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Within and beyond citizenship: alternative educational initiatives in the Arab society in Israel

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In recent years, Arab-Palestinian citizens in Israel are in search of 'a new vocabulary of citizenship', among other ways, by resorting to 'alternative educational initiatives'. We investigate and compare three alternative schools, each challenging the contested conception of Israeli citizenship. Our findings reveal different educational strategies to become 'claimants of rights', yet all initiatives demonstrate the constraints Arab citizens face while trying to become 'activist citizens' (E.F. Isin, 2009. Citizenship in flux: the figure of the activist citizen. *Subjectivity*, 29 (1), 367–388.).

Keywords: Arab citizenship and education (Israel); alternative education; activist citizenship

Introduction

In recent decades, alternative schools, based mostly on parental and educationalists initiatives, have become more salient in the Israeli educational landscape, in both Arab and Jewish societies. Grounded in an ideology and practicality of parental choice, in itself a facilitator of neoliberal reforms that engulf Israeli state and society (Ram 2008), these initiatives are primarily aimed at gaining parental control over the education of their children. In the Jewish sector, this phenomenon developed against the backdrop of educational democratisation and expansion of schooling to the societal margins in the early 1970s (Swirski 1999). Allegedly, this resulted in a deterioration in public education, which urged the more affluent parents to seek refuge by turning to 'grey education' and later to be the initiators of newly quasi-private, magnet schools (Dahan and Yonah 2008). The 'parental choice revolution' was gaining momentum and eventually also penetrated 'regular' state schools, as complementary reforms disseminating from the Ministry of Education helped turning education into a commodity, characterised by notions of academic excellence, autonomy, and lifetime career orientation.

Parental choice, as recorded in a plethora of research, is a class-based phenomenon (Ball and Vincent 2007). In Israel, tuition-based magnet schools, in a country where private education is not officially recognised, have typically been associated with the Jewish urban middle class, mostly in Tel Aviv (e.g. Goldring 1991). This change, however, has not kept the rest of society at bay. As a new hegemonic model has been gradually taking its place in the society, based on the diminution of the nation-building ethos at the expense of a rising

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individualised discourse of citizenship (Shafir and Peled 2002, Filc 2004), and where public commodities were privatised en masse (e.g. Filc 2004), notions of choice were disseminating, reaching the farther parts of society. This was evident in the spawning of quasi-private schools, but more generally in the increasing number of NGOs where citizens were seeking to enact themselves as 'active citizens' (e.g. Silber and Rosenhek 1999, Payes 2003, Jamal 2008a). In lower class vicinities, as well as in the Arab society, notions of pedo-centric education, excellence, and autonomy became prevalent and were no longer seen as exclusive to the well-off (Dahan and Levy 2000, Levy and Massalha 2010). When neoliberalism became in vogue in education and in society at large (Yonah *et al.*, 2008), we sought to explore the new alternative Arab schools and to understand this phenomenon which is prevalent in the Israeli society, and yet idiosyncratic to the Arab-Palestinian society. This, we propose, would provide us with a renewed perspective on the Arab society in Israel.

Our research into Arab education (Levy and Massalha 2010) is grounded in the trailblazing research in this field, led by the works of Mar'i (1978), Al-Haj (1995), Swirski (1999), and others. These studies accounted for the history of Arab education, from its initial modernist beginnings in the late Ottoman period to contemporary aspects of an all-encompassing school system(s). In particular, they offered adequate analyses of the complexities and limitations of 'Arab education in a Jewish state'. However, the term 'Arab education' is somewhat misleading. On the administrative level, this term refers to a designated department at the Ministry of Education that caters for the educational needs of the Arab citizens. Yet, despite some institutional and minor conceptual changes over the years, since its establishment in the 1970s, the department for Arab education has remained under Jewish control and never broken the hierarchical order in the Ministry. In fact, the state has remained as reluctant as it was in the 1970s to grant the Arab community educational autonomy and room for manoeuvre in terms of either infrastructure or content (e.g. Al-Haj 1995, Levy 2005, Abu-Saad 2006, Mazawi 1998). Instead, new methods of control are being implanted, and, as a recent report indicated, the conditions of the Arab schools are still lagging far behind the Jewish ones (Ministry of Education 2005). At the same time, church-affiliated private schools, which for years have been a refuge from the low-scaled state schools, can no longer absorb the many Arab children who are trying to escape the latter. These schools are still far too expensive for some parents, whereas others see their pedagogy as outdated and inadequate for their children's need (Ichilov and Mazawi 1997, Levy and Massalha 2010).

These studies lay the foundations for an understanding of Arab education as a top-down phenomenon, and in fact they testify that the term itself lacks substantial meaning, as Arab education is neither being led independently by Arab educationalists nor reflecting Arab cultural contents when it comes to manifested Palestinian nationalism. Yet, the existing literature calls for further analysis and a refreshed perspective that extends beyond the too broad, structuralist approach that dominates it, and places Arab education as an epiphenomenon of Jewish education. We therefore aim to study Arab education in and for itself, and to place it in the context of a revised conceptualisation of citizenship. Our main interests are mapping and exploring the field of alternative Arab education, identifying patterns of continuity and change between them and existing schools, and explaining them as a phenomenon in its own sake. However, being all the more concerned with citizenship and acts of citizenship, we are equally interested in shifting the focus of attention from what the state does in education, without underestimating its importance, to the level of the city, the neighbourhood, the school, and, most significantly, the social agents themselves – the citizens. Thus, shunning the confines of the control model (Lustick 1980), which rendered the Arab citizens passive, we seek to expand on how citizens seek in the school, in the city,

and in their immediate environment ‘a room for manoeuvre’ (Gordon and Stack 2007, Isin 2007) to ameliorate their children’s future. In this respect, we propose to understand the emergence of alternative Arab schools not merely as another instance of ‘parental choice’, although this idea facilitated this change. Arguably, these schools equally tell a new story on agency and citizenship among Arab-Palestinians in Israel.

Citizenship and the Palestinian society in Israel

Arabs¹ constitute some fifth of the Israeli citizenry, and it took a while before they could materialise, albeit to a limited degree, their citizenship. Through a painstaking gradual process since the abolition of the military administration over Arab localities within the Green Line in 1966, Arabs have gained a liberal type of citizenship against a strong Jewish ethno-republican ethos (Shafir and Peled 2002). Back in the 1970s, when they sought ways to resolve their status and place themselves within the Israeli society (Peres and Yuval-Davis 1969), one may say that ‘Israeli-Arabs’ were practically struggling to become ‘active citizens’. Namely, they asked to be ‘a part of the game’ (Isin 2008) and be able to play by the rules of citizenship, of which they were deprived during the military administration (Boymal 2007, Cohen 2010). This struggle has been depicted and theorised by Peled, whose seminal work (1992) marked a new interest in the role of citizenship in reframing the discussion on socio-political relationships in Israel, and particularly, on the ‘national’ relationship between Arab and Jewish citizens.

By offering the paradigm of multiple citizenship (Shafir and Peled 2002), what Peled suggested was that the reality of Arab citizens was not solely shaped by the impasse created by them living in an ethnic ‘Jewish state’. Nor were they on the road to modernise merely by their ‘association’ to the Zionist modernist vision (Landau 1993). Instead, Peled sought to show the manoeuvring between three discourses of citizenship – republican, liberal, and ethno-national – each having its own particular effect on the Arab citizens, as a determinative of their social and political status. Particularly, it demonstrated how the Arabs’ citizenship, while being curtailed by Jewish-exclusive republican and ethno-national citizenship discourses, is partly protected and benefited by a third, liberal discourse of citizenship. This phenomenon, termed by Jamal (2007, p. 472) as the ‘liberalizing thesis’, yielded anecdotal victories to Palestinian politicians by protecting the right of individuals and parties to run for elections (Rouhana *et al.* 2005), or allowing NGOs to advocate on behalf of Palestinian citizens. In both the cases, the Israeli High Court of Justice has become pivotal in protecting the Palestinian’s citizenship rights (Saban 2004, p. 933, Saban 2008). A case in point is Adalah, *The Legal Centre for Arab Minority Rights in Israel* (see <http://www.adalah.org/eng/>), whose founding lawyers were trained in the USA tradition of liberal protection of minority rights. Since the 1990s, Adalah, maybe more than any other organisation, advocated successfully on diverse issues, such as human rights (e.g. Adalah 1998) or language rights (Saban and Amara 2002), and represented Arab individuals and organisations in numerous legal cases (e.g. Adalah 2010). Adalah was also active in struggles in the field of Arab education, as in the case of Yaffa school (Levy and Massalha 2010).

This short exposition spans a history of change. Peled’s analysis was based on the ruling of the High Court of Justice against an attempt to ban the Progressive List for Peace, a joint Arab–Jewish political party that negated the habitual, submissive forms of political representation. This ruling overturned a 1965 ruling that, in the name of ‘defending democracy’, outlawed the Socialist List (*al-Ard*) and denied it from running in election. As Peled (1992) aptly demonstrated (but see Barzilai 1999, p. 26), this had opened the legal door for Arab individuals to seek protection when the path for political deliberation was

closing. Still, this could not satisfy the need to uphold the collective rights of the Arab citizens.

One major consequence of the ruling in the case of the Progressive List was the amendment to the Basic Law: The Knesset (1985), which restricted political participation to those parties that recognise Israel a priori as a 'Jewish and democratic' state (a third component was an anti-racist clause). This mostly constrained the Arabs' political manoeuvrability (Jamal 2007) and specifically jeopardised various attempts of the Arab leadership to represent and be a voice for the Palestinians in Israel. One such an attempt was the founding of the Supreme Committee of the Mayors of Local Councils as a collective all-encompassing body, of which all governments denied formal recognition, despite continuous changes to the Arab political spectrum. At the same time that several new political parties emerged, new NGOs spawned in the Arab civil society advocating the need for collective representation and protection of cultural rights of the Palestinians (Haklai 2009). The Mossawa Centre (<http://www.mossawacenter.org/>) is an apt example, stating their belief 'in the recognition of the Arab community in Israel as a national minority without sacrificing cultural rights as Palestinians'.

In 2005–2006, the effort to impact the Israeli public debate culminated in the publication of several documents, known as 'The Vision Documents', in which several groupings sought to present their own understanding of how Israel should accommodate its largest, non-Jewish minority (Jamal 2008b, Kaufman 2010). This came at a time when, after a time of limited expansion in their citizenship rights (Peled 2007), Palestinian citizens were facing grave blows to their citizenship status, especially after the government's mishandling of the October 2000 killing of Palestinian citizens by the state police (Peled and Navot 2005, Saban 2008). A recent amendment to *The Citizenship and Entrance to Israel Act (Temporary Order 2003)*, imposing restrictions on family reunification solely targeting the Palestinians (Saban 2008, p. 627), was yet another blow. To cite Jamal (2007, p. 473), these actions render the Arabs' citizenship 'a "hollow citizenship" that is devoid of substantive cultural, economic and political meaning'. How can we account for this 'hollowing of citizenship' against what may be identified as an evolution of 'active (liberal) citizenship'? How and to what extent had the Palestinian citizens' 'room for manoeuvre' shrank, and, not less importantly, how had the dissemination of 'parental choice', as an educational and social notion, created new 'room for manoeuvre' for Palestinian citizens?

Peled's initial endeavour in the early 1990s into the multiple discourses of citizenship in Israel was celebrating the powers of the liberal discourse to alter the fortunes of the Palestinian citizens. A decade and a half later, he saw Israel moving, alongside western liberal states, towards a 'post-citizenship society' (Peled 2007). In other words, the 'room for manoeuvre' for citizenship activism, which since the emergence of the modern nation-state encourages citizens to take advantage of their leverage as citizens and act on their constituted rights and legal capacities, was closing on Israel's Palestinian citizens (Gordon and Stack 2007, p. 121, Isin 2007). It is against this backdrop that the very concept of 'citizenship activism' turned to be limited in its capacity, first, in describing what counts as actions of citizenship, and second, in prescribing acts of citizenship (Isin 2009).

In 'Acts of citizenship' (Isin and Nielsen 2008), the proliferation of new 'ways of being or becoming a citizen' has been a trigger for a renewed attempt to understand what citizenship is and who is a citizen by shifting the focus of observation and analysis from the doer (the citizen) to the deed (the citizenship act). Thus, it was proposed that:

to investigate citizenship in a way that is irreducible to either status or practices, [...] requires a focus on those acts when, regardless of status or substance, subjects constitute themselves as

citizens or, better still, as those to whom the right to have rights is due. (Isin and Nielsen 2008, p. 2)

The doers, or actors, need to be measured by their deeds that are thought of as creative acts in as much as they ‘destabilize the bonds of habitual activity’ (White 2008, p. 52). It is, then, the forsaking of ‘old’ sites, scales, and acts that constitute ‘the habits of citizenship’ (White 2008, p. 55), and the emergence of new ones that allow actors a ‘claim to transform themselves (and others) from subjects into citizens as claimants of rights’ (Isin 2009, p. 368). In this sense, activist citizens are different than active citizens. The latter perform their citizenship within the habitus of a typical modern nation-state that encourages citizens to act, but still, to enact an existing script (Isin 2009, p. 383). Activist citizens, in contrast, seek to ‘break the habitus and act in a way that disrupts already defined orders, practices and statuses’, and thus *be citizens* (Isin 2009, p. 384). The notion of ‘parental choice’, as we show here, was offering a new script for acts of citizenship, yet it did so differently for the various citizens who became involved in educational entrepreneurship. The three case studies that we present below, after pausing on the methodological aspects of the study, tell the stories of these acts of citizenship and the conceptions of citizenship that they yielded.

Methodology

Our study encompasses three alternative schools and is based on multifarious research methods. Each school is differently located, not geographically, but in its place within the social and educational context. The Arab democratic school, Yaffa, is located in the city of Jaffa, now a part of Tel Aviv, and a metropolitan Arab-Palestinian centre in the early twentieth century. Jaffa is now characterised by high poverty rates and a deteriorated urban structure (experiencing powerful forces of gentrification, e.g. Monterescu 2009). Our research was conducted in 2004–2005, when the school was opened against a refusal by both state and municipal agencies to recognise it. On the basis of in-depth interviews, focus-group interview, and a comprehensive survey among Yaffa’s parents’ community, we sought to explore the motivations that kept the parents going against the tide (Levy and Massalha 2010). The other two schools are located in a large urban-like Arab village (circa 15,000 residents), in The Triangle (a concentration of Arab localities in the country’s centre). We entered The Elementary Democratic Community School in 2007 to study what we later identified as ‘a transformation from within’. Under the leadership of a new head teacher, this non-selective state school was becoming ‘democratic’. The main challenge was to mobilise both parents and teachers to adhere to his idea of ‘democratisation’. The third school, *Madrasat al-Nhadha al-Arabia – Deritna*, is an intermediate school that was opened in 2009 by a group of Arab parents from the local bilingual Arab–Jewish elementary school. The school was first opened with a contribution from a local philanthropist, but after one year, it was taken over by a private, state-recognised school chain *Atid*. We witnessed this change as it was happening. In the latter two schools, we carried out semi-structured interviews (partly with the help of a research assistant) with educators and parents from whom we asked to learn on the motivations to overcome the challenges of educational entrepreneurship in the Arab society in Israel. We analysed the texts of the interviews as well as the results of the survey, searching for overarching ideas and themes that reflect the interviewees’ conceptions and notions of education, pedagogy, citizenship, nationalism, etc.

Three ways of being citizens: parental choice and acts of citizenship

It would be politically and historically unjust to understand the emergence of the recent educational initiatives as reflecting a shift from social and political passivity to activism.

Indeed, we are focusing on acts that demonstrate and symbolise a qualitative change, which is a part of the dissemination of entrepreneurship in education, motivated by the idea of parental choice, as well as by the evolution of the Arab society itself (as briefly depicted above). Still, education has always been an arena of struggle and resistance, even when the circumstances were substantially different (e.g. Al-Haj 1995, Abu-Saad 2006, Mazawi 1994). However, the struggle for citizenship in education was facilitated by the 1970s reform in Arab education that attested to a change, limited as it was, in the state's conception of the Arabs as citizens (Levy 2005). It was this symbolic change that allowed, we argue, the surfacing of several, local initiatives of alternative schools since the 1990s, which we set to examine as a sign of a qualitative change in the relation between education and citizenship. It is to the examination of this change that we now turn to.

Yaffa: an Arab Democratic School

The Arab Democratic School is named after the city of Yaffa (Jaffa in English). Known in the Arab-Palestinian memory as the Bride of Palestine, Yaffa has turned after its annexation to Tel Aviv – the 'First Hebrew City' in the Zionist collective memory – into a dilapidated neighbourhood, populated by a minority of Arabs. The Jewish majority in Yaffa has been achieved by waves of Jewish immigration of mostly poor citizens, and more recently by becoming an attraction for Jewish 'jentrifiers' (Monterescu 2009). This latter development all the more accentuated the long-existing socio-economic gaps between Arabs and Jews, and especially, the limited opportunities for development and growth for the Arabs themselves. In 1997, Arab parents, striving for change, organised with political activists to open the (Greek) Orthodox School that would, they hoped, curb the further deterioration of Arab education in the city and give their children the opportunities they would not have in either the public or church schools. This school introduced new methods of teaching and created a new partnership between educators, pupils, and parents, based on the ideals of pedo-centric education and individual autonomy. However, when the Greek Orthodox patriarchate sought greater influence in the school, this initiative came to an end, and the parents joined forces with the school head teacher and local social activists to reopen the school under a new guise. At that time, both the municipality and the Ministry of Education opposed the new initiative that de facto challenged their own educational institutions. When we entered the school in 2004, it ran under a judicial restraint order (Levy and Massalha 2010). We asked why would these parents consent to this situation and risk their children's future by sending them to an illegal school?

In search for an answer we were, at first, guided by the idea of 'parental choice'. Living in a neoliberal time, we thought, had made Arab parents interested in providing their children with 'good education', that is an education that is compatible with the needs of a market economy and society. However, as we delved into the story of Yaffa, identifying its roots in an initiative to open an ethnically affiliated Orthodox school, it turned out that the term 'good education' encapsulated more than one meaning. For one, good education meant what it is, a higher level of learning than is available at state schools, and one which is not as alienating as that offered at church-affiliated schools. Thus, many parents opted not to take the latter path, not for failing to meet the cost or finding a place. These parents abandoned this option because for them 'good education' was the opportunity to offer their children 'good Arab education', that is, stronger emphasis on Arab language and Arabic culture, which is lacking in other schools. Furthermore, what the parents saw in this school and made their act unique was the way in which Yaffa, the school, has become in their eyes, a symbol of Yaffa the city, the Arab-Palestinian city. In other words, 'good education' was

also about making the children proud of being 'citizens of Yaffa'. Indeed, the parents who dared and became a part of the Yaffa school community, despite the risk of having the school closed down, were not necessarily interested in it being designated 'democratic', or even in its pedagogy. By identifying the school with the history of their city Yaffa, and by tying the pedagogy and the learning into their sense of Arabness, these parents were striving to move beyond the script that is imposed on Arab citizens by the state. In so doing, they also instilled a new meaning in the relationship between education and politics that sought to redefine the boundaries and contents of citizenship.

Kufur Qari elementary democratic community school

The *Kufur Qari* elementary school is a state school whose history goes back to the early years of the twentieth century, long before there was a state. For most of its history, this school was no different than any other school within the Arab system, suffering from a failing infrastructure and constant lack of resources. This has changed however when a new head teacher was appointed in 1993. Motivated by innovative ideas of 'democratic education', the head teacher sought to transform the school from within and bring about a change that would affect the children's life at school and beyond. To do this, he needed to mobilise the school's community, and primarily the parents and the teachers.

The conception of 'democratic education' was crystallised in the head teacher's mind already in the 1980s. When serving in various roles in the education system, he became associated with Yaacov Hecht, an educator known as the founder of the 'democratic schools' in Israel, and head of The Institute for Democratic Education (<http://www.democratic.co.il/en/>). 'I loved the idea of a democratic school', the head teacher told us, 'I thought then and still think today that democratic education is capable of curing many of the Arab schools and the illnesses and weaknesses of education, such as dropout, poor educational achievements and a low self image'. Once he arrived at the *Kufur Qari* elementary school, he was determined, 'to make a substantial change and lead the school towards a new educational horizon'.

Implementing this 'freak idea', as he calls it, put him in direct confrontation with mostly the senior teachers who still held on to 'traditional patterns of thinking'. To overcome this and other obstacles, the head teacher had adapted 'incremental tactics'. Alluding to the condition of under-budgeted infrastructure in Arab localities, he first proposed to renovate the school building and make it, to use his words, 'fit to be a school' (compare Brown 2003). A physical, environmental change would strengthen the teachers', and not only the students', sense of belonging, which will eventually increase their willingness to accept the change. On completing the renovation of the school, the next step was redefining the school as a 'community school', and later as a democratic school. To make this happen, the head teacher had to recruit support from yet another group.

The most innovative step in the way to democratising the school was the appeal to the school's mothers, with whom he hoped to form a 'democratically chosen' mothers' council. This he deemed necessary because it's the mothers who spend most of the time with the children, and they ought to be the agents of change. The mothers underwent special programme and activities exposing them to the democratic process in education. Following the success of these two steps, mobilising the teachers and the mothers, the head teacher turned to the next step of organising a 'democratic students' council'. This council was to be given the authority to undertake decisions on matters concerning the educational process, codes of behaviour in the school, and informal activities.

Currently, the school's name has been changed to *The elementary democratic community school*. Teachers and parents whom we interviewed confirmed that the change was timely, and addressed a real need to create a better accommodating learning environment. Still, neither they nor the head teacher seemed to see this change in terms of a profound political change. Rather, in their eyes this *transformation from within* is an advancement in the right direction, incrementally contributing to a better future for Arabs in Israeli society. To end with the head teacher's word:

if [the student] reaches life with all, or even part, of the values I had given him, he will be a good citizen [...] he will believe in democracy, equality and human values and will hold on to the tools and knowledge we gave him.

Deritna: Al Nahda Al-Arabia school

The idea to establish a new post-elementary school in *Kufur Qari* came from a small group of Arab parents whose children were about to graduate from the bilingual Arab–Hebrew elementary school 'Bridge Over the Wadi'.² This was a necessity when these parents realised that the elementary school will not extend to the intermediate level, and that the Jewish parents are going to enrol their children to other Jewish schools. For these parents, sending their children back to state schools was not considered an option. Hence, founding a new independently run school became their only way to continue the educational and the social spirit that was built in the bilingual school. In 2009, a new intermediate school was opened in a temporary location,³ under the leadership of parents who became dedicated, physically and emotionally, to the mission. Soon after, with the help of a financial contribution from one parent, the school moved to a permanent residence on this parent privately owned land.

The ideal educational environment that the parents envisaged was of an alternative school that places the child at 'the centre of the educational process', in a relatively non-hierarchical educational space, and infused with extra-curricular programmes. The latter, according to the parents, would act upon and promote the political and social identities of the school's larger community. Thus, the informal curriculum endorsed and reflected, experientially and symbolically, a national Arab-Palestinian identity. Many of the obstacles down the road were seen at this point as easy to overcome.

There are two major obstacles that acts to establish new schools 'from below' usually face. The first, and the hardest, obstacle is obtaining formal approval from the local municipality and the Ministry of Education. The licensing process, that includes not only an examination of the physical conditions but also questioning the need for the school in the specific environment, is prolonged once the initiators present the school as 'alternative'. To overcome this obstacle, the elementary bilingual school took upon itself to sponsor the new school through its initial stages. The other major obstacle, which is also not unique to this school despite its more local character, relates to the hard-line opposition within the local educational arena. Apparently, the strongest opposition comes from local head teachers and educators, who fear of the new competition. Backed up by the local education department, these head teachers argued against the new school that it will attract the educationally and economically strongest students, leaving them with mediocre and the weakest students. The new school's response to this was opening it up to registration from students from the larger vicinity, and by defining it a non-selective school.

The new school started off in a temporary residence, and was run by parents, one acting as the head teacher and others occupying various roles, mainly in offering co-curricular activities. The latter included regular teaching on the Palestinian history and, most significantly, routine excursions to the ruins of the Arab villages which were

evacuated and demolished by Zionist paramilitary groups during the 1948 War and later by the forces of the military administration. This has made the school unique, obviously within the context of the official curriculum, which still avoids teaching the Palestinian national perspective (e.g. Podeh 2002). However, it would also single the school out in the Arab educational arena, where schools or teachers refrain from confronting these 'sensitive' issues heads on, even unofficially (Abu-Asbah 2007).

Towards the end of its first year, the school was facing several complications that eventually brought the original act to an end. Growing pressure from the local municipality, combined with internal conflicts between 'local' and 'outsider' parents, the latter being over-represented in the founding group, resulted in a change in ownership of the school. It is, however, still early to judge whether the change in ownership (it is now operating under a for-profit private school chain, *Atid* – literally, future) would determine the fate of the initial initiative. Yet, unlike the mandate that the entrepreneurs took upon themselves to offer their children a better future by exposing them to their own national history, the *Atid* schools are known for their focus on excellence and scholarly achievements. It is still left to be seen whether the attempt to extend the teaching of the Palestinian history and to rewrite the script that underscores the collective memory, of Arab and Jewish Israelis alike, would survive this change.

Discussion and conclusion

What does each of the three cases, or acts, tell us about Arab education at large, and about the interplay between education and citizenship in the context of Arab–Jewish relationships in Israel? What can we learn about the enactment of citizenship in this context, and particularly, as a prism to understand how Palestinian citizens face the 'hollowing' of their citizenship, and rewrite the neoliberal citizenship script of the state? In this final analysis, we reiterate briefly what we see as the meaning of each act, and conclude by returning to the concepts of activist and active citizenship.

Going back to these stories, the short-lived and most recent initiative of Deritna school is probably also the most intriguing one. In terms of its ideological goals, which, not incidentally, were rarely spelled out throughout the interviews, Deritna may be considered the most radical initiative of the three. By making the history of the 1948 war and the expulsion of the Arabs from their land as main reference points, this initiative defies the state's reluctance to even name this event by its common Arab-Palestinian name, the Nakbeh (literally, the catastrophe). Only recently, the head of the pedagogical secretariat (the highest pedagogical authority under the Minister of Education) vetoed the use of a new textbook, which simultaneously exposes the students to both Israeli and Palestinian narratives on the conflict (Kashti 2010). Co-written by Palestinian and Israeli historians, this book's pedagogical innovation is that it offers the students the opportunity to 'write their own history'. Being banned in a Jewish school makes it implausible that this book would have been approved for teaching in Arab schools. Controlling the Arab schools' curriculum has been one consistent feature of a persistently highly centralized system, as is clearly evident in excluding from the history curriculum the study of the Palestinians people's heritage (Bar-Tal and Rosen 2009). In this context, the founders of Deritna school were aiming not simply at providing 'quality education', although this has been one major concern, but they were all the more interested in reshaping the students' perception and memory of their national history. In this sense, the school's agenda confronted basic presuppositions of the social order, as it undermined hegemonic Zionist conceptions regarding the roots and meaning of the Israel–Palestinian conflict.

A similar, though not identical, perspective was offered by the head teacher, parents, and the political activists who established the Arab Democratic School of Yaffa. While being aware of and concerned by the condition of being 'Arabs in a Jewish state', they were no longer willing to rely on the state for resolving the deterioration of Arab education. Their refusal to act within the bounds of the extant 'rules of the game' was evident in the two axes along which one can decipher their acts. On the educational and scholastic axis, the parents' move was meant to circumvent the failing state schools and provide their children with quality education that, consonant with the spirit of the time, will open doors for decent and dignified employment. On the political axis, the founders of Yaffa, and in practice the school community at large, were redefining their place in the broadest meaning of the term. Not only did they build the school as a place for their children, but also where they would be respected and offered what a child deserves, namely quality education. They were also making for them a place by reinstating the glory of Yaffa (LeVine 2004, Monterescu 2009). This was not done in a necessarily nostalgic way, but rather by rediscovering the city's history and telling it to the students in different methods, inside and outside the classroom. By reclaiming their identity as *Yaffo-ins* (citizens of Yaffa), that is 'beneath' the state's hegemonic identity, these parents and political activists expressed a disillusionment with the state, but concomitantly, a belief in Yaffa which delivered a message of autonomy and agency that was bound to give their children a sense of pride in being Arabs.

The last story, the odd one out, is that of *The elementary democratic community* school in *Kufur Qari*, which was originally a state school and later transformed itself into a democratic school. The term democratic needs some qualifications. Like its counterparts in the Israeli non-official arena, most of them inspired by the Institute for Democratic Education (see above), this school too adheres to a belief in child-centred pedagogy and in allowing the students to have their own voice. In this context, democracy is understood primarily as a procedural negotiation between seemingly equal parties – namely staff, parents, and students. This indeed reflects an expectation from the children to be autonomous citizens capable of making a choice. Still, their choice is to be made within an orderly structure. Similarly, in this view the state too needs to be 're-educated' and learn to respect its Arab citizens as equals. In other words, what the school offers is a call to the state to become an improved liberal state, and for the Arab citizens themselves to be its 'good citizens'.⁴

We began this endeavour by proposing to see these various educational initiatives as acts of citizenship, which also reflect the opening of a new room for manoeuvre for Arabs citizens to become claimants of rights. What we observed in these schools had less to do with the structure of citizenship, or what might be seen as 'citizenship from above', but with what citizens and non-citizens do with citizenship. Following the agenda of 'Acts of citizenship', we focused on the deeds – the educational choices and initiatives – rather than on re-characterising the doers as, say, second-class citizens. This allowed us to explore what do these various actors, or social agents, do given the constraints on their legal and symbolic citizenship, being 'Arabs in a Jewish state'. In this vein, we wrap up our argument by elaborating on the politics of citizenship and on the distinction between active and activist citizens in neoliberal times.

Education in recent years seems to regain salience, mainly through the consolidation of what Apple (2009, p. 88) has termed 'conservative modernisation'. Accordingly, refocusing on educational reforms, and indeed by resonating to what people need, a right-leaning coalition of neo-conservative, neoliberal, traditionalist, and managerial middle-class elites had won not only education, but also a wider cultural struggle over identities. This 'revolution' has not escaped the Israeli society, both Arab and Jewish. Partly, what we describe here is an effect of this agitation in the field of education, and in fact evidence

that making education a means of change is not one way. As the state rewrites its own script, presenting itself as both 'strong' and 'weak' in terms of its capacity to address the citizenry's needs (Yonah *et al.*, 2008), citizens themselves act to write a script of their own making.

When coming to evaluate these acts in terms of what White (2008) saw as creative acts of citizenship, we find divergence in how these stories may be interpreted. We believe that these acts are illuminating as they demonstrate how *prima facie* citizens (again, Arabs in a Jewish state) act 'beyond the habitual' and seek to make a change where the state seeks to retain its hegemony, namely in the educational arena. However, each deed attests to different ways of countering the hegemony, either by being 'active citizens', as is the case with the elementary democratic community school, or by becoming 'activists citizens, as exemplified in the other two cases. Thus, the democratic *transformation from within* was, by and large, directed at constituting the *Kufur Qari* elementary school's students as active citizens within an orderly *Jewish and democratic* state. Conversely, both Yaffa and Deritna schools demonstrated a more challenging approach of being *activists* in seeking to extend and expand the limits of citizenship.

In a final note, these acts of citizenship were conducted in the field of education, where they were facilitated by the notion of 'parental choice'. This idea that prevails in these neoliberal times has opened new opportunities for citizens around the world, beyond being instrumental in relegating education to the competitive market. While running the risk of deepening social inequalities, this idea also furnished the disadvantaged with a new leverage to question neoliberal policies, or the least, to challenge the exclusive power of the state to determine the goals and structures of education (e.g. Gandin and Apple 2002). In this sense, what we observed in the Arab-Palestinian society may be no different than the choice exemplified by any other 'bottom-up' initiative across society. Yet, they differ, as we hope to have shown, by rendering 'choice' secondary to their challenging of the ethnocentric conception of Israeli citizenship and the attempts to make education a way of 'being citizens'.

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Notes

1. Our study is confined within the borders of the Green Line, which means that we are interested in the Arab-Palestinian society within the state of Israel (excluding the Palestinians under the control of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip). While terminology matters, we shall be using the terms Arabs and Palestinians (or Palestinian citizens) interchangeably, as is also common in the daily language in Israeli society.
2. The school's name translates into the School of Arabic Reawakening, and it is named after a Palestinian school that operated in early twentieth-century Palestine.
3. After some pressure, the local municipality agreed to lend them the community centre. Nonetheless, two weeks later, a representative of the municipality, accompanied by police, ordered the school to shut its gates. This did not discourage the initiators, who found alternative places, but did threaten to turn other parents against the school for its destabilised beginning.
4. This conception resembles what sociologist Smooha (1990) identifies as an improved ethnic democracy. In this model, Israelis should aspire to amend the imperfect democracy that prevails in Israel, yet not expect to change its major feature, namely being dominated by an ethnic Jewish majority.

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