

Yaffa: A School of their Choice?

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Summary

This article is a product of an in-depth research in *Yaffa, The Arab Democratic School* that was carried out in 2004-05, as part of a study on alternative Arab education in Israel. Its aim, beyond telling the story of Yaffa, is to explicate the motivations that underlay this initiative, and to examine parental choice amongst the disadvantaged. We ask how the Arabs' parental choice is affected by **a)** their (marginalised) social location, **b)** how far they are from the dominant culture, and **c)** their (in)capacity to make a difference. Apparently, to make a choice is a multidimensional act, reflecting the Palestinian citizens' resistance to their marginalisation and unwillingness to be subjugated through non-democratic educational perceptions. Their positionality resonates in Yaffa, as an act of intervention, and their search for an alternative reality where democratic education is not and cannot be separated from the Palestinian citizens' need to imagine themselves as Arabs.

Keywords: *Arab education (Israel); parental choice; neo-liberal education; Jaffa (Tel Aviv) – education; school choice*

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The idea of choice in a global context

Since the early 1990s, the idea that market-based school choice holds the greatest potential to bring about better education and to improve the performance of public schools has become the mainstay of contemporary educational reforms (Chubb and Moe 1991; Cooper 2005; Greene 2005). Advocates of school-choice reform argued that it would make schools more competitive and accountable, and that this reform conforms with and reinforces the need to uphold the individual citizen and the choices she makes. Indeed, the liberty to make a choice has become a cornerstone of neoliberalism (Ong 2006) and perhaps one of its most salient components. Moreover, the idea of choice, whose meaning is entrenched in the context of a complex global/local relationship (Davies and Bansel 2007: 249; Yonah 2000), is in itself one of the vehicles that carries the neo-liberal *political rationality*, which involves the ‘extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action’ (Brown 2003: 3).

Choice is not just an idea, but also a practice affected by concrete institutions and settings. In the educational field, parents can make a choice in specific contexts where several prerequisites apply and form the basis for their social acts (Ball and Vincent 1998: 393). The literature on school-choice reforms, and on parental choice at large, shows that family-school partnerships do not occur in a neutral terrain (Auerbach 2007: 251). Patterns of choice and parental involvement in the schooling of their children and of family-school-community partnership develop in a specific social context (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997: 9-10), and vary in accordance to, chiefly, class and ethnicity (Auerbach 2007; Epstein 1995; Reay et. al. 2007; Vincent 2001; Yonah 2000). Particularly, it is argued that ‘parent involvement in education has been socially constructed to privilege White, middle-class norms and the expectations

of educators' (Auerbach 2007: 252); therefore, it is questionable how and whether parents of lower class or minority background may act similarly or as effectively (Cooper 2005). Indeed, non middle-class parents are less likely to get directly involved, or involved in similar ways, as middle-class parents (Auerbach 2007: 255). Since their parent role construction takes place in a different setting, the question of whether and how parents would act to change their children's educational opportunities is affected by **a)** their (marginalised) social location, **b)** how far they are from the dominant culture, and **c)** their (in)capacity to make a difference. Parents' involvement and entrepreneurship is thus understood by their positionality (Alcoff 1988) as a determinant of their 'civic capacity' (Stone 2001) to act and make a choice.

As neo-liberal educational innovations advance with globalization, the nuanced ways in which conceptions, such as individuality and choice, settle in and reshape local realities vary (Savage et al. 2005). This is all the more so when these conceptions dissipate also from the middle- to the lower-classes, or from the privileged and the well-off to the poor and the minorities (Alcoff 1988; Auerbach 2007; Ball and Vincent 1998; Cooper 2005). More specifically, if the global and the local are not seen as antonyms (Savage et. al. 2005: 7; Appadurai 2000), the spread of the (global) idea of school choice becomes in itself a part of the way in which the local (educational) space is re-produced in relation to this dual context (Appadurai 1996). In this sense, our concern with educational choice is bound to yield an understanding on the reproduction of social relations.

In neoliberal times, when the state and its agencies roll back and the demand from the citizenry to take responsibility grows (Ong 2006: 14; Rose 1996), the distance between state and society deepens. Yet, in this space that opens, citizens also increase their *room for manoeuvre* (Gordon and Stack 2007: 121), and they are able to reach *beyond the state* (Isin 2007) in search for 'new designs for collective life'

(Appadurai 2000: 6). It is this capacity that allows individuals to thrive, and which encourages the *non-affiliated* (Rose 1996: 340) to get engaged and challenge state monopoly in education. But since educational, social and spatial boundaries overlap - mainly because historically they were designed to create segregation (Swirski 1999; Greene 2005: 38; Wells and Crain 2005) - by so doing, the *non-affiliated* also engage in everyday acts that re-make (ethnic-) social boundaries (Wimmer 2008). In this sense, local educational initiatives, such as *Yaffa, the Arab Democratic School* become arenas where social relations and identities are being constructed and negotiated (compare, Monterescu forthcoming). Yet, to learn how Arab parents make a choice, we seek, following Appadurai (1996), to situate 'the local against other locals in an environment where comparisons and references are multiple and complex' (Savage et al. 2005: 7). In a complex of global and local economic pressures, and against a backdrop of Jewish political superiority, Arab parents seek to make a choice and offer their children quality education. This act however, cannot escape issues of identity that haunt and shape Arab-Jewish relations in Israel.

Choice in a local context

Educational policy in Israel envisaged a shift towards a market economy model, based on neoliberal principles and ideology that have engulfed the globe (Dahan and Yonah 2008). Driven by these new spirits, and further encouraged by consecutive cuts in public expenditure on education, citizens began seeking new ways to render education valuable. Since the 1980s, new bottom-up initiatives re-shaped the educational landscape, primarily in the more affluent Jewish areas, adding new contents to schooling (Goldring 1991; Goldring and Shapira 1993). A quieter revolution, apparently smaller in size, has taken place in the Jewish periphery, spawning alternative educational programmes and schools in disadvantaged Jewish

neighbourhoods (Levy and Barkay 1998; Dahan and Levy 2000; Schiffman 2005), as well as in the Arab society, which is the focal point of this article.

Two characteristics make Arab education¹ unique for the study of parental choice. First, since its institutionalisation in the framework of the State Educational Act (1953), Arab education has been highly segregated and politically and ideologically controlled (Abu-Saad 2006: 28; Al-Haj 1995; Mazawi 1994; Cohen 2006), which is further exacerbated by the economic dependence of Arab local councils upon the state (Golan-Agnon 2006). Second, Arab education differed in the existence of quasi-choice between state schools and autonomous church schools, if only in few urban centres. Nonetheless, the privilege to *make a choice*, as Ichilov and Mazawi (1997) showed, was limited as church schools became highly selective by setting financial and academic barriers. For these reasons, but not exclusively, parents and educators are currently seeking new paths for education, that evade the low-quality, unruly state schools, as well as the authoritative pedagogies of church schools.

This educational entrepreneurship forms what we identify as *alternative education space*, that encompasses autonomously-run schools, or transformed state schools. *Alternative education* is characterised by new pedagogies or educational visions, or by being organised on new principles of teacher-student relations, and it takes, to a certain degree, its form and content from similar initiatives that emerged globally and locally in recent decades (Walford and Srivastava 2007; Forsey, Davies and Walford 2008). Thus, in less than a decade we are witnesses to a variety of new initiatives, led by parents and educators who, with or without the Ministry of Education's consent, establish schools that offer democratic, bi-lingual, and even

¹Our study is on the Palestinian citizens of Israel, excluding residents of the Occupied Territories and the Palestinian Authority. Terminology matters, and since we find the commonplace term Israeli-Arabs problematic, we shall refer to them as either Arabs or Palestinian citizens.

Islamic education. All intended to offer quality education, and almost all, act in the name of choice and personal autonomy. This new phenomenon has not yet been investigated neither within the general context of educational reforms in Israel, nor as part of the Arab educational landscape.

The Study

This article is a product of an in-depth research in *Yaffa* that was carried out in 2004-05, and is part of a comprehensive study on alternative Arab education.² Our unique timing - when Yaffa school had just been set up and its future was still vague - had a crucial influence on our line of research. Particularly, it allowed us to examine in 'real time' what had made both the entrepreneurs and parents believe in the school.

Methodologically, it was based on personal interviews and a survey amongst the parents' population. We conducted individual interviews with Yaffa's head teacher, a co-chairperson of *al Rabitta* (The Association for the Arabs of Jaffa), and two members of the parents' committee, as well as focus group interview with six mothers. Additionally, a survey amongst the parent population generated 56 responses out of 62 families whose children studied at Yaffa. Both the survey and the interviews were analysed by extracting major recurring themes that attest to the respondents' understanding of Yaffa and the motivations that underlie its foundation (Donald 1989).

Our study is local in character, yet it aspires to reach beyond the local and fill the gap in Arab education research. This field, we believe, is still dominated by too broad, structuralist studies that tend to place Arab education within and against the context of Jewish education. In this sense, while premised on the pioneering works of

² The study was supported by a grant from the Ministry of Science/The Triangle R&D Centre. The Yaffa study was partly funded by a grant from the Research Authority at the Open University, and developed in the framework of a research group at Van Leer Institute.

Mar'i (1978), Al-Haj (1995), and Swirski (1999)³ – this study aims at pinpointing patterns of continuity and change at the level of the city, the neighbourhood, the school, and, most significantly, the social agents themselves. Thus, shunning the confines of the control model (Lustick 1980), we seek to expand on how citizens stretch 'beyond politics' (Isin 2007) and seek in the city and their immediate environment a room for manoeuvre in order to alter their children's future. By telling the story of Yaffa we thus hope to account for three main issues. First, we ask how the idea of individual choice permeates the periphery to become a mechanism for educational improvement. Second, we inquire whether and how this idea is changed once being placed in the periphery. And lastly, we probe on the ramifications of this particular story for Arab education in Israel at large, and ask whether educational choice re-configures the Arab periphery. To answer these questions we investigate how the Arab citizens of Jaffa conceive of Yaffa and what motivated them to partake in this educational initiative.

Yaffa: An Arab Democratic School

The Arab Democratic School of Yaffa was opened as an independent primary school in the 2004/05 school-year. The decision to launch Yaffa was taken hastily, when Mary Copti, head teacher of its previous incarnation as The Orthodox School, has been dismissed by delegates of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate.⁴ Helped by *al Rabitta*, that leased a formerly school building, and following an intensive six-week effort to renovate it, the school community was ready for the new school-year. Shortly after its opening however, the Ministry of Education issued a decree instructing its

³ Major studies on Jewish education include Zameret (1997) and Iram and Schmida (1998); studies on Arab education include Mazawi (1994; 1998), Abu-Asbah (2007) Abu-Saad (2006), Levy (2005), and Pinson (2007; 2008).

⁴ The dismissal of Copti came as the culmination of several disputed between the school and the Patriarchate, as the latter had seen the school becoming successful. The parents' committee was trying to oppose this decision, which even reached the labour court, yet at the end, both the parents and Copti agreed that despite the favourable judicial decision, the bad atmosphere would not allow the development of good working relationship.

immediate closure, as it was operating without the required licence. An interim order issued by the District Court prevented the school's immediate closure, but as the school-year came to an end the ministry stipulated it must be closed, now also as a part of a new policy which opposed independent schools altogether (Khromchenko 2005). To date, and after a prolonged struggle, the school has been officially recognised, yet political and financial constraints prevent its smooth operation. Our interest in the school remains confined, however, to the school's foundation and *raison d'être*. What we ask, then, is to briefly depict Yaffa's story, point out its distinctive qualities, and identify the main explanatory factors for its foundation as they emerge from the way the school community perceive its purpose and goals.

From the Orthodox school to Yaffa

Yaffa was born out of the Orthodox School, which itself resulted from the encounter between the Orthodox Association and Mary Copti, who became the head-teacher of the new school. Copti has engaged in education for thirty-four years – as a teacher in Church schools in Jaffa, and as a group facilitator with the Alfred Adler Institute, where she was working since 1988 with Arab and Jewish parents. Her work with Arab parents in Jaffa began at a time when, as she attests⁵, 'the concept of parents' groups simply didn't exist, no one in Jaffa had heard about the idea'. The experience she gained there led Copti to ascribe great importance to the principles of parent-teacher co-operation and freedom of choice. In particular, as noted in the interview, she concluded that,

one has to find [a way] for the community of parents and school to jointly generate a shift towards a democratic attitude to life. It's not that the parents are inevitably unenthusiastic. Some parents were interested ... in living a democratic life, but the schools were still quite far from the idea. Elsewhere, schools want to effect the change, but the parents don't.

⁵ Interview with Ms. Mary Copti (2 and 9 February 2005).

The opportunity to implement those ideas arose in 1997, when members of the Jaffa Orthodox Association⁶ sought to resurrect the historic Orthodox School. The idea, says Farida Kahawaji - chair of Yaffa's parents committee and prominent member of the Greek Orthodox community – was sectorial. Driven by a competition for power and control with other Christian denominations, and particularly the hegemonic Catholic Church, these parents sought to reinforce their communal bonds, as Kahawaji explains:

In fact there are, we have lots of Christian schools in [Jaffa]. Every year they'd invite people to the graduation ceremony ... twelve years of classes, in all the schools, but we didn't have a school. All of us [the Orthodox] were in the Catholic school. And then we started thinking about what we lacked, as Greek Orthodox people, that we should have a school of our own and our children should learn there. It's better than having them go to school at the Catholics. That's where it all started – from a question of positive envy.

Still, establishing the school was not related solely to 'positive envy', as Kahawaji further explains:

When I first heard about it, anyone who has self-respect want [something like that], out of envy I wanted an Orthodox school ... I said, why is the Vatican flag always flying, why not our flag, as Orthodox Christians, what do we lack? And so I said 'why not?'

The Orthodox Association gave the school its name and reputation, and the political backing that enabled the school's founding. They approached Copti, who was renowned in Jaffa, and she on her part solicited members of her parents groups to join the new school, that would be formed in her own spirit. The Association saw the school as selective, fostering both scholastic excellence and sectorial, Orthodox pride. According to Kahawaji, this also accorded with the spirit of the times, for many parents in Jaffa were realising that education was the key to solving the city's societal problems. Copti saw matters similarly, as she indicated in an interview on the occasion of the school's opening:

Until 1997 education in Jaffa was regressing. The situation was terrible. But then the local population grew stronger and a wave of launching educational institutions got underway in Jaffa. On the one hand the Orthodox Association set up the school, and in

⁶ The Orthodox Association is a Jaffa based secular, democratically elected organisation of Orthodox citizens. It is not institutionally affiliated to the Orthodox Patriarchate, but is a part of a network of similar local associations throughout Israel.

tandem the Ajyal [public] school was opened. The general aspiration was to stop complaining about educational problems in Jaffa and to start changing things. The idea behind reopening the Orthodox school was to bring back good schools, and restore pride to Jaffa. The focus was on the community aspect. (Badash 2004)

Copti, unlike Kahawaji, did not believe that the school was founded to restore pride to the Orthodox denomination. Ethnicity, she maintains, had nothing to do with the opening of the school: ‘from the outset, we opened an Arab school for everyone’. She believed that the Orthodox school, as distinct from other private schools, should not be selective, or based solely on the principle of achievements. Indeed, once Yaffa was established, its Arab character and democratic distinctiveness took shape, in accordance with the worldview of Copti herself. This held that the school was not intended to create a dichotomous distinction between excellence and values:

I didn't think about excellence. I mean, in the state schools they placed stronger emphasis on excellence, as if there are excellent pupils and not enough kids in university. My aspiration was that the school would have a place for every child, and stress values and education.

Copti is well aware of the tension, as depicted in the literature on Arab education (e.g. Abu Asbah 2001), between excellence, selectivity and values. This tension is to be resolved through parental involvement, and their sheer belief in Copti as a person and as a pedagogue. Thus, although the Orthodox Association was intent on traditional pedagogical methods and believed achievement-oriented education to be cardinal, the dominant spirit in the school was relatively liberal. This allowed Copti, together with the parents, to act as they did, underscoring the children's autonomy. Without explicitly declaring this, the Orthodox school became democratic, and parents shared in its educational work. Yet there was no lessening in the tension in the school environment, particularly that which developed between the school's staff and the Patriarchate, not long after the latter became involved.

In 2000 the school had moved to the historic site of the old Orthodox school, which the Israeli military possessed since 1948, and was returned to the Patriarchate. Soon this involvement had turned into a desire to obtain a foothold in the school.

First, the school was to be renamed after an iconic figure of the Greek Orthodoxy. Later, they asked to place a crucifix in the centre of the school. More substantially, the Patriarchate objected the head teacher herself, who was not a member of the Orthodox denomination, followed by a demand to have greater say on the curriculum. The final straw was, apparently, the proposal to make Greek language studies compulsory. The head teacher objected vehemently, saying that it was ‘an Arab school and if I introduce yet another language, making it a total of four [compulsory] languages, it will simply ... collapse. I want to work; this is an Arab community, an Arab school. And the fact that the patriarchate helps and supports us is admirable ... but I’m unwilling for it to become a patriarchate school’. Parents too were outraged by that request.

It was at this point that the Orthodox School reached its end, and a new phase has begun. The core community of the school, from the head teacher down to the parents, re-organised with *al Rabitta* to open the *Yaffa Arab Democratic School*. It was then that for the first time the school acknowledged its pedagogic character and democratic orientation. Yet, the transition was not smooth, and beyond the thrill of the re-opening its future seemed rather cloudy.⁷ At that time, Yaffa’s story begged three questions which, we believe, the idea of choice might help answering: what did initially motivate the parents to join the Orthodox and later Yaffa school? How did they retain their belief in Yaffa, even when their children’s education was at stake? And lastly, what has made the idea of a democratic school attractive? Apparently, as parents in Jaffa are facing several options other than a school whose way is new and its future is bleak, that the school survived the transition from the Orthodox school to Yaffa is remarkable. Under these circumstances, parental choice had become a critical component in Yaffa’s foundation, and it is for its explication that we now turn.

⁷ See: Appeal to the Court for Administrative Affairs ([ATM 3046/04](#)).

The meaning of choice

The parents' choice had been made apparent at two points: by joining the initiative to open the Orthodox school in 1997, and seven years later, with the move to Yaffa.

Three main factors are readily available as an explanatory framework for their choosing: Mary Copti, the head-teacher whose name had been repeatedly mentioned as the reason for their action; the parents' class characteristics, and an ideological shift in the parents' preferences. As for the first factor, one parent told us: 'we are [here] not because of Mary the woman, it's not the personal, it is the way.' Following Stone (2001: 610) we want to propose that Copti's leadership was an important factor, and her agency highly crucial in creating the opportunity for an 'out of the ordinary' act in the form of an educational change.⁸ And yet, this was not an exclusive reason for that act, just like the class factor. As we set to determine whether class was a factor, we noticed that unlike Jewish parents (Yonah 2000) or British ones (Ball and Vincent 1998), Yaffa's community is highly heterogeneous. In fact, our survey reveals that nearly half of the fathers are labourers, and about half of the families reported to be earning below the average income.⁹ This has led us to the third factor, ideology.

While it was made clear that Yaffa has not come into being out of ideological fervour, the idea of choice soon enmeshed in the ideology of the parents. As we immediately show, it was more than the anticipated middle class, individualistic liberal ideology that had taken the parents and made them enthusiastic about the opportunity to be a part of Yaffa, and to follow Copti almost blindfolded.

⁸ For Stone (2001: 611), 'civic capacity has two facets: assembling in recognition of a problem to be tackled and developing an understanding from a community-wide perspective.' In this sense, Copti's leadership was 'instrumental' in articulating the parents' 'problem' with the education system and in her societal attractiveness. As one interviewee has told us: 'everybody knows Mary. Everyone in Jaffa knows that she's a respectable woman, highly educated, knowledgeable, with ideology and values, anything that is required.'

⁹ The parent population is heterogeneous in almost any dimension. It comprises of 39 Muslims and 15 Christians and there is no dominant class characteristic: 48% of the fathers and 30% of the mothers are workers, about a third of the fathers (and a minority of the mothers) are in clerical and professional jobs, and a half of the mothers are housewives while 11.5% of the fathers declared to be unemployed.

Parental choice as an ideological change

In Israel, the phenomenon of distinctive and democratic schools is aligned with the ideological-cultural transformation expressed in the idea of parental choice. It is a change that reflects what Dahan and Yonah (1999) have described as a transition ‘from statist collectivism to civil individualism’. Accordingly, middle class parents endeavour to set up schools where they will have greater say in defining the curriculum, and where interactions within the school, are guided by liberal, market-oriented perceptions. Thus, although the Yaffa parents do not exhibit clear-cut class characteristics, it might be that they have undergone an ideological and cultural shift, and they now adopt values and ideals that are commonly identified with a post-materialist middle class. These ideas of individualism, self-fulfilment, achievement and excellence, and child-centred pedagogies form the ideological bedding for the emergence of distinctive schools in the Jewish society. We used our interviews with the parents, as well as the survey material, in order to identify these themes in the parents conceptions.

The most explicit speaker of the liberal-individualist perspective was Mr. Jabareen, a lawyer, member of the parents committee, whose child joined the Orthodox school prior to the move to Yaffa.¹⁰ Describing his search for a suitable school for his son, Mr. Jabareen revealed his preferences and choice of school:

It was important for me that my son attends a private school, because [...] he would be moving, you know, from one area in Tel Aviv to another [...] so it was important to me that the school be a private one, so I would have access [...] to the home-room teacher if there would be problems in his adjustment ... and I found ... it’s like, the best thing I found was Mary [Copti], whom I felt, I saw that she’s the real thing. And that’s exactly the whole issue. [Mary] sees the child as an independent unit. As a world in itself, as they say.

In light of their re-location from (Jewish) Tel-Aviv to (Arab) Jaffa, this family decided to forsake the comfort of a Jewish middle class environment and to return to an Arabic-speaking environment. As it shows, what caught the father’s attention, and

¹⁰ Interview with Advocate Mukhtar Jabareen, member of the parents committee (2 March 2005).

which rendered the Orthodox school unique, was Copti's pedagogic approach. In particular, it was her liberal individualistic worldview that beset him. Yet, there was something else:

At this [geographical] area [...] there are five private schools, and why's that? All of them, without exception, have a religious or ethnic origin, and are run by one ethnic group or another ... Scottish, French etc. But our school was the first, probably the first, I might be wrong, private school which is not religious or ethnic.

The Orthodox school, although being in a great proximity to the prominent private schools, was miles away in both its pedagogy and ideology. Jabareen, like many other parents (see Table 1 below) reiterated the uniqueness of Yaffa by offering a perspective which is couched in ideals of liberalism and individualism. This differentiated the school from the deteriorated state schools, as well as from the prestigious private schools, where rigid old-fashioned confrontational approaches to education were still the rule. Jabareen, again, was most eloquent in reflecting this, and also in showing the contribution of a democratic approach to the community at large:

And this is exactly democracy and liberalism - when you present the whole spectrum of opinions and culture ... if I could sum up our credo [...] I would say 'autonomy of the child', let the child decide for himself, and this is exactly what we are doing and trying to inculcate in the parents as well. We also think ... as the school's parents committee, that by involving the other parents, we can also have an impact on them. We want to influence the parents too. And *we see the school's added value specifically because of its location in Jaffa - with all the stigmas, all its problems, violence on the street, murders, you know! Drugs, etcetera.* [authors' italics].

This perspective is shared by many of the parents, but above all, it replicates in the head teacher's attitude, who sees 'the child at the centre' and parental involvement as the foundations of her pedagogy. For Copti, this pedagogy is intended to exploit the child's learning potential to the full, and therefore, she claims, excellence is not a prerequisite for admission to the school, but the outcome of her pedagogy:

We didn't set excellence as the goal, but we did set the goal [...] to raise motivation among the children, for them to learn how to be truly responsible and independent.

It is this approach that makes the parents see Yaffa as setting a different pedagogic example. Indeed, when asked what do they see in the name of the school, the most common values were 'equality' and 'liberty', couched in a liberal discourse

(see Table 1). But as the story of Yaffa suggests, the parents first came to the school and only later ‘became’ democratic in their worldview. Furthermore, beyond looking for quality education, the parents seemed to be interested in maintaining the children’s Arab identity. Jabareen, who used an explicit liberal language, repeatedly said ‘*We really wanted to emphasize something not available in other private schools in Jaffa - to emphasise Arabic as our major language, and that we have an Arab culture.*’ Similarly, when Kahawaji pointed to the ethnic motivation that underlay the Orthodox school, she too was looking at the encompassing Arabic context, and more specifically on Jaffa as an Arab city. Another mother said that for her, Arab education meant ‘to be raised without fear with an Arab identity, without looking back in fear.’ As our data show (Table 1), the values of equality and liberty are followed by a conception of local identity, which we named Jaffa-ness. Indeed, the search for Arab culture and identity is present anywhere in Yaffa, in the curriculum and in the way the Yaffa community perceive it. It is not surprising, then, that Jaffa-ness and Arab-ness are cited equally to the total of democratic values in response to our question on the meaning of the school name. These cultural values rendered the idea of democratic education meaningful in the eyes of the parents. Equally important, the school’s democratic character seemed to bear implications not only for the individual child, but also to the community as a whole. In this context, we wish, in final analysis, to return to the idea of choice and re-evaluate the motivations that underlie the foundation of Yaffa.

Table 1. What does the school’s name, *Yaffa the Arab Democratic School*, mean to you? (total number of answers to this question)

Equality / liberty	17	Parental involvement	7	Distinctive	1
Jaffa-ness	15	Freedom of expression	4	Co-existence	1
Democratic values	14	Anti-racism	3	Curriculum	0
Arabness	14	Religious equality	3		

Discussion and Conclusion

Trying to explain her choice in Yaffa school, one mother told us:

When I said democracy, I didn't mean democracy [as] the new name [Mary gave the school]. What I meant was freedom in studies, autonomy, and the feeling of freedom that [we felt] at the Orthodox school [...] But if it turns out eventually that it's a genuinely democratic school, all the better, but to my mind, it's not there yet.

This reluctance to place democracy as a prime reason or goal is telling, especially as the speaker refuses to connote the practice of freedom which she observes with the concept of democracy. Instead, this mother, echoing the voice of most parents, simply suggests that she is there for 'Mary's principles', without seeing the need to explain what those were. How, then, does this voice answer our initial quest, to explore what the idea of choice *is* for and in the periphery? How, if at all, parental choice re-shapes these citizens' *room for manoeuvre* within the Israeli citizenship? Our analysis yields that choice is neither a matter of middle class privilege, nor an ideology. Instead, we find Appadurai's concept of 'deep democracy' useful to our own understanding of how marginalised communities reach globally for new concepts and practices, spreading 'outside the direct reach of state or market regimes' (Appadurai 2001: 42). Similarly, this mother knows what is good for her child, even if she is uninterested in naming the school, as the *affiliated* would, democratic. Yet, her position, and the parents' choice as a whole, expand the meaning of democracy, in ways that call into question the ideology and practice of democratic education and neoliberal citizenship in Israel.

How, then, choice is to be understood, if it is not an individualistic value or principle? In the mother's view, it is a means to an end. To be 'genuinely democratic', is a good outcome, but not as important as sustaining that 'feeling of freedom', which she sees in the school. This takes us back to the parents' and to their act of citizenship, which is premised on the positionality of Jaffa citizens, as marginalised and unworthy. A co-chairperson of *al Rabbita* saw in Yaffa a facilitator of social change and

democracy. It is a resource of change when it becomes a means to strengthen an Arab identity that would couch their sense of belonging in the city and the state (Monterescu forthcoming). In this respect, and seeking to make this story a lesson on Arab education and on Palestinian citizenship, these parents' choice appears to be made from a position of collective imagination, or belonging (Appadurai 2000). Their act is ought to be seen as multidimensional, reflecting their resistance to their marginalised position in the Israeli society, and concomitantly, their unwillingness to be subjugated by the Orthodox Patriarchate, whose demands too contradicted their democratic educational vision. Their positionality resonated in Yaffa, as an act of intervention in their reality, and their search for an alternative one.

Yaffa parents and the educators view their act as stretching beyond the immediate environment of the school. In their eyes, this act was intended to change their place in the political, social, educational and spatial dimensions. All of these aspects were made present by the Yaffa community. As a matter of fact, by initiating Yaffa and becoming a part of an Arab democratic school, they chose to make for themselves a *room for manoeuvre* from which they would redefine their identity as Yaffoines (citizens of the city of Yaffa) and as Arabs, thus creating a new Arab educational space. Whether this choice is successful in making them a room in the larger Israeli society, is yet to be seen.

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