

Number of Arab Teachers in Jewish Schools on the Rise

Arab teachers in Jewish schools up from 465 in 2013 to 805 today, but this is still a minuscule number

[Shira Kadari-Ovadia](#) [Send me email alerts](#)

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An Arab teacher at 'Atid' school in Kfar Yona. Tomer Appelbaum

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Thirteen years ago Ronit Rubanenko spent a lot of time looking for an Arabic-language teacher, in vain. “I went to my supervisor,” says the founder and former principal of the junior high school in Kadima, in the Sharon region. “She said, ‘I have a teacher I can recommend, but she’s Arab.’ I said, ‘She knows Arabic: What’s the problem?’”

More Arab teachers followed. Ultimately, of about 35 teachers in the junior high, seven were [Arabs](#).

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“When the first teacher started teaching Arabic at school, there was a practical approach: I need an Arabic teacher, so we’ll take her because she’s a good teacher,” recalls Rubanenko. “Every day at school begins with 10 minutes of current events. It was the period of the High Holy Days, and we spoke about the festivals.

“Suddenly I saw the teacher and I thought to myself: What is she thinking now? What does she know about us and what do we know about her? I invited her to speak to the pupils about Ramadan. For me that was the beginning of a genuine connection.”

Over the years, what could have been explained as a convenient solution has turned into the increasing integration of Arab teachers in Jewish schools. According to [Education Ministry](#) figures, 465 Arab teachers taught in Jewish schools in 2013 and the number has kept rising: 529 in 2014 and 805 in 2018. Although that figure is 868 today, this is still a minuscule number. Israel’s school system employs about 179,000 teachers, and the vast majority teach at schools in their same ethnic and religious communities.



During the last academic year some 269 Jewish educators – most of them teaching Hebrew – worked in Arab schools; this year that number rose to 350. Emil Salman

The trend of hiring Arab teachers is not rooted in a pro-coexistence worldview, but began as a solution to an urgent problem. Every year, thousands of Arab graduates of teacher training institutes are unable to find work: Reports are that some 11,000 of them, mostly from northern Israel, wait for years for a position in schools in their communities. On the other hand, at Jewish schools there is a shortage of teachers for subjects such as math, science and English.

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In 2013, [the Education Ministry](#), together with the nonprofit Merchavim Institute for the Advancement of Shared Citizenship, launched a program with an annual budget of 1 million shekels (\$277,000) to match Arab teachers with Jewish schools. Principals who hire an Arab teacher receive additional teaching hours during the employee's first year as well as extra funding. The ministry says the goal is to find outstanding Arab teachers; its explanations are pragmatic, and barely mention a desire to break down barriers.

Merchavim and ministry staff interview the teachers, check their Hebrew fluency and help them with the hiring process.

“If an Arab teacher fails, they’ll think it’s because she’s Arab,” says Kamal Aggbriyah, head of Arab Teacher Integration at Merchavim. “But as soon as it succeeds, it opens the door for additional teachers. In 90 percent of cases, the principal will ask if the teacher has friends who are looking for work.”

It would seem that given the laws of supply and demand, there should be no need for a special project. But sometimes an intermediary is needed.

“Only last week,” says Aggbriyah, “I interviewed an Arab candidate who had interviewed independently at a Jewish school. In the initial phone conversation the vice principal was very enthusiastic, but when the candidate walked in wearing a hijab, she told her the position was no longer available.”

There are problems on both sides of the process. “We check that the [Arab] teachers have support from their family for the move,” says Aggbriyah: Teaching in a Jewish school means leaving the village and can involve a long commute. The support of the family is necessary, and cannot be taken for granted. Of course, it’s also impossible in this context to avoid talking about the elephant in the room: prejudice, fear and even racism.

Aggbriyah: “We prepare the teachers for questions and situations that are likely to come up with the students. For example, there could be a student who says something like ‘Arab terrorist.’ We live in a country where every two hours there’s another newsworthy incident, and during periods when there’s a difficult security situation the tension is palpable. Students sometimes ask tough questions and direct them toward the teacher, who is often the only Arab they know.”

And in fact, the tough questions come up very soon. “In one of my lessons the students opened up and began asking questions that they wouldn’t dare ask anyone else,” says Yasin Barhom, a devout Muslim who teaches conversational Arabic at the Amit Nachshon yeshiva high school near Beit Shemesh. “For example, they asked about murder in the name of family honor in Arab society, and about marriage to more than one woman. Their questions reflect what they hear in the media, in

their surroundings, in schools. I give them confidence to ask whatever comes to mind.”

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Even talk about the security situation doesn't remain outside the classroom. Barhom, who teaches most of the time at an Arab school outside [Jerusalem](#), says that one of his Jewish students claimed that the Islamic religion encourages violence against Jews. His reply: “There's no connection between religion and terror attacks; violence comes from hatred and racism and religion is only an excuse. I reminded them that even the Bible can be interpreted in an extremist manner, as in the case of [the late Rabbi Meir] [Kahane](#) and [Israeli politician Baruch] Marzel.”

Today, about half the Arab teachers in Jewish schools teach mathematics, English and science. About one-quarter teach Arabic, and the rest are divided among additional subjects including art and physical education. This is a new development: Until recent years, most of the Arab teachers in Jewish schools taught Arabic.

In the guidebook for Arab teachers working in Jewish schools that was published a few years ago by the Education Ministry and Merchavim, the approach is very practical, deliberately avoiding possible mine fields. “Focus on the points of similarity and the common denominators that create a sense of identification (like children and problems children have), feelings and emotions, fears, things that make you happy and so on,” says the book. “After all, it's easier to connect to things that are shared.”

Regarding Memorial Day, the booklet says: “Act according to the principles of prudent conduct: Try to fit in, respect the other, refrain from infuriating and insensitive remarks. Contain the situation, turn to the principal if you are insulted, and remember that after difficult days emotions subside and becomes easier.”

“There's no need to keep looking for what divides us,” says one of the teachers interviewed here.

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The story of integration of Arab teachers shows how the need to deal with a practical problem can lead to a more profound change. An assessment of Merchavim's efforts, published last summer, found that Jewish students who studied with an Arab teacher identified less with statements like "All Arabs are enemies" or "Islam is a dangerous religion," compared to students in a control group.

The students who had experience with Arab teachers also responded more positively than the others to statements like, "I want to meet Arab teens of my age." The study also showed that the teachers themselves perceive their very presence at school as bringing about a positive change in students' opinions.

Aggbriyah says teachers who go on to teach in Arab schools are part of the cycle of change. "A teacher who has taught for years in a Jewish school has absorbed a different type of learning culture, which she can transfer to the school in her community." However, in many cases, he adds, the teachers prefer to stay put: "In the Jewish schools they feel that they have an added value, that they can offer something unique. That's worth the trip."

There is some evidence of a trend in the opposite direction, but on a small scale: During the last academic year some 269 Jewish educators – most of them teaching Hebrew – worked in Arab schools; this year that number rose to 350. The Education Ministry is currently launching a new program that aims to increase that figure to 500 teachers, in three years.

A 2016 Education Ministry initiative called "Hebrew on the Continuum" determined that of the five weekly hours of Hebrew lessons offered in Arab schools, two hours would be devoted to the spoken language. The impetus for this is the ministry's realization that the younger generation of Israeli Arabs speak less Hebrew than their parents: Indeed, in the era of the internet where there is unlimited access to information and entertainment in both Arabic and English, that language apparently seems less essential.



Shira Kadari-Ovadia
Haaretz Contributor