

not Only Concerned for Curricula Implementations

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## "A Teacher is a Teacher no Matter what Culture": Community Meetings of Beginning Teachers from the Arab-Bedouin and Jewish Sectors

A B S T R A C T: This research emerged from Promentors, an international project of the EU's Erasmus+ program, that took place between 2020-2023. Under the project, learning communities were established for mentors and beginning teachers, and new mentoring models were developed. Seeking to bring a holistic, communityoriented approach to teachers' induction, the project proposed an ecological model for training mentor-teachers, developed an egalitarian and reflective discourse for teachers' induction, and nurtured mutual relations among partners in the community. A special partnership sprouted from the project between two teacher communities — in Kseifa (led by Kaye College) and in Rishon LeZion (led by Levinsky-Wingate Academic College). Teachers from the two communities got together for shared activities, promoting co-existence in a culturally diverse society. The partnership facilitated dialogue between the teachers to advance personal, professional, and cultural understanding and to discuss educational issues relevant to teachers at their initial career steps. The meetings were accompanied by a phenomenological qualitative study, where twenty participants from both communities were interviewed. The interviews focused on participants' perceptions before the meetings, their experiences during the meetings, and post-meetings insights and thoughts. The findings indicate that participants experienced the meetings as meaningful,. For most, it was their first encounter with teachers from a different culture, and they had initially held concerns and negative perceptions about the other. The meetings surprised teachers from both sides. They felt that the discourse was authentic, reflecting genuine motivation for mutual acquaintance. Under the impact of the meetings, bias was reduced and closeness formed between the parties, as participants acknowledged that the similarities between them outweighed the differences. The bond between the two groups was further reflected in their educational work as they handled induction challenges. After the meetings, we detected changes in attitudes, abandoned prejudice, and readiness to meet and collaborate in the future.

<u>KEYWORDS:</u> Beginning teachers, Mentors, learning communities, "Promentors", intercultural, diverse society, prejudice.

#### Introduction

The present study unveils a promising outcome resulting from professional encounters between two groups of beginning teachers and mentor teachers. These encounters brought together participants from two distinct cultural communities: Arab-Bedouin teachers from a small town in southern Israel, and Jewish teachers from a large city in the center of the country.

These intercultural encounters were initiated by researchers facilitating teachers' workshops in the two sectors, which were part of a wide-ranging international project called Promentors, funded by the European Union (under the Erasmus+ program). The project partners included the Ministry of Education's Department for Internship and Teachers' Induction, Mofet Institute, which is National Institute for Research and Development in Teacher Training and Education, nine education colleges in Israel, and four European universities. The project was based on an ecological approach, focusing on communities of teaching interns, new teachers, and mentors, in a model called MITs – Multi Players Induction Teams (Kaplan et al., 2021).

While teacher training colleges see themselves as agents of socialization and aim to shape the identity of teachers and their role in the education system, they also tend to avoid dealing with social and political issues. This reality highlights the uniqueness of the initiative to bring together Bedouin and Jewish teachers. The spirit of the international project, which encouraged interns, new teachers, and mentors to form a collaborative learning community, provided a fertile ground for fostering co-existence in Israel's culturally diverse society. The collaboration between the researchers from the two communities, who were actively involved in the Promentors project and served as facilitators of its workshops, played a crucial role in the planning, leading, and implementation of the intercultural meetings, and contributed to their success despite pre-existing differences, perceptions gaps, and prejudice.

The success of the encounters can be attributed in part to the partnership and friendship between the researchers, which grew over the course of the three years of the Promentors project. Their leadership and personal examples created a model for successfully connecting the two groups despite their geographic, socio-economic, cultural, religious, and linguistic distinctions, bringing them together for a shared human learning experience. Under the impact of the encounters, bias and fear were reduced, and a sense of responsibility towards the other emerged. The model created a platform for the teachers to identify with each other, reinforcing the hope for a shared future for the two communities. The article will begin with a theoretical discussion of intercultural encounters and then present the qualitative research that accompanied the program.

#### Literature Review

Prejudice is an abstract moral category that frames the way we concretely judge beliefs or actions of individuals or groups. It involves ideas, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that defame the "other" (Durrheim et al., 2016). People develop prejudice regarding social norms and tend to express them to secure and maintain personal identity (Schaller & Conway, 1999). Social psychology assumes that individuals expressing prejudice do so with some reflectivity; therefore, in environments where social norms reject prejudice, people strive to suppress them (Crandall et al., 2002).

Prejudice is directed toward individuals perceived as "others." According to Levinas, a dialogue between the self and the other is a necessary condition for shaping a moral subject committed to any "other" unrelated to the self: "I perceive responsibility as responsibility towards the other, that is, responsibility towards what is not mine or not even relevant to me; or perhaps towards what does concern me, that is, what stands against me" (Levinas, [1982] 1986: 72). Derrida further developed the concept of "hospitality," referring to an openness toward "the face of the other" as a condition for welcoming a newcomer (Derrida, 1996).

The concept of "other" is relative; it raises a series of questions and demands comparisons: "other" in relation to whom and what? Different from whom and what? Who determines who the other is? The other himself? Society? Who within society? How is "otherness" defined? How is someone marked as "other"? When does a person or group stop being considered as others? Can someone be marked as "other" in one community but not in another? (Govrin, 2013).

The theoretical and philosophical literature has grappled with the aspiration to create social change. In the field of education, for example, critical pedagogy is an educational approach that seeks to transform the existing social order (McLaren, 1993). According to Freire (2012), social change requires

inquiry, questioning, and empowering individuals and communities. In the spirit of Critical Theory by Adorno and Horkheimer (1993), Freire argues that philosophy and politics should be linked and that schools should not be detached from social reality because they reflect the face of society (Swirski, 1990; Freire, 2012).

The Critical perspective presented by Shor and Freire (1987) relies on a dialogical approach that calls for equality and mutual respect between parties. According to these scholars, reality is not fixed but rather dynamic, dependent on time, and subject to historical, social, and economic contexts. Furthermore, it is capable of changing in response to actions and activities of groups.

One theory directly addressing the relationship between groups and ways to reduce prejudice is Allport's (1954) Contact hypothesis. Allport argued that prejudice could be decreased through face-to-face meetings between conflicting groups where shared goals are pursued. The theory assumes that bringing two conflicting groups together in a common space and allowing group members to personally know each other may trigger a positive process of humanization and decrease hostility. The Contact process invites participants to acknowledge that they are all human beings with commonalities that outweigh their differences (Gor-Ziv, 2013). When encounters are managed in the Contact theory approach, they are generally less threatening and provide a sense of security and immediate success. The key to successful encounters is to create situations that may lead to collaborative and inter-dependent activities while pursuing common goals, such that participants might adopt new thinking categories, shifting from "us and them" to "we" (Dovidio, et al., 2002).

This is where the role of teachers should be considered. Education is the central element that prepares an individual for change and shapes the nature of society (Canuylası & Ozgenel, 2023). According to Aloni (2023), change can be advanced through active pedagogy, such that teachers are endowed with a professional self-image of autonomous transformation agents, rather than merely agents of socialization: "No more passive channels for conveying the messages of the political establishment, and no more carriers of replicated social gaps and alienation, but active shapers of educational ideas known in educational sciences as promoting personal growth, social justice, democratic culture, and cultural richness" (Aloni, 2023, p. 14).

Teachers, as the strongest pillar in the education system, are the dominant force in schools. They are essentially those that keep the education system alive, being the leaders of change that are responsible for developing and promoting society (Canuylası & Ozgenel, 2023). Giroux (1988) calls such teachers "transformative intellectuals." He sees these teachers as educators

aspiring to change the non-egalitarian social reality through their own social involvement and dynamic, explorative teaching. Giroux (1988) considers the work of these educators as intellectual work, conscious human activity aimed at raising awareness and altering reality. In the same spirit, Apple (2013) believes that education can play a transformative role in promoting social justice when teachers strive to inspire change in the world.

Based on these approaches, a partnership was formed between communities of beginning teachers from two cultural groups. We set out with the belief that when beginning teachers from the two cultures got together, prejudice would recede, giving rise to deeper acquaintance on the personal, professional, and cultural levels, which is vital in a culturally diverse society. The research presented here describes what happened in these encounters.

## Methodology

The study was based on a qualitative, phenomenological research design. It focused on the experiences, perceptions, and thoughts of participants, as well as on the meanings they retrospectively attributed to their participation in the program.

**Research Population**: The study included interns, new teachers, and mentor teachers participating in four joint sessions, two each year, one in Kseifa and one in Rishon LeZion, between 2021 and 2023. Among the twenty interviewees, 12 were beginning teachers (interns or teachers in their first post-internship year) and eight mentor teachers.

Research Tools: Semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews took place at the end of the second year and focused on participants' perceptions before the encounters, their experiences during the encounters, and their post-encounters insights and thoughts. The questions used in the interviews included the following: What were your thoughts and feelings before the encounter? What did you think about Arab/Jewish teachers before and after the encounter? What did you implement following the encounters? What was the contribution of meeting teachers from the other group?

**Procedure and Ethics**: The required ethical guidelines were followed. Participants provided their informed consent to be interviewed, their anonymity was preserved, and the information was inaccessible to any external party. Some of the interviews were conducted in Arabic and translated into Hebrew.

**Data Analysis**: A thematic content analysis of the interviews was conducted (Kacen & Krumer-Nevo, 2010). The information from each group

(Jews, Arab-Bedouins) was analyzed separately, and then crossed and examined for common themes. The analysis included several steps (Shkedi, 2003; Creswell & Poth, 2018; 2012): first there was holistic reading of each interview, then information was classified into meaningful units, and then primary categories were determined for each population. The next stage involved comparing the themes created in the two populations and establishing an overall category system. Finally, we mapped the emerging data and generated the final themes.

### **Findings**

The data analysis yielded three main themes: (1) Before the encounters: anticipation and concern, influenced by pre-existing opinions and stereotypes. (2) During the encounters: surprise and wonder at the human similarities and an authentic desire for closeness and open dialogue. (3) Following the encounters: changes in attitudes, expectation of further involvement, and abandonment of previous beliefs, all attributed to the mutual interaction and closeness. These three themes were found in the interviews from both groups.

#### Theme 1: Pre-encounter worry, prejudice, and anticipation

It was participants' first encounter with educators from a different culture. Before the encounter, interviewees from both groups expressed negative perceptions of the other and apprehensions about the meeting. Reporting their thoughts and feelings, the Jewish teachers portrayed the other population as primitive and dangerous.

I've never had the opportunity to meet [...] with the Bedouin sector [...] I had a certain image in my head that they are primitive, a dangerous community. From what I heard in the news, the Bedouins are involved in theft and stealing from farmers (intern, Jewish society).

Similarly, Bedouin teachers also expressed uncertainty and worry about the encounter with teachers different from them.

Before the meeting, I didn't expect there to be such a connection between us and the teachers who came from Rishon LeZion. They seemed very different from us, and I thought about how the meeting would be and was a bit apprehensive (new teacher, Bedouin society).

Despite these concerns, the interviewees described anticipation about the upcoming encounter.

I came to the tour in Kseifa out of my own will. I volunteered to attend the tour; it was my desire. I wanted to come and see because I had no idea (intern, Jewish society)

I participated in all the planning [...] true, it required a lot of work from me, but I did things with joy because I believe in them. Such encounters are a must because they diffuse stereotypes and opinions that each society holds about the other (new teacher, Bedouin society).

#### Theme 2: During the encounters

The second theme refers to the encounter itself and has three subthemes. The first one relates to the surprise and amazement experienced by the teachers from the two cultures during the encounters. The second sub-theme refers to the understanding that the teachers gained about their similarities, reflected in the statement "We are all teachers." The third sub-theme addresses the feelings of trust and the authentic desire for closeness and open dialogue that emerged during the encounters.

#### Sub-theme 2.1: Surprise and amazement

The interaction between the teachers from the two groups that took place during the face-to-face meetings, both in Kseifa and in Rishon LeZion, sparked surprise and other positive responses among teachers from both groups.

The most meaningful experience for me was when we met with the teachers from Rishon LeZion. We sat at round tables, got to know each other, and discussed topics that interested us as new teachers and teachers in general. Even the meeting where we traveled to Rishon LeZion was fascinating. There were engaging activities at various stations, where we learned about a new school model of boarding school. I felt that these meetings were special, and we don't always get the opportunity to meet and get to know the others (intern, Bedouin society).

It was amazing to meet people from the unrecognized Bedouin villages, and [do so] not through the media. Knowing that the teachers from Kseifa and Rishon LeZion deal with the same challenges. In the end, there is one goal for everyone, and that is educating the next generation (intern, Jewish society).

The Bedouin teachers were impressed with the working conditions and the school culture of the Jewish education system. Witnessing the working methods and educational challenges in the Jewish sector, they were surprised to discover that their Jewish counterparts faced the same problems upon beginning their teaching career.

For the first time, I learned with and met Jewish teachers. We discussed important issues for teachers, and I was surprised by the number of challenges in the lives of Jewish teachers. They have a shortage of teachers, school dropouts, and they face many problems. I used to think that the situation in Jewish society was better, but it turns out that teachers are teachers. They confront many problems. In one of the rounds, I spoke with mentor teachers, and [realized that] they face the same dilemmas, such as how to provide feedback to a new teacher and how to elevate the status of the mentor's role (mentor, Bedouin society).

The meetings enhanced the self-awareness of the Bedouin teachers, as they were surprised to discover that their every-day educational challenges are well known to Jewish teachers as well. This contributed to a sense of competence, encouraging them to make the effort to handle similar dilemmas in their schools.

The most meaningful meeting this year was when we hosted Rishon LeZion in Kseifa. It was a meeting between new and experienced teachers, speakers of different languages, and different cultures. I saw that all the educational issues are the same everywhere, and that teamwork in the school is important for everyone's success. I took from it an important lesson: always to try again, not to give up, and to believe in myself [and know] that I am a successful teacher and can achieve my goals (intern, Bedouin society).

In the face-to-face meetings, the Jewish teachers were surprised by their Bedouin peers' eagerness to obtain deeper knowledge about Israeli society and learn better Hebrew.

I saw the students speaking Hebrew, and how important it is to them and to the teachers to acquire the Hebrew language and our culture in general as a way to integrate into Israeli society. It's a thing that fascinated me [...] the commitment of the teachers to teach how to integrate into Israeli society (new teacher, Jewish society).

The Jewish interviewees were further impressed by the quality of the teachers and the schools in the Bedouin sector.

I was very impressed with the level. I didn't know that the level in the schools was high. It's impressive, and it pleasantly surprised me (new teacher, Jewish society).

The Jewish teachers found it surprising and admirable that women like them raise a family in addition to being professional working women. In the dialogue we had with the teachers in the discussion groups, I saw lovely, intelligent teachers for physics, chemistry, and exact sciences, as well as Hebrew teachers. It was a pleasure to talk to them; they are charming, they are raising a family, hardworking, and love what they do, investing all their efforts in it, which surprised me a lot (new teacher, Jewish society).

Similarly, the Bedouin teachers reported that the personal communication enabled by the meetings aroused curiosity and gave rise an unexpected, more respectful, and less hostile perception of the other.

It was meaningful to meet the other and look at the human side—we are all humans, [we are] all teachers facing the same challenges. It was interesting to see how they view things and how the veteran teachers deal with the challenges of new teachers. Do new teachers from both societies have the same problems? For example, student motivation and disciplinary issues. Do mentors come across new teachers without motivation that need to be motivated? I respect and relate to every person that came to the meeting. They put their fear aside in order to get to know the other (new teacher, Bedouin society).

One of the peak moments was when the Bedouin participants were surprised to learn how much they had succeeded in influencing the view of Jewish teachers on the Bedouin sector.

It surprised me—how much we made the guys from Rishon LeZion change their outlook on Arab education in general and on us as Arab teachers (mentor, Bedouin society).

#### Sub-theme 2.2: Similarities: "We are all teachers"

The positive interaction enabled participants to get better acquainted with their peers from the other group, yielding an understanding that their similarities outweigh the differences, especially in the domain of teaching and learning. Discussions of teaching strategies, problem-solving methods, and dealing with various pedagogical issues facilitated the teachers' professional development.

I felt that they experience similar things, and [I understood] the difficulties of this sector in the field of education (new teacher, Jewish society).

The joint meetings were rich in information and experiences. We met new people and professional teachers from Jewish schools. We discussed topics and listened to their experiences in teaching and to the challenges they face. [They] presented to

us the strategies they use in lessons, explained cases that emphasize relationships with students, and taught us methods for differential teaching. We met as teachers. We are all teachers (new teacher, Bedouin society).

The dialogue between the teachers led to a realization that teachers from both sectors work toward the same educational goals, sharing similar professional concerns and pedagogical challenges.

Contrary to those who think that it is not a part of us, that they are there and we are here, it seems that there is similarity between us. It is surprising to see that there is one education system that they are subject to, just as we are, and they teach more or less the same things (new teacher, Jewish society).

The encounter was challenging and inspiring. It surprised me that not only I, as a mentor, am facing challenges at my work. Every teacher I met in the session presented their challenges in schools, whether in Kseifa or Rishon LeZion (mentor, Bedouin society).

#### Sub-theme 2.3: Trust and authentically seeking closeness and open dialogue

Once the teachers were acquainted, they moved on from the stage of discovery to developing mutual trust, and expressed a desire to keep in touch in the future.

I can't remember when I had last sat with Jewish teachers. Suddenly, as we began to talk, I felt that there were many points of similarity, and we were discussing the same challenges and difficulties. We exchanged phone numbers and wanted to collaborate on joint initiatives, and to me, that is something blessed that should not be given up (mentor, Bedouin society).

The Jewish teachers saw the meetings as authentic encounters in which the "other" is someone interested in knowing them in depth. This impression was the result of open, honest dialogue and the sharing of experiences.

It's a genuine desire, not a facade or a game. Genuine and pure, a desire to be an equal part (mentor, Jewish society).

An example of these attitudes, and one of the highlights of the program, was the visit to the private home of Kseifa's sheikh, giving the Jewish teachers a glimpse into the cultural richness of the Bedouin society.

The sheikh opened his home to us. It was important for them to present their side. The value of honor was significant to them, and I highly respected that. When you

are wanted, you give back; you want to give back, to reciprocate. In other words, our desire is both to listen to and see them, [to recognize] that they are also part of Israel, to listen to them and their challenges. The best way to bring [people] together is through education (new teacher, Jewish society).

#### Theme 3: After the encounters: shifting attitudes and hope for the future

Participants experienced the meetings as meaningful and empowering, using positive emotional expressions such as "an exciting and interesting experience," "a wonderful and unique encounter," "a challenging and inspiring meeting," "full of challenging experiences," and "an unforgettable experience." The cross-cultural interaction was perceived as a unique learning experience within their professional development, providing fertile ground for changing positions and views about the other group. Moreover, the positive experience motivated participants to wish for additional future collaboration.

I learned that there is fundamental need to strengthen the connection between the sectors by holding meetings such as the one held today. [This is] in order to find common ground as well as differences, through our eyes (intern, Bedouin society).

Teachers saw the meetings as a central focal point that could induce change by fostering patience, tolerance, and acceptance of the other while reducing prejudice and bringing the two groups closer.

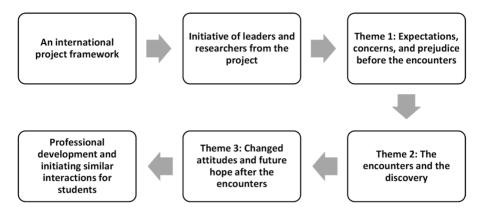
We can eradicate wars through education. We can make a change. It needs to start from a very young age: accepting the other by making it concrete, showing up, meeting up, and then things are different (new teacher, Jewish society).

The mutual suspicions dissipated as the teacher got to interact with each other. The human contact helped dissolve the prejudice they held prior to the first meeting.

These encounters shatter stereotypes. Therefore, it is important [to have them]. It leads to a place of seeing the other side, understanding it. Even if I was taught to hate the other side, and I discover it, it breaks the stereotype you had in mind and can change the opinions you came with from home. That is the important message here. If we can do that, we can create closeness (new teacher, Jewish society).

Several teachers wanted to continue the partnership beyond the designated meetings.

I left with a feeling of hope and a desire to initiate and create partnerships and changes following the joint meetings (new teacher, Jewish society).



Transformed perceptions and professional development resulting from teachers' intercultural encounters

A more advanced collaboration emerged with an initiative involving joint activities with students.

During a meeting with the sheikh, I spoke with the school principal, shared my idea of organizing a meeting between students in both schools, and he liked the idea. He connected me with a teacher at the school, and from there, it started. They liked the idea and joined the initiative. Even my principal liked and supported it (intern, Jewish society).

The first such initiative has already been launched: two teachers planned and executed a physical meeting between students from the two schools.

The visits were excellent and contributed. They strengthened the students' language skills, and the students have remained in touch to this day. In other words, not only the language but also the connection: suddenly an Arab student has a friend from the Jewish society (new teacher, Bedouin society).

The joint meetings between students yielded an understanding that bridges can be built even within their own society.

One of the changes I observed is in the relationships among students in the same class. The interactions between students from different families and different genders changed after the visit to Rishon LeZion. They saw students of the same age behaving differently, talking to each other, and raising various social issues. Today, they talk to peers from all families and genders (new teacher, Arab society).

The seeds of these intercultural encounters, both among teachers and later among students, continue to grow and expand, cultivating hope for

future harmony between the two communities. The effects of the meetings are summarized in Illustration.

#### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Initiated by researchers involved in Promentors, an international project of collaborative learning communities for beginning teachers and mentors, study groups were formed for participants with distinct cultural backgrounds. The initiative brought together beginning teachers and interns from two Israeli sectors: Arab teachers from Kseifa and their Jewish counterparts from Rishon LeZion. The intercultural interaction of the two social groups, which hold negative stereotypical views of each other, aimed to enable personal and professional acquaintanceship, encouraging participants to engage in educational discourse and discuss the responsibility of educators in promoting co-existence.

The initiative sought to structure the personal and professional identities of teachers from the two communities, acknowledging their capacity, as educators, to bridge between the local school reality and the broader Israeli society, as schools are expected to reflect the face of society (Swirski, 1990; Freire, 2012). The conceptual foundation that encouraged the researchers to implement the idea of cultural exchange was Freire's critical approach (1990), in which reality is not a fixed state but rather subject to influences and can be transformed through dialogical activities based on mutual respect and equality.

The findings of this research shed light on participants' perceptions and attitudes before the meetings, the essence of the human experience during the encounters, and the understandings and thoughts that followed. The emerging insights from these findings are as follows:

- (1) The interaction between members of the two social groups, whose knowledge about each other was mostly based on stigmas and prejudice, opened a gate for personal acquaintance. The meetings served as a platform for discovering shared goals and uncovering each other's humanity while reducing bias and alienation (Allport, 1954). The intimate dialogue in the meetings helped to shape ethical subjectivity (Levinas, 1986), which occurs when individuals feel a sense of responsibility toward the other.
- (2) Throughout the meetings, participants were surprised to discover that every new teacher faces similar pedagogical challenges. The meetings, conducted in the Contact theory approach, contributed to a sense of confidence, success, and reduced prejudice (Allport, 1954). The

interpersonal communication brought about increased self-awareness and an understanding that teachers throughout Israel cope with the same issues. Furthermore, it gave rise to insights about how much they have in common as teachers in the Israeli education system, suggesting that the similarities outweigh the differences (Gor-Ziv, 2013). The interaction also strengthened the sense of competence among the Bedouin participants, as they learned about coping strategies used by their Jewish colleagues to deal with familiar school dilemmas. The professional dialogue and the search for common goals prompted participants to start thinking in new categories, leading to an understanding that "we are all teachers"; a shared discourse of "we" replaced the language of "us and them" (Dovidio et al., 2002).

(3) One of the most exciting outcomes of these encounters was the shift in teachers' attitudes and perceptions, raising hope for future change. As teachers are the central pillar of the education system (Özgenel & Canuylası, 2023) and can have a substantial role in advancing society, it was promising to see how their hostilities and suspicions dropped dramatically. The meetings proved that teachers seeking to inspire a change in their surrounding reality are able to do so by shaping consciousness and becoming socially engaged (Giroux, 1988).

The intercultural initiative described above infused participants from both groups with an activist spirit, fostering a sense of confidence in their ability to advance change. They felt empowered and motivated to refuse to be agents of replicated social gaps, instead hoping to set in motion social change and shape educational messages that promote social justice and a democratic culture (Apple, 2013; Aloni, 2023).

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