an underprivileged and marginalized minority at the level of distributional justice (receiving educations budgets from the state), at the level of recognizing this minority’s distinctiveness, and at the level of parents who represent the poorest population in Israel, and are often unable to invest in their children’s education (Arar, 2015).

Sami, head of an education department in a rural locality, explained:

Most of my efforts in relation to the local schools concern providing construction resources, mainly classrooms, not to mention sports fields and facilities and educational space. We are always short of money. Some children study in trailers and portable structures. There were times when we rented rooms in private homes […] Air-conditioning units depend on parents’ and the community’s capacity to help the school. We depend a lot on donations, so we have fundraisers […] Actually, we turn a blind eye to principals’ unconventional methods of raising money, because I realize that they are in financial difficulties, and want to provide the minimum for teaching and learning […] So we are very far from equipping schools with suitable digitalization and preparing graduates to deal with the 21st century.

Criticism voiced by Naem, a member of the follow-up committee, was aimed at creating a medium turbulence that would improve the system’s stability. He emphasized the challenge of integrating the New Horizon reform in the local education system and striving for improved achievements:

The New Horizon reform (for elementary and middle schools in the Israeli education system) completely changed the teacher’s work mix, by dividing his/her day between classroom hours, individual tutoring of some pupils, and attendance and work hours at school. But the reform was not adjusted to Arab schools, neither in structure nor in content. For example, the structure does not allow for [extra space for] work corners for individual lessons. Also, there is no room for teachers’ personal work stations, where s/he can fulfil pedagogic duties at school. So, integration of the reform is faulty, which negatively affects improving learning and closing gaps that could have benefited disadvantaged children and empowered marginal children.

Thus the absence of suitable physical structures prevents implementation of the reform, which ignores the features of Arab education (Arar, 2012). Despite the failure of the reform’s declared objectives, it seems that some heads of education departments believe it is still possible to build an organizational culture that promotes achievement (see: Waters & Marzano, 2006). According to one education department head, building a professional learning community and empowering teachers by conveying trust and including them are important to enlisting all parts of the system in the goal of reducing gaps and promoting a positive climate. Teacher commitment and organizational citizenship are crucial to the creation of such a positive climate.

The lack of resources causes Arab education leaders to seek ways to maximize the system’s influence, as described by the superintendent, Awny:

Some principals know how to focus the school resources on the disadvantaged children. For example, one school operated a personal mentorship program – in each class, the school identifies the children that need dialogue circles, empowerment and help with their lessons, and operates a personal mentorship [structure]. Each teacher personally mentors five pupils, and strong pupils in higher grades mentor younger ones (with a teacher’s guidance). Another school has ‘good deeds’ days, when the school and the community contribute to the weaker population, including organizing funded enrichment courses, etc.

On this issue, Ahmad, the chief education officer, added, “The headquarters of the education system in Israel is aware of the gap between the two systems, so there is a five-year plan to reduce these gaps in the achievements of Arab education”.

However, Naem (member of the follow-up committee) criticized this plan, claiming that:

The five-year plan is a hoax. These are temporary hours, run by a contractor, and over half the hours go to the program manager, who is Jewish and has no clue about the needs of the Arab education system. We always ask – why aren’t these standard hours in the program?

To summarize, the leaders of Arab education regard improving education as the most important goal, and are mainly concerned with organizing physical infrastructure for the education system. In addition, they point to local successes and aspire to them, but are largely dependent on deficient external allocations (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013). The next theme presents the intra-organizational processes to improve the output of the Arab education system.

1. ***Empowering a curriculum that is culturally relevant***

A characteristic of Arab education discussed in the literature is its relevance in the context of the national narrative, on one hand, and in the context of asymmetry of acknowledging the other, on the other hand (Abu-Saad, 2006). The curriculum is devoid of cultural relevance, and this conflicting reality increases the alienation between the school and its community (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016), as expressed by Naem:

The Arab school is expected to deal with technocracy rather than with education relevant to the pupils’ unique historic and cultural essence. Education such as this disconnects them from their natural context. The Arab pupil is expected to learn universal values. In Arabic language lessons, language is learned as if it were folklore […] whereas Hebrew language lessons include cultural values and national context. Arabs are presented as a national minority, which is granted rights by goodwill, with total exclusion and suppression of their existence in this country for countless generations.

Similarly, Adnan, head of an education department, underlined how this conflict

is part of the Ministry of Education’s policy toward Arab schools:

As a national minority, we have days that characterize our narrative, such as Nakba Day or Land Day. These events are suppressed in the school’s landscape. The curriculum leans toward universality and limited reference to heritage and narrative, so that the pupils acquire an education disconnected from their existence. On the other hand, the local schools and education system are required to pass a loyalty-to-the-state test in order to receive the minimal budget. This policy is evident in the Minister of Education’s statements, the civics studies curriculum, national exams in the humanities that stress the Jewish-Zionist narrative at the expense of citizenship education, and suppress the Palestinian national narrative […] This policy has implications to the relevance of Arab schools and the alienation that some of the population feel toward it. Some parents solve the dilemma by sending their children to private schools, whether elite Christian schools or selective schools that promote a ‘grades economy’.

However, the chief education officer took the official stance and vehemently defended the Ministry of Education’s policy, saying that Arab schools can, to some extent, teach about roots, history and relevance, without eroding education processes and making it an example of counter-education (Ball, 2007). This indicates tension between the entities that represent the same system (Boyd, 2003; Gross, 2004).

Although the issue of relevance is present in Arab education, some principals have found ways to reduce the relevance gaps and generate processes that reconnect and empower the pupils. Shereen, head of an education department, highlighted how principals in her local council do so:

Some principals create a pool of informal activities such as trips and tours to get to know the country, and dialogue circles with significant adults who talk to them about their history. Also, they attend performances, choirs and folklore events outside the formal school framework, at which they are exposed to a narrative that challenges the official narrative dictated by the education system.

The respondents described the effective principal as one who creates diverse connections with the external environment, stakeholders, institutions, and anyone affiliated directly or indirectly with the school (Waters & Marzano, 2007) that s/he heads. Sami told us:

We have to maintain a good relationship with all factors including superintendents and local authorities. These relationships are important to expanding the Arab school’s sphere of relevance, and reducing the alienation that often envelops the schools and determines the community’s attitude.

Likewise, Naem underlined Arab schools’ relevance gap and the need to create congruence between Ministry of Education policy and the needs of the Palestinian minority in Israel:

At the beginning of the school year, the Minister of Education initiated a program to teach civic studies in Arab schools. The program’s basics underline the state’s Jewishness, distort historic facts about the Arab minority, and present it as a minority with no history or connection to the place. Events such as the Nakba of the Palestinian people, Land Day, the Kfar-Kassem massacre perpetrated by the Israeli army, the Al-Aqsa intifada that ended with the death of thirteen Arab youths at the hands of police forces […] These events were deleted from civics studies, which require Arab students to exhibit ‘submissive’ citizenship […] The reaction of the Follow-up Committee for Arab Education was to initiate a counter-program that highlights our narrative, which would be taught in homeroom hours in an attempt to clarify the history, narrative and cultural assets that our students should know.

The superintendent of that locality, in contrast, disagreed with the intention of the follow-up committee and head of the local education department to implement this program against the wishes of the Ministry of Education:

As a Ministry of Education employee, I feel it is wrong to include a program that the minister objects strongly to. Although the civics studies curriculum was criticized and condemned, it was finally approved, and for me that is the official program for Arab schools.

Thus, it seems that there is a lack of synergy between various parts of the system and its stakeholders. Moreover, there is a deep conflict with Ministry of Education policy for Arab education. The policy aims to create a generation that recognizes the state’s Jewishness, and is expected to acquire universal values while blurring its own narrative and heritage (Abu-Saad, 2006). On the other hand, local education departments present a discourse that tries to reconcile the ministry’s intentions with the parents’ fierce objection to a discourse that empties Arab education of its essence and values (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016).

1. ***Cultural change as a mobilizer for equity, peace and renewal***

In an attempt to understand the change that is being led by the Arab education leadership, and to highlight the values instilled by the schools and see how these lead toward change, I heard from Shereen (head of an education department) about the value of a sharing culture in processes and decision-making as part of discourse that establishes equity:

We try to observe the many sources of authority among the leaders of a local education system, adopting a transformational leadership style in an effort to coordinate the personal and the professional. It is important to me to promote discourse and practice of procedural justice, focusing on social solutions for educational problems.

Similarly, Eman (a superintendent) described the empowerment circles that she tried to develop and promote, as well as building a leading professional community in the schools she supervises:

I had to start by building an infrastructure. I fought to appoint principals who were respected professionally. It was not easy in a reality in which principals were appointed according to their political affiliation to the head of the local council. Together with the Educational Leadership Institute, I developed a professional development layout for the principals – a work strategy in which the principal collaborates with the leading team, and they are expected to take collective (rather than individual) responsibility for it. Also, it was important to me to build learning communities for principals, in an attempt to reduce their isolation, and to build collective rather than individual leadership among them. We still have a long way to go […]. When a principal experiences such an initial sharing circle, the method may permeate to the lower echelons of the school.

Ahmad described the organization of conferences and training courses as an opportunity to instill not only knowledge but also social vision:

I make sure to organize two conferences a year, in which we discuss relevant issues and questions, on one hand, and give some schools the opportunity to present success stories, on the other hand. I hold activities to train advisors [retired principals], who are especially trained to mentor new principals. I seek people who can be strong advisors with beliefs and vision. I think that if you want to instil vision or beliefs in others, they have to believe in you, in your abilities, and you have to include everyone.

Eman, in her own way, tries to lead Arab schools to success in matriculation exams, without placing herself at the center of the educational work, but by means of empowerment and by providing teachers with work plans:

When I organized the first conference, I wanted to make sure it was successful, because I knew that results would follow success. Many teachers call me and said, ‘You gave us tools; we see the change from the second or third month; we also see the change in the matriculation results’. I don’t have to say, ‘I’m the superintendent, I’m the principal, I’m in charge’. The results speak for themselves, and they produce more results. So, work quietly.

Awny described his way to influence the Arab education system:

I know that affecting education is accomplished by affecting teachers. Policy and guidelines alone do not guarantee optimal teaching and education. I believe in learning from success. Together with the principal and a team, we go into classrooms and try to identify teachers’ successes. It is important to me to broadcast positive energy, to be interested, and to be enthusiastic and to glorify teachers’ triumphs.

Some superintendents try to maximize their impact and stimulate an agenda of first-rate educational change through empowerment of others and promotion of essential equity and social justice (Harvey et al., 2013). They bring to the job personal vision and power and their experience as pedagogues and make an effort to promote and uphold social goals that are far beyond their official job definition. More importantly, they empower and mentor others on their way to professional development, and endeavor to praise teachers’ success (Harvey et al., 2013; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Rafea (a superintendent) believes that the ability to lead significant change at school and see it through is one of the most important leadership qualities for a principal:

I have one principal who has initiative and experience to develop projects. She received an award as outstanding principal. She has excellent relationships with pupils and parents. She studies and trains, and participates in managerial meetings all through the processes. This principal engages in research processes with the pupils, and she is extremely successful.

To summarize, some superintendents represent the ‘upright generation’ of Arab society, and try to support a space of empowerment, enablement and relevance at schools (Waters & Marzano, 2007), which instills in the pupils democratic values, tools for legitimate protest, accessibility to social resources, and a shared life space (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016) – thus leading schools to a state of intermediate turbulence (Gross, 2004). In contrast, some superintendents represent the official line and try to maintain ‘industrial peace’ – or as one superintendent argued, to ‘please their master’ – a pattern that is characterized by adhering to regulations, and considerable monitoring and follow-up at the schools (Arar, 2012).

**Discussion & Concluding Remarks**

Superintendents do not feel part of the Ministry of Education decision-making mechanisms, but at the same time are obligated to implement policy decisions. Moreover, the Ministry of Education disregards Arab citizens’ social-cultural minority characteristics, within which the superintendent also needs to function. He or she must mediate official Ministry of Education policy that does not see the Arab population as a partner in planning its own educational future and in some cases even conducts hostile policies built on mistrust, linking ‘loyalty’ to educational allocations (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016). School superintendents are often perceived as representing the interests of the establishment rather than those of the Arab community. On the other hand, some superintendents view their job as a public mission through which they can reduce gaps, increase equity, and even provide tools for dialogue and common life between Arab and Jewish societies (Arar & Massry-Herzallah, 2017). Despite the Arab education system’s great importance as virtually the sole resource to develop human capital (Abu-Saad, 2006), it is frequently misused for narrow local interests such as solidifying *hamula*-centred power bases (Arar & Oplatka, 2014).

Almost all the interviewees mentioned that scarce resources - a product of unequal allocation of resources in comparison to the Jewish sector (Agnon, 2006) - made it difficult to fulfil their roles properly. This study highlights the damage to the quality of the educational work and the differences between educational leadership of Arab and Jewish education departments, which stem largely from budget gaps (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013). This inequality raises moral questions about the role of educational policymakers in perpetuating lower socio-economic standards among the Arab population (Gibton, 2011; Golan-Agnon, 2006). Experience teaches that without urgent reform, the gaps will only deepen, and Arab society will find it hard to free itself of disadvantage, discrimination and poverty (Abu-Saad, 2006; Balas, 2014).

In addition, the findings indicate the lack of synergetic work among the many stakeholders (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013; Gross, 2014). The lack of over-all accountability is also evident, along with power struggles between headquarters and the field, which do not promote synergy or work with professional learning communities, and often create a sense of isolation among many actors in the system (Waite et al., 2015).

Figure 1 describes the activity pattern of Arab schools in Israel that is subject to ambivalence and contradictory expectations. The two abovementioned factors – sparse resources and an imbalanced system – leave the leadership no choice but to forge intra-organizational change, described as mild or medium turbulence (Gross, 2014). We therefore argue that if no real change is made, starting with clarification of the leaders’ positionality, the local education system’s autonomy cannot bear fruit and extricate Arab education from its debility (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012).

Figure 1. Influence patterns and performance of Arab schools in Israel under conflicting expectations

**Majority-minority relationships**

Region / Regional superintendents

Arab education division; Professional superintendents

Community

Local government

**Majority-minority relationships**

We see that the Arab education system functions as a national minority system, subject to an overriding education system and dominated by general superintendents. At the same time, the relationship between the local government and the school is characterized by weak one-way dependence (by the local authority) (Arar & Abu-Asbah, 2013). The community also maintains a weak relationship with the school, which often functions in isolation from its community (Gross, 2014). The relationship with the Arab Education Department, represented by professional superintendents, also exhibits weak dependence, which diminishes the place of an authentic curriculum vis-à-vis the need for strong regulation. In view of the above, it seems that the Arab school functions under high centralism and control, and lacks pedagogic autonomy (Arar & Ibrahim, 2016; Maxfield, Wells, Keane & Klocko, 2008).

Furthermore, the superintendents stated that, like other minorities throughout the world, the Arab minority in Israel is under pressure to assimilate. The education system adopts the majority culture as an informal norm, so that the superintendent is torn between the professional sphere (as a representative of headquarters) and the personal sphere (as a member of the minority group) (Lewis, Rice, & Rice, 2011). Similar to Van Laer and Janssens’ (2014) argument, the superintendents try to create a coherent identity that integrates the norms dictated by the policymakers with the contradictory expectations of their own society. However, despite the attempt to form a professional-supervisory entity that tries to adapt to both worlds simultaneously, it is evident that some feel they are between a rock and a hard place, pressured by both sides.

It seems that this marginal system has still not translated its segregation into an advantage for its schools, and has failed to pool educational resources that might enable it to strengthen its heritage, educational values and ideology, and organize and manage educational resources more effectively (see also: Early et al., 2016; Harvey et al., 2013). In addition, the education system suffers from this split, which severely disrupts coordination. Local politics produces an ineffective education system dominated by culture of power conflicts, bypassing authorities and lack of clear role definitions (Arnova et al., 2013; Gross, 2014). Thus, finally, facilitating the coordination of stakeholders networks may turn out to be the most cost-efficient and effective method for improving the delivery of education among the Arab minority. Although generalization of the findings is limited due to its methodology, it is possible to point to several implications for Arab education policy and for similar developing and minority societies striving to achieve educational change through a bottom-up process. The findings also suggest the need for broader and more representative future research on these issues.

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