



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures



Access to higher education and its socio-economic impact among Bedouin Arabs in Southern Israel

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 January 2015
Received in revised form 29 May 2015
Accepted 1 June 2015
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Bedouin Arabs
Minorities
Higher education
Access to higher education
Social change

ABSTRACT

This paper explores minority access to higher education in Israel in general, and among the Negev Bedouin Arabs, in particular. The Negev Bedouin community has undergone major changes during the past 60 years, and has the lowest socio-economic level of any population group in Israel. Higher education plays a prominent role in determining a community's competitiveness in the world marketplace. In most societies, it is also recognized as a major avenue to greater economic rewards and social mobility, making it of vital importance to those groups on the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder of society. The provision of public educational services to the Negev Bedouin, admissions procedures and standardized testing, financial assistance policies, and the socio-economic and political impact of higher education in Israel are examined in-depth. The paper concludes that the following structural and policy changes are needed to improve the access of the Negev Bedouin community to higher education: better quality elementary and secondary education, financial aid, removal of minimum age requirements, and culturally unbiased measures for admissions screening.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores minority access to higher education in Israel in general, and among the Negev Bedouin Arabs, in particular, in light of the international literature on minority access to higher education. Furthermore, it examines the provision of public educational services, admission procedures and standardized testing, financial assistance policies, and the socio-economic and political impact of higher education for the Negev Bedouin Arabs in Israel.

Over the past half century, with the formation of nation-states and the encroachment of modernization, Bedouin life throughout the Middle East has changed to varying degrees. This change has been particularly dramatic for the Bedouin Arabs living in the Negev desert who are part of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel, and currently number over 200,000 (Abu-Saad, 2011, 2008).

Prior to 1948, estimates of the Bedouin population in the Negev ranged from 65,000 to 90,000 (Falah, 1989; Maddrell, 1990). During the course and aftermath of the 1948 war, the vast majority of the Negev Bedouin became refugees in the surrounding Arab countries/territories (i.e., the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, etc.), and only about 11,000 remained in the Negev (Falah, 1989; Marx, 1967). Most of these Bedouin were subsequently removed from their traditional lands, and restricted to specified locations in the seig (Closed Area) set up for them in the northern Negev during the period of the

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military administration over Arabs in Israel (1948–1966) (Falah, 1989; Lustick, 1980; Marx, 1967). The Bedouin's traditional way of life changed dramatically due to the loss of their grazing and agricultural lands (Lustick, 1980; Maddrell, 1990), and the community began a spontaneous sedentarization process (Falah, 1989, 1985).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the Israeli government began implementing plans to resettle the Negev Bedouin population into seven government urban-style townships. The official rationale for moving the Bedouin to townships was to integrate them into the modern nation–state and to provide them with services more efficiently, as well as to consolidate government control over the land by concentrating the Bedouin and preventing them from cultivating and settling on or claiming their lands (Abu-Saad, 2010; Falah, 1989; Maddrell, 1990). The provision of services (i.e. running water, electricity, paved roads, local schools, community health clinics, telephone services, etc.) was used as an incentive to attract Bedouin to the government townships; while their traditional villages were, for the most part, left without these services (Abu-Saad, 2010; Swirski & Hasson, 2006). The settlement program, however, has only been partially successful. The government-planned towns, to their disadvantage, lack basic infrastructure and services found in modern, urban settlements of comparable size in the Jewish sector, such as internal sources of employment, public libraries, recreational and cultural centers, internal and external public transportation networks, etc. (Abu-Saad, 2010, 2005; Coursen-Neff, 2005; Swirski & Hasson, 2006). Currently, about 50% of Bedouin live in the planned towns, while 50% continue to live in unrecognized villages (Abu-Saad, 2010, 2008).

Due to the loss or restriction of their traditional livelihood, the Negev Bedouin have become more and more dependent upon integration into the Israeli labor market for their subsistence. However, they remain on the social, economic and political periphery of modern, western-oriented Israeli society, and educational attainment is one of the key factors affecting their status.

2. Higher education and minorities: Theoretical background

Higher education plays a prominent role in determining a community's competitiveness in the world marketplace. In most societies it is also recognized as a major avenue to greater economic rewards and social mobility (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Canton, 2003, 2002.; Connor, 2002; Connor, Tyers, Modood, & Hillage, 2004; Connor & Dewson, 2001; McCauley, 1988), making it of vital importance to those groups on the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder of society. Research has demonstrated that increased educational attainment leads to a narrowing of the gaps in minority-majority occupational and economic attainment, as well as to minority community gains in political resources (Abu-Saad, Horowitz, & Abu-Saad, 2007; Astin, 1982; Canton, 2003; Connor et al., 2004; Connor & Dewson, 2001; Dagan-Buzaglo, 2007; Mar'i, 1978; McCauley, 1988).

However, in many societies, full and equal access of all citizens to higher education remains a problem. More often, the patterns of socioeconomic inequality in the larger society are reproduced in the universities (Abu-Saad, 2004b; Admon, 2005; Astin, 1982; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Dagan-Buzaglo, 2007; Jones, Yonezawa, Ballesteros, & Mehan, 2002; Padron, 2004). A number of factors contribute to this phenomenon, including the political and socio-economic status of minority communities, pre-university educational preparation, university entrance requirements, and financial assistance.

In ethnically stratified societies, the level of educational achievement and preparedness for university studies is usually higher among privileged groups than among subordinate ethnic groups (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Dagan-Buzaglo, 2007; Jones et al., 2002; Shavit, 1990; Swirski, 1999). Several factors contribute to this pattern. First, educational achievement is enhanced by privileged social origins, and students from advantaged ethnic origins benefit from the educational, occupational and economic achievement of their parents. Second, dominant social groups use the educational system to secure their privilege across generations. By virtue of their cultural and political domination, educational selection is based on criteria which favor their offspring (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Collins, 1979; Coursen-Neff, 2005; Jones et al., 2002; Dagan-Buzaglo, 2007; Shavit, 1990; Swirski, 1999). Third, dominant ethnic groups generally control the political processes by which school systems are funded and structured and are able to promote their own schools (Abu-Saad, 2004b; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Coursen-Neff, 2005; Lieberman, 1980; Jones et al., 2002; Shavit, 1990).

There is a considerable body of research demonstrating that the quality of elementary and secondary education is critical in determining whether or not young people go on to higher education, what kind of institutions they attend, how they perform, and whether or not they are able to complete their degrees (Abu-Saad, 2004b, 2011; Astin, 1982; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Dagan-Buzaglo, 2007; Coursen-Neff, 2005; Jones et al., 2002). This issue is of paramount importance to minorities, where the public education system is often the weakest. Predominantly minority schools in low-income communities typically have fewer resources (finances, facilities, high-quality teaching and administrative leadership, community involvement and support) than schools serving predominantly majority students in higher income communities. In addition, middle-class, majority students often have resources and support systems outside the school to compensate for deficiencies in the public educational system, while low-income minority students typically do not have access to such resources and support systems (Abu-Saad, 2004b, 2011; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Dagan-Buzaglo, 2007; Golan-Agnon, 2006; Jones et al., 2002; Shavit, 1990).

According to research done by Admon (2005), Astin (1982), Bowen and Bok (1998), Choy (2002) and Jones et al. (2002) in the U.S., the consequences of deficiencies in the pre-university education of minorities are clear. High school dropout rates are much higher among minority students than they are among majority students. In addition, minority students who do go on to higher education tend to major in education and the social sciences, rather than fields such as engineering or the natural sciences; and, are less likely than their majority counterparts to complete their university degrees.

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