

Chapter 3: Education of the Arab gifted child

I. Introduction

Education of the gifted in Israel is not a matter of professionals either in psychology of the gifted or didactics of the gifted in Hebrew education (David, 2011b; Vidergor and Eilam, 2010), let alone in the Arab education. Until the year 2008 there have not been even one university program for an advanced degree in gifted education. As a result most of the instructors in the various enrichment programs are professionals in their fields who also love teaching but by no means are teachers. This works out quite in the Jewish sector, but does not always work at all for Arab students because of the following reasons:

1. In all enrichment programs in the Arab sector basic subjects, such as mathematics, English, and even Arabic and Hebrew are studied. Thus, the lack of teachers trained and educated to teach gifted students influences the level of teaching, which is not always suitable for the highly gifted students, and the due to substantial gap between didactics for regular and gifted students the trained teachers use, in many cases, ways, styles, and means that are improper for the gifted.
2. The Arab teachers who participate in one of the 4 in-service training for teachers of the gifted have no Arab mentors or professors, and the subject matters they are exposed to have, in many cases, no relevance to Arab students.

There are many harmful consequences connected to this situation.

1. Participation rate in gifted programs is low;
2. In the Arab sector there are not gifted programs for grade 3 students;
3. In the transition from elementary- to junior high school there is a substantial decrease in the participation of students in gifted programs;
4. There are no gifted programs for students in grade 10-12;

5. There are no gifted programs for Arab students living in the Southern district of Israel.

II. The education of elementary school gifted Arab students

According to the Israeli Bureau of Statistics, in the 2006/7 school year 230,646 Arab students, in grade 1-6, studied in Israeli schools (Statistics, Israel, 2007, table 8.13). As programs for gifted students start in Israel in grade 3, the number of Arab students in grade 3-6 was about 153,760. As we see in table 1.1, 1008 of them participated in gifted enrichment programs, which is 0.65%. According to the data of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament (Vorgan, 2006), the rate of grade 3-6 Israeli children, Jews and Arabs, participating in gifted programs was 1.04%, which means the rate of Jewish children was higher than 1.2%. Thus, even though, as can be seen in .1 1, the rate of Arab elementary school students participating in gifted programs was higher than that of junior high school students, let along of high school children (who had no gifted programs whatsoever), their rate, 0.65%, was only about half than the rate of Jewish gifted children.

III. The education of junior high school gifted Arab students

According to the Vorgan (2006) report, in the year 2006 only 0.62% of junior high school students participated in gifted programs, which is about 20% of those entitled to them. This includes both Arab and Jewish students. However, in the year 2006/7 27.6% of junior high school students in Israel were Arabs (Statistics, Israel, 2007, table 8.12, 8.13), while less than 20% of those participating in gifted programs have been Arab (Vorgan, 2006). In addition, while in the Jewish sector there were many gifted classes that operated 6 days a week, no such classes operated in the Arab sector (ibid).

As we see in table 4, the number of junior high school students participating in gifted students decreases substantially from that of elementary school students. This phenomenon is common to 3 districts: the northern, Haifa and Jerusalem. Only in the central district, namely, in the 2 programs of Taibe and Tira, the number of students remains stable in the transition to junior high school.

It is, indeed, impossible to know why in these two programs the situation has been so much different than in all other ones. However, after interviewing Mr. Wagi Bal'um, the head of the Taibe gifted program, as well as Dr. Fadia Naser, the Taibe-born head of the program on research, measurement, and evaluation methods at Tel Aviv University, we can assume that though it is not easy to be an Arab student in Israel, if you live in a place where education is the first priority at home and in the community, your odds become much higher to "make it".

Mr. Wagi Bal'um, who received his MSc in genetic engineering at age 23, started teaching at the gifted Taibe program right after receiving his BSc in agricultural sciences at age 21. As headmaster who is in charge of the subjects studied in the program he insists on 4 main principles: 1. Knowledge and understanding are not enough; each learning process must end with the operational stage; 2. Fine motor skills, which are under-developed in the Arab sector due to lack of knowledge among kindergarten- and lower-grade teachers, must be strength; 3. Emotional intelligence should be nurtured; 4. Creativity is a must in each and every field of knowledge. These principles, as well as many other ways of teaching, social events, and highly competitiveness contribute to the high prestige of the program, where the drop-out rate is about one child per year!

Dr. Fadia Nasser, who was born in Tira and lived most of her life there, gives a clue about the value of education in her hometown. She was born in the late 50ieth to a 10-child family who had to struggle hard for bringing them up, first in a 2.5-room house. In spite of that 2 of her brothers were sent to Jewish agricultural high school, in order to acquire both education in modern agriculture and Hebrew. She herself was encouraged to "go as far as she wished", and when studying for her PhD she left Israel for the US, an unconventional behaviour for a young, unmarried Arab female. Though just one example, the story of Dr. Nasser gives quite a good idea about special standards for gifted children in general, and females in particular, in a comparatively small (21,800 citizens in September 2008, Statistics, Israel, 2008), Muslim town, with a long tradition of focusing on education.

IV. The education of high school gifted Arab students

Until the 2013/4 school year there was no gifted education for Arab high school students in the general education system. In the Jewish sector no less than 80 high school classes operated for gifted students in 2006 (Vorgan, 2006). In the 2006/7 school year the number of Arab junior high school students was about 70,000 in comparison to 183,640 Jews (Statistics, Israel, 2007, tables 8.12 and 8.13), namely, 27.6% of Israeli junior high school students were Arabs. Not only were Arabs under-represented in the enrichment programs for the gifted, with less than 20% of students of all students (Vorgan, 2006) – rather than 27.6% participation rate, in 2013/4 there were still no gifted classes for junior high school students in the Arab sector (Special classes in junior high schools, 2014).

In the 2011/12 school year there were 16 junior high school schools with no less than 41 gifted classes in the Jewish sector, but not even one in the Arab one (Special classes in junior high schools, 2014), and 40 classes in Jewish senior high schools, but only 3 in the Arab one (Special classes in senior high schools, 2014).

In the 2013/4 school year 3 tenth grade classes for gifted students finally opened in the Arab general sector: in Nazareth, Kabbul, and Nahf (Special classes in senior high schools, 2014). Opening such a class in Nazareth, the largest Arab town in Israel (Statistics, Israel, 2013), is understandable. As will be explained later, Nazareth has many educational private, church-related institutions considered the very best in Israel, opened not only to Christians but to children and youth of all religions. The majority of students in some of these schools are Muslims. However, a town with a population of about 74,000 no doubt needs special classes for its gifted students. But the choice of Kabul – located about 14 Km from Acre, with a population of about 12,500, and Nahf, with a population of about 11,250, is somewhat peculiar, especially when Jerusalem, the town with about 300,000 Arabs, offers no gifted classes at all.

Taking into consideration the fact, that the need of high level education has a high priority in the Arab sector, as can be obvious by the fact that many Thousands of families – both Christian and Muslim – finance the tuition for their children in the excellent Christian institutions (David, 2008a, 2008d), and in light of the substantial gaps between the level of the public Jewish and Arab schools (David, 2008a; Kashti, 2011; "Meitzav", 2010;

Velmer, 2010; Zelikovich, 2009), it should be wondered why in the sector most in need there are no public classes for the gifted.

However, excellent private high schools, mainly connected to Christian institutions, have been functioning for high school gifted students, both Christians and Muslims. No wonder "the percentage of Arab Christians entitled to the matriculation certificate and are eligible to university education is higher than that of Jews, Muslims and Druze" (National Council for the Child, 2010, p. 10).

The high school is considered the centerpiece among the Mar Elias Institutions (2013). There are more than 1200 students from all over the Galilee enrolled in its classes, and it is known to be one of the best 4 schools in Israel.

The students of Mar Elias High are encouraged to participate in programs which, among others, try to establish long term relationships with people from other backgrounds, such as Jews, Italians and Americans.

The students are asked to choose a major during the beginning of the 10th grade. Here is the list of the majors that are currently taught at Mar Elias High School:

- Physics
- Biotechnology
- Electronics
- Computer Science
- Chemistry
- Biology
- Sports
- Ecology
- Psychology

In the next chapter the unique characteristics of gifted programs in the Arab sector in Israel are to be discussed.

