AN EXPERIENCE OF ACTION RESEARCH IN ARAB-ISRAELI SCHOOLS

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The hypotheses of action research discussed herein are based on both Lewin's theory and, in view of their mutual affinity, Gramsci's ideas: in particular the role of school in the struggle for cultural hegemony. The research and results obtained support the validity of the theories forming the reference framework. What emerge are both the contradictions arising in a conflictual situation, and the possibility for school to be not only a place of conflict but, above all, of collaboration.

Keywords: action research, Lewin, Gramsci, dropout, Arab-Israeli schools

1. Introduction: Tackling the problem

This action research, started in 2009 and carried out in the two towns of Kana and Iksal in the hinterland of Nazareth, dealt with dropout in its various forms in Arab-Israeli schools: definitive dropouts as well as the problem of those students who remain at the margins of school life, rated by their teachers as "present-absent". School dropout is the most evident sign of school malaise and has particularly serious consequences in difficult and conflictual contexts, making social and work inclusion especially difficult for young people.

The main goal of the research was to start reducing dropouts and student malaise. A further goal, essential in order to achieve the primary aims, consisted in changing the modus operandi of school psychologists, reducing the predominantly diagnostic activities in favour of increasing psychosocial interventions in schools and student groups.

2. Underlying theory and hypotheses

The theoretical basis for this study is Lewin's psychology, together with Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, which ascribes a primary role to school. Indeed, Lewin's psychology – in particular action research – and Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, with the related ideas on common sense and praxis, are held to have important points in common (Colucci & Montali, 2013; Colucci & Colombo, 2018).

The first point to be considered is that action research was the consistent outcome of Lewin's entire theoretical and empirical research (Colucci & Colombo, 2018). Thus, an interdisciplinary

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approach, essential for action research, is founded on Lewin's epistemology, that refers to Cassirer's comparative theory of sciences (Lewin, 1931). From an empirical perspective, the study of the change in food habits carried out in housewives (Lewin, 1943) led Lewin to formulate the concept of "psychological ecology" (Lewin, 1944). This involves analysing the interactions among several factors, starting from a non-psychological, and so an interdisciplinary approach. According to a notion that could have acted as a basis for Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979), the context to which psychological ecology refers can range from global down to increasingly more specific situations. When addressing the problem of minority groups or, more generally, of social conflicts, it is essential to take into account the international situation, broader social groups such as the city or communities, on down to particular institutions or organizations and small groups (Lewin, 1946). Hence, in this research we will consider the situation in the State of Israel, conditioned by the persistent conflict with the Arabs, that is of international importance, and at the same time we will analyse the specific context of the intervention.

A further aspect of Lewin's action research adopted here is group discussion as a basis for deciding the best practices; indeed, "The decision links motivation to action and, at the same time, seems to have a *freezing* effect which is partly due to individual's tendency to *sticks to his decision* and partly to the *commitment to a group*" (Lewin, 1951, p. 233). In our case, group discussions were held in which, apart from the school psychologists, it was mainly the teachers who decided on the best practices to adopt to reduce student dropout rates and school malaise in general.

Unlike what sometimes occurs in post-Lewinian action research – which, in order to make it more participative than Lewin's original model, is presented as generically egalitarian (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Whyte, 1991) – in this case the interactions among participants maintained the diversity of roles and competences. Moreover, given the cultural characteristics of the situations in which we operated, especially in the initial stages some directive roles were essential, although they were expected to decrease as the research advanced and the various other actors became more independent and able to take the initiative.

However, in Lewin's work the decision to make the action research was made at the top (the textile factory managers, the US Department of Agriculture, the State of Connecticut), externally to the subjects involved; in our case the decision to engage in the research was made by the school psychologists. This experience of action research was therefore based on the triangulation *Training ↔ Research ↔ Action* (Lewin, 1946), implemented in the collaboration, on *research* and *intervention* ("action"), carried out by the school psychologists who effected the *training course* with the trainer himself, tackling in daily practice the issues expounded in the classroom.

Nevertheless, despite using Lewin's original model of action research as reference point, we did not close our minds to new perspectives, in particular to Action Science and Communities of practices (Argyris et al., 1985; Friedman, 2006), although these could only be briefly touched on with the school psychologists involved.

Action research, especially in schools, highlights the relations between Lewin's psychology and Gramsci's ideas on common sense and cultural hegemony. The political struggle against the predominant classes and privileged groups, in favour of equality, must also be the struggle for cultural hegemony aimed at forming a "new common sense". Such a struggle requires widespread, continuous cultural work carried out on a daily basis, within the workplace, barracks, prisons, etc., and first and foremost in schools, to which Gramsci assigns priority. School, therefore, should not be considered as only and necessarily an "Ideological State Apparatus" (Althusser, 1969), destined as such to be functional solely under the power of the dominant classes or groups. In Gramsci, the struggle for cultural hegemony and the process of transforming common sense is grounded on the relation between élites and the masses. It is not one-way, top-down – there being no top nor down

– but a two-way dialectic relation, promoting exchanges of experiences and knowledge, even if those with greater experience and knowledge detain more responsibility. Therefore, it is *communication* in its literal sense since *its purpose is to put in common* knowledge and experience. In this sense, the relation between teacher and pupil is paradigmatic for Gramsci; the former has greater responsibility but must, above all, be able to understand the latter's experiences and knowledge and to learn from them (Gramsci, 1996; Colucci, 1999).

Even though Lewin's action research does not advocate direct political struggle, Gramsci's ideas on cultural hegemony appear to be consistent with the main principles, methods and procedures of action research, starting with the interactions among researchers and other participants, all of whom bring different knowledge and experiences together to achieve a common goal. A process in which all the subjects involved are "responsible". Furthermore, while not eliminating individual responsibility action research, like the struggle for hegemony, ascribes a primary role to groups and communities. Above all, both Gramscian cultural hegemony and Lewin's action research were aimed at *emancipation*, transforming the experiential knowledge that governs everyday actions – an essential component of common sense – in order to make it more aware and *critical* (Colucci & Montali, 2013; Colucci & Colombo, 2018).

On these theoretical bases, the hypothesis that Lewin's model of action research could be effectively applied in the particular context under consideration was assumed. A further hypothesis was that this research could confirm the relevant role of school in the struggle for cultural hegemony within a conflictual situation rife with contradictions: in this scenario, it would bring these contradictions to the surface, highlighting the possibility that school could become a place not only of conflict but, above all, of collaboration.

3. Methodology

The research into changes in food habits adopts a multi-method approach, whereby a first observational phase using qualitative methods – semi-directive interviews – is followed by an experimental phase, comparing the various procedures for bringing about change, to verify the greater effectiveness of the group discussion-decision sequence. Together with the essential role of experimentation, Lewin stresses that it is appropriate to measure the changes produced and their trend over time; namely, to single out objective standards on the basis of which to evaluate the results obtained. This is also because without this process, the subjects involved in the research may become demotivated, since they cannot ascertain the results of their commitment (Lewin, 1946). In this particular research, the methodology adopted was, as far as possible, in line with the theoretical model adopted.

During the observational phase, semi-directive interviews were held, seen as qualitative instruments suited to analysing the representations, or common sentiments (Colucci, 1999) about the problems in Arab-Israeli schools and dropout.

All the individual and group interviews[1] were recorded and submitted to a thematic content analysis (Ghiglione & Blanchet, 1991), conducted separately by three researchers. One of them

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[1] Translated into Italian by a Palestinian resident in Italy for some time, if conducted in Arabic. Some individual interviews were conducted in English; others with the participation of a research team psychologist who translated from Italian into Arabic and vice versa.

took part in this analysis[2] only and thus, presumably, was *naive* in the sense of being less likely to be influenced by previous knowledge.

The individual and group interviews carried out in the schools are of main relevance for this research. Their textual corpus (202,097 characters), as well as being subjected to content analysis, was analysed using T-LAB software (Lancia, 2004), that relies on the same methodological principles as ALCESTE software (Reinert, 1986; 1990). It produces a synergy between quantitative results, detecting the relevant words (i.e., lemmas) clusters of the text emerging, and qualitative results, highlighting the sentences (i.e., elementary contexts, ECs) connected with the relevant text dimensions (Colucci & Montali, 2008). In this way, the categories of sentences derived from the thematic content analysis – inevitably reflecting the analysts' subjectivity – can be compared with, and supported by word clusters and ECs identified by the software. Thereby, the sentences derived from both the content analysis and the software, can be subjected to a qualitative and rhetoric evaluation (Billig, 1991).

Finally, using a quasi-experimental method to compare the schools where intervention was carried out with similar schools in which it was not possible to do so, an initial quantitative analysis was attempted, aimed at demonstrating the efficacy of the action research.

3.1. Empirical field and participants

As inevitably occurs in field research and especially in action research, the definition and limits of the empirical field did not follow a pre-established experimental plan but depended on contingent factors. Like all organizations, schools tend to be somewhat reluctant to become involved in research, and resistance is greater towards action research, since it tends to be more invasive. To overcome this reluctance the atmosphere inside the school, the attitude and the receptiveness of the principals, as well as their relations with the researchers, were taken into account. In our case, the research was carried out in Iksal and Kana thanks to the two directors of the Centres for School Psychology who graduated in Psychology in Italy. In Iksal, the research was conducted in an elementary, a middle and a high school and in Kana, in an elementary and a middle school.

The participants had different knowledge, experiences, and functions: they included school psychologists, experts, teachers, educators, and counsellors, local politicians and bureaucrats, mothers of children attending the elementary and middle schools. Levels of participation changed during the course of the research: the participants can be considered as a set with a fixed core consisting, from the start, of the research coordinator, the directors and psychologists (8 with a foreign Master's Degree) employed at the two Centres. They interacted with other groups or even single individuals, forming a set with flexible inner and outer boundaries that changed during the research as a consequence of the study requirements and individual centrifugal and centripetal forces, within a dynamic process that is well described by Lewin's topology and hodology.

Psychologists at both Centres and the principals of the schools in the two towns are male; there are, however, large numbers of women among the teaching staff. The female teachers and the mothers were seen to be particularly active.

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[2] Alongside the research coordinator and Mahmud Said, Morena Pandolfi, a student doing a master's degree in Social Psychology, collaborated in the interview content analysis and in the analysis using T-LAB (Pandolfi, 2012).

3.2. Activity at the school psychology centres

The School Psychology Centres depend, both administratively and financially, on the town councils which receive funds from the Ministry for Education.

These Centres take care of public schools, including kindergartens, and have the statutory task of diagnosing and treating students with learning difficulties and behavioural problems, and of collaborating in monitoring dropout with the *kabas*: the ministry official charged with monitoring regular school attendance and dropouts. Each psychologist is responsible for a school, even if related activities are not restricted to this.

Taking part in "Ministerial programs" – with the aim of improving the school atmosphere and students' wellbeing and preventing dropouts and other forms of youth deviancy – is highly relevant in this context. In addition to these programs, in Israeli Arab schools too, the project WE STAY – Working in Europe to Stop Truancy Among Youth, involving Israel together with western countries such as Sweden, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Rumania, Slovenia, Spain – has been carried out. These programs and projects, monitored by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Welfare, receive financial support, generally from private Institutions, such as the United States *Eric and Wendi Schmidt Foundation* and the *Joint Israel Distribution Committee*. The financial support received is apportioned by the Ministry to town councils in proportion to the number of inhabitants. The school psychologists engaged in these Ministerial programs – principally screening students to be included in the various activities – receive extra payment. Since 2013-2014, financial support has been growing and programs for Arab-Israeli schools, including those in Iksal and Kana, have proliferated.

However, at the start of the research the main activity at the Iksal and Kana Centres was, in fact, diagnostic. Following teachers' reports of students with learning difficulties, the psychologists were involved in making diagnoses of learning disabilities (LD). If teachers reported behavioural disorders like excessive restlessness, after first studying the case the psychologists could decide to send the subject for psychiatric unit screening for a possible diagnosis of an Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

In addition, psychologists receive requests for intervention, even from kindergartens, in cases of sexual abuse of male and female children.

3.3. Conducting the research

The first phase of the research consisted in the above-mentioned training course for school psychologists, which took place in the summer of 2009 (five and a half days) on the premises of Iksal Town Hall. It dealt with group dynamics and, in particular, work group issues.

In this training course, Lewin's action research aroused particular interest in terms of the role played by groups and the possible applications of this approach. At the same time, dropout in its various forms had emerged as a significant, serious problem due to its social repercussions. Hence the decision and request on the part of the course participants to start an action research aimed at reducing dropout, with the trainer acting as scientific supervisor and coordinator.

Following up on the need that had emerged, the *second phase* began with the initial planning – theoretical grounds, clarification of the goals, methodology, procedures – in which the research coordinator, and the directors of the Iksal and Kana Centres were involved, under the guidance of experts. The planning was discussed with the school principals and the town council officials, in

order to gather information and opinions about the research plan and, at the same time, gain the initial, necessary approval by the council and school authorities.

The next three phases, conducted at the same time, make up the observational part of the research (for a complete account of these and the subsequent phases, see Said, 2015).

The *third phase* was dedicated to studying the history and essential regulatory and statistical aspects of the school system, inasmuch as these are important factors in psychological ecology; to begin with the history of education and culture in Palestine under the British Mandate. This study was based on archival material and research by Palestinian scholars (in the References, titles in Arabic have been translated). During the Mandate, even elementary education was often completely lacking in rural areas; education for girls was almost non-existent. Few students had the possibility to attend high school, confined to the upper classes. These deficiencies were compensated, in part, in the case of wealthier families even when Muslim, by the Christian schools operating in some places, like Nazareth (Al-Asad, 2000; Nashwan, 2004; Mansour, 2008). Under these circumstances, the Arab population made efforts to obtain more opportunities for education and thus came in conflict with the British authorities (Nashwan, 2004).

In other words, at the time of the Mandate the schooling supplied did not meet the demand for education. Nonetheless, in this period of relatively greater freedom and openness compared to the long Ottoman domination - in schools, Arabic replaced Turkish, that was previously imposed as the official language - Palestine enjoyed progress in the cultural field. When a high school for teachers was opened in Haifa (Al-Asali,1990), a good level of educational studies was reached, based in particular on the Montessori method. In general, at this time theatres and cinemas were opened and several newspapers founded. Scout groups were started under an association that enjoyed international recognition, although not that of the British authorities (Mansour, 2008). Palestine had one of the most advanced middle classes in the Middle East. It can be concluded that prior to 1948, even though the education system was entirely inadequate, the educational and cultural situation could not really be described as a "desert", as was sometimes asserted later on.

Above all, school was still a cause of, and arena for, the struggle for cultural hegemony, in which the local population demanded more education and the teachers, at risk of going to jail, attempted to disseminate patriotic sentiments aimed at forging a national identity.

In this third phase, the Israeli school system was also analysed from a regulatory and statistical perspective with reference to the Arab-Israeli schools, clearly separate from the Jewish schools: there were only few élite schools for both Arabs and Israelis.

The purpose of this was to outline the general framework within which the issue was addressed, focusing on the main consequences of the Israeli State policy on school attendance among the Arab population. It has to be remembered, in this respect, that the organization of the education system in Israel is highly complex, making it difficult to describe even statistically. Indeed, alongside the State schools, there are private schools, of Christian, Jewish Orthodox, Lay denominations.

In 1952, a Department for Arab Education was created within the Ministry for Education, including some Arab staff, but still run by an Israeli. From the early 1970s, Arab-Israeli politicians were opposed to this Department due to the scarcity of the available funds and, above all, because it sanctioned the division between the Jewish and Arab populations, discriminating against the latter. Thanks to this political struggle, at the end of the 1970s the Department was given greater autonomy, more financial resources and, for the first time, an Arab was put in charge (Al-Haj, 2002; Rinawi, 1999). Nevertheless, a Ministerial commission continued to be responsible for the educational objectives and programs in Arab schools, a critical and conflictual issue, especially as regards the teaching of history and literature.

At the same time, data from the Israeli State Central Office of Statistics show that since 1948, Arab school attendance has grown exponentially. Between school year 1948-49 and 2012-13, the number of elementary schools has risen from 467 to 1999, while middle and high schools have increased from 98 to 1915.The figure for attendance by girls is particularly significant: in Arab-Israeli State schools, in 1948/49 they accounted for 18.6% of the population - remarkable progress compared to the Mandate period - increasing to 47.3% in 1990-91 and thereafter equalling the number of male students (Al-Haj, 2002). This exponential growth of school attendance brought with it an increase in work opportunities for Arab citizens of both genders. A contradictory reality was thus taking shape. On one hand, discrimination against Arab schools still persists (Steiner & Kremnitzer, 2013; Mari, 1978; 1985; Sayegh, 1966). On the other, school attendance in Arab-Israeli schools has improved thanks to the considerable commitment and significant investments – Arab citizens also contribute through taxation – received from the Israeli State: the Ministry for Education's budget is lower only than that for the Ministry of Defence and public expenditure for the educational system in 2015 in Israel was 12.8%, greater than the average in OECD countries (11.1%) and advanced countries: Italy 7.2%; Japan 8%; Germany 9.2%, UK12.4%; USA 11.9%. Nor should the considerable financial support to the above-mentioned "Ministerial programs" be forgotten.

In the *fourth phase*, consistently with the psychological ecology perspective, the Iksal and Kana territory was mapped: these two overpopulated and chaotic cities are located in a single Arab-Israeli urban area in the hinterland of Nazareth, and the economic, social, and cultural factors were analysed. In 2009 Iksal, that was originally a small agricultural village, had 12,300 Arab Muslim inhabitants; Kana had 20,000 inhabitants, 80% Muslim and 20% Christian. As regards quality of life – measured on the basis of indicators like the level of employment, education, presence of infrastructure, crowding index inside the houses – the two cities ranked low-medium level as compared to the Israeli municipalities and medium-high as compared to the Arab-Israeli municipalities. Nevertheless, the economic situation was precarious, especially in Iksal, that is outside tourist religious itineraries. In addition, there were rampant problems of delinquency and drug addiction, in particular among young people, as well as widespread violence within the family and between families. In Iksal, in 2009 there were 3 elementary, one middle and one high public schools. In Kana, there were four elementary, two middle and one high public schools, as well as two Christian elementary schools and one high school.

The overall dropout percentage in Iksal in school year 2009-2010 was considerably higher than the national mean for Arab-Israeli schools (13% vs. 5.2%), and in Kana it was about 2 percentage points higher; there were no significant differences among same level schools and no school showed a greater level of malaise than any other (Said, 2015).

In the *fifth observational phase* the psychologists carried out 22 semi-directive individual interviews and 4 group interviews (in which 26 subjects took part), with the school principals, teachers, educators, counsellors. This phase was aimed mainly at investigating:

– how the subjects saw and interpreted the school problems and in particular school malaise and dropout, referred to Arab-Israeli schools in general and their own school in particular;
– what they thought could be done to deal with the problems that emerged;
– what they thought about the proposed action research, any criticisms and suggestions;
– if and how they intended to collaborate with the proposed intervention plan.

To make a more in-depth analysis of the problems that emerged, a further 10 interviews were conducted by the research coordinator with privileged witnesses: the Director of the Arab-Israeli School Psychology Centre of Galilee, the Director of the School Psychology Centre of Nazareth, school principals, *kabas*, executives and politicians in Nazareth, Iksal and Kana.

Attempts were also made to interview dropouts, to reconstruct the history of their relations with school and with the teachers, what they had done and what their prospects were for the future. But only minimal success was achieved: three boys and two girls aged between 18 and 21 years and four middle school pupils, just after they had dropped out were interviewed.

Finally, in view of the importance of the problem and in order to stimulate reflection on the practice among the psychologists, the diagnostic activity was analysed, paying special attention to ADHD diagnoses. The directors of the Centres ran self-interviews and interviewed their colleagues in Iksal and Kana, and one psychiatrist also agreed to undergo an interview.

The *sixth phase* consisted of group discussions with teachers about the main results, summarized in a Power Point presentation, that emerged from the individual and group interviews conducted in the schools. The main aim of this restitution was to set up a group decision process, in accordance with Lewin's theory on the relation between group decision and motivation to action (Lewin, 1951, 233; or. ed. 1947), referring in this case to actions oriented toward reducing school dropouts and malaise. Further aims were to:
 – ascertain, clarify and examine in depth what had emerged from the interviews;
 – stimulate a process of critical reflection about the problems to be dealt with;
 – increase self-esteem among those working at the schools, starting from the teachers themselves.

The participants were asked their opinion about each and every problem that had emerged from the analyses of the interviews, and what could be done to solve it, continuing to remind them that they should not wait for a solution to be found and imposed top down by the Ministry authorities or the town council. The example of the school in Beer Amir, a downbeat quarter in Nazareth, was made by projecting photos to show how the school environment had been improved, by cleaning, decorating the walls, adding furniture and plants, all done thanks to the work of the teachers, auxiliary school staff, parents and pupils.

Finally, in the course of these years and lastly, in January 2019, the research coordinator verified the state of the action research and results obtained, conducting a series of interviews in Iksal and Kana with the school psychologists, principals, teachers, *kabas*, directors of departments for juvenile policies and cultural policies, and politicians in the two town councils.

4. Analysis of the interviews: Results

The main themes that emerged from the content analysis of the individual and group interviews carried out in the schools (see above *Methodology* and *fifth phase*) are summarized below:
- the different forms of, and reasons for dropout; essentially, the difference between evident dropouts and hidden dropouts, that are a more common and "insidious" problem, featuring pupils who are not attentive in class, and tend to run loose in the corridors or even outside the school, lurking nearby;
- the causes of dropouts, attributed primarily to the difficult social and economic situations of families and the lack of interest in school shown by many parents;
- the "bureaucratic control", "almost like policing", of dropout, and its negative consequences: since schools are assessed also on the basis of the number of dropouts, these control methods lead to hiding the phenomenon "under the carpet";
- the way the problem is presented in elementary schools: there are few dropouts but this certainly does not mean that there are no problems, bearing in mind the numerous pupils with grave

learning difficulties or behavioural problems. In fact, elementary schools are the "culture medium" for school malaise and dropouts;

- the problem, that arises already at elementary school, of the diagnosis of LD and of ADHD, often used to "solve" or cover up other problems: some teachers reported several cases to the school psychologists, in an attempt to shrug off responsibility for these "problematic" or "difficult" children;
- the relations between teachers and pupils, that often lack cordiality and can even be hostile, as indicated by failures to greet teachers, pretending not to see them. These relational difficulties are aggravated by the parents, who tend always to be allied with the children and so in conflict with the teachers;
- the widespread violence in the society, within families and between families, that is reflected in school and in juvenile behaviours;
- the situation of the school buildings: not only are there too few spaces, in particular for sports activities, but these environments are "unwelcoming" or "rejecting", "cold", "dirty".

To complete the results emerging from the content analysis, below we report the fundamental results highlighted by the application of the T-LAB software (see *Methodology*) to the textual corpus of these same interviews, omitting graphs and histograms but referring to the "keywords" (or lemmas) and ECs or sentences, considered as of more immediate relevance from a qualitative point of view. The lemmas that recurred more than 20 times in ECs are shown below, in decreasing order of frequency: *pupils, school, problem, child's family (parent, home, family), teacher, class, absence, aggressiveness, violence, work, society, children, learning, street, low scholastic achievement, future, relation, dangerous.*

As can be seen (Table 1), as well as the words related to school problems, words related to social problems, to "aggressiveness", "violence", "danger", and the "future" are predominant. The relevance of these problems is confirmed and clarified by the two main clusters, based on the percentage of ECs belonging to them:

Table 1. Clusters

Cluster	N° ECs	% ECs	Most recurrent lemmas
School problems	151	43.14	study/studying, school, environment, education, question, level, children, learning, students/pupils, lesson, difficult/difficulty, living, understanding, family, involvement, system, lack
Contextual difficulties	88	25.14	young, behaviour, negative, society, boy, become, aggressiveness, future, creating, consequence, street, violence, effect, great, danger/dangerous, environment, influence, success, possible

The *first cluster* shows elementary contexts and lemmas referring to the main *problems in schools and the school environment* that increase the risk of dropout:

> *There are grave lacks in our system. Our problem is that we obstinately continue to consider pupils as a single block where all must possess the same skills and abilities.* [group interview, elementary school, Iksal]

> *Pupils are not offered any chances to relax and let off steam in the school environment. Only duties.* [group interview, elementary school, Iksal]

...they come to school and find the desks and chairs broken, piles of refuse and mould on the walls. What can be seen in our schools is impossible elsewhere. [group interview, elementary school, Iksal]

one cause of this phenomenon [dropout] *is that school is not a place that attracts pupils, also because of the very high numbers of pupils.* [individual interview, elementary school, Kana]

As regards deficiencies in the schools, an important problem is felt to be the absence of study programs addressing the pupils' needs:

all this is due to the lack of institutes that can satisfy the needs, energies and desires of all the pupils. [group interview, middle school, Iksal]

In addition, the critical relations between the Israeli State and the Arab-Israeli school system are emphasized:

in general, the fact that we live in a Nation that is not Arab, and we are a part of this Nation, means that surely there are things lacking in the Arab educational system. [individual interview, middle school, Kana]

The risk factors linked to the school atmosphere, that detract from the value of school and in particular of the teacher figure, were identified:

Some pupils don't take the role of their teachers seriously because they hear them being criticised and insulted by the family. [group interview, elementary school, Iksal]

The student always has the upper hand, in the sense that he is always right and this shows that the role of the teacher is no longer important. [individual interview, elementary school, Kana]

To improve the situation:

it might be possible to organize afternoon activities, summer camps where pupils in difficulties can get more help, and also to stimulate peer aggregation. It is also important not to neglect the economic aspect. [individual interview, elementary school, Iksal]

The *second cluster* focus on *problems of the external context,* namely the contradictions and conflicts involving young people, that derive from cultural changes due to contact with the modern world, drugs, alcohol, violence. Based on these problems, the view of the future is very negative:

If you go and see near the roundabout this afternoon, you will find groups of delinquents, with a poor quality of life. If it is like that today, in twenty years you will be afraid to walk anywhere in Iksal. If you walk there today and are afraid you may have a quarrel with people, who are they? They are pupils at the school. [group interview, middle school, Iksal]

The dropout problem increases violence in the streets, as well as the number of smokers, drug addicts, alcoholics, and leads to lawless behaviour. Pupils who work are exploited by bosses, and all this affects their future and individual personality development. [individual interview, middle school, Kana]

They watch the TV and try to copy the models shown on the small screen, asking their parents for absurd things that are, of course, denied them. The result is that these kids come to school burdened by frustration and full of impossible dreams, that are strongly influenced by the models presented by western technology. [individual interview, elementary school, Iksal]

Once they leave school these kids can get involved in activities that are harmful to society. Therefore, the problem of dropouts is a problem that affects everyone and that must be solved at the root. Appropriate solutions need to be found and these kids encouraged to continue their studies. [individual interview, elementary school, Iksal]

The problem of adults' inability to exert control over young people is also highlighted. Teachers and parents seem to have lost power and authority in the eyes of the new generations. In short, it seems that the analyses conducted with the software succeeded in eliciting the most critical aspects related to school and the social situation.

The expert witnesses confirmed the conflicts among teachers and pupils and also among teachers and parents, as well as a generalized, extremely serious generational clash that runs the risk of being transformed into a complete communication failure. Some of those interviewed defined the Arab-Israeli adolescents as "the mute generation". These adolescents, who suffer from an identity crisis, aspire to assimilation ("convinced that they can get to be equal to the Jews") because they are attracted by Western culture, represented by the State of Israel. One manifestation of this "attraction" is the use of the Internet and new media, familiar to the new generations whereas most parents and many teachers were unable to use them.

Some constants emerged from the few interviews with school dropouts. Those interviewed recognized their learning, reading and writing difficulties, lack of interest in school and inability to stay sitting down in class. They claimed vocations or aptitudes for craftsmanship, sports, music…, that the school was not organized to develop. Instead, as regards behavioural problems, the boys in particular justified their lack of discipline or aggressiveness, as reactions to the aggressiveness of their companions and teachers. Referring to the latter they said: "they hit me" or "they beat me".

Because of their "severity", the teachers and principals ("we still hate the headmaster") are considered responsible for the bad relations with school, although there is almost always a memory also of a "good teacher" appreciating their skills and aptitudes. In general, the families had not done much to prevent dropouts. Indicating a pathway toward dropout that is probably frequent among girls, one 21-year-old, who had got married at 19 to a cousin, remembered that she had been driven to leave school by her older brother, who had convinced her father because "at school one learns bad behaviours". The girls would have liked to go back to school for the good of their children, to be able to educate them better, and because a "diploma is the only chance of a better life for women" and "it is not good for women to stay at home all the time". All these dropouts habitually use the Internet.

Finally, from the interviews on the diagnoses of ADHD (see before *fifth phase*) it emerged that the requests for diagnosis – "that are constantly increasing" – are largely made by the teachers.

Some parents "deny the problems reported by the school and are ashamed of the diagnosis, fearing the stigma". Some young people recognize that they "have a problem", while others "do not collaborate and think that it is the teachers or parents who do not know how to treat them". When making the diagnosis, the psychiatrists follow the DSM 4 guidelines, prescribing Ritalin as therapy; "at a dosage that is efficacious for 7-8 hours, so that the child is well both at school and at home", stated the psychiatrist who agreed to the interview. Sometimes the parents, or the subject, are against this drug, but they become convinced when they see the results: "how the child is after the treatment". As well as referring the subjects to the psychiatry service, the psychologists mediate among psychiatrists, parents, teachers. Among these, some are against prescribing the drug, others stigmatize the subject, adopting scornful tones: "Oh dear, didn't you take your pill today?" The diagnostic process does not always scrupulously follow the rules, and the diagnosis is sometimes made by private professionals on the request of mothers who are stressed-out ("hysterical") by the children's restlessness: the problem is solved with Ritalin.

In the interviews conducted in 2019 the problem of special classes for children with LD emerged; this problem had become topical since 2018, when the Knesset had discussed a law to regulate the use of such classes. The psychologists and school operators interviewed believe the special classes are useful because "they put homogeneous pupils together". The principal of the middle school in Iksal that took part in the research stated that in his school, each pupil inserted in a special class is followed by a teacher that "takes on parental functions", and believes this has provided an important contribution to the reduction of school dropouts. The psychologists agree about the utility of these classes, also because they follow the pupils as "single cases", taking into account their peculiar characteristics.

4.1. The best practices

The research conducted, from the early planning, through the observational phase to the final group discussions, helped to support decision making about the best practices to be implemented. These practices are summarized below:
– change interpersonal relationships between teachers and pupils, by adopting the "smile policy", and being the first to greet the latter;
– increase visits by teachers, psychologists and *kabas* to families, as well as informal contacts with the parents of pupils at risk, to eliminate or attenuate the bureaucratic procedures controlling dropout;
– make the school buildings more welcoming, also creating spaces for informal meetings, thanks to the collaboration of pupils, both girls and boys, and parents;
– boost extra-curricular education programs: sports, artistic activities, informatics courses, education in the use of the new media;
– involve the parents more closely, especially mothers, in school activities, and also plan periodical meetings about educational problems.
All this requires first of all a change in the modus operandi of the school psychologists, moving away from a largely diagnostic activity in favour of paying an increased attention to psychosocial interventions in institutions and with teachers, pupils and parent groups. This problem was frequently brought up and discussed, with and among the psychologists working at the Centres.

4.2. Possible results

In this experience, as also in general in action research, it is difficult to identify what results are surely attributable to the interventions made, and to what extent, rather than to other factors that occurred after the beginning of the research. Moreover, the problems that emerged, in a restricted context like those of Iksal and Kana, were felt even in the schools that did not take part in the research, with possible positive effects.

As pointed out in the section on the background theory, measurement of the results can be an essential factor promoting the research itself. However, not all the results that indicate the efficacy of an action research can be expressed purely in terms of measurements. It is for this reason that in the previous pages the sentences and "elementary contexts", in other words the emotions and thoughts that emerged in the interviews, and that deserve to be heard, were reported.

In this research, measurements were difficult to make and limited, due to the schools' reluctance to provide data, on school absences for instance, that could be indicative of the risk of dropout. Another problem was the lack of complete, reliable databanks at the School Psychology Centres.

However, when taking into account all the public schools in Iksal, a satisfactory decrease in the percentage of dropouts can be noted. While, as reported above, in 2009-2010 the dropout percentage was nearly 8 percentage points higher than in Arab-Israeli schools overall, in more recent years the following trend has been noted (Table 2).

Table 2. Variation in dropouts (%)

School year	Iksal	Arab-Israeli schools
2015-2016	6.8	5.9
2016-2017	3.4	4.7
2017-2018	2.2	1.8
2018-2019	5.9	5.9

In the same years, in Hebrew public schools the dropout percentage was constantly lower, being between 2.2 and 1.8%.

In the high school in Iksal that underwent intervention, dropouts declined from 40 in school year 2009/2010 when the research began, to 26 in 2010-2011, 14 in 2011-2012, 11 in 2012-2013. In the schools inKana as from 2017 the dropout percentage has been 3.5%, so lower than the mean in the previous years, that was nearly 7%.

However, the trend of dropouts over the years, and the variations, could also depend on more general factors such as political or socioeconomic elements in the specific context. It must be noted that in both Kana and Iksal, as pointed out by a *kabas* in 2019, the problem of latent dropouts is still unsolved, even in elementary school, as shown by the frequent absences, as well as failure to enter school on time.

As observed above, the teachers report students that in their opinion could be affected by LD or ADHD, to the psychologists, thus starting a process that, even if it does not end in a diagnosis certifying the disorder, leads to stigmatization fostering marginalization. In this way, indications of "learning difficulties or problems" or "family and learning problems" can lead to a diagnosis of LD; "behavioural and learning problems" can lead to a diagnosis not only of LD, but also of ADHD. The decrease in the numbers of such indications in the first years of the research (from 2009-2010 to 2011 -2012) in the schools in Iksal involved in the research, as compared with other same level schools that did not take part, can therefore be indicative of the efficacy of the intervention. In elementary schools involved in the research, the indications of "family and

learning problems" decreased from more than 40 (2009/2010) to 10 (2011/2012); of "behavioural and learning problems" from nearly 20 to less than 10; in elementary schools that did not take part, the indications of "family and learning problems" in the same years increased from nearly 40 to nearly 60; "learning difficulties" increased by a few units, but "behavioural and learning problems" decreased from more than 30 to 20.

In the middle school involved in the research, the indications of "family and learning problems" and "learning problems" decreased from 20 to less than 10; "behavioural and learning problems" remained largely stable; in the new middle school that did not take part and that initially had problems, the indications of "family and learning problems" in the same years increased from 30 to more than 60; both "learning problems" and "behavioural and learning problems" increased by 10 units. In the high school that did take part, the indications of "learning problems, in particular, reduced after 2010/2011. It was not possible to obtain certain data for the subsequent years, although the positive trend persisted.

The requests for a diagnosis of ADHD in Albiader elementary school at Kana, where intervention was made, are now 7-8% vs. 20% in 2009-2010.

Other important data obtained regard school performance, that improved in particular in the last classes of elementary and middle school, especially in Arab and Mathematics, two fundamental disciplines (http://meyda.education.gov.il/rama-mbareshet/).

The "active mothers" operating at elementary and middle schools are also a relevant result. Some took part in improving the school spaces, others organized gardening, horticulture or sewing classes. Even if these particular activities were not continuous over the years, there was an improvement, as can be seen in 2019, in the relations between the schools and the families.

The "smile policy" in the middle and high schools was also instrumental in improving the school or "educational climate", as indicated by a report made by the Ministry about the middle school in Iksal that took part in the research (http://meyda.education.gov.il/rama-mbareshet/).

A tangible result is the work done inside the schools to make the spaces "more homely", in the sense of warm and welcoming. This was done with the collaboration of the school staff, the pupils and parents, thus satisfactorily achieving one of the "best practices" that had been planned (http://algaleel.com/index.php?todo=albumpics&id=78&lang=en)

A further event that can be considered as one of the results of the research is the opening of another middle school in Iksal in 2010. This was due also to the pressure from teachers, who complained of the conditions of the old middle school and overcrowded classes, as the interviews show.

From the observations and interviews conducted in 2019, the most consolidated result was, therefore, the changed conceptions and practices of the school psychologists. Now they take into greater account the various social causes that could explain the restlessness of many pupils, such as the violence seen by the young people in their daily lives, including inside the family, the overcrowded homes restricting free movement, and increasingly common habits such as consuming energy drinks that can induce overexcitement. Embarking on a sort of pact with teachers and parents to find an explanation for the cause of restlessness, the psychologists now try to "contain" diagnoses of ADHD. Thanks to the new approach, in both Iksal and Kana – according to statements by various psychologists interviewed separately in 2019 – on average, of 10 requests only two or three lead on to the procedure whose outcome can be a diagnosis of ADHD. However, the problem of checking diagnoses made by private specialists on request by the parents remains unsolved.

The psychologists, and also the *kabas*, have increased their relations with the families of children at risk, endeavouring to understand the cause of the school absences, that are often simply

due to poverty, as stated by the Iksal *kabas*: Some children do not go to school because they "are ashamed of their clothes". Thanks to such psychosocial interventions, attempts were made to avoid limiting relations between school and families simply to the bureaucratic procedures that contribute to exacerbate misunderstandings and tension.

Thus, the psychologists aimed to ascribe a greater content and purpose to "routine activities… not just bureaucracy in order to fill in the required forms". The meetings with the school staff could thus become not just formalities but group discussions, and exchanges of ideas made periodically over the school year. However, this depended on whether the principals were willing to embark on such undertakings; some did "not accept intrusions".

Some psychologists declared, in 2019, that after overcoming their initial perplexities, they noted that group interventions were equally important and could be more efficacious than individual interventions. Group activities were planned to include the families, and pupils were involved in various activities, first of all sports, included and promoted in the Ministerial intervention programs. However, a psychologist doing a stage at the Centre in Iksal said that "the action research yielded good ideas but they are difficult to bring to completion".

According to some politicians and municipality officials, the action research experience changed "the overall idea", "the point of view" and the approach of the school psychologists to the problems. Now they are seen and dealt with in context, taking into account the constraints of both political and regulations type. According to the Director of the Department for cultural activities of the Iksal Municipality, that interacts with similar officials at other Municipalities in Galilee, the Centre in Iksal "is better than other such centres in the North".

Finally, it is reasonable to believe – as demonstrated in 2019 – that an important result is the psychologists' greater capacity to take autonomous initiatives, as expected (see *Underlying theory and hypotheses*). It can also be hypothesized that by highlighting the dropout problem, the action research has raised "the carpet hiding the dust".

5. Concluding reflections

While the success of the intervention carried out depends on its continuity, these concluding reflections may dwell on the strong and weak points of our experience. A major weak point is the failure to solve the lack of databanks at the Psychology Centres. The quantitative measurements it was possible to make were the result of an arduous but innovative experience that will hopefully continue and be improved. A further failing is the lack of direct involvement of the students in the different phases of the research, right from the planning stage. An even more important point should be to involve those who have dropped out. By reconstructing their stories, it might become easier to understand the reasons for dropout and thereby prevent the phenomenon. In any case, the validity of Lewin's action research model has been demonstrated in the specific context of this study. First of all, the efficacy of group decision is evident, as demonstrated by the best practices carried out.

It can therefore be concluded that an action research of this type, that is much less costly than the "Ministerial programs" and international projects, can still be efficacious. Moreover, these programs are based on theories and practices of generally Western conception (like the WE-STAY project), that are suitable for an Israeli population with a western culture, but largely extraneous to the Arab culture. Despite this drawback, as our experience shows, a good synergy can be achieved between top-down programs and bottom-up action research.

Moreover, school is confirmed as a privileged place for the cultural hegemony struggle in course since the times of the British Mandate. With the institution of the State of Israel, it became evident that school is an "ideological apparatus", to quote Althusser's definition, in the sense that the State, or dominant group, endeavours to keep control by transmitting its own ideology and culture. However – where possible and as far as possible – school can also be a place of freedom for "minority and disadvantaged groups", that can transmit their own culture. The conflicts related to the Arab history and literature programs are a demonstration of this. For this reason, contradictions emerge at school in conflictual situations. A clear sign of these contradictions is the persistence of discrimination, side-by-side with the development of Arab-Israeli schools since 1948, thanks to the educational policies and investments in education made by the State of Israel, together with the struggles and commitment of the minority Arab group, whose teachers work on the front line. One development of this, as has been seen, is the emergence of female schooling: an essential requirement for the successful overall development of Arab-Israeli society. The "Ministerial programs" reveal further contradictions and are seen in conflicting ways, as can be explained by the fact that they are largely financed by U.S Foundations.

From a more general point of view, it is essential to bear in mind the context. The Arab-Israeli conflict is constantly present in the minds of all. This background needs to be understood in order to comprehend the roots of the widespread and increasing violence in the society and so in the schools, and consequent tensions among teachers and pupils, schools and families. These tensions in the Arab-Israeli population have a particular intensity, diffusion and peculiar connotations. During a working lunch held in 2019 at the School Psychology Centre in Iksal, an Arab-Israeli woman took part in the discussion – an action research is also important in promoting such occasions – pointing out that "it is pointless to demand equality with the Jews, who believe they are the Chosen People". This has to do with the relations between adults and the "mute generation", whose identity crisis is also connected to aspirations to "assimilation, attracted by western culture". It must be added that at the same time, this "mute generation" sometimes reacts to failure of the assimilation or integration process by individual and collective acts of rebellion, as a way of strengthening their own identity as opposed to their fathers' "defeated generation" (Veronese, Castiglioni and Said, 2011).

Finally, this experience has shown, in a specific context, that in action research communication and cooperation among those with different knowledge and experiences can forge a dialectical relation, as theorized by Gramsci, changing common ideas about the problem and fostering awareness and the power to take the initiative. All this is aimed at forming a *critical consciousness,* the ability to face a difficult, contradictory reality, activating conflict and cooperation, in order to achieve *a possible emancipation.* Remembering, as pointed out by the woman mentioned above, that "as stated in the Koran, every change must start by changing oneself".

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