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Achievement Gaps in High-School Education among the Bedouin Society in the Negev

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Abstract

Background

The Bedouin population in the Negev is more than 250,000 people, situated at the bottom of Israel's socioeconomic rating. The Bedouin education system in the Negev is characterized by low achievements compared to the general education system in Israel. The professional literature suggests that Bedouin education suffers from many problems. The challenge facing policymakers is to find optimal solutions to these problems. The research reported here was conducted in 2022-23 at the request of the Ministry of Finance's Budgets Department. It focused on identifying the factors behind the educational gaps among the Bedouin society in the Negev and assessing their impact, with emphasis on the public secondary education system.¹

Objectives

1. Map the major problems of high-school education in Bedouin society in the Negev, and the barriers and challenges facing both students and educators.
2. Assess the relationships between educational inputs and the students' background variables and the outputs of Bedouin secondary education in the Negev, to identify factors potentially affecting academic attainment.

Methods

1. **Review of the professional literature**, addressing two questions: (1) What factors affect the outputs of the local education systems? (2) What are the unique characteristics of the Bedouin education system in the Negev?
2. **Qualitative analysis** of sixteen in-depth interviews with education system officials in the nine local authorities in the Negev, conducted during April-November 2022. Some of the data collected in the interviews were also used for quantitative analysis.

¹ The following terms are used in this report to indicate the various forms of settlement of the Bedouin population in the Negev: the 18 localities – 18 localities in the local authorities (town, local councils, and regional councils): the town of Rahat, the local councils of Hura, Kuseife, Lakiya, Ar'ara BaNegev, Segev Shalom, and Tel Sheva; the localities of the al-Kasom Regional Council: Umm Batin, al-Sayyid, Drijat, Kukhleh, Mulada, Makhul, and Tirabin al-Sana; and the localities of the Neve Midbar Regional Council: Abu Qrenat, Qasr al-Sir, Bir Hadaj, and Abu Talul.
Unregulated residences – residences outside the 18 localities.

3. **Quantitative analysis** of administrative secondary education data at both school and student level. The school-level data were collected from the Transparency in Education system at the Ministry of Education website, covering 33 secondary schools. Some of the data about these schools were collected in the in-depth interviews. The student-level data were collected in the virtual research room of the Ministry of Education, covering 4,814 12th-grade students.

Main Findings

1. Findings of Both the Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses

Some of the problems arising in the in-depth interviews have to do with the students' *socioeconomic situation*, including lack of infrastructures and difficulty arriving at school for students living in unregulated residences; low motivation among students who would rather help support their families than attend school; juvenile delinquency and its impact on the students; and the lack of additional educational programs due to economic difficulties. Analysis of the administrative data suggests that the rates of students entitled to a Bagrut (matriculation) certificate in schools with socioeconomically weaker populations were lower compared to those in schools with stronger populations. It was also found that the rates of Bagrut entitlement of students living in unregulated residences were comparatively low. The Bagrut rates of students whose fathers had completed 12 education years or more were relatively higher than those of students whose fathers had completed up to six education years. Finally, it was found that girls' odds of being entitled to the different types of Bagrut certificates examined in this study were 2.8 to 4.7 times higher than those of boys.

The in-depth interviews found that *teacher quality and training* were inadequate. The interviewees also reported a shortage of English and math teachers, as well as of teachers who spoke Hebrew at native speaker level. Analysis of the administrative data found that in schools where the number of teachers with an MA or higher degree was relatively high, the odds of earning Bagrut entitlement were higher compared to other schools.

The in-depth interviews showed that *divisions between tribes and clans* had a negative influence on the educational environment. They also suggested that when *appointing principals*, tribe- and clan-related considerations were often prioritized over professional considerations. The interviewees reported that once appointed, principals were rarely replaced, but held their office until their retirement. Moreover, analysis of administrative and interview data indicated that the gap between schools where most students came from one tribe or clan and schools without a dominant tribe or clan in the rates of entitlement to a Bagrut certificate including five units in mathematics was 2.5 percentage points (1.9% compared to 4.4%). The gap between the two groups in the rates of an outstanding Bagrut certificate was 1.7 percentage points (0.3% versus 2.0%).

The interviewees also reported safety issues and logistical difficulties in the *system of transportation of students to and from schools*. Apparently, students living in unregulated residences sometimes found it difficult to arrive at school using shuttles due to the lack of paved roads. Nevertheless, the analysis of the administrative data indicated no statistically significant relationship between the rate of students transported to school and back and educational achievements.

Finally, it was reported that *the number of students* was high relative to the schools' capacity, leading to classroom congestion and overcrowding due to inadequate infrastructures. Nevertheless, in analyzing the administrative data, there was usually no negative correlation between the number of students per classroom and educational achievements.

2. Findings of the Qualitative Analysis Alone

The Bedouin population in the Negev faces two major problems that affect all areas of life, including education. First, *inadequate law and order enforcement*, resulting in a widespread experience of lack of personal safety in Bedouin towns and villages. Second, *house demolition* due to unregulated construction, mainly in unregulated residences. The ongoing conflict between the Bedouin population in the Negev and the state authorities due to the issue of ownership claims and land disputes, and the issue of unregulated residences, including house demolitions, has negative effects on a variety of levels. This starts from the formation of a distrust in the authorities, through difficulty in promoting social initiatives among the population, to the delay in the construction of public buildings and infrastructure.

It was also found that many students had *low literacy* in their mother tongue and found it difficult to study Hebrew. In some schools, there was a severe problem of *copying and leaking answers in the Bagrut exams*, and it was suggested that the Bagrut exam scores did not reflect the students' real knowledge. Finally, the curriculum in the humanities fields was *culturally insensitive* to the Bedouin society in the Negev. According to the interviewees, the textbooks provided no expression of the collective identity of the Bedouins in the Negev; therefore, the students felt these books were irrelevant to them.

Main Recommendations for Policymakers

We recommend that policymakers

1. Promote the students of relatively low socioeconomic status; improve academic motivation and attainments among boys in secondary education
2. Regulate the residency status of the Bedouins in the unregulated residences
3. Increase supervision of teacher training and incentivize teachers with high-quality training and those specializing in high-demand subject areas
4. Reduce tribe- and clan-based student concentration as much as possible; reduce the influence of the dominant tribe or clan on school management; increase supervision of the appointment procedures of school principals and limit their maximal term in office
5. Increase the number of schools and classrooms based on population growth forecasts
6. Improve the school transportation system in terms of safety and logistics
7. Intensify law enforcement with emphasis on juvenile delinquency
8. Enhance the acquisition of literacy skills in native language, starting from preschool; enhance Hebrew instruction
9. Conduct intensified inspections to prevent copying in exams
10. Adapt the school curriculum and textbooks to the culture and the collective identity of the Bedouins in the Negev