Yes, We Can! Palestinian-Israeli Teachers in Jewish-Israeli Schools

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Abstract
The goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Palestinian-Israeli minority teachers when teaching at majority state Hebrew secular schools in Israel. Specifically, the objective is to describe and analyze the role of the teachers’ work-related experiences in shaping their sense of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, acculturation process, and how all these affect their feelings regarding their potential role in helping break down stereotypes and misconceptions about the Palestinian-Israeli minority. Data were gathered from 15 interviewees, who described their experiences, feelings, and perspectives about their work. Findings indicate that Palestinian-Israeli teachers experience a strong sense of self-efficacy, satisfaction, and positive relationships with students, parents, and colleagues. Participants expressed the belief that their work helps reduce prejudice and increases mutual understanding among the groups in conflict, through successful acculturation, despite some difficulties. It is suggested that stakeholders should strengthen efforts to recruit and retain these teachers, through strong administrative support.

Keywords
minority teachers, Palestinians, Israel, satisfaction, prejudice, acculturation

Background and Context
Palestinians in Israel are a national ethnic group and an indigenous minority, totaling a 20% of the population; of these, 85% are Muslims, 6% Druze, and 7.5% Christians (Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Indigenous minority (Palestinian minority in our case) refers to the remaining minority of a group that resides in its own homeland, consider themselves distinct from other sectors, and develop and transmit their ethnic identity and cultural heritage to the next generation (Jamal, 2005, 2011). This Palestinian minority aims to retain its unique characteristics although becoming integrated within the majority culture. Yet, its members are relegated to a secondary status and do not enjoy equal citizenship status with the Jewish population, in terms of employment, per capita income, education, or access to social and political leadership (Ghanem, 2002).

Palestinians with an academic education suffer from a high rate of unemployment, yet there are many positions that they cannot take because they are related, in one way or another, to army or security areas. Under such conditions, a high rate of the Palestinian-Israeli academics work in the public service in teaching positions in schools (Abu Asba, 2006; Hadad Haj-Yahya & Assaf, 2017).

Thousands of Palestinian teachers in Israel submit employment requests to the State’s Arab-sector schools each year, but because of market limitations, many of them remain unemployed. For those, the State’s Hebrew secular schools constitute a solution.

Palestinian Teachers and the Education System in Israel
The education system in Israel is one of the areas where Palestinian-Israelis and Jewish citizens of Israel are segregated from each other, as the schools are strictly divided into different sectors. In 2014, 1,514,965 students studied in the Israeli education school system; of these, 1,081,451 (71.38%) were Jewish students and 433,514 (28.6%) were Palestinian-Israeli students, each group assigned to a different educational sector. However, there are also other subsectors in Israeli society (see Table 1).

Distribution of schools in Israel. As a result of the segregated reality, it is very rare for Palestinian Arab and Jewish students to study under one roof, and very few Jewish and Arab students study together in mixed schools (Shwed, Shavit, 2017).
Dellashi, & Ofek, 2014). Table 2 describes the distribution of schools according to the governmental supervision (Israeli Education System, 2015).

### Literature Review

**Integrating Minority Teachers in Majority Schools**

The phenomenon of integrating minority teachers in majority schools is not exclusive to Israel. For the most part, it has been approached from a perspective that emphasizes the importance of having minority teachers serve as role models for minority students studying in mainstream majority schools (Carrington & Skelton, 2003; Ingersoll & May, 2011). Minority teachers draw on specific personal experiences that may be useful in overcoming cultural and/or language barriers (Strasser & Waburg, 2015). Their sociocultural experiences, as well as their potential multilingual competencies, facilitate more deliberate dealings with cultural diversity at schools (Georgi, Ackermann, & Karaka, 2011 in Lengyel & Rosen, 2015).

Cherng and Halpin (2016) collected data from a study that measured effective teaching in six U.S. school districts. They found that students had a more favorable perception of minority teachers (Black and Latino teachers) than they did of non-minority teachers. Hue and Kennedy (2014) examined how 12 school minority teachers (American, Canadian, Indian, Nepalese, and Pakistani) working in Hong Kong were handling the growing cultural diversity. The findings indicated that the ethnic minority teachers were able to make positive sense of the students’ cultural diversity and to create culturally responsive environments. The teachers had overcome the difficulties of adaptation and developed a sense of identity as belonging to local society.

Research on Palestinian-Israeli teachers working in State Hebrew schools is scant. Fragman (2008) shows Palestinian-Israeli teachers in Israel’s Hebrew-speaking elementary schools having a strong desire to be “ambassadors of good will,” viewing their position as an opportunity to break down stereotypes and misconceptions. Brosh’s (2013) findings indicated that Palestinian teachers teaching spoken Arabic in Hebrew secular schools lack a cultural understanding of their students and that they find it difficult, even impossible, to effectively communicate their knowledge. Sion (2014) examined how Palestinian teachers appropriated performative identity strategies by passing as cultural hybrids to gain acceptance in the schools. Despite their efforts, she underlines that the teachers were not fully accepted by students, parents, or colleagues. As a minority group in Hebrew secular schools, most of the Palestinian teachers felt lonely, isolated, and vulnerable.

Self-Efficacy, Job Satisfaction, Belonging, and Ethnic Identity in the Workplace

**Self-efficacy.** Teachers’ professional self-efficacy is defined as a belief in one’s capabilities in the areas of student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management, which can be used to bring about a desired outcome in terms of student commitment and learning (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Self-efficacy is positively related to job satisfaction (Shen, Leslie, Spybrook, & Ma, 2012) and has a considerable effect on it (Viel-Ruma, Houchins, Jolivette, & Benson, 2010). Teachers with a strong sense of professional
self-efficacy are more prone to demonstrate a variety beneficial behavior: trusting and respectful relationships with students, helping them view their lives as significant and valuable; enhanced communication with students' families; a tendency to be reflective toward their own fundamental beliefs and practices; and strong cooperation with their colleagues and the community. Individuals with higher self-efficacy are typically challenge-oriented, more willing to be self-reflective, persistent in their task, and take greater risks; thus, they experience greater gains (Pajares, 2003). These teachers set high standards, for themselves, as well as for their students, demanding persistence and believing in their own and their students’ potential success (Sachs, 2004).

**Job satisfaction.** Job satisfaction is conceptualized as the positive or negative evaluative judgment that people make about their job (Weiss, 2002). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) have suggested that the impact of the school context on teachers’ satisfaction is mediated through teachers’ sense of belonging, indicating that teachers’ sense of being accepted by the school leadership and their colleagues plays an important role in their motivation to continue to be affiliated with the teaching profession. Within this context, of no less importance is the research that has shown that a positive and supportive social climate in which teachers maintain positive relations with parents, students, and colleagues is positively related to teachers’ satisfaction (Kokkinos, 2007; Scheopner, 2010). To clarify, teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy have effective communication in the workplace (which strengthens the sense of belonging) and leads to a high level of job satisfaction (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006).

**Ethnic identity in the workplace.** Self-efficacy also affects ethnic self-identity. Ethnic identity is defined as identifying oneself as belonging to an ethnic group or subgroup that claims common ancestry and shares a variety of cultural elements (Phinney, 2003). It is an important component in the conceptualization and construct of a minority identity, especially when working in the environment of the cultural majority. Studies have shown that a strong sense of ethnic identity is related to self-efficacy (Chesnut, 2017; Flores & Clark, 2004). Griffith and Combs (2015) found that the relationship between ethnic identity and job attributes was moderated by personal efficacy, with higher self-efficacy levels leading to greater importance placed on job attributes. It turns out also that effective teachers (with a strong sense of self-efficacy) tend to demonstrate enhanced self-understanding, which can facilitate the development of a positive ethnic self-identity and the capacity for self-inquiry regarding the relationships between one’s fundamental values, attitudes, beliefs, and teaching practices (Castillo et al., 2006; Clark & Flores, 2001; Sachs, 2004). Booth, Abercrombie, and Frey (2017) found that for some minority groups, a strong ethnic identity may be a protective factor in efficacy development.

Bukor (2015) found that teacher identity is deeply embedded in one’s personal biography. Furthermore, teachers’ personal life experiences and their impact on teaching can lead to a holistic understanding of the dominant influences on the development of teacher identity.

**Acculturation**

Berry (2005) defined acculturation as a dual process of cultural and psychological change that involves various forms of mutual accommodation, which leads to some long-term psychological and sociocultural adaptations between the groups in contact. Acculturation has become a well-recognized and important area of study (Tadmor, Tetlock, & Peng, 2009), which when applied to individuals, mostly migrants, refers to changes that take place as a result of contact with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social influences (Gibson, 2001). Björnsdóttir and Rule (2016) concluded that cross-cultural understanding was malleable to acculturation among Caucasian and East Asians in Canada.

Van Oudenhoven and Benet-Martínez (2015) found that a new composition of societies, which include immigrants and native groups, leads to a shift from acculturation strategies toward both identity strategies, such as biculturalism, and personality-based intercultural competencies, such as cultural frame-switching (CFS; that is, switching between the different cultures, for example, between the local majority culture and a more mixed one). They also found that the acculturation strategies may differ from one person to another as reflected by the desire to be in contact with the native society and one’s own ethnic group. It is important to note that, in our specific case, we are examining a group that has experienced acculturation as a result of involuntary subjugation and thus has a complex set of grievances that typically do not apply to immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and sojourners (e.g., Forman, 2006).

Coming back to minority teachers, teachers who are immersed in an unfamiliar and new culture are liable to experience culture shock, as they seek to acculturate to the new and overlapping environments (Romig, 2009). Later, they might adopt strategies that involve dissociation from their ethnocultural backgrounds (Strasser & Waburg, 2015).

**Prejudice Reduction Based on Intergroup Contact Theory**

Allport (1954, p. 9) defined “prejudice” as “an antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalization.” His intergroup contact theory stands out as a particularly powerful theory among intergroup relation theories (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). It holds that people who engage in intergroup contact are likely to be less prejudiced toward out-group members than are those who do not have such intergroup experiences (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Positive contact experiences are
particularly exceptional and noticeable in conflict areas, as they help to improve attitudes even under these societal conditions (Wagner & Hewstone, 2012). Pettigrew (2009) argued that contact changes mutual interpersonal attitudes and attitudes toward the target out-group as a whole and even attitudes toward out-groups not involved in the contact. This generalizing effect occurs even in the context of indirect contact (Asbrock, Lemmer, Becker, Koller, & Wagner, 2014). Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp (1997) introduced the “extended contact hypothesis,” which proposes that knowledge that an in-group member who has a close relationship with an out-group member can lead to more positive intergroup attitudes.

Slone, Tarrasch, and Hallis (2000) found that Jewish children hold more negative stereotypic attitudes toward Arab children than do Arab children toward Jewish children, and by two intervention programs, one textual and the other audiovisual, children reduced their negative stereotypes.

The findings of Cameron, Rutland, and Brown (2007) in research on intergroup attitudes toward disabled children and refugees suggested that direct contact can encourage more positive intergroup attitudes.

R. Berger, Benatov, Abu-Raiya, and Tadmor (2016) tested the efficacy of the Extended Class Exchange Program (ECEP—incorporation of prejudice-reduction models) in reducing prejudicial attitudes among students from third and fourth grades from both Israeli-Jewish and Israeli-Palestinian schools in Jaffa. Results indicated that the program increased positive feelings and readiness for social contact with the other. In summary, Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the concepts of the theoretical framework.

The figure expresses our understanding of the relations among the concepts from the literature combined with what we found in the study according to the themes and categories (see the “Findings” section). The construct directions are bidirectional, emphasizing mutual relations.

**Method**

We employed a qualitative method, which enabled us to construct a richly detailed depiction of Palestinian-Israeli teachers’ varied and multidimensional worldviews, with the aim of trying to understand the teachers’ perspectives on the social and cultural contexts within which the teachers evolved (Gay & Airasian, 2003). Conducting in-depth interviews allowed the researchers to delve deeply into social and personal matters (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Teachers, after being asked to render some biographical background, were asked to talk about their decision to work in the majority-sector schools and to describe the reactions they encountered in response to their choice. Teachers were also asked to describe their relationships to other participants involved in the educational context—principals, students, teachers, and parents—and to give examples of important events or experiences that they had faced in the classrooms and in other school settings. Questions were also asked regarding their feelings while working at the schools. With the exception of these few guiding questions, interviewees were encouraged to tell their stories without limiting themselves to any fixed agenda.

**Participants**

Interviews were conducted with 15 Palestinian-Israeli Muslim female teachers employed in State Hebrew schools. The teachers’ ages ranged from 32 to 50 years. Eight teachers taught Arabic and Shared Citizenship, two taught mathematics, three taught English, one taught Hebrew, and one was a remedial teacher. Three of the teachers defined themselves as religious and wore headscarves; the remaining 12 had adopted secular dress; seven teachers had graduated from Arab teacher-education colleges and eight from Jewish ones. The duration of their experience teaching in State Hebrew schools ranged between 3 and 11 years, only one of them had 22 years of teaching experience in State Hebrew schools. Four teachers started their careers teaching in State Hebrew schools and 11 had first worked for a year or two in Arab-sector schools.

We used the snowball sampling method (Vogt, 1999) to recruit the participants. The first teacher interviewed was an acquaintance of the research team and was asked to give the names of other teachers whom she believed might be interested in participating in the research project. A similar procedure was undertaken with the following interviewees. Given that ethnicity and culture were central to the research process, this study qualified as “sensitive research” (Fahie,
2014; Tillman, 2002). Hence, to ensure confidentiality, the researchers took a number of practical steps. Participation in the research was voluntary and participants signed an informed consent form, after hearing and reading an explanation (both in Arabic) regarding the research purpose, procedure, and expected benefits. Participants were also informed that their identities would remain undisclosed and that they were free to withdraw their participation at any time. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, at a place of the participant’s choosing, and lasted between 1½ and 3 hr. All interviews were fully recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The Researchers

The two researchers are from the education field, and they are experts in peace education and minority–majority relations in the education system. The first author is a member of the Palestinian national minority group and the second author is a member of the Jewish-Israeli majority group. The first author was the interviewer. Belonging to same national minority as the interviewees ensured access to sensitive issues, as the participants felt a bond with the researcher and willingly cooperated in the construction of meaning. Then, both authors analyzed the interviews together.

To ensure the reliability of the study, the researchers exercised a scrupulous and reflexive approach (P. L. Berger, 2015). There are numerous strategies that can be used to exercise reflexivity (see: Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2007; Russell & Kelly, 2002). In this study, the first researcher discussed the results with a group of the participants, to obtain their feedback (member checking) (Carspecken, 1996). Throughout the process, the researchers questioned themselves regarding their own position at any given moment in relation to what they were studying and what potential ramifications this position might have in terms of their research. Both researchers reflected on their work, repeatedly discussing relevant issues with others, that is, peers and colleagues. For example, for some teachers, standing in the national memorial ceremonies was a personal problem because they were sad for the Palestinian citizens killed by Jewish solders. This was a very sensitive issue that we two researchers discussed carefully and reflexively before deciding to expose it, but finally, we did include it to ensure maximum ratability.

Analysis Procedure

We adopted a conventional content analysis approach (Berg & Lune, 2004) for examining the transcripts of the in-depth interviews conducted. We avoided using preconceived categories (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002) and chose instead to develop categories through an inductive process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which included multiple readings of the transcribed texts, allowing the categories to emerge from the data (Kondracki et al., 2002). After rereading a given interview, the number of categories was reduced by combining similar themes and focusing on those that were most relevant. Next, the findings from the various interviews were integrated into common categories. These categories were scrutinized again, to examine the connections among them and to ascertain their centrality. The initial theoretical framework was adapted to the main themes and categories found in the analysis. In a few cases, when we felt unsure about our choices, we turned to the interviewees asking for clarifications and examples of the events they had related. The analysis process and the main themes and the categories are presented in Table 3.

Findings

In this section, we present the findings according to teachers’ perspectives arranged according to the categories and the themes that were derive from them, as we described earlier.

Self-Efficacy and Job Satisfaction

Feeling Comfort, Satisfaction, and Strong Self-Efficacy

The teachers reported feeling satisfied with their work. Very few reported events in which they had negative experiences, and these were related mostly to political subjects. They liked teaching in the State Hebrew schools and wanted to
continue working there. Any thought of switching to an Arab-sector school was motivated, if at all, by the desire to work closer to home and spend more of the day in the geographic vicinity of their own children, who were growing up and would soon attend the local schools:

The school for me is like a warm home . . . The school gives me the support that I need.

I am satisfied with my work. If I leave in the future, it will be after I get married and have children. I see how it is difficult with children.

All the teachers recommend to new graduated or unemployed Palestinian teachers to integrate in Jewish school. They all think teaching in Jewish schools gives them good experience:

I recommend it . . . An Arab teacher can learn a lot of things there like me . . . I began to understand life thanks to the Jewish school

All of the teachers mentioned that they feel that in their work, they contribute, professionally, a great deal to the school, to the students and expressed satisfaction with their perceived status in the schools. The entire cohort of interviewees talked about using a variety of innovative teaching methods that enable genuine learning and contribute to making the students’ learning meaningful. The teachers made it clear that they believe they are recognized by the schools as excellent teachers and that their students’ grades have improved:

I feel that I am professionally growing. They respect my work. I am a person who likes receiving attention and I have that in the school. I have also a lot of encouragement and praise and that encourages me to give more.

According to the teachers’ view, they have good relationships with principals, students, parents, and colleagues. Their success in developing good contacts contributes to their sense of job satisfaction and feeling of belonging to the school. The next findings characterize the way teachers’ perceive their contacts with other actors in the educational setting.

Contact With Principals, Colleagues, Students, and Parents

Teachers, for the most part, described having a good working relationship with the school principal. Principals play an important role in helping the Palestinian-Israeli teachers adjust to the schools: by treating them as equal members of the teaching staff, by offering support and help, and by establishing and maintaining a trusting relationship. One teacher stated this succinctly:

This principal was [like] a second mother to me . . .

The principal helped and supported me from the inside after accepting me from the outside. It is what makes me continue working here . . . She was accepting and supportive of me . . .

Teachers emphasized that they also benefited from the principals’ support regarding regular dealings with parents and students, even in the rare case that parents let slip a racist remark.

. . . When some parents knew that I am the English teacher, they protested claiming that I would teach their children English with an Arabic accent. The principal supported me and told them that I am the most professional English teacher at the school and the days will tell what excellent pupils their children will be thanks to me.

Fourteen of the 15 teachers felt that the school principals understand their national feelings, more specifically those related to the school’s ceremony for Israel’s Memorial Day (Israel’s national day of remembrance for fallen soldiers). For the Palestinians, this is the day in which they remember the Nakba, when thousands of Palestinians were killed or were forced to leave their homes and became refugees during the 1948 war. Some of the principals give the teachers (if they ask for it) permission not to attend the memorial ceremonies or to be absent from school on this day:

It is too hard for me on Memorial Day. I used to stand with them, but it was very hard. I cried several times and other teachers hugged me. I explained to them that it hurts me to stand because I think about my people who were killed. That is why for the last three years I ask the principal to allow me not to come to school on that day and she has agreed. I don’t mention the word “Nakba” but I don’t see how I can stand in a good way on this day for fallen IDF soldiers. I’m not disparaging it but it is hard. However, on Holocaust Remembrance Day I feel sad for the people who were killed and express solidarity. I don’t have any problem to be there and even participate and am active in the ceremony.

The teacher finds commonality with the Holocaust victims, but it is different when it comes to the separate feeling that their grandfathers were protecting their land and large number of them were deported or killed:

It is very difficult for me; my grandfather was killed by Jews, even though I come and participate . . .

The political view of the principals seemed to be central to the teachers’ sense of well-being. Only two teachers reported having problems with principals and that they had felt unwelcome as Palestinians. But these events did not prevent them from trying to find a new State Hebrew schools
where they could work and where they currently teach. One recalled,

The principal also asked me to come to school on Muslim holidays although she knows that I am single mother and have to be with my son. I solved this by sending illness approval from my doctor . . .

The interviewees described a variety of relationships with colleagues. For the most part, teachers have regular collegial relationships in the school. However, teachers described some painful experiences. Politics was mentioned at times as a point of friction, whereas other times, geographical distance is mentioned as what seems to prevent close contact. In any case, we have no record of teachers who changed schools because of tensions with colleagues.

Seven of the interviewees mentioned that they have not developed particularly strong or friendly relationships with their Jewish colleagues; they have neither visited them in their homes nor the Jewish teachers visited them; yet, the reasons mentioned were unrelated to their ethnic-national background:

I don’t meet them outside of school because of the distance. It is difficult for us to visit one another, it takes an hour and a half each way. We talk on the phone.

The teachers mentioned that they avoid talking about political events with their Jewish colleagues or expressing their political views. When justifying this behavior, they mention that they come to teach and to earn a living, and they do not wish to get involved in anything that might jeopardize their jobs:

. . . I don’t know what the teachers honestly think [about the political conflict]. I prefer to remain a colleague not a friend. . . .

. . . When political issues are raised, as happened recently because of the situation, I am very careful, and I try not to become emotional, because I might say things that I’ll regret later. The policy of the school is not to discuss politics, but sometimes it happens, and I try not to intervene.

Yet, four teachers reported having a strong, friendly relationship with Jewish teachers, which included mutual visits.

The teachers report that in general their relationships with the students are very good. It is their view that students respect and like them very much, and that they too like their students and treat them with warmth. No unusual conflicts with the students were reported. Some of the teachers recounted touching stories about helping and supporting students with educational and personal problems:

. . . A 5th grade student whose parents went through an abrupt divorce had lost contact with her father after he disappeared. This situation caused the student a great deal of sorrow. I helped the student by talking with her and encouraging her . . . Her mother told the principal that her daughter is happy and does not stop talking about me . . .

The interviewees also described having very positive relationships with parents. Three interviewees mentioned having friendly relationships with them. Some of the parents even ask the teachers directly for help regarding their children. Teachers also talked about parents who give them positive feedback, sometimes through a thank-you note, and other times directly, in the course of a meeting:

I have a good relationship with some of the parents. I feel that we are like a family. The head of the school’s PTA told me that it has become clearer every year that I am not only a member of the school staff; as he put it, “for the parents, [you are] an essential part of the school . . .

Despite the general positive relationship between teachers and parents, teachers occasionally face situations in which parents exhibit prejudice. One recalled,

. . . Through the acculturation project about the three main religions, some parents asked the principal to stop me, claiming that I call to convert to Islam.

**Acculturation**

**Integration Processes—Belonging or Alienation**

When starting their work at the Hebrew-speaking schools, the Palestinian teachers went through an initial stage, in which they learned about the new culture, became accustomed to the spoken language, and experienced some surprising occurrences and discoveries. As time went by, teachers felt more and more comfortable in the schools; they developed a sense of belonging and grew to like the new culture:

. . . In the beginning it was difficult to understand the mentality of the society . . . sometimes I was shocked by some things; they have a lot of complex issues that I was supposed to understand . . . With time I began to think and talk like them. For example, I have tried to convince my friend, a single Jewish teacher to get pregnant by sperm bank. In my society its madness to talk like that even among women. I think that is a natural solution, but it is not acceptable in Arab society.

The interviewees are on an easy path toward assimilation. They recognize some of the benefits of the Western culture represented in the Jewish environment in which they work, and they do indeed believe it could be beneficial to introduce some aspects of the new culture they encounter into their own communal contexts; but, if change is to be achieved, it must be done within the boundaries that define the communal context, not by crossing them.

Despite the general positive attitude toward Jewish schools and the strong integration, the teachers’ children (for
those with children) don’t study in Jewish schools because of the fear of losing or weakening their culture and their Arabic language:

My children are and will continue studying in an Arab school for a lot of reasons. I think that the liberty in Jewish society is excessive, it is a mess sometimes and I don’t like mess. For example, a student from 5th grade was telling me that she has a boyfriend from another class, and they go to movies together. This is not acceptable for me . . . I cannot imagine my daughter in this position. It would be difficult to fight it. Besides, she must know her language and religion . . . It is important to keep our culture and language and have to keep limits.

Critical Perspectives on Palestinian Society and Adopting Jewish Culture

All the teachers interviewed admitted that they experienced a change, also sensed by their families, as a result of their encounter with the Jewish-Israeli culture:

My husband tells me sometimes that I am forgetting that I am an Arab. Now I see more wrong habits in my society, I don’t like a lot of things and wish to change them.

The teachers mentioned that they have adopted some practices from the surrounding Jewish culture, which they wanted to introduce in their own culture, even if such changes could only be introduced on an individual level:

. . . Their mentality is completely different from ours in a positive way.

Four teachers expressed their concerns about being able to reintegrate into the Arab schools, in case they ever went back to teaching there in the future:

If I ever decided to move to an Arab-sector school, it would be very difficult . . . I don’t know if I could integrate there . . .

The Palestinian teachers seem both to be able to recognize some of the benefits that could be gained by adopting elements of the Jewish culture and to approach these elements carefully and critically:

Prejudice Reduction

All the teachers strongly believe their presence in the schools helps reduce prejudice among students, parents, and colleagues. The events they recall as having positive effects particularly in reducing prejudice and overcoming negative perceptions relate to both direct and indirect activities. At times, they directly intervened in situations to correct perceived prejudices, and at other times, prejudice reduction is perceived as the outcome of their routinely professional work.

Thus, for example, the story we related previously regarding the fifth grade student whose parents went through an abrupt divorce, as well as stories regarding the way they treat their students with warmth and empathy are just some of the examples which teachers mentioned as influencing the way both parents and students changed their appreciation of Palestinians. Even when dealing indirectly with parents, the teachers had a sense that they were able to induce change. They related that although in the beginning not all was “perfect,” as some parents exhibited prejudice and racism regarding their presence in the schools, as time passed and their involvement in the school grew, things started to change. Teachers strongly believe that by meeting with the parents to discuss educational issues, the parents came to recognize the teachers’ professional quality and contributions (“for the parents, [you are] an essential part of the school”). Hence, teachers feel appreciated for their professional skills and were of the opinion that this appreciation is central to the change they believe parents underwent.

Also, when relating to their colleagues, teachers believe their presence and professional activity help correct misconceptions or misinformation:

The atmosphere in the staffroom is positive. I think that I succeeded in changing prejudices of a lot of teachers. The strongest proof of that was from the teacher who had lost her son in the war. She used to give me a very piercing and hateful look at the beginning of my first year at the school. She hated all Arabs . . . she noticed that I expressed solidarity with my students and the other teachers by participating in the ceremony for Israel’s Memorial Day in my first year. This exited her and made her rethink of me or of everything . . . we are friends now.

In their view emphasizing their belonging to the school and expressing solidarity, sharing symbolic events added to offering emotional support and empathy, have an important role in increasing the respect, understanding and empathy for the Palestinian teachers among parents, colleagues, and principals.

The interviewees were aware that the wider social context of some of the children might be tainted by prejudice, yet they strongly believe that they are successful in changing students’ negative prejudiced perceptions, by explaining things that the children do not see in the media or hear in their immediate surroundings. They do this by offering students information that they believe their students lack, telling students about their society, culture, and religion. Yet, they realize change can only occur gradually:

I am not only teaching, I am passing all the good things from my culture. I present a nation so it is important for the Arab teacher to be who he is really and to show the good things.

Teachers also consider their work as one which helps build bridges between the two societies and that their work not only succeeds in changing negative stereotypes about the
Palestinian society in Israel but also strengthens tolerance and understanding toward alterity in general.

Five of the teachers lead the “Shared lives” project in their schools, organizing mutual visits with Palestinian-Israeli schools. These kinds of projects, they believe, contribute to better intergroup relations and the reduction of prejudice:

I organized several activities, Arabic days and another language day. I founded and managed an Arabic class. I was responsible for preparing everything in this class including books, stories, activities and students could come and use it. I also had organized a “Shared lives” project with an Arab school from another town. We had two student meetings in a park and one for teachers.

. . . my presence in the Jewish school makes a difference. My students learned that it is important to know about the “other,” not to judge, [but rather] to accept the “other.” . . I send a message to the students that the fact that the other is different doesn’t make him or her worth less.

National ceremonies do indeed accentuate the tensions felt, but even in these difficult moments, both the Palestinian teachers and their colleagues (from the Palestinian teachers’ view) appreciate the other’s efforts to demonstrate respect, despite their cultural and political differences:

Events in which teachers are challenged by students to address political aspects related to their national minority background are examples of direct interventions. As mentioned, the Palestinian teachers understand that students ask political questions because they view the teachers as representing the whole of the Palestinian people, and especially those in the Palestinian territories and in the Gaza Strip. The teachers believe that they have succeeded in successfully dealing with these situations:

Some students ask questions, once they asked why do the Arabs in Gaza hate us? Why do they attack us? Why do they try to kill us? I answered their questions. I told them that it happens because there is a struggle and a war between two groups that are in conflict. I explained that not all of Gaza’s citizens are terrorists and they have regular families and children, like people in Israel, and that these children have dreams and worlds of their own. I also told them that there are children on the other side who live under occupation and shelling and some of them die. I taught the students the meaning of inclusion. I explain that not everyone who says “Allah Akbar” is a member of Hamas; I too say it as part of the prayer . . . in general I explain a lot of things, because that could change a lot of wrong perceptions. This [change] happens gradually; perceptions aren’t changed overnight.

Furthermore, in their view, their work with students influences the students’ parents. Through this learning, students become aware of and even repudiate negative judgments and expressions of prejudiced views:

One of my students told me that while her father was watching the news, he cursed the Arabs as a group, and that she had asked him to stop and told him that she has an amazing Arab teacher. Another teacher said,

A student told me that once before knowing me he was ill, and his mother took him to the hospital. There, they met an Arab doctor, his mother refused to let him check him. He said: “At that time I accepted my mother’s behavior, I thought Arabs are bad people. Now I am ashamed of that act. Thanks to you, I know that Arabs are like us and I told my mother how wrong her behavior was.

Knowledge sharing contributes to the teachers’ relationships with their colleagues as well, especially in situations of tension:

I entered the teachers’ lounge and one of the teachers, a person of Russian origin, was saying that “it’s necessary to get the Arabs out of here.” When she suddenly saw me, she stopped talking. I talked to her and to the others and said that she is wrong and that the Arabs in Israel did not come from nowhere; they were born here from the moment God created them; it is their land and they live on it.

Discussion

In this study, we focus on the experiences of Palestinian-Israeli minority teachers working in State Hebrew secular schools of Israel, examining their perceptions and feelings. The goal is to describe and analyze the role of the teachers’ work-related experiences in shaping their sense of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, acculturation, and how all these affect their feelings regarding their potential role in helping break down stereotypes and misconceptions about the Palestinian-Israeli minority. We focus in this article on the direct and indirect intervention of the Palestinian teachers when they themselves undergo new experiences and changes.

Palestinian-Israeli teachers initially started working in Jewish majority schools because of the lack of job opportunities in the Arab-sector’s education system; however, they continued to work there due to a growing sense of job satisfaction and professional and personal growth.

The Palestinian teachers’ sense of satisfaction stems from their perceived success in creating positive relationships with all relevant stakeholders—colleagues, principals, students, and parents. These warm relationships have a strong effect on teachers’ feelings of belonging and motivate them to continue teaching in the schools. These findings are in line with those of Jennett, Harris, and Mesibov (2003) and Scheopner (2010), who noted that a positive and supportive social climate helps teachers sustain constructive relationships with all school stakeholders, and it is instrumental for establishing and sustaining their sense of satisfaction and motivation (Scheopner, 2010).

The teachers stated that they have developed a strong sense of self-efficacy thanks to their positive experiences and to the school environment (Flores & Clark, 2004). They are confident in their professional abilities, which, in turn, promotes
students’ outcomes and success (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). This strong sense of self-efficacy seems to be another factor that helps teachers maintain their sense of satisfaction. In other words, self-efficacy is positively associated with and has a considerable effect on job satisfaction (Shen et al., 2012).

This is not to say that the teachers experienced no difficulties or challenges. In their work, they encountered multiple situations (of which we believe we got reports for only a few) in which they were pressed to accommodate and at times compromise so as to be able to continue on their job. What disturbs the teachers’ sense of well-being are events in which they feel that their ethnic and national identities are denied, as is the case with the Memorial Day ceremonies. The teachers who participate in the Memorial Day ceremonies do so despite the memory of the Nakba, whereas other teachers ask to be absent on that day, and most principals agree.

The acculturation process that the Palestinian teachers experienced coincides with levels described by Berry (1980), namely, the acquaintance level, which includes facing a new culture, a new language, new people, and new and unusual habits. As a few of the teachers mentioned, this initial experience can be shocking. The second level of acculturation corresponds to the phase when the teachers began to feel more familiar with the new culture and developed a sense of belonging to the school. The third level involves liking the new culture and criticizing the home culture; and in the fourth level, some habits are changed, and new ones are adopted. Berry (1980) developed a model suggesting that the intersection of two predominant dimensions, namely, receiving-culture acquisition and heritage-culture retention, renders four acculturation types: assimilation (adopting the receiving culture and discarding one’s own heritage), separation (rejecting the receiving culture and retaining one’s heritage), integration (adopting the receiving culture and retaining one’s heritage), and marginalization (rejecting both the receiving culture and one’s heritage). According to the findings, the integration type fits the Palestinian teachers’ situation.

The teachers in our cohort recognized that coming in contact with the other’s culture not only helped them affect the surrounding majority but also affected them and their perceptions and understanding of their own community. When considering Barry’s acculturation types, we could say that the experience of the teachers fits the integration type, implying adopting and receiving the host culture although retaining one’s heritage. Indeed, the teachers recognize many elements of institutional and social life in the school system that they considered positive and would like to introduce to their own societies, but in no instance did they seem to consider assimilatory perspectives. Strasser and Waburg (2015) claimed that to succeed, minority teachers would have to pursue strategies that involve dissociation from their own ethnocultural backgrounds. However, in the case of this study, these changes were not perceived as threatening to the minority teachers’ own ethnic identity. The teachers, immersed in an unfamiliar and new culture, seem not to have experienced severe cultural shock (Romig, 2009). Perhaps, as Nieto and colleagues suggested (Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008), this is because individuals can have multiple identities that connect to various cultural groups and reflect different life experiences. As the findings indicate, the teachers’ experience of integration did not alter their feelings of pride in their own culture. Notwithstanding, they expressed a wish to contribute to the Arab education system when the time comes, by proposing the adoption of ideas that they encountered in the State Hebrew schools and would like to see incorporated in their own community’s educational frameworks.

An important finding of our study is that the teachers believe they can greatly contribute to the reduction of prejudice and thus to abating some of the flames that fuel Israel’s conflict. As is the case with many other teachers, those in our sample were not trained to teach for diversity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015). Yet, they see in their work the potential to be effective agents of social change, by helping their students (parents and colleagues) combat racism and prejudice. As shown, at times, they directly intervene in situations to correct perceived prejudices, and at other times, they see similar effects resulting from their routine professional work. Palestinian-Israeli teachers treated their students with warmth and empathy, helped and supported them with educational and personal problems, encouraged and respected the students’ curiosity and offered clarifications, and presented new information regarding the minority culture and history. They promoted and sustained direct and indirect contact with the parents, which apparently was a result from generalizing effect, such that prejudice is reduced, and attitudes change, even when the contact is indirect (Asbrock et al., 2014). Finally, yet importantly, they invested efforts in managing their relationships with colleagues and principals expressing solidarity and empathy to other teachers, and although reluctant to engage purposefully in political issues, never (accept for once) did they evade conflictual issues. Contact situations that induce empathic feelings are likely to lead to generalized positive out-group evaluations (Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003). Although lacking in intercultural training, they seem to naturally understand that reducing prejudice implies working on the social-cognitive development of their students through the promotion of sustained contact (Allport, 1954), offering antibias information (Bigler & Liben, 2006), empowering their students to construct new knowledge (Peucker & Reiter, 2008), and by trying to widen the sociopsychological repertoire (Bar-Tal, 2013) of their students, which can lead to a reduction in prejudice (Allport, 1954).

Our findings add some optimism to the existing research on the absorption of Palestinian-Israeli teachers into State Hebrew-speaking schools. The teachers in this study have a strong sense that they are successful not only as “ambassadors of good will” (Fragman, 2008) but also in truly influencing the perceptions of all of the stakeholders at the schools.
where they work. Contrary to our findings, Brosh (2013) and Sion (2014) findings were negative and pessimistic, as they found that Palestinian teachers were not fully accepted by students, parents, or colleagues. Two arguments can explain this contrast. First, recently there is a greater awareness among Israelis of the importance of integrating Palestinian-Israeli teachers in the Jewish schools, due to the encouraging attitude of the Ministry of Education. The second argument is related to the perceived status of Arabic language and its instruction. In both of the above-mentioned studies, the teachers taught only Arabic, a discipline that the non-Arabic-speaking Jewish population associates with feelings of suspicion and alienation (Amara, 2010). The teachers who participated in this study taught other subjects also, such as mathematics, sciences, and English, disciplines that are viewed as highly important. Consequently, the attitude toward teachers of these subjects is more serious and respectful, which increases the likelihood of their positive reception.

Based on these findings, we suggest that increasing the number of Palestinian-Israeli teachers in State Hebrew schools would be beneficial for all those involved, due to the teachers’ significant contribution, not only to the schools but also to Israeli society in general, through the ripple effect. It is important to support these teachers, by offering special preparatory workshops before and during their first year of integration. Furthermore, establishing special training units in universities and in education colleges for teaching on “the other side” should be considered. Finally, the findings of this study, namely, that the practice of integrating minority teachers in majority schools is beneficial to all parties involved, as well as to the encompassing society, as a whole, is of relevance to other societies in which the relationship between the majority and minority cultures is strained.

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Note
1. We use the term Palestinian-Israeli minority to refer to what Israeli officialdom terms Arab-Israelis. They are those Palestinians who remained in their villages and towns during Israel’s War of Independence in 1948, and later became Israeli citizens. The main difference between the Palestinians in Israel and Palestinians elsewhere is the fact that they stayed on their lands and later became Israeli citizens. They are an indigenous minority, totaling 20% of the population (Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

References


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