



## Alternative education in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel: Rationale and characteristics

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### ABSTRACT

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of alternative schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel. Drawing on data from interviews and observations at two prominent alternative schools, we examine the rationale for establishing alternative schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel and their characteristics. The analysis reveals that discontent with the state-mandated curriculum, the lack of autonomy, and the excessive focus on academic achievement in mainstream schools were the main reasons for establishing alternative schools. The analysis identified six major themes that distinguish these schools from mainstream schools: interpersonal relationships; alternative teaching practices; alternative subjects and extracurricular activities; strengthening students' sense of Palestinian national and cultural identity; active parental engagement; and committed, motivated teachers. The findings are discussed in relation to mainstream schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel.

### 1. Introduction

Education is entwined with politics everywhere, particularly in societies that are divided. This is especially so in periods of political transition (Gallagher, 2004) – be it a transition from colonial rule to independence, from dictatorship to democracy, from one state to another or from one ideological regime to another (Bray and Lee, 2001). This was the case in Palestine in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Palestine transitioned from Ottoman rule to the British Mandate and subsequently the creation of the State of Israel. Since its founding in 1948, Israel has utilized strategies of control against Palestinians who remained in the country and who became known as Arab Israelis. The State of Israel has tightly controlled the education system of its Palestinian-Arab citizens (Al-Haj, 1996; Makkawi, 2002) and has used formal education to repress national and cultural awareness among Arab students (Jabareen and Agbaria, 2011; Makkawi, 1999).

The Arab education system in Israel functions as a separate, subordinate and marginalized body within the state education system (Agbaria, 2015). It is devoid of autonomy and Palestinian-Arab cultural content that would meet the diverse national, cultural, and religious needs of the Arab-Palestinian society (Abu Saad, 2006; Al-Haj, 1996; Jabareen and Agbaria, 2011). This policy allows Israel to emphasize its own narrative, particularly in subject-matters such as civics, history,

geography, and literature, while ignoring, obscuring, or even eradicating the Palestinian-Arab narrative (Agbaria, 2015). The state aims to create a type of Palestinian-Arab educational system that produces shallow citizens who are devoid of history, and lack independence and a clear national and cultural identity (Al-Haj, 1996; Amara and Mar'i, 2002). Mar'i (1978) argued that the centralized education system was established in such a way as “to instill feelings of self-disparagement and inferiority in Palestinian-Arab youth; to denationalize them, and particularly to de-Palestinize them; and to teach them to glorify the history, culture, and achievements of the Jewish majority” (p. 37). Furthermore, Palestinian-Arab education system in Israel features an excessive emphasis on academic excellence and, in the process, fails to attend to the social, intellectual, and emotional needs of the students (Abu-Asbah, 2007; Al-Haj, 1996; Amara and Mar'i, 2002).

Against this backdrop, in recent years, groups of parents, educators, and social activists have acted to set up educational frameworks that provide an alternative to the restrictive and narrow curricula of state schools (Levy and Massalha, 2010). They planted the first seeds of alternative education frameworks in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel; among other elements, these frameworks welcome the expression of Palestinian-Arab identity and bring Palestinian-Arab historical and cultural narratives to the fore (Amara et al., 2009; Massalha, 2009).

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### 1.1. Alternative schools: a brief review

In the early years of the 20th century in Europe, educational re-assessment of traditional education was led by visionary educators and thinkers such as Rudolf Steiner (Waldorf education), Maria Montessori, and Loris Malaguzzi (Reggio Emilia education). These led to the establishment of some of the best-known alternative approaches to education (Edwards, 2002). Alternative education echoes the form of learning found in most pre-industrial societies, where children are actively engaged in the life of their society: they learn skills and knowledge through imitation, apprenticeship, modeling and conversation rather than in any formal school setting (Bennis, 2006). Alternative education is a paradigm shift from the hierarchical and behaviorist model (structured and industrialist) of traditional education to the humanist model of education. Humanist education believes that self-actualization rather than knowledge is the goal of education. Achieving self-actualization involves re-formulating the quality of interaction between pupils and teachers, involving students in planning and decision-making, arranging for student-led activities, and, rather than assigning grades and normative evaluations, engaging in descriptive reporting (Doll, 1979).

However, there is still no commonly accepted definition of alternative education frameworks, and the constantly evolving nature of alternative schools and the rules that govern them have made them something of a moving target and difficult to define (Lange and Sletten, 2002). Generally, educators and researchers agree that the term refers to educational approaches that differ from traditional state-provided mainstream education (e.g. Carnie, 2003; Foley and Pang, 2006).

Alternative schools are characterized by a commitment to constant self-examination and change, creation of democratic structures and processes, a cooperative learning process between students and teachers, and a learning community that acknowledges the student's uniqueness based on the view that every person has the right to his/her own self-expression (Kizel, 2012). Common characteristics of alternative schools include: small classroom sizes, emphasis on one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, supportive environments that strengthen the relationship between teachers and students, opportunities and curriculum relevant to students' interests, structural flexibility and an emphasis on student decision-making (Lange and Sletten, 2002).

In the United States, the alternative movement gained steam along with the civil rights movement. It served as a model for hundreds of free schools in the 1960s and 1970s, which were particularly popular among African Americans in the American South (Stronach and Piper, 2008). Miller (2002) describes such free schools as small educational communities that were free from state control and the values of corporate capitalism, in which children and teachers were free to think and engage in interactions according to their own authentic needs and passions. The mission of free schools, therefore, was to "initiate a mental revolution by teaching reading, writing, and speaking skills through discussion of black history, the power structure, and building a movement to struggle against the latter." (Conley, 2002, p. 63). The next sections, review alternative education in the Israeli context in general and in the Palestinian-Arab society in particular.

### 1.2. Alternative education schools in the Israeli context

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing trend in Israel in which groups of dissatisfied parents in Jewish secular communities have been coming together to establish alternative school initiatives for their children that are customized to their pedagogical needs and preferences, although the initiatives are often lacking in professional guidance and government supervision (Gofen et al., 2014; Gofen and Blomqvist, 2014). Gofen and Blomqvist (2014) called such initiatives,

*parental entrepreneurship*, which "reflects a refusal to accept current public education arrangements, and undermines the authority and professional stance of administrators" (p.555). These entrepreneurial endeavors are often classified by how far they stray from conventional educational practices (Eyal, 2008).

Several factors have driven Israeli parents (primarily affluent and secular middle-class) to seek alternative options for their children, including dissatisfaction with the deteriorating levels of public education (Dahan and Yonah, 2007), and the desire to improve the quality of their children's education by instituting a specific pedagogy that they argue is not available in the public education system (Gofen et al., 2014) – in particular, pedagogies that follow the alternative educational philosophies of such as Waldorf, Montessori, or Dewey. This growing phenomenon marks a power shift in the provision of education from the monopoly of government administration to parents (Gofen et al., 2014). Note, however, that in Israel there are no charter laws that allow parents to establish schools and no formal policy has been proposed to regulate these school initiatives. Therefore, the Ministry of Education has consistently objected to such parental initiatives; only the court rulings in favor of these initiatives enable their existence, albeit as recognized but nonofficial schools, and as a result they receive up to 75 percent of their funding from the state (Gofen et al., 2014).

### 1.3. Alternative education schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel

Parental alternative school initiatives have also recently sprung up in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel, although not in the same rate as in the Jewish society and with varying degrees of success. These are small alternative schools, intended at first for early childhood and elementary education (see Levy and Massalha, 2010, 2012). They aim to offer alternative pedagogies and educational visions different from those prescribed by the Israeli Ministry of Education, and as such can be seen as attempts by parents and educators to gain more control over the education of their children (Levy and Massalha, 2012). The schools strive to increase students' awareness of their Palestinian-Arab heritage by integrating Palestinian-Arab historical, cultural and national narratives into their curricula (Massalha, 2009).

One of the earliest and most prominent alternative school initiatives was the Arab Democratic School of Yaffa in the mixed locality of Jaffa, which comes under the jurisdiction of the city of Tel Aviv-Jaffa. The school was founded in 2004 by a group of Palestinian-Arab parents and political activists. The school advocated democratic pedagogy and placed a strong emphasis on the Arabic language and culture in the hopes that these would ameliorate the state of Arab education in Jaffa and offer children a type of education that state- and church-affiliated schools would not or could not offer (Levy and Massalha, 2012). The founders of the school advocated a curriculum that reflects a Palestinian-Arab narrative and links learning to students' sense of Arab identity (Levy and Massalha, 2010). However, the school closed its doors in 2011 due to financial constraints and lack of funding.

Another initiative was Deeritna: Al Nahda Al-Arabia School ('School of Arabic Reawakening'). This post-elementary school was established in the Arab town of Kufr Qari'in in 2009 by a small group of educators and parents. The founders of the school envisioned an alternative educational environment for their children that "places the child at the center of the educational process in a relatively non-hierarchical educational space and infused with extracurricular programs" (Levy and Massalha, 2012, p. 13). Extracurricular programs include learning about Palestinian history and going on excursions to the ruins of the Arab villages demolished by Zionist paramilitary groups during the 1948 war and military forces thereafter. The school, however, faced numerous problems, eventually dropping its alternative vision and subsequently being taken over by Atid, an Israeli for-profit network of schools. The network is known for its excessive focus on excellence and academic

achievements (Levy and Massalha, 2012).

Although the schools no longer exist, they signify the rise of grass-roots movements in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel that call for new educational spaces in which Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel can have greater control over their education, and develop their national identity awareness and self-assurance by anchoring the pedagogical process and the learning experience in their cultural and historical contexts. However, there is a dearth of research and knowledge on these grass-roots movements and the alternative education schools they strive to establish in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel. Therefore, this study aims to expand on our current understanding of this phenomenon by addressing the following research questions:

- 1 *What is the rationale for establishing alternative schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel?*
- 2 *What are the characteristics of two prominent alternative schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel?*

#### 1.4. Research context

The current study focuses on two prominent alternative Palestinian-Arab schools that have not received attention in the literature. The first school is called Masar ('Process') and is based in the city of Nazareth. The second school is called Hewar ('Dialogue') and is based in the mixed Jewish-Arab city of Haifa. The two schools were selected for several reasons. Firstly, the two schools are firmly established alternative schools that serve a student population from the primary to post-primary school years. They are regional schools that admit students from each of the cities and the surrounding localities. Second, the schools are openly secular (against the backdrop of religiously divided communities in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel) and admit students irrespective of their religious affiliation (hence there are Muslim, Christian, and Druze students). Third, the schools were established from the outset by groups of parents as alternative school initiatives, as opposed to having been conventional schools that were then converted to alternative ones. Unlike the schools reviewed earlier in the study, which all now have been closed, Masar and Hewar have persisted in the face of adversity and numerous bureaucratic challenges in their journey toward recognition. Despite the difficulties that parents face in obtaining recognition for their schools, they are often highly motivated and draw their strength from the fact that their initiatives are grassroot initiatives developed by and for the community (Eyal, 2008).

Masar was established in 1998 in Nazareth by a group of social activists and parents, who, with the support of the Department of Education in the city, opened the school's first pilot kindergarten with a group of 11 children. The school has expanded in size since then and was officially recognized in 2006 by the Ministry of Education as a fully independent alternative school. Today the school is firmly established as a regional comprehensive school with over 250 Christian and Muslim students. It receives up to 75% of its funding from the Ministry of Education and supplements the rest with tuition fees. The tuition fees are currently 5000 NIS (~ \$1355) per annum. The school is open to all on a first-come basis, and there are no academically-based selection criteria for admission. Each class has a total enrollment capacity of 25 students, and registration ends once enrollment capacity has been reached. The school, however, has devised a point-based registration process to select parents based on their interest and commitment to the school's alternative ethos that includes parents' attendance at an open day, a tour of the school, learning workshops for a deeper understanding of the school's alternative philosophy and, for new parents, a personal interview if needed. Parents with children already at the school are given priority. To ensure socioeconomic diversity, the school allocates an annual budget for assisting students from low-income families and offers reductions in tuition fees for parents with two or more siblings enrolled at the school as well as for single parents.

Hewar is based in the mixed Jewish-Arab City of Haifa and, as the

name in Arabic implies, dialogue is one of the guiding principles of the school, along with democracy, creativity, and critical thinking. The school was first established in 2001 by a group of parents, educators, and social activists. In contrast to Masar however, Hewar's journey to recognition was long, having been faced with fierce resistance from Haifa's Department of Education and the Ministry of Education. It was only in 2012 and after several petitions to the Supreme Court that the school was finally granted a license to operate as an independent alternative school. However, the school receives no state funding and relies completely on tuition fees. The tuition fees now stand at 13,000 NIS (~ \$3500) per annum. The school is open to all on a first-come basis, and there are no academically-based selection criteria for admission. Parents, however, must agree to the school's principles and accept its alternative character and philosophy. The substantial tuition fees may naturally attract highly educated and affluent parents, many of whom moved to Haifa from other Palestinian-Arab localities in search of job opportunities or in search of progressive education opportunities for their children. However, to ensure socioeconomic diversity, the school provides a fund (from donations) to assist students from low-income families and offers a 10% reduction in tuition fees for parents with two or more siblings enrolled at the school. The school caters to pupils in the primary and secondary school (up to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade) levels. There are currently 120 pupils and 55 preschool children aged 3–5.

## 2. Data collection and analysis

In this study, we adopted a qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews and observations. The data was collected over a one-year period (from February 2016 to March 2017). In total, 44 semi-structured interviews were carried out (23 in Masar and 21 in Hewar). The participants interviewed included the general directors of the organizations that run the schools, school principals, teachers, students in secondary and high school levels, and also parents and graduates. The interviews with the general directors and school principals were conducted first to gather factual information about the schools, determine the rationale for establishing the schools, and to explore their visions, philosophies, and general characteristics. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and lasted between 40 and 80 min. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated from Arabic into English. Depending on their role, (principal, teacher, or student) participants were asked open questions about the characteristics of the schools and the key features that deem the schools 'alternative.'

Seven observations were conducted at Masar, in different classes including: mathematics, Arabic language studies, dance, music, critical thinking, and debate. At Hewar, five observations were conducted in the following classes: mathematics, geography, history, and the morning 'conversation' (an activity each class carries out in the morning for 30 min before teaching commences, where they discuss a range of topics), and one observation in the kindergarten. In each observation, the researcher made notes about the learning atmosphere in the classroom, student-teacher interaction, teaching content, and teaching styles.

The transcripts of the interviews and observation notes were analyzed using the 'thematic analysis' method as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). In this analysis, we followed a systematic process to find patterned responses or themes within a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We followed the six-stage analysis provided by Braun and Clarke: (1) *Familiarizing yourself with the data*: all data were read repeatedly by the researchers to obtain a sense of the breadth and depth of the data. The researchers met on several occasions to discuss their initial impressions of the data. (2) *Generating initial codes*: all phrases, sentences, or paragraphs (text units) that related to the research question were extracted and given a code, a brief label that captures the essence of the text unit. The team discussed, refined, and verified all the codes. (3) *Searching for themes*: the researchers divided the codes into broad overarching themes based on code similarities. (4) *Reviewing*

themes: the themes were reviewed and revised by the researchers and organized into a coherent pattern.<sup>1</sup> The researchers then re-examined the data set as a whole to ensure that all relevant data were captured by one theme. (5) *Defining and naming themes*: each theme was identified by a statement that captured a distinct characteristic of both schools. (6) *Producing the report*: The researchers prepared a final report that provided a detailed account of each theme. For validation, the report was then crosschecked with the general directors of the non-profit organizations that run both schools.

### 3. Findings and discussion

The following section is in two parts. The first part focuses on the rationale for establishing alternative schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel, and the second part focuses on characteristics of alternative education in Masar and Hewar.

#### 3.1. Rationale for establishing alternative schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel

In line with the parental entrepreneurship literature (e.g. Gofen and Blomqvist, 2014; Eyal, 2008), the interviews with the general directors and the school principals of both schools revealed that the schools' founding was the joint efforts of groups of parents who came together because they were discontent with the mainstream education arrangements and the state of public education in their cities. They deemed the state-mandated curriculum in Palestinian-Arab schools as traditional, outdated, suppressive of creativity, and excessively focused on academic achievement and testing at the expense of developing students' character (e.g. Dahlan and Yonah, 2006). In this regard Masar's General Director noted, "The fundamental problem with mainstream education is that no matter how good it is, in its essence lies a bad structure, the curriculum, the grades, it is like production lines in factories." Hence, by seeking alternative frameworks the founders aimed to widen the narrow academic scope of mainstream education to include new concepts, values and a sense of belonging. As the General Director of Hewar noted, "The aim of the school is to develop a new educational model, outside the dictates of official authorities, in order to promote human values and a sense of national belonging, and to create a different educational environment that fosters motivation for learning, creativity and critical thinking."

The founders also believe that current mainstream education system is dislodged from the social and historical contexts and deliberately sidelines Palestinian-Arab national narrative (e.g. Agbaria, 2016; Arar, 2012). Hence, they call for educational visions and teaching practices rooted in the specific values, culture and challenges of Palestinian-Arab society in Israel. As Masar's principal explained, "*We link students to their history to help them form their identity, but not in isolation from universal values.*" In the same vein, the founders of the schools seek to create secular educational spaces where students can learn to negotiate their religious and cultural affiliations in a non-biased way. Although the schools celebrate religious festivals such as Islamic holidays and Christmas, their approach is secularly oriented and excludes religious education. As Masar's General Manager illustrated, "Masar is known to be truly secular, and because we are secular, we tackle taboo subjects, social and religious, that wouldn't be raised in mainstream schools." By openly defining the schools' characters as secular, both schools challenge existing Palestinian-Arab societal norms and follow the example of Jewish secular parents who have established alternative schools (Gofen et al., 2014).

<sup>1</sup> A coherent pattern includes internal homogeneity (i.e., the codes link together meaningfully in each theme) and external heterogeneity (i.e., there are clear distinctions between the themes).

#### 3.2. Characteristics of alternative education in Masar and Hewar

The analysis reveals that, despite some of the differences between the two schools in terms of size, context and history, both schools share characteristics related to ideology and pedagogical practices. For this reason and to avoid repetition, the common characteristics presented in the next section relate to both schools. Six major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) *interpersonal relationships and power relations*; (2) *strengthening students' sense of Palestinian national and cultural identity*; (3) *proactive parental engagement*; (4) *alternative teaching practices*; (5) *alternative subjects and extracurricular activities*; and (6) *committed and motivated teachers*. In the following sections, evidence for each theme is presented followed by a discussion in relation to the broader context of Palestinian-Arab education system in Israel.

##### 3.2.1. Interpersonal relationships and power relations

Masar and Hewar adopt an anti-authoritarian model of teacher-student interpersonal relationships. This contrasts with mainstream schools in Palestinian-Arab society where power dynamics between teachers and students are characterized by traditional and authoritarian values (Abu-Asbah, 2007; Bekerman and Tatar, 2009; Levy and Massalha, 2010). The analysis reveals that interpersonal relationships emerged as the most salient theme, particularly teacher-student relationships, hence implying that the teacher-student relationship is one of the pillars of alternative education. McCombs (2014) argues that caring teacher-student relationships and a supportive learning environment lead to positive growth and development in students throughout all stages of schooling. Research shows that teacher-student relationships and caring are related to student effort (Murdock and Miller, 2003; Sakiz et al., 2012), motivation, and engagement (Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda et al., 2011).

The findings of the current study point to a safe and friendly classroom atmosphere that is devoid of formality and authoritarian tendencies. Interviewees described the teacher-student relationship as humanistic and one based on camaraderie. In the interviews, it was often mentioned that teachers in both schools see the student as a person first before they see him/her as a student. Hence, the relationship between teachers and students is not based on fear and awe but on mutual respect and inclusion. As one parent at Hewar explained, "There is no need for the teacher to shout in order to establish his/her authority and earn his/her respect." This was further supported by a teacher at Hewar who stated, "Being alternative is not a question of whether we have exams or not, it's a lot deeper than that. Teacher-student relationship is based on mutual respect. This does not mean that we don't face some difficulties with some students, however we don't scream back at students with insulting and demeaning language."

In this regard, students in both schools can address their teachers (and the school principals) by their first names, something that interviewees considered unthinkable in state or public schools in Palestinian-Arab society. From the teachers' and students' viewpoint, doing away with formal titles in the schools reflects the depth of the inherent relationship and the depth of cooperation between teachers and students. One student at Masar explained, "the absence of formal titles at school breaks down the barriers between teachers and students and strengthens the relationship between them. The student sees the teacher as a friend, and that's why he is obliged to respect him."

The close relationship between teachers and student creates a sense of safety among students which allows them to express their views freely even if it is criticism directed at the teacher him/herself. To achieve this sense of safety, "a teacher needs to have the capacity to go down to the level of his/her students, to the extent that s/he re-lives their experiences and to put himself/herself in their place," as one teacher at Masar illustrated.

The intimate interpersonal relationships found in both schools at all levels create a friendly atmosphere and a comfortable learning environment. Students in both schools described how the schools'

environment and atmosphere make them feel safe, comfortable and free. This is due in part to the small number of students in each classroom (up to 25 students), and in the school in general. Having a small number of students in the classroom allows teachers to reach out to each student and be mindful of individual differences. From the students' perspective, the small number of students allow them to get to know one another including students from different educational stages. Students from both schools frequently remarked on the family atmosphere that prevails in their schools. As one student at Hewar explained, "students at Hewar like the school, they don't feel coerced into coming to it...on the contrary, they feel at ease at the school." Similarly, a student at Masar stated, "The family atmosphere here differentiates the school from mainstream schools, and this creates in me a sense of belonging to the school, the students and the teachers". For parents, the friendly atmosphere in the schools was the decisive factor for enrolling their children there. As one mother at Masar related, "I chose the school because of the friendly and humane atmosphere, and that was important for me, because I didn't want my children to go through what I went through in state schools where the atmosphere was fraught with tension, fear of authority and lacking in humanity." Similarly, a parent at Hewar stated, "I have chosen the school because it doesn't put undue pressure on students through school homework and exams and also because I reject the repression and rigid rules that are common in mainstream schools."

### 3.2.2. Strengthening students' sense of Palestinian national and cultural identity

Many of the schools' curricular and extracurricular activities are geared toward strengthening students' sense of Palestinian-Arab national and cultural identity. This orientation sets the schools on a path that contrasts with existing Arab state schools where the curricula is dislodged from the social and historical context, and schools refrain from teaching the Palestinian-Arab national narrative, or even discussing it unofficially (Abu Saad, 2006; Abu-'Asbah, 2007; Arar, 2012). Agbaria (2016) points out that the excessive focus on academic achievement and excellence in the Arab education system leaves little room in mainstream schools for strengthening students' collective identities, community development or social responsibility. This contrasts with Jewish schools, where Jewish identity and national awareness are nourished not only via the curriculum, but also by a variety of extracurricular programs that are supported by the Israeli army, various highly politicized youth movements and numerous civil society organizations (Dror, 2007; Pinson, 2007). The analysis shows that in both schools the subject of identity is strongly present in the Arabic language lessons. Arabic language teachers in both schools share a common belief that the Arabic language is a core component of Palestinian-Arab national identity, and one of the subject-matters that carries within its folds the most content on identity. The subject of identity is present through the texts of prominent Palestinian-Arab writers and poets such as the late poet Mahmoud Darwish. An Arabic language teacher at Masar stated that they at Masar "succeed in nurturing identity through language, and nurturing language through identity, and as a result they feel that their students' sense of national identity is high and responsible." Similar sentiments were shared by an Arabic language teacher at Hewar who stated that "teachers at school choose texts that are close to the cultural and political reality of the Arab student, with the aim of meeting the school's declared objectives of nurturing a sense of national identity in their students." In contrast, Palestinian-Arab teachers in mainstream schools experience a sense of conflict regarding their loyalty to their employer, the Ministry of Education, and their loyalty to their Palestinian community (Dwairy, 2004).

Both schools conduct various extracurricular activities aimed at inculcating a sense of national identity and a sense of affiliation in their students. At Masar, the school dedicates a week annually for activities that commemorate the Palestinian Land Day that represents the events of March 30, 1976, when a general strike and marches were organized

in Palestinian towns across Israel to protest of land expropriation in the Galilee. In the ensuing confrontations with the Israeli army and police, six unarmed Palestinian citizens were killed, about one hundred were injured, and hundreds were arrested (Amara and Kabaha, 2005). Related activities include visits to social clubs for the elderly to listen to their stories of the events on that day, voluntary work in the surrounding community and reciting poetry of prominent Palestinian-Arab poets. The subject of identity is frequently raised and discussed in various lessons. In an observation of a 'general education' class, a group of students presented information, pictures and videos depicting ordinary life in Palestinian-Arab towns and cities before the Nakba ('Catastrophe') commemoration day. They showed a black and white documentary film that depicts life in 1925 in the former Palestinian-Arab city of Tabariyya (Tiberias). This was followed by another short documentary featuring interviews with displaced residents of the city who talked about their memories of the city before the Nakba, the Judaization of the city and the ensuing displacement. The aim of this activity according to the teacher was "to search for identity by exposing students to Palestinian memory, Palestinian cities, and Palestinian writers and poets."

In Hewar, the school also conducts similar activities aimed at reviving the Palestinian-Arab memory. For instance, each year the school organizes a trip to the sites of displaced Palestinian-Arab villages with the aim of raising awareness of their names and locations. One teacher commented: "The school provides us the space to incorporate learning materials that reflect Palestinian identity." The teacher further added, "This is very important for me as a teacher and as a mother because I believe that it's the duty of each Palestinian student to know his/her history, particularly when this history is absent in the curriculum of mainstream education." A geography and history teacher at Hewar stated that in her classes she raises political issues such as the Palestinian cause, Jewish immigration to Palestine, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the role of the Rothschild family in the establishment of Israel, settlement building in the West Bank, land appropriation, and home demolitions in Palestinian-Arab localities in Israel.

Education has been a central arena for the struggle for culture recognition among religious, ethnic, and national minorities and for group-based rights worldwide, especially in divided societies (Gallagher, 2004). Therefore, the schools' emphasis on strengthening students' sense of Palestinian national and cultural identity represents actions that a minority can initiate in the educational field to attain a more just and equitable majority-minority relationship and acknowledgement of their collective memory and identity (Kymlicka, 1995). This is particularly pertinent in the Palestinian-Arab context, in which the State of Israel has been manipulating the Arab education system and its goals in order to create a politically impotent minority with no history or national roots with which students can identify (Makkawi, 2002).

### 3.2.3. Proactive parental engagement

Parents play a very important role in both schools where they are encouraged to take a proactive part in the running of schools' affairs and in various educational and extracurricular activities. Parents' proactive engagement is not limited to material contribution (e.g. donating money for air-conditioning units or help with school renovations). Parents' engagement implies *doing with* the school and therefore differs from parental involvement which implies *doing to* the school, where the school identifies the projects and needs and then tells parents how they can contribute (Ferlazzo and Hammond, 2009). One parent at Masar stated, "Mainstream schools often don't engage parents, and if they do, mainly for limited functions such as financial support. In Masar things are different, the door is open for parents to participate in various school activities and are invited to initiate and take the lead in organizing and coordinating school activities." Similarly, a parent at Hewar stated, "Parents play an active role in all school matters and if you have any concerns, they listen to you and do something about it."

The type of parental engagement in both schools reflects the entrepreneurial type of parental engagement (Gofen and Blomqvist, 2014; Eyal, 2008). Parental entrepreneurship suggests that parents take joint responsibility in running the schools and “shifts the focus from parents as policy targets, to parents as policy makers” (Gofen and Blomqvist, 2014, p. 562). However, the pinnacle of parents’ engagement in both schools was manifested in the moral and the legal support that parents lend to the schools whether in their struggle for official recognition or to ensure the schools’ survival. Naturally, engaged parents must have adequate economic resources and the social and cultural capital to be able to invest their time in the schools (Gofen and Blomqvist, 2014). In contrast, Arar and Massry-Hezllah (2016) reported that relationships between Arab mainstream schools and the students’ parents are often considered unsatisfactory and characterized by one-directional communication, tension and conflict. According to Arar and Massry-Hezllah (2016, p. 8) the turbulent relationship between schools and parents “prevent the desired harmony between the two socializing agents that shape the student’s personality: school and family.”

#### 3.2.4. Alternative teaching practices

Observation and interview analyses reveal that teachers in both schools do not follow prescribed and unified alternative teaching methods. Instead, teachers speak of the things they do *not* do, such as ‘spoon-feeding’ the students which is considered common in mainstream schools. In general, it is left to each teacher to instruct their classrooms as he or she sees fit, often based on trial and error, and students’ feedback. Some students admitted that there were occasions in which they asked teachers to change their teaching style because they thought it was too traditional. Nevertheless, from the observations it was noticed that teaching styles vary from one teacher to another, depending on the ages of the students, the subject-matter, and teachers’ commitment to the overall alternative ideology (the more devoted a teacher is to the principles of alternative education, the more effort he/she puts into deviating from traditional teaching practices). For instance, a math teacher at Masar stated “I integrate my hobbies in painting, playing musical instruments, and singing in my teaching when I realize that the existing teaching tools in my position are not enough to illustrate a particular point.”

Teachers in both schools reject traditional teaching methods that are based on memorization and rote learning. Teachers’ attitudes toward traditional teaching methods echo the attitudes of advocates of alternative schools worldwide who view state-run mainstream schools as closed institutions that deny children intellectual stimuli and constrict their personal development. In addition, the competitive nature of achievement-dominated exam systems in state schools stifles creativity while simultaneously maintaining achievement gaps (Kizel, 2012). This is true as far as the teaching methods in mainstream schools in Palestinian-Arab society are concerned, in which education is largely teacher-centered, pedagogically traditional, and may be deemed as outdated (Abu-‘Asbah, 2007; Bekerman and Tatar, 2009; Levy and Massalha, 2010). This could be attributed to the school culture prevalent in mainstream schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel, which is often characterized as being formal, traditional, and conservative (Eilam, 2002). In such a school culture, epistemological beliefs are expected to prevail about teaching and learning according to which teachers are regarded as the unquestioned authority and source of knowledge (Safadi and Yerushalmi, 2009). Teachers in mainstream schools are therefore more inclined to choose teaching practices that grant them ultimate authority, while discouraging students’ expressions of opinions, independent behavior, criticisms, liberal attitudes, or arguments (Bekerman and Tatar, 2009).

In both of the schools examined in this study, students do not have homework, and if they do, it is often minimal (even though the principals emphatically discourage it). They do not fully adhere to the curriculum prescribed by the Ministry of Education, and do not use the Ministry’s recommended textbooks, particularly at the elementary

level. Instead, teachers are expected to search various resources to select learning materials they find appropriate. As one graduate from Masar related, “For instance in the Arabic language class, the learning materials were designed and determined by the teacher himself, and hence they were close to the student’s reality, such as the poetry of Mahmud Darwish and Samih Al-Qasim.”

However, as students advance to secondary and high schools (in Masar), teachers align more to the Ministry’s curriculum, primarily to prepare the students for Israeli ‘bagrut’ (matriculation) examinations. In this regard, a high school Arabic-language teacher at Masar explained, “at the high school level, the teacher tends to oscillate between the traditional system and the alternative system, where, on one hand the teacher adopts the Ministry’s curriculum and follows its recommendations, and on the other hand he/she wants to preserve the alternative characteristic of the school.” He further stressed, “Although I find myself bound by the Ministry’s curriculum, I don’t rely on the recommended textbooks for learning materials...instead I look for other sources that are in line with the school’s ideology and reflect the schools’ standing on educational, moral and ethical issues.”

Both schools adopt an alternative evaluation system devoid of summative exams and tests at the elementary level and, to some extent, at the secondary level. Instead, students’ progress is monitored through ongoing formative assessment based on several criteria including the personal, academic and social. Students receive written reports detailing their strengths and areas for improvement and remedial recommendations. A parent at Hewar commented, “the evaluation is detailed and comprehensive to the extent that it makes me feel that the teachers know my son better than me.” From the teachers’ perspective, “the alternative evaluation does not pigeonhole the student into a grading category and judge him/her accordingly,” a teacher at Hewar explained. Moreover, in the written report the recommendations for improvement begin with the pronoun ‘we’ and not ‘you’ (i.e., we will work together to improve) in order to assure the student that he/she is not alone and that the teacher will accompany and support him/her through this. However, at the secondary and high school levels (at Masar), evaluation tends to revert to the traditional summative form (using marks and grades). In Hewar’s case, this is done to prepare their students for the transition to a local traditional high school, whereas in Masar, to prepare their students for the Bagrut (matriculation) examinations.

#### 3.2.5. Alternative subjects and extracurricular activities

Masar and Hewar place greater emphasis on non-traditional subject-matters and extracurricular activities such as arts, music, drama, and dance. This contrasts with mainstream schools that feature an excessive emphasis on academic excellence, leaving little room for the creative arts and values education (Abu-‘Asbah, 2007; Agbaria, 2016; Levy and Massalha, 2012). In a study examining the nature and extent of extracurricular activities in Palestinian-Arab, Jewish- religious, and Jewish-secular schools in Israel, Yemini and Addi-Raccach (2013) found that the Palestinian-Arab schools offer fewer arts-related activities and more academic activities. According to Massalha (2009), the excessive focus on academic excellence in mainstream schools is considered one of the fundamental flaws of Palestinian-Arab education in Israel. The purpose of integrating alternative subjects and extracurricular activities in Masar and Hewar is to create opportunities for both academically strong and weak students to actualize their creativity and develop hidden potential in a supportive environment. From the schools’ point of view, no child is a failure because success is not measured by whether a school graduate has become an engineer or a doctor; graduates who become professional creative artists, artisans, or musicians, for example, are also seen as successful. Ultimately, these activities are designed to develop confident and creative students who can become change agents and social entrepreneurs. Yemini and Addi-Raccach (2013) argue that extracurricular activities offer non-academic challenges that give students opportunities to express and explore their

identity and generate social and human capital.

In Masar and Hewar, art lessons include, painting, coloring, and sculpting. In music lessons, students play musical instruments such as the violin, drum, *Daf* and the piano. In Masar, they introduced chess into the curriculum, and it is taught as a primary subject-matter to all students at the elementary level, and as an optional subject-matter in advanced school levels. The school holds internal yearly chess competitions for its students and encourages the competent ones to participate in regional and national chess competitions. Both schools start the school day with warm-up activities. Hewar devotes half an hour each morning to an activity called ‘the morning conversation’ where students and teachers raise and discuss various topics and issues. The topics may include current and political affairs, school events, or personal matters. For instance, during one observation in the kindergarten, the teacher seated the children in a circle and talked about feelings and their meanings. She went around asking each child to share their feelings on that morning and the reasons why they feel that way. According to one teacher at Hewar, the “aim of the morning talk is to let go of feelings and give students an opportunity to vent their concerns before teaching starts.” Masar has a similar practice where teachers assign fifteen minutes each morning for discussing general topics with their students. Moreover, Masar allocates two lessons each week for an activity called ‘dialogue’, where students debate and discuss diverse educational and social topics, aiming at developing their debating and dialogue skills.

Another prominent activity at Masar is called the students’ platform, which is a weekly gathering for all secondary and high school students where they raise and discuss school matters, vote on school’s decisions that are related to students, suggest new school initiatives. The platform is akin to ‘a *mini parliament*’ as one student described it. The aim of the students’ platform “is to break the hierarchy at school, internalize democratic values, enhance students’ self-confidence, and to develop leadership and public speaking skills,” stated one teacher involved. During one of the observations of the students’ platform, a student proposed an initiative calling on students to give up their mobile phones for at least a day week, and not bring them into the classroom. The proposal aimed at using students’ time better and increasing social interaction among students. The platform is seen by the school as an exercise in democratic education aimed at helping their students internalize democratic values and attitudes and encouraging students to think critically about school policies and the society in which they live. According to Smith (2009), the purpose of democratic education is not only to enable students to develop their cognitive abilities, but also to enable them to think critically and to act on these ideas. To aid the development of critical thinking abilities Masar runs ‘critical thinking classes,’ where students critically examine a variety of social, religious, political, and cultural topics. Topics discussed include: women’s rights, equality, identity, religious beliefs, and martyrdom. For example, in an observation of a critical thinking class, students raised the subject of pedophilia in the context of underage marriages. Students debated whether marrying a girl under the legal age of marriage (18), a social norm that was practiced in some Palestinian-Arab communities, is considered a form of pedophilia. The guiding principle of these classes is that “no subject is taboo,” as the teachers put it. This is particularly pertinent in Palestinian-Arab society, in which a patriarchal, male-dominated, collectivist, and less egalitarian culture is still dominant (Abu-Baker, 2007; Abu-Rabia-Queder and Oplataka, 2008).

### 3.2.6. Committed and motivated teachers

Teachers play an important role in developing and maintaining the alternative character of both schools. Since the schools are run by not-for-profit foundations, this gives them the freedom to select teachers based on their creativity skills, initiative, and social achievements, and to a lesser extent, their academic qualifications and achievements. It became evident in the analysis that not all teachers are suited to work in these schools, because foremost, they ought to believe in the concept behind the schools and their missions. Teachers must have an open

mind, be flexible, possess a creative teaching style, and the capacity to attract and retain students. As a teacher at Masar related, “the school’s uniqueness is largely related to the characteristics and quality of its teachers.” In contrast, most Palestinian-Arab teachers in mainstream schools in Israel often feel alienated, frustrated, and stressed (Arar, 2014; Berson et al., 2015).

All interviewees highlighted the crucial role the teachers play in enriching the learning experience, building the student’s personality and raising cultural and political awareness among students. Students in both schools commended the attention and care they receive from their teachers. They understand them, empathize with them, and know them personally. As one Hewar student explained, “teachers take the interest of students and his/her success seriously and show willingness to explain and clarify things to struggling students, during a lesson, after it or even in their spare time.” Parents feel free and comfortable in contacting teachers to clarify school matters, even outside school hours. As one teacher at Masar confirmed, “I allow parents to contact me at any time, even late at night if necessary.” She further added, “I sometimes receive phone calls from parents to talk about general matters that have nothing to do with their children or school... I have become like a family friend.” Similarly, a teacher from Hewar said, “I don’t see the school as just a workplace, it’s a place where I find myself, and put my beliefs and ideas into practice through education.”

Teachers’ motivation is important not only for its implications for their own personal and professional development, but also it has been shown to improve teaching quality and positively influence students’ motivation, academic success and progress (Finnigan, 2010; Nir and Hameiri, 2014). Teacher motivation is a critical issue in mainstream schools in the Arab society in Israel, because the decision by many to undertake teaching as a profession is often a ‘constrained’ and not a free choice, due to limited access for Arabs to Israel’s employment market (Agbaria, 2013). Some teachers see teaching as a secure profession because of the tenure, and for women it is seen as ideal for combining work and running a home (Arar et al., 2013). Moreover, Arab teachers in mainstream schools suffer from ambivalence, since they have to respond to conflicting needs of their students, the expectations of the local community, and the demands of the Ministry of Education (Agbaria, 2013; Makkawi, 2002). These perceptions may undermine teachers’ motivation and commitment to their work, so that they lack any social or national mission, or a sense of involvement and affinity to the job and the organization (Wei, 2013).

Both schools pay special attention to teachers’ professional development through continuous in-house training, given that teaching occurs in a rapidly changing reality that requires teachers to continuously learn, innovate, and develop professionally (Campbell, 2002). This aspect is pertinent in both schools, due to the shortage of teacher training programs in Israel that specialize in alternative education. Hence, the task of training the teachers lies with the schools – an uneasy task since training teachers not only entails equipping them with alternative teaching practices but also involves changing mindsets and challenging existing assumptions about the meaning of education in general, and the role and professional identity of teachers. This aspect is of vital importance, since the design of teacher professional development courses should be culturally sensitive and adapted to meet the needs of the Arab teachers and students (Arar and Massry-Herzllah, 2016). During the duration of this study, both schools conducted training sessions once every two weeks with external facilitators where they were exposed to new concepts in alternative education, discussed case studies from the schools and developed best practices.

## 4. Conclusions

The current study sheds light on the recent phenomenon of alternative schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel by investigating the rationale for establishing these alternative schools and by exploring their characteristics. The study draws on the recent trend of parental

entrepreneurship in the Israeli education system in which dissatisfied parents, primarily secular, come together to establish alternative schools for their children, according to their pedagogical preferences and general perceptions on what quality education consists of (Gofen et al., 2014; Gofen and Blomqvist, 2014; Eyal, 2008). In line with the literature on parental entrepreneurship, the findings of the current study indicate that Masar and Hewar were also established by groups of Palestinian-Arab parents in Israel who banded together to provide alternative educational frameworks for their children due to their discontent with the state of the mainstream school system in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel.

Despite differences between the two schools in terms of history and size, they share a philosophy and other characteristics as well. The two schools pay particular attention to the teaching and learning milieu, the interpersonal relationships and power relations between teachers and students, students' sense of national identity, teaching practices, and extracurricular activities. This does not mean that some of these characteristics are not present in mainstream schools; rather, what distinguishes alternative schools is the coming together of these characteristics to guide teaching and learning and to meet parents' needs for what they perceive as quality education for their children (Gofen et al., 2014). Naturally, it would not be possible to achieve the desired outcomes in their students without qualified and highly motivated teachers who are committed to the school's guiding philosophies. Hence, as the findings demonstrated, both schools invest considerable resources on training new and existing teachers in the principles of alternative education. This is necessary because in the absence of teacher training programs in Israel that specialize in alternative education, the schools take it upon themselves to train their teachers.

Taken together, the results of this study define and delineate the concept of alternative education in the context of Palestinian-Arab society in Israel. On the basis of these characteristics, Masar and Hewar offer a different model of education that challenges the state-dictated mainstream educational model in Palestinian-Arab schools in Israel. Nevertheless, the findings also raise a fundamental question concerning their effectiveness in achieving the desired outcomes. This, however, may be difficult to gauge due to the fact that the schools consider any evaluation based on academic excellence to be invalid and hence reject the standard evaluation criteria. The founders of Masar and Hewar argue that the schools should be evaluated according to a holistic learning experience that includes, among other things, students' satisfaction with the school, the freedom to learn without the pressure of exams, and the friendly school atmosphere where everyone knows each other's name. Notwithstanding these attributes, the school may still face challenges in terms of how they are perceived in their communities. After all, the schools operate in a society that associates school effectiveness with academic excellence or what Barr and Parrett (2001) called the 'bottom line.' Moreover, although the schools welcome proactive parental engagement, questions arise about the boundaries of their engagement and the extent to which they have power to alter existing educational arrangements (e.g. the no-exams policy). Gofen and Blomqvist (2014) argue that although parental engagement is one of the positive aspects of parental entrepreneurship, it is multifaceted and can be a social force or a problem. In that respect, Gofen and Blomqvist raise important questions about who is in charge and where the boundary lies between parents and the administration.

In summary, the findings presented in this study delineate the key characteristics distinguishing alternative schools from mainstream schools in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel. While Palestinian-Arab mainstream schools may have some of the elements identified in this study, what distinguishes the Masar and Hewar schools is the combination of these characteristics to create holistic educational alternatives in theory and in practice. While it is beyond the scope of this study to argue the pros and cons of alternative schools, this study contributes to the literature by documenting and expanding upon the discussion of this growing phenomenon in Palestinian-Arab society in Israel. The

study also marks a significant shift in Palestinian-Arab parents' involvement in formal education, from passive involvement to taking control by creating educational alternatives. The study also captures the struggle between Palestinian-Arab society, which seeks to gain more control over its education, and the Israeli state apparatus, which seeks to maintain a highly centralized Arab educational system as a mean of control and subjugation of Palestinian-Arab society. Research on the phenomenon of alternative schools in Palestinian-Arab society remains in its infancy. Thus, further research is needed to explore other schools and to address the effectiveness of these schools in internalizing the desired values in their students, and the extent to which students, as agents of change, contribute to social progress in Palestinian-Arab society.

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