

Position Paper Presented to the Ministry of Education, March 24th, 2020

Digital Gaps and Repercussions for Remote Learning for Arab Students

The Corona crisis has required the education system to switch to a digital format, remote learning, with the aid of technology. Teachers, students, and parents must utilize computers, and digital applications and pedagogic tools. Arab society, which has suffered from persistent inequality and discrimination in the area of education, from the establishment of the State until today, finds itself with a wide digital gap as compared to Jewish society. Arab society is entering this period without adequate material resources or the necessary skills. All of these factors point to a significant challenge to education in this Corona period, which will again leave Arab society behind and will increase the gap.

The Abraham Initiatives has been operating in the education arena for many years. Throughout these years of activities with teachers and students in Arab and Jewish schools, the digital gaps between the two societies has been constant. Now, with the outbreak of Corona, these gaps take on an acute magnitude. From discussions with principals and teachers in Arab schools, we know that their students suffer from a variety of problems which make them unable to participate in remote learning.

Digital gaps exist on the material level, of access to resources and also regarding proficiency in their usage to effectively participate in remote learning.

Causes of the Digital Gap in Arab Society

Access to Computers – For many years, a significant gap has existed between Arab and Jewish societies with relation to access to computers, and to the internet via computer. The gap is closing, but slowly. In a survey conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics, 71% of Arab respondents reported that they connected to the internet with their telephones, and only 43% reported use of a computer at home, as compared with 77% of Jewish respondents. Personal computers are a better tool than mobile phones for educational purposes. Arabs in Israel are poorer than Jews, for the most part, and purchasing a computer is beyond their means.

Infrastructure Not Adequate for Remote Learning – Infrastructure for internet usage in most Arab towns is poor, and the bandwidth inadequate for supporting current internet resources which require use of video and visual graphics components. A report prepared by Israel's Internet Association in 2018, indicated the need to upgrade the internet and cellular infrastructure in Arab towns to be equivalent to that in Jewish towns and mixed cities. Without a stable and up-to-date infrastructure with broadband capabilities, it is not possible to enable adequate access for students and teachers to resources designed for education and study.¹ Arab

¹ The Internet Association of Israel recommends that the Ministry of Communications require the following: a) communication infrastructure providers (Bezeq/HOT/Optic Fiber Initiative) Unlimited to install advanced internet structures in Arab towns under the framework of the principles of universal deployment. b) Internet providers (ISP Netvision/Cellcom/012, Partner, Bezeq International, Exphone) to establish and support fast broadband internet in all Arab towns. Alternatively, the new providers might be encouraged to provide access and support services in Arab society. c) Cellular providers (Cellcom, Partner, Pelephone, Hot Mobile, Golan Telecom) should establish and support an array of cellular antennas in all Arab towns according to the accepted standard in Jewish towns and mixed cities. The Internet Association of Israel recommends that the Ministry of

schools cannot implement a program using technology without the necessary infrastructure. Therefore, one cannot expect pupils to routinely use the internet, or to compare Arab students and teachers to their Jewish counterparts, as long as digital resources are not comparable.

Teachers' Lack of Proficiency in Digital Learning – As mentioned, many schools in the Arab community do not have the resources to utilize digital learning on a regular basis. They lack computers and screens in classrooms, and thus, these are not used for instruction. This fact is the reason that teachers and their students now are entering the Corona crisis unprepared to work on-line. Teachers in the Jewish community have been working with these resources for many years.

Students' and Parents' Lack of Proficiency in Use of Digital Tools for Education – According to surveys which were conducted in the recent past, Arab citizens of Israel, including schoolchildren and their parents, are proficient in using the internet for social networking, entertainment and culture, but not for educational purposes. They are not in the habit of using computers for pedagogic purposes.

Inferior Content Offered by the Ministry of Education to the Arab Community – With the outbreak of the Corona crisis, the Ministry of Education established a portal for on-line learning in the Hebrew language. A parallel portal—to some extent—was set up in Arabic, but a comparative study revealed that the resources were inferior to those in Hebrew. This was true regarding the technological enrichment material as well as live lessons on-line.

For instance, in an examination conducted on 22/3/20, we found that lessons for children, grades 1-6, in the Hebrew system were offered until 15:45. The hours of learning offered in the Arabic system were shorter; grades 1-4 until 12:45, and grades 5-6 until 13:45. Grades 7-12 in the Hebrew school system studied until 16:45, whereas in the Arabic system, only until 15:45. The content offered was also significantly different. The Hebrew program offered enrichment classes with a writer, two plays, and one film. The Arabic language program offered only to workshops: a creative session about values and a session about the voyage to Mars. Subjects which were offered for Jews in Hebrew, but did not appear in Arabic, included film, art, and history.

In addition, the Ministry of Education portal appears only in Hebrew, including daily timetables. Among Arabs, the younger pupils cannot understand what is written on the portal and for older students and their parents, the Hebrew engenders disaffection and alienation.

Communication make sure that these demands be included in the conditions of all tenders for general providers (and if not, to add them) and to review their implementation, at least once every six months to assess the progress regarding implementation of the recommendations.

Summary – Recommended Steps to Narrow the Gaps between Arab and Jewish Society

1. **Comparable On-Line Learning Program from the Ministry of Education**, both in content and scope, and at the very least, the ministry should immediately upload Arabic language pages on its portal.
2. **Screen filmed lessons on a designated satellite channel**, to which almost all homes in Arab towns have access, to enable the viewing of lessons on television.
3. **Computer/tablet for every child** – the State should make sure that all students are in possession of the necessary equipment, with priority for Bedouin settlements in the south who are especially deprived. According to the data at our disposal: in the Negev there are 102,224 students. 36,000 live in unrecognized villages or in the villages of the local councils, Neve Midbar or ElKassum, without utilities. 20,000 live in neighborhoods within cities without utilities. 30,000 live in neighborhoods with utilities, but average eight children per family, generally with only one computer in the house. At least half of the students in the Negev have no access to the internet. To deal with this dilemma, equipment could be provided (tablets in places with cellular connectivity or laptop computers) through purchase, rental, or loan, and through the local welfare networks.
4. **Emergency Program for On-line Learning Training in Arab Communities** – This emergency program would instruct teachers, students, and parents in the use of technological platforms designed for education.

In this framework, teachers would be trained in remote educational tools (slide presentations and the use of Zoom, etc.) creating them and using them. It would include training and mentoring through implementation of the tools. Also, it would be effective to compile an array of shared digital resources by which teachers could close, in a short period, the gap in creating digital resources in Arabic.

In addition, to deal with the demands of remote learning, schools will need to hold training sessions for parents and children in the use of remote learning resources. The Ministry of Education should prepare video clips in Arabic that demonstrate the use of educational resources, preparing assignments and working at home, including printing skills, saving information, preparing slide presentations with the students' answers, et al.

5. **Necessary Long-term steps to close the digital gaps between Jewish and Arab society:**
 - a) **Infrastructure arrangement** - the Ministry of Communications must ensure that appropriate utilities are in place according to the standards in Jewish towns and mixed cities.
 - b) **Digitizing schools** – the Ministry of Education must provide the resources and equipment (computers, screens, and internet access) needed to digitize all schools in Arab communities.