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## Promoting a True Pluralistic Dialogue: A Particularistic Multicultural Teacher Accreditation Program for Israeli Bedouins

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This paper reports on a preliminary assessment of a unique teacher accreditation program that was established in a college in southern Israel in an attempt to improve the Arab Bedouins' educational system and to promote a true dialogue between Bedouins and Jewish students on the basis of a particularistic multicultural approach. Data was collected and analyzed by employing a combination of several qualitative methods including content analysis of program-related documents and interviews with students and faculty. The results provided preliminary support for the idea that a 3-year particularistic stage in their program allowed Bedouins students to have more productive encounters and dialogue with Jewish students during a subsequent fourth year.

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### Introduction

Israeli society is composed of a highly diverse amalgamation of different national, ethnic and religious groups that live side by side. Since the establishment of the state of Israel almost 60 years ago, Israeli social policy toward the Palestinian minority, in general, and Bedouins (a sub-group of Arabs), in particular, could hardly be characterized as multicultural. Instead, individuals, non-governmental institutions, and non-profit organizations voluntarily initiated the vast majority of attempts to create a dialogue between Jews and Arabs and to improve the social, economic, and educational realities of the non-Jewish minority in Israel.

This paper reports on an attempt to improve the Bedouins' educational system and to promote a true dialogue between Bedouins and Jewish teacher education students on the basis of a particularistic multicultural approach. During the academic year 1998-1999, a unique teacher accreditation program was

established in a teacher education college in southern Israel. In this program Bedouin students had two options: (1) they could enroll in the traditional program in the college and study together with Jewish students throughout their 4-year program; or (2) they could participate in a 3-year particularistic program designed exclusively for Bedouin students and join the traditional program in their fourth and final year in order to obtain a bachelor's degree in education (B. Ed.). In addition to the standard teacher education curriculum, the particularistic program was designed to include an in-depth study of Arab history and Islamic culture. Given the deficiencies in the primary and secondary education systems in the Bedouin sector in Israel, the particularistic program also includes remedial courses aimed at improving students' knowledge and skills in Hebrew, English, mathematics, and computer use in order to reach the level required for tertiary education.

The manuscript constitutes a preliminary report and evaluation of the particularistic program. In order to interpret the present findings, it is essential to consider the broader context within which the program was designed and carried out. The next section of this paper provides a brief description of the circumstances of the Bedouin community in Israel, as well as the theoretical framework and considerations underlying the program. Finally, in light of this background, the present methodology and findings are presented and discussed.

### **The Bedouins in the Negev**

The Bedouins are part of the Arab minority in Israel. Most are devout Muslims. The semi-nomadic Bedouins are the indigenous population in the Negev Desert of southern Israel. They inhabited this region for centuries, long before the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. During the past half century, a succession of Israeli governments evacuated the Bedouin from their lands, often settling and resettling them in specific areas and permanent towns that were built for them by the state. In addition to denying them access to their ancestral land, the resettlement of the Bedouins caused an extreme and sudden transition from the traditional semi-nomadic way of life to life in a more urban environment.

Currently, over 120,000 Bedouins live in the Negev Desert in Israel with approximately half of this population living in small villages that are not recognized by the Israeli government; their inhabitants are considered illegal settlers. These villages are not marked on government maps; they lack recognized local governing bodies and receive limited or no governmental services such as schools, running water, sanitation, electricity, roads, and health clinics (Human Rights Watch, 2001). The other half of the Bedouin population resides in government-constructed towns in which more local services are available. However, the economic and educational infrastructure in these towns is inadequate to deal with the needs of the population, which results in poverty and high unemployment.

Thus, although the Bedouins in the Negev are Israeli citizens who by law are entitled to the same rights and privileges that are afforded their Jewish counterparts, this unfortunately is far from true in practice. The degree and scope of the discrimination that the Bedouins are subjected to by the state of Israel and the fact that they are prevented from pursuing their traditional semi-nomadic way of life result in feelings of frustration, hostility, and alienation toward the dominant Jewish society.

### **Particularistic Multicultural Education: A Bridge Toward a True Pluralistic Dialogue**

During the past several decades, academic and non-profit organizations that were guided by pluralistic, multicultural, or social justice approaches organized numerous encounters between Arabs and Jews in order to promote a dialogue between these groups. The rationale advocated by the organizers was based on the "contact hypothesis." Specifically, encounters between groups are predicted to reduce hostility and stereotypes and encourage a more positive relationship between members of different groups (Maoz, 2002; Nesdale & Todd, 2000; Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002). However, empirical support for the effectiveness of these encounters is at best mixed, with some studies reporting that the discourse developed in these meetings produced a change in the stereotypes and preconceptions that were held by the participants (Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002; Halabi, 2004), while other studies failed to document such an effect (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002) or even demonstrated that the encounters resulted in an increase in hostility, frustration and alienation (Zupnik, 2000).

It seems clear that although inter-group contact might be a necessary condition for promoting a true dialogue between groups, it is in no way a sufficient condition for such an outcome. In particular, as argued by Bekerman (2004), real multicultural dialogue can hardly be achieved when there is an asymmetric power relationship between groups such as the one that exists between Bedouins and Jews in Israel. The main rationale underlying the teacher education program that is the subject of the present report is that in order to improve the outcome of inter-group exchange and dialogue, the Bedouin students must first be empowered via a particularistic stage prior to their extensive encounter with their Jewish counterparts.

The historical and theoretical underpinnings of the particularistic multicultural approach to education are best understood in the context of the multiculturalism debate that was the focus of academic and political discourse in North America, Europe, and Australia during the past four decades. It is important to note that the term "multiculturalism" has been used to refer to a wide variety of theoretical constructs including demographic heterogeneity and geographical proximity of people from different cultural backgrounds (Katz, 1998), the structural power struggle between dissimilar cultural subgroups and

the goal of equal and fair distribution of resources and power sharing (Sarup, 1986; Zolberg, 1996), and the ideology of respect and sensitivity to cultural heterogeneity and the promotion of a true dialogue between groups (Asante, 1998; Banks, 1996; Smolicz, 1997).

Most important for the present context is the debate between the particularistic and pluralistic schools of thought on the best way to initiate and sustain a true multicultural dialogue. Common to both approaches is the assumption that social reform is a prerequisite for building mutual respect between groups and that the success of such social transformation may result in a shift from an assimilation or a "melting pot" policy toward a multicultural policy (Bodi, 1996). However, the particularistic method (Asante, 1998) requires providing a unique space for each disadvantaged group in which its members will be able to become acquainted with their own legacy and become empowered before they enter the competitive encounter with other more self-confident groups. In marked contrast, the pluralistic approach (Ravitch, 1992) believes that the multicultural encounters should start in a mixed group and that the enhancement of the dialogue will result from a cultivation of a tolerance and appreciation for the uniqueness of other groups.

During the 1990s, at the height of the debate between particularistic and pluralistic scholars, advocates of the multicultural particularistic approach and, in particular, its most prominent protagonist Molefi Kete Asante, were branded as ethnocentric, racists, and separatists and touted as a great danger to the fabric of American national unity (Ravitch, 1992; Schlesinger, 1991). In responding to such accusations, Asante (1998) argued that in calling for a creation of separate Afro-American educational systems he did not encourage the separation of this ethnic group from American society. On the contrary, the restoration of the African culture was meant to enable Afro-Americans to gain knowledge about their culture and pride in their legacy, develop positive self-esteem and enter the inter-group dialogue as equal and proud citizens.

Interestingly, the need for an educational process aimed at helping students acquire knowledge about their own ethnic and cultural legacy, as a prerequisite to the creation of a true pluralistic dialogue, was formally recognized by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). During the last quarter century, this important educational organization addressed multicultural curricular issues in the United States. In its famous 1995 research report entitled "American Pluralism and the College Curriculum—Higher Education in a Diverse Democracy," the AAC&U stated that "because one's own particular inheritance and experiences form an interactive framework both for the construction of identity and for all further learning, all students should be encouraged to study this inheritance" (American Commitments National Panel, 1995, pp. 21-22). Consequently, "the study of one's particular inherited and constructed traditions" (p. 25) is the goal of the first of four segments in the curriculum recommended by the AAC&U.

## Methodology

The main goal of the present research was to examine the extent to which the accreditation program for Israeli Bedouins in Achva College is consistent with the principles of the particularistic multicultural approach and the degree to which the educators and students involved in this program view it as effective in potentially influencing future dialogue between Arabs and Jews in the Israeli society, in general, and the campus, in particular. Data were collected and analyzed by employing a combination of several qualitative methods including in-depth content analysis of program-related documents and interviews with students and faculty. Documents analyzed included the program curriculum, mission statement, annual academic handbooks, and course syllabi. This analysis included an explicit comparison between the declared pedagogical and ideological goals and actual implementation and practices.

Subsequently, 15 in-depth open interviews were carried out with the following individuals: (1) the head and founder of the program, a female Jewish lecturer, who designed its curriculum and formulated its mission statement; (2) the only two tenured Bedouin lecturers with a full-time appointment in the separate Bedouin program (both were awarded their Ph. D's from universities outside Israel); and (3) a total of 12 male and female students, most of whom are Bedouin (from illegal villages or permanent towns) and the remainder of whom are Arabs. One student was enrolled in the traditional program alongside Jewish students while the rest of the students were attending or had previously attended the separate Bedouin program. Two of the male students, who recently graduated from the separate Bedouin program, were enrolled in an additional 4<sup>th</sup> year of study together with Jewish students.

The students were asked about their reasons for joining the program, their evaluation of both the content and the atmosphere in the program, their level of satisfaction with the program, and any potential influence or relevance the program might have on their future choices and outlook. Educators were asked about the origins and evolution of the program, the principles guiding it, the program's strengths and weaknesses, and their vision for the future.

Interviews were conducted in informal settings such as the college cafeteria. The conversational style of the interviews and the friendly setting were meant to convey and encourage openness and equality in sharp contrast to the formal, asymmetric, and often intimidating nature of interactions between Jews and Arabs in the Israeli society. In addition, the students and faculty who were interviewed were familiar with me as a lecturer and a colleague, a fact that facilitated obtaining frank and direct opinions during the interviews. Although under normal circumstances such a pre-existing relationship with research participants would be considered a possible methodological limitation, in the context of the present research, the chances of the interviews resulting in a true reflection of opinions and attitudes were very low without pre-established trust.

## Results

### *Documents Analysis*

Even though the special teacher accreditation program was designed for Arabic students and Hebrew and Arabic are both official languages in Israel, the curriculum and the annual academic handbooks (hardcopies and electronic versions) were written exclusively in Hebrew. The curriculum of the program begins with a mission statement that defines the ideological basis underlying the program as an attempt to preserve the Bedouin legacy and cultural tradition and simultaneously expose students to other cultural perspectives and universal values. It is stated that one-third of the courses would deal with Bedouin history, tradition, and identity and with the Islamic religion. In addition, it is stated that, based on a guiding multicultural perspective, encounters with Jewish students would occur as part of the program.

Compared to the mission statement, the multicultural vision and its implementation as reflected in the annual academic handbooks are far more modest. For example, in the hardcopy version it is written that in order to improve the academic skills of students and to enrich their cultural knowledge, the "foundation segment" of the program (20 single-semester courses, approximately one-third of the program) would include courses about the Koran and Islam, as well as courses in Hebrew, English, mathematics, sciences, and computer use. In the electronic version of the annual academic handbooks, we find only a brief mention that in designing the courses in the program a special emphasis was placed on the linguistic, traditional, cultural, and basic educational skill differences between the Bedouins and Jews.

Most importantly, in marked contrast to the declared mission, the only requirement in "Bedouin Legacy" is a course about Islamic Civilization. Nevertheless, in addition to the "Islamic Civilization" requirement, students can choose from a variety of other courses that were designed at least in part based on a multicultural paradigm. For example, "Dilemmas in Arabic Society" deals with the realities of the Arabic minority in Israel mainly within the framework of a functionalist paradigm. Another course entitled "Difficulties and Dilemmas in Arabic Society" is based on more critical paradigms, mainly the structural multicultural approach. A course named "Critical Analysis of Otherness," discusses slavery, racism, colonialism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, male chauvinism, and homophobia. Another course, "The Discourse Concerning the Holocaust in Arabic Texts," deals with racism, stereotypes, and democratic values versus totalitarian ideologies. Furthermore, multicultural and diversity perspectives appear to influence even some of the general courses in the program. For example, in the course "Computing Information Management," students are exposed to databases in Arabic in addition to ones in Hebrew and English. Similarly, a course about the "Philosophy of Education" deals in part with debates concerning multicultural education.

### *Analysis of Interviews*

The analysis of the interviews provided a more revealing and direct window on the program. The head of the program is firmly and explicitly committed to the particularistic multicultural approach. Her vision is a creation of true and open dialogue between Arabs and Jews in Israeli society. She is working toward the expansion of the program and creation of a multicultural education center. In addition to the teacher accreditation program, such a center would offer professional development courses and workshops for Bedouin teachers in the community, as well as a bachelor degree program in education.

The two Bedouin lecturers were interviewed separately, but their views were remarkably similar. Both of them claimed that the college and the ministry of education did not initiate the particularistic program based on multicultural ideas or aspirations. Instead, they argued that the government wanted to isolate the Bedouins from the Jews because of a separatist agenda and a desire to control and supervise the program. They further argued that the college administration formed a separate program because of the lower levels of academic knowledge and skills among the Bedouin applicants compared to Jewish applicants. By forming a separate program, the college hoped to attract more Bedouin students by promising them a less intimidating learning environment while maintaining higher standards in the regular program, thereby preserving the reputation of the college. Nevertheless, both of the lecturers acknowledged that although the program was not established because of a multicultural agenda, they could identify some first signs of multicultural education in the program. However, both of the lecturers preferred the pluralistic multicultural approach over the particularistic approach and suggested that it would be better to integrate the Bedouin students with the regular program and modify the traditional curriculum to include courses on Arabic heritage.

It is important to note that with the exception of the author of this manuscript, who offered courses in the separate Bedouin program on topics related to the philosophy of education and multiculturalism, all other Jewish instructors in the program were part-time lecturers who exclusively focused on teaching academic skills such as math, English and Hebrew. The perspective of these instructors was assessed via informal conversations with the author over a period of several years. Generally, these individuals often mentioned pragmatic reasons (e.g., pay increase) rather than ideological reasons for their participation in the program. As such they express a limited sense of being a part of the broader mandate of the program. Instead they view their role as professionals providing remedial education.

The most fascinating insights about the program and its effectiveness were obtained from the interviews of the Bedouin students. The detailed analysis of the interview protocols focused on the following themes: (1) the expectations of students prior to enrolling in the program and their reasons for joining the

program; (2) the nature of their experiences in the program and the impact on their future plans; (3) the changes, if any, in their attitudes toward Jewish teachers and students (with particular emphasis on the two graduates of the program who were enrolled in an additional 4<sup>th</sup> year of study together with Jewish students); and (4) difficulties and limitation identified by the students. These themes will be discussed and illustrated in the remainder of this section.

### ***Reasons for Choosing the Program***

The interviews revealed several main reasons that motivated students to enroll in the program. Some students stated that they chose the program because they thought that they had no chance of being able to gain admission elsewhere. They based this assessment on either a poor academic record or on insecurities concerning their intellectual abilities. For example, a male student (B) from a city in the center of Israel stated, "Because of the affirmative action policy of the college I was accepted to the program even though my matriculation examinations grades were low and I could not enroll at the university." Another male student (T) from Northern Israel confessed,

I had no intention of becoming a teacher. I joined the teacher accreditation program because I thought that I was not a good student and that I had no chance of getting into university or any other respectable program. Even if I could get in I did not think that I could succeed.

Some students chose to participate in the program because of other pragmatic reasons. A female student (R) from an "illegal" village in the Negev stated an economic reason:

My friend and I chose to study in this college, even though there was another option for study closer to our village, because we could obtain a teaching certificate after 3 years and we wanted to get a job and bring income to our family as soon as possible.

The reputation of the program in their community also attracted some students. A female student (F) from a permanent town in the Negev explained: "My friend and I chose to study here because some of the women in our village who studied here recommended the college". Similarly a male student (S) from a permanent town in the Negev explained, "My friend and I came here because we heard about the respectful attitude of teachers in this college toward Arabs. Prior to that we studied for a year closer to our village but we were humiliated and discriminated against."

Only very few Bedouin students chose to register in the traditional non-particularistic program. A male student (G) from a city in the center of Israel

chose the program because he was concerned about the academic quality of the particularistic program:

I decided to join the regular program because I assumed that the standards of studies in the particularistic program would be too low. I was concerned that if I wouldn't study in the traditional program I wouldn't have a chance to be accepted into a masters program at a university. My only priority was my studies. I knew that I would not have Jewish friends and that the Arabs would also keep their distance from me.

### ***Experiences in the Program and Their Impact on Future Plans***

Regardless of the reason that brought them to the program, the vast majority of the students that were interviewed were generally quite positive about the program. Among the positive aspects, they emphasized that courses were taught in Arabic, that they derived inspiration from encountering Arab lecturers who served as important role models and mentors, and that they gained the knowledge about Islamic and Arabic culture and multicultural ideas.

These positive experiences often had a major impact on students' future plans. Four students—two females and two males—decided to pursue advanced studies thanks to this program.

Because of the positive treatment we received from the teachers, and because we enjoyed the studies, we decided to continue our studies for an extra year and obtain a bachelor's degree in education. (A female, SH, from an "illegal" village in the Negev)

It is very convenient that most of the courses are taught in Arabic. Because of my experience here I decided to pursue a masters program in education and I believe that I could obtain a position as a school principle even though a female principle is very uncommon in our community. (A female, L, from a permanent town in the Negev)

Although, here it is more difficult academically in terms of the assignments, we plan to study here for 3 years and maybe even a fourth. (A male, Y, from a permanent town in the Negev)

During my studies here I met many Arab lecturers and I was inspired to pursue a masters program in Political philosophy. (A male, T, from Northern Israel)

Although these students come from different parts of Israel, they gained confidence by participating in the program, which enabled them to formulate a higher educational goal.

### ***Change in Attitudes toward Jewish Lecturers and Students***

One interesting theme emerged from the interviews, concerning the stereotypes that the Bedouin students had toward the Jewish lecturers and the changes that occurred due to their experiences in the program. For example, a male student (B) was "very disappointed by the attitude of the Arabic lecturers who treated us like high school students" but was pleased with the Jewish lecturers who "treated us well." This statement is especially striking given that this student defined himself as a Palestinian patriot who often actively and vigorously debated Jewish students during his 4<sup>th</sup> year of study. Furthermore, most of the Bedouin students admitted repeatedly that prior to attending the program they were very concerned that Jewish lecturers would discriminate against them or humiliate and offend them "because all the Jews hate the Arabs," as one student said. At the very least they expected to feel alienated and disadvantaged due to linguistic and cultural barriers. Occasionally, when the Arabic students encountered Jewish lecturers that demonstrated great knowledge of Islamic tradition and Arabic history and/or treated them with respect, they suspected that the lecturer was actually an undercover agent from the Israeli General Security Service. One of the most important potential contributions of studying in a separate Bedouin/Arabic program was the opportunity afforded to students to bring up and openly discuss such concerns.

Of particular interest were the interviews with two Bedouin students that graduated from the separate program and at the time of the interviews were enrolled in a 4<sup>th</sup> year of study alongside Jewish students. Both individuals reported a sense of empowerment and an ability to participate in discussions and debates with their Jewish counterparts. The statement given by a male Bedouin student (J) from an "illegal" village in the Negev (at the time of this writing, a graduate student in the history of education at a large university in Israel) illustrates such a case:

I felt I had to show the Jewish students that Arabs are not all primitive and that Islam is not fundamental and conservative. For example I told them that women were very important in the age of Mohammad and that there are religious Muslim women that are feminist. They were amazed when I told them that murdering a woman who is accused of adultery is contrary to the Islamic law (Shariha).

He added that his broad understanding concerning Islam was due to a course that he took in the separate program. Similarly, a male student (B) also mentioned that the knowledge he gained in the program gave him confidence to stand up on his feet: "I felt I could argue with Jewish students. I felt that I am not less smart than they are and that they are not the Lord of the Earth and I have the same right as them to express my beliefs".

These self-reports by two Bedouin students who graduated from the separate program seem to provide support for the hypothesis that in order to improve the outcome of inter-group dialogue, the Bedouin students must first be empowered via a particularistic stage. However, due to the very small number of such students in college and in the present study, their responses must be interpreted with caution.

### ***Difficulties and Limitations***

It is important to point out that some limitations and difficulties with the program were identified by students. The program, while helpful, is by no means adequate to eliminate the disparities in resources and opportunities between the Bedouin and the Jewish education systems. Specifically, one of the main reasons for establishing the program was to help the Bedouin students improve their knowledge and skills in Hebrew, English, mathematics, and computer use. Unfortunately, most of the Jewish lecturers who offer such remedial classes do not speak Arabic, which causes substantial difficulty and frustration. In addition, students point out that the program does not provide enough exposure to Arab culture and tradition. A female student (R) from an "illegal" village in the Negev said that "we didn't study enough about Islam and Arabic culture, but we studied these topics more than in high school."

Finally, some limitations arise from an interaction between the program and attitudes in the Arab community at large. An example of such a problem was expressed by a female student (E) from an "illegal" village in the Negev, who said that even though she wanted very much to continue with her friends for an extra year, her "husband would not allow it."

Some problems concern the program implementation and others arise from students' personal situations. Regardless the origin, difficulties and limitations that students have identified affect their learning and the effectiveness of the program.

### **Discussion**

The results of the present study indicate that even though the mission of this program reflects a multicultural ideology; the practice is far from the vision. This was mainly revealed by the voices of the lecturers who were interviewed in the current study and by the document analysis of the program. In addition, it was found that that the reasons given by many of the Bedouin students for joining the program were primarily based on pragmatic, not ideological, considerations. Despite the shortcomings, the results of the present study indicate that the outcome of the program is multicultural.

In general, students' experience in the program is positive, exceeds their expectations, empowers them to pursue more ambitious career goals, and leads them to recommend the program to others in their community. The fact that 100 new students, approximately 1% of the entire Bedouin population, join this program yearly is a testimony to the success of the program. Undoubtedly, the affirmative action policy of the college and the more lenient admission standards play a role in this impressive statistic. However, based on the present research it is safe to conclude that the program's content and structure substantially contributed to the popularity of the program.

There is a clear need to provide a more rigorous implementation of the declared mission statement of the program by strengthening the emphasis on the teaching of Bedouin legacy within the program. However, in light of the mixed record of the outcome of numerous previous encounters between Jews and Arabs in Israel, the success of the present program is encouraging and deserves further systematic study. Consistent with the basic tenet of the particularistic multicultural approach, it appears that under conditions of an asymmetric power relationship between groups, such as the one that exists between Bedouins and Jews in Israel, in order to improve the outcome of inter-group dialogue, the Bedouin students must first be empowered via a particularistic stage.

In the context of the present program, deficiencies in the primary and secondary education systems in the Bedouin sector in Israel are compensated for by including remedial courses aimed at improving students' knowledge and skills in Hebrew, English, mathematics, and computer use. More importantly, the present program is also designed to help Bedouin students enter the encounter with Jewish students during the fourth and final year of the program with less frustration and hostility toward Israeli society and with a much more positive attitude toward their own ethnic and cultural identity. Although anecdotal in nature, the evidence documented here provides promising indication that the program is making progress toward attaining these goals.

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