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Israeli Arabs Enter Jewish Classrooms

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YOKNEAM, Israel – In an educational revolution of sorts, a growing number of Israeli schools are taking a novel approach to the instruction of Arabic: They're hiring Arab teachers.

The initiative is about far more than teaching children a new language. Educators say they hope to break down barriers in a society where Jewish and Arab citizens have little day-to-day interaction and often view each other with suspicion.

"It is very important to get past the stigmas. We have a chance to get closer," said Shlomit Vizel, principal of the Tidhar elementary school in Yokneam, a picturesque town in the rolling hills of Israel's northern Galilee region.

In a country where 20 percent of citizens are Arab, enlisting native Arabic speakers for the classroom would seem obvious. But a mix of politics and cultural differences over the decades have left Israeli students overwhelmingly separated between Jewish and Arab educational systems. With few exceptions, Jewish teachers teach Jewish students, and Arab teachers teach Arab students.

The "Ya Salam," or "O Peace," program is trying to change this trend with a new approach to Arabic, which is considered an official language in Israel and in theory is a required subject for all students. In reality, few Jews speak it well.

First, the program starts Arabic teaching in the 5th grade, two years earlier than normal. It also teaches colloquial spoken Arabic, instead of the formal literary Arabic that is traditionally taught. This is meant to allow students to converse, rather than just read. Most critically, it is bringing Arab teachers into Jewish classrooms.

Maram Faour, a young teacher from the Arab town of Kabul, is on the front lines of this effort.

The 29-year-old is now in her second year at Tidhar, where she says she is supported by her co-workers, embraced by her students and welcomed by parents.

"I feel like a regular teacher. I'm not a foreign teacher," she said.

This was not always the case. When she started, Faour was terrified about how she would be accepted. She struggled with the rambunctious and informal atmosphere of the classroom and was surprised to be addressed by her first name -- something unheard of in the more hierarchical Arab school system. She sometimes went home in tears.

But then something clicked. Backed by her colleagues, she stopped worrying about the formal curriculum and began to forge a relationship with the kids. She played games with the students, encouraged conversations with them, and taught them about Muslim holidays.

Her kids were surprised to see that she dressed like them, not in the traditional robe and head covering they had imagined. They learned that she vacations in Eilat, a popular Israeli tourist spot on the Red Sea, and that she uses e-mail and a laptop.

She brought in an Arabic storyteller one day. On another occasion, a musician taught the class how to play the darbuka, a Middle Eastern drum. She brought in her three young daughters to meet the class.

"I want them to learn as much as possible about Arabs in a positive light," she said.

Today, Faour is in firm control of her classroom. Dressed in jeans and a black shirt, she peppered her students with questions on a recent day, picking someone to answer by playfully throwing a yellow sponge ball to them. Nearly all of the students raised their hands to answer, and the lesson was conducted almost entirely in Arabic.

"My name is Adir. I live in Yokneam. I go to Tidhar School. I am 11 years old. I'm in 6th grade," said one boy. The class sang the alphabet song, and students eagerly came to the board to write letters in Arabic.

"We don't just learn. We do fun activities. It's more fun than our regular lessons," said sixth-grader Michal Zimmerman.

But the students also are learning some grown-up lessons. They speak about diversity, respecting "the other," and breaking the stereotypes held by many Israelis that Arabs are religious fanatics or terrorists.

"You can't generalize," said Ron Crispin, another girl in the class. "We live in one country. We have to live in peace."

Faour tries to avoid politics, but that's not always possible. During an air raid drill that simulated a missile attack, a student asked, "Do you also do this?"

"I said, 'They also fire rockets at us. We're also sad. We also want peace and quiet,'" Faour said.

Arabic is mandatory in all Israeli schools from 7th to 10th grade, but the requirement is unevenly enforced. Only about half of the schools teach it, and in many of those most students take it only

for two years, according to the Abraham Fund, an advocacy group that promotes coexistence between Israel's Arabs and Jews.

Hebrew, the native language of Israel's Jews, is required in all schools, and schools in Arab communities generally start teaching it in the 3rd grade. There are hardly any mixed Arab-Jewish schools in Israel, since the communities generally live apart.

Working with Israel's Education Ministry, the Abraham Group launched the "Yaa Salam" program in 2005 on an experimental basis in two school systems in northern Israel, and gradually expanded it.

Today, it is taught in 200 of the country's approximately 1,700 Jewish primary schools, most of them in northern Israel where many of the country's Arabs live. The ministry now runs the program, though the Abraham Fund still provides support.

"The goal is to break the stereotypes and fears and get to know each other. That's what has happened," said Orly Nachum, the northern district's Arabic language supervisor.

Israeli Arabs, unlike their Palestinian brethren in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, hold full citizenship rights but often face discrimination in housing and employment. The Jewish majority often views Israeli Arabs with suspicion, citing their frequent identification with the Palestinians and anti-Israel statements by political leaders.

In this atmosphere, the Israeli government, dominated by Jewish nationalists, has approved a series of bills in the parliament, or Knesset, that are perceived as anti-Arab.

Amnon Beerli Sulitzeanu, the Abraham Fund's co-director, urged the Education Ministry to make the program mandatory nationwide to counter this trend.

"Children, even young, feel the antidemocratic winds blowing from the Knesset and internalize sentiments of xenophobia and alienation toward Israel's Arab citizens," he said. "In this complex and dangerous situation, this program somehow offsets negative attitudes toward Arabs."

Faour tries to avoid such deep issues, though she knows she's an unofficial ambassador. For now, she is just content talking to her students.

"They just want to speak Arabic. What fun," she said.