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Progressive education and the case of a bilingual Palestinian-Arab and Jewish co-existence school in Israel

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to exemplify a ‘grass-roots’ change based on Dewey’s experimental progressive education model employed in the ‘Bridge over the Valley’ bilingual school, a Palestinian-Arab and Jewish school in Israel. In order to identify the progressive ‘approach’ underlying this change, the ‘method’ that guided the implementation of a bilingual school, its evaluation and then its dissemination to other schools, we used a qualitative case study method to understand whether John Dewey’s theory of education for peace was able to effect change in Palestinian-Arab and Jewish school education in Israel. The case findings describes the use of the progressive approach of education for peace in the ‘Bridge over the Valley’ bilingual school, as it is expressed in the school’s pedagogy, the implementation of the progressive method and in the accompanying discourse. Reciprocal teacher–child relations are considered an important factor to create fertile conditions for learning. The case findings contribute to our introduction of democratic education in a spatial reality. Underlying this approach stood a pedagogical method and conceptualization for conflict resolution and the opening of a space for empowering dialog for co-existence.

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Introduction

Policy-makers, educational researchers and the public all agree that the world’s education systems are in a state of crisis due to a list of socio-economic variables. This crisis has engendered two patterns of change, well-documented in the literature on education from the end of the nineteenth century: the first – change of the entire education system in the form of a top-down ‘reform’. The second, is a second order change aimed at changing the basic structure of the individual school unit, a ‘grass-roots’ change based on empirical experimentation, or what was dubbed by John Dewey as the ‘experimental’ or the ‘lab’ school. Each experimental school is an innovative school, which is constantly maintained.
observed and systematically and scientifically assessed (Chen 2006; Schutz 2001).

Many scholars have tried to construct a typology of educational philosophy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Dewey [1902]1990; Lipman 1991). Characteristic streams of educational theory in the last century, include the ‘old’ classical stream that focused on delivering a pre-determined learning programme, in contrast to the ‘progressive’ stream that changed the focus and suggested a transition from the ‘demand model’ to the ‘support model’, focusing on the child as the centre of activity around which the education system revolves and evolves (Wood and Deprez 2015). In his book, The School and Society (Dewey [1902]1990), John Dewey envisaged a progressive model of education that would foster the individual’s own expression, within the boundaries of external discipline, learning through free action and experience and striving for maximal realisation of life opportunities in the present, while recognising that this is a dynamic changing world (Dewey [1938]1997, 17–20).

The theory underlying Dewey’s progressive pedagogy and pedagogical practice sees the school as an organisation structured through its daily discourse and class interaction. This theory has been examined by many research studies in different world states (Bekerman 2015; Gatto 2002; Harpaz and Lefstein 2000; Lipman 1991), however, there are few studies that relate to the influence of progressive theory on the Palestinian-Arab education system in Israel, a system subordinate to the hegemonic Jewish majority discourse (Arar 2012; Levi and Masalha 2012).

Two societies exist within the State of Israel: Jewish society that dominates and Palestinian-Arab society that is dominated by the Jewish hegemony, and lives at fluctuating levels of friction with the majority society. One implication of this friction is that Palestinians and Jews largely inhabit two separate spaces, with separate education systems. The dominated Palestinian-Arab education system draws substantial criticism (Arar 2012). The Jewish education system is itself fractionalised and sectarian (Gibton 2011), although it is considered more satisfactory. Yet, dissatisfaction with both education systems has led to the growth of experimental schools in Israel, including the establishment of ‘Democratic’ schools (Bekerman 2015). We would like to illustrate this model of education here with a description of an experimental bilingual school that was established to build a bridge for discourse under the shadow of the conflict between the two national groups by offering a space for shared dialogue (Bekerman 2015; Howlett 2008; Schutz 2001)

During the years between the two world wars, Dewey examined ways in which education for peace, as opposed to traditional patriotic indoctrination, could become an effective instrument to advance global understanding. He believed that the study of geography and history could enable students to reconstruct the past in order to cope with the present (Dewey [1938]1997, 725). In geography, for instance, he applied his child-centred concepts and his
The concept of ‘schools as community’ to develop more detailed investigation of people and their societies. Tying the notion of peace to global awareness required new ways of teaching geography (Dewey [1938]1997, 725–728). Dewey believed that geography should be taught as ‘the environment entering into the life of man and the life of man as modifying the environment’ (28). Dewey indicated that each subject should be taught in relation to the present, yet with consideration of historical social concerns so that students could understand its contemporary meaning (Fallace 2011).

The present study aims to describe the challenge posed to the Palestinian-Arab education system in Israel by the concept of a ‘bilingual’ lab-school for co-existence and peace education, driven by constructive pedagogic discourse in the spirit of Dewey’s progressive pedagogy. More specifically, the paper attempts to respond to the following research questions: (1) To what extent is progressive pedagogy expressed in the studied school? (2) Which challenges does the school face in the implementation of a progressive pedagogy for co-existence and peace? (3) What influence does the progressive approach have on the development of the studied experimental school in response to the criticism of traditional-state education?

In order to identify the way in which the progressive approach is expressed in the experimental bilingual school, we used a qualitative methodology. Employing a case study, we aimed to reach deep insights concerning the progressive theory that guided the experiment of the bilingual school. We aimed to use this case study to understand whether John Dewey’s theory of education for peace was able to effect change in Palestinian-Arab and Jewish school education in Israel.

Setting the context: the Israeli education system

Both the Jewish and Palestinian-Arab societies in Israel contain multiple religious sects and sub-cultures. Rough characterisations see Palestinian-Arab society as mainly a traditional-patriarchal, less egalitarian culture, characterised by a collectivist culture (Abu-Baker 2012), while Jewish society is mainly seen as a more individualist and egalitarian culture (Sagie et al. 2005). Palestinian-Arab citizens do not enjoy full equal civilian rights and face obstacles in attaining access to public resources. Politically underrepresented in government, Palestinians also have difficulties integrating within Israel’s employment market. Consequently, 53% of the Palestinian-Arab population in Israel lives below the poverty line (Ben-David 2014; Gara 2013).

In 2014, the indigenous Palestinian-Arab minority of Israel numbered 1,694,000 persons (including 82.1% Muslims, 9.4% Christians and 8.4% Druze) (Central Bureau of Statistics 2014), representing 20.7% of the country’s population. This minority population contends with a constant identity conflict as citizens of a state officially defined as a Jewish state. Most the Arabs in Israel identify themselves as Palestinians, yet they are citizens of a country that is in conflict
with the Palestinian-Arab people in neighbouring states. Thus, the collective identity of the Palestinian-Arab community in Israel comprises several elements: citizenship (Israeli), nationality (Palestinian), ethnicity (Arab) and religion (Islamic or Christian or Druze). Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel see their identity as comprised primarily as a mix or delicate balance between these elements, or as one identity displacing another. This ongoing identity crisis alters with changing circumstances (Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004).

Education in Israel is segregated, with separate education systems for religious and secular Jewish children and for Palestinian-Arab children, while each sector includes both state and non-state schools. The language of studies for Jewish children is Hebrew, and for Palestinian-Arab children, Arabic. Because of the segregation, the likelihood of encounters between Jewish and Palestinian-Arab children is very low (Gibton 2011; Sbirsky and Degan-Bouzaglo 2009). Therefore, historically, schools that are segregated by nationality, religion or ethnicity are in the norm. An alternative educational model in conflict-ridden areas is integrated schools in which children who are customarily educated separately are deliberately educated together (Bekerman 2015).

Palestinian-Arab education is subordinate to government control of organisational structure (Arar and Abu-Asbah 2013). The curriculum (content) of state schools is 80% state-mandated. Government-dictated content in the standard learning programmes almost completely ignores the narratives of the Palestinian nation and the Palestinians living in Israel.

Despite a steady increase in the proportions of young people studying in Palestinian-Arab schools in Israel since 1948, lower budgets for Palestinian-Arab schools appear to affect outputs, so that Palestinian-Arab students have lower achievements. Balas and Adler (2009) noted the larger amount of lesson hours assigned to Jewish schools, a far larger proportion of Jews studying 13 years or more, a decrease in the average years of education among the Palestinian-Arab public from 1999 to 2009, higher dropout rates for Palestinian-Arab students from the school system, lower achievements by Palestinian-Arab students in standard national exams in elementary education, and an under-representative proportion of all university students and faculty staff.

In the context described above, in a country split by political and religious conflict, with a fractionalised education system, the bilingual co-existence school was established by two friends – a Palestinian (citizen of Israel) and an American Jew (also citizen of Israel) – started what seemed like an impossible (and in the eyes of some consulted experts, undesirable) grassroots movement for the creation of integrated bilingual schools in Israel. Their determination resulted in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called the ‘Center for Bilingual Education in Israel’ that became the tool through which most of the schools investigated in this study developed. In 2003, the NGO changed its official name to ‘Hand in Hand – The Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel’, emphasising the initiative’s attempt at educational integration and
multiculturalism rather than solely its bilingual goals guided partially by progressive pedagogy (Bekerman 2015; Chen 2006; Levi et al. 2012).

*The influence of progressive pedagogy in Jewish and Palestinian-Arab education in Israel*

One of the outstanding educational reforms of the nineteenth century was the establishment, in 1896, of the first experimental ‘lab-school’ based on a theoretical rationale and initiative by John Dewey of the University of Chicago. The school was intended to establish a pedagogy that would liberate students and allow them to affiliate with the school to achieve social equality, while also trying to reduce the separation between the school and society. Inspired by the movement that had established such ‘experimental’ schools, the Israeli Ministry of Education established a Department for Experiments and Initiatives that recognised close to 100 schools as ‘experimental’ schools. Schools wishing to be accepted as experimental schools and to receive the support of the Ministry, presented their rationales and theoretical frameworks for approval by the department (Chen 2006, 23).

This opened the door for recognition of another innovative trend that had developed as a response for parents dissatisfied with the operation of Israeli state schools: the establishment of democratic schools (Argaman 2011). These schools set a serious challenge for the state education system in Israel. The first democratic school was established in Hadera in 1987. Israel is considered one of the first countries to shape this form of education, with the growth of more than 20 democratic schools all over the country from the 1980s. New schools appeared using different models of democratic education such as ‘progressive schools’, ‘personal education schools’ and ‘educational pioneering schools’. An Institute for Democratic Education was also established in the Kibbutz Seminar College in Tel Aviv that promotes the teaching, research and development of democratic education, and publishes professional books on democratic education (Argaman 2011). In 1993, the first International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) was held at the Democratic School of Hadera. Today, there are over 200 places offering democratic education in more than 30 countries, working with over 40,000 students (IDEN 2015).

Democratic schools have no specific operational instructions or consistent education theory in didactic terms. Nevertheless, democratic education advocates employing dialogue as a tool in educational processes such as interpersonal communication, non-violent communication, interpersonal respect, and encourages creativity and expansion of the frame shared by the school and its environment. Dialogical teaching aims to stimulate the learner to reveal the hidden meaning in contents, to expose possible implementations of this meaning and to foster alternative thinking. Teachers who employ the dialogical method have been shown to be empathetic, flexible, focused on thinking...
processes, having faith in their students’ potential and being aware of their own personal limitations (Kizel 2009). Together with a multi-age and multi-disciplinary learning strategy, the dialogical approach distinguishes democratic from traditional education (Wood and Deprez 2015).

Democratic education also advocates the construction of spaces that bring democracy into school life, creating democratic structures and processes for the school’s daily operation and developing learning programmes that enable students to experience democracy in practice (Argaman 2011).

In parallel to these initiatives, an attempt was made to respond to the need to conduct dialogue under the shadow of the continuous national conflict between the Jewish and Palestinian-Arab populations in Israel. In 1997, the Hand In Hand Association founded a unique educational framework for coexistence of Israeli citizens based on principles that would permit the expression of both Palestinian and Jewish cultures and languages in an equal manner (Bekerman 2015). Jewish and Palestinian-Arab children are accepted for all classes, from kindergarten to Grade 12 (the high school is in Jerusalem). The school is open for all sectors and strata of Jewish and Palestinian-Arab society, and acceptance does not depend on the family’s financial standing or compliance with exams or other requirements (Bekerman and Zembylas 2010).

In addition to this education framework, community frameworks have been established for adults in the school’s environment, so that students’ parents, school staff and other interested citizens, have established a shared community space. The integrated Palestinian-Jewish educational bilingual initiative studied was established in 1997 by the Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel with the goal of creating fully egalitarian, bilingual, educational environments equally staffed by Palestinians and Jews, and equally using Arabic and Hebrew as languages of instruction (Bekerman and Zembylas 2010, 509). Their main goal was to educate youths who could both acknowledge and respect one another, while at the same time cultivating loyalty to their own ethnic/cultural heritage (Bekerman 2015).

Since 1998, the Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel (Hand in Hand) has established three bilingual schools: in Misgav (in the Galilee), in Jerusalem, and in Kfar Kara (in central Israel; the school presented here). In 2012, a bilingual kindergarten was established in Haifa (Bekerman 2015), and in 2013 a similar kindergarten was established by Hand in Hand in Jaffa. In the 2014–2015 academic year, in Hand in Hand schools, 200 teachers provided education for 1600 students (Haaretz newspaper 2014; Hand In Hand 2015).

The schools are recognised and supported by the Israeli Ministry of Education as non-religious schools; they use the standard curriculum of the secular State school system, which is supplemented to reflect the schools’ ideological commitment to equality and coexistence. A team of in-house teachers, aided by professionals, has drawn up additional programmes for bicultural issues such as addressing historical narratives and religious/cultural studies. Most of each
group’s religious festivals are recognised together with the groups’ respective national narratives. The schools have had to seek out creative solutions such as instituting extracurricular activities for the school community in cases where there was concern about the possible reaction of the Ministry of Education (Bekerman 2015).

As is the case with most of the ideological, state-recognised schools, funds from the Ministry of Education are inadequate to provide for the supplementary materials and staff that the integrated bilingual schools require. Accordingly, the schools must charge fees to families who enrol their children. This may account for the fact that the families attracted to the bilingual schools, both Jewish and Palestinian, are mainly middle to upper-middle class.

These schools have generated much public debate, and recently one of them was the target of a violent attack on the school buildings, aimed at undermining its very existence.

Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy and peace education efforts after the end of World War 1, aimed to minimise the call for nationalism. Eliminating the institution of war required an educational programme that would re-construct existing social and political habits. He was convinced that schools could serve as a basis for dynamic change (Howlett 2008, 2).

To sum up, Dewey understood that education is a form of communication between people with different experiences, and in our case with different ethnicities and circles of affiliation. Dewey ([1902]1990) set clear criteria for the creation of free and open dialogue between and within groups, and provided important guidance for development of deliberative communication (see Englund 2011, 238).

Methodology

The study presented here aimed to describe the progressive education model employed in the ‘Bridge over the Valley’ bilingual school, an Arab-Jewish school in the central Triangle region of Israel. The school employs a unique educational approach, expressed in learning and school activities in interaction between Jewish and Palestinian-Arab students, and the project includes the evaluation and distribution of this experiment.

A qualitative case study was used for empirical data collection and analysis. A case study investigates the unique nature of a case and learns from this uniqueness. Case study is also used to learn about the ‘real world’ of particular situations, without any conditions of control of the process (Stake 2005).

Methods and sample

To select an appropriate research sample, that would exemplify progressive education in Israel we applied our familiarity with ‘lab and innovative’ schools, from
which we chose the bilingual school in Kfar Kara. Three main data-collection tools were used, by order of appearance:

(1) Open observations: during the months of October–November 2014 – open observations studied the school classrooms, corridors, yards and environment. Observations were recorded in the researcher’s diary.

(2) In-depth interviews were held with the school principal, two teachers (one Palestinian and one Jewish) and two parents (one Jewish and one Palestinian) at locations and times chosen by the interviewees, which lasted from one to one-and-a-half hours. The interviews’ purpose was to clarify issues relating to progressive education and the way in which it was applied in the school. Emergent data were cross-checked. Interviews focused on the interviewees’ perceptions of progressive education as expressed in the school and the teaching processes, and its influence on the students’ emotional and social development, the teacher’s role in the teaching process, implications of teaching-learning processes for the school’s educational climate, the parents’ perceptions of the pedagogic and social processes in the school, etc. Among the questions asked were: ‘How would you describe the school to an outsider?’ ‘What is unique about the school?’ ‘Which types of activities characterize the school?’ and ‘Who are the figures that determine the type of actions performed?’ Clarifying questions were also asked, such as: ‘Can you give an example of that?’

(3) Documentary analysis – this related to evaluative research, of press clips dealing with the model employed by the school (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Data analysis

The qualitative data gathered from these tools underwent comparative analysis (Patton 1990), and were sorted according to three levels: (1) The theoretical-research component – a lab-school model proposed by John Dewey, the educational approach and its underlying rationale. (2) The ‘lab school’ under investigation, its educational method and the expression of innovation (development) in the organisation of the school. (3) Evaluation and dissemination of the experiment throughout Israel (Figure 1).

These units of information were then coded, reduced and connected to form different categories, which were collected into central themes that would help to answer the research questions. Coding was guided by the principles of ‘comparative analysis’ (Strauss and Corbin 1998), including comparison of any coded element in terms of emergent categories and sub-categories. Structured analysis and peer review enhanced trustworthiness and reliability (Marshall and Rossman 2012). Use of a systematic data-collection procedure hopefully contributed to the credibility and authenticity of the data.
Since this was a case study, generalisation of the findings to other social contexts is limited to phenomenological generalisation. The reader is invited to judge the applicability of the findings and conclusions to other similar cases of progressive schools.

**Findings**

*A meeting point: the education for peace ‘lab-school’*

The lab-school envisaged and established by Dewey was an outstanding innovation, involving an educational project with a theoretical rationale, research and evaluation. Using this model, Dewey promoted a revolutionary change from traditional to progressive education (Dewey [1938]1997), promoting dynamic personal development through experience in a real-time situation (Harpaz 2009), to foster individuals who could actively engage with obstacles, changing themselves and their environment in the process (Schutz 2001, 268). Following Dewey’s ideas, Englund (2011) questioned whether in areas of conflict, where different cultures meet, such as the Middle East, schools could contribute to a deliberative mode of communication that would improve inter-cultural relations. This would need schools where young people could encounter and debate with others who are not of the same category as themselves. This was apparently the underlying question that guided the Hand In Hand association in the establishment of the bilingual school, whose profile is described below.

**The ‘Bridge over the Valley’ school profile**

The ‘Bridge over the Valley’ school was the first bilingual school to be established in a Palestinian-Arab community, in the village of Kfar Kara, in 2004.
The school was a joint initiative between Hand in Hand and the local Palestinian-Arab and Jewish populations, believing that this would contribute to coexistence (Bekerman 2015). In the nine years since its establishment the school has undergone significant changes, and in the last four years it has grown substantially and become a centre for educational excellence and inter-cultural encounters. It draws students from Jewish and Palestinian-Arab communities, both near and relatively far. According to our interview with the principal, Dr Hasssan Agbaria (4.11.2014), the school teaches 269 Palestinian-Arab and Jewish students from kindergarten to sixth grade. The school employs 37 teachers, including 16 homeroom teachers (8 Jewish and 8 Palestinian), and 21 subject teachers, a psychologist and educational counsellor, taking care to ensure a balance between the two national groups in numbers of teachers and students. Lessons are taught in both Arabic and Hebrew in the same classroom. The Ministry of Education’s stipulated contents are supplemented here with unique enrichment programmes in Western and Oriental music and art, civics and ecology. The school fosters values of mutual respect, tolerance, consideration of others and sensitivity to their needs, and acceptance of diversity. The school year includes celebration of religious and national festivals and commemorative days and Sabbath days of both populations.

The Hand In Hand association provides backing and reinforcement for the school as a centre for high-quality education, and organises social and cultural community activities for students’ parents and the wider community, for example an annual ramble, annual mothers’ evening, theatre and cinema performances dealing with social and humanist issues (Bekerman and Tatar 2009). Residents of the surrounding area are invited annually to an Open Day – the Green Festival at the beginning of spring (Bekerman 2015).

Having presented the school, we now discuss the theory and approach that guides this experimental school and constructs a defined image for the school’s graduates: (1) Recognition and acceptance of the unique language, culture, history, traditions and heritage of each of the populations that compose the Israeli state; development of sensitivity, concern and understanding for others and tolerance for different expressions of behaviour, culture and thinking; (2) Education for equality and democracy; (3) Training for future life: equality and mutual respect, pluralistic life, dialogue without hostility; (4) Reinforcement of personal and national identity through natural experimentation and learning, to embrace one’s own cultural richness while respecting what is common and different in the culture of others (Bekerman 2005, 2015, 2019; Caspi 2009).

In Dewey’s books ‘Democracy and Education’ ([1938]1997), and ‘The Public and its Problems’ (1927), he developed a ‘concern for communication as a democratic form of life, that is the development of communicative and deliberative capabilities for democracy’ (Englund 2000, 306). The idea of deliberative
democracy as an educational process, in which individuals bring different perspectives to ongoing communication, is emphasised in the studied school as we will exemplify.

Bekerman (2009) showed school activities, at the intergroup level, to be working well. While knowing and clearly recognising their own ethnic/religious/national affiliation, the children seem able to create and sustain social interactional spheres where identity is not necessarily addressed. This ability of children stands in sharp contrast to the adult stakeholders’ tendency to adopt a purely categorised identity approach, based on the premise that strengthening ethnic and national identities is the path to achieving its aims.

The school offers a unique educational experience based on the principle of Palestinian-Jewish coexistence, and provides an intense education programme, within a warm and supportive environment, enabling each child to develop their various abilities. It encourages respect for the national and religious practices and festivals of each population group based on values of tolerance and mutual respect. The model of bilingual education contributes to the development and enrichment of the child’s world and reinforces their ability to cope with changes and uncertainty (words of the principal and the teachers).

Observations conducted by the second author at the school revealed that the school space enables various learning processes. Students and teachers can exploit the well-tended school and its grounds and surrounding natural scenery for learning and social purposes (Wood and Deprez 2015). The children learn to respect the teachers and the school. Emphasis is given to education for values including: morality, honesty, friendship, gender equality, cooperation, mutual assistance and volunteerism (Bekerman 2015). The teacher Hiba explained:

The school constitutes an arena for interpersonal discourse relying on mutual respect and a space for both narratives. We help the students to assimilate debating skills, experiencing a shared life in an environment where Jewish and Palestinian-Arab teachers and students conduct discourse that is sometimes difficult and complex, but always legitimate.

The school strives to develop a variety of skills and abilities including self-confidence, creativity, intellectual curiosity, self-learning, coping with different types of information, use of computers and other communications means, abstract thinking and multi-intelligences, and familiarity with the natural and human environment. Music, movement and art are given a considerable place, while emphasising the development of intellectual tools (see Bekerman and Zembylas 2010). Teaching strives to maintain the child’s dignity, and to adjust to the skills and abilities of each individual. The teacher Hiba explained:

There is variance among the students in the classroom. At school we are meticulous about this, and work with each child according to his or her abilities. This makes students believe in themselves, increases their motivation to learn.
Elsewhere in her interview she added:

The teaching and counselling staff is always ready to provide appropriate solutions for students’ needs. Once, during recess at school, a girl had climbed up high on a climbing frame, and was afraid to come down. It was interesting to see how the staff, including the principal and the caretaker, enlisted to help her down without harming her mentally. Such an approach is not always evident in the Palestinian-Arab state education system in Israel.

Besides the level of human sensitivity, there is also sensitivity to the culture and history of both nations (Bekerman 2015), as exemplified by Rasha (a teacher), who told us about a school assignment:

Two students, Palestinian-Arab and Jewish, go out together on a quest that invites questions about each of their cultures, to seek the unique on one hand and the common on the other hand, and then they present it together at a collective forum.

Both the principal and the teacher stressed Dewey’s concept that democratic education relies on ‘continuous reconstruction of experience’ (Dewey [1938]1997, 86), so that education, as Dewey believed, becomes a constructive agent to improve society.

There is also a unique perception of knowledge and learning in this school, shaped to respond to the goals of education that the school sets for itself. The principal explained:

We believe that the school space is very significant for the students’ development and that students have the right to exploit that space not only for learning but also to attain personal goals, during breaks, according to their choice without interference from the teachers. Our role as the school’s teaching staff is to guide and support them in exploiting this effectively.

The teacher Rasha also commented on this issue:

I believe in the school’s educational approach. Our goal is to train the students to respect their space, the environment, to use it wisely, so we let them study outside, take responsibility for their conduct, cherish and preserve their environment. I should add that we don’t ask the children to take care of the projects that the school promotes; they know what each one’s job is, they are responsible for it, for instance to water the plants and hothouse, take care of the petting zoo, etc.

Apart from the vagueness and difficulties involved in operationalising democratic education described by Dewey (Englund 2011, 238), the school needs to work to create spaces that can contain students from two different cultures, and also constitute a space for their personal and interpersonal communication development (Schutz 2001). Our observations and the interviews indicated that the school’s educational method does facilitate these processes including equipping students that represents two ethnic groups tools for dialogue and existence (Bekerman 2015). The principal described the school’s approach:

I do not limit the teachers in their classroom teaching. Each teacher chooses the most suitable place to conduct learning processes together with their students. We believe
that it is important to exploit the space that we occupy for teaching processes and for the students’ personal and social development.

This perception was confirmed by the observations we conducted in the school, where we saw teachers and students that chose to study in the school yard, or on the grass, each group sitting in a circle to learn together. One day, while we were present in the school, a group of students and their teacher were unable to use the library as the location for a lesson that relied on learning in small groups. One of the students suggested that they could sit around one of the benches in the yard and learn. The teacher agreed and the lesson took place there. From the interviewees’ remarks it was clear that the child is the focal point of the school’s education work. The school space constitutes a place for the students’ social and learning development, an achievement of the school’s education model, constituting an improvement on the traditional model of education (Harpaz 2009).

We now turn to discuss the character of learning in this institution. As noted, each class has two homeroom teachers, one Palestinian-Arab and one Jewish, who work simultaneously with the class. The democratic education approach is expressed in the school’s teaching-learning methods, which are guided by several pedagogic principles (Bekerman 2015; Caspi 2009): (1) Each teacher understands both languages but turns to the child only in their own language. Thus, for example, in the kindergarten there are two sessions all day, one in Hebrew and the other in Arabic; (2) Teachers support each other during the lesson, but they do not translate. For example, if the Jewish second-grade teacher is teaching a song on the subject of rain, the Arab teacher can add explanations in Arabic during the lesson but will avoid translating what is said (and vice-versa); (3) First-grade students begin with learning how to read and write both languages simultaneously. This is in line with proven experience that learning to write in a new language is similar in the extent of innovation to learning to write in a familiar language, and that knowledge of reading and writing in the new language advances oral expression and comprehension in that same language (summary of the principal’s words).

A central element of the school’s learning process is the teacher’s special position in the process and the collaboration between the teacher and child. Reciprocal teacher–child relations are considered an important factor to create fertile conditions for learning (Argaman 2011). Students are given personal support, to reinforce their self-confidence and their sense of belonging. Students are encouraged to conduct reflection under the teacher’s guidance, with regard to their experimentation (Wood and Deprez 2015). The children actually learn about their own strengths and weaknesses from these experiences, examining their relationships with their environment and developing their aspirations and abilities (Bekerman 2015). The principal explained how he sees the position of the teacher, and acknowledged the difficulties involved in applying this system:

As the principal, I look after the mental welfare of the school staff, I believe that if a teacher does not feel well, is undergoing a crisis or has a problem, it is difficult for
them to complete their school day. I therefore take care to continually talk with the school’s teachers, to understand their needs, and to help them to overcome their difficulties. For example, recently the teachers noted that they still feel they lack suitable tools to improve the school’s pedagogy. They are mostly satisfied with their work, but it’s not at the required level, so it is my obligation as the principal to help them with that, either through the [Hand In Hand] association’s pedagogic mentor and the school association or through suitable training courses and workshops.

The teacher, Rachel, added in this context:

So that we can give our students the maximum, we have to teach them, to be up-to-date on teaching and pedagogy innovations, to hold ongoing colleague-learning. This is of course not easy, but we do it happily. The cooperation between the teaching staff and the school leadership is the most significant part of our work. We learn in depth the needs of various students, especially due to the many cultures at our school, and act accordingly. We all operate the same way, and it is therefore easier for us to reach each child.

The teacher Hiba also related to these arguments:

Although we teachers work far more than the teachers in state schools, our work is founded on collaboration with another teacher. This model is not easy, you have to prepare joint work programmes, to coordinate fully and this is not stress-free.

According to the principal, all the school’s teachers are graduates of Israeli colleges and universities, who have taught according to traditional education methods. Working in the bilingual school obliges them to alter their work methods, to accept guidance and support appropriate for the school’s vision and policies. All the Palestinian-Arab teachers are graduates of Palestinian-Arab schools, who studied according to the traditional teaching model used in the Palestinian-Arab education system. They graduated from Palestinian-Arab teacher training colleges, where progressive methods were not taught. The teachers receive training and guidance after they are accepted to the school:

When I began to work in the school, I had great difficulty; I didn’t understand exactly what they wanted from me. Working together with another teacher in the class, in two languages, listening to the students, using different teaching methods, it was not so obvious (Rachel, a Jewish Teacher).

Palestinian-Arab teachers also find it difficult to face this challenge, to understand and believe in the school’s pedagogical principles, while having to cope with two very different cultures (Jewish and Palestinian), as Hiba explained:

As a Palestinian-Arab teacher I live between two worlds. The character of the Palestinian-Arab students in this school is completely different from the Jewish students. At first I cried about this, I didn’t really understand the responsibility imposed on the teacher. With the continuous guidance and support that I receive, I now understand and accept the situation in the classes, I understand the educational perceptions of the Jewish teachers, and the pedagogy. It’s just that the gaps are enormous.
She illustrated her feelings with an example:

We asked each child to invite a friend to their home. Rafa, a third-grade Palestinian-Arab child was invited by Yoni (a Jewish child), his classmate. He was given some soup and began to eat. Suddenly Yoni’s grandmother asked him: ‘Do you see what they are doing to us? Your brothers are shooting at us’. Rafa did not know how to answer. He felt frightened and the next day he told me about it.

She added another illustration:

One day, a Jewish student brought a snail to school in a little box. He was very excited. After he told us where he got it, we discussed the issue, and then I asked him to go outside and release the snail in the garden. He did so happily. During recess, the child came to me in tears, very sad, and told me that one of the Palestinian-Arab students had crushed the snail. After I clarified the act with the Palestinian-Arab student, and realized his motives, he stated that a snail is a harmful creature and that’s why he killed it… As a teacher, I had to bridge the two cultures, and convince the Jewish student that the Palestinian-Arab student did not do it deliberately.

Another piercing example was seen in an argument between two teachers about the teaching of the Palestinian Nakba. This occurred when the Palestinian-Arab teacher taught the history that led to the establishment of the State of Israel and mentioned the horrors of the war that had led to the murder of many of her people. This had caused the Jewish students to experience feelings of guilt, which the Jewish teacher found difficult to accept (Bekerman and Zembylas 2010). The clash between the two teachers teaching this period of history reflected the clash between the two national narratives (see also Yona and Shenhav 2005), necessitating dialogue and mutual understanding.

Dewey’s words on the teaching of the facts of history on the one hand and the need to educate for peace on the other hand, may be relevant to this case. He argued that in order to achieve international harmony, important change in domestic institutional thinking would have to occur first. In ‘Human Nature and Conduct’ (1922), Dewey observed that ‘history does not prove the inevitability of war but it does prove that customs and institutions which organise native powers into certain patterns in politics and economics will also generate the war pattern’ (115).

According to the principal, the school strives to find the middle path between education for achievements in a clear framework of boundaries, demands and rules and education that allows freedom of choice and consideration of the desires and inclinations of each child and the need to establish an experience of coexistence. The school encourages the children to attain academic achievements, but the learning system relies on listening to each child’s world of meanings, and teaching is delivered with consideration for the individual’s learning pace, abilities and needs. This approach sees encouragement of the children’s excellence as compatible with allowing choice and flexibility (Wood and Deprez 2015).
Thus, some of the teaching is conducted according to the traditional-frontal method, and some with various other teaching methods. School trips and journeys are part of the school’s teaching-learning processes, used to reinforce the children’s spatial orientation and their perception of knowledge and learning (Harpaz 2009). Additionally, the school often uses research in many disciplines; they use the school environment for this purpose. For example, students, together with the homeroom teachers, conduct observations on sunrise and sunset during an overnight weekend stay in the school, and through collaborative and cooperative work under the guidance of the teachers. This is an experience which would not be easy to conduct in Palestinian-Israeli state schools.

In addition to the bilingual dimension and the emphasis on culture, the school’s unique learning programme also includes teaching of the core disciplines such as: English, mathematics, natural sciences, sciences and history. Although the school operates according to a unique learning programme, they do not rely merely on transmitting materials, and take great care that each student learns according to his or her abilities. The teacher Hiba related to this strategy:

Our work methods are different from those in other state schools. For us the most important thing is to teach the student how to think and not to learn the material; we feel less stressed because we are teaching according to this method. In contrast in other Palestinian-Arab state schools, the teachers push to complete all the learning material, they are interested in completing all the text books.

She demonstrated with the following example:

We heard complaints that we weren’t teaching by the book; students in neighboring state schools had reached page 80, and we were on page 50. That annoyed me. So I took my son, who goes to our school, and another boy from a state school in the area, and I asked both of them to read me a paragraph from that same book. My son, although they hadn’t reached that part yet, made an effort and read. The other boy said they hadn’t reached it yet, and found it difficult. My conclusion was that we teach our students how to learn, to overcome difficulties. We empower them, not just teach them material. This perception is missing in most state schools.

Rachel, a Jewish teacher working in the school’s kindergarten, presented the kindergarten’s educational perception:

I believe that we do not need to worry about achievements in early childhood, especially not in the kindergartens. The main principle for us is to love the children, to work on the consolidation of their identity, not to teach them to read and write. We oppose that approach.

The evaluation conducted in the school is not traditional evaluation. Students are not evaluated with grades, but rather receive verbal evaluation, an evaluation that necessitates a serious investment by the teacher, as noted by the teacher, Rasha: ‘The evaluation system used in the school is very complex. I invest many hours in the preparation of the students’ report cards, I think about every word that I use.’
There is also strong emphasis on movement and physical skills, on music and artistic creativity of various kinds and several enrichment activities, both within and outside the school. As part of the commitment to a full and rich educational pedagogy, the school provides the students with an extended school day (Englund 2011). Afternoon activities include a variety of courses, but also time for rest and homework preparation.

We learned from the interviewees that there is use of various pedagogical perceptions and teaching and learning methods in the bilingual school. The teacher serves as the guide and mediates the knowledge to the students; the emphasis is on the teacher’s attention to the student’s needs and fields of interest and also on expressing empathy and support for the children. Having discussed the teacher’s role in the school we now turn to discuss the involvement of students’ parents in the school’s educational model.

The school sees the parents as important partners in the decision-making to construct their unique path and as an essential human resource for the enhancement of the education process (Bekerman 2015). Like the teachers, parents constitute a target community founded on the same principles of coexistence and equality that underpin the school’s approach (Hand In Hand 2015). Jewish and Arab parents differ in the manner of their cooperation and contribution to the school. According to the school principal, the initial contact between the school and the parents was not easy, yet with time the school succeeded in convincing the parents of the correctness of its educational approach (Bekerman and Tatar 2009).

Most parents in the school are middle-class or high-middle-class. The principal noted that the cooperation of Jewish parents was different than that of Palestinian-Arab parents, due to the cultural aspect. He believes that Jewish parents’ commitment to the school is different because they are more available than Palestinian-Arab parents, who have other social and cultural commitments. He added that initially the school struggled with Palestinian-Arab parents. Not all of them believed in the educational approach. Some claimed that the school did not devote enough time to pedagogy, rather to the development of social and leadership skills, which contradicted their outlook, and that of the Palestinian-Arab education system (Arar 2012). The school puts a lot of effort into changing this perception, but it is still sometimes expressed by Palestinian-Arab parents.

The difficulty was explained by the teacher, Rasha:

We work opposite two populations of parents. Palestinian-Arab parents are very critical of the school’s operations. For example, they think it very important that their children come home with homework. They don’t find it easy to accept that homework is not essential. They think that teachers should use textbooks; they don’t understand how teachers can teach without textbooks. On the other hand, this criticism is not heard from Jewish parents. I think this is because of social values in Palestinian-Arab society, which these parents were raised in.
Rasha added, ‘In recent years our principal has succeeded in reducing parents’ criticism that hindered their involvement, and they have now become parents who are involved in their children’s education.’

The principal and teachers raised an important issue regarding parents. They commented that Palestinian-Arab parents are willing to donate money to the school, purchase equipment, etc., while Jewish parents are more willing to volunteer than to donate money.

In a conversation with a mother of three children studying in the school, she noted: ‘The school works hard to develop students’ thinking abilities and leadership, the social activities and courses that it conducts do not exist in any other school in the Palestinian-Arab education system’. The mother added that the school invested significant efforts to guide and support the staff, and improvement could be seen especially in the pedagogical aspect.

Another mother pointed out, ‘I think that the school has to invest more in pedagogy, train teachers in this aspect. It’s true that they do good work on children’s empowerment, inclusion in society, but they are not good enough on the pedagogic side’.

To summarise, according to the interviewees there are still points of conflict with some of the parents who continue to demand traditional methods of teaching-learning for their children in the school, while other parents understand the educational approach underlying the school’s operation, something that constitutes a challenge for the school (Bekerman 2015).

The school is constantly evaluating its educational model and also disseminates it to other places. Amara (2005) conducted an evaluation of the operation of the bilingual model, and noted that the school was run according to a holistic-humanist method, so that it would be unsuitable to conduct a traditional evaluation of the school. The study produced mixed findings, noting that the parents were involved in the students’ learning processes and the students’ learning involved personal investment, development and expression including involvement in the choice of sites and ways of learning, but not in choosing learning materials (Wood and Deprez 2015). In some of the disciplines there was holistic inter-disciplinary and experiential learning, with significant emphasis on research as part of the learning. In a later article on the bilingual school in Israel, Amara (2014) noted that the main aim of Hand In Hand was to develop a new educational scheme for Jewish-Arab schools that integrates children, parents and the community together with government stakeholders, that is, the local education departments and the Ministry of Education, in order to alter the existing contentious reality, and to offer respect and equality to both national groups in Israel – Palestinian-Arab and Jewish. The basic idea underlying this initiative is to create an egalitarian and bilingual educational environment (Bekerman 2015).

Bekerman (2005) found that among Jewish students, the bilingual model only has partial success. After three or four years of education most of the Arab students had high-level ability in Hebrew, at a level close to their command of their
own mother language, both speaking and writing skills. In comparison, Jewish students were not able to communicate in fluent Arabic without mistakes, and their Arabic reading skills were very limited (Bekerman 2015). These evaluations of the experimental bilingual school are included in the dissemination of the concept to other education institutions.

**Discussion and conclusions**

This paper aimed to identify how the progressive education perception empowers an experimental school in Israel as a response to the criticism that was heard concerning the functioning and practices of the traditional education system. Progressive education relies on the assumption that educational change needs to come from below, and should be expressed in a unique educational approach that forms the foundation for experimentation and innovation (Chen 2006; Howlett 2008). The paper describes the use of the progressive approach of education for peace in the ‘Bridge over the Valley’ bilingual school, as it is expressed in the school’s pedagogy, the implementation of the progressive method, and in the accompanying discourse (Argaman 2011; Bekerman 2015; Kizel 2009).

It seems that the dissatisfaction with the state education system in Israel and the opening of a window for choice and different streams in education (Arar 2012; Gibton 2011) has allowed the growth of experimental schools according to the tradition started by Dewey (Chen 1999, 2006). The findings we have described above indicate that the approach of education for peace challenges the discourse of the political context in which two peoples, Palestinian-Arab and Jewish, are locked in conflict and education is segregated, and offers a way to educate for peace and conflict resolution based on dialogical pedagogy (Amara 2014; Bekerman 2005, 2015; Fallace 2011). The educational approach directing the school challenges both the existing social order and also traditional education (Harpaz 2009), since it is based on dialogical circles, shared discussion and research, weakening the national value, and increasing commitment to civil education and education for peace as envisaged by Dewey in his book ‘Human Nature and Conduct’.

Our research revealed that self-realisation is seen as a central value in this educational framework. The development of individual abilities is realised in an optimal manner when the individual is given the opportunity for personal experimentation with minimal outside interference (Dewey [1938]1997). The findings of this case study indicate that the introduction of components of democratic education in the bi-lingual school enhances the school climate, teacher–student relations and satisfaction levels in the school (Amara 2005; Bekerman 2015). The introduction of democratic components also assists the positive development of personality elements (Caspi 2009). These elements are mentioned as part of the fundamental principles of Dewey’s progressive approach (Englund 2011).
Analysis of the work of the bilingual school showed that an orientation emphasising personal liberty, children’s rights and the creation of conditions for self-realisation constituted fundamental components of the adults’ educational perception (Fallace 2011). The educators in the school act according to principles such as self-realisation, acknowledgment of the child’s inner autonomous world, and recognition of the adult’s responsibility to allow each child self-expression and free development (Dewey [1902]1990). The school as an organisation and the classroom as the site of events constitute the places for the development of national narratives confronted and processed through education for common civic and humanitarian values (Bekerman 2005; Yona and Shenhav 2005). This discourse challenges the prevailing social order and the existing learning programme and crosses the school’s boundaries, turning parents into partners in this progressive educational circle (Howlett 2008), which constitutes a platform for empowerment (Wood and Deprez 2015). This method is sometimes seen as education that threatens the practices of conventional conflict management in Israeli society (Bekerman 2005, 2015).

Despite the promise of progressive pedagogy, the school is ensnared in a difficulty reality. The school exists in an ‘ethno-democracy’ (Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004), where there often seems to be room to develop an empowering democratic vision for students from only one ethnic origin. Applying the progressive approach, the experiment that was presented here has built a community ‘of its own’ that differs from the surrounding reality, shaping a new ideology that threatens the ideology of the establishment (Bekerman 2015; Chen 2006). Dewey envisaged these problems and suggested how to cope with these challenges in his book ‘The Public and the Problem’ (1976). Apart from Dewey’s consistent commitment to the democratic idea, there is perhaps difficulty involved in educating children to this messianic democratic perception, overshadowed by ‘ethno-centric democracy’ that encompasses the school, that has often recently even discussed the de facto exclusion of the Palestinian ethnic minority, outside the boundaries of this collective (Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004). As we saw, the school that was represented here has chosen to conduct continuous negotiation with the surrounding community, and thus tried to balance between the different cultural and social perceptions that are involved in the school and to fulfil the desire to construct a school collective (Bekerman 2005). Both the educational and pedagogical approaches that the school offers and the challenges with which the school chooses to cope constitute an expression of the experiment that Dewey offered to challenge the existing social order (Gatto 2002; Schutz 2001).

Among the contributions of John Dewey’s educational project, was his proposal for a scientific ‘experimental’ approach to introduce educational changes that would respond to the community’s needs. Underlying this approach stood a pedagogical method and conceptualisation for conflict resolution and the opening of a space for empowering dialogue for co-existence (Howlett 2008).
The studied school is founded on this model. Respect for both cultures, and the continuous interaction between children of two different nationalities in the studied school, allows these children to grow in a different atmosphere of dialogue and conflict resolution, so that the school’s graduates will be able to approach the reality in which they live with varied and deep-rooted tools.

In the end, despite Dewey’s brilliance, it is important not to forget that his theories were created at a particular time by a specific person situated at a particular intersection of class, gender, race and so forth (Schutz 2001). We are convinced that Dewey drew from his own experience a philosophy that made sense of that experience and was appropriate for his own way of being in the world. Yet, his model of experimental innovative ‘lab schools’ can perhaps drive us to enhance our schools according to our own progressive thoughts.

Disclosure statement
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