

June 20, 2017

Bedouin children need preschools

The law allows the installation of prefab buildings to provide essential services in the unrecognized villages - and that's how preschools should be built for those villages

Attia Al-Assam and Ofer Dagan

In recent months there has been an extensive debate about educational frameworks for the children of the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev. Nobody is arguing about the hard facts: In the Negev there are about 5,000 children aged 3-6 who don't attend preschools as mandated by the Compulsory Education Law. Recently, the Knesset Education Committee held a series of urgent discussions in order to find a solution to this serious problem. But although there are ways of providing suitable and accessible education for these children the Education Ministry, which is in charge of the issue, is insisting on alternatives that will ensure that Knesset committees will continue to deal with this subject for many years to come.

The ministry claims that the children of the unrecognized villages have no place to learn because in the educational centers of the Al-Qasoum and Neve Midbar regional councils, which provide services for these villages, there are not enough preschools. But the problem is more complex.

In addition to the fact that there is a shortage of preschools, the locations where they are being built are not accessible to many of the parents, who therefore are unable to send their children there. At present there are preschools in the 11 recognized villages that are included in the abovementioned regional councils, and in 10 unrecognized villages that receive educational services from these councils. Parents of children who live in the other 25 unrecognized villages cannot send their children to these preschools because they are too far away – often about an hour's drive in each direction, on unpaved dirt tracks.

The Education Ministry is proposing the construction of some 100 additional preschool classrooms in the same villages where preschools are located today, without new construction in the villages without preschools that will still be too far away to send their children to them. In addition, the ministry will allocate 50 million shekels for transporting children to the preschools and in order to increase access - the ministry will even change its safety procedures, which forbid transporting children under the age of 5.

This plan lacks any logic in terms of expenditures, safety or pedagogical considerations. In financial terms, the Education Ministry already now invests about 80 million shekels in transporting children to the educational institutions in the Al- Qasoum and Neve Midbar

regional councils. This is a transport system of unprecedented size, and the ministry wants to increase it dramatically.

In terms of safety, the ministry has to date refrained from transporting children under the age of 5 - and it's very surprising that in a region where the road infrastructure is the worst in the country, and which lacks organized bus stops, the ministry is choosing to make an exception to this rule. Only last year a 7-year-old girl from the village of Al-Fura'a was run over by a vehicle that had dropped her off.

In pedagogical terms, it is very doubtful that 3-year-olds will be able to maintain their concentration and benefit from activity in the preschool when they travel to and from the school for about an hour in each direction on dirt roads.

The most logical and humane solution to the lack of educational services in the Negev's unrecognized villages is to build centers for essential services in the unrecognized villages that will also include preschool classrooms, and will thereby make up for the lack of preschools in these villages. As opposed to the common argument that it's impossible to issue building permits in the unrecognized villages because they have no community master plans, Amendment 40 to the District Master Plan allows the installation of prefab buildings to provide essential services in the unrecognized villages - and that has already been done in several villages.

By means of this amendment it will be possible to add preschools in additional villages. This solution will be cheaper for the state, safer for the children, and more sound pedagogically. Now we can only hope that the Education Ministry will also understand and act accordingly.

Al-Assam is the chairman of the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages, Dagan is the co-director of the Equality Policy Department at Sikkuy-The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality.