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Social Justice, Identity Politics, and Integration in Conflict-Ridden Societies

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Challenges and Opportunities in Integrated Palestinian–Jewish Education in Israel

Zvi Bekerman

Introduction

The arguments I put forward in the following chapter have been in the making for a long time. Put succinctly, I claim that it is mainly class interests and not multicultural interests that guide even well-intentioned, bottom-up, educational initiatives declaratively geared toward recognition, inclusion, and coexistence. As such, these educational settings are shown to further social justice only for those who already enjoy it. These arguments stem from seven years of ethnographic research in an outstanding educational initiative in Israel. This initiative attempts to educate a new generation of students toward mutual recognition, coexistence, and reconciliation through the creation of integrated bilingual schools where Palestinians (Palestinians living in the State of Israel) and Jews learn together. The insights I offer here do not contradict previous findings. Rather, they add to their complexity and emphasize the importance of longitudinal research in education and the need to account for ever expanding contexts within which to situate our interpretations.

One of the primary issues I have had to confront as a result of my research is the realization that the way I look at these schools and their functioning in Israeli society is tinted by macropolitical formations, such as the nation-state. These formations fix our gaze in ways we are not always “aware” of. For example, I have come to realize how easy it is to overlook class issues in a national context because we are thirsty for cultural and identity categories. I have also come to realize how easy it is to fall prey to romantic approaches which focus on the meeting of, so called, different and conflicted national/cultural/ethnic groups while losing sight of subgroups within these categories—groups that might want to maneuver themselves out of such categorizations or of other structural differences that, if accounted for, expand our understanding and might help us offer better advice.

In my recent publications I have dealt with issues related to bilingualism and multiculturalism, identity formation and stakeholder’s expectations as they are exposed in the daily practices of the schools (Bekerman, 2002, 2003c, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Bekerman & Horenczyk, 2004; Bekerman & Shhadi, 2003). Using previously gathered data, I deal here with larger issues related to the possibility of educational reform as a means to advance social justice in general and, more specifically, within conflict ridden societies. I believe that an analysis based on this particular case, as opposed to those based on “regular” schools, brings sophistication to arguments against the declared aspirations of national frameworks to promote further recognition and social justice through mass education. Israel is a society full of cleavages (Shafir & Peled, 2002), in which segregation among ethnic/national groups reigns in the educational system and in which most top-down reform efforts have been implemented in the Jewish educational realm. So, more specifically, in the Israeli case, it is of utmost importance to inquire into bottom-
up integrated reform which can easily be exploited by the hegemonic powers to their own benefit while co-opting them to show their attempts to alleviate the suffering of its minorities.

Before bringing this introduction to an end, I want to mention my Jewish background. Such a mention is made out of a sensibility toward theoretical perspectives which emphasize the relevance of the researcher’s sociocultural and historical trajectories in the performance of any research activity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Haraway, 1991). This sensibility should be doubled in the case of this study, which is conducted in an area engaged in one of the most intractable conflicts of modern times (Bar-Tal, 2000). Indeed, ethnic, national, and religious identities operate in the lives of people by connecting them with some individuals and dividing them from others (Appiah & Gates, 1995). Still, individuals negotiate their identities while constituting and being constituted by them (Harre & Gillett, 1995; Sampson, 1993). Though in present conditions my Jewishness might be a given, I want to believe that throughout my many years of life experiences and theoretical training in a variety of sociohistorical perspectives, I have come to sustain a critical perspective on myself and the circumstances of my research. This has never been an easy task; suspicion (self and that of others) has been everywhere (Bekerman, 2003b). Thus, in addition to my own reflective and critical position, I have made sure throughout the research process to be assisted by figures fully identified with those groups which might not have initially trusted my “ethnic/national/cultural” presence.

On Educational Reform and Paradigmatic Gaze

Education is central to the preservation of the nation-state machinery by helping it shape a national consciousness and ideology. Education is also the main conduit for mobility. As such, it comes as no surprise that education and its goals become the focus of agitated debates. These debates are full of conflicts and compromises among social groups which hold different perspectives of the “good.” Even when in sync about meaning, they do not necessarily share a vision of how the “good” is to be realized. The arguments are often organized around either class, national, or ethnic distinctions. Though not all citizenry is involved in these disputes, all pay the price or make a cent participating, or not participating, in the deliberation.

Those in power see with clarity the lack of achievement of the underprivileged. However, in order to keep their power they need to show an interest in the fate of the deprived and try to advance them. Since the central sphere for the advancement of the destitute in modernity has been the state-instituted, mass educational establishment, suggesting its reform is parallel to taking a true interest in reforming society toward the “good,” or so we are asked to believe.

In short, the three main assumptions behind educational reform are: (1) that equality can be achieved through reforms in the educational system; (2) that inequality in the educational system is a product of ignorance as opposed to bad will; and (3) that when considering the above, investing in teacher training will remedy the present situation and education will foster the implementation of social justice for all (Rogers & Oaks, 2005).

These assumptions rest on a second set of cultural assumptions. In the case of Israel, for example, this second set of assumptions presupposes that the very basic values of the Jewish civilization deny racist perspectives while emphasizing love and recognition of “otherness.” If so, and in the absence of unexpected obstacles, the Jewish civilization can produce only justice and Jews can work only for the good. Given this, reform efforts simply need to achieve technical changes such as the reorganization of curriculum, the
adding of hours to the school schedule, and the training of teachers. All these are supervised by specialists informed by strong positivist research.

Still, it has become increasingly clear that, save for a few exceptions, educational reform has failed to deliver the goods. Even if educational reform would, in any measure, succeed, we would have to deal with the efforts invested by the middle upper class to sustain the existing gaps so as to secure the future well-being of their children. The middle upper classes will, without doubt, be successful in achieving educational reform, once again letting us realize that what education is asked to correct, has little to do with education and a lot to do with the world in which schools exist, the very world they are asked to support. For better or for worse, present research supports this critique showing that reforms developed in Western countries in the last half-century have achieved little, if anything, in the way of bettering the chances of the destitute (Anyon, 1995; Apple, 1999; Berliner, 2006; Hirschland & Steinmo, 2003; Ravitch, 2000; Sarason, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Similar results have been documented for Israel (Shye & Zion, 2003).

The views expressed above with their emphasis on just distribution and care for the destitute easily become identified as some kind of communist plot for they challenge myths about the power of education to effect change. Indeed, they have been voiced by Marxist influenced educational theoreticians such as Willis (1977), Bernstein (1970), Wexler (1992), Apple (1982), and others, but this does not make them less relevant.

As previously mentioned, arguments concerning educational reform organize around more than simply class issues. With the development of postmodern theorizing, the traditional effort of ignoring or diminishing the potential influence of class has been reinforced and class, as an analytical category, seems to have receded to backstage with categories related to culture and identity taking its place. Much of present educational thinking points in this direction, including calls for reform. It is enough to mention the numerous academic publications dealing with multicultural issues in educational reform (Banks & Banks, 1995). Their chief arguments align with the writings of philosophers who have challenged self-centered perspectives such as Taylor (1994), communitarian perspectives such as those represented by Kymlika (1995), feminist traditions identified with names such as Benhabib (1992) and Fraser (1997), and in the political sciences with thinkers such as Walzer (1984, 1997) and Young (1990, 2000). Such arguments call for the need to overcome individual centered perspectives which dominate the West in all that relates to social and political rights legislation. Even those within this tradition who have to struggle to maintain a balance between class/recognition, individual/universal categories find difficulties in their conceptualizations. For example, Fraser’s bifocal approach focuses our attention on both economic redistribution and cultural recognition while trying to prevent the reduction of one category into the other. Benhabib believes her deliberative model offers built-in protection against the discursive tyranny of the majority but her emphasis on “rationality” seems, at times, to sustain the same universal perspective she wishes to overcome. Young points to the limits of understanding alterity; she stresses the fundamental asymmetry of subject positions. In her view, communication does not necessarily allow for communion. From Young’s perspective, there is no place for universal presuppositions. She calls for a renegotiation of political and socioeconomic impediments so as to secure the active and effective participation of marginal groups (including their right to veto majoritarian decisions unacceptable to them). Still, and though commendable, her project has difficulty challenging social movements that act in nonpluralistic fashions.

It is not just an issue of personal choice in deciding which of these perspectives to adopt. In my introduction, I have hinted that one of my main realizations while involved in the research had to do with understanding how macropolitical formations such as
the nation-state fix our gaze in ways we are not always “aware” of. Adopting a class or a cultural and identity perspective is not just the reflection of one’s own ideological inclinations.

The adoption of individualized perspectives and the development of cultural and identity categories are strongly related to the development of the nation-state (Elias, 1998; Porter, 1997; Watt, 1997; Williams, 1961). From whatever theoretical position one opts to look at nationalism, either as the awakening of a dormant force (Smith, 1998) or as the consequence of a new form of social organization (Gellner, 1997), it seems nationalism is “the most successful ideology in human history” (Birch, 1989), one that shapes our present perspective. Regardless of nationalism’s assumed components, whether civic or ethnic, nation-states have struggled to homogenize their population through the development of institutional practices (the most powerful of which is education) creating for their inhabitants a sense of uniqueness (individual identity) and togetherness (cultural identity) which, by now, we all assume to be natural.

Class was so displaced within the national scheme that for the most part we have been raised to think of class and cultural and ethnic differences as existing in isolation from each other. Reviews of theories of nationalism (Hutchinson & Smith, 1994) have largely overlooked class categories, and, though for different reasons related to our following critique, within the Marxist tradition class and ethnicity have traditionally been considered polar opposites (Connor, 1972).

The social sciences and their social analysis seem to have been influenced by nation-state structures as well. Reicher and Hopkins (2001) and Billig (1995), among others, have urged the social sciences to recognize the crucial influence of national structures in shaping our understandings of group identities. Our flattened perspectives, on issues such as identity or ethnic belonging, do not seem to reflect the dynamics of human experience and though allowing for fast analysis, might not further our understanding of complexity.

These issues are echoed in some of the recent arguments sustained within critical and feminist circles around issues of social justice and education. The discourses of distribution and recognition align themselves easily with the problems expounded above. Even when theoreticians, such as those mentioned above, do not deny social class as a relevant category for social analysis but ask us to add cultural and identity categories which, in their case, cannot be easily criticized for falling prey to essentialist perspectives of identity and culture, as is the case with most multiculturalist theorizing (Arvizu & Saravia-Shore, 1990; Bekerman, 2003a; Hoffman, 1996; Urciuoli, 1999).

When considering the above, we should be able to understand why my first interpretative efforts at the integrated bilingual schools rested on theoretical cultural identity frameworks. The one thing we seem to fix on when visiting or just hearing about these schools is that social class categories, though important, might not be the only ones through which to try to understand the schools. Other categories make their appearance; national, ethnic, and cultural categories burst into the picture. These categories, as they are revealed in the setting, raise doubts regarding the potential of class theorizing to serve as a rich enough foundation upon which to base socioeducational analysis. Still, during the years of fieldwork, when I probed deeper into the picture, I found theoretical frameworks focusing on culture and identity to be lacking and expressive of a gaze fixed by the larger sociopolitical contexts within which participants and researchers were functioning. It is around these multiple paths that my argument will evolve when considering issues related to social justice and educational reform as they are played out in the schools.

For the sake of those not fully acquainted with Israel’s realities, I now offer a short historical review of the sociopolitical context.
The Political, Sociocultural, and Educational Background of the Bilingual Initiative

Since its inception, and as stated in its Declaration of Independence, Israel has been committed to full political and social equality for all its citizens irrespective of religion or ethnic affiliation. Still, for the most part, Israel as an ethnic democracy (Smooha, 1996) has not welcomed the active participation in political, cultural, or social spheres of any other than its legitimate invented community (Anderson, 1991) of Jews. Though officially offered full rights as citizens, Israeli Palestinians, a 20% of the population, have chronically suffered as a putatively hostile minority. They have little political representation and a debilitated social, economic, and educational infrastructure (Ghanem, 1998). In general, the Palestinian Israeli population is geographically segregated and institutionally and legally discriminated against (Al-Haj, 1995; Kretzmer, 1992).

In spite of Israel’s declared goals of offering equal opportunity to all its citizens through the educational system, a gap remains between the Jewish and Arab sectors. For example, in 1980, the proportion of high school students between the Arab and the Jewish sector was 0.64. In 1990, the proportion increased to 0.69 and in 2002, an additional decrease of the gap is evident as the proportion reached 0.84 (Shye & Zion, 2003). The improvement is also evident in the rate of children who pass the matriculation examinations. In 1991, 45.4% Arab and 67.3% Jewish children earned a matriculation diploma, while in 2001, the percentage increased to 59.1% and 69.7% respectively (Central Bureau of Statistics [Israel], 2002), reflecting that the gap between sectors remains.

Not only are the school systems segregated, but so too are the curricula. The Jewish curriculum focuses on national Jewish content and Jewish nation-building and the Palestinian curriculum is sanitized of any national Palestinian content (Rouhana, 1997). While Jewish students are called to engage in the collective Jewish national enterprise, Palestinian students are called on to accept the definition of Israel as a Jewish democratic state (Al-Haj, 2002; Gordon, 2005). They are not allowed to choose freely their own narratives concerning issues related to their cultural and national histories. Lastly, it is worth mentioning some features of the Palestinian educational system in Israel which reflect the unique sociocultural background of this population (Abu-Nimer, 1999). Among these is an authoritarian model of student-teacher relationships, a very traditional frontal pedagogical approach, and, for teachers, a sense of conflict regarding their loyalty toward their employer, the Ministry of Education, and their loyalty toward their Palestinian community. The security principal traditionally used by Israeli officialdom to restrict teacher appointments was canceled only in 1994 (Kretzmer, 1990; Rouhana, 1997). All in all, the Arab educational system in Israel lacks the preferential support given by the government to the Jewish educational system, thus creating an enormous gap and leaving the Arab educational system behind.

Main Findings

As mentioned in our introduction, my arguments presented here are built on data collected through a longitudinal ethnographic study which I have been conducting since 1999. Those interested in the specifics of the methodologies adopted are encouraged to consult my previously published work (Bekerman, 2002, 2003c, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Bekerman & Horenczyk, 2004; Bekerman & Shhadi, 2003). Space limitations force me not only to skip methodological details but also to present the descriptive materials in brief. These do not do justice to the richness of the data gathered throughout the many
years of research. The publications previously mentioned may satisfy readers interested in more detailed accounts of the events described.

The Center for Bilingual Education, the NGO behind the initiative was established in 1997, with the aim of fostering egalitarian Palestinian–Jewish cooperation in education, primarily through the development of bilingual and multicultural coeducational institutions (Bekerman, 2004). The first school opened in 1998 in Misgav, a Jewish settlement, situated in the northern part of Israel. The second school opened a year later as part of the experimental “open” school, the bastion of liberal education in Jerusalem. Within a year, the school was moved to an independent site as an experiment (the integrated school) within an experiment (the experimental school) was too much of an experiment, or so the parents said, when explaining why the bilingual school needed to move into a new site. The third and most recent school opened in 2004 in Kfar Kara. Undoubtedly, this was a surprising turn given that Kfar Kara is a segregated Muslim Palestinian village. For the first time, Jewish parents were asked to send their children to school in a solely Palestinian populated area.

The schools are recognized as nonreligious schools supported by the Israeli Ministry of Education. For the most part, they use the standard curriculum of the Jewish nonreligious school system, the main difference being that both Hebrew and Arabic are used as languages of instruction.

The educational initiative has to confront what Spolsky and Shohamy (1999) have characterized as a Type 1 monolingual society: one in which a sole language (Hebrew) is associated with national identity while other languages (i.e., Arabic), though officially recognized as second languages for education and public use (Koplewitz, 1992; Spolsky, 1994), have been marginalized.

The schools have adopted what has been characterized as a strong additive bilingual approach, emphasizing symmetry between both languages in all aspects of instruction (Garcia, 1997). The schools are also distinct in that they reflect a strong egalitarian structure that attempts to sustain symmetry in multiple aspects of activity. The schools are directed by two coprincipals a Palestinian and a Jew. Each classroom has two cohomeroom teachers, a Palestinian and a Jew, a balanced body of students half Palestinian and half Jewish, and also a well-balanced parents’ committee with equal representation of Palestinians and Jews.

Regarding their educational practices, the schools seem to be faring well when their educational achievements are compared to other, segregated educational institutions. Though not all the needed assessments have been made, it seems that in some cases Palestinian students are doing better when compared to Palestinian students in segregated Palestinian schools.

Like many bilingual programs, the bilingual schools suffer from somewhat contradictory practices, perspectives, and expectations in relation to their goals. Despite serious efforts by the entire staff, the attempt to sustain full symmetry through the implementation of bilingual educational practices fails. Even when the language policy shifted toward an even stronger support for Arabic, the introduction of English and Israel’s rather low tolerance toward multicultural educational approaches and its homogenic context renders the bilingual efforts mostly ineffective with regard to the Jewish population at school, at least for now (Amara, 2005; Bekerman, 2005b). While teachers and the NGO see this as a serious obstacle to achieving their declared goals, both Jewish and Palestinian parents seem less worried. Jewish parents support bilingualism as long as it does not harm educational excellence. They seem satisfied with an educational initiative that allows them to substantiate their liberal positions and to offer their children cultural understanding.
and sensitivity toward the other. Palestinian parents seem to be after the best education available given the present Israeli sociopolitical context. As apparent from the interviews we conducted, Israel’s present sociopolitical conditions make it almost impossible for parents to dream about a soon-to-arrive top-down multicultural, multilingual policy and given their educational aspirations for their children, they prefer an English lingua franca and high Hebrew literacy.

With the introduction of English into the school curriculum Jewish parents and their children increasingly questioned either the absolute need to study Arabic, or the amount of time invested in the study of Arabic. Palestinian parents also expressed positive feelings toward increasing the time allotted to English. In the larger context, where Hebrew is the local dominant language and English potentially offers a free pass into a global reality, Arabic risks being completely undermined. Such a context may be too powerful, even for the most well-intentioned bilingual initiatives.

Though central to the ideological aims of the schools, bilingualism is not the only sphere which needs to be confronted. All well intentioned teachers and parents are committed to acknowledging alterity. However, for alterity to be acknowledged, it must first be shaped and thus essentialized. Israel is a fertile cradle for the, at times, violent shaping of identity and its inseparable twin, culture. But the “fact” is that Jews are recognized by the Palestinians, willingly or not, if only because of their irreducible power, putting Palestinians in the unfortunate situation of being the only ones in need of recognition. At school, Palestinians again have to recognize Jews, for the sake of symmetry (the basis of the school’s declared educational goals) while this time being thankful that they are recognized back. Palestinians seem to stand at that place which Arendt (1979) and Agamben (1998) identify as “the place of non-citizens,” thus in need of human rights.

Recognition for the nation-state implies the recognition of nationhood and culture and these become the two spheres in which recognition is wrestled with in the schools. Wrestling with religion, while at times accommodating and at times co-opting particular meanings, is rather easy. Parents emphasize the need to know and understand the other’s culture better, and believe that the schools are achieving this goal. Teachers emphasize similar goals and educational activities/celebrations (i.e., the study of holy texts, Hanukkah, Christmas, and Idel-Fiter celebrations, etc.) around these issues appear to be conducted with ease and in fruitful collaboration. These celebrations carry a strong religious emphasis. In fact, it could be said that religious aspects are disproportionately emphasized given that the majority of the Jewish parents belong to secular sectors of Israeli society and the Muslim populations, though more traditionalist, are also mostly nonreligious (Bekerman, 2004). While at times, Jewish parents express concerns and ambivalence about this religious emphasis, they also seem to find solace in the religious underpinning of cultural activities given their (mostly unarticulated) fear that their children’s Jewish identity will be eroded as a result of participation in a binational program.

The ethnographic data suggest that issues of national identity have become the ultimate educational challenge for parents and educational staff alike (Bekerman & Maoz, 2005). National issues are compartmentalized into a rather discrete period in the school year corresponding, in the Jewish Israeli calendar, to Memorial Day and Israel’s Independence Day, and in the Arab calendar, to the Day of the Nakba (Bekerman, 2002, 2004). In accordance with the policy of the Ministry of Education, all three schools hold a special ceremony for the Jewish cohort on Memorial Day, which the Palestinian cohort need not attend. Depending on the schools’ (complex) relations with the surrounding community and the Ministry of Education’s supervision, a separate ceremony is conducted for the Palestinians in commemoration of the Nakba. Though Jews at the schools clearly represent the politically liberal, center-left segments of Israeli society, Palestinian national
expression does not always fall within the limits of legitimate expression as delineated by liberal Jews. For most liberal Jews, Israeli Palestinian cultural and religious expression in school is legitimate. However, national identification with the Palestinian Authority is not welcomed, and neither are perspectives which would in any way try to deny the right of Israel to be a Jewish state.

For the Palestinian group, tensions are apparent, particularly among the teachers, who see themselves at the forefront of the struggle to safeguard the Palestinian national narrative which remains unrecognized by Israeli educational officialdom. Though truly trying, and at times achieving the best possible outcomes, the schools find themselves in awkward positions. During these ceremonial occasions, Jews meet the limits of their liberalism. The Palestinians, pragmatists not necessarily by choice, accept the limits of their partial resignation to national recognition, knowing well that the other option is to forfeit hope for their children's better education, the key to a better future. When choosing to retreat, they once again endanger their position within their own community which does not easily accept their crossing the borders of segregated education into integrated settings. Treason is not an easily digested accusation.

The parents' backgrounds and perspectives ultimately reveal the centrality of class categories. Last year for one of the schools, 55% of the Palestinian children and over 80% of the Jewish children came from families where at least one parent held an academic degree (similar numbers have been confirmed, though informally, for the other schools). Undoubtedly, and maybe as expected, families sending their children to the bilingual schools belong to the middle/middle-upper class.

From the many interviews I conducted with these parents, it becomes apparent that their main interests regarding school do not revolve around social order change, particularly as it pertains to distributive justice or recognition. While they do support liberal views regarding majority–minority relations in Israel, parents ultimately seem concerned with the school functioning in a manner that will secure their children a place of preference in Israeli society. Securing the social mobility of their children is the parental main interest. While many of the parents might not have sent their children to the school in the absence of some of the egalitarian practices previously discussed, they are not after emancipatory education for their children.

All issues related to identity and culture are secondary to the aim of mobility. This does not mean participating parents lack an interest in their own cultures or identities. Rather, they see these issues as related to private spheres and not to the school's environment and by extension the public sphere. The main problem that arises is that the schools develop within the nation-state context, ever so thirsty for identity and culture, and are thus not able, or allowed, to put these issues to rest.

Finally, but of no less importance, our observations show children as the ultimate challenge. Watching them carefully, we become easily aware that each of them knows exactly where they belong. At the same time, we become aware of the fact that the younger the children are, the less these groups of belonging matter in their daily activity. From the children's perspective, other differences usurp identity or culture. Sports, games, fashion, preferences and or choice of music, TV programs, or behavioral idiosyncrasies might be better differences to pay attention to when chasing alliances and friendships. The children are alert to their surroundings and the presence of their adults. They will ultimately come to resemble them at a later stage. Until then, they will complain about the emphasis adults put on national identity and cultural differences realizing that the efforts at interethnic parity, themselves, reconfirm the boundaries of ethnicity. Children constantly show us that the world can be organized according to categories which differ from the ones present political systems have made so salient.
Discussion

Israel’s sociopolitical context seems to invite theoretical perspectives like those mentioned in our opening section. Such perspectives challenge the aptness of class based theories to serve as the only analytical tool for understanding social context and the potential success of educational reform. The descriptive materials present an educational environment which, in spite of a rather difficult and conflicted sociopolitical context, is able to successfully implement educational practices guided by culture-sensitive strategies which help develop a bottom-up reform project in an area whose official educational policies seem to have no interest in developing such initiatives.

A combination of outstanding entrepreneurship, with a rather positive political atmosphere and the educational and ideological needs of a sector of the majority and minority population, allowed for the creation of such an educational experiment. This endeavor crosses tabooed boundaries and opens spheres of trust and fairness for groups suffering from intractable conflict. As described above, the schools’ structure illustrates the possibility of creating egalitarian social settings even in conflict ridden societies such as Israel; structures in which Jews and Palestinians can live happily, for the most part, and together. Through the creation of symmetry among the groups they show that structural change can indeed take us a long way toward equity and social justice. From this viewpoint, the bilingual integrated initiative is indeed an unprecedented success.

But there is more in the descriptions we rendered. Further investigation introduces us to a much more complex picture. The efforts invested toward recognition and inclusion through the bilingual, culture-sensitive, and inclusive curriculum, though recognized for their unprecedented reality, seem not to be faring well. Nevertheless, given Israel’s present policies, there is no way they can be considered a failure. In spite of the partial success, stakeholders seem unhappy. The context that surrounds these educational efforts configures stakeholders to maintain essentialist understandings of culture and identity. They shape them in ways which reify and misrepresent culture and identity, strengthening at times stereotypical perspectives or making salient aspects which do not necessarily benefit their understandings of themselves or serve their goals. In spite of their relative malfunction, we might assume that lacking these strategies, the schools would not allow for the participation of representatives of both groups. Lacking strong observable efforts toward inclusion in the school curriculum, parents would not find it easy to justify sending their children to these settings and would fear their communities’ reprisal. It is important to point out that parents seem to express different concerns regarding the bilingual and multicultural policies implemented at the schools. They seem to hold both public and private concerns, mostly the minority parents’ group. Privately, they do not seem to be particularly concerned with issues related to recognition and inclusion; it seems as if they would have sent their children to the bilingual school even if these would have not been part of the curriculum in as much as the schools would not embody open prejudiced views. In a society thirsty for identity and cultural differences, the fact that the schools explicitly adopt an inclusive perspective helps parents justify their choice on the public level.

The schools attract rather homogeneous sectors of both Jewish and Palestinian populations. This is understandable given that the schools, in order to allow for a fully bilingual curriculum in line with their symmetry policies, need parents’ fees to supplement coverage from the Ministry of Education. The schools receive support from the Ministry of Education comparable to the amount regular segregated schools receive. In a sense, the middle upper classes use multicultural ideologies to further their mobility chances, their class mobility. To reference Bourdieu (1991), it can be said that in general they
are after cultural capital relevant to the Israeli marketplace and not reformation of the marketplace.

Palestinian parents, on the whole and mainly because of contextual conditions, can rest assured that their children’s Arabic skills are safeguarded while concurrently gaining Hebrew literacy. This literacy will serve their children in the future and help them succeed in a variety of institutional frameworks on their path toward upward mobility. Paradoxically, the bilingual schools’ emphasis on sustaining parity between the languages through affirmative action toward Arabic could endanger Palestinian aspirations toward upward mobility within the Israeli Hebrew-speaking society. Jews, while rhetorically supportive of bilingual parity, are satisfied with an educational initiative that allows them to substantiate their political liberal stands and to offer their kids the opportunity to know the “other’s” culture and tradition better. They might enjoy having their children learn Arabic, but this is not deemed as ultimately necessary. The Jewish parents are well aware that Arabic is not the key to any upward mobility, particularly given present circumstances. However, the symbolic value of participating in a seemingly just, educational initiative, with the added value of its standing as an excellent learning institution, was enough to justify their children’s attendance.

All in all, it is class interests that seem to guide parents in their decision to enroll their children in the bilingual schools. If so, then it seems that the bilingual schools will not further social justice in Israel except for those who already enjoy distributive justice and, moreover, for those that enjoyed it before joining the schools.

Bottom up reforms, though relatively successful when compared to the ones imposed from above by the reigning hegemony (in our case of the dominant group with its needs to incorporate some limited segments of the minority agenda into their own position so as to sustain their position of power), seem to achieve reform only for a particular segment of the society, mostly those whose values comply with the present hegemony (Apple, 2001). Reform in whatever direction seems always to be co-opted to benefit those in power.

Conclusion

Traditional, theoretically based, neo-Marxist perspectives which point toward the impossibility of institutionalized educational reform to achieve its declared goals to offer equality for all, were doubted at the beginning of our work. This was because of the salient cultural/identity features of the sociopolitical context. Rescue was sought in more recent theoretical perspectives which emphasize the need to account for cultural recognition and a politics of identity. These, though seemingly active and successful in the educational initiative under study, seemed not to be essential to its development and, at times, to interfere with its goals as these are interpreted by the stakeholders. Even culture-sensitive theories, which are not essentialist or reify cultural categories, seem to offer, in the best case, answers to questions not asked, or, in the worst case, serve to cover up what indeed stands at the basis for change—material benefits and the basis on which these resources are allocated.

Thus, it seems that schools (institutionalized education) have not been, are not, and will not become arenas where the struggle for social justice can or should be fought. Schools might be places where such struggles should be supported, but they can never be expected to become the arenas where the “war” for social justice can be won. The struggle has more to do with the allocation of resources than with the recognition of identity and culture; the arena for these struggles is political and not educational. This does not mean education is not political, it always is, it just means that as in many other cases our schools, though working through a rhetoric of “political change” seem for the
most part to support the existing asymmetries. Schools cannot reallocate resources and seem not to be able to prepare masses to relocate themselves in the allocation system. When adopting cultural sensitivities and multicultural strategies, they seem, at the most, to replicate the social system.

We need to be suspicious of any argument which raises identity and cultural issues, even those which, like the ones submitted in our introduction, seem to be free from essentialist reified cultural underpinnings. Staying uncritically attached to them hides the fact that at present culturally and linguistically sensitive educational projects seem primarily to serve class and political agendas, within the realm of the nation-state, in a world where national boundaries no longer represent clear-cut national identities. For whatever the reasons, these initiatives seem, in the best cases, not to be accomplishing their goals, and in the worst cases, to be oblivious to the reasons for their failure.

We need to continue the critical work initiated by Elias (1998) and Williams (1961) in trying to uncover the complex connections between the development of the concepts of culture and identity and the development of the modern nation-state. In our analysis, we need to emphasize the search for strategies and practices implemented by the hegemonic powers to achieve their goal. Moreover, these studies need to help us to critically approach present sociopsychological perspectives which stand at the basis of present theorizing regarding educational reform, multiculturalism, and so forth.

What ultimately needs to be addressed is the deeply entrenched, paradigmatic perspective that supports nation-state ideology and its traditional massive socializing tool—schools—which sustain its power. The nation-state monologic stance denies otherness through the representation of culture as unitary (Bauman, 1999; Billig, 1995; Gellner, 1983) and schools and national curriculums serve a central task in imprisoning individuals in these monolithic perspectives which have little tolerance for difference. If a dialogue about the epistemological basis which substantiates this attitude is not initiated, I doubt whether educational initiatives, even the best intentioned of them, will ever be able to help support change toward equality.

In no way do I want these remarks to reflect a critique of the minority or majority behavior. Judging them would be too easy and unfair when considering that what they are doing is what most of us would do when trying to secure a better future for our children. Moreover, elitist initiatives may have a positive impact on the surrounding context by helping start a process of reformulation of present categories and practices which may, in the future, influence larger sectors of the population as well as policy makers.

At this point, given Israel’s present realities, the integrated schools present a partially egalitarian option unheard off in the surrounding context and as such serve as an example of how “things” could look even in deeply conflicted societies. We might not want to support a large bottom-up reform project which serves only to further the mobility of those already mobile even if they are mixed Palestinian–Jewish groups. However, as a small project it might contribute to a change of rhetoric which might inspire others to follow. The schools once again raise questions as to what the purpose of national educational systems should be. Schools might need to restrict themselves to teaching competence in multiple literacy and not to creating a homogenized citizenry. That said, we do understand the difficulties and realize education is never neutral or free of ideological underpinnings. Still, we could choose to support environments which implement serious structural change (as our schools do), working toward symmetry and equality while trying not to be too attentive to or supportive of cultural and identity differentiations.

My emphasis on the primacy of class in social analysis should not be understood as a denial of other relevant categories. Edward Said (1993) has argued that we are never one thing. It is clear to me that I might need to further my analysis so as to again include
culture and ethnicity, but not as mutually exclusive; and while inquiring in depth from all involved, about the motivations for exclusion or inclusion of certain categories and not others.

The children at the bilingual schools seem to know this option well and manage it with ease. The only question that remains is whether we, the adults, are ready to pay attention to their profound understanding and let them live. I doubt we will.

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