Special Education Use among the Negev Bedouin Arabs of Israel: a case of minority underrepresentation? [1]

STEVEN C. DINERO
School of General Studies, Philadelphia University, School House Lane and Henry Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19144, USA (e-mail: DineroS@PhilaU.edu)

ABSTRACT This study takes the well-documented minority overrepresentation/disproportionality debate a step forward by asking if, and in what ways, overrepresentation and disproportionality may be seen among a non-American minority group, namely, the Arab citizens of Israel. Statistical evidence suggests that Arab children are more likely than Jewish children to be diagnosed as retarded and to be sent to special education schools. But why? Moreover, Negev bedouin Arab children appear to be underrepresented in special education environments. Might underrepresentation, like overrepresentation, also result from social group conflict? The article raises two interrelated questions: (1) is the dominant Jewish state fostering a culture of ‘disability’ among the minorities, using ‘disability’ diagnosis and labeling as vehicles of control and disempowerment; and (2) is the fact that the bedouin Arabs generally do not use special education services a sign of passive resistance to such a culture, or are there other possible explanations for bedouin underrepresentation in Israel’s special educational program?

Introduction

In the following analysis, I will discuss the question of minority disproportionality in special education, using a case study from outside of the USA. First, I will assess the literature concerning conflict and labeling theory perspectives, and how it helps to explain why members of minority groups are often overrepresented in special education environments. I will then examine the case of the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. I will give some general background and history about this community, and then will show that like African-Americans and other minorities in the USA, Arab children are disproportionately labeled as mentally retarded, and are overrepresented in Israel’s special education programs. Lastly, I will highlight the situation of a subgroup of Arab citizens, the Negev bedouin. I will report on information that I gathered among this group during the 1990s that suggests that rather than being overrepresented in special education schools, the bedouin are underrepresented. I will conclude by arguing that this fact does not contradict the conflict theoretical approach to labeling and disproportionality. Rather, it only further confirms my
contention that the Arabs of Israel live within a culture of post-colonized minority oppression, and that bedouin underrepresentation in special education is as much a sign of this culture as the overrepresentation found within the rest of Israel’s Arab sector.

**Minority Representation in Special Education Programs: culture as ‘disability’**

The issue of minority overrepresentation in special education programs has been well documented over the past few decades. This literature has emphasized a number of themes mainly related to disproportional representation of minority members in special education programs. What is significant about these themes is that all concern the question of ‘disability’ as a social construct, a construct that quite clearly is influenced by the social constraints and power relations found within a given society.

Coutinho & Oswald (2000), for example, argue that disproportionality may indeed stem from ‘referral, assessment, and eligibility that are culturally and linguistically loaded’ (p. 147). This is to say that, while the cause of a ‘disability’ may have a number of explanations, the literature is clear that ‘disability,’ especially mental ‘disability,’ is a sociocultural construct (Patton, 1998), or even a ‘cultural fabrication’ (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

Thus, a process of labeling is involved in mental retardation diagnosis. The label of retardation assigns a ‘defect’ to an individual; those given this label are somehow lacking in relation to the norm (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Such systemic labeling is problematic at the community level, as well as at the individual level, where labels have the potential to impact a child’s sense of self-worth and esteem in negative ways (Valles, 1998).

Perhaps the contention that labeling is used by dominant societies against minority groups is most easily validated by the fact that minority overrepresentation in special education is limited to the moderately retarded, not the physically disabled or those with severe forms of retardation (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Rather, it is found almost solely in ‘disability’ areas where outsider opinion plays a primary role in diagnosis (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Patton, 1998). The significance of this is clear; mental disabilities require a judgment on the part of others (presumably trained professionals) to diagnose a ‘disability.’ In essence, they ‘make it so.’

As a result, the determination of who is retarded must by definition be a relative science, comparing one group of people with another in an effort to define who is ‘normal.’ Thus, assessment and labeling of the mentally disabled is a systemic issue. If the system is in some way biased or prejudicial toward/against a certain group, then referral and assessment will similarly be biased (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

Like labeling theorists, conflict theorists too are especially likely to see the construction of mental ‘disability’ from within this context, where the dominant group manipulates power differentials in an effort to further control and disempower ethnic, racial, linguistic or other minorities.
These… theorists hold that education, and thus special education, grounded in structured power relationships, is designed to serve the interests of the dominant social, political, and economic classes ... [Therefore] the structures, processes, assumptions, and beliefs of the dominant classes are deeply imbedded in the special education knowledge base. (Patton, 1998, p. 28)

As will be seen in the Arab case study that follows, such power relationships described by conflict theory are central to the argument presented here that retardation diagnosis and labeling are tools used by the dominant group to control or even oppress the minority groups with whom it shares scarce resources.

**Difference as Defect: minorities as ‘disabled’ people**

The social constructs of ‘those who are disabled’ and those who are ‘culturally different from the dominant classes’ share some similarities, for both concern the issue of ‘difference’ as one relates to the dominant group’s society and culture:

The notion of disability exists because we have established parameters to judge when a person functions anatomically, physiologically, intellectually and/or psychosocially within the limits of what is considered typical. On the other hand, cultural diversity is not defined—at least theoretically—by a standard parameter of functioning. Although it is also concerned with the idea of difference, it is not—unlike the disability construct—inherently linked to the notion of deviance ... nevertheless ... we have been socialized to equate these two notions almost unconsciously. (Artiles & Trent, 1994, pp. 424–425)

As a result, the issue of difference is at the heart of the discussion of both minority status issues, as well as the definition of being ‘disabled.’ Artiles contends that discussions over ‘disability’ overrepresentation among minorities have often ‘ignored the fact that minority people are seen as “different” in our society and that the way we treat difference in our society raises complex dilemmas’ (Artiles, 1998, p. 32) relating to national identity, culture and values.

Indeed, the issue of being ‘disabled’ may be seen not only as being different, but also as having some sort of deficit. If one does not behave within the norms of society, one can be seen to be lacking. As McDermott & Varenne suggest:

the problem in assuming that there is one way to be in a culture encourages the misunderstanding that those who are different from the perceived norms are missing something, that it is their doing, that they are locked out for some reason, that they are in fact, in reality, ‘disabled.’ (1995, p. 326)

Further, constructs emphasizing ‘deficit’ place blame upon the disabled person, in so far as he/she is seen as lacking in some way as compared with the rest of society. Thus, it can be argued that dominant culture acts as a ‘disabler’ (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). This is seen particularly among groups that have become minorities as a result of the processes of colonization. Just as a sense of lost control may help
in defining the end results of colonization, so too may such disempowerment help in defining ‘disability.’ In this way, the loss of culture and identity resulting from colonization can itself be seen as helping to define ‘disability.’ As Ariotti suggests in regard to the Anangu of Australia, an Aboriginal minority, this loss of culture, self-definition and control is ‘perhaps the most important feature of “disability”’. In this regard, at least, all Anangu may be defined as, at the very least, somewhat “impaired”—a condition which only developed following Australia’s colonization (Ariotti, 1998, p. 84, emphasis added).

From the perspective outlined above, the conflict theory argument explaining minority involvement in special education programs is compelling. And yet, it should be recognized that disproportional minority representation in special education programs also might exist because ethnic or other minority groups are, for various reasons, more vulnerable to educational ‘disability.’ Whether a result of power relations or less overt socio-economic causes, minority overrepresentation in special education programs for the mentally retarded is seen as ‘problematic’ in much of the present literature (see, for example, Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles, 1998; Patton, 1998).

That said, some efforts to respond to disproportionality might result, perhaps inadvertently, in children losing access to special education services (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). In other words, when considering whether disproportionality is a problematic concern, a distinction should be made to determine not only that minority overrepresentation in special education programs exists, but also why it exists. Moreover, while the disproportionality debate should not be ignored, it may be questioned whether solving the overrepresentation problem will resolve systemic biases in minority education programming (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). The desire to achieve social justice and ethical behavior are cornerstones of special education (Artiles, 1998). And yet, taking an ‘ethic of caring’ too far can result in attitudes and views directed toward minorities which are inherently paternalistic; instead of ‘other’ being portrayed as someone who is feared, ‘other’ can become someone who is pitied (Patton, 1998).

Thus, a key question that I wish to raise here is whether designating minority members for special education is doing them a service at all—or whether such labeling and assessment is not, ipso facto, a disservice, and a potential tool of power used by dominant groups to control and oppress minority populations. The following examination of the case of special needs education for the mentally retarded among the Arab minorities of Israel will help to shed some light on this question.

### The Palestinian Arab Citizens of Israel

The theoretical framework within which Arab special education will be addressed here is premised upon a differential in social group positioning. My contention is that ethnic and religious differences between the dominant Jewish Israeli society and the Arab minority, when combined with a power struggle over land and resources over the past several years, have come to form a ‘disabling environment’ in today’s Israel.
Following Blumer (see Bobo, 1999), the basic elements of this environment include a sense of dominant group superiority, a sense that the subordinate group is ‘intrinsically different and alien,’ a sense of rightful claim to land and other resources, and a perceived threat from the minority group that members of the subordinate group may challenge the dominant group in an attempt to achieve parity. As Bobo notes, the fear of such desires to challenge or threaten the group positioning status quo feeds into the perpetuation of prejudicial attitudes. These in turn, it may be argued, feed into a culture and environment within which difference and ‘disability’ become one.

The following policy analysis is based on the collection of previously published data, as well as data gathered through personal interviews conducted in Israel concerning special education in the Arab sector. As will be discussed, the stigmatized nature of mental ‘disability’ among Palestinian Arabs makes gathering solid statistics difficult. The identity of the families of the mentally disabled is not a matter of public record; discussion of ‘disability’ is taboo, further hampering successful interviewing and statistics gathering. Similarly, the state’s information is also incomplete, in so far as the Arabs are generally mistrustful of state interests and motivations, and are reluctant to cooperate with the state concerning sensitive, potentially damaging issues to the family or community such as mental ‘disability’.

Moreover, and perhaps most relevant to the discussion that follows, much of the information about Arabs in special education environments is carefully guarded by the state [2]. Indeed, Aziz Haidar—himself an Arab citizen of Israel—notes in his work on Arab social welfare that ‘our attempt to reach some kind of evaluation of the situation of the physically and mentally handicapped in the Arab sector revealed that writing about this topic would be most problematical’ (1991, p. 55). The reason for this, he asserts, is that very little official data on the topic is in fact available for public consumption.

The Background and History of Israel’s Palestinian Arab Minorities

Israel’s Arab citizens, a numeric minority comprising about 18% of the Israeli population, differ from the dominant Jewish society ethnically, linguistically, and religiously [3]. They also experience higher rates of crime, unemployment, and poverty than their Jewish neighbors; according to state statistics, an Arab child is three times as likely to live in an impoverished environment as a Jewish child (Jerusalem Post, February 23, 2001). They are, in effect, Israel’s underclass.

There is a variety of political, social, cultural and economic factors that have contributed to this status over the past six decades. Whether ruled by leftist or rightist parties, certain popular ideologies may be used to typify the Israeli state. Among these are Zionism and the absorption of world Jewry (Torgovnik, 1975), as well as national pride and, until very recently, numerous common enemies. The very nature of Israel as an immigrant society experiencing ongoing social change while at times fighting for its very survival as a national entity further fostered the development of a highly centralized state, in which Jewish political, economic and social values and ideals are paramount. In this context, non-Jews are known within the
country as the ‘minorities’ (Hebrew, ha’miutim), a term which serves to single them out as separate from the Jewish mainstream. Though the Arabs are a clear minority in demographic terms, ‘referring to them as minorities [also] carries the clear political message that a Jewish state means a Jewish majority’ (Rabinovich & Reinharz, 1984, p. 293).

Officially, non-Jews are equal citizens with all of the rights and privileges afforded to Israel’s Jewish citizens. The very proclamation of the creation of the State of Israel on May 16, 1948, calls upon the country’s Arab inhabitants to ‘return to the ways of peace and play their part in the development of the State with full and equal citizenship’ (cited in Rabinovich & Reinharz, 1984, p. 15). And yet, from the outset, the status and conditions of the Arabs differentiated them from their Jewish neighbors. Their liberties were curtailed for the first 18 years of statehood, due primarily to concerns for security, stability, and control. A Military Administration was created in order to protect Jewish citizens from reprisal raids, and to maintain order in those areas with the highest concentrations of Arab inhabitants, primarily the Galilee and the Negev. This military government was abolished in the Arab sector only in 1966 (Rabinovich & Reinharz, 1984). Despite this change, the condition of the Arabs of Israel has continued since then to be largely that of a disempowered, albeit increasingly vociferous, minority.

What makes this condition even more problematic, however, is the fact that since statehood, Israel has continued to fight for its very survival against common enemies who were, like the majority of Israel’s minorities, Arab Muslims. More to the point, the Arabs became Israeli citizens only as a result of the Jewish colonization and eventual conquest of Palestine, having lost the land to the newcomers during Israel’s Independence War. These facts only further complicate the ongoing strained relationship between Israel’s Jewish and Arab communities.

Separator but Equal: education provision in Israel’s Palestinian Arab community

Given the background history of the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, it is now possible to address the issue of disproportionality and overrepresentation of Arab children in special education environments. Indeed, the dynamics of the relationship between the Jewish state and the Arab minorities in Israel is connected to virtually every aspect of Arab life, including social service delivery. In terms of educational structure, Israel has two systems, one for Jewish Israelis, and one for the Arab Israelis. Indeed, since the early years of the state’s existence, the two systems have operated largely independently. The Arab system initially was structured within the Department of Arab Education, which was aligned with the Military Administration and the state apparatus as a whole. The system was decentralized in the 1970s (al-Haj, 1995), though Arab education still remains separate from the Jewish system in the present day.

The division between the Arab and Jewish educational systems stemmed from a structure inherited from the Ottomans prior to the creation of the state (al-Haj, 1995), as well as from the fact that the communities have different interests and concerns regarding their children’s education. The curricula of the two systems, for
example, vary considerably; children in Arab schools study Arabic, Arab history, and Islam, while children in Jewish schools are educated in the culture, values and history of the Jewish community (see al-Haj, 1995, for an extensive discussion; also see Arab Association for Human Rights, November 20, 2000).

While the separation between the two systems is not inherently discriminatory, some observers note the distinct qualitative and quantitative differences between the two systems (Haidar, 1991; al-Haj, 1995; Abu-Saad, 1995, 1996). Indeed, al-Haj contends that these differences are not incidental, but in fact accomplish another state goal, which is directly related to control of the minorities. The provision of a bifurcated educational system, he argues, aids the Jewish establishment in its efforts to pacify the Arabs by implying that they are receiving separate, albeit equal, treatment to that of the Jews. At the same time, however, al-Haj notes that the state is able to control fully the Arab educational agenda from above through such a division in order to achieve its own anti-Arab nationalist, pro-Zionist purposes. He suggests that:

[an] analysis of Arab educational goals and curricula leads to a clear conclusion that they are aimed at creating a submissive Arab, ready to accept his inferiority vis-à-vis the superiority of the Jews and at disparaging, weakening, and annihilating the Palestinian Arab identity. (al-Haj, 1995, p. 127)

Abu-Saad notes too that school budgets, resources, and teaching hours all are unequal between the two systems, and are biased in favor of the Jewish community. He cites numerous government statistics (1995), all of which reveal total inequity between the Arab and Jewish educational systems. To cite examples relevant here, he writes that 99% of the positions for educational psychologists are in the Jewish sector, as are 97% of the centers devoted to students with learning disabilities. As a result, he concludes, ‘the disparity between the Jewish and Arab school systems is reflected in their respective levels of achievement’ (p. 152). While Jewish students are prepared to succeed, his data reveal that Arab students seem to be prepared for failure. Clearly, these statistics offer cogent evidence of social group conflict and minority inequality in Israel, especially, though not solely, within the field of education. As will be seen below, the inequalities found within Arab special education are even more blatant and acute, and well exemplify the trend of minority disproportionality and overrepresentation in special education environments. It will be seen too that while Arabs are overrepresented in terms of the rolls of the special education school, funding and resource provision are also disproportionately skewed in favor of the Jewish sector.

Special Education and Disproportionate Diagnosis in the Arab Sector

As noted above, minority overrepresentation and disproportionality concern two related issues, retardation diagnosis, and the percentage of children being sent to special education environments. Evidence suggests that the Arabs of Israel are in fact diagnosed as retarded more often than Jews. Further, Israel’s Arab citizens are
sending their children to special education facilities at higher rates than Jewish Israelis.

Regarding diagnosis, the state estimates the rate of mental disabilities among the Arabs at a relatively modest 15% (www.education.gov.il/edu). And yet, a 1978 study (cited in Haidar, 1991) found a rate of diagnosed retardation of Galilee Arab youth of 23.7%. The research team believed at the time that this figure was an underestimate (due to underreporting, fear of stigma, etc.), and that in fact the Arab retardation rate should have been even higher. Indeed, 20 years later, the Joint Distribution Committee–Brookdale Institute, a non-partisan, non-sectarian Jewish organization, published research results which also suggested that Arabs are in fact diagnosed at a higher rate than Jews in Israel, saying that Arab children are three times more likely to be identified as having mental disabilities than Jewish children (Naon et al., 1998).

The authors of the JDC–Brookdale study found that overall, Arabs were overrepresented (two to three times higher than Jews) in what they termed the ‘most serious’ disabilities, such as problems with activities of daily living, emotional problems, retardation, and blindness, while Jews had higher rates of behavioral, speech, and educational disabilities. Like the authors of the 1978 study, they suggested that the Arab rates were actually higher in the aforementioned areas as well, attributing the higher Jewish rates to underreporting in the Arab sector. In other words, both research teams assumed *prima facie* that disproportional Arab representation was not extraordinary or exceptional, but rather, was to be expected.

A 2000 study, also sponsored by JDC–Brookdale, confirms these statistics. This study once again found that Arab children were twice as likely to be diagnosed as retarded as Jewish children; 0.8% in the Arab sector, and 0.4% in the Jewish sector (as cited in Weisel et al., 2000, p. 16). Weisel et al. note, however, that only towns larger than 2500 inhabitants were included in this study, and that the Arabs of Israel tend to live in small villages, rather than in urban centers. Thus, they too conclude that had small towns been included in the research, the Arab retardation rate may indeed have been higher still. In any case, Weisel et al. attribute this difference in rates to use of differing diagnostic tools and evaluative systems in the two sectors, and not to the reality of the situation.

Disproportionality on the diagnosis side of the issue appears also to be manifested in terms of a greater percentage of Arab parents sending their children to special education programs than Jewish parents. Arab children comprise 20% of the total Israeli elementary school population, and 15% of the high school population (Abu-Saad, 1995). Yet, Arab children in special education classrooms in Israel are estimated to comprise approximately 25–30% of the total special needs population (Haidar, 1991; Arab Association for Human Rights, August 28, 2000).

**Qualitative Problems of Special Education Services**

While overrepresentation of Arabs in special education provides one piece of evidence concerning the minority group’s control by the Jewish state, it is significant to point out that, according to a number of Arab and Jewish sources (see, for
example, Haidar, 1991; al-Haj, 1995; Jerusalem Report, 1999; Arab Association for Human Rights, August 28, 2000), the most egregiously overlooked service provision in the Arab sector historically has been special needs education. Problems in Arab special education include not only the quality of the services provided, but their quantity. Inadequate supplies, classrooms, and qualified teachers are problematic throughout the special needs schools of the Arab sector.

Indeed, Israel’s Special Education Law (1988) calls for free and individualized education to all Israeli children according to their needs. Students are entitled to schooling, free transportation to school, lunch and physical therapy (Jerusalem Report, 1999). And yet nowhere in this law is there mention of the rights or unique needs of the disabled within Israel’s minority communities (Arab Association for Human Rights, August 28, 2000).

Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, has been one of the most visible critics of the Arab special education system. In remarks made before the United Nations in Geneva in 1998, Adalah officials stated that:

it is widely recognized that Arab students with special needs are not adequately provided for by the state, and that funds for special education are unequally allocated to the Jewish and Arab school systems. (www.adalah.org)

For example, despite the high rate of Arab retardation diagnosis, only 44 (17%) of the 266 special education facilities in Israel are in Arab communities (www.education.gov.il). Further, Arab children in special education are allotted a far smaller number of teaching hours than Jewish children, receiving only 10% of the total teaching hours in the country as a whole [4], while 90% of the hours are committed to the Jewish sector (Weisel et al., 2000). According to Shatil, a part of the New Israel Fund (a Jewish Israeli organization), 83% of special education facilities in the Arab sector are not adequately equipped with the teaching resources needed to educate the children in attendance (as cited by the Galilee Society, www.gal-soc.org).

State policy towards the mentally retarded also suggests that Arabs in Israel experience uneven access and treatment. Mainstreaming is the endorsed special education policy of the Israeli Ministry of Education and Culture (www.israel-mfa.gov.il), yet Jewish children tend to be mainstreamed at far greater rates than Arab children. According to year 2000 national statistics for the Arab and Jewish sectors combined, 53% of those diagnosed as mildly retarded, 10% of those diagnosed as moderately retarded, and 2% of those diagnosed as severely or profoundly retarded who are in school (grades 1–9) are mainstreamed into regular classrooms (adapted from: www.education.gov.il/special/netunim.htm). Though the raw number of pupils in Israel’s special education schools, Arab and Jewish combined, increased by nearly 2000 between 1989 and 1995, the percentage of Israeli pupils in special education frameworks dropped from 3.6% to 3.3% during that same period (adapted from: www.education.gov.il/edu).

And yet, during the same time period, the number of Arab pupils enrolled in special education continues to rise at a far higher rate than that of Jewish pupils.
Over the past two decades (1980–2000), Arab enrollment in special education has increased by nearly 300%; in the Jewish sector, the increase is a more modest 16% (adapted from: www.education.gov.il/edu).

As this discussion indicates, disproportionality, overrepresentation, and inadequate special education resources are relevant concerns in the Arab sector in Israel. But these trends are not found among all groups within the Arab sector. Rather, disproportionate underrepresentation, where fewer children are found in the special education system than one would expect, is found within the Negev bedouin community. Below, I will argue that underrepresentation of bedouin children in special education environments is as problematic as overrepresentation is within the Arab sector as a whole.

A Minority within the Minority: the case of the Negev bedouin Arabs

As Arab Muslims, the Negev bedouin cannot be divorced from the rest of the Arab community in Israel as a whole. The bedouin are a small minority group within the Arab sector, whose social, economic, and political dependence upon the Jewish sector parallels that of other Arab groups. And yet, the recent history of government relations with the bedouin community reveals that they, as a minority within a minority, experience even greater economic, social, and political peripheralization than their urban brethren. This, in turn, appears to play a key role in the issue of bedouin involvement with special education programming.

In brief, the Israeli Government has sought to resettle the formerly pastoral, post-nomadic bedouin since the early years following the state’s creation in 1948 in order to further its control of the Negev region. Beginning in the late 1940s and early 1950s, efforts were made to initiate settlement of the bedouin in permanent, concentrated areas (for further discussion, see, for example, Boneh, 1983; Dinero, 1996). In the mid-1960s, these efforts were formalized through the creation of a new town program with the hope of modernizing the society and economy of the bedouin community, now Israeli citizens, through the provision of services (health, education, infrastructure, social welfare) deemed essential to all Israelis (Horner, 1982; Boneh, 1983). At the same time, spontaneous settlements outside of the planned sites were deemed illegal.

In 2000, the number of bedouin living in one of the seven towns is nearly 60% of the total population of 120,000 (Statistical Yearbook, 1999), while about 40% still live in traditional goat-hair tents or, increasingly, informally built shacks, in the periphery. Beyond their geographic relocation, the Negev bedouin have experienced a variety of documented social and economic changes (see, for example, Dinero, 1997), largely as a result of the resettlement and service provision initiative.

Formal education provision has played a primary role in this change. A compulsory education law was passed in 1949, though only in 1968 did all bedouin tribes have schools (Abu-Saad, 1991). My own longitudinal research conducted in Segev Shalom/Shqeb, one of the smallest of the planned bedouin towns, has found that the percentage of residents accessing formal education rose consistently during the 1990s. The percentage of high school aged children actually in school rose from only
73% in 1992–93 to 92% in 1996–97 (see Dinero, 1996); according to data I collected in 2000, this figure reached nearly 100% during the 1999–2000 school year. This may be compared to the year 1970, when only 23% of school-aged bedouin children were actually in school (Maddrell, 1990). A likely explanation for this development is that the state’s bedouin resettlement agenda has long been concerned with the encapsulation of this sector through the provision of government-sponsored public services, including implementation of an education program for all youths under age 16.

And yet, as Abu-Saad notes throughout his research (1995, 1996), education provision in the bedouin community is infamous for its poor quality. The bedouin schools in general are poorly equipped, and lack adequate staffing by bedouin community members. There is a severe shortage of classrooms for bedouin pupils, further inhibiting equal educational access (Lithwick, 2000). Schools in planned towns are better overall than those in unplanned areas (Maddrell, 1990; Abu-Saad, 1995), but still lack adequate facilities, qualified staff, and equipment. That said, provision of formal education to bedouin families in the planned towns is a primary component of the state’s social development agenda, and has proven to be a major attraction in the towns, utilized by the vast majority of settlers (see Dinero, 1996).

Although Israel’s Arab schools, and especially bedouin schools, have long experienced especially high drop-out rates in comparison with schools for Jewish Israelis (Abu-Saad, 1991; Haidar, 1991; Abu-Saad, 1995), the statistics quoted above suggest an increasing bedouin acceptance of education as a vehicle for economic success in the competitive Israeli economy. A direct correlation found between bedouin educational level and the likelihood of holding a wage labor job (Dinero, 1996) only furthers the contention that today, formal education is an essential element for individual success as pastoralism declines in practice and relevance in the community.

**Mental Retardation in the Negev Bedouin Community**

Given that historically, discussion of retardation within the Palestinian community was taboo (Abu-Habib, 1997), documented concern over the issue—or indeed, knowledge of its very existence—is relatively recent. The reason that retardation is of major concern today is largely circumstantial, related in part to the intensified encounter between the bedouin and the Jewish social and cultural establishment that has occurred since resettlement.

In the recent past, the Negev bedouin community lived in a dispersed environment, remote from, and experiencing limited interactions with, Europeans or other Westerners. Since resettlement, however, Jewish Israeli social workers, educators, and health care professionals have had increasing contact with the bedouin community. Thus, a particularly high incidence of developmental disabilities has only recently been identified, and has been found to be considerably higher than that in the Jewish Israeli population. According to the Masos Regional Council Office of Social Welfare, for example, the incidence of mental ‘birth defects’ among the bedouin is four times higher than that in the Jewish population (Masos
Indeed, the Masos social workers believe that one sub-tribe averages one diagnosed mentally disabled child per nuclear family. Another sub-tribe, located in the periphery of the town of Kafr Muntahal (a pseudonym), has been identified by social workers as having a 60% rate of developmental ‘disability’ at birth.

Officials typically blame the high incidence of ‘disability’ not on any structural or diagnostic difference between the bedouin and Jewish communities, but rather, on bedouin behaviors. In essence, bedouin actions are seen to be responsible for the ‘creation’ of disabled children. Women who continue to bear children well into the late fertility years, or who have large numbers of children (one-half of bedouin families in the towns average four or more children [Statistical Yearbook, 1999] and families outside the towns tend to have even more children) are seen as helping to contribute toward the mentally retarded population. The authorities also blame intramarry, and the fact that as many as 85% of marriages are traditional bint am, first cousin, marriages [5] and 10% are between second cousins (Belmaker, 1993) as a primary explanation for the high bedouin retardation rate (see Carmi, 1998).

Thus, Jewish health care and social welfare professionals place the onus of the bedouin ‘retardation problem’ upon the bedouin families themselves. It is up to them, they contend, to anticipate the problem in advance, and to alter their behaviors; for example, by seeking genetic counseling prior to marriage (Carmi, 1998), rather than to risk reproducing yet more disabled children. Not only is this cultural bias not fully helpful to the bedouin community that these professionals serve, but also, as will be seen below, such views accomplish little in the way of encouraging parents to send those children who are diagnosed to bedouin special education programming.

The Kafr Muntahal School for Special Education: description and analysis

Understandably, special education in the bedouin community is a relatively new concept. The first class for special needs education in the Negev bedouin community outside the major bedouin city of Rahat (not included in this case study) was created in 1988 (Abu-Majhul, July 23, 1996). The program was not fully established until the early 1990s, when the Ministry of Education created two schools for special needs outside the bedouin town of Kafr Muntahal. The first, designated for the mildly mentally disabled, served only seven students during the 1992–93 school year and the other, for the severely disabled, had 24 students.

By 1994, the bedouin special education program was restructured (Abu-Majhul Pamphlet, 1996) with the creation of a single more specialized school for mentally retarded children. At the time, students were divided by level of ‘disability’: moderate, severe and profound (Abu-Majhul, July 23, 1996). The school had 34 pupils that year: two classes served the moderately retarded, and one class each served those diagnosed as severely retarded and profoundly retarded (Abu-Majhul Pamphlet, 1996; Abu-Majhul, July 2000).

By 1999, the school population had grown by 365%, and was comprised of 16 classes of 124 pupils (see Table I). Impressive as this growth may appear, it should
Table I. Number of classrooms for the mentally disabled at the Kafr Muntahal School in 1999, by type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom type</th>
<th>Number of classrooms</th>
<th>Number of pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderate retardation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe retardation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profound retardation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: adapted from Abu-Majhul, July 2000, p. 2.*

be kept in mind that at the time, there were 20,082 bedouin pupils, grades 1–9, in the six recognized towns (excluding Rahat; adapted from *Statistical Yearbook, 1999*), and the unrecognized villages of the periphery, the very areas which are served by the Kafr Muntahal School for Special Education.

The school employed 27 teachers and 59 professional staff in 1999, including social workers, psychologists, physical therapists, nurses and administrators. Between 1994 and 1999, the teacher/pupil ratio remained virtually unchanged (from 0.57 to 0.59; adapted from Abu-Majhul, July 2000). One-half of the teachers were bedouin and the rest were Arabs from the Galilee in northern Israel. Nearly 90% had special education teaching certificates (Abu-Majhul, July 20, 2000).

As for the student body, 60% were female, and 40% were male in 1999. This point is noteworthy, as it also contradicts the fact that throughout the Middle East, families are more likely to send their disabled sons to school rather than their disabled daughters (Abu-Habib, 1997). Students varied from age 3 to 21 (School Profile, 2000). About 53% of the pupils lived in one of the seven planned bedouin towns, and 47% lived outside, virtually mirroring the total population of bedouin in these environments. That said, 77% of the pupils from the towns traveled a minimum of 20 km one way to get to school each day; some students from outside the towns in the tent and shack settlement ‘periphery’ traveled as far as 60 km one way (adapted from Abu-Majhul, July 2000). Indeed, the school is located on the very edge of the town of Kafr Muntahal, and even pupils from that town travel a minimum of 5 km one way to get to school each day.

According to the official literature, the goals of the new Kafr Muntahal School entailed providing physical and spiritual support to its pupils. The school also sought to encourage ‘basic self-sufficiency,’ to improve learning habits and the ability to work, and provided therapy for improving speech and motor skills, social skills, and reading (Abu-Majhul Pamphlet, 1996). The Kafr Muntahal School curriculum was designed in order to meet these goals as well. Grades one through nine are represented in the school. At each grade, such courses as sewing/ornamentation and home economics are provided in addition to more traditional classroom subjects. The school also has several computer stations for student use, some modified with special foot pedals and browsers to accommodate the physical needs of some students.

While the Kafr Muntahal School population has grown slowly but steadily over
the past decade, Jewish social workers involved with the community have admitted that bedouin parents resist sending their children to the school. There are a number of possible explanations for this fact. First, social workers contend that part of their job is to identify such children, and then to encourage parents to send such children to the Kafr Muntahal School (Shimshoni, 1993). Indeed, some have noted that not all bedouin parents are able to determine that a problem with a child even existed—until a social worker explained the problem to them. Mothers who give birth at Soroka Hospital in Be’er Sheva (both bedouin and Jews alike) are informed upon the birth of a Down’s syndrome child so that they can seek assistance at the Office of Child Development and receive information on how to handle such a child’s special needs. And yet, social workers have noted that even the more ‘obvious’ existence of Down’s syndrome has gone undetected by bedouin parents, until informed by an educated professional (Shimshoni, 1993; Goren, 1993). Such labeling by outsiders is obviously problematic, and directly mirrors the conflict theoretical discussion outlined earlier.

Second, bedouin observers suggest that they themselves are unable to evaluate their own children as effectively as can Jewish professionals. Bedouin educators in the regular bedouin schools are criticized for being ill prepared to understand or work with the mentally retarded, or to identify who might be better served in a special needs environment. Indeed, one of the stated goals in Negev bedouin education is to identify and treat special problems such as retardation in the most appropriate setting possible. And yet, bedouin educators’ efforts to work with such special needs populations have been deemed ‘unprofessional and unsystematic’ (Abu-Rabiyya et al., 1996).

To be sure, there are other reasons why bedouin parents choose not to send their children to the Kafr Muntahal School. Traditionally, children who behaved differently (i.e. were ‘disabled’) in Palestinian Arab society were often forbidden to leave the family dwelling because of the issue of family shame and dishonor. This could influence not only the possibility of the youth in question being able to marry, but indeed, the marriage prospects of the youth’s siblings and other family members as well (Abu-Habib, 1997). Today, when a child is required by the Government to begin attending school by age six, the arrival of a special bus coming to take the child to a special school creates a ‘fact’ on the ground: the child is ‘disabled.’ This is particularly true in the towns, where the neighbors living in close proximity may see the arrival of a special bus. Therefore, parents are reluctant to allow a child to leave the household even when he or she reaches school age. Given that some children without special needs still do not attend school, especially in the periphery areas, the ability to protect a child from the ‘disability’ label is difficult, but not impossible.

Lastly and perhaps most significant, the special schools themselves were of distinctly poor quality in the past, and continue to lack the equivalent quantity and quality of services found among their Jewish counterparts. For example, the Kafr Muntahal School lacked adequate staff or programming in its early years of existence. A teacher in one of the schools in the early 1990s, who formerly served as janitorial staff, was illiterate and lacked even an elementary school education (Goren, 1993).
It is apparent that some improvements have been made in bedouin special education over the last decade. This is exemplified by the fact that the Israeli Government has increased the level of funding and attention paid to special education among the bedouin (Al-Baz, 1996). As a result, bedouin special educators in 2000 had access to a far greater number of resources than in the past, including specially designed facilities for the disabled, better communications between bedouin parents and trained special needs professionals, and even such basic conveniences as air conditioning in the Kafr Muntahal School itself.

Official statistics show there is little doubt that the majority of those Negev bedouin diagnosed as mentally retarded do not attend the Kafr Muntahal School. During the 1998–99 school year, 1024 classes (grades 1–12) could be found in the entire Negev bedouin community. Of these, 46, that is, only 4%, were special education classes in the Kafr Muntahal School and Rahat School for Special Education combined. In terms of actual students, only 1% of bedouin children who were in school were in special education classes during that academic year (adapted from Statistical Yearbook, 1999), comprising 2.8% of Israel’s special education student population (www.cbs.gov.il, Table 22.10a/b, 1998–99).

During the 1990s, the authorities believed that there were at least 150 additional children who could have attended the school, but that they had not been brought into the special education system at that time (Masos Regional Council, July 1993). As Headmaster Abu-Majhul notes, ‘a very small percentage choose [special education]’ (July 23, 1996). One reason, he suggests, is that regular education, or no schooling at all, is more appealing. The desire to try to mainstream one’s child into a regular school or keep them out altogether helps parents and families attempt to keep their children from being labeled and stigmatized as ‘disabled.’

And yet, an official report written in 1998 to the Ministry of Education anticipated that the number of bedouin special education classrooms must triple by the 2002/2003 school year (Katz et al., 1998) in order to meet anticipated need. To be sure, such figures are premised upon the state’s assumption that either (a) the disabled bedouin population will swell in the years ahead, or (b) bedouin parents who opted out in the past will now begin to send their children to the two schools for the disabled found in the community. Given the high rate of retardation diagnosis among the bedouin population, as well as the uncertainties of how many ‘hidden’ disabled there are in the community at present, perhaps both may be anticipated.

Discussion: are the Negev bedouin ‘victims’ of underrepresentation?

It is the contention here that the social, economic and political norms of Jewish Israeli culture and society are disabling to the Arab minorities. The fact that, overall, Palestinian Arab children in Israel are overrepresented within Israel’s special educational system (see Table II) places them in a situation not unlike that of African-Americans and other minority groups in the USA and elsewhere, where charges have long been made against the systemic disabling of minorities as a means of dominant group oppression.

Yet in the Israeli case, charges are also made by Jewish and Arab observers alike
### Table II. Summary of disproportionate diagnosis ratios and over/underrepresentation percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>All Arabs</th>
<th>Negev Bedouin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of children likely to be diagnosed as mentally disabled in this sector as related to those diagnosed in the Jewish sector of the population</td>
<td>3–1&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>4–1&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in these sectors as a percentage of all Israeli school children, grades 1–9</td>
<td>20%&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3.9%&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in these sectors as a percentage of all Israeli children studying in special education schools, grades 1–9</td>
<td>25–30%&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2.8%&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


(Haidar, 1991; al-Haj, 1995; Naon et al., 1998; Jerusalem Report, 1999; Adalah, 2000; Arab Human Rights Association, 2000), that oppression of the minorities is manifested not only through the labeling or diagnosing of minority youth as mentally retarded, but also via the dearth and quality of Arab special education facilities in relation to those found in the Jewish sector. The Arab case falls well within the bounds of the conflict theoretical ideological framework.

It is apparent that among the bedouin, the special education programming has grown over the past decade. But it is also clear that those who participate in special education are in the distinct minority. In this article it has been argued that, overall, Arabs are more likely to be diagnosed as mentally retarded and that Arabs are increasingly more likely to participate in special education. Clearly, the bedouin are diagnosed at a very high rate, like other Arabs, but they are not overrepresented in special education environments. Why is this so?

First, Israeli provision of services to the Arab community, and especially the bedouin community, has long been criticized for being far poorer in quantity and quality than equivalent provisions in the Jewish sector. Further, service provision in the bedouin community has a history of being problematic in other ways as well. On one side, the state has experienced logistical difficulties, as it typically lacked the needed resources—or, one might add, the necessary will—to reach the bedouin in their dispersed, distant environment in relation to Jewish Israel. At the same time, the bedouin have always proved reluctant and suspicious of state motives, given that service provision has always been connected to the resettlement initiative, and also often have not seen the value from a Jewish/Western perspective of the services being provided in any case (Dinero, 1996).

Thus, the Negev bedouin community’s underrepresentative use of special education, despite its presumed need, can be seen in two or more ways. On one side of the issue, the bedouin may ‘lack’ the knowledge, culture, or appreciation for educating the disabled in their community. They may question investing much time or funds into such individuals, especially if resources are limited (Abu-Habib, 1997).
Or further, they do not see the Kafr Muntahal School as the best option for their children, preferring to either send their children to regular schools, or not to school them at all.

But an additional dilemma for bedouin parents should also be noted, for it can be seen that sending one’s child to a special education classroom may be either an act of communal and individual empowerment, or disempowerment. By enrolling one’s child to study there, one is presumably helping that child to grow and develop to his or her fullest capacity. And yet, sending children to schools like the Kafr Muntahal School for Special Education also may be perceived as facilitating Jewish Israeli domination through a process of disablement, disempowerment, and prejudice. If so, then use of such a school serves to further strengthen Jewish control over the lives and futures of Israel’s minority communities. As Jewish Israelis hold most of the power when it comes to determining who is in fact ‘disabled,’ one way for the bedouin to counter this process is by refusing to accept the labels given to their children through the diagnosing process.

Thus, while individual family reasons for making this choice certainly vary, I would also contend that the bedouin Arab community is expressing an unwillingness to be ‘disabled’ by Jewish Israeli society. In effect, their not using special education services also serves, perhaps unwittingly, as a form of passive resistance against the dominant culture within which their society now resides.

I would not go so far as to assert that this is the only rationale behind their not using this service. But one could say that, from a Negev bedouin perspective, the educational provisions offered at the Kafr Muntahal School for Special Education may not be seen as a ‘service’ to their community at all, despite Jewish Israeli efforts to the contrary.

The ultimate unanswered question, then, is whether the state’s provision of special educational services is indeed a service or a disservice to the Arab communities. More to the point, is refusing to send one’s child to such a school an act of empowerment against the will of dominant state motivations? Events over the past half-century suggest that the Arabs in general and the Negev bedouin most especially will continue to live as disempowered minorities within the Jewish state that replaced what was once Palestine. From a Western perspective at least, such passive resistance toward the use of Israel’s special educational system—if this is in fact what is occurring—is at best, a questionable forum within which to fight for equal rights.

At the same time though, it may be contended that a state’s efforts to try to serve such a small minority sector may also provide a measure of what it means to be a ‘developed’ society in the twenty-first century. Perhaps the most developed state of the future will be that which views the ‘Fifth World,’ that is, that subgroup of a minority population which is physically or mentally different from those of the dominant culture and society, less as a burden to be overcome, and more as a community to be embraced within the wider definition of our evolving global society.

In the final analysis, just as determining who is ‘disabled’ may be in the eye of the holder, so too may determining the benevolence or malevolence of the state vis-à-vis this service provision also depend upon whether one is a member of the dominant
group, or of the minority. In this regard, at least, special education provision is no
different to any other similar issue that divides such competing interests.

Notes
[1] The author wishes to thank Dr Libby Cohen, the University of Southern Maine, and Dr
Katharine Jones, Philadelphia University, for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of
the article.
[2] Primary data for this article could only be obtained after having submitted the research
questions in advance to the Minister of Education, Culture & Sport—Southern Region, for
approval.
[3] The majority are Muslims, but about 10% are Christian.
[4] Official government estimates are closer to 15%; see: www.education.gov.il
[5] This statistic may be compared with a 40% rate of consanguine marriages in all of Arab

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