

# DIVERSITY IN TEACHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A HOPE OR RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOCIAL REALITY?!

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## Abstract

Using a quantitative approach, this study examines how students of different minority groups in teacher education institutions perceive sociocultural relationships with other groups, belonging, and being minority or majority. Findings show that most participants reported good relationships with students and faculty of different ethnicity and a deep sense of belonging to the academic institution. However, Ethiopian and Arab students tend to form social bonds with students of the same ethnicity.

Jewish students mostly define the terms “minority” and “majority” quantitatively, while Arab students relate to their social meaning and see themselves as a disadvantaged minority outside the Arab academic institution. Overall, the results suggest that colleges for education can achieve supervisory relationships that are detached from the reality in the society. However, mere attitude of nurturing and caring is not enough and there is a need for a deliberate policy to encourage interaction among the various groups and to address minority issues.

Keywords: diversity, teacher education, sense of belonging, majority, and minority

## Introduction

Higher education and in particular teacher education institutions face challenges associated with increasing student diversity, which is one of the most widely discussed topics of higher education policy and research worldwide. Researchers and theorists have consistently argued that higher education should prepare the students for a future of participating in a multicultural and democratic society (King et al., 2013).

Several studies have been conducted on the conditions, practices, and intervention programs that promote intercultural interactions and learning among culturally diverse groups (Lee, 2012; White et al., 2019; Morgan Consoli & Marin, 2016). The study of Michalski et al. (2017) concentrated on organizational aspects. However, other studies have highlighted students' experiences (e.g., King et al., 2013).

Israel's society is comprised of several diverse ethnics, religious, linguistic, and cultural communities. The unique demographic profile of Israel state, which includes a native minority on the one hand, and massive waves of immigrant groups on the other, create an enormous educational challenge for teacher education.

The theoretical framework of the study suggests that tensions between different groups in Israeli society extend to all areas of life, including education. Bourdieu (1991) has extensively studied symbolic power resources, arguing that various strategies are used in education to replicate the existing social order and perpetuate inequalities in society. Lev Ari and Ron (2012) argue that Israel's pluralistic education policy is necessary to bridge the gap between different sectors and reduce tensions between them. Yogevev and Shapira (1992) pointed out that higher education is a key tool to achieve this goal.

As a result of massive waves of migration, the number of higher education institutions in Israel-including teacher education colleges-increased dramatically in the 1990s, a development enhanced by parliamentary legislation (Israel Knesset, 1994).

Teachers' colleges encompass a diverse array of people from different ethnicities due to changes in Israel's demographics and structure of higher education (Israel Central Statistics Office, 2017). Some of these students met for the first time at the teacher colleges. However, these institutions do not promote a sense of belonging among different groups through their policies and activities (Paul-Binyamin & Haj-Yehia, 2019).

Several teacher education colleges were opened in peripheral areas to facilitate the access to higher education for local residents (Schayek, 2005). The new college is designed to meet the growing demand for higher education and to break down the barriers of traditional rigid university admissions policies (Ayalon, 2008).

At the theoretical level, there seems to be a contradiction between the perception of power relations in society, according to which the social hierarchy is replicated in the field of education, and the humanistic view adopted by some colleges of education that aims to create social solidarity (Aloni, 2013). Humanistic education aims to create a friendly living environment and cultural wealth and to cultivate human relationships based on brotherhood, mutual respect, responsibility, and caring. However, no research evidence has been found for official multicultural policy in teacher training institutions in Israel according to the specified indices, so this study suggests examining another index and that is the perceptions of students.

The purpose of this study is to examine the authentic learning experiences of students from the social periphery who study in colleges of education and will be responsible for the education of the next generation in the future. It is assumed that the learning experiences of future teachers will be passed on to the students of the schools in which they will teach, thereby influencing the multicultural encounter between different groups in society. Current research can shed light on the role of teachers' colleges in socializing and shaping the social, cultural, and citizenship identities of students from the social periphery, and how they respond to the challenges of social diversity.

## The Study

The current study looks at the topic of diversity from a student's perspective by examining student experiences and points of view. By diversity we mean the minority groups that study together at the Israel Teacher colleges. We look at how students experience interactions with other students and examine their social relationship characteristics, their sense of belonging within the college, and their perception of being a minority both inside and outside the college.

### *Questions:*

1. How do students from the social periphery studying in colleges of education perceive the socio-cultural interaction that takes place within the college and the feeling of belonging to it?
2. How do students from the social periphery who study in colleges of education perceive their belonging to minority or majority in the Israeli society? Do the perceptions of these students reflect the relationships among the different groups in society?

## Methodology

The research paradigm is naturalistic-phenomenological, and the research genre focuses on the narratives of students from colleges of education who belong to a minority group or distinct ethnic groups: Arabs, and Jews who are immigrants or descendants of Ethiopian and North African immigrants living in periphery. Interviewees interpret "chapters" of their lives through questions in a semi-structured in-depth interview. The research design is based on field-based theory, which is the product of a qualitative research approach that focuses on interpretation and aims to learn about the researched topic in its natural environment, using the meanings that people themselves attach to their experiences (Gibton, 2001).

## Sample

The sample included 48 students studying at seven colleges (five Jewish and two Arab): 12 students from Ethiopia, 12 students from Eastern communities who live in development towns and peripheral localities, 12 Arab students who study at Arab colleges, and 12 Arab students who study at Jewish colleges.

The large representation of Arab students in the sample (50%) is intended to help expose the differences between those who study in Jewish colleges and those who study in Arab colleges. The Arab students included in the sample represent the main ethnic groups and sectors in Arab society: Muslims, Christians, Bedouins, and Druze.

Using a judgmental sampling sample, a non-random sample, the choice of the final unit in the study is at the discretion of the researcher (Miller & Salkind, 2002). This was to create a combined sample that included different ethnic groups in teacher education colleges and two types of colleges, Jews and Arabs.

## Research Tool

The research tool used to collect the data was a semi-structured in-depth interview, which allows flexibility to raise new topics that may help in understanding the interviewees' perceptions (Shaked, 2003). The interview included 18 questions, for example: "To what extent do you feel you belong to the college?" Or "What can you say about your relationship with other students?" It is important to note that during the interviews the rules of ethics were observed, and the privacy of the participants was carefully maintained as is customary in the study.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis is done using the thematic analysis method, which is based on horizontal and vertical coding of the interviews and on the creation of mortality (Shaked, 2003). The interviews were conducted in Arabic and Hebrew and translated to English by the author.

## Findings and Discussion

This study focuses on the human diversity in Jewish and Arab teacher education colleges, to examine how students from the social periphery perceive the social and learning experience in them. The aim was to learn whether the educational approach adopted by some colleges was reflected in their socio-cultural interaction and sense of belonging.

The findings show that there were notable differences among the groups, especially in terms of social interaction and sense of belonging. Most Jewish and Arab students attach great value to social relationships. They describe good social relationships with their peers, relying on respect and mutual support that enhance their sense of relatedness. In this context, an Arab student from an Arab college says: "The most beautiful thing at the college is the friendships, even though there are different ethnic communities, it's so comfortable with the students and with the lecturers as well". And a Jewish student descent of North Africa adds: "There were several times I wanted to leave because of the pressure, and thanks to the friendships I stayed."

The general atmosphere in Jewish and Arab teacher education colleges is positive and they describe it as "my second home", "warm home", and "I feel happy here". Arab students attending an Arab college said: "Studying here is very pleasant"; "A social atmosphere that induces acceptance and peaceful".

However, it seems that the good relationships that students describe are mostly with friends from the same ethnic group. The social contexts described by most Arab students studying at Jewish colleges (about 90%) show that there is almost no relationship between the various groups in the college and that their close relationships are with Arab students: "I hardly know any Jewish students"; "We Arabs study separately, only in a joint course I meet Jews, but after the course everything ends"; "Relationships with Jewish students are cold, it's a different place in every way, language, speaking style, I do not belong". A similar feeling is also described by students from Ethiopia: "I have two Ethiopian friends and my tutor. I do not have non-Ethiopian friends because they do not understand us".

In contrast, Jewish students whose parents are longtime immigrants from North Africa reported a positive self-image, a sense of belonging to college and positive social interactions. The opening of colleges appears to be particularly popular with members of this group, whose young people are using higher education as a means of social mobility. In future research, it seems unnecessary to treat members of Eastern communities as socially marginalized, especially given the growth of the middle class in this social group (Cohen & Leon, 2018).

Some Jewish colleges teach a course aimed at fostering multiculturalism among students from different groups. Such courses are valued by students as an important event that fostered social bonds among the different groups. An Arab student at a Jewish college described the contribution of the course: "This course gave us the opportunity to build a relationship with Jewish girls, which was always a barrier: 'You are Arabs and we are Jews, you are alone and we are alone.' This course has broken this barrier". A Jewish student descended from North Africa said similar things: "At first I opposed, but the course showed me that it is not black and white.

It gave me the chance to meet different people. This is the only course that has affected me. Before that I did not want to interact with Arabs ... In college I realized that we are all students and we all want to progress and you can put all things aside. I contacted with Arab students and we still meet and talk".

While students participating in these courses are exposed to a multicultural encounter that has been well received by all, this is not enough to allow "others" to be treated as friends. Meetings of this type can, at best, deepen the acquaintance between the students from different groups and reduce prejudices and stereotypes (Plous, 2003).

Students at Arab colleges describe a sense of belonging associated with the culture of origin. They study mainly in their mother tongue and with people from similar cultural backgrounds, so they feel at home and more confident: "I feel like family here, I feel safe, it's the same culture, same language and same people. I feel comfortable talking to Arab students, I feel understood. Everyone here knows everyone's situation". Another student said: "I'm not racist, but the truth is, I feel better around Arabs than Jews. In university, I felt alienated, buildings and beautiful scenery...but I felt lonely. Here we are together and it feels good. Good friends and excellent teachers".

In conclusion, Ethiopian and Arab students studying at Jewish colleges describe a sense of alienation and lack of belonging to the college. In contrast, Arab students studying at Arab colleges and students of Oriental descent studying at Jewish colleges describe positive relationships with other students at their college. It seems that it is only in the course of the joint program that students have the opportunity to develop friendships between the different social groups of the college. The descriptions of the meetings indicate that the students aspire to continue in these meetings and build deeper relationship among the various groups.

The results of this study are consistent with findings of other studies that Jewish colleges have difficulties promoting solidarity and multiculturalism among groups (Davidovich et al., 2006). Hyder (1994) argues that the social space in Jewish colleges is mostly Jewish, a fact that creates a sense of alienation among Arab students. In contrast, Arab colleges, where only Arab students study, seem to have an atmosphere of multiculturalism, as reported by their students and various studies. For example, at the Arab Academic College of Education in Haifa, multiculturalism is reflected in the variety of courses dealing with multiculturalism, in lecturers who represent the cultural diversity in the country, and in the student population from different cultures (Alian, Abbas, & Zidan, 2015). That is, even though the differences between the groups in the Arab colleges are not so great, the sense of multiculturalism is still maintained.

Regarding the perceptions of majority and minority in the Israeli society, differences were found first of all in the definitions of the concepts between Jewish students and Arab students. Jewish students define minority and majority quantitatively and “minority” as a group which it is preferable not to belong to: "Just the number of people, there are more in the majority than in the minority"; "More than 50% is the majority". After giving it more thought they added: "Minority is a group that's socially disadvantaged".

All Arab students noted that in quantitative terms, the Arabs in Israel are a minority, and the Jews are a majority. At the same time, they pointed to other characteristics that define majority and minority, such as: the group's influence on the national agenda; the degree of cultural, social, political, and economic mobility of the group; the control of one group over the other; and the rights granted to the group by the state scope. The following are examples of definitions proposed by Arab students: "Majorities and minorities are measured by the group's impact on the country, not by the number of inhabitants in the group"; "Rights and opportunities are lacking in all areas of life"; "The minority is constantly controlled and doesn't get the full rights".

Defining majority and minority groups reveals issues related to discrimination and the negative image of minority groups in the eyes of the majority, as reported by Arab students who perceive themselves as disadvantaged: "Minorities are over the world. The problem with us is that we are an undesirable minority, belonging to a hostile people. That's why the state deprives us and most Jews look down on us. Arab labor means inferiority".

In addition, defining majority and minority from the perspective of Arab students reveal a dilemma about their national-cultural identity and a sense of uncertainty about their future: “At this country the Jews are the majority and it's their country. I'm not Israeli and I'm not Palestinian. I was born here and I don't belong here nor there. I don't define myself as Palestinian nor as Israeli. I don't belong to Palestine, I don't have memories there and I don't have friends there. Nazareth (a big Arabic city where she lives) is my country and my security”.

When asked which social group they belonged to, all students indicated that in at least one group they considered themselves to belong to the majority. Jewish students associated themselves with at least one majority group inside and outside the college. Some of them joined their groups of origin (Ethiopians or members of Eastern communities), others joined religions (Orthodox and traditional...), and still others defined themselves as "Israelis": "I do not belong to any minority"; "I am an Israeli. I belong to this majority". An Ethiopian student said: "In college I sometimes feel part of the Jewish majority, but most of the time I feel the same as the Arabs who had no power. It depends on where you are, among Ethiopians I feel

majority. Israelis see me as a minority even though I sometimes feel part of the majority".

In contrast, Arab students studying at Jewish and Arab colleges tend to be associated with Arab countries, their Arab colleges or places of residence. Arab students at an Arab college said: "I belong to the Arabs and I am proud of myself. The Arabs in Israel are minority, but in the college I feel majority"; "I belong to the Arabs, not the religion. In my college and the North region, I feel majority, I feel safe. In public places I feel like a minority, and then I don't feel good, I'm tired and anxious". As can be seen, questions related to cognition of group belonging are difficult, and the answers to these questions have strong perceptual and emotional connotations among both Jewish and Arab students.

The findings reveal differences between Arab students studying at Jewish and Arab colleges, especially in terms of interpersonal perception. Those who studied at Arab colleges reported a sense of belonging to the college, which stemmed from its response to cultural needs such as language, customs, and holidays, while those who studied at Jewish colleges felt alienated and did not see the college as a source of support. Some try to deal with alienation on their own, or seek support from family and friends. Based on the research literature (Totari, 2010), it turns out that Arab students in Jewish colleges are united in a sense of alienation, while in Arab colleges they are united in a sense that this is their homeland. The findings of Totari (2010), show that many Arab students in Jewish colleges do not participate in college activities because they feel rejected and unwanted. They describe a feeling of discrimination and inequality compared to the Jews and emphasize that change must be brought about.

Some education colleges promote a democratic climate and humanistic education (Aloni, 2013; Ben-Yosef, 2009) to prepare future teachers to deal with disparities and tensions in multicultural societies. They can be described as institutions that allow caring, and as explained by Noddings (1984), caring describes giving that combines responsibility and a positive attitude towards the "other" to help him perform actions that the giver can logically explain. It can be assumed that this is the picture that emerges in the eyes of the colleges of education and leads to a sense of satisfaction of Arab students in the Arab colleges and of North African students in the Jewish colleges.

The education system in general, and teacher training institutions in particular, have an important role in preventing exclusion and accepting difference. However, it appears that teacher multicultural education is not adequately emphasized in education colleges, and there is no activity in this area in the context of Israel's policy for teacher training. (Lev Ari and Ron, 2012; Yogeve, 1996).



The great educational challenge in dealing with multiculturalism has been partially addressed in some colleges for education, by creating a climate of caring and humanistic educational approach. In addition, the general social reality in Israel is reflected in the Jewish colleges, where students from different sectors study. On the other hand, in Arab colleges, issues of belonging and majority-minority relations are not addressed. These colleges provide Arab students with a space of hope where they feel secure, thereby creating a gap between the reality within and the reality outside them.

## Summary

The present study was carried out in a qualitative approach methodology in order to examine how students from the social periphery who study in colleges for education in Israel perceive their social and learning experiences. It presents and discusses Jewish and Arab students' perceptions regarding their social interaction in the college, feelings of belonging, and being a majority or a minority. The sample included 48 students studying at Jewish and Arab colleges for education.

The findings show that the general atmosphere in Jewish and Arab teacher education colleges is positive. However, good relationships are mostly formed among students from the same ethnic group. Apparently, the only practical expression of multicultural humanistic education in Jewish colleges is in courses on multiculturalism, in which students from different social groups participate. But when the course ends, the relationship formed among the students disconnects.

Arab students in Jewish colleges connect socially almost exclusively with other Arab students, maintaining connections with Jewish students mostly around academic issues. Ethiopian and Arab students studying at Jewish colleges do not participate in activities because they feel alienated.

Students at Arab colleges feel at home and more confident. They describe a sense of belonging associated with the culture of origin and response to cultural needs such as language, customs, holidays, and studying with people from similar cultural backgrounds.

Differences were found between Jewish students and Arab students in their perceptions and definitions of majority and minority in the Israeli society. While the Jewish students define minority and majority quantitatively, Arab students perceive themselves as a disadvantaged native minority and explain these concepts with reference to their subjective life reality. Their descriptions revealed issues related to discrimination, a negative image of minority groups in the eyes of the majority, lack of influence and involvement in decision-making, control

and discrimination, insecurity, and a dilemma about their national-cultural identity and a sense of uncertainty about their future.

The humanistic approach in dealing with diversity and multiculturalism has been partially addressed in some colleges for education. Apart from this, the same general social reality in Israel is reflected in the Jewish colleges, where students from different sectors study. In contrast, Arab colleges provide Arab students with a space of hope where they feel secure, thereby creating a gap between the reality within and the reality outside them.

The conclusions of this study is that colleges for education do indeed make higher education accessible to the social periphery; however, teacher multicultural education is not adequately emphasized in their policy. Mere attitudes of nurturing and caring alone are not enough, and there also needs to be a deliberate policy that encourages interaction among different groups and addresses minority concerns.

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