

The Village School<sup>2</sup> is one of five integrated Jewish-Arab schools in Israel that set out to advance understanding and equality through bilingual multicultural education. In Israeli social reality, creating opportunities for Jewish and Arab children to learn together and develop friendships at an early age is no small accomplishment. The Israeli school system is divided between Jewish and Arab schools and it is rare that Jewish and Arab children in the country find opportunities to develop relationships.

Research on multicultural issues in the integrated schools tends to focus on how the schools address different holidays, ceremonies, identities and historical narratives. These questions are important in examining how teachers, parents and State authorities negotiate the meaning of culture and shape school policy. As a teacher in the Village School for 23 years I have been more interested in looking at multiculturalism by examining the mundane classroom practices that shape our images and expectations of each other. This chapter is based on my attempt <sup>3</sup> to learn something about the culture created through the Jewish-Arab encounter by following routine classroom experiences of a single child in the school.

Identity politics and holidays often lead the Village School to separate the Jews and Arabs for study in "uninational" forums. For example the school's conviction that it

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<sup>2</sup> "The Village School" and all of the people's names in the chapter are pseudonyms. .

<sup>3</sup> The research was conducted for an M.A. thesis and supervised by Dr. Zvi Bekerman.

is important to strengthen each group's national and cultural identities led it to separate the Jewish and Arab children for weekly study of Holy Books. The combination of uninational and binational forums provides us with opportunities to see how the same children respond to different classroom contexts. Naturally one of the important differences between these contexts is in the use of language. Despite the integrated schools' progress in creating a bilingual reality for the children, the Arabs' Hebrew remains incomparably stronger than the Jews' Arabic in all five schools (Amara, Azaiza, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Mor-Sommerfeld, 2009; Bekerman, 2009 a; Nasser & Abu-Nimr, 2007). With Hebrew as the dominant language the Jewish children can always count on being able to communicate in their mother language regardless of the context. Only the Arab children find themselves in situations in which they have no choice but to function in their second language. For this reason I chose to focus on an Arab child, examining how his participation changes from one forum to the next. I call him Khalil.

The idea of examining the school by following a single student was inspired by Varenne and McDermott's (1998) case study entitled, "Adam, Adam, Adam and Adam: The Cultural Construction of a Learning Disability." Varenne and McDermott demonstrate how differently the same child can be perceived in different classroom contexts, often with far-reaching consequences. By observing the strategies that Adam employs to overcome the obstacles of various classroom settings, our attention is focused not on Adam but on the institutional structures that labeled him as learning disabled. Similarly, following Khalil from one classroom to the next was to provide me with an eye-opening look at the institution that I helped to build.

Khalil was in the fourth grade. I did not normally teach his class but, as a Jewish teacher, I worked with the Jewish fourth-graders on Arab holidays when the Arab children and teachers remained home. I often entered their classroom with my guitar and repertoire of songs in English and the lessons were relaxed and enjoyable. As the Jewish children began to acquire more and more songs I decided to come on an Arab uninational day and teach the Arab children some of the songs as well. That was when I first met Khalil. The lesson was a nightmare. It seemed to me that if it were only ethical to keep Khalil gagged and tied to his chair I might have stood a chance at conducting a lesson with many of the other children. Khalil struck me as the ringleader of the trouble-makers and I clearly did not have whatever it would take to win him over.

Several Arab teachers explained to me that the difficulty of working with the Arab children in the school is that they come from many different places. They came from four all-Arab towns and villages, from the two mixed Jewish-Arab towns of Ramla and Lod and from well-off houses in a liberal Jewish-Arab community. Reviewing the school's history I found that the Jewish children actually came from four times as many different places as the Arab children. However this was never regarded as more than a problem of logistics. The middle class surroundings of the Jewish families were very similar to each other. When the Arab teachers spoke about different places they were referring to very different social realities.

Khalil came from one of the mixed Jewish-Arab towns. Mixed towns are predominantly Jewish towns with Arab minorities. Out of the 70,000 Palestinians in

Ramla and Lod prior to the 1948 War, approximately 68,000 were evicted (Morris, 2004: 425-437). The evicted residents were replaced by Jewish immigrants and by Palestinian internal refugees who were evicted from their villages but remained in Israel (Morris, 1994). In the 1960's Bedouin Arabs whose land in the northern Negev was expropriated were also relocated to Ramla and Lod and after the Palestinian uprising in 1987 Palestinian collaborators from the Occupied Territories were housed there by Israeli security authorities. The discrimination experienced by the Palestinian minority in Israel reaches extremes in the mixed towns. Whereas homogeneous Arab towns at least have representative municipal bodies, Arabs in mixed towns are at the mercy of Jewish municipal authorities which have a history of neglecting Arab residents' interests. Having been thrown together without much say in the matter, the Arab communities in these towns have been characterized by a lack of social cohesion and a lack of political channels to advance their interests. The over-crowded conditions and the discrimination in budget allocations characterizing the Arab neighborhoods are well documented in the Shatil organization's survey of Jaffa, Ramla and Lod (Jabarin & Hamdan, 2002).

Khalil was from a Bedouin family. The more deprived neighborhoods of Ramla and Lod are largely Bedouin. From discussions with several Arab parents of children in the Village School, the Bedouin appear to be a stigmatized group. One of the Arab parents, who grew up in Lod, presented the influx of Bedouin as part of a scheme:

"...It's apparently part of a policy, I think. It [the Arab community in Lod] was a healthy population and bringing in these people [the Bedouin] seriously hurt the original residents socially, economically and from every other aspect."

Several Arab parents echoed concern about working with such a great socio-economic gap when bringing children from Bedouin neighborhoods into the school. Khalil originally appeared to justify their concern and I did not want to focus attention on anyone regarded as being particularly problematic. However as I watched the children I began to discover Khalil's sense of humor and I was captivated by the way that he got through the day.

Hebrew classes were opportunities to see how Khalil managed in lessons with one of the Jewish teachers. Shiri, the teacher, had prepared work corners with a large selection of tasks aimed at enabling children to work independently and progress at their own pace. The children worked in pairs and brought their completed tasks to her for correction. Tomer, an introverted Jewish boy who I often found alone on the playground, would have been an unlikely partner for Khalil under any other circumstance. Tomer began by working alone and Khalil joined him with a Hebrew task from the work corner. Khalil sat down with the task, looked around for several minutes and then declared to no one in particular (in Hebrew), "I'm going to do this alone. I'm not retarded." He took out a piece of paper, slowly copied the instructions, threw the paper away and spent the next five minutes watching Tomer work on the assignment. Finally Khalil decided that it was time to check in on his friends and disturb some of the other children in the class. He made his rounds and when Tomer finished the task Khalil joined him again in order to bring "their" work to Shiri for corrections. Shiri made her comments, Tomer made the corrections and they moved on to the next task.

I later asked Shiri if she was aware of how little Khalil actually managed to do in the lesson. She was not surprised. She explained to me that everyone does what they can:

"A few weeks ago Khalil took work home and copied it on the computer.

Some of it he understood. He's not like Daniel, David, Fatin or Nasrin.

They're on a much higher level. Whatever Khalil absorbs, he absorbs, and I hope that by next year he'll progress a little more. He's slow, but he's making progress."

Shiri's conclusions about what Khalil is capable of doing were based solely on her interaction with him in Hebrew. In principle the Jewish teachers are expected to learn Arabic, or at the very least to learn some basic concepts connected to their subjects. The following exchange reflects Shiri's attitude towards the minimal language demands made of her. 'Aishe had approached Shiri's table with her completed Hebrew task. Shiri tried to explain something about the imperative but 'Aishe was not familiar with the word:

Shiri: *raising her voice and looking over the class for help* eh... Fatin. How do you say imperative in Arabic?

Fatin: amr.

Shiri: *looking confused* How?

Fatin: amr.

Shiri: *continues to look at Fatin for a second and then turns to 'Aishe* Did you understand her? *'Aishe nods her head and Shiri continues with her explanation.*

*Translated from Hebrew.*

As a language teacher, Shiri might have been expected to take this opportunity to demonstrate at least symbolic interest and make an attempt to acquire an important grammatical term such as "imperative" in Arabic. Instead she made it clear that translation is *'Aishe's* problem. As far as Shiri was concerned the problem was solved as soon as *'Aishe* confirmed that she understood the word. There was nothing exceptional about this interaction. In an art activity that I observed, a Jewish teacher introduced techniques of drawing a profile and a frontal view of a face. She explained the concept of profile and, to define the frontal view, she used the French "en face," shortening it and expressing it "fas." Unfortunately she was unaware that fas in the colloquial Arabic means "fart."

Teacher: Our goal is to draw a face both in profile and fas.

Child: What fas?

Children: fas!

*All of the Arab children and several of the Jewish children break up laughing.*

Teacher: Fas is when they look at you straight on.

Children: *one after another* fas? fas! fas!

Teacher: *calmly* Yes that's fas.

Child: Fas is...

Teacher: Profile is when you only see one eye...

Child: Say fas!

*Translated from Hebrew.*

What was noteworthy in the above cases was not the teachers' lack of understanding, but their lack of interest in acquiring essential Arabic vocabulary or in clarifying what was stirring up the classroom. The Arab children are accustomed to speaking a language and coming from a world from which their Jewish teachers are disconnected. As I continued to observe Khalil I began to see exchanges like these as reflections of a much more fundamental problem.

The introduction of Arabic into the classroom opened the door to a very different kind of interaction with Khalil. Arwa, the Arab English teacher, jumped back and forth between Arabic and Hebrew, each time appearing to invite either the Arabs or the Jews to discussion. While transcribing the lesson, I came across a part at which Arwa explained the difference between "sorry" and "forgive me." This was followed by one of the boys breaking into a blues rendition of the text singing in an American accent, "I'm sorry, please forgive me!" I had no question that it was one of the Jewish boys who I taught on the unicultural days but I could not identify which one. When Arwa heard the tape she laughed and told me without hesitation that it was Khalil and that it is typical of him. Khalil would have been my last guess. At another point Arwa searched for a way to explain a particular concept in English and Khalil provided her with a parallel expression in Arabic that captured what she was trying to say. These were the first of several exchanges in the data that were to illustrate Khalil's language

skills. In each of the two lessons that involved reading Arabic texts, the Arab teachers turned first to Khalil to read in order to ensure that the children would hear a proper reading of the language.<sup>4</sup> During discussion of a chapter in the Koran there were two points at which Khalil explained to the other children the implications of a word in the classical Arabic text as opposed to its more familiar usage in modern Arabic. As long as Khalil's Jewish teachers and classmates were restricted to speaking to him in Hebrew, they were not likely to notice or appreciate Khalil's language skills, nor were they likely to experience him as someone who contributes to the lessons.

There was an exceptional episode in one of the lessons in which Jewish children, if they were paying attention, might have noticed a change in Khalil. An Arab teacher brought the children a very short and simple poem about friendship. It was written in both Hebrew and Arabic. She suggested a novel idea, asking Arab children to read the Hebrew version and Jewish children to read the Arabic. Arab children had no trouble with the Hebrew. Several of the Jewish children read the Arabic better than I expected. However Hanna, a Jewish girl, read the Arabic with tremendous difficulty. For two full minutes she worked on three brief lines of the poem, one syllable at a time. The class was absolutely silent, giving her all of the time that she needed. The only other people occasionally heard from were the teacher and Khalil. Khalil sat on the edge of his seat enthralled by Hanna's efforts, helping her through words at times and once pointing out a missing vowel mark that made the reading difficult. Hanna's difficulty was not cause for embarrassment. She did not seem to think less of herself for struggling in public with her second language. This contrasted with Khalil's

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<sup>4</sup> This was confirmed by the teachers

concern in Shiri's class that his difficulty with the Hebrew task might be construed as a sign that he was mentally challenged. The episode was a warm moment in which the Jewish children were hosted by the Arab children in Arabic. It stood out because of how rare it was that such conditions were created.

The differences between teacher-pupil interactions in Hebrew and in Arabic went beyond language. The Arab and Jewish uninational lessons were characterized by classroom discourses that positioned the teachers and children very differently in each forum. Since Khalil was the focus of my work with the fourth-grade class, I accompanied the children primarily in the binational and Arab uninational forums. I only observed one lesson in the Jewish uninational forum in Khalil's class and I bring it here as an example of classroom discourse in that forum. It was a Bible lesson on the Ten Commandments. Bible lessons in the Village School, as in most secular schools in Israel, are conducted as literature lessons rather than as a source of moral teaching or of faith. Here the teacher opened by explaining that this Bible lesson was to be exceptional. They were going to read Deuteronomy because that's where the Ten Commandments are "otherwise Deuteronomy wouldn't interest us because it's all about laws and laws interest the religious. They don't interest us." The children were seated behind tables set up in a horseshoe arrangement. The teacher facilitated discussion and the children directed their comments at each other. Children analyzed the commandments identifying the distinction between those relating to one's relationship to God as opposed to those relating to people's relationships with each other. It was agreed that those regarding God were of less interest to them and they focused on commandments regarding people's relations with each other. They

conducted lively discussion often opening their remarks with: "Well, I don't believe in God, but..." and they went on to analyze Biblical law offering sociological explanations of rules that societies need in order to function.

The Koran lesson with the Arab children was very different not only in regard to religious belief but in the very structure of the discussion. When speaking Hebrew the teachers are addressed by first name. However the Arab children addressed the Arab teachers by title: "ma'alme" for women and "ustaz" for men, each literally meaning "teacher" but used here as terms of respect. I translate the titles as ma'am and sir. The Arab uninational lessons were characterized by a clearer hierarchical structure. The children were seated in rows facing the teacher. Most of the teacher's questions were closed questions inviting one-word responses. The children's responses were always directed at the teacher.

The structural differences between these two uni-national lessons are consistent with patterns found in much more extensive data gathered six years later for research work on another class in the Village School. Social theory such as Cazden's (2001: 5) IRE (initiation – response – evaluation) versus discussion-based discourses and Bernstein's discussion of how the hierarchy and pedagogical relations within the classroom are "framed" (Bernstein, 2000: 12) to reflect and reproduce the larger social order outside of the classroom are helpful in examining these differences. However, they may also help us to lose sight of Khalil.

Just before one of the Arab uni-national days, I asked Rawan, the teacher, if I would have a chance to observe a Koran lesson. Rawan told me that it was an excellent idea: "I don't like the way that some of the girls have been speaking to each other. This is a good time for a Koran lesson. Come tomorrow at 8:00." Gender distinctions in the Arab group and the introduction of God in the Koran lesson in particular added to the sense of hierarchy in the Arab classroom. The Koran was mobilized to address the children's behavior. The lesson the next day was on Surat al-Humazah, a chapter warning against mockery. The belief in God was taken for granted, reflected in Rawan's regular reference to "Rabna," our lord. To illustrate the problem of gossip and mockery, Rawan described the way that the people of Mecca initially made fun of Muhammad for praying to a God that he can't see. Khalil banged his fist on the table and asked how they can pray to statues that they themselves made. "*You made it!* How can you believe that *it* made *you*?!!" I never saw Khalil so engaged in a lesson and I was impressed by the eloquent case that he made against the pagans. Khalil was among the few in the Arab uninational forum who broke the pattern of one-word responses. Rawan went on to introduce the text:

Rawan: The words that you will learn today – humazatin? and lumazatin. 'adada comes from the word? ... 'adad, ya'id. Humazatin is one who always points out people's faults. Khalil what does that mean one who points out people's faults?

Khalil: Like you.

Rawan: *looking surprised* How? Tell me.

Khalil: Like the way you speak about the girls who make problems and the boys who make problems...

Rawan: I meant... is this verse talking about me or is it referring to them?

Khalil: to them.

Rawan: It's referring to them, not about me. And what do I do?

Khalil: You embarrass them (btifdah'ihum).

Rawan: That's not a nice word, what do I do?

Khalil: You correct them.

*Translated from Arabic.*

Khalil's suggestion that the Koran was warning against behavior such as Rawan's appeared to me to be an innocent misunderstanding. When Rawan heard the recording of this excerpt she smiled, shook her head and said, "That bastard." It was clear to Rawan that Khalil knew exactly what he was doing. As in the case of the English lesson I was surprised once again by how differently the Arab teachers experienced Khalil.

Rawan eventually addressed the agenda of her lesson by instructing the children to close their eyes and silently consider whether they too may have been guilty of the sin of mockery. As I watched them I thought of how inconceivable it would have been to use a Bible lesson with the Jewish children for such an exercise. I found it interesting that here the Arab children cooperated. However, after a short period of silence I noticed a low hum in the classroom and I turned to find Khalil sitting in lotus position with his eyes closed as he emitted a long and quiet "ommmmm."

McLaren (1999: 162) describes the class clown as one who expresses resistance by trivializing instructional transactions and exposing the classroom cultural codes before all. Khalil may indeed have been working at exposing the classroom's cultural codes; however it was hardly "before all." Khalil's quiet satire of the moment of silence, his blues rendition of the English lesson and the subtle way that he managed to turn the Koran against the teacher all required a considerable amount of work to notice. In fact Khalil's disappearance from the school also seemed to go unnoticed.

In November of the following school year I entered Khalil's class, now in fifth grade, and suddenly realized that I had not seen Khalil for a while. The children told me that after his misbehavior in the school van, the driver said that he was no longer prepared to drive that line as long as Khalil was on it. Khalil's family took him out of the school. The principal later confirmed the story and added that the family asked if they could return him to the Village School. Hearing this, a Jewish teacher sitting with us immediately responded with, "Oy vay!" (i.e. "oh no") followed by an Arab teacher who said, "That would be great."

I arranged a visit with Khalil's father Jawad. Khalil was to meet me by the local grocery store and show me the way to their house. The rows of new and identical three-story apartment buildings on the way to the store were not how I imagined Khalil's neighborhood. Khalil met me on his bicycle and led me down one more road into a large lot. Behind long lines of laundry was an unplastered cinder-block house that had obviously gone through various stages of development - one improvised

extension added to another. Khalil's grandmother sat outside behind a table sifting through a pile of lentils, while around her seven or eight chickens searched for food among the pebbles. More three-story apartment buildings loomed over three sides of the lot and I had a sense of being watched from the rows of windows overlooking Khalil's home. Khalil was the youngest child in the family. His three sisters slept in one bedroom, three brothers slept in another and Khalil slept on a couch, sharing the living room with his grandmother at nights. Though agreeing to the interview, Jawad did not want to be recorded. His trust had to be earned. The turning point may have been when Jawad's brother joined us and we shared a series of laughs exchanging stories about Khalil's antics in the classroom and at home.

Jawad told me about his struggle to maintain a hold on their home. His lot was the last remnant of what was a Bedouin neighborhood. Their houses had been registered to a public housing company that provided homes for the Bedouin after their family's land in the Negev was taken from them decades earlier. The other Bedouin in the neighborhood succumbed to pressure to sell out and move again, this time to make room for the new apartment buildings built to accommodate the latest wave of Jewish Russian immigrants. Jawad told me that his new neighbors were assured that a shopping center would eventually replace his home as well. Money did not prevent Jawad from fixing up his house. The fact that he sent Khalil to the Village School indicated that he had money for the modest tuition fees that the school charges. However any attempt to renovate his house or even to repair his leaking ceiling without a permit would give the public housing inspector the excuse that the company

was waiting for to evict the family on grounds of a breach of contract. Needless to say, receiving the required permit was out of the question.

So what happened to Khalil? The family did take him out of school after the incident in the van but a week later he wanted to return. They called the principal several times, leaving messages with the Village School secretary. They abandoned the idea when no one returned their calls. Knowing that the principal received those messages I later asked him why he never returned Jawad's call. The principal told me that it was the family's choice to take Khalil out of school and that all they had to do was to bring him to the bus stop and send him back to the Village School again. The fact that this message did not reach Khalil's family indicated that the principal was not keen on seeing that actually happen.

The number of ways that Khalil could be treated as a troublesome interference is mind-boggling. Municipal authorities, neighbors, teachers and a Village School bus driver seemed to be working hard to ignore Khalil and his family. While a discussion on the nature of culture exceeds the scope of this chapter, it is a key component in Varenne and McDermott's (1998) discussion of Adam. "Inner city and suburb," they tell us, "do not belong to different worlds. They belong to the same differentiated world." Similarly any attempt to untangle and broach the forces acting on Khalil must include an examination of the differentiated world of Jews and Arabs - and in this case of Arabs and Arabs. It is not clear if or how the school's multicultural approach contributes to such an examination. A wealth of literature warns against the attempt of liberal multiculturalism to celebrate difference while

overlooking power relations. McLaren (1997: 47) warns that "multiculturalism as liberal pluralism... always has an ideological center of gravity which rarely gets defined for what it is: liberal pluralism as the politics of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism."

Approaching culture as if it is a schedule of holidays and an anthology of texts and narratives allows the Village School to evade examination of how power and class relations position us and influence the value of each group's cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). It is an approach that obfuscates the way in which our culture is co-created and the way in which our identities are shaped in dialogue with and in response to each other (Wexler, 1992).

I could and generally do speak about the Village School through its many success stories. This particular story is obviously not one of them. It is easy to criticize the Village School for adapting to the constraints of mainstream discourse just as it is easy to criticize Shiri, the Hebrew teacher, for her low expectations of Khalil. Yet when I first met Khalil I wanted him gagged. Discovering Khalil and learning about ourselves through Khalil requires hard work. The work is hard because, as Bekerman (2004: 604) points out, the banality of the discursive practices that reflect our social reality makes it hard to pay any attention to them.

Many of the issues that surface in the Jewish-Arab schools will never be confronted in Israel's mainstream schools. That in itself is one of the Jewish-Arab schools' most important contributions. The Village School is a site where discursive practices

sustaining the social order can be exposed and challenged. Putting the spotlight on Khalil – or better yet handing the spotlight over to him – may be the kind of Freirean (Freire, 1999) work that is needed to show us the way.

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