

# Policy reform in Israel: Perceptions of Arab Palestinian kindergarten teachers

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**Abstract:** The research investigated the perceptions of kindergarten teachers in Arab Palestinian society concerning the contribution of the latest Israeli government education reform entitled the "New Horizons" reform to provide additional material enabling assessment of the reform's efficacy and attainment of its goals in Arab Palestinian kindergartens. Previous studies have shown inconsistent results concerning the benefits of the reform and indicated that educators had both positive and negative views concerning its different elements. A qualitative research study gathered data from semi-structured interviews with 16 Arab Palestinian kindergarten teachers. The findings indicated that the teachers were dissatisfied with the reform, indicating different negative aspects of the reform: burdensome work, intensive work, and lack of autonomy for the teachers, unsuitability of the programs for the kindergarten's workday and its structure. Although teachers indicated that the reform had a positive influence on the children's achievements and their progress, it also generated pressure on the teachers. The research findings clarify the way in which the reform is seen by these Arab Palestinian kindergarten teachers and points to the need for further studies, which will investigate kindergarten teachers' work in the local and global context.

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## Introduction

One of the most significant educational reforms administered in recent years in Israel is the "New Horizons" reform (Sprinzak et al., 2004). The reform was implemented in elementary and middle schools in 2007 and was applied to kindergartens in the following year. The reform declared several main goals (Ram'a, 2008): the improvement of the education system's achievements, improving the school climate (including socio-emotional processes and organizational processes), the enhancement of learning-teaching methods and increasing students' achievements, improving the professional status of the teachers (including their work conditions and salaries and improvement of the enlistment process) and of the principals (improving their salaries and autonomy in the schools). This is a policy that encourages and supports preschool kindergartens to make changes and evaluate the implementation of these policies (Cohen & Caspari, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2018a; Shehory-Rubin et al., 2021).

With regard to early childhood education, the reform intended to afford an important opportunity to improve the quality of learning and experiences in the kindergartens, and to enhance the kindergarten teachers' role and their professional development (Ministry of Education, 2018a; Ram'a, 2008; 2014).

The reform immediately aroused dispute among those implementing it in the field, some supporting and some resisting it (Aram & Ziv, 2018; 2024). Some educators saw the "New Horizons" reform as the most important advance in the Israeli education system in recent years, since it set goals, and especially because it promised to reinforce the teachers' status, improve students' achievements, reduce gaps in learning and enhance the school climate (Zamir, 2009). However, the reform also drew severe criticism since it was thought to create more difficult work conditions for the teachers (Itzhak, 2011). Oplatka (2008) suggested

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that this criticism might stem from different and varied sources, for example a cultural preference for familiar, existing conditions instead of something new and unfamiliar or personal inhibitions such as teachers' low sense of self-efficacy for the new tasks, for example teaching individual lessons, dissatisfaction regarding remuneration and teachers' feelings that their salary did not sufficiently compensate for the extra work hours required by the reform.

These studies examined the reform in a general manner and included Arab Palestinian Kindergarten Teachers (hereafter: APKT) as part of their sample (Alfahel, 2012; Bishara, 2013; Oplatka, 2017; Ram'a, 2014; Sarsor & Mahajne, 2017); however, no studies were devoted entirely to the views of teachers in Arab Palestinian kindergartens (hereafter: APK) in Israel.

There is a significant difference in almost all dimensions of their job definitions between school teachers and kindergarten teachers. They have different daily work schedules, manners of work, classroom structure, work environment, communication with staff etc. (Uibu et al., 2011). Consequently, in order to clarify the effectiveness and influence of the reform on the different aspects of early childhood education, it is also informative to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of kindergarten teachers towards the reform. It is also particularly important to investigate attitudes of kindergarten teachers in Arab Palestinian society in Israel since there is little recorded knowledge concerning their attitudes in this field of research and their particular difficulties—especially those presumably imposed by the Israeli education authorities— are largely ignored in Arab Palestinian society in Israel and in research across the Arab world. Few studies have investigated this subject and they are mainly quantitative studies which have overlooked qualitative aspects (Shehory-Rubin et al., 2021). Therefore, qualitative studies on the subject could reveal valuable insights that have not yet been considered.

### **The Reform in Early Childhood Education in Arab Palestinian Society in Israel**

The Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel are a heterogeneous minority. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the Arab Palestinian population of the state numbered 1,997.8 persons constituting (20.9%) of the state's population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Arab Palestinians are also considered to be a sociological minority since this population sector is not proportionally represented in the political, military and economic elite of the state. The Arab Palestinian population is also distinguished as a distinct traditional cultural group with internal cohesion and a crystallized collective identity (Paul-Binyamin, 2024; Haj-Yehia & Lev Tov, 2018). The Arab Palestinian society in Israel occupies a precarious position as a minority facing systemic marginalization, discrimination, and educational disparities. Challenges such as underfunded schools, discrimination, and socioeconomic disadvantages negatively impact the academic achievements of children in this community. Arab Palestinian teachers in Israel face systemic challenges within the Israeli educational system, which is predominantly shaped by Jewish-Israeli cultural values. Discrimination and bias, including limited professional development opportunities and fewer resources in Arab-majority schools, are common (Bashir, 2018). Language barriers between Hebrew-speaking Jewish-Israeli teachers and Arabic-speaking Arab teachers further hinder collaboration (Khalaila & Shtarkshall, 2017).

However, in recent years, there has been growing awareness among Arab Palestinians of the crucial role of education in fostering upward social mobility—both for individuals and for the collective society. Education is increasingly viewed as a key tool for reducing socioeconomic gaps and promoting equality (Al-Haj, 2024; Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2016). Additionally, Arab Palestinian schoolchildren develop resilience and a strong cultural identity, which can drive academic success and a commitment to social justice. Their educational outcomes are shaped not only by the barriers they face but also by the solidarity and support within their community (Al-Haj, 2024).

In Arab Palestinian society in Israel, education for early childhood is part of the national education system, but there are large gaps between Jewish-Israeli and Arab Palestinian early childhood education, especially when dealing with systemic and economic barriers affecting accessibility (Sayma et al., 2022). APKT, as a minority group, often face unique challenges that differ from those of their majority Jewish-Israeli colleagues. These challenges include cultural and linguistic barriers, limited career advancement,

and discrimination due to socio-political tensions between the Jewish-Israeli and Arab-Israeli communities. APKT may struggle with balancing their personal and professional identities, navigating biases in the classroom, and adapting to a curriculum that reflects Jewish-Israeli national values. These factors can contribute to feelings of alienation, stress, and a lack of professional support. Understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering a more inclusive educational environment (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2010). According to the State Comptroller's report (Office of the State Comptroller, 2015) this gap between APKT, as a minority group, and Jewish-Israeli colleagues is expressed in different dimensions: the number of children learning in early childhood settings, severe shortage of kindergartens, and the number of days that children attend the kindergarten. Additionally, learning programs are not adapted for the Arab language and culture, and there is a lack of auxiliary services in Arab Palestinian society. Moreover, the report indicates partial implementation of the "New Horizons" reform in the first two years after it was introduced.

A good early childhood education is one of the most important keys to achieving economic success in life. When it comes to a minority population, such as the Arab Palestinian society in Israel, the issue takes on a different importance (Sayma et al., 2022). In the past, formal early childhood education has not received the attention it deserves in the discussions on the Arab Palestinian education system. However, in recent years, the Arab Palestinian population's awareness of the importance of formal early childhood education has increased. It seems that the improvement of Arab Palestinian parents' education level and their increased entry into the labor market (especially the women), has deepened awareness and demand for appropriate educational frameworks for their children. Protected kindergartens for ages 3-6 exclusive to Arab Palestinian children are located in Arab Palestinian society's villages and cities and also in mixed-ethnic cities in Israel. For the most part, the kindergartens are adjacent to the schools, however, recently autonomous kindergartens have been built in places separated from the schools. The typical staff for each kindergarten, includes a preschool teacher and assistant. In the 2020-2021 school year, the average number of children in the Arab Palestinian sector kindergartens was 33 children (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Kindergartens for ages 3-6 are supervised by the Ministry of Education and focus on the ministry's uniform curriculum. The curriculum provides the educational framework from the children's entry into the education system (age 3) until the beginning of school studies (age 6). It is designed to promote the children's early linguistic literacy, emphasizing components that pave the way for the acquisition of reading and writing skills. In addition, the preschool curriculum includes math, science and technology, physical education, arts, health education and life skills (Aram & Ziv, 2024; Sarsor & Mahajne, 2017; Shehory-Rubin et al., 2021).

It is argued that the reform has engendered many changes in the pre-school education system, however few studies have examined Arab Palestinian society's attitudes and perceptions concerning the reform and more specifically its implementation in APK. Moreover, when the reform was applied, there was a recommendation to perform evaluation research a decade after it began, however evaluation studies were mostly performed only two to three years after implementation. These were quantitative research studies and so dimensions were already established for the measurement of attitudes, however it is possible that main important dimensions were overlooked. Thus, the current research was unique in that it examined the perceptions of kindergarten teachers in Arab Palestinian society concerning the contribution of the "New Horizons" reform and its implications in the early childhood education system, a decade after the reform's implementation. This was qualitative research, and can therefore clarify views on the reform's implementation and enrich the corpus of knowledge on this issue.

The research aimed to examine the perceptions of kindergarten teachers in Arab Palestinian society concerning the contribution of the "New Horizons" reform to their work in the kindergartens. The research questions are, therefore, formulated as follows:

1. What are APKT perceptions concerning the reform and its influences on their functioning as kindergarten teachers?

2. What are the APKT perceptions concerning the influences of the reform on the atmosphere in the kindergarten in Arab Palestinian society in Israel?
3. What are the APKT perceptions concerning the influences of the reform on the achievements of children in Arab Palestinian society in Israel?

### Method

The research was an explorative study, collecting qualitative data in line with the research questions. Using qualitative research to investigate APKT perceptions and experiences concerning the implementation and consequences of the evolution of the reform over time, enabled the researchers to clarify the changes that have occurred over the years and the influence of the reform on different aspects of the kindergarten's life. Qualitative methodology helps researchers to expose inner processes that are often not overtly evident, focusing on deep understanding of the interviewees' words and perceptions and this may lead to insights and findings that explain the studied issues and help to inform policy-makers, so that their policies can be relevant to the work of the kindergarten teachers in the Arab Palestinian education system in Israel (Bryman, 2001; Shkedi, 2003).

### Research Tools

The researchers designed and employed a semi-structured interview, using an interview guide in which the questions were constructed in line with the research questions. In order to test the interview questions, several preliminary examinations of the guide were conducted by other researchers working in a similar area. Then questions considered inappropriate were recomposed and redrafted to reinforce their internal reliability, until they were found to be appropriate. The interview included two parts:

*Part one* asked for the kindergarten teachers' personal details. *Part two* included twelve open-ended questions in which the teachers were asked to express their attitudes on different subjects, for example: "Is it important that the reform allowed the kindergarten teachers to choose between their previous work structure and the new work structure after the reform?" "How did work under the reform conditions contribute to the level of investment that you need to provide as the kindergarten teacher? And "In your opinion, did the reform improve the achievements of children in the kindergarten?"

### The Research Population

16 APKT participated in the research, 14 of them were also qualified homeroom teachers. Their ages ranged from 35-50, with a range of from 13 to 28 years' teaching experience. With regard to their ranks according to the New Horizons reform, nine of the teachers had grade 6.5 while 7 had grade 4.5. Four of the teachers were working with children aged 3-4 years and 12 of the teachers were working with children aged 5-6 years. All the teachers were employed in four clusters of kindergartens in Arab Palestinian society, and had begun their work in kindergartens before the implementation of the reform. The teachers were selected as an "intentional sample" by one of the researchers who manages a kindergarten and is familiar with the region in which the participating kindergarten teachers work.

The research was conducted after receiving the institution's approval and was performed according to the institution's ethical research requirements. The researcher who interviewed the teachers (Author 3), was more easily able to gain the consent of the teachers to participate in the research because of her work in this field. The interviews were conducted in Arabic in the kindergartens where the interviewed teachers were working, and continued for an hour to an hour and a half.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted according to content analysis guidelines, as delineated by various scholars (Creswell, 2004; Shelaski & Alpert, 2007; Shkedi, 2003). At the first stage, the interviews were read in full to identify meaningful themes in the texts (Cohen & Manion, 1997), and at the second stage, after finding repetitive units of meaning and identifying main common themes that emerged from the transcript texts, initial codes were generated and applied to the data (Shelaski & Alpert, 2007). The content analysis

involved sorting the statements expressed in the interviews into categories, distinguishing the kindergarten teachers' perceptions towards the reform that related to the reform's influences on Arab Palestinian society, on the kindergarten children, on APKT themselves and on the atmosphere in the kindergarten from their expressions concerning the implementation of the reform. At this stage, a mapping analysis was conducted to reinforce the reliability of the analysis and to improve the quality of the findings, so that connected categories were united in line with the emergent themes. In the final step, the categories were revised and refined. It is noted that in a qualitative study, external validity enables partial naturalistic generalization in similar contexts beyond this research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethics committee of the academic institution where two of the researchers are employed approved the performance of the research. Ethical guidelines were rigorously followed. The interviewees were provided with a clear explanation of the research's purpose, assured that their participation was voluntary, and guaranteed full confidentiality in any publication of the findings. They then gave their informed consent.

### **Findings**

The current research aimed to investigate the perceptions of kindergarten teachers in Arab Palestinian society concerning the contribution of the latest Israeli government education reform entitled the "New Horizons" reform. This data was to provide additional material enabling assessment of the reform's efficacy and attainment of its goals in APK. Seven main categories emerged from the content analysis of data drawn from the semi-structured interviews with 16 APKT, which address the research questions. This process required careful and reflective work from the researchers, who were open to the emergence of new and unexpected patterns in the data, while maintaining objectivity. In the following descriptions of their testimony, interviewees are given pseudonyms. These areas of concern are now explained in greater detail through the words of the teachers:

#### **The Arab Palestinian Kindergarten Teacher and the New Work Burden**

The interviews revealed that the reform emphasized the teachers' responsibility for education, imposing increased accountability and many heavy, bothersome tasks on the kindergarten teachers. The multiplicity of the tasks created over-intensity in their work and made their work more difficult. For example, Sara described the burden created by the intensity of her work and the sense of pressure that she experienced:

It is more and more demanding and stressful all the time. More work hours in small groups, more work with the parents and also more time with the staff and colleagues and individual meetings ... I reckon that the reform provides a more organized program than existed before. "New Horizons" really emphasizes individual work and work in groups, so that if until now we had not done that individual work and work in groups, today we are obliged to do it. Everything is written down clearly, they tell us how many times to meet each month with each child, how many times each year. You have a larger quantitative obligation and you can check whether you have actually done it, but it's worth noting that the daily schedule under the reform is very heavy and under pressure.

The large number of activities that the kindergarten teacher is required to perform as a result of the reform and their understanding that they cannot manage to perform them in the time available means that they are constantly pressed for time. Maha related to the lack of time:

There is not even time to eat a meal at the kindergarten, I eat my meal while I'm working with a group or during play time or yard activity. "New Horizons" has packed many activities into set periods of time, it's very difficult, but I am trying to keep up with it all the time.

Moreover, the lack of time means that the teachers often feel frustrated and unable to perform all that is demanded and are dissatisfied with the work that they do, as Monira noted:

I have to do so many things. The work hours have become longer as have the demands! All the form-filling has produced too much bureaucracy. We need to comply with form-filling all the time, the work is unending. I think that the kindergarten teachers are now more frustrated at work.

Most of the kindergarten teachers (n=10/16) described their sense of burden due to the totality of tasks and responsibility that characterizes their role, and a few noted that there had been a difference in the level of their teachers' effort as a result of the reform. The burden was expressed in different ways: an extended work day, the teachers' participation in afternoon activities including various courses; and the influence on the teachers' free time and their family lives. The expected reduction of number of children in a class would essentially reduce the kindergarten teachers' work burden and taking care of the children's problems.

### **The APKT Sense of Lack of Autonomy**

The reform is expressed in other administrative, pedagogic and organizational aspects of the kindergarten teachers' work and also in changes to their remuneration. The research participants expressed negative feelings towards their workplace and described the education system's lack of trust towards them. They felt that they were not awarded the respect that they deserve in light of their professional pedagogic, didactic and disciplinary knowledge, and they felt that they were treated as some sort of "technical" workers who were supposed to fulfill predefined tasks according to strict and clear standards. They felt that the educational policy-makers and other Ministry of Education role-holders did not trust their professional abilities, and to a certain extent they felt that this reduced their sense of professional autonomy, for example the demand to record each activity on various forms. Sara described this feeling:

More paperwork, more forms, reports, summaries. In the kindergarten, the teacher does all that is demanded from her, often distancing her from the children and from the important goal of the kindergarten – to educate out of pleasure.

The external stipulations that the kindergarten teacher is expected to obey, prevent her from teaching contents derived from her educational world perception, while they also impose increased responsibility on her, as described by Nohad:

Actually, we don't have the option to choose the structure, because the superintendent is the one who chooses the structure for us ... and if ... we want to change it or replace it, according to what the teacher thinks is important and her educational philosophy, it is often not accepted.

The kindergarten teachers' demand to regain their professional autonomy, does not stem from their desire to control their work time, rather out of a desire to perform tasks that are appropriate for their professional perceptions and their needs.

### **"More Responsibility and More Commitment"**

Despite these feelings, the injury to the teachers' autonomy has apparently not harmed their sense of responsibility. Thus, for example, when she was asked about the character of her work within the stipulations of the reform, Hala noted: *"more responsibility and more commitment"*. Samar also related to her sense of responsibility and linked this to the fact that despite the many assignments imposed on her as a kindergarten teacher, she chose out of her sense of responsibility to perform them all even at a cost to her private time and preferred not to lose her time with the children during the day:

It's clear that the kindergarten teacher needs her free time, because she needs more time to consider the program. The kindergarten work hours are insufficient, so there is not sufficient time to do all the work in the kindergarten. It's impossible to leave the children in the kindergarten ... they need attention while they are active and occupied and we have much responsibility.

Another factor that reflects increased responsibility and commitment relates to the kindergarten teacher's leadership of the staff's work. According to the reform, the professional setup in the kindergarten is the main factor for change, and the teachers are strongly influenced by this. Manal explained how the reform had a positive influence on relations between staff members and how this affected the harnessing of the staff for common goals:

The reform demands a lot of prior preparation from me, it requires much work and teachers' effort so that we can help the children in the kindergarten to advance, and the kindergarten staff play a very important role, since they work together to advance the kindergarten's goal, to empower the children.

The interview responses indicated that the many assignments demanded by the reform, necessitate the harnessing of the staff's help since the teacher cannot do them all alone, and this fact leads to increased cooperation and professional responsibility within the staff, guided and instructed by the kindergarten teacher.

### **Time Management: "The Work Never Ends"**

In addition to the above-mentioned difficulties, the kindergarten teachers related to the influence of the reform on their time management. Thus, for example Samia noted:

The clear and organized daily agenda facilitates efficient time management. You need to create programs with a certain character in advance, because every part of the day has its own program that you have to be ready for before you reach it.

Nivin also related to time management and compared the work of the kindergarten teacher before and after the reform. She also related to the different roles of school and kindergarten teachers:

In addition to the duties that I already had to do, I now have to record my staff meetings in paperwork. In the past, I had a more comfortable relationship with the staff, there was no need to manage time, it was spontaneous and easy and everyone worked with all their soul and not only because we had to. Today ... the work never ends, we arrive home ... sit down and continue to record and summarize everything. It's different for [school] teachers who have special hours when they remain in school [for paperwork].

The words of the kindergarten teachers indicate that although the new fixed daily agenda helps to manage time, in the kindergartens it leads to a lack of dynamism or flexibility in their time management, because there are multiple tasks to be performed regarding the children and a large number of children in each kindergarten.

### **The Salaries Increased ... But ...**

In addition to the reform's influence on managerial, organizational and pedagogic aspects of the kindergarten, the teachers noted that a principal change related to one of the reform's main goals: an increased salary for the staff. According to the new reform, kindergarten teachers who work within the new reform receive a salary that consists of a base salary combined with compensation for specific jobs and payments for overtime. Kindergarten managers are entitled to supplemental management remuneration, which is determined according to years of managerial experience and rank: up to five years' experience entitles them to management remuneration of about 17%; management experience of 6-10 years entitles them to management remuneration of 20%; and with more than 10 years of seniority they receive 21% management remuneration. In addition, kindergarten teachers who upgrade their academic knowledge with a master's degree and a doctorate receive increased salary. Nevertheless, kindergarten teachers' salaries are still lower than those of primary or secondary school teachers.

Nevertheless, although their salary had increased, they felt that their income was still inappropriate for the effort that they were required to invest, as Fadia explained:

The teachers' effort in the reform is double [what we used to invest] because I need to continually reorganize things, to innovate learning materials ... as the kindergarten teacher I feel more rewarded, it's true, although I need to make up for the individual lessons in hours that I invest at home and come to work in the kindergarten in the afternoons. I get more compensation and that gives me more motivation. But still we are not rewarded for the far more hours that we give in practice. But that's fine [the increased salary], it's a good start, it means there is appreciation. Even if it is appreciation with money.

It also appears from the interviews that there is a distinction between the increase in the novice kindergarten teachers' salary and that of the more experienced teachers. Mona also related to this subject:

The salary increased reasonably especially for the novice teachers, but the extra salary from "New Horizons" was not enough for the extra hours which we give. It's my work, and I always knew that I was going to work so hard and the present wage in my opinion is [just] normal.

The interviews indicate that the kindergarten teachers were dissatisfied with the amount of their salary, and noted a discrepancy between their salary and the extent of their efforts in their work.

### **The Atmosphere in the Kindergarten: Positive and Negative Influence**

Apart from the influence of the reform on the kindergarten teachers' work burden, it seems from the interviews that the reform also influenced other aspects, especially the atmosphere in the kindergarten. The sense of pressure that the teachers experienced, radiated on the atmosphere in the kindergarten, especially at the beginning of the school year, a period that is heavily loaded and stressed, when the teacher is getting to know the children, the parents and the kindergarten staff. During this period the kindergarten teacher has to deliver a learning program and to prepare the initial records for the children for the superintendent. Samar explained:

The atmosphere was affected negatively at a cost to the children's pleasure in the kindergarten. The hours that were added to the kindergarten day were allotted for learning, not enough time for recreation. Everything is more focused on the core program and its concepts, although a child at this age searches more for pleasure and recreation instead of learning ... so in my opinion it has negatively influence the atmosphere instead of improving it.

Nevertheless, there were some kindergarten teachers, who noted, albeit with much reservation, that as a result of the reform, the atmosphere in the kindergarten had improved, for example Yasmin said:

It positively influenced the atmosphere in the kindergarten, but in a not so meaningful way, especially for the pre-compulsory education children. The reform provides more time for play and work in smaller groups, although I sometimes feel that the pleasure no longer exists in the kindergarten and they try to create irregular activities in order to improve the pupils' interest and enjoyment.

The interviews indicate that despite their view that the reform had certain positive effects, teachers felt that it had a negative effect on the kindergarten atmosphere. The kindergarten teachers, felt they were more involved in fulfilling the reform's many demands and felt that the sense of pleasure had disappeared from the kindergarten.

### **The Contribution of The Reform to Children's Achievements in the Kindergarten**

One of the main goals of the reform related to the importance of investment in kindergarten children and the influence on their future life. In some of the interviews, the teachers noted that the reform had improved the children's achievements in the kindergarten, and that it allowed them to meet various needs and helped to provide them with effective learning skills. An example of such evidence was given by Siham:

Yes, it improved their achievements, because "The New Horizons" reform gave a lot to the children, it improved the level of their knowledge because it offered the child sufficient hours for their kindergarten activities.

In contrast, six kindergarten teachers (n=6/16), noted that the reform did not help to improve the children's achievements, for example Amal noted:

In my opinion it did not improve their achievements, it only provided more consideration for each individual child.

Other kindergarten teachers linked their perception that the reform did not improve the children's achievements to their view that there was a huge burden imposed on them as a result of the reform. Samia explained:

I don't believe that it improved the children's achievements, not even a little bit, it granted us more hours, but obliged us to fill in many forms, and we were only able to manage things with difficulty.

It appeared from most of the interviews (n=11/16) that the individual lessons and the extra hours spent in the kindergarten enabled the teachers to do more with the children. Thus, Hoda remarked:

What the children do all the day is to settle down in groups, and we consider that to be individual work, there is more time to work with the children individually, and also to do all sorts of social activities when the children are tired.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to reveal the perceptions of kindergarten teachers in Arab Palestinian society towards the "New Horizons" reform in Israel, and to examine the reform's practical expressions in the work field through an examination of the teachers' perceptions concerning the influence of the reform on different aspects of kindergarten work. In general, the research findings indicated that in



most cases the kindergarten teachers felt that changes had occurred in practice as a result of the "New Horizons" reform. Many of the research participants emphasized that they continue to work as they had done before the reform but some added that positive points were added to their work. Meanwhile, the research findings indicated also that the kindergarten teachers in Arab Palestinian society were not satisfied with different aspects of the reform, especially with regard to their work and the influence on the kindergarten. The kindergarten teachers expressed negative as well positive perceptions of the "New Horizons" reform in the kindergartens.

Moreover, it seems that even after a decade of implementation of the reform their negative views concerning its effects have not altered. Thus, for example, in a study that investigated kindergarten teachers' satisfaction concerning the reform two years after it was introduced, it was already found that only a third of the kindergarten teachers in the Jewish-Israeli and Arab Palestinian early education sectors in Israel expressed general satisfaction regarding its implementation. Thus too, in a later investigation of attitudes of kindergarten teachers belonging to Arab Palestinian society it was found that only 50% of them were generally satisfied with the reform's implementation (Ram'a, 2014). In line with these findings, the present study shows that there has been no significant improvement in the satisfaction of kindergarten teachers in Arab Palestinian society with regard to the reform.

However, other research that investigated the level of satisfaction concerning the reform where kindergartens were located in schools, found slightly different results. Alfahel (2012) investigated the attitudes of Arab Palestinian elementary school teachers and found they held positive attitudes towards the reform. Similar findings were found by Gilat et al. (2009) among intern teachers performing their practicum in schools.

Analysis of the interview texts indicated that in order to perform all the tasks, the teachers take work home, sometimes even working on vacations, with consequent injury to their home lives and free time. This injury was considered in other studies that investigated this issue among school teachers, which found that the additional work hours that the reform provided was insufficient for the demands that the reform stipulated, so that they too take work home (Oplatka, 2012; Sarsor & Mahajne, 2017; Sayma et al., 2022). Consequently, in contrast to one of the reform's goals: improvement of school and kindergarten teachers' work conditions, the reform actually led the teachers to sense that there was a deterioration in their work conditions and led to criticism (Itzhak, 2011).

Moreover, although one of the reform's goals was to improve the school and kindergarten teachers' terms of employment by increasing their salaries, most of the kindergarten teachers testified that even though their salaries increased, they felt that this increase was inappropriately low to compensate for the additional teachers' effort required. This was also found in an additional study (Ram'a, 2014). Some of the kindergarten teachers noted a connection between the increase in salaries and their years of experience since novice kindergarten teachers benefitted more from the increase than experienced teachers: according to the reform, the level of educators' salaries depends on several components, such as years of experience, education, advancement steps etc. As data from previous research show, differences in these components necessitate deeper examination with regard to the issue studied here. Apart from the differences concerning salary level, in general the sense of lack of suitable reward for their work influences the kindergarten teachers' sense of satisfaction at work, since naturally, one of the main reasons for going out to work is in order to receive a financial payment (Sarsor & Mahajne, 2017). It is clear that when employees feel that the reward that they receive meets their expectations, their satisfaction regarding their work increases (O'Leary-Kelly & Griffi, 1985), meaning that there is a positive correlation between the reward of the salary and the extent of satisfaction.

The kindergarten teachers also reported a lack of professional autonomy as a result of the reform and noted that most of the demands were dictated from above, including the determination of kindergarten learning contents and contents of the courses that they were expected to study. According to the findings, the kindergarten teachers express a demand to regain their professional autonomy. This does not stem from their desire to control their work time, rather out of a desire to perform tasks that are appropriate in

order to realize their professional mission and their needs. This fact led them to feel that their role was merely to comply with the Ministry of Education instructions (Ministry of Education, 2018b). Apparently, the sense of lost autonomy influences the extent of the kindergarten teachers' satisfaction, previous studies also found a positive correlation between the level of autonomy and the level of satisfaction at work (Johnson, 2012).

The feeling of pressure that emerged in the interviews also seems to influence the kindergarten's atmosphere, so that most of the kindergarten teachers noted a deterioration in their sense of pleasure and satisfaction at work due to pressure. This finding relates to two types of pressure: pressure on the teachers and pressure on the children. Pressure occurs when there is a gap between the demands imposed on an individual and their mental resources and they sense a threat to their physical and mental wellbeing. This feeling is expressed in individual stress and may influence their extent of enjoyment and satisfaction at work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2005; MacIntosh & Doherty, 2010). The kindergarten teacher has to cope with all the tasks imposed on them within the allotted time frame, and simultaneously to perform tasks such as diagnoses and evaluations of the children. This is another factor for the pressure on them and they feel as though they are continually under inspection, something that influences the level of their enjoyment in kindergarten activities. Additionally, the number of children in each kindergarten has not altered and remains large. Together with the multiplicity of tasks that the kindergarten teacher is required to perform, it is therefore not surprising that both the teacher and the children feel pressured and this is reflected in the kindergarten's general atmosphere.

The high participation in kindergartens in Israel is due to the participation rate of mothers of young children in the labor market (Aram & Ziv, 2024). The evidence from the interviews clearly indicated that there had not been any significant change concerning reduction of the number of children in the kindergartens, and the large number of children in each kindergarten does not allow deep work with each one, something that hinders follow-up after their development and progress in the kindergartens. Nevertheless, most of the kindergarten teachers indicated that the reform had a positive influence on the children's achievements and similar findings were obtained in previous research (Alfahel, 2012; Ram'a, 2008, 2010, 2014; Sarsor & Mahajne, 2017). The teachers attributed this improvement to their individual lessons with the children and longer hours that they spend in the kindergarten after the reform. The contradiction between the large number of children as a negative influence on progress and the improvement of the children's achievements as a result of the individual lessons, may testify to the kindergarten teachers' enlistment to achieve the goal of reaching each individual child in the kindergarten.

One of the important components influencing the children in the kindergarten that did not emerge significantly from the teachers' reports is the teachers' connection with the parents. This finding is surprising given the extent of parents' involvement in their children's lives especially in early childhood. The teachers' consideration of their relations with the parents was indirect and arose in connection with the extension of the workday and the work burden, when they mentioned the benefit to parents of the longer kindergarten hours as they had an arrangement for the children in the afternoons. They also mentioned the parents in their consideration of the activities that take place at the end of their workday when they meet with parents for conversations or for shared activities with the children.

The fact that the kindergarten teachers spoke about their relations with the parents in the context of their work burden, apparently stems from their perception of their relations with the parents as a source of burden and pressure. This point was emphasized by Oplatka (2012), who noted that students' parents' behavior, the interaction with parents and their expectations constitute a source for educators' dissatisfaction and generate their sense of encumbrance at work. Parents often have a negative influence on the educators, which affects their work: parents are critical, they tend to belittle educators' profession and skills. To cope with parents' many expectations and demands, the educators need to devote additional time often at the expense of their private lives. It is also noted that the kindergarten teachers' heavy workload may mean that they are unable to organize and plan activities to tighten relations with parents and to develop more meaningful relations regarding kindergarten life, which might improve parents-

teacher collaboration.

In general, it seems from the evidence in this research and in previous studies (Oplatka, 2017) that there is a gap between the reform's intentions and its implementation in practice. Moreover, it appears that the kindergarten teachers' satisfaction concerning the reform is influenced by various factors, the main factor being their sense of pressure and work burden. This feeling does not only affect the kindergarten teachers, but also the kindergarten and the children, and seems to constitute a major factor for the development of negative attitudes towards the reform, as voiced by the interviewed kindergarten teachers, generating their low level of satisfaction concerning the reform. Yet, it is again emphasized that most of the studied kindergarten teachers expressed positive perceptions of the influence of the reform on the children's progress in the kindergarten.

One of the main contributions of the present study lies in its investigation of educators' perceptions of the reform. These perceptions are very significant in order to understand the implication of the reform for the education system including educators' feelings of dissatisfaction, pressure and burnout, accompanied by feelings that they are not sufficiently rewarded for the fulfilment of the many tasks imposed on them. These feelings lead to the departure of professional educators from the education system and reduce the number of applicants for the teaching profession (Fitchett et al., 2016). This situation raises doubts concerning the reform's ability to improve the quality of teachers – one of the main goals of the reform – because, in comparison to the past, new applicants for the teaching profession have lower qualifications. This raises speculations concerning the extent of effectiveness of the reform and the attainment of its goals.

The research exploring the perceptions of APKT in Israel regarding the latest education reform, "New Horizons", can be effectively grounded in Critical Race Theory (hereafter: CRT). CRT provides a lens to examine how systemic power structures and institutional policies perpetuate racial and ethnic inequalities, even within ostensibly neutral education reforms (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). As a minority within an educational system shaped by the Jewish-Israeli majority, APKT face unique challenges that influence their experiences with policy reforms. The "New Horizons" reform may reinforce hegemonic narratives that privilege Jewish Israeli-majority perspectives while marginalizing Arab Palestinian cultural and linguistic identities. These disparities manifest in limited professional autonomy, heavy workloads, and high student-to-teacher ratios, all of which negatively impact both the kindergarten environment and children's progress. Structural inequalities—such as underfunded schools, limited resources, and fewer professional development opportunities—further exacerbate these challenges.

A follow-up study applying a CRT framework to thematic analysis would not only reveal patterns of exclusion but also underscore the role of systemic racism in shaping educational policies and their impact on minority communities. Additionally, it could highlight how APKT experience the reform differently from their Jewish-Israeli colleagues, who, as part of the majority group, generally benefit from a more inclusive educational environment. Examining these differing experiences through the intersecting lenses of race, class, and gender would provide a deeper understanding of how ethnicity and institutional inequities influence policy implementation (Abu-Rabia-Queeder, 2010; Bashir, 2018).

The study also contributes to the academic community by providing empirical evidence that can inform further research on the long-term impact of educational reforms on teacher retention and professional satisfaction. Additionally, it highlights the need for interdisciplinary collaboration among education scholars, policymakers, and sociologists to develop evidence-based strategies that address the challenges faced by educators in reform-driven environments.

Given these findings, it becomes important to reevaluate the effects of the reform among educators in general and in particular among kindergarten teachers, and to delve deeper into the program in all its aspects, investigating all the possible factors that contribute to the reform's effectiveness, in order to improve the situation and attain its goals.

## Research Limitations

It is noted that the present study is limited because it is based mainly on a qualitative approach. We recommend further quantitative study that would yield statistically valid conclusions about other aspects and implications of the early childhood education policy reform in Israel on APKT. Furthermore, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations in the conclusions of this research: Many of the interviewees were known to the researcher. Broad-based future research should investigate the different characteristics that may influence attitudes and perceptions concerning the reform such as the kindergarten teachers' personal characteristics, personality traits, demographic data, characteristics of the kindergarten teachers' work and characteristics of the organization and education system that are likely to clarify this issue. This finding calls for further research into policy adjustments that balance reform goals with teacher well-being.

## Declarations

### Authors' Declarations

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