

The Ya Salam Program: Evaluation Study

Summary

The Henrietta Szold Institute executed a comprehensive evaluation study of the Ya Salam program for teaching Arabic and Arab culture in Hebrew elementary schools. The program was developed eight years ago by the Abraham Fund Initiatives and is currently implemented by the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the association, in 5th and 6th grade classes in some 200 state (Mamlachti) and state-religious (Mamlachti Dati) schools. The program is taught by Arab teachers (the majority of whom are women) who hold a teaching certificate for Arabic and have been trained to teach the curriculum. The Ministry of Education adopted the curriculum in the 2010-11 school year and it is now taught as a compulsory program in all the schools in the Ministry's Northern District and in the city of Haifa. The program is also taught in some 30 schools in Tel Aviv – Jaffa, Jerusalem, and the Southern District.

Research Goal

The research goal is to evaluate the various components of the Ya Salam program and to examine the extent to which it has influenced the participants' attitudes toward Arabic, Arab culture, Arabs in Israel, and toward coexistence with Arab citizens. The study also seeks to evaluate the program's academic achievements and its impact on the participants' achievements in Arabic studies in junior-high school. In addition, the study examines the integration of the program in Hebrew schools and its impact on school life.

The following are the main research questions:

1. How did the Ya Salam program and the Arab teachers integrate in the Hebrew schools from the principals' perspective?
2. How did the Ya Salam program and the Arab teachers integrate in the Hebrew schools from the teachers' perspective?
3. To what extent did Ya Salam achieve its academic objectives?
4. To what extent, if any, did Ya Salam influence the attitudes of students completing the program toward the Arabic language and Arab culture and toward Arabs in Israel?
5. To what extent did the Ya Salam program effect the academic achievements of its graduates in their study of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in seventh grade? Did participation in the program influence their desire to continue to study Arabic in high school?
6. To what extent, if any, did Ya Salam influence the attitudes of the graduates toward Arabic, Arab culture, and Arabs in Israel one year after its completion (i.e. at the end of the seventh grade)?

Methodology

The study was undertaken over a period of three years and includes 75 principals from the schools implementing the program; 19 Arab teachers who teach Arabic using the Ya Salam

curriculum; approximately 1,000 elementary-school students (approximately half of whom are participating in the program, while the other half served as a comparison group); approximately 500 junior-high students (approximately half of whom are graduates of the program, whereas the other half constitute a comparison group); and 16 (Jewish) Arabic teachers in junior-high schools. The study used attitude questionnaires, written and oral Arabic tests in spoken Arabic and MSA, and feedback questionnaires.

Summarized Findings

1. The integration of the Ya Salam program and its Arab teachers in Hebrew schools from the principals' perspective:

The principals expressed satisfaction with the implementation of the Ya Salam program and with the integration of the program teachers in their schools. They reported a personal interest in the program and stated that their personal attitudes had changed as a result of the program.¹

- ✓ 87% of the principals stated that they identify completely with the program vision (80% responded to this question). Over one-third believed that achieving this vision is a realistic goal. The principals expected that the program would provide the students with knowledge about Arabic and Arab culture; promote tolerance and mutual respect between Jews and Arabs; reduce stigmas about Arabs; and moderate reservations about the Arabic language among students in Hebrew education.
- ✓ 91% of principals are very or extremely satisfied with the fact that the program is taught in their school and recommend that it (or a similar program) be included as part of the compulsory curriculum in Israel.
- ✓ The principals ranked the importance of the program goals as follows: inculcating knowledge (4.36 on average, out of 5); changing the students' attitudes toward Arabic, Arab culture, and Arabs (4.30); and changing teachers' attitudes toward Arabic, Arab culture, and Arabs (3.96).
- ✓ 81% of principals reported that they have a great or very great personal interest in the program. Approximately half stated that following the program they have a very strong or extremely strong desire to learn Arabic themselves. Approximately two-thirds noted that they would be very willing or extremely willing to introduce additional programs relating to coexistence in their schools.
- ✓ Approximately two-thirds of the principals felt that the Arab teachers integrated very well or extremely well in the life of the school. However, 15% of the principals felt very strongly or extremely strongly that the Arab teachers who worked in the program were unusual in their attitudes toward Jews and did not reflect the society they come from.
- ✓ Approximately one-third of the principals stated that their view of Arab society had changed to a very great or extremely great extent following the program. Approximately half the principals believed to a very great or extremely great extent that the chance of coexistence has increased following the program.

¹ In most schools the program was introduced on the basis of a decision by the Ministry of Education or the local authority, and not necessarily in accordance with the principal's wishes.

- ✓ In response to a question about difficulties in implementing the program, 10 to 20% of the principals replied that these include problems in the students' behavior, in some cases due to a lack of identification with the subject and in others due to a difficulty on the part of the teachers in managing the class and coping with cultural gaps between the teachers and the students.

2. The integration of the Ya Salam program and the Arab program teachers in Hebrew schools from the teachers' perspective:

- The program teachers (all the teachers interviewed in the study are Arab women) reported that the staff and students in the schools accepted them positively, although some of them found it difficult to integrate in the school beyond teaching the program curriculum. The teachers believed that the educational and value-based goals of the program were met, and stated that their own attitude to Jewish society had improved.
- ✓ Most of the teachers identified with the vision of the program (65% answered this question) and approximately two-thirds felt that achieving this vision is realistic.
 - ✓ Most of the teachers stated that they joined the program mainly for ideological reasons. Some stated that they joined the program in order to "give Jews a chance to meet an 'authentic Arab,'" to fight common stigmas about Arabs, and to secure recognition and acceptance. Some teachers stated they wanted to "create change in Jewish schools out of a sense of mission."
 - ✓ Almost all the teachers reported that the staff and children "welcomed them" to a very great or extremely great extent, and 74% stated that they had made personal relationships with the schools' Jewish teachers to a very great or extremely great extent. Almost all the program teachers were very satisfied or extremely satisfied with their work.
 - ✓ In response to a question about the change in the school since the introduction of the program, one-third of the teachers chose to mention the strengthening of Arabic as a subject in the school and recognition of its importance, alongside appreciation of Arabic and Arab culture. Just over one-fourth of the teachers felt that the teaching of the program and the integration of an Arab teacher in the school helped dissipate prejudice and reduce stereotypes among students and teachers.
 - ✓ 42% of the teachers reported that "they find it difficult to gain a place for themselves in the school beyond the teaching of the program"² to a great or very great extent.
 - ✓ All the teachers noted that they were also willing to work in order to promote coexistence in other frameworks to a great or very great extent, and 95% felt that the program made a great or very great contribution to them personally.
 - ✓ Following the program, 84% of the teachers stated that they had a better understanding of Jewish society and are very or extremely interested in getting to know this society. Additionally, 76% stated that their opinion of Jewish society has changed for the better, and almost half noted that they felt closer to Israel than they did before to a very great or an extremely great extent.

² Most of the teachers work in three schools (due to the relatively small number of hours allotted to the subject and the fact that the program is only implemented in two grades).

- ✓ 88% of the teachers stated that in Arab society (in their personal environments) there was a great or very great level of appreciation of their work teaching Arabic in the Jewish sector.

3. Achievement of the academic objectives of the Ya Salam program:

- In light of the results of the written and oral knowledge tests, the program appears to have met its educational goals, both in terms of inculcating spoken Arabic and in terms of providing a preliminary basis for reading and writing Arabic. To a certain extent, a correlation was found between the students' attitudes and their achievements. Accordingly, it can be assumed on the basis of these findings that programs such as Ya Salam, which combines language learning with cultural studies with the intention to reduce the level of alienation between Jews and Arabs, also contribute to improving academic achievements per se.
- ✓ The following are the results of the written tests (aural comprehension, identifying letters, reading comprehension, vocabulary, cultural familiarity) and the oral tests (ability to express oneself in Arabic) at the end of the program (tests were only given to the students in the program and were based on the Ya Salam curriculum): almost 40% of the examinees secured intermediate or high scores. The highest scores were obtained in the sub-tests of aural comprehension and identification of the letters. Over 60% of the examinees secured intermediate or high scores in the oral test.
 - ✓ The test results show that the program achieved its academic goals, which focus mainly on conversation, a familiarity with Arab culture, and the use of a common vocabulary shared by spoken Arabic and MSA.
 - ✓ Over one-third of the respondents mentioned aspects of the program they liked. These related mainly to the diverse ancillary activities that accompanied the frontal teaching. Approximately one-fourth of the respondents were impressed by their own ability to acquire a new language. Approximately one-fourth of the respondents mentioned aspects of the program they did not like. These responses highlighted a difficulty in coping with the language in general and the study assignments in particular. Approximately half the respondents recommended expanding the range of cultural activities in the program. Approximately one-fourth noted that learning Arabic with an Arab teacher differs substantially from learning the language with a Jewish teacher. Some of the responses highlighted the "strangeness" of the teacher: "Different accent / different culture / different ethnicity / different dress."

4. The impact of the Ya Salam program on the students' attitudes toward Arabic, Arab culture, and Arabs in Israel at the end of the program (at the end of the 6th grade):

The Ya Salam program managed to block or significantly moderate the negative impact on the students of the anti-Arab attitudes prevalent in public discourse in Israel. In the comparison group, a statistically significant deterioration was shown in attitudes toward Arabs over two years (2010-2012). By contrast, no change in attitudes was seen among the graduates of the curriculum, and some of them even presented more positive attitudes than they had the past. In addition, the program students were found to be less

biased in their stereotypes of Arabs than the comparison group. This result was secured thanks to the fact that the Ya Salam program teaches Arabic as an integral part of culture, presenting a diverse range of language contexts and areas of content, and promoting a pleasant familiarity with the everyday lives of Arab children.

- ✓ The students' attitudes were measured using two scales: A language scale, which included the subjects "interest in language and culture," "perception of the benefit of knowing Arabic," and "discomfort about Arabic (21 items), and an 'attitudes toward Arabs' scale, which included positive attitudes toward Arabs, negative attitudes toward Arabs and a willingness to engage in contact with Arabs (31 items).
- ✓ In the comparison group, a sharp and statistically significant deterioration was seen over the two years (from the beginning of the 5th grade through the end of the 6th grade) in all six parameters (sub-scales) measured. By contrast, in the experimental group (program students) no significant difference was found the 'attitudes toward Arabs' scale between the beginning and end of the curriculum. In the language scale, no decline was seen in the parameter of "discomfort about Arabic," though a statistically significant decline was seen in the parameter "interest in Arabic and Arab culture" and in the parameter "perception of the benefit of knowing Arabic" (though far more moderate than the decline seen in the same parameters in the comparison group). This finding was explained by the natural decline in the level of curiosity regarding subjects that have become familiar due to the program.
- ✓ An examination of stereotypes among the students was undertaken by means of a list of positive and negative characteristics attributed to Jews, Arabs, or the members of both groups. After the end of the program, it was found that the students in the experimental group were less biased in their opinions than those in the comparison group. More students in the experimental group perceived both peoples as hard-working, arrogant, cheats, or insolent in the same degree than was the case among the students in the comparison group.
- ✓ In open feedback, when asked about the impact of the curriculum, the following were some of the comments made by students completing the curriculum:
 - "I realized for certain that Jews and Arabs can live together in peace and communication;"
 - "I learned that Arabs and Jews can live together and we are all equal human beings;"
 - "I understand them [Arabs] now. I've also realized that the Arabs aren't all that different from the Jews;"
 - "After the Ya Salam program I have more respect for the Arabic language;"
 - "I discovered that this is a special language and their festivals are also special;"
 - "I thought that Arabic was a strange and difficult language but when I started to learn Arabic it was easy and okay;"
 - "I used to be a bit racist toward Arabs, but now I'm not;"
 - "I thought they were always hitting people, but now I see that they're just like us;"
 - "I thought that Arabs didn't care about other people, but they are very polite and nice;"
 - "I used to think that every Arab was a terrorist, now I think that that is only a minority."

- ✓ A correlation was found between the students' attitudes and their academic achievements: 16% of the variance in the students' grades in the written test can be explained by their attitudes. Two parameters (out of the six) made a statistically significant contribution to predicting the students' score in the written test: the belief that it is beneficial to study Arabic has a positive correlation to the test scores, while the fact that a student holds negative attitudes toward Arabs is related to low achievements. No correlation was found between the students' attitudes and the scores in the oral test.

5. The impact of the Ya Salam program on the achievements of program graduates in their 7th-grade studies of MSA and on their desire to continue to study Arabic in high school:

The graduates of the program achieved scores in their written and oral tests that were statistically significantly higher than those of the comparison group in the aural comprehension, identification of letters, identification of words in context, grammar, syntax, reading comprehension, and writing, as well as in oral expression. These findings differ from those of previous studies on this aspect (particularly the findings of Brosh's comprehensive study). The explanation for this lies in the learning principles of the Ya Salam curriculum: developing a linguistic awareness of the differences between spoken Arabic and MSA, including a visual distinction in the presentation of the two forms in the study materials; including teaching of the first foundations of reading and writing as part of the program; creating high motivation to study Arabic by means of an attractive program that includes cultural aspects; and providing in-service training for junior-high school teachers to help bridge the transition from the Ya Salam program to teaching of MSA in junior-high school. It should also be noted that changes that have been introduced in the teaching of MSA in junior-high schools over the years have also enhanced the relevance of programs such as Ya Salam to subsequent language studies.

- ✓ At the end of the 7th grade, the program graduates and the comparison group took written and oral tests. The tests in MSA were based on the Ministry of Education curriculum for the 7th grade. The scores of the experimental group in the written test were statistically significantly higher than those of the comparison group in reading comprehension, identification of letters, identification of words in context, grammar, syntax, reading comprehension, and writing (but not in "culture.") In the written test 18% of the experimental group students achieved intermediate or high scores, as compared to eight percent of the comparison group. The scores of the program graduates in the oral test were also statistically significantly higher than those in the comparison group.
- ✓ After approximately one year (at the end of the 7th grade), about one-third of the graduates of the program stated that the program had contributed to their achievements in their studies of MSA to a very great or extremely great extent. In their view, contribution was mainly in the fields of new vocabulary acquisition, identification of letters, and reading and listening comprehension. 1%-3% of the program graduates felt that the program had interfered with their MSA studies.

- ✓ 40% of the program graduates highly or very highly recommended teaching spoken Arabic in elementary school as part of the preparation to MSA studies in junior-high school. Approximately one-fourth of the students who had not participated in the program expressed a very strong or extremely strong desire to have done so.
- ✓ No statistically significant correlation was found between participation in the Ya Salam program and the desire to continue to study Arabic in high school. However, 32% of the program graduates stated that they would very much or extremely much like to study Arabic in high school, compared to 27% in the comparison group.
- ✓ 54% of Arabic teachers in the junior-high schools expressed the opinion that the Ya Salam program formed a good foundation for studying MSA, while 23% did not share this view.
- ✓ The teachers of the graduates of the Ya Salam program in the junior-high schools evaluated these students as having higher knowledge, understanding, and capabilities than their classmates who had not participated in the program, or than the students in other classes where none of the students had participated in the program. However, the teachers were divided on the question of whether the program made a long-term contribution to the study of MSA. Some reported that the gap between the two groups closed toward the middle of the year. As noted, the test scores of the students in the experimental group **at the end of the year** were statistically significantly higher than those of the comparison group.
- ✓ The 7th-grade teachers stated that the program graduates show a lower level of stereotypical attitudes toward Arabs than students who did not participate in the group. They also claimed that they show a higher level of involvement in their Arabic studies.

6. The impact of the Ya Salam program on graduates' attitudes toward Arabic, Arab culture, and the Arab citizens of Israel one year after the end of the program (at the end of the 7th grade):

It seems possible to identify an ongoing positive impact of the Ya Salam program on the participants' attitudes. A comparison between the graduate group and the group of students who did not participate in the program showed that many of the graduates' attitudes toward Arabs were more positive than those of the comparison group. This was particularly evident in the lower prevalence of stereotypical perceptions of Arabs among the program graduates.³

- ✓ In almost all the parameters (attitudes toward Arabic, Arab culture, and Arabs) the averages in the experimental group (the program graduates) were higher than those of the comparison group; nevertheless, no statistically significant differences were found between the groups in terms of the scale or sub-scales. However, in approximately half the items describing attitudes toward Arabs, the average scores for the experimental group were statistically significantly higher than those for the comparison group.

³ The attitudes of the program graduates one year after they had graduated (completing 7th grade) were examined at the same time as when the attitudes of the program participants completing the 6th grade were examined. Accordingly, it is not possible to examine the consistency of the program's impact on **individual** students over the three-year period.

- ✓ The program graduates showed less biased attitudes concerning stereotypes attributed to either group. More students in the experimental group than in the comparison group perceived both peoples as honest, modest, and brave – and as arrogant, violent, and warmongering – in the same degree.

Conclusion

At the start of the study (the beginning of the 5th grade), 75% of the children in the entire sample (some 1,000 children from 35 schools) wanted to understand Arabic to a very great or extremely great extent; 61% stated that they would like to learn to speak Arabic to a very great or extremely great extent; and 55% stated that they would like to learn to read and write the language to a very great or extremely great extent. These findings show that there is a high level of interest in learning Arabic among Israeli-Jewish students.

The Ya Salam program is now implemented by the Ministry of Education, which employs teachers from the Arab sector to teach Arabic and Arab culture to 5th and 6th grade classes in Hebrew schools. The program has successfully provided students with conversation skills and with a solid foundation in Arabic, which is also useful in studies of MSA and was manifested in their achievements at the end of the 7th grade, which were higher than those of the students in the comparison group.

The program has also secured positive change in the students' attitudes toward Arabs in Israel; in reducing negative stereotypes about Arabs; and in enhancing the affinity of the principals toward Arabic and Arab culture. The program also changed the attitudes of the Arab teachers toward Jews.⁴ Principals, students, and the program teachers all expressed a high level of satisfaction with Ya Salam. Arabic teachers in 7th-grade junior-high classes (Jewish teachers of MSA, who are not necessarily familiar with the program) also stated that it made a contribution to the students who participated in it.

The empirical findings of the study thus show that the program was successful and made a contribution in academic terms and in terms of values. The natural recommendation is that the program should continue to be operated, with a further reinforcement of the connection between spoken Arabic and MSA, both in the curriculum itself and through the in-service training programs for junior-high school teachers.

⁴ This study did not examine the opinions of the other teachers in the Hebrew schools regarding the impact of the program and the integration of the Arab teachers in the school.