

THE EFFECT OF HIGH-SCHOOL CURRICULA ON THE IDENTITY OF ARAB STUDENTS IN ISRAEL

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Abstract: The paper presents findings from a study which examined the social identity of Arab high-school students in Israel, and the effects of core academic subjects on the formation of national (Arab) and civic (Israeli) identities, as perceived by the students. The study included 271 students at the end of grade 10, all majoring in one of the following academic streams: exact sciences, biology, or social studies. It was found that overall the students' national identity was more clearly defined than their civic identity. National identity was more clearly defined among boys than among girls, and among Muslims more so than among Christians. The different academic subjects were perceived by the students to differently affect the formation of national and civic identities. Arabic studies were perceived to have the most dominant effect on the formation of a national identity, while Hebrew studies were perceived to have the most dominant effect on the formation of a civic identity.

Keywords: National Identity, Civic Identity, Arab Sector, High-School Curricula

Introduction

Students whose mother tongue is Arabic and were born in the State of Israel, are part of the Arab Israeli population. In 2016, 20.8% of the Israeli population were Arabs (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The history that had been shared by this population had also shaped its identity (Schmaltz, 1981).

One of the more striking characteristics of the Arab Israeli population is the lack of a shared and coherent vision with respect to its future within the State of Israel (Osatzki-Lazar and Ghanem, 1999). Members of the Arab minority, often unsure of their future, are exposed to a variety of ideologies, political agendas and election platforms.

They are divided between several political movements as well as a number of self-identification subgroups: Palestinian (ethnic identity), Muslim (religious identity of the majority of Arab Israelis), Arab (national identity) and Israeli (civic identity). Together, these subgroups combine to form the identity of Arab Israelis (Smoocha, 1998).

The conflicted identity of the Arab minority in Israel may be attributed to the traumatic process by which this minority group came to be, as well as to the manner in which it has been treated by the Israeli state. Such a conflicted identity is manifested when a minority group identifies both with the national group with which it is affiliated, and with the majority group with which it lives (Meiari, 1976). In the present study, the idea of a collective identity, comprised of several sub-identities, has been adopted (Miller, 1963).

Three models have been employed to describe the identity of the Arab Israeli minority – the **Conflict Model**, the **Adaptation Model** and the **Accentuated Identity Model**. All three models postulate the existence of two identities: Arab (Palestinian) and Israeli. The conflict model (Hofman, 1982) proposes that members of the Arab Israeli minority try to balance between these two identities and that the two identities are conflicted. In his adaptation model, Smoocha (1998) assumed that the two identities exist side by side and without conflict. According to his model, it is the weight attached to each identity that is a key to the balance between the two. According to the accentuated identity model, the two identities are inherently different and independent and are linked to different and separate functions: the Palestinian identity is linked to emotions, ideology and core values, while the Israeli identity is linked to formal and civic matters (Hujierat, 2005).

Two processes were noted to affect identity formation among members of the Arab Israeli minority: Israelization and Palestinization (Rekhess, 1998; Smoocha, 1998; Yiftachel, 1999). The Palestinians in Israel have internalized their status as a minority group and are aware of differences between them and Palestinians elsewhere in terms of their future (Ghanem, 2004).

Since the founding of the State of Israel, the number of students in the Arab Israeli education system has increased by a factor of 20, while the entire population has grown only by a factor of 5 (Lavi, 1997). In the year 2007, Arab Israeli students

comprised a quarter of the students in the Israeli education system. The 2001 five-year government program, the third of its kind aimed at advancing the Arab sector, includes goals and methods that were formulated based on the recommendations of three committees (Abu-Asbah, 2001). Despite an ongoing improvement in the achievements of Arab Israeli students, these achievements, as reflected in the scores of the matriculation exams and other pedagogical parameters, are still significantly lower than those of Jewish Israeli students. Significant gaps between the Jewish-Israeli and Arab-Israeli education systems still exist, including ones in the quality and level of education, support and enrichment services, the options available and the level of independence of the systems (Al-Haj, 1996; Abu-Asbah, 2005).

Erikson (1968) noted that periods of identity crisis may in fact provide an opportunity for identity exploration. He further suggested that trust, autonomy and a sense of safety are prerequisite for a successful identity-formation process. Arab youth in Israel are caught between conflicting influences and powers. Confronted by an intensive process of change (Rekness, 2008), and in an attempt to survive and assimilate into the multicultural society in which they live, young Arab Israelis try to absorb and adapt to the various cultures to which they are exposed. These attempts further aggravate their identity crisis (Abu-Baker, 2008). Under such conditions, the education system plays a crucial role in shaping the future face of the young generation, in terms of culture as well as national and societal core values.

According to Ghanem (1997), the complexities faced by young Arab Israelis can be resolved into the following four spheres of interactions: the **internal sphere** – interactions amongst themselves; the **Israeli sphere** - interactions with Jewish Israelis; the **civic sphere** - interactions with the Jewish and democratic State of Israel; and the **external sphere** – interactions with Arabs outside of Israel.

In their study entitled *Curricular Influence on Identity among Jewish and Arab School Students in Israel*, Hertz-Lazarowitz et al. (1978) examined the perceptions and opinions of Jewish and Arab Israeli high-school students with respect to the effects of studied curricula on identity formation. The authors concluded that for Arab Israeli high-school students, national identity was more important than civic identity, and that the subjects in which the students majored, and in particular language studies, were important

in shaping the students social identities. For the past thirty years, no other studies, aimed at examining the contribution of various academic subjects to the social identity of Arab Israeli school students, have been conducted. Furthermore, studies of identity in youth have been mostly limited to the study of personal and familial aspects and failed to examine social aspects. This lack in data with respect to the effects of school environment and curricula on identity formation had motivated the present study.

Research Goals and Methods

The present study aimed to examine the social identity of Arab high-school students in Israel, and to evaluate the perceived contribution of the school curricula to the process of social identity formation. Social identity was assumed to be comprised of two sub-identities: national (Arab) and civic (Israeli), and was examined in students majoring in subjects from the exact sciences, biology and social sciences academic streams. The research questions addressed the level of clarity of social identity among the students and the perceived contribution of various academic subjects to the process of identity formation.

A cross-sectional study design was employed. 271 Arab students from six high-schools in northern Israel participated in the study. Students were given questionnaires, and were asked to fill them up, following receipt of parental consent. The questionnaires, which were based on the earlier work of Hertz-Lazarowitz et al. (1978), included the following sections: a general background-information section, a questionnaire examining identity clarity, and another questionnaire examining the perceived contribution of various academic subjects to the process of identity formation.

Results

Identity Clarity

No significant differences were found between the social identities of students from different academic streams. Most students, irrespective of the subject in which they majored, related positively to their Arab identity, and their national identity was clearly defined. Similarly, no significant differences between the reported civic identities of students from different academic streams were noted. However, the students' civic

identity was not as clearly defined as their national identity. Almost half of the students did not identify with Israelis or else reported low levels of identification, a third of the students reported medium levels of identification with Israelis, and only a fifth reported a strong sense of civic identity. National identity was more clearly defined among the boys than among girls, and among Muslim students than among Christian students.

Contribution of High-School Curricula to the Formation of Social Identity

Students in the exact sciences and biology streams perceived the study of Mathematics and Physics to contribute more to the formation of national and civic identities, than ones in the social sciences stream. The perceived contribution of the study of Biology to the formation of national and civic identities was highest in the biology stream. The perceived contribution of the study of History to the formation of national and civic identities was higher in the social sciences and biology streams than in the exact sciences stream. It appears that core subjects in each of the academic streams, respectively, were perceived to contribute most to the formation of a social identity, both national and civic, by students who were majoring in these subjects.

The study of Arabic was perceived to contribute most to the formation of a national (Arab) identity, as compared with all other academic subjects in all academic streams. Hebrew and English were perceived to contribute most to the formation of a civic identity.

Links between Identity Clarity and the Perceived Contribution of High-School Curricula to Identity Formation

According to present findings, the higher the perceived contribution of academic subjects to the formation of social identity, the clearer is that identity. In particular, links were noted between the perceived contribution of the study of History and Arabic to the formation of a national identity and the clarity of that identity; and between the perceived contribution of the study of Hebrew and English to the formation of civic identity and the clarity of the civic identity.

Summary

The present study examined the social identity (both national and civic components) of Arab Israeli students as a function of the academic subjects in which they majored, and the perceived contribution of these subjects to the formation of social identity.

According to the adaptation model (Smootha, 1998), the two identity components, national and civic, exist side by side in Arab Israelis. The present findings indicate that among the study population, the national identity component was more clearly defined than the civic identity component, and more so in boys as compared with girls, and in Muslim students as compared with Christian students.

A clearly defined national identity reflects the students' positive view of their Arab identity. The present findings indicate that national identity was pronounced more in boys and in Muslims. This noted gender effect might reflect the traditional and conservative values that still prevail in the Arab sector in Israel, whereby boys are brought up on nationalistic ideas, while girls are taught to embrace more family-centered themes. Similarly, in recent years and both in Israel and worldwide, Islam has been associated with national ideas, while Christianity has mostly been viewed as a religion and not as a political movement.

Different academic subjects were perceived by students to contribute differently to their national and civic identities. The students' national identity appears to reflect the internal sphere (Ghanem, 1997), which involves students' interactions amongst themselves, while civic identities reflect the Israeli and civic spheres.

Core subjects in each of the academic streams, respectively, were perceived to contribute most to the formation of social identity among students who were majoring in these subjects. These included Mathematics and Physics in the exact sciences stream, Biology in the biology stream, and History in the social sciences stream. It appears that these core subjects were perceived by the students to play a central role in their personal development, and in particular in the process of social identity formation.

The study of history exposes students to their national heritage and is thus expected to highlight the links between social context and social identity. Positive links

were noted between the perceived contribution of various subjects to the formation of social identity and the clarity of that identity. The most prominent links were noted between the perceived contribution of History and Arabic studies to the formation of a national (Arab) identity and the clarity of that identity, and between the perceived contribution of Hebrew and English studies to the development of a civic (Israeli) identity and the clarity of that identity.

Based on the present findings, I propose that the clarity of the national (Arab) identity is linked to a process of Palestinization, while the clarity of the civic (Israeli) identity is linked to a process of Israelization. These two processes, Israelization and Palestinization, distinct but not opposite to each other, are both inherent to the identity of Arab Israelis. Similarly, the two processes affect the identity of Arab students in Israel, and the exact balance between them reflects the level of clarity of each identity component: national Arab or civic Israeli, respectively. The two processes, corresponding to two identity components, thus represent two aspects of the composite identity. Together with the time variable, these processes combine to construct the social identity space of Arab Israelis.

As a teacher and an educator, I would like to conclude on a personal note: social identity, as well as the link between it and high-school curricula, are subjects that have been of interest to me for many years. This interest prompted me to conduct the present research and thus to learn more about the current social identity of Arab Israeli students. I strongly believe in the power of teachers to influence the social identity of their students and to contribute to the creation of a peaceful society.

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