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Challenge and Opportunity? Arab Teachers' Perspectives on Teacher Training in a Hebrew-Speaking Program

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Abstract

The academic encounter between Jews and Arabs in Israel carries tensions stemming from a prolonged historical conflict, yet at the same time offers opportunities for authentic engagement that deepens mutual understanding between the groups. This study is grounded in contact theory and multiculturalism, focusing on the integration process of Arab women teachers in a Hebrew-speaking track at an academic college of education. The research explores the participants' experiences against the backdrop of national tensions, asking how they perceive their teacher education journey in the Hebrew-speaking track in terms of challenges and benefits. The study is based on a qualitative–phenomenological approach, collecting data through interviews with 12 graduates who shared their experiences and reflections. The analysis reveals the participants' explicit and implicit attitudes, the barriers they faced, and the gains they reported during their studies.

Keywords: contact theory; multiculturalism; Arabs in a Jewish teacher education track; inequality; national tension; teacher education

1. Introduction

The teacher education system in Israel constitutes a unique arena for encounters among diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups, within which processes of identity formation, belonging, and professional development take shape. These encounters unfold against a complex sociopolitical backdrop, marked by majority–minority relations and an ongoing national conflict between Jews and Arabs. Although academic spaces are often perceived as egalitarian and neutral, research shows that mechanisms of exclusion and hegemony operate within them, and students from minority groups frequently face cultural, linguistic, and social challenges (May & Sleeter, 2010; Bezek-Hilger & Peis, 2024).

Training Arab teachers in Hebrew-speaking institutions poses unique challenges for Arab women, including linguistic demands, socio-cultural integration, power relations between majority and minority groups, issues of identity and representation, and national tensions between Jews and Arabs. These challenges are explored in detail later in the article.

The present study focuses on Arab female teachers who completed their teacher education in a Hebrew-speaking academic college. It examines their lived experiences during coursework and practicum, and the personal–professional meanings they constructed in a dominant-language training environment. Specifically, the study explores how participants interpret and negotiate Hebrew-dominant norms within an asymmetrical intercultural context shaped by power relations and language ideologies. In doing so, it attends to both the reported benefits of Hebrew proficiency (e.g., participation, mobility, and professional

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legitimacy) and the potential costs associated with minority-language visibility, identity positioning, and the sustainability of Arabic across academic and professional pathways. Building on these insights, the article proceeds with a literature review, findings, and discussion, and ends with practical recommendations for policy and practice in Israel in light of demographic and social changes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism represents an ideological and value-based perspective that views cultural diversity as a positive and desirable attribute, expressing the richness of the human spirit and the values of justice, liberty, equality, and human dignity (Glady, 2009; Triandafyllidou et al., 2012). The multicultural approach advocates for the preservation and development of cultural differences rather than assimilation into the dominant culture. It calls for recognition of cultural diversity and upholds the individual's right to maintain their cultural uniqueness without compromising equal access to rights, resources, and opportunities in society (Kymlicka, 2010; Meer, 2010).

In the Israeli context, multiculturalism lies at the heart of public discourse on identity, nationality, and belonging (Perry, 2007; Paul-Binyamin & Haj-Yehia, 2019). Israeli society is characterized by ethnic, religious, and national diversity, and is marked by an ongoing tension between the desire to preserve the distinctiveness of each cultural group and the aspiration to create a shared civic culture (Gilat et al., 2020b). Common critiques argue that institutional recognition of cultural difference may undermine the shared civic ethos and encourage social fragmentation into smaller, often antagonistic, groups—frequently along ethnic, religious, or national lines (Vincent & Torres, 2015).

Against this backdrop, multiculturalism within institutions of higher education in Israel presents a particularly complex challenge. These institutions are expected to foster a pluralistic discourse while recognizing their students' diverse national identities, and at the same time provide a shared framework for professional training. In practice, however, the implementation of multiculturalism often fluctuates between institutional rhetoric and a reality marked by inequality, linguistic exclusion, and feelings of alienation among minority groups (Hasisi-Sabek & Lev Ari, 2020).

Critical multiculturalism emphasizes the need to expose and deconstruct systemic structures of power and oppression. Grounded in critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and anti-racist education, this approach offers a more radical path for transforming the educational system (May & Sleeter, 2010; Sleeter, 2024). The implementation of critical multicultural principles in education has been shown to significantly improve students' sociopolitical awareness and academic achievement (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). Gonzalez (2023) highlights the importance of this approach in fostering a positive identity and a sense of belonging among cultural and ethnic minorities.

2.2. Contact Theory

According to Contact Theory (Allport, 1954), positive and well-structured interpersonal contact between groups in conflict can lead to changes in emotions, perceptions, and attitudes among participants, thereby helping to reduce disparities and promote rapprochement between the groups, despite their differences.

Numerous studies (Pettigrew et al., 2011; Vezzali et al., 2017) indicate that tensions between dominant and marginalized groups are likely to persist unless intentional contact aimed at narrowing the gap between them is facilitated. Through such encounters, members of majority groups are exposed to new information about minority groups. This exposure

fosters mutual understanding, reduces negative emotions and prejudices, and strengthens positive attitudes.

The historical and ongoing separation between Jews and Arabs in Israel reflects the existence of two distinct groups, each characterized by internal diversity and independent political dynamics. For the most part, meaningful contact between Jewish and Arab groups in Israel is limited, and the mere existence of contact is not sufficient to change attitudes or reduce intergroup tensions (Yiftachel, 2006).

This lack of contact is evident even among Jewish and Arab students studying education at multicultural colleges. These students typically do not encounter one another during their years in the Israeli elementary and secondary education systems, not due to personal avoidance, but because the surrounding sociopolitical structure insists on keeping them "safe" within two separate education systems (Golan & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019).

Paul-Binyamin and Reingold (2014) found that within academic spaces, intergroup contact is limited: Jewish and Arab students often remain in separate spaces, which reinforces distinct group identities but maintains existing hierarchies and divisions, thereby impeding the development of a shared and egalitarian society. A recent study by Sindiani et al. (2024) highlights that although there is growing interest in forming social and academic relationships, a significant gap remains between intentions and actual interactions—underscoring the need for proactive institutional initiatives and policies that foster meaningful intercultural contact.

In other cases, the potential of intergroup contact to reduce collective conflict between ethnic, national, or religious groups remains superficial and "censored." Bar-Tal (2017) shows that contact between Jews and Arabs, particularly in educational and academic institutions, often occurs within constrained boundaries that hinder authentic dialogue. In some instances, intergroup contact may even exacerbate conflict. Keshet and Poper-Givon (2020) point out that the ongoing conflict and charged sociopolitical climate often turn intergroup encounters into clashes between collective identities rather than spaces for personal dialogue.

2.3. Arab Women in Israeli Society and East Jerusalem: A Socio-Cultural and Economic Perspective

The Arab society in Israel constitutes an indigenous minority with a distinct national, cultural, religious, and linguistic identity (Abu Asba, 2007). Arab women often live within patriarchal frameworks in which the man is perceived as the central authority figure (Masri-Herzallah et al., 2011). This is particularly evident in East Jerusalem, an area characterized by high poverty rates and poor infrastructure, where many women face a lack of access to basic services such as water, electricity, sewage, and social welfare. These conditions exacerbate issues such as domestic violence, school dropout, and family crises (Ramon, 2024).

Tradition and religion play a central role in shaping the life paths of Arab women and significantly influence their patterns of engagement in education and employment. Many women bear a dual burden—managing family life while striving for personal and social fulfillment (Sabbah-Karkabi, 2021).

Over the past decade, there has been a notable increase in higher education attainment among Arab women and in their participation in the labor market (Fox et al., 2018). In East Jerusalem, women are primarily employed in the field of education. For many Arab women—particularly those from East Jerusalem—higher education serves as a gateway to opportunity, social mobility, and a driver of gender-based transformation. Studies show a strong correlation between parents' educational levels and their daughters' integration into academia (Kryll & Amariya, 2019).

During their formative years, most young women in East Jerusalem are educated under the Palestinian curriculum, which is not recognized by the Israeli education system.

They do not encounter Jewish teachers or students, and this national and social separation during a crucial period of identity formation tends to reinforce alienation, estrangement, and nationalist rejection (Erlich et al., 2020).

Transitioning to higher education institutions in Jewish-Israeli settings requires young Arab women to contend with linguistic, cultural, and identity-related challenges. Family support is considered a critical factor in the decision to pursue higher education and in the choice of study tracks, particularly in teaching (Dallasheh, 2025). Institutions such as the Hebrew University and David Yellin College in Jerusalem offer substantial opportunities, but also pose challenges related to cultural adaptation and negotiation with dominant norms.

Arab women studying in Hebrew-speaking academic environments are often perceived as agents of change within Arab society, while at the same time experiencing a sense of alienation and indirect exclusion within the Jewish-majority space (Gilat et al., 2020a). They are required to navigate between their collective-national identity and the educational and professional spheres of a hegemonic state (Sabbah-Saadi, 2007). These women often experience hyper-vigilance, avoidance of political expression, and feelings of implicit marginalization. Nevertheless, their presence in these institutions allows for the development of a personal voice, authentic self-expression, and the expansion of their agency as change-makers within their communities (Arar, 2017).

2.4. Language Barriers

Proficiency in the Hebrew language is one of the most critical skills for successful integration into the Israeli labor market and for academic achievement (Haj-Yehia et al., 2021). A deeper examination of the methods used to teach Hebrew in the Arab education system reveals significant barriers that hinder both the ability and the motivation of Arab students to learn the language. The main issue is the complete separation between Arabs and Jews in the education system and in daily life, which limits exposure to Hebrew.

Language difficulties constitute a major barrier for Arab students studying in Hebrew-speaking academic institutions. For these students, Hebrew is not their first language, and they are required to quickly adapt to expectations such as reading academic articles in Hebrew, understanding lectures delivered in Hebrew, and producing written summaries and academic assignments in the language (Haj-Yehia et al., 2021).

2.5. Gaps Stemming from Jewish-Arab Tensions

Relations between Jews and Arabs in the State of Israel are marked by significant tension, accompanied by mutual distrust and structural inequality. During periods of escalation, war, or terrorist attacks, these tensions tend to intensify. The conflict serves as both a source and a catalyst for the formation of stereotypes and prejudices, which in turn contribute to mutual social alienation and estrangement (Bar-On et al., 2007).

The integration of Arab students into Jewish academic institutions leads to frequent contact between the two populations, each of which holds distinct political awareness and perspectives. The present study examines the experiences of Arab women who were trained as teachers in an academic institution that embraces multicultural values, offering a Hebrew-language track that is open to both Jewish and Arab students.

2.6. Research Context: The Elementary Education Program at the College

The Academic College of Education in Jerusalem declares in its mission a commitment to supporting students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Both faculty and students come from various nations and religions, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Druze. Arab students comprise approximately 25% of the college's total student population. Within the elementary education program, however, there is a Jewish majority and an Arab minority, with a ratio of approximately 80% to 20%, respectively.

The program brings together Jewish and Arab female students who are capable of studying in Hebrew, based on the belief that their future integration into Jewish schools will foster social and cultural change. This setting facilitates authentic contact, which has the potential to break down barriers between the two sectors, reduce feelings of alienation, and dismantle stereotypes (Abu Salah, 2017).

Students from East Jerusalem who integrate into the college face several challenges, including academic adjustment difficulties stemming from language barriers, limited exposure to Israeli culture, and prior educational experiences based on a different curriculum than that used in Israel. The adaptation process is further complicated by the broader Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Weissblei, 2007).

The decision to examine the perspectives of Arab female students who chose to study in a Hebrew-speaking Jewish elementary education track stems from the researchers' belief that the findings of this study may contribute to the field of teacher education in Israel and around the world, particularly regarding multicultural education and efforts to promote mutual understanding between the two nations.

The uniqueness of this study lies in its focus on Arab women who deliberately chose to pursue their teacher training in Hebrew. This is a group that has received relatively little focused scholarly attention and whose voices remain largely unheard in Israeli society. The study seeks to authentically and reflectively examine their training experience from their own perspective.

The research question guiding this study is as follows: What are the experiences of Arab female participants during their teacher education in a Hebrew-speaking track: what barriers do they face, and what benefits do they gain?

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative–phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research focuses on the individual, their lived experiences, and the way in which they perceive those experiences. In this approach, the researcher does not take reality for granted but rather examines the nature of phenomena through the contexts and circumstances in which they are observed.

A phenomenon perceived from one point of view will not be identical to how it is perceived from another. Thus, the essence of phenomenological research lies in constructing theoretical generalizations based on these differing perspectives. According to this approach, human experience holds meaning for the individual who undergoes it, and this meaning precedes any interpretation or theoretical framework. Such lived experience is regarded as a vital and valid source of knowledge (Husserl, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The research tool used in this study was the semi-structured interview, designed to explore the participants' inner world and deepen the understanding of their personal interpretations of the studied phenomenon. This method is based on an open and flexible set of questions, allowing the interviewer to respond to the dynamics of the conversation and to delve into topics that emerge spontaneously from the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

An interview guide was developed, covering a range of topics relevant to the participants' experiences, with an emphasis on the challenges they faced and the benefits they gained. The interview also included questions related to instances or perceptions of racism. Here are examples of interview questions that led to open conversations on these issues:

- Tell me about your time studying at the college.
- Why did you choose to study in a Hebrew-speaking track?
- You study at a college that defines itself as multicultural. How is that reflected in your experience?
- Describe any changes you have experienced on a personal, social, or political level.

The interviews were conducted in accordance with the interview guide and were adapted to the content that emerged during the conversation. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, and each session lasted approximately one hour. The study population consisted of 12 Palestinian Arab female teachers from Jerusalem and its surrounding areas who completed their teacher training at an academic college of education. These teachers are currently employed in both Arab and Jewish elementary schools. The participants were recruited through a call for interviews distributed by a research assistant. All participants gave their informed consent to take part in the study. Table 1 presents the participants' details and demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Participants' details and demographic characteristics.

Name	Age	Residence	Education	Self-Defined National Identity	Employment
Lin	31	Ein Rafa	B.Ed & Teaching Certificate	Muslim Arab Israeli	Bilingual school
Malak	31	Ein Rafa	Same	Muslim Arab, 1948 Arab	Arab elementary school
Tzafiya	28	Abu Ghosh	Same	Arab, in the State of Israel	Arab elementary school
Baryan	22	Abu Ghosh	Same	Muslim Israeli	Orthodox school
Rania	34	Shuafat	Same	Arab living in Israel	Arab elementary school
Umaya	28	Beit Safafa	Same	Muslim Arab living in Israel	Jewish school
Siwar	35	Ramla	Same	Christian Arab, Israeli citizen	Orthodox school
Rimel	28	Abu Ghosh	Same	Muslim Arab in the State of Israel	Currently unemployed
Jinan	28	East Jerusalem	Same	Muslim	Currently unemployed
Amani	27	Beit Safafa	Same	Muslim Palestinian Arab	Currently unemployed
Dunia	30	Tira	Same	Muslim Arab Israeli	Jewish school
Diana	26	East Jerusalem	Same	Muslim Arab Israeli	Jewish school

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative content analysis approach, which involved identifying key themes and organizing them into categories and subcategories, according to the conceptual framework of the study (Merriam, 2009). The process unfolded in three stages: (1) Open Coding: Each researcher independently read the interview transcripts of the 12 participants. During this stage, initial categories were defined, laying the foundation for deeper analysis. (2) Axial (Focused) Coding: The transcripts were reread to identify and deepen the understanding of core thematic units. Segments were categorized in alignment with the research question, focusing on barriers and gains, and with the theoretical framework. (3) Selective Coding: Recurring themes were identified, and final categories were refined. Data segments were assigned to the developed categories. The coding process was iterative, allowing for ongoing dialogue between theory and data. The researchers dedicated time to repeated readings, processing, and revisions, leading to grounded decisions.

Through this process, meaningful data segments were clustered into major categories (Dey, 1993), and overlapping categories were merged and renamed. This structure enabled a broad representation of perspectives and provided meaningful organization to the findings.

In the final stage, a joint discussion was held among the researchers to assess the alignment of the data segments with the categories. In cases of disagreement, a discussion was conducted until full consensus was reached. To examine inter-rater reliability, the level of agreement between the researchers was evaluated on a sample of the data. A high agreement rate of 84% was found, indicating consistency in data interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Guest et al., 2011). In rare instances of disagreement, consensus was achieved through collaborative discussion (Nowell et al., 2017).

Participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study and gave their informed consent for the use of the data collected during the interviews. The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the College of Education.

4. Results

The participants' reflections on their training experience revealed four main thematic dimensions: the linguistic, personal–professional, socio-cultural, and intergroup (national tension) aspects. Alongside the barriers and challenges emphasized by the participants, there were also reported gains and personal development within the first three domains. However, no significant benefits were identified in relation to the fourth aspect.

4.1. Linguistic Aspect

4.1.1. Barriers

The participants expressed anxiety and linguistic challenges related to Hebrew. The following quotes (with pseudonyms) illustrate the social and linguistic disconnect between Jews and Arabs throughout the participants' lives, prior to their first meaningful interaction, which took place only upon entering the academic program:

> When I started, it felt strange, because in the preparatory program I was the only Arab. I had no one to ask. I didn't study Hebrew the way Jewish students do, because I went to a private school. (Diana)

> I didn't really have experience working in the Jewish sector, so I didn't know the academic language very well. It was a bit difficult for me. (Baryan)

> There were courses where I needed twice as much time, because the vocabulary or the material was at a relatively high linguistic level. I had to understand what the lecturer was saying in Hebrew. (Rania)

Participants tended to describe the beginning of their journey in the Hebrew-speaking track using expressions of absence, lack, or linguistic deficiency. Their language choices often reflected negation in the first person (e.g., *I didn't study Hebrew, I didn't have experience, I didn't understand anything, I didn't know*), underscoring that they entered the program with limited Hebrew proficiency.

They also reported feelings of loneliness, the need to meet the academic standards expected in a Hebrew-speaking track, and the extra effort required of them as second-language speakers. These challenges were particularly prominent in both coursework and practical teaching placements.

The participant Rimel described her linguistic struggle during the practicum in a Hebrew-speaking school:

> During my internship in the Jewish school, I had difficulties with the language. I had to study a lot at home and prepare every single word for the lesson. I would learn the lesson and practice it before teaching it. (Rimel)

Rimel's words suggest that she was expected to teach in grammatically correct and fluent Hebrew, as is customary in Jewish schools. Her fear of making linguistic mistakes, possibly in front of students, mentor teachers, or supervisors, appears to create stress that may negatively affect her training experience. Her expression, *prepare every single word*, reflects her perception that classroom discourse must be meticulously planned rather than spontaneous.

This indicates that the contact between cultures is not occurring under equal or equitable conditions. The demand for Rimel to demonstrate mastery in standard Hebrew, despite it not being her native language, generates feelings of inferiority and anxiety compared to her Hebrew-speaking peers. Such structural imbalances may, in fact, reduce the likelihood of achieving the intended goals of multicultural education, particularly the reduction in intergroup tension.

Although Hebrew was repeatedly framed as essential for academic success and employment, several accounts also pointed to ongoing Arabic maintenance alongside Hebrew.

Participants described sustaining Arabic as a resource for identity continuity, emotional safety, and pedagogical belonging, particularly in peer interactions and in their work in Arab schools. They also referred to moving between Arabic and Hebrew depending on audience and setting, using Arabic to process complex experiences and Hebrew to access institutional participation. At the same time, the findings suggest that linguistic challenge is not merely an individual "deficit," but also a product of an institutional-social structure that centers standard Hebrew as the sole legitimate norm. A linguistic hierarchy is thus maintained, in which Arab students are expected to demonstrate near-perfect Hebrew proficiency as a condition for belonging, while the majority group is not expected to make a parallel adjustment, for example, familiarity with Arabic or minority cultural-linguistic repertoires. Consequently, multicultural contact occurs under asymmetrical conditions, placing most of the "work of integration" on the minority group.

4.1.2. Gains

Achieving a strong and successful command of the Hebrew language was seen by the participants as a critical condition for integration and for cultivating professional relationships:

> I acquired a language that, as an educator, allows you to engage in more meaningful and richer conversations. People see that you are educated, that you've truly studied, that you've invested in yourself. I wouldn't have received that recognition in Arabic. I developed my Hebrew. (Siwar)

> You can live here better. You can receive the things you deserve more easily when you know the language, understand it, and manage well with it—both in terms of education and employment, and in all sorts of opportunities. (Malak)

From Siwar's perspective, acquiring the Hebrew language was a significant gain achieved through her studies in the Hebrew-speaking track. Hebrew fluency, in her eyes, is aligned with education, advancement, and personal development. Moreover, she views mastery of Hebrew as a marker of intellectual competence and social credibility, something she believes she would not have gained had she studied solely in her native Arabic.

Malak's words, *you can live here better, you can get what you deserve more easily*, reflect her perception that Hebrew is the language of access and opportunity. She sees Hebrew as a key to success in multiple life domains, including academics, employment, and broader socio-economic advancement.

Although the participants described acquiring Hebrew as a resource for mobility and recognition, the findings also reveal the social cost of this resource: Hebrew was perceived as a language associated with value, quality, and prestige, whereas Arabic was sometimes positioned as more limited in terms of institutional recognition. This perception is not neutral; rather, it reflects broader power relations in which the majority society frames its language as a gateway to opportunities, thereby reproducing symbolic inequality between languages and between groups.

4.2. Personal–Professional Aspect

4.2.1. Barriers

Ten out of the twelve participants stated that their decision to enroll in the Hebrew-speaking teacher training track was primarily influenced by their families, particularly their mothers, who encouraged them to choose this path over an Arabic-language program. Reflecting on their experiences, the participants described the challenge as complex due to their young age, low self-confidence, and the clear expectations for success imposed by their families:

> My mother told me to study in the Jewish track. It was her idea. The whole family supported me. . . In general, it was clear to my family that I would register for the Jewish track. (Siwar)

> My mother studied at this college, my sister studied there, my aunt studied there. Many of my relatives studied there, and many recommended the college and the elementary track to me. It was obvious I would end up here. It wasn't even a question. (Amani)

> I was very young, only 18. I didn't understand anything, I didn't know what I wanted. My mother had already studied at this college and wanted to pay, so she came with me to the college. . . She supported me all the way. (Baryan)

The participants reported that their decision to enter the program was guided by their mothers and was not the result of independent decision-making. At the time, they accepted this path naturally, without resistance or defiance. The examples reflect a close mother-daughter bond and show that the mother had a decisive influence on the choice. There was no dialogue within the family; rather, the mother's or relatives' past experiences dictated the decision.

This dynamic reflects the collectivist and traditional nature of Arab society, where values such as family cohesion, loyalty, and interdependence are emphasized.

4.2.2. Gains

Despite the personal and professional challenges, the participants reported that they were able to overcome the barriers and gain meaningful benefits, both in everyday life and in their professional development as educators, particularly through the Hebrew-speaking program:

> The Jewish track helped me in life. It opened doors that wouldn't have opened for me in the Arabic track. . . I gained both personally and professionally. (Dunia)

> I learned so much from my pedagogical instructor, not only how to manage interactions with people, but also how to give everyone a voice. I learned when to be calm and quiet and when to be assertive. I also learned how to be inclusive. A good teacher will tell a student: If I see you're making an effort, I'm with you. I'll lift you up. I'll help.' No doubt, this truly shaped both my professional and personal identity. It's amazing to go through this, I think it's a real opportunity. (Siwar)

Dunia's words, *It opened doors that wouldn't have opened for me in the Arabic track*, suggest that the Hebrew-speaking training program equipped her with a broad and applicable pedagogical toolkit that enabled her to integrate successfully into the school system. This represents a personal milestone with the potential for significant career advancement.

The students were aware of the differences between the two educational tracks. The Jewish track was often perceived as higher quality or more prestigious, as it fostered reflective processes, personal growth, and professional development that were not as prominent in the Arabic track. Their learning experience encouraged self-efficacy, self-confidence, and educational–pedagogical awareness, enabling them to shape their identity as educators.

4.3. Socio-Cultural Aspect

4.3.1. Barriers

Significant differences exist between Jewish and Arab groups in terms of central cultural assets and norms. The following examples illustrate participants' challenges in adapting to new behavioral and educational processes:

> I always say that I studied in the Jewish elementary track, and there I learned a lot really, a lot about myself. It wasn't easy, because I'd never done anything like that before. We were never taught to reflect on ourselves. Here, I learned from my pedagogical instructor how to accept others, how to show respect, and how they respected and accepted me. (Jinan)

> In the first lessons, it was interesting to see that if someone had a question, they weren't shy at all. They would ask—even simple things. If I were in the Arab track, I would have been too shy to ask. (Baryan)

These statements highlight the participants' process of adapting to new social and educational norms such as reflective thinking, acceptance of others, and assertive classroom participation. Baryan's remark emphasizes a cultural behavioral gap between the two sectors. Jinan's use of repetition, such as *a lot, a lot, a lot*, emphasizes the personal growth she experienced, despite the challenges.

Alongside the challenges reported in the intergroup dimension, participants also described several benefits. In this context, the shared goal among Arab and Jewish students of succeeding in teacher training likely served as a foundation for positive intergroup contact and collaboration. Participants described identity-shaping experiences, an expanded sociocultural understanding, reduced tensions and prejudices, and an educational worldview grounded in inclusion and belonging.

Other cultural gaps emerged in participants' encounters with Jewish cultural content, triggering anxiety due to limited prior exposure or knowledge:

> I was worried during the first year of my practicum that I wouldn't succeed, because I didn't know what they teach in Jewish schools, the holidays, stories, songs. We never learned anything about Jews in our schools. (Umaya)

> Studying literature, at first it felt like learning Chinese. The course had nothing to do with my world. It wasn't even interesting. (Tzafiya)

> One of my biggest challenges was in literature. I have to study a lot, a lot, twice, all the students know Jewish writers, like, they would know the names, the works and I don't. I have to study it like really twice. (Lin)

Umaya expressed anxiety over her unfamiliarity with Jewish schools and emphasized the division between the two sectors: *We never learned anything about Jews in our schools.* This gap created a significant cultural and historical distance, making it harder for her to navigate the Jewish educational space.

Tzafiya noted her lack of cultural relevance and engagement in Hebrew literature courses: *The course had nothing to do with my world.* Her experience illustrates the disconnect Arab students may feel when encountering cultural content from the majority group.

Lin's repeated emphasis on *a lot, a lot* reveals the academic strain caused by unfamiliarity with canonical Jewish texts. Her experience underscores how the need to catch up on cultural content requires Arab students to put in far more effort than their Jewish peers, amplifying feelings of alienation and educational inequality.

In this context, the cultural gap is not merely the result of an individual's "lack of familiarity," but may also indicate epistemic exclusion and a curriculum that assumes the majority group's knowledge as the default. The literary canon, historical knowledge, and cultural competencies required in the Hebrew-speaking track are treated as self-evident, while the minority group's cultural knowledge is rarely recognized as an equally valued asset. As a result, minority students invest double the effort to "close the gaps," yet their culture does not receive parallel recognition within the teacher-training field.

4.3.2. Gains

Even though I work at Castro and know Jews, I still learned many things I didn't know. I learned how to listen to opinions different from mine, from outside my sector—to open up to new ways of thinking, to something different. It's always more challenging and more interesting. It gives you a new perspective, and it really impacts you. (Umaya).

> I had the opportunity to teach in a Jewish school. Now I know what they learn. I even taught them about Hanukkah and Passover—things I learned in the Jewish track. Because I'm an Arab who studied in a Jewish track, I have this option. I can teach what Jews know and what Arabs know. (Dunia)

Umaya expressed appreciation for the cultural and educational experiences she gained in the Jewish track. She developed pluralistic thinking, greater openness, and tolerance toward different traditions, which have positively influenced both her personal life and her role as an educator.

Dunia conveyed a sense of pride in her ability to teach in a Jewish school, highlighting her professional competence in applying knowledge from the Jewish curriculum. Her statement (*I have this option. I can teach what Jews know and what Arabs know*) reflects a bilingual and bicultural capability. This suggests that the experience enhanced not only her pedagogical confidence but also her ability to serve as a bridge between cultures.

4.4. Interethnic Tensions

Barriers

The participants' accounts reflect subtle and often understated experiences of discomfort rooted in the ongoing national conflict between Jews and Arabs. These experiences emerged in interactions with faculty and fellow students, as well as during practicum placements in Jewish schools. Across interviews, participants described feeling marked as "the other" and encountering stereotypes and exclusionary remarks that they perceived as discriminatory, stemming from their identity as Arab women. Multiple examples from the interviews revealed the presence of tension between the two national groups. These tensions surfaced both explicitly and implicitly:

> I'm a Muslim Arab living in Israel, considered one of the '48 Arabs.' In the Jewish track, I sometimes felt that I was the only Arabic speaker in the lecture, and it wasn't easy. You feel different. You're the 'other'—and they're not. They don't know you. They look at you differently. They usually come with prejudices, and you feel uncomfortable. Only later, slowly, they begin to understand who you are and where you're coming from." (Siwar)

> I'm a Muslim Arab living in Israel. I remember in one of the lessons, during the military operation in Gaza, the lecturer said that in Arab schools, there are no mixed schools with Jews and Arabs. Then one of the students said: 'There shouldn't be schools for both Jews and Arabs. There should be separate schools: Jewish and non-Jewish, because mixing isn't good.' I felt that was a bit racist." (Dunia)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that intergroup interactions were often experienced as asymmetrical and shaped by limited familiarity. Participants described being positioned as "the other" and encountering prejudicial assumptions, which constrained opportunities for open dialogue and sustained collaboration, and therefore limited the potential for meaningful attitudinal change.

The examples illustrate personal emotional discomfort. Dunia demonstrates power relations between the students. According to her, a discussion around an educational issue during a crisis in the conflict intensified expressions of racism, violence, and discrimination

between the sectors. She emphasized the words *the student from there* in her statement, thereby creating a very clear distinction between the two peoples, and as a result, she was able to emphasize the student's words and see them as racist towards her as an Arab. The words *it's not good to mix* also emphasize the tension between the two people. A tension that exists on both sides of the fence, between Jews and Arabs alike.

Siwar's words, *Then slowly they start to get to know you, and then they start to understand you, and where you come from*, present a sense of discomfort against the background of a lack of knowledge about the other. It is possible that the ambivalence between being an Arab representing a collective narrative and belief system of a minority culture and identifying with Arab national values and being a student on a track based on Jewish cultural values creates a conflict between her and the way she is perceived. She argues that deepening the acquaintance between the two sides will lead to respect for the other side's perspective.

Participants' accounts suggest that intergroup encounters do not always take place within a safe and equitable framework. At times, minority students appear to be required to manage emotions, justify themselves, and prove their legitimacy, while the majority group can afford ambiguity, silence, or exclusionary remarks without bearing a comparable cost. In the absence of a clear institutional language for addressing discriminatory statements and the impact of the conflict within the classroom space, such encounters may end not as a site of mutual repair, but rather as a reinforcement of feelings of "otherness" and vulnerability.

During the interviews, each participant was asked to define her national or religious identity. The responses varied:

- 2 participants identified first and foremost as Muslim, before Arab.
- 10 participants identified first as Arab, then Muslim.
- 9 participants included "Israeli" as part of their identity.
- 5 participants held permanent resident status.
- The remaining 7 participants were Israeli citizens.

The diversity in the definition of national identity indicates the existence of different definitions of national identity by students from the Arab sector in Israel, and may indicate confusion, a sense of embarrassment, a desire to please, or soften their answer to the interviewer. Most of the answers indicate a clear worldview in which being an 'Arab Muslim' is a fundamental component of national identity. The addition of the word "Israeli" always appeared at the end of the definition and seemed to symbolize a desire to belong to the majority society.

5. Discussion

The decision to pursue teacher education in a Hebrew-speaking, Jewish track reflects a profound socio-cultural process for Arab women in Israel. Their entry into Hebrew-language higher education is not merely a personal milestone, but also a potential catalyst for social change within the broader Arab community and, potentially, within Israeli society more broadly (Kryll & Amariya, 2019; Gilat et al., 2020a).

This study gives voice to the unique experiences of a minority within a minority—Arab women in a patriarchal society, who also belong to a national minority in Israel. It explores their lived experiences during their academic training, revealing a dual narrative of barriers and opportunities. The term *barrier* is used here not only to refer to objective limitations but also to describe the participants' subjective sense of difficulty and exclusion. The findings identified four main types of barriers: (1) linguistic, (2) personal–professional, (3) socio-cultural, and (4) interethnic (national tension).

While personal gains were reported in the first three domains, no meaningful benefits were associated with the fourth, reflecting the enduring and unresolved nature of the Israeli–Arab conflict.

The linguistic challenge was twofold: limited Hebrew proficiency and the expectation to perform in a Hebrew-dominant academic environment (Laron & Lev Ari, 2013). Arab students were required to bridge language gaps quickly while meeting rigorous academic standards delivered entirely in Hebrew.

Research confirms that language is a critical challenge for Arab students, including difficulties in lecture comprehension and academic reading (Amara & Abd el-Rahman, 2002). It is particularly concerning that most faculty members in Hebrew-speaking programs are native speakers with no formal training in teaching Hebrew as a second language. This may lead to diminished trust in Arab students' abilities and a focus on deficits rather than strengths (Kavanagh, 2022; Okhremtchouk & Sellu, 2019).

Despite these challenges, participants reported significant linguistic gains. Hebrew mastery was perceived as essential for integration into Israeli society, for building professional relationships, and for effective communication (Kayam & Hirsch, 2015; Tahauchu et al., 2020). At the same time, interpreted within the Israeli sociolinguistic context, these gains should be understood as occurring under unequal conditions of language status: Hebrew operates as the dominant language in higher education and professional arenas, while Arabic is often less visible and less institutionally valued in these spaces. In such settings, multilingualism is experienced within a hierarchy in which minority students are expected to demonstrate near-perfect proficiency in the dominant language as a condition for full participation, whereas the majority group is rarely expected to make a parallel linguistic or cultural adjustment. Consequently, participants may gain access, mobility, and professional legitimacy through Hebrew, while also facing the risk that Arabic is relegated to private or informal domains, raising concerns about minority-language visibility and long-term maintenance.

In line with Haj-Yehia et al. (2021), Hebrew learning among Arab students often takes the form of adaptation to dominant norms shaped by structural separation and limited exposure, positioning language acquisition not only as skill development but also as a sociopolitical negotiation.

The findings on the personal–professional dimension suggest a layered decision-making process. While several participants described mothers' encouragement as influential in steering them toward the Hebrew-speaking track, many also framed this choice in pragmatic terms, particularly as a pathway to strengthen Hebrew and improve prospects for integration into the Jewish labor market. A hierarchical social structure that places men in a higher status (Sabbah-Saadi, 2007) presents female students with a unique challenge in their pursuit of independent fulfillment (H. Zoabi & Anson, 2017).

The increasing number of Arab women in higher education reflects a broader aspiration for social change and independence, especially in the field of education (K. Zoabi & Savaya, 2016). According to the theory of contact and multicultural education, exposure to shared spaces can reduce prejudice and promote social change. By participating in such programs, Arab women may position themselves as agents of change within their communities (Khattab, 2002).

The findings show that the participants' growing sense of self-efficacy and their reflective development through participation in Jewish educational systems contributed to their professional and personal empowerment. The growing number of Arab women in higher education reflects a broader aspiration for social transformation and independence, particularly in the field of education (K. Zoabi & Savaya, 2016). According to Contact Theory and Multicultural Education, exposure to shared spaces can reduce prejudice and promote social change. By participating in such programs, Arab women may be positioning themselves as agents of change within their communities (Khattab, 2002).

The findings suggest that some of the difficulties experienced by the participants stem not only from personal characteristics but also from cultural and institutional structures that characterize the majority society and the teacher-training system. In certain contexts, these structures create unequal conditions for intergroup encounters and limit the possibility of fully realizing the goals of multicultural education.

The findings show that the participants' growing sense of self-efficacy and reflective development through participation in Jewish education systems contributed to their professional and personal empowerment.

The findings in the socio-cultural aspect are closely related to the complex status of the Arab minority in Israel, located within a deeply divided society. Recent studies (Asala et al., 2020; Myers-Joint-Brookdale Institute and Israeli Democracy Institute, 2023) highlight the significant cultural gaps between Jews and Arabs, in which each group clings to its cultural heritage. The power dynamics are not symmetrical: a dominant Jewish majority versus a weaker Arab minority.

This study's contribution lies in amplifying the authentic voices of Arab Muslim women, a minority within a minority, often marginalized even within their own communities in areas such as employment and education (Fox et al., 2018), and frequently invisible within Jewish and academic spaces.

The findings deepen our understanding of how teacher training institutions are often geared toward serving the dominant group, while struggling to accommodate national minorities (Wolff & De Costa, 2017). The study underscores the need for teacher education programs to adopt multicultural pedagogies that address the complex identities and experiences of their diverse student populations.

To promote equity, sensitivity, and inclusion, faculty development should extend beyond disciplinary expertise to include preparation for teaching and mentoring in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Such preparation may support more meaningful relationships across groups and foster students' intellectual, social, and emotional growth. Innovative pedagogical approaches in intercultural education and teacher preparation should also be developed to improve learning experiences for students from diverse backgrounds (Mahalingappa et al., 2018). In parallel, language-focused academic support, such as courses in academic Hebrew for second-language learners and structured scaffolding in coursework, may help bridge linguistic gaps and reduce the challenges Arab students face.

Furthermore, in an open conversation about issues related to tension between nationalities, Arab female students tend to downplay and soften events that have a racist flavor, but as the discourse deepens, despite their declaration of gains, it is possible to clearly identify feelings of discrimination, alienation, inequality, and tension that are expressed in their relationships with lecturers, students, children's families, etc. This is reinforced by a study (Asala et al., 2020) that found that most Arab students do not perceive themselves as an integral part, deal with discriminatory and racist treatment, feel inferior, and therefore most prefer to isolate themselves ethnically. However, for many of them, the fact that they managed to complete their studies in an academic environment is perceived as a success.

On the issue of national identity, it was found that Arab women consciously choose to avoid expressing their national identity in the academic institution. The encounter with the majority group sometimes requires personal concessions from the disadvantaged group, and in this case, Arab women who give up part of their national identity. This is a type of "social agreement" in which the process of their integration into the academic institution involves giving up national identity as part of coping with the socio-cultural conditions at the place of study.

Future research could compare the training experience of Arab and Jewish female students to identify differences between the groups.

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