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Special Issue Reprint

Teacher Preparation in Multicultural Contexts

Edited by
Shahar Gindi

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Guest Editor

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Contents

About the Editor . . . . . **vii**

Preface . . . . . **ix**

Shahar Gindi
Teacher Preparation in Multicultural Contexts—The Illusion of Universal Competence
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 1586, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16101586 . . . . . **1**

Mahmood Sindiani, Devora Hellerstein, Sigal Ben-Zaken and Bosmat Sky
Jewish–Arab Relations on Campus: How War Reshapes Student Attitudes
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 656, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16040656 . . . . . **7**

Dalya Yafa Markovich
"Peace Is (Not) a Political Position": Intercultural Competence in Higher Education at Times of War
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 1166, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071166 . . . . . **28**

Rakefet Erlich Ron
Beyond Utility: Language Intervention, Identity Dynamics, and Political Attitude Change Among Palestinian High School Students and Pre-Service Teachers in Post-7 October Israel
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 353, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020353 . . . . . **48**

Baoqian Yang, Jing He, Lifang Tang, Ming Lyu, Jia Cong, Ziqiao Wang and Shihan Wang
Influencing Factors and Mechanisms of the Construction of Practical Knowledge for Chinese as a Foreign Language Intern Teachers in an Online Internship Program: A Qualitative Study Based on Key Events
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 1159, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071159 . . . . . **67**

Shahar Gindi
Durable Professionalism in Contested Spaces: Evaluating the Conversion of Teacher Readiness into Stable Professional Tenure in Politically Contested Multicultural Settings, 2022–2025
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 285, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020285 . . . . . **96**

Michal Hisherik
Navigating the Intersecting Divide: The Role of Induction and Mentoring in Negotiating National and Cultural Tension for Palestinian Teachers in Jewish Schools
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 394, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16030394 . . . . . **114**

Anat Reuter and Dolly Eliyahu-Levi
Challenge and Opportunity? Arab Teachers' Perspectives on Teacher Training in a Hebrew-Speaking Program
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 178, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020178 . . . . . **131**

Tamar Shuali Trachtenberg, Remedios Moril Valle, Carmen Carmona, Assumpta Aneas Álvarez, Marta Simó Sánchez and Victoria Tenreiro Rodríguez
The IMAGINE Programme: Inspiring Innovative Practice for Intercultural and Democratic Teacher Education in Europe
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 1323, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323 . . . . . **148**

Eran Gusacov
Self-Determined Learning in a Multicultural Context of Teacher Education
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 303, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303 . . . . . **180**

Emily Howell, Hazel Vega, Lindsey W. Rowe, Katie M. Crook, C. C. Bates, Kavita Mittapalli and Amlan Banerjee
Multidimensional and Burgeoning Leadership: Literacy and Multilingualism
Reprinted from: *Educ. Sci.* **2026**, *16*, 1112, https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112 . . . . . **201**

About the Editor

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Shahar Gindi is a senior lecturer and academic researcher at the Faculty of Education, Levinsky-Wingate Academic Center, in Tel Aviv, Israel. He holds a PhD and works as a practicing clinical and school psychologist. His research interests focus on the intersections of education and politics, specifically the teaching of controversial political issues, teacher professionalization, and qualitative research analysis. He is the co-author of the book *Teaching controversial political issues in the age of social media: Research from Israel* and leads research evaluating educational policies and programs in multicultural settings.

Preface

This Reprint compiles the contributions included in the Special Issue titled "Teacher Preparation in Multicultural Contexts". The primary motivation for this compilation was to question standardized models of intercultural competence and investigate how systemic inequalities, temporal crises, and spatial architectures actively shape teacher preparation. In particular, several contributions focus on the Israeli context, examining Jewish–Palestinian relations in light of the events of October 7 and the ensuing war to illustrate how acute conflict impacts educational environments. Addressed to educational researchers, teacher educators, and policymakers, this book aims to provide a critical framework for moving beyond assimilationist paradigms toward culturally responsive, structurally aware pedagogy in deeply divided societies.

Shahar Gindi
Guest Editor

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Editorial

Teacher Preparation in Multicultural Contexts—The Illusion of Universal Competence

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1. Introduction

The landscape of teacher preparation has transitioned from assimilationist, "melting pot" frameworks of teacher socialization toward models centered on intercultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 2019). Historically, teacher education programs aimed to assimilate diverse populations into a singular, national standard, treating differences as deficits to be corrected. Today, educational systems widely endorse intercultural competence as a core professional standard, operationalized as a standardized set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills that enable educators to work effectively across diverse environments (Deardorff, 2006).

However, this Special Issue has come to question the implicit belief behind standardized models: the idea that intercultural skills form a fixed, globally applicable, and easily transferable skill set. Reading the literature might inadvertently lead one to assume that once intercultural competence is acquired, all cross-cultural challenges are simply resolved. This illusion of universal competence presumes that these skills apply seamlessly across any multicultural context, regardless of localized historical grievances, active socio-political conflicts, or power asymmetries. I argue that intercultural competence is not a stable individual asset, but a volatile, relational, and contingent process constantly reshaped by the temporal realities and spatial architectures of social encounters, and that the papers in this Special Issue support this claim.

This editorial integrates ten studies that collectively offer a critical perspective on any such universalist canon of teacher preparation. These contributions demonstrate that professional competence is contingent upon temporal shifts—including acute crises, military conflicts, and classroom disruptions—as well as physical, linguistic, and institutional spaces that regulate identity and enforce power hierarchies. By analyzing teacher preparation through the lenses of Contact Theory (Allport, 1954), Intergroup Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2013), Liberal Peacebuilding (Paris, 2010), and Heutagogy (Blaschke & Hase, 2021), this Special Issue offers a critical, contextualized framework for teacher training. Preparing teachers for diverse classrooms requires moving beyond individualist skill acquisition toward a systemic commitment to structural reform, linguistic equity, and institutional accountability, establishing a realistic, politically conscious approach to teacher preparation in multicultural societies.

2. Crisis, Conflict, and Key Events as Catalysts

Standardized models of intercultural competence often implicitly rely on linear theories of intergroup integration, assuming that structured contact gradually reduces prejudice and stabilizes shared democratic values (Allport, 1954; Byram, 1997). However, this developmental trajectory is challenged in environments of active ethno-national conflict. In high-

intensity conflict settings, time is characterized by acute events that fracture liberal peacebuilding assumptions and expose the raw power dynamics within educational institutions.

Allport hypothesized that positive contact reduces prejudice when four conditions are met: equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support. In peacetime, schools and campuses can satisfy these conditions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). During war, however, these conditions are severely strained. Intergroup Threat Theory posits that crises amplify realistic threats as well as symbolic threats (Stephan & Stephan, 2013). These heightened threats trigger defensive mechanisms, outgroup homogenization, and social distancing.

How do acute macro-temporal shocks disrupt intergroup contact and liberal peacebuilding models? Comparing Jewish and Arab undergraduate students in an Israeli Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) program before and after the October 2023 war, Sindiani, Hellerstein, Ben-Zaken, and Sky (contribution 1) documented a post-war attitudinal rupture: while Arab students maintained a stable desire for interaction, Jewish students withdrew into cultural ingroups. Notably, Sindiani et al. (contribution 1) identified a "contact paradox" where localized campus warmth failed to generalize to broader outgroup attitudes. This breakdown of peacetime contact under temporal strain is mirrored discursively in Markovich's (contribution 2) study of a joint Palestinian–Jewish academic program during active warfare. Markovich (contribution 2) demonstrates that during acute conflict, participants explicitly reject liberal multicultural assumptions of apolitical peace (Paris, 2010), viewing demands for neutral dialogue as politically biased stances that ignore core security and identity needs. Discursive practices fell into a "discourse of reconstruction" (clichéd statements to satisfy facilitator expectations) and a "discourse of destruction" (confrontational narratives questioning the program's relevance). Together, Sindiani et al. (contribution 1) and Markovich (contribution 2) reveal that wartime temporal shocks do not merely strain intergroup relations; they destabilize the foundational premises of liberal peacebuilding, exposing how "neutral" dialogic spaces can become sites of ideological friction and mistrust.

Rather than relying on unstructured dialogue during crisis, targeted interventional tools and micro-level encounters offer alternative pathways for navigating temporal disruptions. Erlich Ron (contribution 3) demonstrates that structured Hebrew language training among Bedouin high school students and PSTs can operate via an "instrumental-to-intrinsic pathway," where improved linguistic confidence buffers intergroup anxiety and builds hope for peace. However, Erlich Ron (contribution 3) shows that the outcome of this intervention was different for the different groups: while high school students used language acquisition to develop critical consciousness regarding structural inequalities, PSTs adapted to their emerging professional roles as state agents by rationalizing the existing school system, temporarily concealing its structural barriers. On a micro-temporal scale, Yang et al. (contribution 4) illustrate how daily "negative key events," such as classroom misunderstandings during internships, force intern teachers into cognitive "disorienting dilemmas" (Mezirow, 1991; Piaget, 1970) that catalyze practical schema accommodation. Taken together, Erlich Ron (contribution 3) and Yang et al. (contribution 4) emphasize that temporal contingency operates across multiple scales, from structural political shocks to daily classroom dilemmas, and that educational interventions must account for the participant's developmental and professional positioning.

3. The Spatial Architecture of Encounter

The physical and institutional spaces in which intercultural encounters occur are not neutral containers of social action. Instead, they represent active spatial architectures that enforce power relations, reinforce hierarchies, and regulate identity expressions. In divided

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societies, structural segregation transforms majority-dominated schools into contested territories for minority educators (Saada & Gross, 2019). Language is a prime site for reproducing symbolic inequality, with the hegemonic group's language presented at times as the sole legitimate standard (Bourdieu, 1991). When minority teachers operate within these spaces, they must navigate a rigid division between the visible front stage and the safer backstage. Professional durability requires the creation of "third spaces"—hybrid, non-hegemonic environments where cultural and professional identities are negotiated and validated without the demand for assimilation (Bhabha, 1994).

In my paper in this Special Issue (Gindi, contribution 5), I examine Palestinian graduates placed in Jewish state schools in Israel (2022–2025), finding a 60.6% turnover rate driven by contractual precarity, geographic misalignment, and principal linguistic policing that forced teachers to suppress their personal identities during political flashpoints. I argue that when institutional structures are decoupled from pedagogical goals, a form of institutional betrayal occurs. This front-stage institutional pressure is corroborated by Hisherik (contribution 6) and Reuter and Eliyahu-Levi (contribution 7). Hisherik (contribution 6) shows how Palestinian novice teachers navigate school staffrooms through "strategic ambiguity" and "implicit resistance" (Scott, 1990), for example, standing silently during national ceremonies to satisfy the front-stage gaze while maintaining internal identity boundaries. Similarly, Reuter and Eliyahu-Levi (contribution 7) demonstrate how Hebrew-speaking academic tracks operate as epistemological borders, where Arab teacher candidates experience intense linguistic anxiety and epistemic exclusion due to an unexamined dominant canon. The findings of the three contributions (5–7) reveal that institutional spaces frequently demand double labor from minority teachers, who must continuously manage linguistic and identity boundaries to achieve professional legitimacy.

To counteract institutional exclusion, educational programs construct protective safe spaces and leverage alternative spatial environments. Hisherik (contribution 6) highlights that induction workshops led by shared-identity mentors serve as backstage sanctuaries where novice teachers process complex experiences and translate political pain into professional resilience. Expanding beyond institutional walls, Shuali Trachtenberg et al. (contribution 8) demonstrate how non-formal, place-based residential seminars (the IMAGINE project in Spain) dismantle traditional power hierarchies. By placing student teachers in historical settings (e.g., Toledo, Sagunto) where Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities historically coexisted, Shuali Trachtenberg et al. (contribution 8) show how engaging with tangible and intangible cultural heritage fosters mutual recognition and democratic competence under the Council of Europe's RFCDC framework. Conversely, Yang et al. (contribution 4) identify a "spatial deficit" in purely online internship environments, where digital delivery restricts exposure to non-verbal cues and physical classroom richness, representing only 6.7% of context knowledge construction. Together, these contributions (4, 6, and 8) demonstrate the connection between spatial design and the quality of intercultural encounters, where non-formal heritage sites and mentored sanctuaries expand relational possibilities, while unadapted digital or rigid institutional spaces restrict them.

4. Contextualizing Pedagogy

To prepare teachers for multicultural classrooms, teacher training systems must dismantle standardized, top-down curricular models that perpetuate cultural hegemony under the guise of an objective disciplinary canon. Standardized assessments and uniform curriculums often operate as assimilationist mechanisms, forcing minority PSTs to adapt to dominant cultural narratives. Rejecting this universal canon demands a paradigm shift in teacher preparation: a transition toward localized, adaptive, and self-determined learning

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frameworks that empower teachers to co-construct knowledge in accordance with their cultural and community contexts.

Rather than treating standardized curricula or academic canons as fixed mandates, teachers can exercise agency by modifying and contextualizing learning frameworks. Gusacov (contribution 9) proposes self-determined learning as a practical response to canon-bound inequality, demonstrating how PSTs in a teacher education course were empowered to investigate culturally relevant topics (such as femicide activism in Arab communities or LGBTQ+ youth support) using written or oral sources sensitive to their group's language. By framing the academic canon as an open hypothesis rather than an absolute authority, Gusacov (contribution 9) shows how student agency can diversify course knowledge and expose cohorts to non-hegemonic perspectives. This subversion of standardized expectations is mirrored in the design-based research of Howell et al. (contribution 10), who examined early literacy teachers navigating standardized "Science of Reading" mandates. Howell et al. (contribution 10) implemented micro modifications, such as translanguaging modules and community-led caregiver workshops, to adapt rigid literacy frameworks for multilingual learners. Furthermore, they documented how teachers developed "burgeoning, hesitant leadership" identities, preferring collaborative coaching roles that bridged state standards with family needs (Vega et al., 2025). Together, Gusacov (contribution 9) and Howell et al. (contribution 10) underscore that teacher agency thrives when programs adapt pedagogical content to community realities.

In sum, contextualizing pedagogy requires aligning curricular content with the physical and cultural realities of the learning environment. As Yang et al. (contribution 4) observed in their analysis of online internships, decontextualized or spatially restricted settings hinder interns from developing contextual teaching knowledge. Moreover, when state initiatives operate in isolation from field realities, such as the stark disconnect I documented between the Ministry of Education's policy to train Palestinian Arab teachers and the precarious field conditions in host schools, where graduates faced substitute labor contracts, geographic commuting burdens, and principal linguistic policing (Gindi, contribution 5), pedagogical readiness fails to translate into durable tenure. When pedagogical training is disconnected from local environments or community needs, it risks reinforcing deficit views of multilingual and minority students (Howell et al., contribution 10). By integrating self-determined inquiry (Gusacov, contribution 9), community-anchored literacy modifications (Howell et al., contribution 10), and physically situated encounters (Shuali Trachtenberg et al., contribution 8; Yang et al., contribution 4), teacher preparation can replace universalist skill models with localized, culturally responsive practice.

5. Future Research Directions

The empirical and theoretical insights presented in this Special Issue point to the limitations of standardized approaches to multicultural teacher training. To overcome the weaknesses of Western liberal models of intercultural competence and address the systemic inequalities that define contested educational spaces, future scholarship would do well to embark on a rigorous, ecologically sensitive, and politically conscious research agenda.

First, there is a need for longitudinal cohort studies that track the impact of acute events and temporal shocks over extended periods. Most current research relies on cross-sectional or short-term longitudinal designs (contributions 1 and 6). Future studies should design multi-year longitudinal projects that follow cohorts of PSTs from initial preparation, through their induction year, and into early career tenure. These designs should explicitly monitor how bicultural identity integration, linguistic self-efficacy, and political attitudes change as teachers transition through different sociopolitical phases. This longitudinal tracking will allow researchers to evaluate the durability of intercultural competence and

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determine whether initial individual gains eventually collapse into systemic attrition or sustain themselves as resilient professional assets (contributions 3 and 5).

Second, researchers would do well to develop spatially sensitive and ecologically valid methodologies capable of capturing physical and symbolic architectures of exclusion in real time. Traditional self-report surveys are insufficient to capture the subtle, everyday dynamics of linguistic policing, emotional labor, and spatial segregation that minority teachers experience. Future research would do well to utilize critical qualitative and mixed-method approaches, including diary studies, smartphone-enabled ecological moment-to-moment assessments, and mapping of staffroom interactions. For instance, researchers could ethnographically map how the physical layout of school staffrooms and the informal language choices of majority teachers create hidden borders or, conversely, support inclusive dialogue, shifting the focus from individual capability to the accountability of receiving institutions (Byram et al., 2022).

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this Special Issue represents a critique of an implicit universal, apolitical, and standardized multicultural competence toolkit. The ten compiled studies demonstrate that preparing teachers to navigate human diversity demands a move away from individualist, deficit-oriented models toward a critical recognition of the spatial and temporal contingencies of intergroup encounters. Intercultural competence is not a static set of transportable skills, but a volatile, relational process that is constantly reshaped by acute events, such as armed conflict, and by spatial architectures, such as linguistic hierarchies and institutional precarity.

To ensure that teacher preparation moves beyond the illusion of universal competence, teacher education should be anchored in systemic, contextualized accountability. This highlights the value of restructuring pedagogical and institutional spaces to be sensitive to localized, temporal, and spatial contexts. By prioritizing context-sensitive designs—such as localized curricular adaptations, self-determined learning models, and place-based experiential encounters—programs can move past decontextualized skill acquisition. Within these context-sensitive environments, attention must also be paid to how PSTs navigate and construct their professional and multicultural identities amidst competing cultural and institutional pressures. Supporting this ongoing identity negotiation, rather than expecting a static set of competencies, is essential for cultivating educators equipped to navigate the realities of multicultural societies.

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Article

Jewish–Arab Relations on Campus: How War Reshapes Student Attitudes

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Abstract

This study presents a longitudinal examination of intergroup relations between Arab and Jewish students in an Israeli higher education institution, focusing on their willingness for intergroup closeness and actual intergroup interactions. Building upon previous data collected in 2023, the 2025 findings reveal both persisting views in certain attitudes and behaviors and changes in others. Arab students consistently reported higher levels of willingness for academic, friendship, and acquaintanceship relations, as well as more frequent intergroup interactions. In contrast, Jewish students demonstrated a significant decline in both willingness and engagement, particularly following the 7 October 2023 attacks and ensuing war between Hamas and Israel. The study highlights the gap between expressed willingness and actual behavior, emphasizing the need for structured institutional interventions to foster meaningful intergroup contact. Differences were also observed across gender and friendship status, with Arab students showing increased openness over time. The findings underscore the critical role of higher education institutions in promoting intercultural competence and suggest practical recommendations for enhancing intergroup relations in conflict-affected societies.

Keywords: intergroup relations; Arab-Jewish relations; higher education; intercultural competence; contact hypothesis; Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE)

1. Introduction

Intergroup relations in deeply divided, multicultural societies have long been the focus of social and psychological research. Foundational theories have emphasized how conflict, segregation, and historical inequality shape the dynamics of trust, identity, and cooperation across group boundaries (Allport, 1954; Brewer, 1999). More recent empirical studies consistently confirm that armed conflict and prolonged ethnonational division weaken social cohesion, reduce intergroup trust, and heighten identity-based tensions. Comprehensive reviews and cross-national studies show declines in both social and political trust, reduced willingness for cooperation across group lines, and the solidification of exclusive collective identities in post-conflict contexts (Fiedler, 2023; Mayer et al., 2024; Vonhm, 2025). Contemporary scholarship further highlights that rebuilding cooperation and shared identity in such settings requires attending to multidimensional processes of social cohesion, including trust, social identity, participation, and equality, which are often disrupted by conflict (Vonhm, 2025). Longitudinal evidence from other divided societies similarly shows that while intergroup contact remains central to reducing bias and promoting empathy among youth, its effects are often constrained by prevailing threat dynamics

(McKeown et al., 2025). Together, these bodies of work underscore that intergroup relations in divided societies must be understood as embedded within broader sociopolitical and historical forces shaping opportunities for cooperation and coexistence (Figueiredo et al., 2025).

Such relations do not emerge in isolation; rather, they are shaped by the broader sociopolitical context, historical narratives, and the lived experience of conflict. Research on intergroup relations in conflict zones demonstrates that conflict influences perceptions of threat, feelings of mistrust, and low expectations regarding intergroup cooperation (Kilpatrick & Leitch, 2004; Bagci et al., 2023). Accordingly, intergroup conflict serves as a central analytical lens through which Jewish–Arab interactions in shared environments must be interpreted. Like elsewhere, intergroup conflict reflects the enduring national and ethnic tensions that shape Jewish–Arab relations in Israel. These tensions are expressed in collective memories of hostilities, structural inequalities, and political contestation (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1999; Bar-Tal, 2014).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) offer a potential shared space for bridging gaps between groups in conflict. In Israel, students often experience a meaningful encounter for the first time in their higher education studies (Hellerstein & Sindiani, 2025; Hellerstein et al., 2023; Sindiani et al., 2024). Studying for an extended period of four years together can lead to processes of reduced tensions, greater trust and enhanced intergroup relations. While these processes are challenging during relatively peaceful times, it can be assumed that the challenge is expounded during wartime. To better understand the potential role of HEI settings in mitigating external sociopolitical circumstances on intergroup conflict, this study compares between the attitudes and perceptions of Jewish and Arab undergraduate students before and after the 7 October war.

2. Background

2.1. Theoretical Lenses

This study is mainly grounded in the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), which suggests that under appropriate conditions of equal status, cooperation, shared goals, and institutional support, intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. Several meta-analyses have reinforced this claim (Banas et al., 2020; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and while Paluck et al. (2019) have raised critical questions regarding the long-term and ecological validity of contact interventions, their findings still confirm the claim. Within this theoretical framework, we distinguish between two constructs derived directly from intergroup contact research. The first is willingness for intergroup closeness, which reflects students' attitudinal openness to forming academic, social, or personal relationships with outgroup peers, an indicator of motivational readiness and positive orientation toward contact. The second is actual intergroup interaction, which captures the behavioral dimension of contact, referring to concrete everyday encounters such as studying together, collaborating in class, or spending leisure time with outgroup members. This distinction, central to previous findings (Sindiani et al., 2024), allows us to examine not only how students feel about intergroup engagement but also how these attitudes translate into real-world behavior within the natural HEI environment.

2.2. Sociopolitical Context

This study examines undergraduate students in a PETE program in Israel. Israel's political, cultural, and historical conditions have structured Jewish–Arab relations characterized by enduring national tensions and collective memories that influence perceptions and social behavior (Bar-Tal, 2007; Lavie et al., 2021). Understanding this context is essen-

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tial for interpreting variability in intergroup attitudes and behavior within Israeli HEIs (Sindiani et al., 2024).

Historical developments, from the 1948 war and the ensuing establishment of the State of Israel, to recurring flare-ups of political violence, have produced enduring asymmetries in socioeconomic status and political representation, and competing collective narratives (Bar-Tal, 2007; Smooha, 2010). These dynamics periodically intensify in response to external events. A particularly significant rupture occurred on 7 October 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel, claiming the lives of some 1200 Israeli civilians. The attack generated widespread fear, trauma, and mistrust among Jewish citizens, while Arab citizens faced heightened scrutiny, pressure to condemn violence, and increased monitoring of political expression (Özkan et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2025; Taub Center, 2023). Research in Israel and other conflict zones shows that such crises can sharply undermine willingness for intergroup engagement and increase negative attitudes (Saguy et al., 2008; Maoz, 2011). The 7 October massacre therefore represents a sociopolitical turning point with profound implications for Jewish–Arab relations across multiple social domains, including higher education campuses.

Recent public opinion data following the 7 October events also highlight a sharp deterioration in Jewish–Arab relations within Israeli society. Surveys conducted by the aChord Center (2023–2024) documented increased perceptions of threat, decreased trust, and heightened emotional distancing between the groups in multiple social arenas, including workplaces, education, and community settings. These findings demonstrate that the post-war polarization was not limited to political discourse but reflected broad shifts in intergroup attitudes across the Israeli public. Integrating these insights provides essential context for understanding the campus-level shifts observed in the present study.

Further evidence from the Israel Democracy Institute's September 2024 survey (Hermann et al., 2024) shows that one year after the 7 October war, both Jewish and Arab respondents reported significantly lower trust, higher perceptions of intergroup threat, and decreased expectations for coexistence compared with pre-war baselines. These national-level findings mirror the attitudinal patterns identified in the current study and underscore the broader sociopolitical forces shaping student interactions on campus.

2.3. Higher Education Institutions as Sites of Intergroup Contact

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are often theorized as sites for intergroup contact with the potential to cultivate intercultural competence and foster meaningful engagement among diverse populations (Deardorff, 2006; Guo & Jamal, 2007). However, research across global contexts suggests a "contact paradox": physical proximity often results in division into monocultural groups. Studies on international and local students, for instance, show that individuals often retreat into cultural ingroups despite sharing classrooms and dormitories (Volet & Ang, 2012; Dunne, 2009).

This phenomenon points to a persistent discrepancy between orientation and action. While students may express an abstract openness to diversity, their concrete daily behaviors—studying, eating, and socializing—frequently remain segregated (Harrison & Peacock, 2009). This gap suggests that the latent potential for contact in HEIs is often hindered by psychological barriers, such as intergroup anxiety or the comfort of the familiar, which prevent students from translating positive attitudes into actual behavioral engagement.

2.4. Israeli HEIs: From Segregated to Shared Spaces

In Israel, this global "contact paradox" is intensified by a domestic educational structure characterized by long-term institutional separation. For most Jewish and Arab students,

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the higher education setting represents the first sustained encounter with the other group after twelve years of growing up in almost entirely segregated K-12 school systems (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2008). While HEIs are officially shared spaces, they are often experienced as segmented (Hasan-Aslih et al., 2020).

Beyond the broad sociopolitical tensions mentioned previously, specific structural barriers reinforce this segmentation. The dominance of Hebrew as the primary medium of instruction often creates a power imbalance and a social barrier for Arab students who represent the largest minority group (21%) of Israel's population (Dallasheh, 2025). In general, students tend to maintain "island" communities on campus, mirroring the geographic and social segregation of their home communities (Abu Raiya et al., 2008). Consistent with this pattern, our prior longitudinal data (Sindiani et al., 2024) confirmed that while students, particularly in friendship domains, expressed a high willingness for closeness, their actual reported interactions remained significantly lower.

This suggests that in the Israeli context, the gap is not merely a matter of social preference, but a reflection of a society where living together often translates to living side-by-side without deep integration. This underscores the need to examine how external shocks, like the events of 7 October, further strain these already fragile shared spaces.

2.5. Physical Education Teacher Education as a Contact Arena

Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) programs present a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. PETE curricula emphasize teamwork, cooperation, embodied interaction, and shared physical engagement, creating natural opportunities for both positive and negative intergroup encounters (Leitner et al., 2014; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2017). At the same time, these embodied and socially intensive environments may heighten intergroup sensitivities, particularly in periods of broader sociopolitical tension.

Building on these theoretical and empirical foundations, the present study examines changes in willingness for intergroup closeness and actual intergroup interactions among Jewish and Arab PETE students in Israel across two timepoints: 2023 (pre-7 October) and 2025 (post-7 October). This repeated cross-sectional design enables an examination of how a major sociopolitical rupture shapes intergroup orientations within a shared PETE environment.

In addition, the study offers several distinctive sources of novelty that enhance its contribution to the field. First, it captures an unprecedented and highly consequential sociopolitical moment, the immediate period following the 7 October events, providing rare empirical insight into how intergroup attitudes and behaviors shift in the aftermath of a national trauma. Second, unlike most prior studies that focus exclusively on attitudes, the present research simultaneously measures both willingness for intergroup closeness (attitudinal orientation) and actual intergroup interactions (behavioral enactment), thereby enabling a more comprehensive assessment of the attitude–behavior gap. Third, the study draws on a relatively large sample across two naturalistic measurement points, strengthening both the ecological validity and the generalizability of its findings within higher education contexts. Together, these elements underscore the study's innovative contribution to understanding intergroup dynamics during periods of acute societal rupture.

Accordingly, the study addresses two primary research questions:

1. How did Jewish and Arab PETE students' willingness for intergroup closeness change following the events of 7 October compared to the period prior to the war?
2. How has actual intergroup contact between the groups changed during the same period?

By comparing these dimensions across a period marked by profound societal upheaval, the study contributes to broader debates on the limits and possibilities of intergroup contact in societies experiencing protracted conflict. It further illuminates the role of higher

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education as both a site of social reproduction and a potential catalyst for intergroup openness, cooperation and reconciliation.

3. Methods

3.1. Study Design

This research utilized a quantitative approach, employing a repeated cross-sectional survey design to facilitate longitudinal analysis. The questionnaire, primarily composed of closed-ended questions, explored the interactions between Jewish and Arab undergraduate students in a Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) program, alongside their attitudes and perceptions toward one another. To examine changes over time, data collection was conducted at two distinct intervals. These two intervals represent measurements taken before the 7 October war (2023) and in its aftermath (2025), enabling a comparative assessment of shifts in intergroup willingness for closeness and actual intergroup contact.

Although key background variables such as place of residence, admission criteria, and socioeconomic status were broadly comparable across the two cohorts, the proportion of Arab students increased from 21% in 2023 to approximately one-third in 2025. This shift in sample composition should be acknowledged when interpreting cohort differences. Nonetheless, the patterns observed within each group (Arab vs. Jewish students) remained internally consistent, supporting the interpretation that contextual changes, including the sociopolitical impact of the 7 October war, contributed meaningfully to the differences found.

3.2. Setting

The study was conducted at a teacher education institution located in central Israel. The regional demographic composition from which the majority of students are drawn includes predominantly Arab villages and cities in northern Israel and in the central "Triangle" region, alongside predominantly Jewish cities, kibbutzim, and moshavim in the center of the country. This context provides an important backdrop for understanding campus-level intergroup dynamics.

3.3. Participants

The study involved a total of 616 PETE students (298 female) enrolled at a teacher education college in Israel. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 41 years (M = 24.56, SD = 3.35) and represented all four years of the undergraduate program. In 2023, data were collected from 314 students (70 Arab participants), while in 2025, 302 students participated (101 Arab participants).

A detailed demographic comparison between the 2023 and 2025 cohorts, including gender distribution, year of study, country of birth, dormitory residence, and sports team participation, is presented in Table 1. This descriptive overview provides essential context regarding sample composition and supports the interpretation of cohort differences.

Table 1. Distribution of characteristics (%).

	2023 (N = 314)		**2025 (N = 302)**	
	Jewish Students (N = 244)	**Arab Students (N = 70)**	**Jewish Students (N = 201)**	**Arab Students (N = 101)**
Gender				
Male students	48	57	56.7	46.5
Female students	52	43	43.3	53.5

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Table 1. *Cont.*

	2023 (N = 314)		2025 (N = 302)	
	Jewish Students (N = 244)	**Arab Students (N = 70)**	**Jewish Students (N = 201)**	**Arab Students (N = 101)**
Country of Birth				
Israel	95	96	91	94.1
Year of Study				
First year	24	29	34.3	22.8
Second year	34	25	24.9	29.7
Third year	20	21	19.4	27.7
Fourth year	22	25	21.4	19.8
Living in Dormitories	10	43	12.3	39.8
Participation in a Sports Team	92	91	70.5	81.8

3.4. Procedure

Following ethical approval from the authors' affiliated Institutional Review Board (Approval No. 398/23), participants completed a paper-based questionnaire. The study objectives were explained both verbally and in a written introduction at the beginning of the survey. Participation was anonymous, and survey completion signified informed consent (Landau & Scheffler, 2007). Recruitment was conducted through the college's social media platforms (Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups), and students were also given class time to complete the questionnaire. Since instruction at the institution is in Hebrew, and all students are required to demonstrate Hebrew proficiency based on national psychometric scores for admission, both Jewish and Arab participants responded to the survey in Hebrew.

The study was conducted using a large-scale, structured questionnaire comprising two primary sections: (1) demographic background (28 items) and (2) attitudes of Arab and Jewish students toward one another (36 items) (Bäuml et al., 2009; Jayusi, 2009; Swart et al., 2010).

The present analysis focuses on two key dimensions derived from the questionnaire. The first, willingness for intergroup closeness, was measured using four subscales: willingness for academic relationships, willingness for friendships, willingness for acquaintanceship, and an overall index (average of the first three subscales). Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 5 = to a very great extent). The second dimension, actual intergroup interactions, was assessed by asking participants to rate their agreement with 11 items describing interactions with students from the other group, also on a 5-point Likert scale.

3.5. Data Analyses

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS v.27 for Windows. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to determine the internal consistency of each scale. Mean scores are presented with standard deviations in parentheses, and Cohen's d effect sizes are reported to compare Arab and Jewish students across time periods and within the willingness for closeness index.

Additionally, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to assess the impact of ethnonational group and study year on the four aspects of willingness for closeness: academic, friendship, acquaintanceship, and overall willingness for closeness. To determine whether differences existed in this dimension based on group affiliation and year, repeated measures ANOVA was conducted, incorporating two independent variables (year and

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group) and three dependent variables (academic, friendship, and acquaintanceship relations). Bonferroni corrections were applied for multiple comparisons, and independent samples *t*-tests (two-tailed) were used to compare the two groups.

4. Results

The results of the data analysis are presented first regarding willingness for intergroup closeness, followed by those regarding actual intergroup interactions.

4.1. Willingness for Intergroup Closeness

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the internal consistency of the actual intergroup closeness scales. To identify factors, Varimax-type factor analysis was performed, initially yielding two factors that together explained 67% of the variance, though their reliability was low. A subsequent content analysis by expert judges identified three willingness for intergroup closeness scales. For willingness to develop academic relations, items such as "studying together for exams" and "writing a paper together" were assessed and demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.887$). For willingness to form friendships, items such as "going out together to a social activity," "hosting them at my house," and "accepting them as good friends" were assessed ($\alpha = 0.893$). Finally, for willingness to form acquaintances, items such as "being friends on social media," "playing together on a sports team," and "working together in the same workplace" were assessed ($\alpha = 0.709$).

Based on these categories, three indices were constructed for the ANOVA. Additionally, a general willingness for closeness index was designed, derived from all statements in all three categories ($\alpha = 0.927$). Higher values in these indices indicate a stronger desire for closeness with students from the outgroup.

The analysis of students' willingness for intergroup closeness, based on the 2025 dataset, revealed a consistent and statistically significant pattern in which Arab students reported higher levels of willingness than their Jewish peers across all dimensions. As shown in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 1, Arab students expressed greater willingness to engage in academic relations (M = 3.93, SD = 0.91) compared to Jewish students (M = 2.95, SD = 1.35), [t(300) = 6.58, $p < 0.001$, d = 0.80]. A similar pattern was observed in friendship relations, where Arab students (M = 3.73, SD = 0.94) scored significantly higher than Jewish students (M = 2.69, SD = 1.25), [t(300) = 7.38, $p < 0.001$, d = 0.90]. In the domain of acquaintanceship relations, Arab students again reported higher willingness (M = 4.26, SD = 1.09) than Jewish students (M = 3.48, SD = 1.19), [t(300) = 5.23, $p < 0.001$, d = 0.67]. The general closeness index followed the same trend, with Arab students (M = 3.81,SD = 0.75) scoring significantly higher than Jewish students (M = 2.90, SD = 1.12), [t(300) = 7.37, $p < 0.001$, d = 0.90].

Table 2. Willingness for intergroup closeness: differences by year and group.

	Jewish			Arab			Jewish vs. Arab (2025)
Willingness for Closeness	**2023 (N = 236)**	**2025 (N = 198)**	**Significance**	**2023 (N = 69)**	**2025 (N = 100)**	**Significance**	**Significance**
Academic relations	3.65 (1.29)	2.95 (1.35)	0.001	4.01 (1.07)	3.93 (0.91)	NS	<0.001
Friendship relations	3.35 (1.23)	2.69 (1.25)	0.001	3.68 (1.08)	3.73 (0.94)	NS	<0.001
Acquaintanceship relations	4.10 (0.98)	3.48 (1.19)	0.001	4.23 (0.96)	4.26 (1.09)	NS	<0.001
General closeness index	3.52 (1.00)	2.90 (1.12)	0.001	3.81 (0.75)	3.81 (0.75)	NS	<0.001

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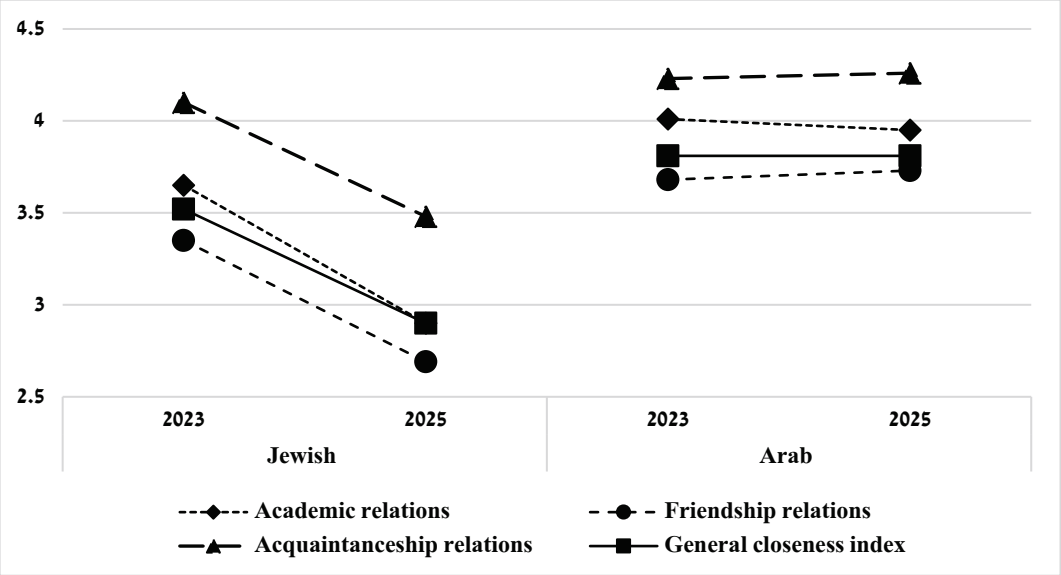


Figure 1. Willingness for intergroup closeness by year and group.

A repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for the kind of intergroup closeness in which students were willing to engage, $p < 0.001$, indicating that across both groups, willingness for acquaintanceship relations was highest, followed by academic relations, and finally friendship relations. This pattern was consistent with findings from previous years. However, a significant interaction effect between group and closeness subscales was also observed, $p < 0.01$, suggesting that the relative ranking of closeness subscale differed slightly between Arab and Jewish students.

A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of gender on the general closeness index, $p < 0.05$, with male students reporting higher willingness for closeness than female students. This effect was consistent across both national groups.

4.2. Differences by Year and Group

A two-way ANOVA was conducted on data collected between 2023 and 2025, with group and year as independent variables and willingness to engage indices as dependent variables. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of group across all indices ($p < 0.001$), a significant main effect of year ($p < 0.01$), and a significant interaction between group and year ($p < 0.01$). To further examine temporal trends in willingness for intergroup closeness, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted for each group separately, comparing responses from 2023 and 2025. As shown in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 1, Jewish students demonstrated a significant decline across all dimensions of willingness for closeness between 2023 and 2025. Specifically, their willingness for academic relations decreased from M = 3.65 (SD = 1.29) to M = 2.95 (SD = 1.35), $p < 0.001$; friendship relations declined from M = 3.35 (SD = 1.23) to M = 2.69 (SD = 1.25), $p < 0.001$; acquaintanceship relations dropped from M = 4.10 (SD = 0.98) to M = 3.48 (SD = 1.19), $p < 0.001$; and the general index fell from M = 3.52 (SD = 1.00) to M = 2.90 (SD = 1.12), $p < 0.001$. In contrast, Arab students showed no statistically significant changes between 2023 and 2025 across any of the indices. These findings suggest a growing divergence in intergroup attitudes over time, particularly among Jewish students.

4.3. Emotional Attitudes and Frequency of Joint Activities

Both Jewish and Arab students reported relatively low levels of personal hostility. Notably, 66.5% of Jewish students and 71.1% of Arab students indicated that they do not

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exhibit hostile behavior toward the other group. Similarly, 68.0% of Jewish students and 82.1% of Arab students reported no feelings of hatred toward the other group. These differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$ for hostile behavior; $p < 0.01$ for hatred), indicating a perceptual asymmetry in emotional attitudes. Furthermore, the proportion of Arab students reporting no hostile feelings was consistently higher than that of Jewish students across all items.

Arab students reported significantly higher frequencies of interaction across all items. For example, 68.0% of Arab students frequently sat with Jewish students in class (M = 3.93, SD = 1.06), compared to 30.9% of Jewish students (M = 2.72, SD = 1.40), t(300) = 7.65, $p < 0.001$, d = 0.93. Similar patterns were observed for studying together, working in teams, preparing assignments, and engaging in social activities such as leisure time, home visits, and personal communication.

4.4. Actual Intergroup Interactions

To categorize the types of activities, a Varimax-rotated factor analysis was conducted, initially yielding one factor explaining 66.8% of the variance. A subsequent content analysis by expert judges identified two distinct categories: academic activities (sitting together in class, studying for exams, working in teams, and preparing assignments) ($\alpha = 0.920$) and social activities (preparing meals, spending leisure time together, visiting each other's homes, sharing personal information, communicating via mobile phone, helping each other, and being connected on social media) ($\alpha = 0.925$).

Based on these categories, two indices were constructed, along with a general index encompassing all items ($\alpha = 0.950$). Higher scores on these indices indicate greater frequency of intergroup engagement. Across all indices, Arab students scored significantly higher than Jewish students, with p-values < 0.001.

Friendship with members of the other group was associated with significantly higher willingness for closeness among Jewish students (M = 3.1 with friends vs. M = 2.2 without), $p < 0.001$. Among Arab students, no significant difference was found based on friendship status (Table 3; Figure 2).

Table 3. Actual intergroup interactions by year and group.

	Jewish			**Arab**		
	2023 (N = 231)	**2025 (N = 199)**	**Significance**	**2023 (N = 69)**	**2025 (N = 99)**	**Significance**
Academic relations	2.81 (1.50)	2.46 (1.23)	<0.01	3.42 (1.26)	3.75 (0.93)	<0.05
Friendship relations	2.25 (1.14)	1.97 (0.93)	<0.01	2.74 (1.10)	3.12 (1.14)	<0.05
General index	2.45 (1.19)	2.15 (0.98)	<0.01	2.99 (1.11)	3.35 (1.00)	<0.05

Arab students reported significantly higher frequencies of both academic and social interactions with Jewish students. For academic relations, Arab students scored M = 3.75 (SD = 0.93) compared to M = 2.46 (SD = 1.23) among Jewish students, t(300) = 9.29, $p < 0.001$, d = 1.13. In friendship relations, Arab students scored M = 3.12 (SD = 1.14) versus M = 1.97 (SD = 0.93) among Jewish students, t(300) = 9.38, $p < 0.001$, 1.14. As such, the general interaction index showed a significant difference (Arabs: M = 3.35, SD = 1.00; Jewish: M = 2.15, SD = 0.98), t(300) = 10.31, $p < 0.001$, d = 1.26.

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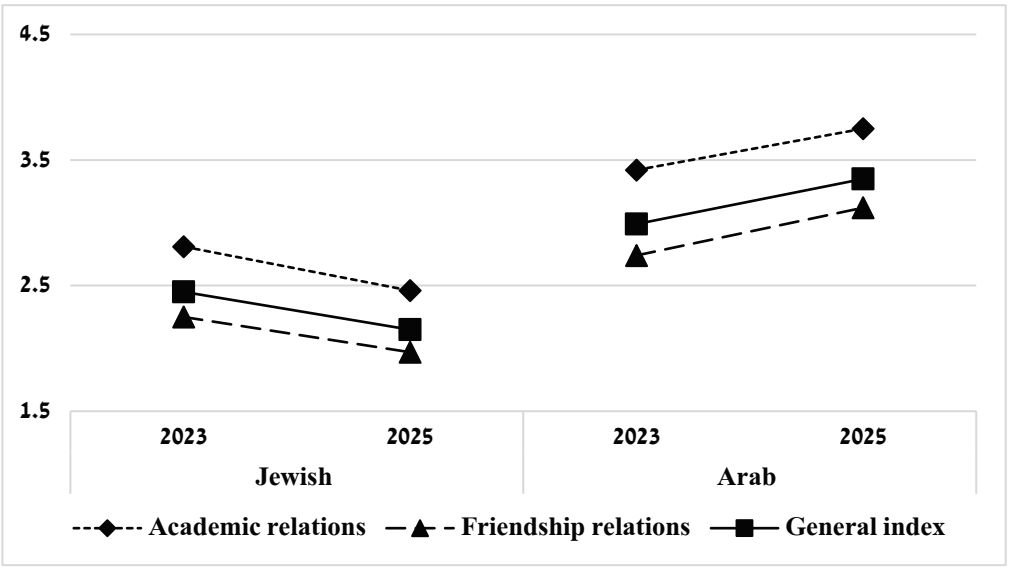


Figure 2. Actual intergroup interactions by year and group.

Repeated measures analysis confirmed that, for both groups, academic activity frequency was significantly higher than social activity frequency ($p < 0.001$). No significant differences were found between male and female students in the frequency of intergroup interactions. Jewish students, those who reported having friends from the other group engaged in intergroup interactions significantly more frequently than those who did not ($p < 0.001$). Among Arab students, no significant difference was found based on friendship status. Analysis of variance revealed significant differences in the general activity index by year of study. Among Jewish students, first-year students reported the highest frequency of intergroup activities, with a decline in subsequent years ($p < 0.001$). Among Arab students, the highest frequency was reported in the fourth year ($p < 0.05$).

Among Jewish students, the frequency of intergroup interactions declined from 2023 to 2025 across all indices. Academic relations decreased from M = 2.81 to M = 2.46, $p < 0.01$; friendship relations from M = 2.25 to M = 1.97, $p < 0.01$; and the general index from M = 2.45 to M = 2.15, $p < 0.01$. In contrast, Arab students showed a significant increase in all indices: academic relations rose from M = 3.42 to M = 3.75, $p < 0.05$; friendship relations from M = 2.74 to M = 3.12, $p < 0.05$; and the general index from M = 2.99 to M = 3.35, $p < 0.05$.

A two-way ANOVA, with group and year as independent variables and interaction frequency indices as dependent variables, revealed a significant main effect of group across all indices ($p < 0.001$), a non-significant main effect of year, and a significant interaction between group and year ($p < 0.01$). Detailed descriptive statistics and interaction patterns are presented in Table 3 and illustrated in Figure 2.

4.5. Attitudes Toward the Other Group

Finally, the study assessed students' attitudes toward the other group both prior to and during their academic studies. In 2023, only 12% of Jewish students reported a positive attitude toward Arabs before beginning their studies, compared to 44% of Arab students who reported a positive attitude toward Jews. By 2025, these figures had increased to 16% and 56%, respectively, indicating a general trend toward more positive initial attitudes, particularly among Arab students. During their studies, 32% of Jewish students in 2023 reported an improvement in their attitude toward Arabs, while 47% of Arab students reported a similar improvement toward Jews. However, by 2025, the proportion of Jewish students reporting improved attitudes had declined to 26.8%, while the proportion among

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Arab students had risen to 61%. A chi-square test confirmed that the difference in positive attitude change in 2025 was statistically significant, $p < 0.001$.

The emotional impact of the 7 October 2023 events was also assessed. Among Jewish students, 60.9% reported that their attitude toward Arabs had become more negative, while only 2.6% reported a positive shift. Among Arab students, 14.2% reported a more positive attitude toward Jews, while 17.2% reported a more negative one. These differences were highly significant, $p < 0.001$, and reflect the asymmetric emotional consequences of sociopolitical events on intergroup perceptions within the academic environment.

5. Discussion

The present study extends a longitudinal investigation into intergroup relations between Arab and Jewish undergraduate students in Israel, which previously compared attitudes and interactions between 2016 and 2023 (Sindiani et al., 2024). By incorporating a third measurement point in 2025, the current study examines how willingness for intergroup closeness and actual intergroup interactions have evolved in the aftermath of the 7 October war. The 2025 data provide a perspective on the evolving dynamics of willingness for intergroup closeness and actual intergroup interactions, particularly in light of recent sociopolitical developments. The findings reaffirm several patterns observed in the first two time periods of the study, while also revealing new trends that warrant both theoretical reflection and practical consideration.

Consistent with the findings from 2023, Arab students reported significantly higher levels of willingness for intergroup closeness across all dimensions–academic, acquaintanceship, and friendship–as well as higher frequencies of actual intergroup interactions. However, unlike the pre-war trend, the 2025 data indicate a pattern of stability in Arab students' willingness for intergroup closeness, with no statistically significant change between 2023 and 2025. This stability stands in contrast to the sharp decline observed among Jewish students. This upward trend suggests that the 7 October war did not diminish Arab students' motivation for engagement; rather, it appears to have strengthened their desire for partnership. This interpretation is compatible with reports of Arab citizens' heightened civic engagement and solidarity-oriented initiatives observed after 7 October, highlighting efforts to preserve social cohesion under a national crisis (Taub Center, 2023).

In contrast, Jewish students showed a reversed trajectory: an increase in willingness for closeness from 2016 to 2023, followed by a clear decline across all willingness indices in 2025. Their actual intergroup interactions also decreased in 2025, although the magnitude and pattern of change differed from those observed in willingness. This decline aligns with research documenting heightened fear, mistrust, and identity defensiveness among Israelis following the 7 October attacks, including evidence of increased psychological distress and trauma-related symptoms at the population level (Siegel-Itzkovich, 2025).

Taken together, these evolving patterns show that the gap between the two groups widened between 2023 and 2025. Whereas Arab students demonstrated increasing willingness for intergroup closeness and higher actual contact, Jewish students displayed a decline in both domains. This divergence reflects asymmetrical emotional and social responses to collective trauma. Arab students moved toward partnership and inclusion, while many Jewish students retreated socially.

Importantly, despite the overall decline observed among Jewish students in 2025, the data also reveal a noteworthy and encouraging counter-trend: more than one-quarter of Jewish students actually improved their attitudes during their studies toward their Arab peers following the war. This finding is particularly striking given the profound trauma, fear, and uncertainty that characterized the period. Moreover, the improvement was specifically directed toward the Arab students with whom they study, indicating that

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the shared academic environment continued to function as a protective contact setting even under extreme sociopolitical strain. At the same time, this positive shift did not generalize to attitudes toward Arabs as a broader social group, suggesting a widening gap between localized, relationship-based experiences of contact and more abstract perceptions of the outgroup. This pattern reinforces the well-documented distinction between personalized, high-quality contact, which can foster warmth and openness even during conflict, and generalized outgroup attitudes, which tend to remain more susceptible to threat, fear, and macro-level narratives.

Similar patterns were documented in earlier periods of Jewish–Arab tensions. Gindi et al. (2022) showed that intergroup violence that erupted in the May 2021 uprisings generated a "ripple effect," whereby threat salience led to increased ingroup retreat and broader rejection of cross-group interactions, even in settings unrelated to the original conflict. The parallels to the post-7 October dynamic observed among Jewish students in the current study reinforce the role of perceived threat and collective trauma in shaping intergroup withdrawal.

Figure 3 illustrates within-group change over time (Δ 2023→2025) in willingness indices separately for Arab and Jewish students, showing each group's increased or decreased attitudes across academic, friendship, and acquaintanceship domains, as well as in the general willingness for closeness index. Figure 4 presents between-group differences in 2025, comparing Arab and Jewish students' mean levels across academic, friendship, and general closeness indices. Thus, Figure 3 addresses how each group changed over time, while Figure 4 shows the extent of the Arab-Jewish gap at the latest timepoint. These figures complement each other by separating temporal change from group comparison.

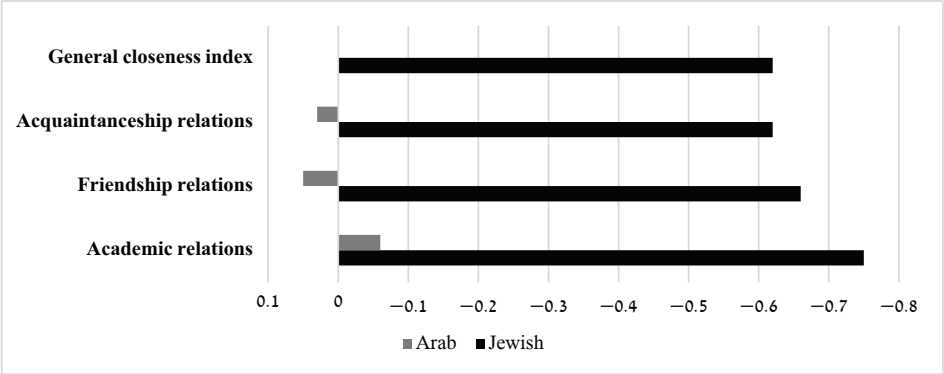


Figure 3. Within-group change over time.

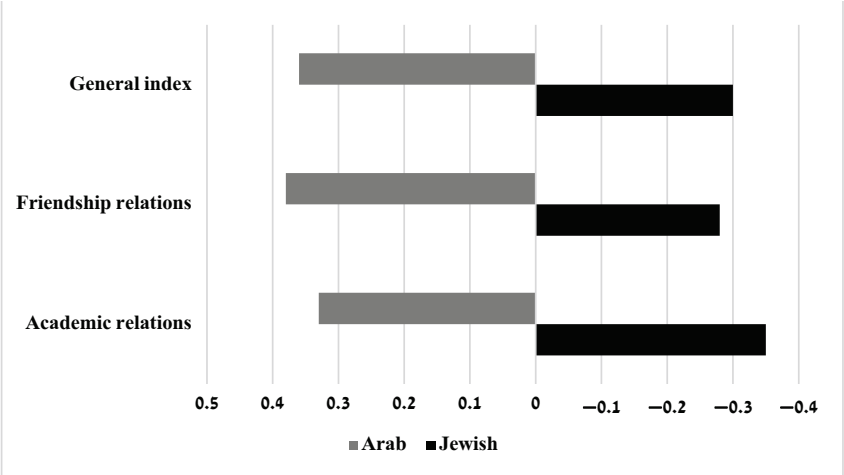


Figure 4. Between-group differences.

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The patterns shown by Jewish students following the events of 7 October are consistent with intergroup threat theory, whereby perceived existential threat activates boundary reinforcement, reduces openness to contact, and encourages outgroup homogenization (Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Riek et al., 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 2013).

5.1. The War's Impact on Students

The present cohort was studied during a period marked by overwhelming exposure to trauma, loss, and acute instability. The 7 October attacks and the subsequent war have reshaped the lived reality of young adults in profound ways. Many students belonged to the age group heavily represented at the Nova Music Festival, where 344–378 civilians were killed, over 250 raped, and dozens kidnapped (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024; United Nations Security Council, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). Students lost friends at the Nova festival and in the kibbutzim near Gaza; some are survivors themselves (Danan, 2024).

Moreover, an extraordinary portion of Israeli students were mobilized to reserve duty. According to official data, approximately 55,000 reservist students, about 18% of all students, served during the 2023/24 academic year (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Frenkel & Wasserman, 2023). This level of mobilization placed significant strain on students' academic continuity and on the universities responsible for supporting them. In the institution where this study was conducted, 12% of students served in reserve duty between October 2023 and the end of the academic year.

A nationwide 2025 survey conducted by the National Union of Israeli Students (NUIS) found that 66% of reservist students experienced emotional or social difficulties upon returning to campus, and 61% reported significant academic decline. For many Jewish students who served in Gaza or lost friends in combat, re-entering a mixed classroom requires navigating a complex emotional terrain. National data show substantial increases in anxiety, hypervigilance, depression, and trauma-related symptoms among Israelis following the 7 October attacks, underscoring the psychological burden many reservists and bereaved students carry upon returning to campus (Siegel-Itzkovich, 2025). Intergroup threat theory further suggests that trauma heightens vigilance, reduces cognitive differentiation, and can temporarily impede the ability to distinguish between Arab citizens and perpetrators of violence (Stephan & Stephan, 2013).

Conversely, Arab students reported fear, stigmatization, scrutiny, and pressure to publicly "prove" loyalty. Evidence from a mixed-methods study of 453 Palestinian Arab undergraduates in Israel shows that students perceive campuses as exclusionary spaces requiring continuous negotiation of their identity and legitimacy (Mansour, 2024, 2025). Additional campus climate data reveal that half to one third of Arab and MENA students reported experiencing insults and intimidation, and up to 72–78% described feeling unwelcome on campus, with many concealing aspects of their identity to avoid scrutiny (Taylor et al., 2024). These patterns are consistent with findings from recent research on Arab–Israeli academic leaders during the 7 October war, who reported intense fear, anxiety, helplessness, isolation, and experiences of silencing within academic institutions, reflecting secondary traumatic stress and highlighting how the conflict amplifies vulnerability among Arab members of the academic community (Hellerstein & Sindiani, 2025).

These parallel vulnerabilities create a classroom environment in which both groups carry heavy emotional burdens, though the nature of the burdens differ. This emotional context helps explain why Arab students' willingness for closeness increased (seeking connection, acceptance and stability), whereas Jewish students' willingness declined (seeking psychological safety and ingroup security). The structural asymmetry of the institution should also be acknowledged: Arab students constitute approximately 20% of the overall

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student body, positioning them as a numerical minority within a Hebrew-medium environment. This context likely constrains opportunities for avoidance and may help explain their higher reported levels of interaction. Conversely, Jewish students—even those interested in engaging with their Arab peers—may have fewer such opportunities.

5.2. Interpreting the Asymmetric Trends Through Contact Theory

The asymmetric post-war patterns align with the contact hypothesis, which posits that positive intergroup relations depend on four conditions: equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support. While these conditions were more fully met prior to 7 October as reflected in earlier data from 2016 and 2023 (Sindiani et al., 2024), the war partially disrupted them in several significant ways. The sense of equal status was undermined as Jewish and Arab students entered the post-war campus with sharply divergent emotional realities; Jewish students returning from reserve duty carried trauma, loss, and hypervigilance, whereas Arab students increasingly faced fear, stigmatization, and heightened scrutiny. Collective psychological conditions weakened the perception of parity that had previously supported constructive intergroup contact.

In addition, the shared sense of common goals eroded. Before the war, daily academic routines fostered a sense of joint purpose. After 7 October, however, students' goals and emotional priorities diverged: many Jewish students sought psychological safety and stability, while Arab students were focused on affirming belonging and mitigating identity-based pressures. This fracture in collective orientation made it harder to maintain a unified sense of "we", a critical component of cooperative intergroup dynamics.

The war also disrupted opportunities for cooperation. The delayed academic calendar and the shift to online instruction limited spontaneous encounters, reduced face-to-face collaboration, and made avoidance between groups easier. Even after the return to campus, students coping with trauma or fear often withdrew socially, reducing the frequency and quality of intergroup interactions that previously fostered trust.

Finally, institutional support for meaningful intergroup contact was strained. HEIs were preoccupied with crisis response, logistics, and security management, leaving less capacity for campus-wide dialogue initiatives or proactive climate-building efforts. Moreover, both groups perceived the institutional environment as tense—Arab students due to increased monitoring and Jewish students due to heightened safety concerns—signaling a campus atmosphere less conducive to open, supported intergroup engagement.

Together, these shifts may help explain why willingness for intergroup closeness diverged after the war. The above-described asymmetric pattern reflects not only differing emotional burdens but also a disruption in the structural conditions that had previously enabled positive Jewish–Arab contact in higher education. For Arab students, the experience of studying in a mixed higher education institution may have contributed to a greater sense of academic belonging and institutional integration, particularly when contact with Jewish peers was positive and high-quality (Kahalon et al., 2023). By high-quality contact, we refer to interactions that are respectful, cooperative, and voluntary, marked by equal status, mutual recognition, and emotional safety. Such interactions often include meaningful collaboration in academic or social settings, opportunities for personal self-disclosure, and repeated encounters that build familiarity and trust. These forms of contact are known to reduce intergroup anxiety, increase empathy, and foster a sense of shared membership within the academic environment, conditions that are especially important in mixed ethnonational settings (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Davies et al., 2011).

At the same time, research also shows that many Arab students perceive Israeli campuses as ethnonationally charged and at times exclusionary, requiring them to negotiate their presence within these spaces (Mansour, 2024, 2025). Similar patterns have been found

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16040656

in intergroup workplace relations in educational settings. In a recent qualitative study, Silverman et al. (2024) found that in the months following 7 October, Arab teachers in Jewish schools reported increased scrutiny, perceived hostility, and reduced trust from Jewish colleagues, while Jewish principals and teachers described heightened sensitivity, fear, and intergroup tension. These dynamics of fear-based withdrawal and asymmetrical vulnerability parallel the divergent trends observed among Jewish and Arab students in the present study.

Thus, the campus environment can function either as a site of opportunity for belonging or as a context marked by tension and marginalization. For Arab students, our data suggests the former, as they increased willingness for closeness and actual intergroup interactions, indicative of their perception of the academic setting as an opportunity for integration and belonging. However, for many Jewish students, the sense of mistrust and threat heightened, which undermined previous sentiments of shared goals and cooperation.

Willingness for intergroup closeness and actual intergroup interactions reflect two aspects of the contact process. Willingness indicates a motivational, attitudinal component and actual interaction reflects an enacted behavioral component. In 2025, the gap between these two components widened for Jewish students but narrowed for Arab students, illustrating how conflict can differentially influence affective responses (such as willingness for intergroup closeness) compared to behavioral outcomes (such as actual intergroup interactions), with each pathway reflecting distinct psychological and social mechanisms through which collective trauma and threat shape intergroup relations.

Importantly, conflict contexts often magnify the divergence between attitudinal and behavioral pathways. Research on intergroup relations in HEIs situated in conflict zones demonstrates that external violence can suppress intergroup behavior even when underlying attitudes remain ambivalent or moderately positive (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Bar-Tal, 2007). Studies of HEIs during periods of political unrest similarly show that threat salience, collective trauma, and heightened identity boundaries reduce the likelihood that students will translate attitudes of openness into action (Ben-Porath, 2009; Kelman & Fisher, 2017). These findings reinforce the need to understand Jewish and Arab students' trajectories not merely as individual psychological responses, but as embedded within broader sociopolitical dynamics that shape how, when, and under what conditions contact is enacted.

5.3. Practical Implications for Higher Education Institutions

Given the scale of trauma and reserve mobilization, higher education institutions (HEIs) can play a key role in mitigating negative effects on intergroup contact, rebuilding trust, and enhancing intergroup relations. Several empirically grounded implications emerge.

First, HEIs should provide dedicated safe spaces for processing war-related trauma. Facilitated environments, either within culturally homogeneous groups or mixed Jewish–Arab settings, are essential in contexts of collective trauma. Without such spaces, fear, stigmatization, and identity threat increase, reducing willingness for intergroup engagement (Mansour, 2024, 2025). In contrast, guided processing allows students to express anxieties, grieve losses, validate identity complexity, and rebuild trust—necessary precursors to renewed contact.

In Israel, organizations have developed research-based frameworks and campus tools to manage intergroup tension and support emotionally safe dialogue during periods of escalation (aChord Center, n.d.-a; Living Together, n.d.). For example, the aChord Center provides psychosocial tools and intervention guides to help institutions navigate crisis-related emotional responses and restore constructive communication (aChord Center, n.d.-b). It also offers specialized resources addressing Jewish–Arab relations, threat perceptions,

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16040656

and the psychological dynamics shaping intergroup behavior under conflict (aChord Center, n.d.-c). Together, such guided environments help repair relational ruptures and support renewed openness to intergroup engagement.

International research on trauma-informed higher education similarly emphasizes the importance of structured, emotionally safe, and moderated environments for restoring belonging, reducing polarization, and supporting post-crisis recovery (M. R. Holmes et al., 2025b, 2025a).

HEIs should also expand mental health services for students affected by the war. National assessments indicate sharp increases in PTSD, anxiety, and depression following the 7 October attacks, with 25–50% of trauma-exposed individuals at risk of significant psychological distress (Sztokman & Brook, 2024; Israel Science Info, 2024). Beyond individual well-being, post-trauma distress directly shapes intergroup relations (Hager et al., 2025). Strengthening trauma-informed, culturally responsive mental health services can reduce emotional reactivity and restore the psychological safety needed for constructive intergroup contact.

Emerging evidence from Israeli campuses shows that departments perceived as emotionally safe and student-centered maintain more effective intergroup dialogue under crisis conditions. Arab Bedouin students report greater manageability, meaningfulness, and capacity for intergroup communication when institutions provide accessible support systems, including mentoring and structured processing spaces (Al-Said & Jaber, 2025). Similarly, creating secure spaces for vulnerable groups and training faculty to moderate sensitive discussions can reduce polarization and support inclusive campus functioning (Hager et al., 2025).

These findings suggest that mental health services function not only as therapeutic resources but also as mechanisms for sustaining intergroup relations. By strengthening counseling, embedding trained moderators, and establishing structured processing spaces, HEIs can counteract war-related psychological strain that otherwise fuels segregation and social distancing.

Beyond immediate support, conflict-aware and curriculum-embedded mechanisms are needed to sustain intergroup contact. Intergroup dialogue courses and co-curricular programs, when designed around equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support, enhance empathy, critical reflection, and collaboration across difference (Gurin et al., 2013; Zúñiga, 2007). Embedding such practices within departmental routines (e.g., facilitated reflection sessions, clear discourse norms, and visible administrative backing) aligns with evidence-based frameworks and complements trauma-informed approaches (aChord Center, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

5.4. Embodied Cooperation as a Foundation for Post-War Intergroup Dialogue

Alongside clinical and organizational support, structured intergroup activities are essential for restoring students' capacity for engagement after collective trauma. PETE programs, while distinct from dialogue-based interventions, offer a complementary pathway through embodied cooperation. Activities such as paired motor tasks, team-based exercises, and shared problem-solving create low-verbal, high-coordination contexts that foster trust, attunement, and shared intentionality meeting conditions aligned with Allport's (1954) framework.

Research in Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) shows that shared physical activity reduces intergroup anxiety, promotes prosocial orientation, and fosters psychological safety, often more effectively than verbal interaction alone (Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group, 2008; Tang et al., 2025). These embodied experiences do not replace dialogue but help create the conditions that make it possible. By lower-

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16040656

ing vigilance and enabling coordinated action, students begin to perceive one another as partners rather than abstract outgroup members. Evidence from Israeli HEIs indicates that structured contact—cognitive, emotional, or physical—enhances belonging, academic functioning, and intergroup attitudes (Kahalon et al., 2023; Hellerstein & Sindiani, 2025).

Accordingly, structured intergroup contact within PETE should be deliberately integrated into curricula. PETE programs offer a unique pedagogical channel for embedding contact-based interventions into core coursework. Examples include cooperative Jewish–Arab pair work (Hellerstein et al., 2023), SDP modules under joint leadership (Hellerstein & Sindiani, 2025), mixed-community field experiences, and reflective courses linking physical cooperation with intercultural theory (Hellerstein & Sindiani, 2025).

Extensive research on sport-based cooperation shows that shared physical activity, synchronized movement, and team-based goals reduce prejudice and threat while promoting empathy, trust, and prosocial behavior (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2017). PETE programs should therefore be understood not as incidental contact settings but as intentional platforms for high-quality intergroup engagement. When combined with guided reflection, these experiences create a psychologically safe climate that supports deeper dialogue, or "deep contact," integrating physical coordination, emotional attunement, and reflective exchange.

Despite these opportunities, intergroup engagement remains shaped by post-7 October asymmetries. Arab students often bear disproportionate pressure to demonstrate belonging, while Jewish students may struggle to maintain openness under heightened threat. To avoid reproducing inequalities, conflict-aware design should: (a) prevent burden-shifting that imposes performative expectations on Arab students; (b) ensure equal-status conditions and visible institutional support (Gurin et al., 2013; Zúñiga, 2007); and (c) provide parallel identity-safe spaces alongside mixed settings, moderated using trauma-informed protocols (aChord Center; Living Together). In practice, this requires pairing embodied cooperation with joint facilitation, ensuring that renewed contact does not come at the expense of those facing greater psychosocial risk.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

The reliance on self-report data may introduce social desirability bias, especially in politically charged periods. This concern is particularly salient when studying minority populations who may experience additional pressures when reporting attitudes and perceptions in institutional settings. For Arab students, in particular, self-report measures may be shaped by feelings of vulnerability, concerns about surveillance, or fears of negative repercussions, which could lead to underreporting of negative experiences or attitudes. In addition, the repeated cross-sectional design limits causal inference.

Another important limitation is that the study was conducted within a single higher education institution. While the institution represents a meaningful site of Jewish–Arab interaction, it cannot capture the full heterogeneity of campus climates, administrative cultures, or regional sociopolitical dynamics across Israel. Findings should therefore be interpreted with caution when generalizing to other HEIs, especially those with different demographic compositions or institutional missions.

Given the centrality of intergroup dynamics to this study, the limitations section plays an essential role in contextualizing the findings. Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge more explicitly that relying on one institution, self-report measures, and minority participants' potentially constrained willingness to disclose may affect both internal and external validity. Expanding this discussion strengthens the interpretive robustness of the study and provides a clearer foundation for future work.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal panel data capturing individual trajectories before and after reserve duty. Qualitative interviews could further illuminate

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the lived experiences of both Jewish and Arab students navigating the emotional, political, and interpersonal complexities of post-war campus life.

7. Conclusions

The 2025 findings reveal the fragility, albeit promise, of Jewish–Arab intergroup relations in higher education. While Arab students expressed increased willingness for closeness and sustained levels of interaction, Jewish students exhibited reduced openness and trust, consistent with trauma-induced threat responses. These divergent pathways underscore the need for HEIs to adopt intentional, structured, and trauma-informed strategies for fostering intergroup engagement, especially in times of national crisis.

As one of the few shared societal spaces in an otherwise segregated landscape, HEIs hold a critical responsibility to cultivate the conditions necessary for reconciliation, understanding, and long-term living in partnership.

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Article

"Peace Is (Not) a Political Position": Intercultural Competence in Higher Education at Times of War

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges facing intercultural competence education in higher education during times of intense conflict. Most of the intercultural competence programs in higher education are based on Western liberal multicultural logic that strives to build trust between groups in conflict to promote peacemaking. The common conception of trust is described as a developmental cognitive–emotional effort that is anchored in a reflective and multi-perspective calculation of events and procedures that require a willingness to give up parts of positions and standpoints. The process is supposed to be mediated by a professional and unbiased facilitator who creates a "dialogic space" based on self-reflection and perspective-taking of the "other". Previous findings suggest that these programs were relatively efficient before the 7 October war broke out in Israel. Thus, a joint Palestinian and Jewish program that was conducted at a teacher training college after 7 October challenged these findings. Examining the discursive practices used by the participants during the meetings revealed that the basic liberal multicultural assumptions of the intercultural competence model were rejected by students from both groups. The students interpreted the model as a way to contextualize the term peace in a specific ideological–political context. Understanding peace as a concept with a layered meaning contradicts the intercultural competence model's perception of it as a universal–humanistic–independent position. Thus, the findings further problematize the universal perception of intercultural competence models in order to adjust them to teacher trainees working outside the West during difficult times.

Keywords: peace; teacher training; liberal multiculturalism; trust; dialogue; neutrality

1. Introduction

Education for intercultural competence has become widespread in a global reality characterized by increased diversity and anti-democratic and nationalist voices/conflicts based on political, religious, ethnic and gendered grounds (Cuccurullo & Cinganotto, 2020). Even though intercultural competence programs used in higher education are divided into several different types, most of them are based on a liberal multicultural logic (Paris, 2010) led by international organizations operating in the West (UNESCO, 2005; UNICEF, 1999; UNITED-NATIONS, 1998; EU Peacebuilding initiatives, 2021; European Neighborhood Instrument, 2025). The liberal multicultural logic strives to build relations of trust between groups that are in conflict (Broome, 2015), not only to navigate diverse classrooms (Dervin & Hahl, 2015) but also to promote peacemaking (Muszkat-Barkan, 2022). The common conception of trust is described as a developmental cognitive–emotional effort that is anchored in a reflective and multi-perspective calculation of events and procedures that require a willingness to give up parts of positions and standpoints (Pearson d'Estree et al.,

2001; Persico, 2024). The process is supposed to be mediated by a professional and unbiased facilitator who creates a "dialogic space" based on self-reflection and perspective-taking of the "other". This process obliges the participants to step into the shoes of the "other" and understand the world from their point of view. It is a difficult journey, both cognitively and emotionally. This Western liberal multicultural model is positioned as a moral–humanistic imperative that relies on two interconnected assumptions: that intercultural competence is based on trust; that trust is a platform on which tolerance and peace can be shaped and maintained; and that striving for peace is a position that transcends any ideology, identity and political disagreement. The Western liberal multicultural model can be traced in a diverse assemblage of projects, as well as in guidelines presented in How to talk about political conflicts with students,[1] which was published recently and is used across many campuses in the West and in Israel (Asaf, 2024).

A joint Palestinian and Jewish program, based on a Western liberal multicultural model of this kind, was conducted at a teacher training college in Israel after the catastrophe of 7 October to strengthen education for intercultural competence and reestablish trust among teachers-to-be in light of the challenges they are about to face in the school system (see Jayusi, 2025; Paul-Binyamin & Garah, 2023; Silverman et al., 2024). This research began as a small-scale ethnographic study. The study wished to address three core research questions:

1. What kind of discursive practices do Palestinian and Jewish teacher trainees use to interpret their interlocutors' positions during intercultural competence programs for peace in times of conflict?
2. What are the implications of the participants' discursive strategies on the intercultural competence model for peace?
3. How can the intercultural competence model for peace employed in teacher training programs during difficult times be improved?

Examining the discursive practices used by the participants during the meetings revealed that the basic assumptions of the intercultural competence model were challenged by questioning the character of trust and its goal—achieving peace. Thus, the crisis of trust was not expressed towards the "other"—the Palestinian or Jewish students—but rather between students from both groups and the notion of trust and peace that intercultural competence strives to achieve. The students interpreted trust and peace as a political contextualization and an embedded term that depends on a specific ideological–political context. This notion deviated from the students' behaviors and attitudes during intercultural competence programs before the war, as was shown in the findings of a vast body of literature regarding Israeli higher education. Understanding peace as a concept with a layered meaning contradicts its perception in intercultural competence as a universal–humanistic–independent position. These findings further contextualize the universal perception of intercultural competence models in order to adjust them to teacher trainees working outside the West and to help them become agents of peace in their future work during difficult times.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to examine the common liberal multicultural models in intercultural competence programs, the discussion must be anchored in the basic assumptions of the model. The multicultural liberal discourse began as an attempt to broaden the so-called "ethnocentric cultural core", which was perceived as characterizing many diverse societies in the West (Naveh & Yogev, 2002). The exclusive visibility given to Western culture in academia was perceived as hegemony—established, that is, as an expression of cultural oppression. The liberal multicultural model maintained that this oppression should be challenged by articulating silenced voices and acknowledging different cultures and identities. However,

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getting to know another culture and showing tolerance towards it were not perceived as sufficient to broaden the borders of belonging and promote the acceptance of national, ethnic, religious, and other minorities. The collective identities of minority groups, and in particular, minority groups that are in conflict with the majority group, necessitated a mutual process of recognition between the different groups (Taylor, 1994). The mutual process of recognition was defined as key to establishing the identity of subjects as simultaneously equal and separate. The importance of recognizing the other is attested to by the harsh results (humiliation, degradation, and denial of rights) of not recognizing the other (Giroux, 1983). In the case of multinational multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 1995), the level of recognition also affects a group's differential positioning in the social force field and the nature of the majority–minority relations it makes possible. The definition of the power structure that governs the group's relations relies to some extent on the postcolonial approach, namely understanding otherness as the product of differences between the "First World"/"Third World", East/West, and Judeo-Christianity/Islam. This prism serves to examine the power relations that govern a variety of issues between and within the groups, including language, culture, body, rights, citizenship and so on. Although this prism is not blind to the dialectical space ("the third space") created by the power relations that govern the connection between groups (Bhabha, 1984), the distinction between groups is fairly binary. Therefore, the process of recognition is not formulated as an encounter between hybrid, hyphenated or fluid categories but as an encounter between groups with a stable, monolithic, fixed and almost essentialist identity, which is supposed to give itself up to the process of recognizing the other, in order to deconstruct ethno-national–religious hierarchies by highlighting them (Stam & Shohat, 1994).

An array of strategies seeks to activate the process of recognition by exposing the complex and asymmetrical system in which the "other" is constituted. A large inventory of practices is charged with exposing the power relations in which the social–economic–political processes of constructing different identities (the oppressor/the oppressed) are embedded. These include: intragroup and intergroup dialog, historical–genealogical analysis of the construction of otherness, questioning positioning and identities, and casting a personal/collective reflexive gaze (Freire & Shore, 1987) in order to establish trust. The concept of trust, namely, the psychological–social–ideological event that makes a person put their trust in another person, and in particular, in a person from a rival group, relies on a universal and stable definition, which states that trust is derived from a process of reflective calculation that takes the "other's" point of view into consideration. This mutual process is based on clear norms, structured and evidence-based dialog, perspective-taking and self-reflecting while managing discussions that are supposed to lead to the "evolutionary" development of trust-building, ending by forming interpersonal emotional relationships and intimate friendships between individuals who are in conflict, as well as creating trust-based social projects. The facilitator in the encounter plays a key role in building processes of trust between the different parties. Drawing their inspiration from the judiciary in the modern secular state, the facilitator is charged with mediating between the parties in a neutral and unbiased way. Although the facilitator represents the position of the program (striving for intercultural competence, trust and peace), they are not allowed to impose their position on the participants through the force of their role (Bar-Tal, 2002); preach one moral position or another (Salomon, 2004); or take an authoritative attitude. To resolve this immanent tension, the facilitator takes on an epistemic role by providing the participants with the tools to forge their own relations of trust by understanding, accepting, and containing the position of the "other" with whom they are in conflict (Schwartz-Franco & Ergas, 2021). Thus, the facilitator does not lack agency. On the contrary, the facilitator's power is perceived as precisely occupying the rational position. Most of the facilitators

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acting in this spirit have been trained in light of Western conceptions of education for intercultural competence and are themselves representatives of Western culture. The term "peace" is described as involving negotiation and a mutual relinquishing of outlooks, worldviews, and definitions of identity.[2] These practices are supposed to establish trust in the other and create a polycentric sociocultural reality in which different groups are required to give up parts of their identity and positions that disrupt and even prevent the process of recognition.

2.1. (Dis)Trust in Intercultural Competence Programs

Many Western democracies in the European Union and North America invest great effort and resources in building intercultural competence programs and projects that seek to establish trust between Palestinians and Jews using the platform afforded by educational institutions. Most of these programs are based on liberal, multicultural, Western fundamental assumptions. Thus, programs that have been developed from "Southern" perspectives employ different conceptions of intercultural competence and trust and ascribe a different role to the facilitator in the trust-building process.

Firstly, the complicated nuances of trust-building and peacebuilding processes in conflict settings in "Southern" perspectives do not necessarily rely on binary divisions between groups or on a permanent solution that is reached by mutual recognition. These context-specific approaches are often neglected in liberal multicultural models. See, for example, the implementation of inflexible models that ignore differential contexts in the cases of Afghanistan, Iraq (Özdemir, 2017), and Somaliland (Njeri, 2019) and the insufficient attention given to local–local dynamics in the case of Sierra Leone (Martin, 2021).

Secondly, the role of the facilitator is usually not perceived as neutral in "Southern" perspectives. For example, in programs conducted in Egypt, the local peacebuilding practices include a facilitator/teacher who acts with authority, preaching a particular agenda and demanding that the participants follow it (Awad, 2020). Similar conclusions were reached by studies that examined programs in Pakistan (Jamal et al., 2023). In Saudi Arabia, programs did not include the figure of a facilitator at all, only that of the mediator—the person conducting the Sulha[3], or reconciliation process—who decided which of the sides was required to give up their positions and how they should compensate the "other" (Standish & Talahma, 2016). Thus, critics of the liberal multicultural model point to the limited agency the model gives to local players in the process of trust and peacebuilding (Ateng & Musah, 2022).

In sum, the problematization of the liberal multicultural model reveals its Western-hegemonic status and its processes of universalization, standardization and generalization, which have positioned it as an almost exclusive moral standard (Chandler & Ledo Martínez, 2024). Furthermore, it has been claimed that the liberal model replicates the power relations between the West and the Global South (Rodriguez Iglesias, 2020) and that these power relations exclude local traditions and practices that are based on the communal–organic–local processes that characterize specific communities (Vonhm, 2025; Genbezo et al., 2026). To counter the weaknesses of the liberal multicultural model, the suggestion is to adopt hybrid models that integrate local forces (Mushtaq, 2018) and models that adopt conceptions of peace that rely on local values.

However, Israeli programs and projects on campuses employ the Western liberal multicultural model (see Markovich et al., 2019). Findings suggest that these programs were relatively efficient before the 7 October war broke out (see Hisherik et al., 2025). Thus, at times of extreme oscillations in the political situation and atmosphere, trust breaks down since the encounter not only confronts students from different groups but also different traditions of trust building and reconciliation.

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2.2. (Dis)Trust in Israeli Academia

In light of the violent war raging in the Middle East at the time of writing, trust between Palestinians students and Jewish students studying in the Israeli higher education system has taken a severe blow on several levels that have coalesced into an acute crisis of trust, both in the academy and in the peace discourse that the academy promotes. The crisis of trust in academia in Israel was addressed by Minister of Education Yoav Kisch as early as November 2023 15, about two weeks after the term started in the Israeli higher education institutions.[4] In the Knesset's Education Committee, Kisch said, "Arab citizens of Israel are our partners [. . .] To incite [against Arab citizens studying in higher education institutions, D. M] can harm [the fabric of relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel, D. M]" (Kav Mashve, 2023a). This was not said in a vacuum. The suspicion between Palestinian students and Jewish students who are citizens of Israel, and between Palestinian lecturers and Jewish lecturers who are citizens of Israel, has skyrocketed (Elmaliach, 2024). The anxiety over joint encounters while sirens wail; explosions echo day and night; information about the number of people killed, injured, kidnapped and missing flows incessantly; and horrific live footage of rape, murder, and bombings floods the social networks has forced the academy to ready itself for a study "routine" unprecedented in recent decades. The extreme changes in the relations between Palestinians and Jews in Israel have raised fundamental questions about the intercultural competence of both sides that can allow for joint study on campus. In total, 56% of the Palestinian students testified that they did not feel safe returning to study on the shared campus, 7% chose to suspend their studies, and 4% chose to move to campuses outside the state of Israel (Kav Mashve, 2023b). Moreover, the Palestinian students testified that they felt the Israeli academy discriminated in favor of the Jewish students during the war. The students claimed that they were scared to hang around shared spaces on campus and that they were experiencing confusion, instability, and a shaky mental state (Council for Higher Education, 2023). Simultaneously, the number of claims of incitement to support terrorism in academia increased, a charge that includes identifying with a terrorist organization, publishing a direct call to perpetrate terrorist acts, publishing praise and sympathy for terrorist acts, and holding materials related to identifying with and incitement to terrorism (Israeli Knesset, 2016). On 11 October 2023, the National Union of Israeli Students set up a complaint hotline where one could report offences of incitement to terrorism by students and lecturers, which resulted in a very large number of complaints—around 3000—most of which were not proven. Only 133 students from 22 different higher education institutions faced hearings due to claims of incitement to terrorism (Adalah Center, 2023). As a consequence, 11 Palestinian students were temporarily suspended from their studies, and 9 students were permanently suspended. These data suggest the great and unjustified suspicion felt by the Jewish students towards their Palestinian counterparts. Similarly, there have been increasing claims by Jewish students who said they had been maltreated by Palestinian students and lecturers (Dvir, 2023) and that Palestinian students had denigrated the official Holocaust Day ceremony held on campus and deliberately interrupted prayers by Jewish students (Dabush, 2024). At the same time, Palestinian and Jewish lecturers who called for the abolishment of Zionism and denied or doubted the events of 7 October earned widespread public condemnation (Maniv, 2024)[5] and were even arrested and threatened with dismissal.[6] In light of all these events, the Council for Higher Education in Israel (Council for Higher Education, 2023) initiated intervention programs to strengthen the intercultural competence of students. The Rowad Program offered support to Palestinian students that were going to start their first year of study in Israeli academia (Kav Mashve, 2023b); rules for "expressing oneself on campus" were published by Tel Aviv University's Equity, Diversity and Community Commission (2023); "guidelines for protecting freedom

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of expression on campus" were published by Academia for Equality (2023); a model for coping with hostility in the classroom was published by the Achord Center at the Hebrew University (Achord Center, 2023); "resilience-building pedagogy" was developed by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (Vexler, 2023); and a "guide to teaching in times of crisis" was published by the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue (Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue, 2023). In light of all the intercultural competence intervention programs, the Knesset's Education Committee (2004) stressed that "The Swords of Iron War is not a war between Jews and Arabs (on campuses, D. M)," suggesting that the liberal intercultural competence models should be adopted and implemented on campuses (Knesset News, 2024).

3. Methods

The program under study consisted of 12 in-class lessons, each lasting 90 min and held over 12 weeks in the 2024–2025 academic year. The aim of the program was (1) to promote baseline knowledge and enrich the participants with knowledge from different perspectives about the ethnic–national–religious rifts that characterize Israeli society and Israel's education system; (2) to encourage the participants to examine the perception of the "other" in a reflexive–critical way; (3) to enable students of both peoples to voice their opinion, acknowledge the voice of the "other", and improve cross-cultural communication; and (4) to influence their intercultural competence as education practitioners that will hopefully recreate trust and processes of recognition (see Table 1).

Table 1. The program's curriculum.

	Topics	**Pedagogical Techniques and Assignment**
1	Self-awareness and identity	Personal task
2	What is cultural competence in a diverse ethno-national–religious society in conflict? Conceptual clarification: Ethnocentrism, power relations, acculturation	Discussions in small groups
3	Israeli society as a diverse society: ethno-national–religious tensions in the first decade (the 1950s)	Watching a documentary film Facilitated discussion in the course forum
4	The Israeli educational system: shaping the educational systems in light of ethno-national–religious tensions (1950s)	Task: collecting memories from parents/grandparents describing the spirit of the time
5	Israeli society as a diverse society: ethno-national–religious tensions (in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s)	Reading a text Group discussion
6	The Israeli educational system: changes in educational policy and in the curriculum in light of ethno-national–religious tensions (in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s)	Watching a documentary film Facilitated discussion in the course forum
7	Israeli society as a diverse society: ethno-national–religious tensions since the 2000s	Reading a text Group discussion
8	The Israeli educational system: changes in educational policy and in the curriculum in light of ethno-national–religious tensions since the 2000s	Reading a text Group discussion
9	Cultural–political knowledge and its influence on the perception of the "other"	Reading a text Discussion in small groups
10	How do we handle this? Practical skills	Reading a text Facilitated discussion in the course forum

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Table 1. *Cont.*

	Topics	Pedagogical Techniques and Assignment
11	Recognizing and assessing personal assumptions	Small-group discussion
12	What will we do at school? On culturally responsive communication	Group discussion

In order to create a safe environment in which participants would feel they could discuss sensitive subjects freely, the participants were asked: (1) to use respectful language; (2) to show patience towards diverse perceptions/positions; and (3) to be accountable in cases of offensive and inappropriate language.

The program was held in Hebrew by a Jewish facilitator—who is also the researcher. The study is part of a decade-long survey of the course and its participants (2014–2024), in particular of the discursive aspects that students from the two groups use in order to interpret their interlocutors' positions. This is the first study to be conducted after the events of 7 October 2023 (see Markovich, 2015, 2018; Markovich et al., 2019; Markovich & Masry-Herzalla, 2017). The facilitator has a Ph.D. in sociology and 3 decades of training and experience in educational projects dealing with intercultural competence. In total, 33 students in the field of education and teaching participated in the program: 10 Muslim Palestinians and 23 Jews, all citizens of Israel. The segmentation of the program's student population is the same as the proportions in the population of Israel.

This ethnographic study is based on participant observations that took place during the encounters. Detailed notes were taken during all the encounters. In addition, 8 of the 12 classes were recorded by Zoom. Since the participants were used to Zoom recordings, it did not affect their behavior in class. In addition, the students were asked to write a task (in Arabic or Hebrew) regarding the ways in which educators can deal with the ethno-national–religious rifts in their work in the education system. Allowing the participants to choose between the languages helped them express themselves more freely and accurately in their mother tongue. The task written by the Palestinian students was read by a Palestinian researcher (the tasks were used in additional research conducted by the Palestinian researcher). The tasks did not require revealing the students' names. In total, 33 tasks that were written by the students were analyzed. This combination of the two methods allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the ways the participants interpreted the intercultural competence process (see Sirvent et al., 2022).

In light of the wish to examine discursive practices that Palestinian and Jewish teacher trainees use to interpret their interlocutor's positions and the extent to which the program helped forge renewed intercultural competence and trust between students on campus, the observational transcripts were read with the aim of locating references to these issues. The first reading used a qualitative content-analysis approach. The transcripts showed that the dominant discursive practice that came up in conversations and discussions was the component of (dis)trust in the model/peace, rather than (dis)trust in each other. This tendency led to a further reading of the transcripts. The aim of the second reading was to identify the dominant themes and categorize them in light of the new framework. The second reading comprised two stages: (1) Free coding—Rereading the 8 class transcripts and 33 tasks and defining the analytical theme that appeared in them and that referred to various objections to the encounter; (2) Coding specific subcategories—Defining the content that appeared in the dominant categories in light of the discursive practices through which the participants expressed positions of trust and distrust (see Scott, 1990) and examining the data in light of the research literature around programs of intercultural competence in the Global South.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071166

The discursive practices through which the participants expressed positions of trust and distrust were divided into two main categories: "a discourse of reconstruction" and "a discourse of destruction". "A discourse of reconstruction" refers to practices that produce a generalized, vague, and clichéd narrative. "A discourse of destruction" refers to practices that produce a narrative that disrupts, confronts and questions the possibility of creating a conversation. Both categories express and produce speech that prevents speech. This reading examined the "areas of discourse" in which the participants activated discursive mechanisms that engaged with reconstruction and/or destruction. It attempted to understand what conceptions underlay the disruptive discursive mechanisms, and why the latter were activated by the students from the two groups in order to prevent conversation. This led to an examination of the political–ideological foundations of the intercultural competence program (see Table 2).

Table 2. Examples of the coding process.

Raw Data Excerpt (Participant Narrative)	Initial Codes
Yossera (a Palestinian student): "the social and political dynamics in Israel are influenced by political constraints, contemporary events, cultural developments, and broad social changes." Bat El (a Jewish student): "Joint education is a product of a very big complexity that characterizes the society."	Discourse of reconstruction: Generalized narrative, broad statement, vague and abstract narrative, clichéd narrative
Arin (a Palestinian student): The founding of the state of Israel in 1948 and the wars that followed it led to the Nakba, a process in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced from their homes. The Arab population in Israel is seen as a double periphery [. . .] So now there is no longer. . . There is no use speaking [about peace]. Yifat (a Jewish student): "All the lecturers at the colleges are Ashkenazi lefties you also have 'Arab Ashkenazi's [laughing] It's hard for them to hear things they don't like, so I'm not going to speak and I'm not going to say what I have to say, because I feel that's right for me."	Discourse of destruction: Disrupting narrative, confrontational narrative, questioning the narrative

A few words about the power relations between Palestinians and Jews are necessary. A study that examines the dynamics between Palestinian and Jewish students, particularly during an ongoing war in the Middle East, cannot be detached from this issue when the research is led by a Jewish Israeli. As described above, the relations between Palestinian and Jewish students experienced one of the greatest moments of crisis in the history of the relations between the two peoples, in Israel in general and in academia in particular. The Palestinian students, who belong to a minority group that forms 20% of Israeli society, experience discrimination in various realms of life, including disadvantages in the academic realm (see Reuter & Eliyahu-Levi, 2026, in this volume). The war brought an increase in feelings of relative weakness and unbelonging to Israeli society, in light of Arab society being accused of supporting the 7 October events (see Kav Mashve, 2023b). At the same time, the 7 October events dramatically influenced the Jewish group as well. Although the Jewish students belong to the majority group in Israeli society, the war brought an increase in feelings of being betrayed by their Palestinian colleagues due to the fear/suspicion that they supported the 7 October events, and consequently the Jewish students' worldview regarding the possibility of coexistence was shaken (see Sindiani et al., 2026, in this volume). Since the war broke out in 2023 and throughout the program's existence, the college has made great efforts to restore a sense of security for students of both groups, but the influence

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of the continuing war on the continuance of studies in general and of the studied program in particular cannot be ignored.

The collaboration with a Palestinian researcher was crucial to overcoming a considerable portion of these tensions between the groups. This joint effort allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the multi-layered processes within the mixed class against the backdrop of ongoing conflict.

The study's main limitation stems from its being based on a single case that took place during an intensive war, which could have influenced the participants' positions and behaviors. This includes the positions of those who collaborated with the program's demands against their will and who might have done so due to the effect of social desirability ("a discourse of reconstruction"). A further study, undertaken during a ceasefire, might shed light on how positions and behaviors are shaped at times of emergency. The second limitation stems from the dual role: the program's facilitator was also conducting the research. Usually, influence on participants can manifest itself in a change in their behavior due to the power dynamics characterizing the encounter, and more specifically, in encouraging an effect of "social desirability" and a reluctance to express difficulty or resistance. In addition, the lecturer/researcher may avoid critically reflecting on the findings when they indicate the program's lack of success. As the findings show, this effect did not manifest itself in this study. Nonetheless, to avoid bias, the observations were integrated with another source of information—the tasks submitted by the students anonymously. This triangulation mitigated the effect that could have been produced by the duality of roles. The third limitation is related to the composition of the student population, in particular, to the internal differences within each of the groups, for example: differences in ethnic origin in the Jewish group (Mizrahim/Ashkenazim), differences in the area of residence in the Palestinian group (north/south), and differences in the political views held by the students (left/right). These differences may influence the students' positions regarding the program and the discursive patterns they use.

4. Analysis

4.1. The Reconstruction of Established Intercultural Competence Scenarios as an Expression of Distrust

In accordance with the intercultural competence multicultural models for building trust between groups that are in conflict, the encounter facilitator played the role of an unbiased mediator. The facilitator brought up issues relating to the ethno-national–religious rifts in Israeli society and the concept of intercultural competence as a way to regain trust. The facilitator conducted the conversation aiming to create a space that would gradually establish the discursive rules that would produce a safe space for conversation, debate, negotiation, and agreement. A "safe space" is defined in intercultural competence programs as a space that enables the participants to reexamine their own position through recognizing the position of the "other", and thus establish an open conversation that is not based on suspicion, wariness or even hatred, but on a willingness to look at reality from a different perspective and change positions and worldviews accordingly. However, many of the participants in the encounters chose to respond to the invitation to hold a conversation by using discourse practices that blocked many of the possibilities of in-depth discussion that would allow them to build intercultural competence and trust. Yossera (a Palestinian student) chose to use general and noncommittal statements: "the social and political dynamics in Israel are influenced by political constraints, contemporary events, cultural developments, and broad social changes." A similarly broad statement was offered by Ruwan (a Palestinian student): "Political and social attitudes can spread and change in the Israeli society according to the constraints of policy and new events." In the same vein,

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Ella (a Jewish student) claimed generally that "There are many factors that will influence the rifts in the Israeli society. The political attitudes can change in line with events and social trends." On other occasions, the participants chose to respond in a similar way when asked about the possibility of them promoting intercultural competence programs when they became teachers. Wafaa (a Palestinian student) said: "In the end, the national rifts in the Israeli society are the result of a complex historical process of dealing with multiple and competing identities, social and political conflicts, and dealing with the challenges of education in a democratic society." Bat El (a Jewish student) claimed, in the same vein, and in the same context, that "Joint education is a product of a very big complexity that characterizes the society." In choosing broad statements, the speakers chose not to take a position, let alone the perspective of the "other" or self-reflection. The "events", the "factors", and the "attitudes" remained abstract and unmarked by any of the identities/positions/political perspectives of the interlocuters. Given that the participants have a strong position about the ethno-national–religious relations between the two groups and the future of their coexistence in Israeli society, we may wonder why the participants reconstructed the established narrative of intercultural competence and trust by producing, in many instances, noncommittal positions that lacked reflectivity on these loaded subjects. The research literature very rarely examines the use of noncommittal (broad, vague, abstract and clichéd) generalizations. Perceiving noncommittal generalizations as a kind of non-participation or silence allows us to examine the differential appearance of this discursive practice in encounters dedicated to intercultural competence. Many findings suggest that underprivileged groups, especially in encounters between Palestinians and Jews, participate less in discussions and are less likely to express their views. The increased speech of the Jewish participants is interpreted as a resource of social and political dominance (Maoz, 2001); the relatively reduced speech of the Palestinians is attributed to the fear that their positions will not be accepted (Halabi, 2016; Agbaria & Totari, 2016).

Other statements by the participants employed different mechanisms of reconstruction. The students thus sought to go along with the narrative that the program's facilitator ostensibly wanted to hear. In a written answer to a question about the possibility of intercultural competence education, Maram (a Palestinian student) said, "These encounters can include educational and social activities that allow the students to get to know the 'other' side and understand its point of view." Arin (a Palestinian student) said, "The education system should train teachers to deal with the subject of the rift and instill values of tolerance." Anat (a Jewish student) claimed that "We have to promote tolerance and mutual familiarity [. . .] Education for tolerance should appear in joint curriculums that emphasize values of tolerance and acceptance of the 'other' [and also] the sharing of joint projects." Meital (a Jewish student) said, "[All] these actions can lead to building a more equal and tolerant society, in which every group knows and respects the other." And Tamar (a Jewish student) wrote,

We have to accept the "other". It is very important so that we can create equality and justice. We need intercultural competence programs that will try to combine study contents that are based on mutual understanding and tolerance. In addition, in the teachers' training they should engage with issues of multiculturalism, tolerance, and acceptance of the "other". The teachers need to get tools on how to contain differences and deal with prejudices about certain people.

These statements correspond to the accepted narrative of establishing intercultural competence. They include the keywords: "the other", "tolerance", "familiarity", "acceptance", and "equality". Reconstructing the common narrative of programs for establishing intercultural competence by using vocabulary that creates the "correct" and agreed-upon social scenario also results in empty words. These words are empty because they do not

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contain any specific or focused statements dealing with the relations between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis in the State of Israel. Nor is there any attempt in them to take the perspective of the "other" and understand the "other" from their own point of view and to establish intercultural relations between the groups.

In this sense, these statements are no different from the aforementioned general ones. Both sabotage the model of the open, reflective conversation that the facilitator is supposed to lead in order to build intercultural competence and trust, thus emptying the terms of their meaning. What can be learned from this avoidance of taking a clear stand, or from the choice to "take a stand" that submits to the rules, the expectations, and the narratives of models for creating intercultural competence and trust? A first reading of the many different statements voiced in the program's encounters gave the impression that the participants acted according to a hidden censorship mechanism. Since the events of 7 October, Palestinian students have been more likely to avoid expressing criticism related to the events of the war (Agbaria & Totari, 2016; Haneen et al., 2024) and have suffered a greater sense of alienation (Mansour, 2025). This has made self-censorship one of the strategies used by these students (Mahajne & Alnabilsy, 2025). Jewish students, on the other hand, have avoided discussing the relations between the groups (Abu-Gweder, 2025). Since the war broke out, Jewish students have even displayed a decreased willingness to hold intragroup interactions (Sindiani et al., 2026).

Thus, had these discourse patterns characterized mainly the Palestinian participants, it would have been possible to ascribe the reconstructed—circuitous and noncommittal—narrative to the fear of some external censorship. However, the fact that students from both groups widely adopted discourse mechanisms that emptied what was said of any concrete content may suggest the existence of "self-censorship"—personal internal censorship, characterized by an unwillingness to hold a critical and incisive debate that might threaten the participants' positions. Informal mechanisms of internal censorship may stem from an attempt to satisfy, or alternatively, from an attempt to criticize, the facilitator/program. However, these attempts not to cooperate with the political–ideological narrative/scenario underpinning the intercultural competence model suggest that internal censorship, albeit existent, is only part of the story.

4.2. The Destruction of Established Intercultural Competence Scenarios as an Expression of Distrust

Along with general statements and/or hackneyed slogans, another mechanism stood out in the participants' words—disruption. This happened, for example, when the facilitator opened the discussion with a general question, unbiased towards one side or the other, in which the participants were asked to list the advantages of establishing intercultural competence between the Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel. In response, the Palestinian and Jewish participants rejected the possibility of having a conversation on the subject precisely due to their positions on the subject. Meital (a Jewish student) articulated it thus: "I would have said something unpopular (about peace). But I'm not going to say it, I'm not going to say it because the facilitator is not going to like it." In a similar vein, Doaa (a Palestinian student) claimed: "I don't think I should say anything, the facilitator is not going to be too thrilled." And Yifat (a Jewish student) claimed: "All the lecturers at the colleges are Ashkenazi lefties you also have 'Arab Ashkenazi's [laughing] It's hard for them to hear things they don't like, so I'm not going to speak and I'm not going to say what I have to say, because I feel that's right for me." The demonstrative refusal to express an opinion created a confrontational discourse that refused to collaborate with the goals of the encounter by giving the facilitator's demands a political contextualization and presenting them as a non-neutral element embedded in a specific context. Another

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discursive practice used by the participants was questioning the very request to create intercultural competence. Liron (a Jewish student) said,

> In the middle of this year, we are facing a crisis that places in real danger the existence of the state [of Israel, D. M] and the existence of the Jewish national home in its own country. Now, the Israeli Arabs seem not to "choose a side", maybe wanting to see from the side what harm the Jewish Israeli society can do to itself in internal intersectional wars [. . .] We are only shown Israeli Arabs helping Israeli Jews in the 7 October events, like rescuing young people from the Nova festival,[7] as was shown in the media. [But] there is a fear within the Israeli public about the intentions of the other side [the Arabs, D. M] and what will emerge from the mis. To talk now about intercultural competence is to talk about the politics of the left. I will take no part in it.

This statement conceals a triple claim. First, the speaker claims that the Palestinian participants (including those who are outside academia) are refusing to voice their position so as not to reveal their "cards" to the Jewish Israeli public. The silence that the Palestinians in Israel have imposed on themselves arouses fear of that hidden narrative. The silence is not interpreted as the Palestinians being afraid to take a stand, but as a stand in itself, a stand that wants to examine what the other—Jewish—side is going to do before the Palestinian side attacks. Secondly, the help offered by Palestinians in Israel to Jews who were injured in the Hamas invasion is also perceived as part of the distraction deliberately created by the "leftist" Israelis, including the facilitator. Thirdly, faced with the silence that the speaker ascribes to the Palestinians, she wishes to be similarly silent and keep her "cards", i.e., her opinions, close to her chest without creating a discussion. These arguments expressed an explicit political position of the speaker. The anger expressed by some of the Jewish students attests to the great personal and national pain and to the difficulty experienced by Jewish students in managing their anger and emotional distress in the wake of the war (Harari-Paltiel et al., 2025). This tendency also found expression later in the discussion.

When the facilitator asked the participant, "Who is the other side?" another Jewish participant, Gal, answered, "You know exactly who it is," refusing to speak further, name names or reveal her opinion on the subject. This refusal to express a position was likewise a resounding political position that ended the conversation, wishing to avoid what usually happens in encounters of this kind, which require the participants to reveal their positions, discuss them and put them to the test.

Merav (a Jewish participant) similarly chose not to risk putting her positions up for discussion and to avoid speaking about peace and coexistence:

In such a reality, to read Al Haj's article [an article that examines multiculturalism in the Israeli society from the point of view of a Palestinian Israeli scholar] is irrelevant. Peace is an irrelevant political position at the moment. What the education system mainly needs now is to educate us [Jewish, D. M] Israelis to rise again and build ourselves as one nation. One people with one heart.

Even though Merav expressed her political opinion when claiming that it was not the "right time" to read Palestinian thinkers, at the same time, she said that she did not want to carry on speaking because "peace is a political position." This political position put an end to the discussion because of the political context attached to the term intercultural competence and peace as it was used in the encounters, which was represented, in her view, by the facilitator.

Arin (a Palestinian student) said the following:

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> The founding of the state of Israel in 1948 and the wars that followed it led to the Nakba, a process in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced from their homes. The Arab population in Israel is seen as a double periphery [. . .] So now there is no longer. . . There is no use speaking [about peace, D. M].

Dua also holds a firm political position, which concerns the founding of the state of Israel following the '48 war, but she too refuses to express her position or reflect on the perspective of the "other", precisely because she has a position about intercultural competence and peace. Her refusal to speak implies the assumption that her political position does not coincide with the "political unconscious" of the encounter. Both speakers, each in her own way, object to the collaboration with the "other" and the demand that they self-reflect, take a perspective on the "other", and compromise on their position in order to accept the "other". The objections to the encounter coincide with findings that suggest that students from both groups express skepticism about the ability of such programs to truly influence the relations between Jews and Palestinians (Hellerstein et al., 2023). This is evident, in particular, in programs based on criticality and on building awareness of history and power. These programs provoke opposition due to the great challenge of changing existing power structures and realizing conceptions of peace, which are presented as the only utopia that can bring about change (Silberberg, 2019). Only a small number of students answered the call to participate, share, and create the possibility of speech, such as Amani (a Palestinian student), who chose to speak about the difficulty caused by the absence of coexistence, as an opening for thinking together about the possibility of creating it:

> I want to share with you as a lecturer an incident that happened to me at a certain college. As an Arab student, there were lecturers at the college who promised that every student would get a respectful and equal education, with consideration for their unique cultural background. And there was one male lecturer who didn't respect the Arab students and maintained eye contact only with the Jewish students, as if we weren't present in the room. That's why I think that the teachers should develop skills to communicate respectfully and sensitively with students from different cultural backgrounds.

Thus, disrupting the conversation allowed for strong statements to be made but did not allow for a conversation to be held, except in very specific cases, such as Amani's intervention. The clear and unambiguous statements voiced by the participants were not meant to create trust, but to sabotage the process in order to avoid the need to examine their position critically, to examine their position from the point of view of the "other", and to give up parts of their position in an open negotiation with the "other".

Practices of this kind were more prevalent than practices of open dialog about positions or of concessions over positions in order to realize the rights of the "other", as required by the intercultural competence model.

5. Discussion: Distrust of Intercultural Competence and Peace

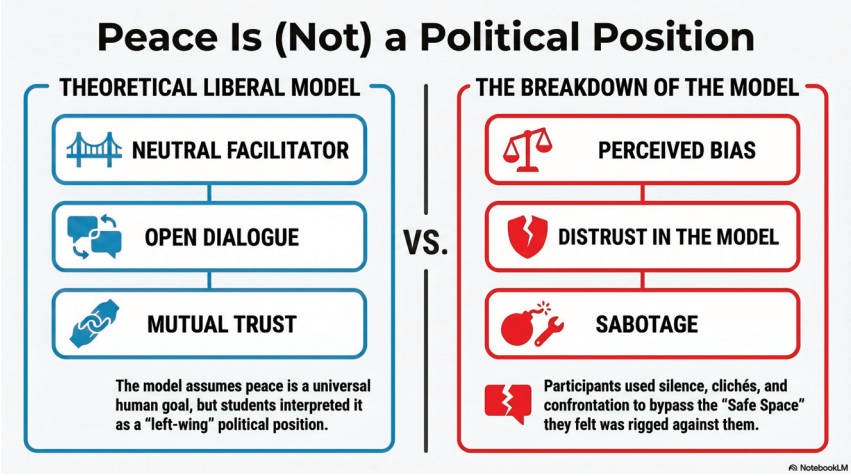
The attempt to use the common liberal model of programs of intercultural competence at times of major crisis reveals, in this specific case, the weaknesses of implementing this model in non-Western contexts in light of harsh conflicts on a campus located in the Middle East.

The findings suggest that many students refused, in different cases, to cooperate with principles and practices that characterize the liberal multicultural peacemaking model. They objected to creating a conversation that would oblige them to self-reflect, to observe reality from the point of view of the "other", and to give up their ideological and identity positions; furthermore, they objected to defining the facilitator as a neutral mediator who

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071166

enables them to conduct an open dialog on each other's positions. The objections took the shape of discursive disruptions that created narratives characterized by general, clichéd, and confrontational statements. These discursive mechanisms constituted an expression of distrust in the process.

Instead of creating a discussion about positions, they created a conversation that positioned the terms trust and peace, which made it almost impossible to say anything productive that would contribute to the process (see Scheme 1).



Scheme 1. Challenges of the liberal multicultural model.

How can we explain the phenomenon of distrust that occurred in this case study? One possibility is the range of usual explanations, suggesting that the participants are displaying embarrassment, resistance, and anger due to self-censorship, concern and fear, or that they have been caught in a "false consciousness" (see Mizrahi, 2016). Another possibility is the relative social/political weakness of Palestinians in these encounters, resulting from being a Muslim minority group in a Jewish state experiencing contrasting pressures that demand that they preserve their cultural identity while having to adapt to the Jewish environment (Bekerman, 2002; Shalabny & Tannenbaum, 2023). This also leads to claims that Jews should accept the collective narrative of Palestinian citizens of Israel and not expect a similar acceptance from them (Salomon, 2004). It is possible that the Jewish participants' refusal to fulfil this role was a hindrance to the Palestinian participants. However, the reactions of the Palestinian and Jewish participants seem to suggest a deeper distrust. It is not only the distrust between participants from either group, but also, at least partly, a crisis of trust in the trust-building model and process itself. In other words, the participants expressed distrust mostly towards the very model that sought to create relations of trust between them. Put differently, the liberal multicultural concept of intercultural competence has become, to a large extent, the ideological enemy of both groups in this case study.[8] Many of the participants rejected the conception that stands at the heart of the Western–liberal multicultural model: that peace is a working assumption shared by the two rival sides, embodying a universal human aspiration, and that peace is located outside any political or ideological position and is mediated by an unbiased facilitator. Even though the model and process that brought the students together did not overtly and explicitly declare their affinity with any worldview and did not "color" intercultural competence with any specific ideological colors, some of the participants assumed that the encounters relied on a specific ideological–political basis, leftwing and progressive, which required them to make potential shifts in their positions and views (see Franch, 2020). This assumption, which was mostly accepted by participants from both groups in intercultural competence programs before the war, was no longer tolerated.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071166

Even though the conclusions do not imply that the liberal multicultural competence model fails all the time and in every educational context, the findings still raise key questions: Is this concept of intercultural competence program culturally/ideologically blind? Is this model the only possible way to construct intercultural competence in higher education in diversified and conflict-ridden societies? Is it possible to articulate intercultural competence through different, apolitical processes and definitions?

To a large extent, the students' approach interpreted intercultural competence and peace as an ideological bias (rightwing/leftwing, conservative/progressive) that benefits one side or the other. Identifying peace with this or that political worldview stands in contradiction with the idea of universality and with making this universality an axiom that obliges any human society. If the concept of intercultural competence does not equal a basic and obligatory human "truth", then the dichotomous division peace/war might become blurred, extending the legitimacy and normalization of different war situations of varying intensity. Therefore, little scholarship has examined voices that claim that Western agendas are enforced by the process of establishing peace and coexistence, and little scholarship has criticized the absence of spaces for objecting to ideas expressed by programs for intercultural competence and peace and coexistence in the global south (King, 2011).[9] As was shown in this specific case, knowing the "other" and establishing peace between rival groups are perceived in different ways in different cultural and political contexts. Hence, the data suggests that what was perceived as almost an "essentialist" model of intercultural competence education should be reflectively analyzed due to the new conditions created by the recent war in the Middle East. See the interfaith encounters between Jews and Muslims that are based on faith in the power of God (Weiss, 2022); projects that strive to find a "common story" for Jews and Arabs that would not oblige them to give up their definition of national identity (Sinjlawi, 2024); and projects such as the Holy Land Confederation (Husseini & Beilin, 2022). Thus, the "politization" of the terms trust and peace and the debate around the meaning of intercultural competence should not be seen as a defeat. If "peace is a political position," as most of the participants believed, it should be seen as an opportunity to discuss the basic working assumptions of programs for intercultural competence and peace in higher education during times of intense conflict. The lack of trust in the models does not necessarily mean that both groups oppose coexistence.

6. Implications

In order to avoid perceiving the concept of "peace" as a politically biased expression loaded with historical grievances, among other things, due to disappointments with past initiatives and security-related and existential fears, I propose the following tools:

Changing terminology:

Using "smaller" concepts instead of using the word "peace", which suggests a broad and profound macrosocial change laden with difficulties and distrust. Thus, it is better to use more concrete and localized concepts, such as "living together", "neighborly relations", or "a safe future". Changing key concepts and replacing them with more practical and neutral terms may lower expectations and therefore also reduce resistance to big concepts such as "peace", which might be perceived as loaded with competing political meanings. Such concepts will locate the encounter in a more practicable and possible horizon for the participants, in particular in stressful situations due to an ongoing war.

Pragmatism instead of ideology:

Breaking the concept of "peace" into implementable practices and translating the concept of "peace" into steps and actions that are related to daily routine. For example,

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071166

modest collaborations on different subjects that the participants share—the environment, informal education, or help in schooling—and in which the benefit for each side is clear and is not perceived as the relinquishment of a national–ethnic–religious identity. Choosing a pragmatic option, focused on shared interests, may deflect the ideological disagreement, which increases in times of crisis, as happened during the encounters, and in particular, in discussions about broad issues related to society, conflicts and education in Israel. Emphasizing a common goal, not necessarily designed to promote broad political agreement but focusing on finding a solution to concrete problems that influence both sides' quality of life, may increase the chances of achieving coexistence in practice.

Identifying the source of the difficulty:

Giving legitimacy to concerns about peace is important for recognizing that the term "peace" has been politically exploited by various elements on both sides and has caused losses of property and life. It is important to give full legitimacy to fears and concerns in times of political or security-related tension and acknowledge that an encounter induces great emotional stress and requires courage, which may encourage the participants. In particular, it is important to make it clear that they are not obliged to change their political views but mainly to listen and show mutual curiosity.

Focusing on justice and security:

It would be good to integrate, in these discussions, concepts that are important to both participating sides—security, the right to exist, equality and rights, self-definition—so that no side feels that peace is ignoring their basic needs and endangering them as individuals or as part of the group.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 How to Talk about Political Conflicts with Students? is a guideline developed by the Erasmus University Rotterdam IDEA Center. The guideline focuses on ways to create a "brave space" that fosters respect, empathy, and open-mindedness, and key strategies include setting clear norms, using structured, evidence-based dialog, encouraging perspective-taking, and validating student emotions while managing classroom tension.

2 In Muslim societies, trust is based on more relative and contingent perceptions. While the non-Western perception of the concept of trust equally relies on a dichotomous definition (trust/distrust), according to Abu Nimer (2001), these poles hold different meanings from the Western ones, which also influence the set of practices that comprise the process of putting trust in the "other".

3 In Muslim–Arab society, peacemaking is performed by a mediator in a procedure called Sulha (Fares et al., 2006). The person conducting the Sulha openly and explicitly takes a side in the conflict he is asked to resolve. His role and status derive from his stature in the community—from kinship, affiliation and position in the hierarchy of local politics. The mediator is always a man (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2002), has an interest in the conflict, and is emotionally invested in the situation due to being part of

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the community or close to it. As such, the mediator has the authority to enforce the conditions for resolving the conflict and to demand concessions from one of the sides in order to resolve it and make peace (Abu Nimer, 2001).

4 Higher-education institutions started to resume their activities gradually and very late in 2023due to and in the shadow of the war.

5 The National Union of Israeli Students launched an extensive campaign seeking to get terrorism out of academia. As part of this campaign, they posted huge billboards bearing a quote by Prof. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (a Palestinian citizen of Israel) from the Hebrew University: "It is time to abolish Zionism", and a quote by Dr. Anat Matar (a Jewish citizen of Israel) from Tel Aviv University, who described Walid Daqa, who was involved in the murder an IDF soldier, as "A beloved friend and a source of inspiration" (Gruber, 2024).

6 The Btsalmo organization—self-described as a human rights organization focusing on Jewish rights (2024)—sent a scathing letter to higher-education institutions that allowed the return of Palestinian students who had been arrested on suspicion of incitement to terrorism. The chairman of the Knesset's Education Committee, MK Yosef Taieb, called for the immediate dismissal of lecturers in academia who incited terrorism (Knesset News, 2024). MK and coalition chairman Ofir Katz sponsored a bill called Getting Terrorism Out of Academia, which ordered the directors of academic institutions to dismiss faculty who supported terrorism or face budget cuts (Ettinger, 2024).

7 Palestinian Israelis helped save the lives of Jewish Israelis who were partying at the Nova festival. The Israeli media reported extensively on these heroic events, in which partygoers were rescued, hidden, and given life-saving first aid by Palestinian Israelis who risked their lives in rescue missions.

8 See, for example, the political role of higher education in conflict-affected societies—Afghanistan and Somaliland—and especially the tension between educators who impose Western concepts and their students (Kester et al., 2022).

9 Many studies that examine Western models of peacemaking and coexistence do not question the model's basic assumptions but rather reconstruct it by examining the ways it affects the participants and/or the ways the participants react to it (Levi Paluck et al., 2021).

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Article

Beyond Utility: Language Intervention, Identity Dynamics, and Political Attitude Change Among Palestinian High School Students and Pre-Service Teachers in Post-7 October Israel

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Abstract

This quasi-experimental study employed Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) to examine the longitudinal changes in intergroup perceptions following a targeted Hebrew language intervention on intergroup perceptions among 119 Arab citizens of Israel, segmented into high school students (HSS; adolescents) and pre-service Teachers (PSTs; young adults). Focusing on instrumental language acquisition as a form of positive intergroup contact, the research measured changes in self-efficacy in Hebrew, endorsement of democratic influence strategies, hope for peace, and common ancestry categorization (Semitic/Abrahamic) across two time points (pre/post intervention). Results indicated a robust positive association between the time of intervention and four of the five tested outcome variables, supporting the instrumental pathway hypothesis. Complex interactions revealed that participants identifying as Palestinian, who exhibited lower baseline hopes and categorization scores, demonstrated the sharpest increase in both hope for peace and Abrahamic categorization. Conversely, sensitivity to inequality diverged by group, dropping significantly among PSTs but increasing among HSSs. These findings highlight that while language intervention bridges ideological divides, its impact is shaped by the professional socialization inherent in teacher training. For PSTs, the combination of linguistic proficiency and emerging professional identity appears to mitigate feelings of marginalization, offering a constructive pathway for negotiating identity, status, and belonging.

Keywords: pre-service teachers; Hebrew language intervention; Palestinian citizens of Israel; political attitude change; identity

1. Introduction

1.1. Context of Protracted Conflict and Language Asymmetries

The protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict is characterized by profound political, social, and economic asymmetries, a context in which language plays a critical role in shaping intergroup dynamics. Hebrew functions as the dominant language of power, economy, and culture in Israel, while Arabic has been demoted from an official language to having a special status (Knesset, 2018). Consequently, for the Palestinian minority in Israel, Hebrew acquisition is simultaneously viewed as an essential prerequisite for educational attainment, employment mobility, and basic navigation of public life (Abbas & Mendel, 2022; Manor & Binhas, 2023), and yet, it is often treated with ambivalence or outright negativity (Gindi & Erlich Ron, 2025).

This dual perception means that the Hebrew language carries immense symbolic burdens for Palestinians in Israel. Learning it can be associated with necessary integration

or, conversely, with assimilation and a subtle form of political submission (Suleiman, 2011; Or & Shohamy, 2016). Qualitative studies confirm this contradiction, revealing that while students recognize the practical necessity of Hebrew ("instrumental motivation"), many harbor emotional alienation or even perceive it as the "language of the enemy". This affective barrier represents a critical challenge to meaningful social inclusion (Gindi & Erlich Ron, 2025).

1.2. Interventions for Shared Society: The Role of Hebrew Acquisition

Social psychological research has long established that contact between hostile groups, when structured under optimal conditions (e.g., equal status, common goals, institutional support), is one of the most effective means of reducing prejudice and enhancing positive intergroup attitudes (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Language training programs inherently provide a structured environment for sustained, goal-oriented contact and interaction, generating practical opportunities for engagement that foster motivation (Gardner et al., 1985). Studies have shown a connection between majority language proficiency and the ability to critically examine democratic principles (Bonotti & Willoughby, 2022; Shohami & Tenenbaum, 2018). Research has shown that teaching the Arabic language promotes changes in attitudes toward shared living among Jewish citizens of Israel (Bandes-Yakov & Makhoul, 2013; Donitsa-Scmidt et al., 2004), but to the best of our knowledge no such evidence has been provided for teaching Arab citizens Hebrew.

This study is theoretically framed by the notion that an individual can transition from instrumental motivation to intrinsic or affective transformation (Charamba, 2022). Specifically, when the acquisition of Hebrew is driven primarily by career or academic necessity (instrumental motivation), successful mastery (measured by self-efficacy) is expected to transition into genuine positive sentiment toward the outgroup and broader shared society. This transformation is posited to occur by reducing psychological threat and replacing anxiety with competence (Gindi & Erlich Ron, 2025).

1.3. Study Aims and Contribution

Previous research has explored the correlates of Hebrew acquisition among Arab citizens (Abbas & Mendel, 2022; Manor & Binhas, 2023), but longitudinal, quasi-experimental evidence demonstrating the efficacy of instrumental language interventions in shifting complex, politicized attitudes remains scarce. Furthermore, it is critical to understand how these effects vary across distinct developmental and identity groups. This study investigates this gap by using a rigorous, repeated measures design employing Generalized Estimating Equations (GEEs) to assess the longitudinal changes associated with a language intervention across two cohorts: high school students (HSSs) and pre-service teachers (PSTs).

The contribution of this research lies in exploring the associations between instrumental competence (self-efficacy in Hebrew) and shifts in political and identity perceptions, specifically among groups defined by high baseline political tension. Crucially, it examines how these processes are dynamically affected by the unique socio-political climate following the acute escalation of the conflict after 7 October 2023. To systematically evaluate the hypothesized transition from instrumental mastery to intrinsic attitude change, the study addresses the following four research questions:

RQ1 (Intervention Effect): To what extent does a structured Hebrew language intervention correlate with positive changes in intergroup perceptions—such as hope for peace, endorsement of democratic values, and dual-ancestry categorization—over time?

RQ2 (The Instrumental Pathway): Is higher self-efficacy in the Hebrew language associated with more positive attitudes toward the outgroup and shared society, regardless of the specific intervention stage?

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RQ3 (Developmental and Professional Context): Do the trajectories of attitudinal change differ between adolescents (HSSs) and young adults undergoing professional socialization (PSTs), particularly regarding their sensitivity to structural inequality?

RQ4 (Identity Moderation): Does self-identified national identity (Palestinian vs. Israeli Arab) moderate the effect of the intervention on political attitudes and the willingness to adopt superordinate ancestry categories?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Interplay of Language, Instrumentalism, and Identity

The literature consistently suggests that linguistic proficiency in the dominant language is a critical factor in the economic and academic success of minority groups (Tahaucho et al., 2020). Studies focusing on the Palestinian citizens in Israel confirm a strong correlation between Hebrew mastery and improved employment opportunities, higher wages, and better academic outcomes (Marom, 2014; Tarabia, 2023). This pragmatic valuation has led to observations that the Palestinian public's attitudes toward the Hebrew language itself are often more positive than their attitudes toward Jewish individuals (Atili, 1999), demonstrating a functional decoupling of the language as a tool from its emotional attachment to the dominant group.

However, the acquisition process remains psychologically complex because language is deeply intertwined with group identity (Altun, 2023). For Palestinian citizens of Israel, the decision to invest in Hebrew education triggers internal negotiations over national loyalty and cultural preservation (Amara, 2016; Klar et al., 2020). Successful language learning (indicated by high self-efficacy and performance) is hypothesized to resolve the tension between instrumental need and symbolic identity threat. This mechanism suggests that acquiring confidence in the outgroup's language reduces anxiety and converts a perceived external burden into an internal, positive resource, thereby facilitating greater social openness and support for constructive intergroup relations (Raoofi et al., 2012).

2.2. The Role of Teacher Colleges in Bridging Cultural Divides

In the deeply divided landscape of Israeli society, where physical and psychological segregation often characterize the relationship between Jewish and Arab citizens, teacher training colleges serve as a rare and vital arena for cross-cultural engagement (aChord, 2023; Paul-Binyamin & Haj-Yehia, 2019). These academic institutions must transcend their traditional pedagogical mandates to function as active cultural mediators, transforming the campus into a shared space that challenges the prevailing ethnocentric narratives of the conflict. This necessity is underscored by findings indicating that while natural, unstructured contact remains limited and often reinforces existing power asymmetries, structured educational interventions can effectively reduce prejudice and foster intercultural competence and resilience among educators (Manor & Masry-Herzallah, 2025; Shapira & Amzalag, 2021). Furthermore, research suggests that for minority students specifically, these academic encounters are not merely social opportunities but critical mechanisms for negotiating status and belonging within the state, thereby aligning the goals of teacher education with the broader imperative of social cohesion and democratic resilience (Yablon et al., 2022).

2.3. Social Categorization and the Challenge of Superordinate Identity

The Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM) posits that recategorizing formerly antagonistic groups under a single, superordinate identity (e.g., "Israelis" or "citizens") can reduce bias (Erlich Ron, 2025; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2014). However, in conflicts where identity boundaries are sacred or highly politicized, appeals to a common identity can be

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perceived as threatening to the minority group's distinctiveness or status, thus provoking resistance rather than inclusion (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Spears et al., 1997).

A more nuanced approach involves promoting a dual identity structure, where the subgroup identity is maintained while embracing the superordinate one. This complexity is often studied through the lens of Bicultural Identity Integration (BII), which assesses the degree to which an individual perceives their two cultural identities as compatible or oppositional (Benet-Martínez et al., 2021). Research indicates that individuals experiencing high BII conflict are more likely to adopt political positions supporting collective action to advance their group's status (Simon & Grabow, 2010; Wright, 2001).

2.4. Ancestry Framing: Semitic and Abrahamic Categorization

In the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, two primary frameworks for establishing shared identity have been explored: Abrahamic and Semitic categorization. Abrahamic categorization emphasizes religious commonalities among Jews, Christians, and Muslims (Dickens, 2006; Kunst et al., 2014, 2019). While this framing has been shown to promote peace attitudes in some circumstances (Kunst & Thomsen, 2015), it risks triggering defensiveness due to historical, moral, or doctrinal objections, particularly among highly religious or fundamentalist groups.

In contrast, Semitic categorization appeals to the shared linguistic and ethnocultural ancestry of Hebrew and Arabic, both originating from the ancient Semitic language family (Huehnergard & Pat-El, 2019). Because this frame centers on language rather than theology, it is conceptually distinct and theorized to be less affectively charged or ideologically threatening. The premise is that highlighting linguistic commonality offers a pragmatic and potentially more acceptable basis for mutual recognition, serving as a symbolic bridge that maintains connection while preserving subgroup distinctiveness. This alignment with the core subject of the intervention, language mastery, suggests Semitic categorization may be a more readily internalized framework for inclusion.

2.5. Developmental Stage and Conflict Context

Adolescence is recognized as a pivotal period for the formation of coherent political and social identities (Erikson, 1963; Marcia, 1980). This developmental stage renders high school students particularly sensitive to socio-political environments. The current study examines adolescents as well as young adults, who are older and have already pursued higher education. This group of young adults represents a cohort that has typically navigated greater social integration and crystallized professional identities (Chen et al., 2022).

The data utilized in this study were collected after the acute escalation of the conflict following the 7 October 2023 massacre (Reis & Wald, 2024). Research shows that periods of high intergroup conflict typically intensify polarization, reinforce negative group norms, and depress hopes for reconciliation (aChord, 2024; Gindi et al., 2022; Harel et al., 2025). The effectiveness of the language intervention must therefore be assessed against a backdrop where identity salience and perceived threat are acutely elevated, presenting a test of whether instrumental learning can foster resilient positive attitudes, even during a sustained crisis.

2.6. The Research Gap

Existing research on Hebrew learning has either focused on policy (Manor & Binhas, 2023) or indicators of language acquisition (e.g., Abu-Rabiah, 2025). The innovation of this study is its robust, quasi-experimental design which moves beyond prior work. It models the simultaneous changes over time in linguistic self-efficacy, political attitudes, and dual-ancestry categorization. The study further enhances this by systematically comparing two distinct cohorts, adolescents and PSTs at different stages of social integration.

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2.7. The Research Context

The study was conducted across two distinct Hebrew instruction programs for Arabic native speakers, each involving contact with Jewish peers or instructors, which is essential for investigating how language acquisition influences attitudes toward shared living. The study focuses on two distinct cohorts participating in specialized Hebrew language interventions. The first group comprises Bedouin high school students (HSSs) who received Hebrew training from Jewish volunteers (Manor & Binhas, 2023). This intervention consisted of weekly 90 min sessions over a six-month period, specifically designed to enhance communicative competence and spoken Hebrew as a means of reducing language anxiety. Notably, these sessions were conducted as a supplement to, and remained distinct from, the students' formal school curriculum. In contrast, the second cohort consisted of pre-service teachers (PSTs) enrolled at a teacher education college, preparing for professional roles within Arabic-speaking schools. Unlike the HSS group, the intervention for PSTs was fully embedded within their academic framework, comprising two semester-long courses (four hours weekly) titled "Hebrew for Academic and Professional Purposes." Furthermore, while the HSS intervention relied on informal contact with volunteers, the PSTs' experience was characterized by structured professional socialization. This included instruction from both Arab and Jewish lecturers and routine, integrated contact with Jewish counterparts and faculty within the mixed college environment.

The decision to include both HSSs and PSTs in the same research is justified by their differing stages of social integration, which offer a valuable comparative opportunity. By examining these two groups, the study can evaluate if the maturation and professionalization characteristic of the PST stage, combined with their more institutionalized intergroup contact (aChord, 2023; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), moderate the changes in intergroup attitudes observed alongside Hebrew language mastery. This comparison moves beyond a simple assessment of language instruction to explore how developmental stage and sustained exposure interact with linguistic self-efficacy to produce affective change. Furthermore, focusing on PSTs is particularly relevant because they are future educators. A positive shift in their attitudes toward shared living, following successful Hebrew acquisition, has the potential to influence the school environment they enter, which is a key consideration for informing teacher training programs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Procedure

The study proceeded after securing necessary ethical and governmental clearances, specifically from the Institutional Review Board (#152-2025) and the Israeli Ministry of Education's Chief Scientist (#13457 & #14176). In September 2024, researchers approached principals of several Arab high schools to initiate the study. Once principals agreed, the team secured parental informed consent for student participation. PSTs were approached in a large teachers' college in Israel. Data was gathered at two points during the Israel–Hamas war: the initial collection (Time 1) was in November 2024, and the follow-up (Time 2) occurred in June 2025. Arabic-speaking research assistants distributed the Arabic-language questionnaires to both HSS and PSTs, providing cultural and technical assistance, such as explaining wording. The completion time for the questionnaires was around 10–15 min. While six high school students utilized their right to withdraw, all PSTs who started completing the questionnaires completed the study.

3.2. Research Design and Participants

The study employed a quasi-experimental design using repeated measures (Pre–Post) across two non-equivalent educational groups: high school students (HSSs) and pre-service

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020353

teachers (PSTs). The intervention comprised a focused Hebrew language training program delivered over time.

Descriptive statistics for background characteristics are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Data were drawn from 78 PSTs without drop-outs and 41 HSSs out of 104 who started (39.4%) but did not complete one of the questionnaires. Missing data were imputed based on a preliminary test of missing completely at random (MCAR; little test of missing at random: $\chi^2 = 23.07$, df = 22, $p = .456$) using the Monte Carlo Markov Chain (MCMC) for random value imputation.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Background Characteristics of Survey Participants.

	High School Students (*n* = 41)		**PSTs (*n* = 78)**		χ^2
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	
Gender					44.72 ***
Male	20	48.8	0	0	
Female	21	51.2	76	100	
Total	41	100	76	100	
Identity					10.42 **
Israeli/Arab	13	31.7	49	62.8	
Palestinian	28	68.3	29	37.2	
Total	41	100	78	100	
Intensity of meeting					0.03
Limited meetings	9	22.0	18	23.4	
Intensive meetings	32	78.0	59	76.6	
Total	41	100	77	100	
Grade started studying Hebrew					2.61
1st grade	6	14.6	5	6.4	
2nd grade	12	29.3	30	38.5	
3rd grade	23	56.1	43	55.1	
Total	41	100	78	100	
Time					0.08
Time 1 (Pre)	41	51.9	78	50.0	
Time 2 (Post)	38	48.1	78	50.0	
Total	79	100	156	100	

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .05$; standard errors are in parentheses.

Table 2. Research Indicators, Descriptive Statistics, and Reliability.

	n	**# Items**	**Range**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Alpha**
Self-efficacy in Hebrew—Time 1	119	7	1.57–5.86	4.01	0.85	.859
Advancing democracy						
Time 1	119	3	1–6	4.55	1.10	.696
Time 2	109	3	2.67–6.00	4.94	0.86	.675
Hopes for peace						
Time 1	119	7	1–6	3.88	1.11	.862
Time 2	109	7	1–6	3.95	1.09	.859

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Table 2. *Cont.*

	n	# Items	Range	Mean	SD	Alpha
Sensitivity to inequality						
Time 1	119	2	1–6	4.84	1.17	.569
Time 2	109	2	1–6	4.89	1.16	.649
Semitic categorization						
Time 1	119	4	1–6	3.79	0.96	.753
Time 2	109	4	1–6	3.80	0.94	.730
Abrahamic categorization						
Time 1	119	4	1–6	3.45	1.39	.881
Time 2	109	4	1–6	3.53	1.40	.883

The high school group (HSS, $n = 41$) was nearly gender-balanced but predominantly identified as Palestinian (68.3%). The PST group ($n = 78$) consisted entirely of women and predominantly identified as Israeli Arab (62.8%). However, no differences were found between the groups in terms of how often they meet with Jewish citizens or the grade in which they started learning Hebrew.

3.3. Measures

The study assessed six key variables over time, measuring both perceived individual competence in Hebrew and intergroup attitudes. Table 2 shows descriptive and reliability for research indicators, which include the number of items each indicator comprised, namely, self-efficacy in Hebrew, 7 items; preference for democratic influence, 3 items; hopes for peace, 7 items; sensitivity to inequality, 2 items; Semitic categorization, 4 items; and Abrahamic categorization, 4 items. Although reliability for two indicators was only fair, which was a result of a small number of items (3 and 2 items only), most indicators exhibited high reliability.

3.4. Analytical Strategy

The primary analytical strategy to account for the correlated nature of the repeated measurements was the Generalized Estimation Equations (GEE; Hardin & Hilbe, 2013), which were built to determine time (before versus post intervention) and group (PSTs versus high school students) and possible interaction effects. Specifically, we applied the normal distribution assumption with the identity link function and unstructured covariance matrix; that is, T1, T2 covariance was freely estimated. A robust standard error estimation was applied, such that the normality assumption was relaxed (Suktitipat et al., 2013). Post hoc multiple pairwise comparisons were tested to address the interaction results, where the Bonferroni correction was used to adjust for multiple comparisons. The Wald χ^2 was used to test significance. To ensure the robustness of the findings, sensitivity analyses were conducted using alternative working correlation structures (e.g., exchangeable and autoregressive). The patterns of significant main and interaction effects remained substantively similar to those obtained with the unstructured covariance matrix reported below.

The GEE models tested five outcomes: (i) preference for democratic influence strategies (henceforth, advancing democracy); (ii) hope for peace; (iii) sense of inequality; (iv) Semitic categorization; and (v) Abrahamic categorization. In each model, we tested the effect of time (post versus pre-intervention); group effect (PSTs versus high school); Identity (Palestinian versus Israeli Arab); grade in Hebrew (reported by participants); intensity of meeting with Jews (rarely versus often); and self-efficacy in Hebrew. The next step included interaction terms with time.

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4. Results

As shown in Table 3, a comparison between group was performed (two independent sample *t*-tests), which showed greater hopes for peace among the PSTs, and higher perceived Abrahamic categorization, in comparison to the high school students.

Table 3. Research indictors, descriptive statistics by education level and *t* tests.

	High School Students			PSTs			t
	Means	SD	N	Means	SD	N	
Age	16.05	0.22	41	20.87	1.51	78	−27.73 ***
Self-efficacy in Hebrew	4.03	1.12	41	4.00	0.68	78	0.15
Advancing democracy	4.46	1.27	41	4.59	1.01	78	−0.61
Hopes for peace	3.38	1.24	41	4.14	0.95	78	−3.77 ***
Sensitivity to inequality	4.70	1.17	41	4.91	1.16	78	−0.96
Semitic categorization	3.69	1.16	41	3.85	0.84	78	−0.87
Abrahamic categorization	3.05	1.34	41	3.65	1.38	78	−2.27 *

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$; standard errors are in parentheses.

Main Effects: Table 4 provides GEE results, namely, main effects and interaction effects. Time (fixed) effect was found to be significantly positive for four out of the five tested outcome variables (legitimate ways to promote Arab citizens: $b = 0.36$, $p < .001$; hopes for peace: $b = 0.24$, $p < .05$; Semitic categorization: $b = 0.43$, $p < .001$; Abrahamic categorization: $b = 0.37$, $p < .001$). In other words, the post-intervention round was shown to be higher on average in key perceptions. However, sensitivity to inequality remained unchanged, across all participants. We found greater hopes for peace among the PSTs in comparison to high school students ($b = 0.67$, $p < .001$). Hopes for peace were lower among those who identified themselves as Palestinians ($b = -0.36$, $p < .01$). Two more effects were found to associate with hopes for peace; higher (self-reported) grades in Hebrew were positively associated with hopes for peace as well as self-efficacy in Hebrew ($b = 0.17$, $p < .05$; $b = 0.28$, $p < .01$, respectively). Self-efficacy in Hebrew was found to positively explain promotion of Arab citizens (advancing democracy), Semitic categorization, and Abrahamic categorization ($b = 0.44$, $p < .001$; $b = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$; $b = 0.26$, $p < .05$; respectively), which suggested that stronger self-efficacy in Hebrew was associated with higher levels of these outcomes. We found that those who identified themselves as Palestinians were more likely to sense inequality, but less likely to endorse Semitic and Abrahamic categorization ($b = 0.51$, $p < .01$; $b = -0.38$, $p < .01$; $b = -0.50$, $p < .05$, respectively). Starting Hebrew studies at a higher grade was associated with higher sensitivity to inequality ($b = 0.29$, $p < .05$).

Table 4. GEE regression analyses to explain various outcomes and main and interaction effects.

	Advancing Democracy	Hope for Peace	Sense of Inequality	Semitic Categorization	Abrahamic Categorization
Main Effects					
Time (Post = 1)	0.36 ***	0.24 *	−0.19	0.43 ***	0.37 ***
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.07)	(0.09)
Group (PST = 1)	0.15	0.67 ***	0.08	−0.11	0.23
	(0.16)	(0.14)	(0.17)	(0.15)	(0.20)
Identity Palestinian = 1	0.26 ~	−0.36 **	0.51 **	−0.38 **	−0.50 *
	(0.15)	(0.12)	(0.17)	(0.14)	(0.21)
Age of starting Hebrew studies	0.03	0.17 *	0.29 *	−0.03	0.03
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.15)
Meet Jews often	−0.001	0.05	−0.04	0.05	−0.05
	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.22)	(0.17)	(0.28)
Self-efficacy in Hebrew	0.44 ***	0.28 **	0.12	0.23 *	0.26 *
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.14)	(0.10)	(0.13)
Interactions with time	Wald	Wald	Wald	Wald	Wald
Time × Education Group	0.88	2.01	6.65 **	3.24 ~	3.60 ~
Time × Identity	0.37	16.46 ***	2.78 ~	1.27	7.78 **
Time × Heb. Grade	0.11	1.89	2.79	1.49	1.27
Time × Meet Jews	0.00	5.07 *	0.08	0.09	0.54
Time × Hebrew Self efficacy	0.33	0.25	0.02	0.64	0.01

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ~ $p < .10$; standard errors are in parentheses.

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Interaction Analysis: As for the interaction effects, we found time by PST group to affect sensitivity to inequality and Semitic and Abrahamic categorization (Wald's = 6.65, $p < .01$; Wald's 3.24, $p < .10$; Wald's 3.60, $p < .10$, respectively). Follow-up analyses were performed to assess the sources of these interactions (Figures 1–3), namely, a test of, for example, whether one group made greater progress than the other at the outcome level. Interestingly, Figure 1 shows that sensitivity to inequality dropped among the PSTs, whereas this sensitivity increased for the high school students. PSTs who identified as Israeli Arabs kept their hopes for peace at a relatively constant level, whereas those identified as Palestinians showed an increase in their hopes for peace.

Figure 2 shows that high school students increased their use of Semitic categorization, while for the PSTs, this increase was much lower and similarly with respect to the Abrahamic categorization (see Figure 3), yet the end point rather than the starting point was similar for both education levels. Three interactions with time were found regarding identity, an interaction in explaining hopes for peace conditioned by perceived identity, Israeli Arab versus Palestinian (Wald's = 16.46, $p < .001$), an interaction in explaining sensitivity to inequality (Wald's = 2.78, $p < .10$), and in explaining the use of Abrahamic categorization (Wald's = 7.78, $p < .01$). Figures 4–6 present the sources of these interactions, respectively. In Figure 4, hope for peace remained unchanged for those who identified themselves as Israeli Arabs, but for those who identified themselves as Palestinians, these hopes grew with time. We found that for those who identified themselves as Palestinians, sensitivity to inequality decreased with time but was lower in both time periods for the Israeli Arabs (Figure 5). Finally, in Figure 6, the increase in the levels of Abrahamic categorization was relatively higher among those identified as Palestinians. Intensity of meeting with Jews was found to indicate hope for peace as well (Wald's = 5.07, $p < .05$). Figure 7 shows that these hopes remained unchanged among students who met with Jews intensively.

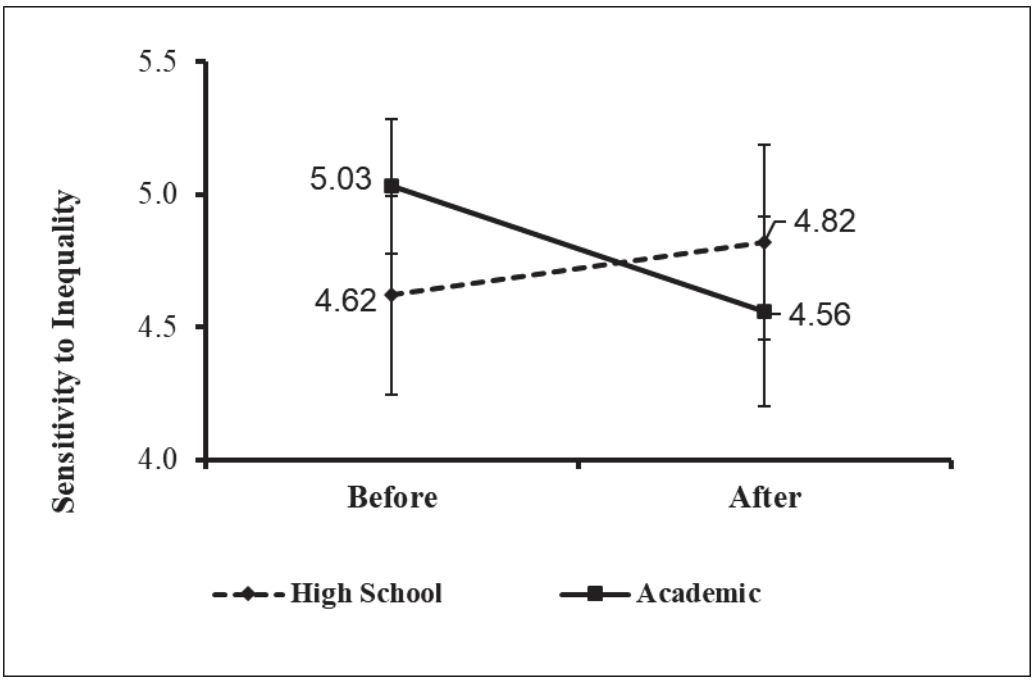


Figure 1. Group by time on sensitivity to inequality: contrasting the decrease among PSTs with the increase among HSSs.

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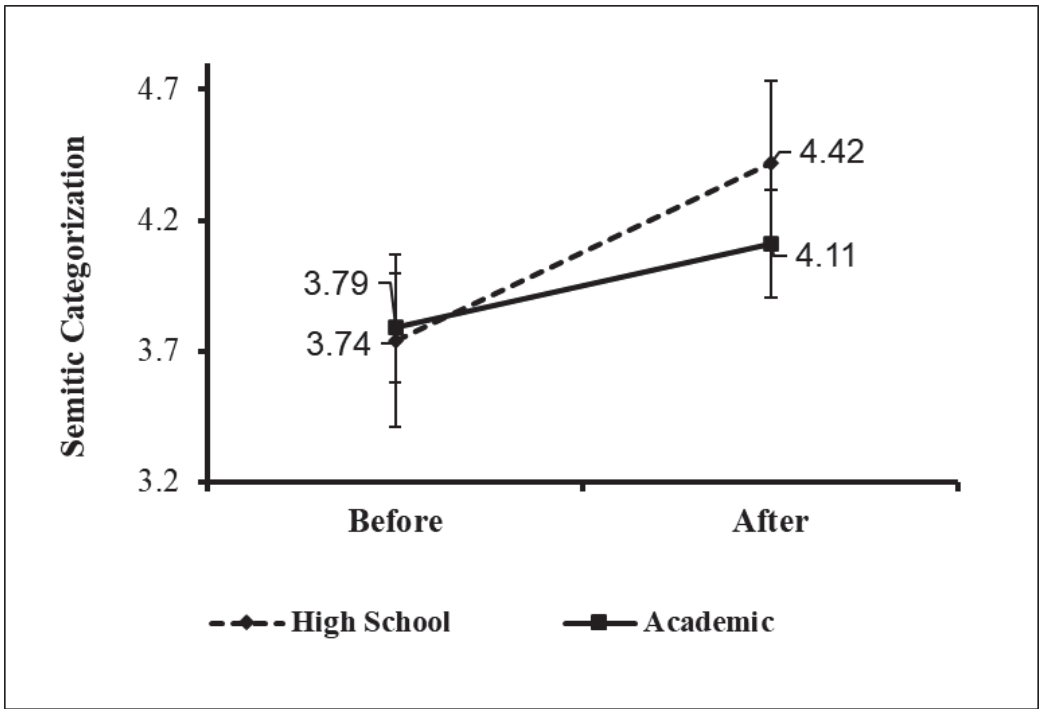


Figure 2. Changes in semitic categorization scores over time comparing high school students and pre-service teachers.

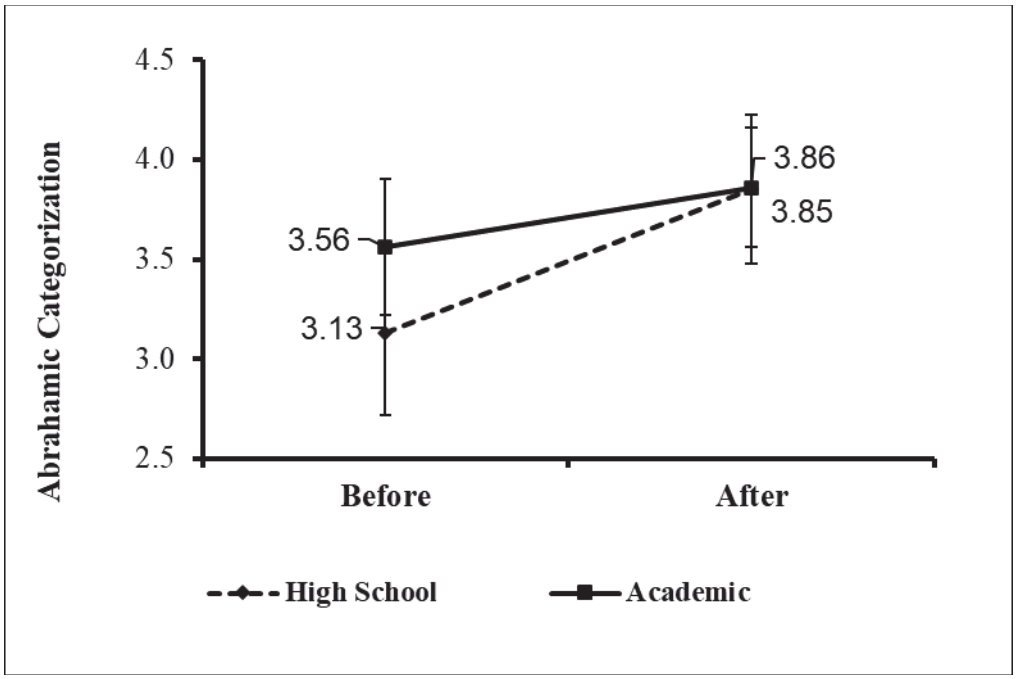


Figure 3. Education level by time effect on Abrahamic categorization.

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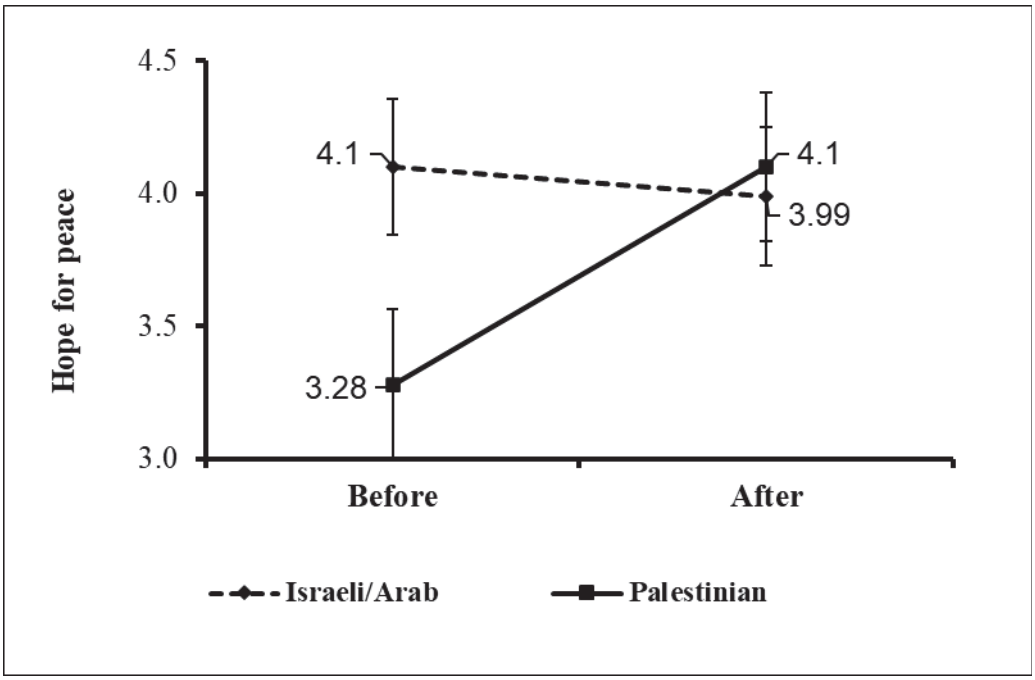


Figure 4. Longitudinal trends in hope for peace: divergent trajectories between Palestinian and Israeli Arab identifiers.

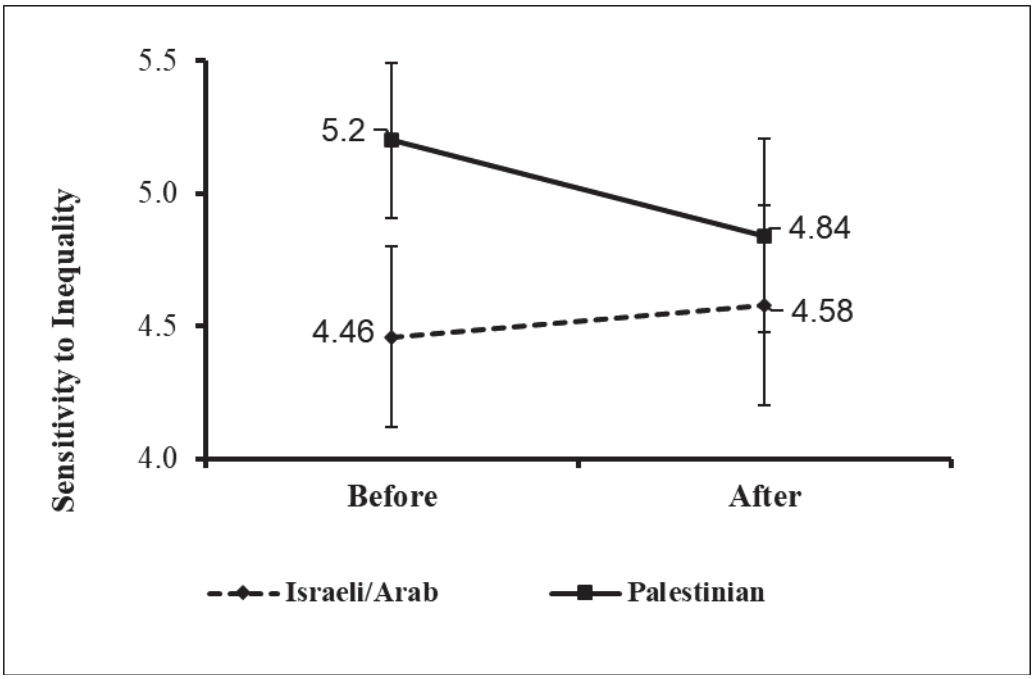


Figure 5. Identity by time effect on sensitivity to inequality.

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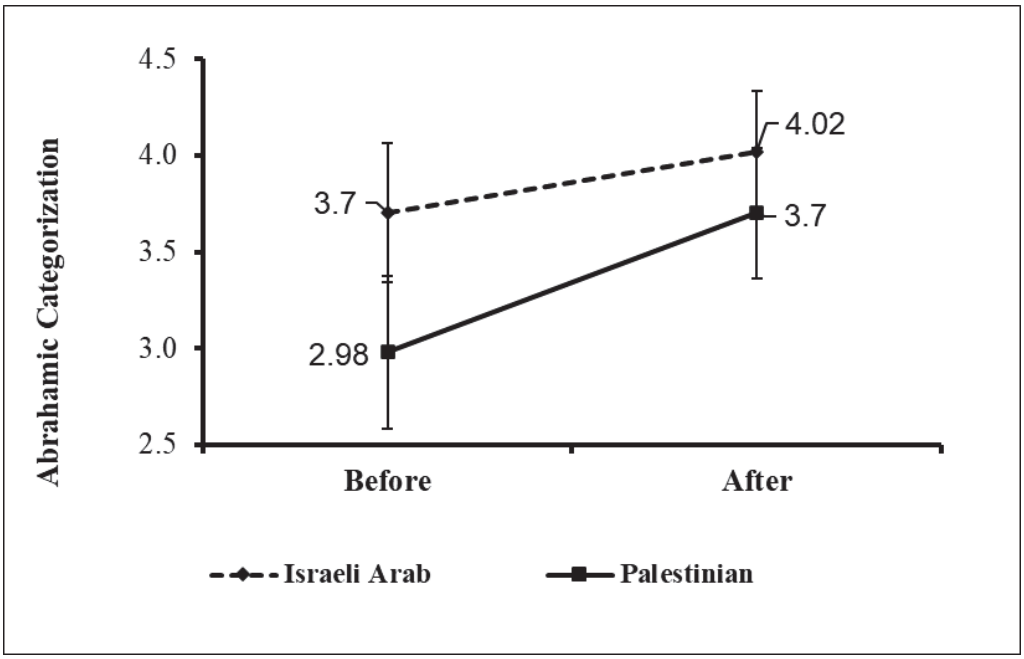


Figure 6. Longitudinal increase in Abrahamic categorization: a comparison between Palestinian and Israeli Arab identifiers.

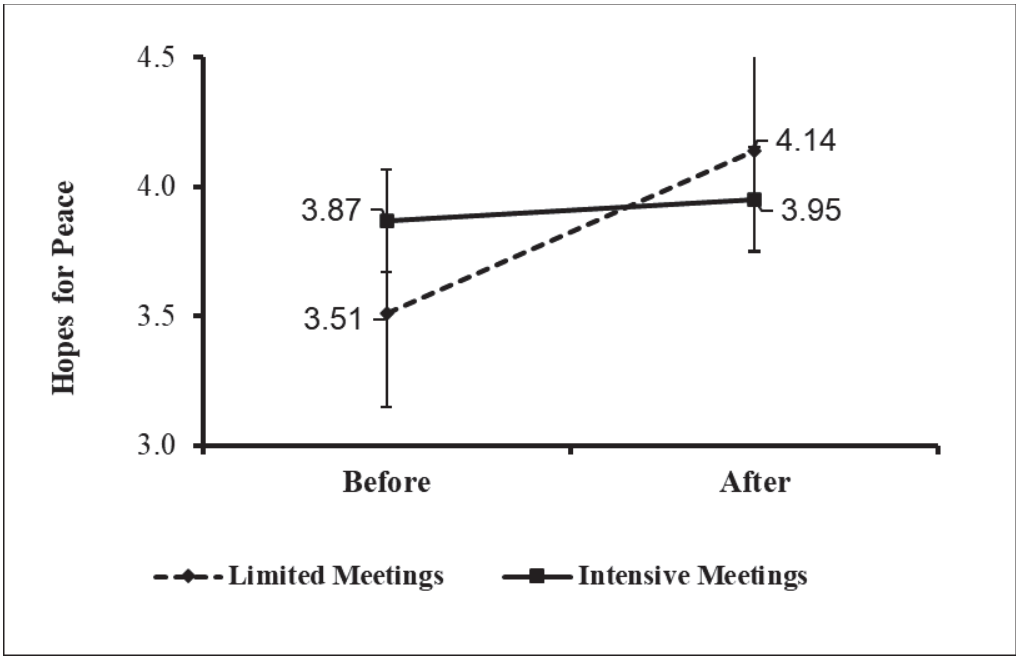


Figure 7. Intensity of meeting by time effect on hopes for peace.

5. Discussion

The analysis of main effects provides robust evidence supporting the core hypothesis that a focused language intervention, acting as structured intergroup contact (Bandes-Yakov & Makhoul, 2013; Donitsa-Scmidt et al., 2004), successfully fosters positive attitudes even during a period of acute conflict. The significant positive time effect across four of the five outcomes, Preference for Democratic Influence Strategies (advancing democracy), hope for peace, Semitic categorization, and Abrahamic categorization, demonstrates that learning Hebrew for instrumental purposes can initiate a shift toward affective and ideological openness.

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The finding that all measured indicators of reconciliation and constructive political engagement increased over time is particularly noteworthy given that the data collection spanned a period of national trauma and high polarization after 7 October 2023 (Reis & Wald, 2024; aChord, 2024). This suggests that structured educational programs based on mutual, practical goals provide a powerful mechanism for improving intergroup attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

A detailed examination of the covariates highlights the role of perceived individual competence in relating to generalized attitude shifts. Self-efficacy in Hebrew was positively associated with all four variables that showed a positive time effect: democratic strategies, hope for peace, Semitic categorization, and Abrahamic categorization.

This pattern validates the instrumental-to-intrinsic hypothesis (Charamba, 2022; Gindi & Erlich Ron, 2025). When participants achieve linguistic proficiency, the internal conflict between the instrumental necessity of Hebrew and its symbolic political burden is partly reconciled (Amara, 2016; Klar et al., 2020). The acquisition of skill helps mediate the perceived function of the language from an oppressive requirement into a personal asset, thereby reducing alienation and increasing openness to the outgroup (Raoofi et al., 2012). This move can drive the shift toward perceiving commonality and supporting democratic engagement.

Interestingly, the overall positive effect of the intervention stands in contrast to the finding that intensive, unstructured meetings between Arabs and Jews did not significantly influence hope for peace over time. This comparison reinforces a core tenet of contact theory in conflict settings: the sheer quantity of contact is insufficient; the quality of the interaction, specifically when focused on achieving shared goals and building competence, is the critical factor for producing meaningful attitude change (Maoz, 2011).

The most complex and significant findings arise from the Time x Identity interaction effects, demonstrating that the political positioning of the participants contributes to the efficacy and magnitude of the intervention. Individuals identifying as Palestinian exhibited significantly lower baseline attitudes: lower hope for peace and lower endorsement of both Semitic and Abrahamic categorization. This baseline resistance is consistent with literature on Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) conflict, where strong minority identity (Palestinian) is linked to political polarization (Hong et al., 2000; Simon & Grabow, 2010).

However, the post-intervention results show that individuals identifying as Palestinian exhibited the most significant attitudinal change over time. Hope for peace remained unchanged for Israeli Arab identifiers but grew significantly for Palestinian identifiers. Similarly, the increase in Abrahamic categorization was relatively higher among those identified as Palestinian. It is important to note, however, that these identity categories are self-reported and likely fluid, particularly in the volatile post-7 October context. Rather than viewing 'Palestinian' or 'Israeli-Arab' as fixed traits, these findings suggest that the intervention interacts differently with participants' current political orientation, offering a pathway to inclusion even for those prioritizing their national identity. This suggests that the structured, goal-oriented nature of the language intervention was associated with overcoming the initial layer of political resistance, despite the contemporary polarization. The mechanism here appears to align with the dual identity model, where a successful, pragmatic superordinate connection (language competence) allows for more integration of previously conflicting identities.

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Furthermore, the data reveal nuances in how commonality frames are adopted. While HSS, relative to PSTs, showed a steeper increase in adopting Semitic categorization and Abrahamic categorization, the magnitude of change was greatest among Palestinian identifiers specifically for Abrahamic categorization. This is notable because Semitic categorization, based on linguistic roots (the intervention's focus), was hypothesized to be the less threatening bridge. The pronounced change in Abrahamic categorization suggests that once linguistic proficiency lowers the barrier to affective trust, more difficult to bridge frameworks of commonality (shared religious ancestry) become accessible, potentially leading to a more comprehensive recategorization among the most initially resistant individuals.

The contrast between the PSTs and the HSSs holds significant implications, grounded in the importance of teacher colleges as multicultural sites w (aChord, 2023). These colleges provide a rare space for institutionalized contact that is endorsed by authority figures, a key condition for reducing prejudice (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). For the PSTs, the college environment functions not just as a place of learning, but as an anticipatory socialization stage where they begin to adopt the identity of a future state agent (Paul-Binyamin & Haj-Yehia, 2019). Unlike the HSSs, who view Hebrew primarily through a personal or political lens, PSTs are actively constructing a teacher professional identity that requires them to integrate their personal values with the institutional norms of the Israeli education system. This professional identity acts as a stabilizing superordinate identity (e.g., "we are all educators"), which can override narrower ethno-national divisions and mitigate the sense of intergroup threat (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2019). In this context, the divergent patterns observed between the two cohorts regarding sensitivity to inequality (Figure 1) necessitate a more rigorous conceptual distinction between system-justifying adaptation and heightened political awareness. For the PSTs, the significant decrease in perceived inequality may be interpreted through the lens of system-justifying adaptation. As these young adults undergo professional socialization within a state-sanctioned institutional framework, their emerging identity as future state agents likely prompts a shift toward institutional alignment (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2019).This process, coupled with increased professional agency and a belief in social mobility, may temporarily obscure the visibility of structural barriers as they prepare to navigate the system from within. Conversely, the HSS cohort, lacking this institutionalized professional pathway, appears to utilize their increased linguistic proficiency to develop a 'critical consciousness' or heightened political awareness (Bonotti & Willoughby, 2022; Shohami & Tenenbaum, 2018). For these adolescents, the Hebrew language serves as a tool to identify and articulate structural disadvantages rather than to navigate them through professional integration. This divergence underscores how the same linguistic asset can lead to either institutional adaptation or political sensitization depending on the individual's developmental and professional context.

This finding is further complicated by the positive association between a higher grade in Hebrew and higher sensitivity to inequality. These results indicate that acquiring the language of the dominant group acts as a double-edged sword. For the PSTs, who are predominantly Israeli Arab identifiers and focused on immediate vocational advancement, language mastery reinforces their ability to navigate the system, potentially reducing their perceived sense of institutional barriers. In their context, the idea "I can speak Hebrew well, therefore I can succeed," mitigates feelings of systemic disadvantage.

Conversely, for the younger HSS cohort, improved linguistic proficiency provides a clearer lens through which to perceive and articulate the persistent structural disadvantages and discrimination faced by the Palestinian citizens (Zeedan & Hogan, 2022). Language skills, while instrumental for mobility, heighten political awareness, aligning with the literature that suggests high proficiency in a majority language can empower minorities to better analyze and critique systemic inequalities. This political sensitization is likely

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amplified by the data collection occurring immediately after the 7 October escalation, where conflict brought intergroup hostility and asymmetrical power relations into sharp focus, bolstering the adolescents' developing political consciousness (Amara, 2016).

6. Limitations and Future Research

The acute political timing of the data collection represents an external validity limitation. The study was conducted in the aftermath of the 7 October 2023 conflict escalation. This "history" effect likely magnified the salience of identity, political issues, and perceived threat, potentially generating volatile or amplified attitudinal responses that may not be sustainable or generalizable to peacetime conditions. Notwithstanding this, it is difficult to find peaceful times in Israel, without serious security events.

Second, the interpretation of these results must be balanced against several methodological constraints inherent to the study design. First, the research relies on a quasi-experimental, non-equivalent control group design. The two primary groups, HSSs and PSTs, differed significantly on critical baseline variables, including age, gender, and identity. Although GEE statistical modeling controls for these measured baseline differences (group effects), the lack of randomization makes the study susceptible to threats to internal validity such as selection bias and differential maturation effects. Furthermore, given the quasi-experimental nature of the design, causal terms such as 'effect' or 'impact' should be interpreted with caution. The observed changes reflect associations over time within the context of the intervention, rather than definitive causal outcomes derived from randomized trials.

Additionally, the findings regarding sensitivity to inequality must be interpreted with specific caution. This construct was measured using a two-item scale which exhibited relatively modest internal reliability (α = .57 at Time 1 and α = .65 at Time 2). Given these psychometric constraints and the overlapping conceptualizations of political awareness, critical consciousness, and perceived marginalization, these results should be viewed as exploratory. Future research employing more robust, multi-item scales is necessary to definitively distinguish between enduring ideological shifts and situational adaptations.

Finally, as with many studies in social psychology, all dependent variables relied on self-reported attitudinal measures. This introduces the potential risk of Common Method Variance (CMV). However, it is worth noting that the primary findings of this study rely on complex interaction effects (e.g., Time $\times$ Identity $\times$ Group) rather than simple correlations. Interaction effects are generally less likely to be artifacts of CMV than main effects are (Siemsen et al., 2010), lending some support to the validity of the interpretations.

Future Research Directions

Based on the complex pattern of results, future research should focus on three key directions. While this study suggests Semitic framing is effective, experimental research is needed to establish causality. Future studies should use a fully randomized experimental design to explicitly manipulate the framing of shared identity (e.g., Semitic linguistic roots vs. Abrahamic religious roots vs. neutral control) immediately prior to structured language contact interventions. This would test whether the linguistic, pragmatic frame offers a unique advantage in lowering affective threat and promoting successful dual identity integration.

Future studies would do well to track the high school cohort as they transition into teacher training and the workforce, broadening the scope to monitor the dynamic interplay between Hebrew proficiency and identity formation. A central question is how high linguistic self-efficacy interacts with Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) over time: does this combination empower constructive collective action, or does the intersection of competence and realized exclusion eventually drive participants toward withdrawal, apathy, or support for political radicalization (Simon et al., 2013).

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7. Conclusions

This study provides evidence that strategic, instrumental interventions focusing on Hebrew language acquisition can serve as a resilient mechanism for improving intergroup attitudes among Arab citizens of Israel, even in the highly strained socio-political climate following the acute conflict escalation in late 2023. The significant overall positive shift in hope for peace, endorsement of democratic strategies, and adoption of common ancestry frames (Semitic and Abrahamic) confirms the change hypothesized under the instrumental-to-intrinsic pathway (Charamba, 2022; Gindi & Erlich Ron, 2025). The data demonstrate that increasing self-efficacy in the dominant language correlates with a reduction in threat and an increased willingness to engage with the outgroup constructively.

However, the findings reveal that the change is neither uniform nor politically neutral. The observed link between higher Hebrew proficiency and increased sensitivity to inequality underscores a divergence in how linguistic assets are utilized across different developmental stages. For the PSTs, mastery of the language appears to function primarily as a vehicle for professional mobility (Abbas & Mendel, 2022; Manor & Binhas, 2023), effectively diminishing their perception of structural barriers. Conversely, for the HSS cohort, this same competence seems to promote more critique, demonstrating the gaps between them and the Jewish population and sharpening their ability to identify and articulate systemic discrimination. Thus, proficiency in the dominant language can also serve as a potential factor in heightened political consciousness, particularly among adolescents navigating a polarized environment.

The theoretical implication is clear: language interventions, rooted in functional needs, offer a low-threat entry point for initiating dialogue and reconciliation. The practical imperative is that educational policy would do well to leverage this instrumental success, pairing language training with programs that guide the resulting political awareness toward empowered, constructive civil engagement. In this way, functional integration can be translated into resilient civic participation, laying the groundwork for a more robust and equitable shared future (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2019).

The implications of this study extend beyond language acquisition to the fundamental role of teacher education in a conflict zone. In the deeply divided landscape of Israeli society, teacher training colleges serve as a rare and vital arena for cross-cultural engagement (aChord, 2023; Paul-Binyamin & Haj-Yehia, 2019). For PSTs, this training experience serves as a powerful crucible, forging a professional identity that acts as a secure anchor and establishes a profound sense of connection to their future role. This newly acquired professional self, complemented by the concurrent mastery of language skills, offers a constructive pathway to mitigate the complexities of their BII (e.g., Erlich Ron, 2025).Consequently, these academic institutions must transcend their traditional mandates to function as active cultural mediators (Shapira & Amzalag, 2021), ensuring that language training serves not merely as a technical skill, but as a mechanism for negotiating status and belonging within the state (Yablon et al., 2022).

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by Institutional Review Board of Beit Berl college (protocol code 129-2022 and date of approval: 30 March 2025).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy restrictions, as they contain sensitive information regarding participants' identities and political attitudes. Data may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to approval by the institutional ethics committee.

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Article

Influencing Factors and Mechanisms of the Construction of Practical Knowledge for Chinese as a Foreign Language Intern Teachers in an Online Internship Program: A Qualitative Study Based on Key Events

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Abstract

A persistent challenge in teacher education is that intern teachers often struggle to effectively apply theoretical knowledge to classroom practice. While constructing practical knowledge is key to bridging this gap, current research has paid insufficient attention to the dynamic processes and triggering mechanisms through which such knowledge develops among Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) intern teachers during the internship stage. This study focuses on the "key events" encountered by 7 CFL intern teachers participating in an online internship program at a teacher education institution in Northeast China, through 83 class observations and semi-structured interviews. Using qualitative analysis methods, it explores the content, influencing factors, and mechanisms of practical knowledge construction. The results show that CFL intern teachers generated seven types of practical knowledge. Among them, teaching belief knowledge was the most frequently coded category (20.5%), while teaching context knowledge was the least frequently constructed (6.7%)—a pattern largely attributable to the online teaching environment in which all internships were conducted. Negative key events outnumber positive events in terms of quantity, depth of reflection, and persistence of impact. Reflection is the core mediating mechanism connecting key events and knowledge construction, but the "reflection-in-action" ability of intern teachers is weaker than that of expert teachers. This study reveals the dynamics and cross-cultural particularity of practical knowledge construction for CFL intern teachers, providing empirical evidence for optimizing teacher education internship training.

Keywords: teaching internship stage; Chinese as a foreign language teacher; practical knowledge; key events

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, teacher knowledge has been the core topic in teacher education research. The research focus has shifted from the classification of teacher knowledge to teacher thinking, and finally returned to the practical dimension of teacher knowledge. For teacher professional development, practical knowledge—that is, the highly personalized and experiential knowledge formed by teachers in specific teaching situations—plays a crucial role (Elbaz, 1981; Shulman, 1987). Therefore, it is particularly important to

cultivate such knowledge during the internship stage for teachers about to enter the profession. However, researchers have long pointed out that the difficulty of integrating theory and practice is a fundamental dilemma faced by novice teachers (Grossman, 2007; Korthagen, 2010). When teachers encounter specific problems in teaching practice, they often feel confused and believe that they are not yet ready to meet the challenges of the profession (Grossman et al., 2009; Meijer, 2010). The pressure in the early stages of teaching may lead to job burnout, even in the early stages of the internship (Eisenschmidt et al., 2013). A considerable number of teachers choose to leave after the first few years due to heavy emotional burdens and lack of support (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). To improve teacher retention rates and teaching quality, educational researchers attach great importance to internship experiences and attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice by supporting the construction of practical knowledge. The main way to promote teacher continuous development is reflection. Reflection not only includes the review and analysis of teaching practice, but also involves in-depth thinking about personal educational concepts, teaching methods, and their effects (Korthagen, 2004; Toom, 2012). However, in practice, many teachers often limit reflection to problem aspects (such as students' learning difficulties, classroom management problems), while neglecting the positive aspects of practice, such as successful teaching cases or the sense of achievement brought by students' active participation. More importantly, regarding how to assist novice teachers in extracting "key events" from teaching practice and how these events affect the construction of their knowledge, there is still limited understanding. "Key events" refer to those ordinary daily events that, after reflection, have a profound impact on teachers' thinking and behavior (Tripp, 1994). Existing research acknowledges that key events have the potential to promote teachers' reflection and professional growth, but most studies only regard them as empirical materials, fail to systematically integrate them with specific learning theories (such as transformative learning, reflective practice), and fail to deeply reveal the internal mechanisms by which key events trigger the generation and reconstruction of practical knowledge.

In this article, "Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) teacher" refers specifically to teachers who teach Chinese to international students in China, as opposed to those teaching abroad. This study takes master's students of the Foreign Chinese Language program as the research subjects. After completing the courses, they go to specific foreign universities for internships. The internships focus on theory, case studies, and simulated classrooms in the first year, and real classroom teaching in batches in the second year, with the teaching objects being international students studying in China for undergraduate degrees. Understanding the factors that affect the construction of practical knowledge by novice teachers is crucial for their future teaching (Hanna et al., 2020; X.-Q. Wang et al., 2018). However, although research on teacher practical knowledge has begun to form a system, studies that start from "key events" to explore the construction of practical knowledge and its influencing factors are still few. To fill this gap, this study investigates the internship teachers participating in the PEI project (Preparatory Education for International Students Program) at a teacher education institution in Northeast China, focusing on the "key events" that have a significant impact on teachers in the real classroom, and explores the content, influencing factors, and mechanisms of the construction of practical knowledge by teachers during the one-and-a-half-year internship. This study aims to explore the following questions:

(1) What are the contents of the practical knowledge construction of Chinese as a foreign language teacher?
(2) What are the factors influencing the construction of practical knowledge of Chinese as a foreign language teacher?

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(3) What is the mechanism that affects the construction of practical knowledge of Chinese as a foreign language teacher?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teacher's Practical Knowledge

Elbaz (1981) was the first to propose "teacher practical knowledge", defining it as highly individualized and experiential knowledge formed by teachers in specific teaching contexts, covering five aspects: subject matter, curriculum, teaching methods, self-awareness, and school background. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) further emphasized its "embedded in practice" tacit nature. Shulman (1986, 1987) proposed seven types of teacher knowledge, among which "subject matter teaching knowledge" is regarded as the key to distinguishing experts from novices. Fenstermacher (1994) further problematised the distinction between propositional knowledge and practical knowledge, arguing that teachers' knowledge cannot be reduced to formal propositions. Verloop et al. (2001) pointed out that various types of knowledge are intertwined in practice and deeply influenced by specific contexts. Korthagen (2004) emphasised that practical knowledge is not merely theory application, but a holistic integration of teachers' beliefs, experiences, and contextual understanding.

Existing studies have shown that the construction of teacher practical knowledge is a dynamic and gradual process, with reflection playing a core role (Schön, 1983; Korthagen, 2004). However, most existing research focuses on experienced teachers and pays insufficient attention to the internship stage, especially for foreign language teachers. Moreover, although "key events" are recognized to have the potential to promote reflection, most studies have failed to integrate them with transformative learning or reflective practice theories systematically. Based on the above, this study focuses on the key events of foreign language internship teachers, exploring the content, influencing factors, and internal mechanisms of their practical knowledge construction.

2.2. Factors Influencing Teachers' Practical Knowledge

Previous studies have shown that the construction of teachers' practical knowledge is influenced by multiple factors. Glatthorn (1995) summarized these factors into three aspects: factors related to the teachers themselves (such as cognitive development, career development, self-development, motivation, etc.), factors related to the working environment, and factors related to special activities that promote teachers' development. Lampert (2010) pointed out that pre-service training and on-the-job training are important external conditions that affect practical knowledge.

Further, researchers have classified the influencing factors into internal factors and external factors. Internal factors include the teachers' personal life experiences, teaching experience, reflection ability, professional motivation, teaching beliefs, etc.; external factors cover school management, school culture, educational policies, social expectations, etc., as synthesised in the literature on teacher professional development (e.g., Glatthorn, 1995; J. Wang, 2004; Zhao, 2011). In addition, the experiences during the student period (including observational learning as a student) and the course settings in pre-service training also have a profound impact on the initial construction of teachers' practical knowledge.

It is worth noting that "key events" as a special external stimulus are considered to be able to have a significant promoting or reconstructing effect on teachers' practical knowledge through the mediating role of their reflection (Tripp, 1994). However, existing research mostly focuses on listing the influencing factors, rarely delving into the interaction mechanisms among these factors, and lacks a systematic examination of this special group of foreign language teaching interns.

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Based on the above, this study builds upon the existing classification framework of practical knowledge. Through a detailed analysis of key events during the internship stage, we aim to further explore the internal and external factors that affect the construction of practical knowledge among CFL intern teachers, as well as the interaction between these factors.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

3.1. Teacher Cognition Theory

Teacher cognition theory posits that teachers do not simply "apply" the acquired theoretical knowledge to teaching practice; instead, they are involved in a complex and context-specific cognitive-driven process (Borg, 2006). The classroom decisions of teachers are influenced by a multitude of factors such as their personal teaching theories, the way they represent subject knowledge, the classroom environment, student feedback, and unexpected events. In other words, a teacher's teaching behavior is the result of the continuous interaction between their internal cognition and the external context. This perspective is particularly applicable to understanding novice teachers—they have not yet formed stable practical knowledge, and their teaching behaviors are more susceptible to the impact and reshaping of "unexpected events" in the classroom.

3.2. Theoretical Integration

As mentioned earlier, teacher's practical knowledge is a highly personalized and experiential knowledge system formed by teachers in specific teaching situations (Elbaz, 1981), while teacher cognition theory focuses on how teachers perceive, interpret, make decisions and adjust their teaching behaviors in complex classroom environments (Borg, 2006). The two concepts are not opposing or parallel, but rather a relationship between process and result, mechanism and product: Teacher cognition is the psychological process and dynamic mechanism for the construction of practical knowledge, while practical knowledge is the relatively stable cognitive structure that accumulates and stabilizes during this process.

Specifically, teacher cognition theory provides three key mechanisms for understanding the construction of practical knowledge. First, selective attention: In the classroom, teachers encounter a vast amount of information, and their existing beliefs and knowledge structures will guide them to prioritize which events to focus on (such as a student's unexpected answer or a classroom chaos). This selective attention determines which "key events" can enter the reflection process. Second, the explanatory framework: how teachers interpret the same event depends on their existing cognitive schemas. For example, when two trainee teachers face the same unresponsive student question, one might attribute it to their own teaching incompetence, while the other might attribute it to cross-cultural communication differences, which will lead to completely different directions of knowledge reconstruction. Third, memory and integration: The event experiences that have been reflected and processed will be incorporated into long-term memory and undergo assimilation or accommodation with existing knowledge, ultimately forming new practical knowledge (Piaget, 1970).

In this study, we use the teacher cognition theory as an integration framework, regarding "key events" as the stimulus source triggering cognitive reconstruction, reflecting practice as the core way of cognitive processing, and changes in practical knowledge as the result of cognitive reconstruction. This integration avoids regarding the construction of practical knowledge as a simple "accumulation of experience" or "application of theory", but reveals the complex cognitive processing process involved. The theoretical framework in Figure 1 is precisely constructed based on this integration.

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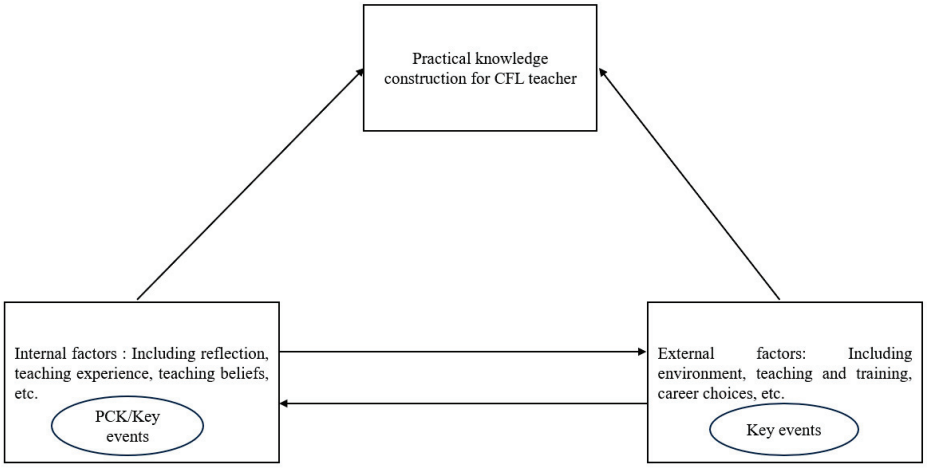


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of the Study.

To avoid confusion of concepts, this study makes the following clear distinction between "teacher cognition" and "practical knowledge": Teacher cognition refers to the dynamic psychological process of perception, interpretation, decision-making, and reflection in the classroom context (Borg, 2006); Practical knowledge is the relatively stable knowledge structure accumulated and stabilized during this process (Elbaz, 1981). In short, teacher cognition is "how to think", and practical knowledge is "what is known". Although the two are closely related, they should not be used interchangeably. In this study, "constructing practical knowledge" refers to the change in the knowledge structure, and "cognitive process" refers to the psychological mechanism that leads to this change. In the following text, this distinction will be strictly followed.

3.3. Key Events as Catalysts: Supplementary Theoretical Perspectives

While teacher cognition theory provides the core analytical framework for this study, two additional theoretical perspectives—transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and reflective practice (Schön, 1983)—serve as supplementary lenses for understanding the specific mechanisms through which key events trigger cognitive change.

Mezirow's (1991) concept of the "disorienting dilemma" helps explain why negative key events are particularly effective in prompting deep reflection: they challenge teachers' existing meaning structures and force a fundamental reorganisation of beliefs. In this study, when intern teachers encountered teaching failures, cross-cultural misunderstandings, or classroom management crises that contradicted their prior assumptions, they were compelled to question their existing beliefs and reconstruct their practical knowledge—a process that aligns with Mezirow's transformative learning framework.

Schön's (1983) distinction between "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action" provides a vocabulary for describing the different temporal modes of teacher reflection observed in our data. For instance, teachers' immediate adjustments during classroom teaching (such as modifying questioning strategies when students showed disinterest) exemplify "reflection-in-action," while their retrospective analysis of critical incidents after class (such as re-evaluating their teaching presuppositions) exemplifies "reflection-on-action."

However, these perspectives are used as interpretive tools rather than as independent theoretical frameworks. The integrative lens remains teacher cognition theory (Borg, 2006), which subsumes these mechanisms within its broader account of how teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and contextual factors interact in the construction of practical knowledge. In other words, we draw on Mezirow and Schön selectively and strategically to illuminate specific aspects of the knowledge construction process, but we do not treat them as parallel or competing frameworks. Figure 1 illustrates this integrated theoretical structure.

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4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

This study focused on 7 postgraduate students majoring in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. Their internship period ranged from January 2021 to July 2022. All seven respondents had bachelor's degrees in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language or related fields, and none had prior teaching experience in primary or secondary schools. They all directly entered the postgraduate program from their undergraduate studies (the second-year students were admitted as L2 teachers). They were selected based on the principle of maximizing information. As shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research object.

Participants	Internship-Duration	Teach Courses
Teacher W1	January 2021–July 2022	Cultural courses, head teacher
Teacher H	January 2021–July 2022	One-on-one tutor sessions
Teacher L2	January 2021–July 2022	Science and technology Chinese course, head teacher
Teacher M	January 2022–July 2022	HSK course
Teacher L1	January 2021–July 2022	Vocabulary and reading course, head teacher
Teacher W2	January 2021–June 2022	Practical Chinese language course, head teacher
Teacher Z	July 2021–July 2022	One-on-one tutor sessions

4.2. Data Collection

This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of Northeast Normal University (Approval Number: 202402037). All participants provided written informed consent prior to data collection and were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. All identifiable personal information was anonymised during transcription and analysis, with participants assigned codes (W1, H, L2, M, L1, W2, Z) and any identifying details deleted or replaced with generalised descriptions.

This study explores "key events" in the teaching practices of trainee teachers, some of which are negative experiences (such as teaching failures, classroom conflicts, professional frustration, etc.). To minimize the psychological risks of the participants, the researchers maintained a neutral and non-judgmental attitude during the interviews, using open-ended questions (such as "Please describe an impressive classroom event") instead of leading questions (such as "Have you ever experienced teaching failure"). The researchers clearly informed the participants that they could skip any questions they did not want to answer and could terminate the interview at any time. During the transcription and reporting stages, further obfuscation was carried out for potentially identifying the identity of the participants in sensitive situations (for example, "A student from country X openly questioned my teaching in the classroom" was changed to "A student from a foreign country raised an opinion in the classroom"), ensuring that even if negative events were cited, it would not be possible to trace back to a specific teacher, student, or teaching institution. All original data (audio files, transcription texts, observation notes, development curve charts) were stored in the researcher's personally encrypted computer, accessible only to the research team members. After the study, all data would be destroyed or permanently sealed as required by the ethics committee upon the conclusion of the study.

This study conducted non-participatory classroom observations of the courses of seven teachers at different internship stages (pre-internship, mid-internship, and post-internship), totaling 83 class hours of observation. The researchers informed the teachers in advance that the purpose of the observation was only for research, not for evaluation of teaching, and not to interfere with the teaching process, in order to minimize the Hawthorne effect. During the observation, a classroom observation record sheet was used, distinguishing

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between "objective description" (such as "The teacher paused for 5 s" "The student raised their hand to answer") and "subjective inference" (such as "The teacher seemed confused"), the latter needed to be marked and verified with the teacher in the subsequent interview. Electronic records were completed within 24 h after each observation, and an electronic file bag was established for classification storage. The classroom observation data was named "L-OB-12.08", that is, L teacher's classroom observation record on 8 December. After completing at least 3 classroom observations with each teacher, the researchers conducted the first semi-structured interview, which lasted for 45 to 60 min. The content covered the teacher's basic information, internship experiences, memorable classroom events, and reflections. The interview outline was designed based on the literature review and the initial classroom observation results. All questions were expressed in an open-ended manner. The interviews were conducted online (as all internships were conducted online), and the entire process was recorded. Subsequently, supplementary interviews were conducted for specific events in the classroom recordings and key events mentioned by the teachers in the first interview but not fully elaborated upon. Each interview lasted approximately 35 min and was conducted by the same researcher to maintain a consistent questioning style. After the supplementary interviews, the researchers showed Scherer (1999)'s sample development curve diagram (as shown in Figure 2) to each teacher and explained that the diagram was only for understanding purposes and was not required to be imitated. The teachers were asked to draw their own development curve based on their teaching mood, teaching ability, and changes in their own cognition throughout the internship period, and to mark the corresponding key events. After collecting the curve diagrams, the researchers used them as auxiliary materials for analyzing the mechanism of practical knowledge construction.

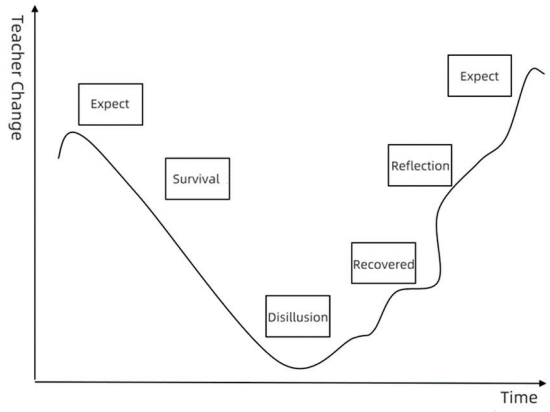


Figure 2. Sample of the development curve (Scherer, 1999).

All interview recordings were transcribed into text by a third-party transcription service company. The researchers then checked and corrected the transcribed text sentence by sentence. The interview data were named "H-I" (i.e., the first interview data of Teacher H); the supplementary interviews were named "H-SI". Approximately 50,000 words of analyzable text were obtained. All electronic materials (observation records, interview transcripts, photos of the curve diagrams) were stored on encrypted computers and archived by participant code.

4.3. Data Analysis

This study employed a qualitative analysis method, using NVivo 12 software to conduct three-level coding on the transcribed interview texts and classroom observation records. Specifically, we adopted a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the data. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for this study because it provides a flexible yet systematic method for

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identifying both explicit and implicit meanings in qualitative data, making it well-suited for exploring the complex and multifaceted nature of teachers' practical knowledge construction (Nowell et al., 2017). To operationalise the analytical process, we borrowed and adapted the coding terminology—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—from the Grounded Theory tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) as an analytical heuristic. This adaptation is not intended to claim a full Grounded Theory design, which would require theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis aimed at generating a substantive theory from the ground up (Charmaz, 2006). Instead, we use these coding procedures as systematic tools for data reduction, organisation, and theme development, which aligns with established practices in qualitative teacher cognition research (Borg, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).The epistemological stance underlying this analysis is interpretivist/constructivist: we assume that teachers' practical knowledge is socially constructed, contextually situated, and subjectively experienced, and that the researcher's role is to interpret participants' meaning-making processes rather than to uncover objective truths (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The specific steps are as follows.

Step 1: Primary coding (open coding). The researchers repeatedly read the interview texts and classroom observation notes from each teacher, marking the content fragments related to the teachers' practical knowledge construction from a "third-person" perspective-that is, approaching the data as an external analyst rather than as a participant, thereby maintaining analytical distance and minimising the influence of the researchers' own teaching experiences on the coding process. When coding, they used the respondents' original words or concise phrases that were close to the original meaning as free nodes. For example, Teacher H mentioned in the interview, "The online teaching software couldn't initiate the class, so I had to live-stream while teaching. Later, I learned to make appointments in advance," and the researcher marked this as "Adaptation of Online Teaching Technology". A total of 127 initial free nodes were generated.

The purpose of this step is to break down the raw interview data into discrete meaningful units and label them with preliminary concepts. This initial coding phase is exploratory and inductive-the researchers approach the data without preconceived categories, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the participants' own words. The goal is to identify all potentially relevant content fragments related to teachers' practical knowledge construction, ensuring that no meaningful data is overlooked at this early stage.

Step 2: Secondary coding (axial coding). Based on the primary coding, the researchers classified and merged similar or related free nodes. For example, "Adaptation of Online Teaching Technology", "Network congestion causing teaching interruption", "Making appointments in advance to avoid accidents" and other nodes were grouped under the secondary category "Online Teaching Environment". At the same time, they constantly compared the similarities and differences between different nodes and deleted those with low frequency (less than 2 mentions) or irrelevant to the research question. Eventually, 22 secondary categories were formed. (As shown in Table 2).

The purpose of this step is to organise and synthesise the large number of open codes by identifying relationships, patterns, and connections among them. Similar or related open codes are grouped together into more abstract conceptual categories. This step reduces data complexity and begins to establish a hierarchical structure. The goal is to move from fragmented descriptions to coherent conceptual groupings that capture recurring themes across participants.

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Table 2. Complete list of secondary categories (axial coding).

No.	Secondary Category (Axial Code)	Related Primary Coding Examples
1	Teaching style and characteristics	Self-perception of personality; teaching approach
2	Self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses	Recognition of teaching advantages; identification of limitations
3	Self-efficacy	Teaching confidence; sense of achievement; teaching anxiety
4	Course content knowledge	Understanding of different course types (Basic Chinese, Practical Chinese, etc.)
5	Pedagogical content knowledge	Matching teaching methods to content; adaptation to different courses
6	Linguistic knowledge (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar)	Application of textbook knowledge to real teaching; student-inspired explanations
7	Student background knowledge	Nationality; cultural background; language proficiency; prior learning experience
8	Student learning characteristics	Learning styles; motivation; classroom participation patterns
9	Student psychological states	Learning pressure; emotional needs; cross-cultural adaptation
10	Classroom teaching strategies	Questioning techniques; error correction methods; interactive activities
11	Classroom management strategies	Discipline management; student engagement; handling unexpected incidents
12	Student management strategies	Dealing with problem students; "three-level reporting system"; motivational strategies
13	Reflection on linguistic knowledge	Identifying gaps in content knowledge; post-lesson self-correction
14	Reflection on teaching practice	Reflecting on teaching style; teaching effectiveness; teaching adjustments
15	Self-reflection	Reflective diary; overall reflection; metacognitive awareness
16	Beliefs about linguistic and cultural knowledge	Importance of cultural teaching; beliefs about error correction; beliefs about theoretical knowledge
17	Beliefs about teaching	Equal opportunity beliefs; technology-supported teaching; teaching style; educational values
18	Beliefs about learning	Technology training; supportive learning environment
19	Beliefs about career	Reasons for choosing the major; future career plans
20	Online teaching environment	Technical challenges; platform proficiency; online classroom management
21	Offline teaching environment	Classroom atmosphere; non-verbal communication; seating arrangement
22	Socio-cultural context	Institutional requirements; cross-cultural sensitivity; cultural conflicts

Step 3: Tertiary coding (selective coding). Based on the existing classification of practical knowledge in the literature (Elbaz, 1981; Shulman, 1987) and the core themes repeatedly appearing in this study, the secondary categories were further summarized into higher-level tertiary categories. For example, "Online Teaching Environment", "School Culture", "Cross-cultural Interaction between Teachers and Students" and other secondary categories were classified under "Teaching Context Knowledge"; "Understanding of Students' Background", "Attention to Students' Psychological State" were classified under

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"Students' Knowledge". Finally, seven categories of practical knowledge were determined (As show in Tables 3–5).

Table 3. Mapping of tertiary categories to secondary categories.

Tertiary Category (Selective Code)	Corresponding Secondary Categories
Self-knowledge	(1) Teaching style and characteristics; (2) Self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses; (3) Self-efficacy
Chinese subject knowledge	(4) Course content knowledge; (5) Pedagogical content knowledge; (6) Linguistic knowledge
Student knowledge	(7) Student background knowledge; (8) Student learning characteristics; (9) Student psychological states
Strategic knowledge	(10) Classroom teaching strategies; (11) Classroom management strategies; (12) Student management strategies
Reflective knowledge	(13) Reflection on linguistic knowledge; (14) Reflection on teaching practice; (15) Self-reflection
Teaching belief knowledge	(16) Beliefs about linguistic and cultural knowledge; (17) Beliefs about teaching; (18) Beliefs about learning; (19) Beliefs about career
Teaching context knowledge	(20) Online teaching environment; (21) Offline teaching environment; (22) Socio-cultural context

Table 4. Summary of coding hierarchy.

Tertiary Categories (Selective Coding)	Number of Secondary Categories	Number of Primary Coding References
Self-knowledge	3	48
Chinese subject knowledge	3	48
Student knowledge	3	52
Strategic knowledge	3	32
Reflective knowledge	3	37
Teaching belief knowledge	4	61
Teaching context knowledge	3	20
Total	22	298

Table 5. Teacher practical knowledge node frequency table.

Primary Coding	The Number of Encoded Reference Points	Percentage of Total Coded Points
self-knowledge	48	16.1%
Chinese subject knowledge	48	16.1%
student knowledge	52	17.5%
strategic knowledge	32	10.7%
reflective knowledge	37	12.4%
teaching belief knowledge	61	20.5%
teaching context knowledge	20	6.7%
Total	298	100%

The purpose of this step is to integrate and refine the axial categories into a smaller set of higher-order, theoretically grounded themes that directly address the research questions. This step is guided by the study's theoretical framework and existing literature on practical knowledge classification (Elbaz, 1981; Shulman, 1987). The goal is to produce the final set of knowledge categories that represent the core findings of the study, ensuring that the coding outcomes are both empirically grounded and theoretically coherent. (As show in Figure 3).

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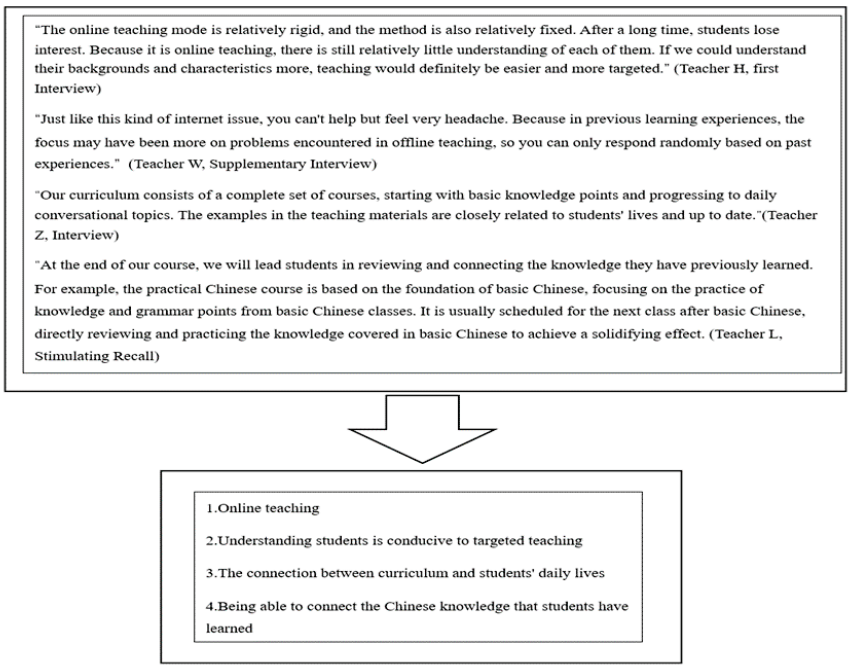


Figure 3. An example of open-coding of first-level themes from raw data.

Consistency assessment of coders. To ensure the reliability of the coding, this study invited another doctoral student with qualitative research experience in education as the second coder. 20% of all interview materials (approximately 10,000 words) were randomly selected, and the two coders independently coded according to the above coding scheme. The coding consistency percentage was 87.6%, and the Kappa coefficient was 0.83 ($p < 0.01$), indicating a high degree of consistency in coding. For conflicting coding items, the two coders reached consensus through discussion. We conducted code-by-code comparison queries in NVivo, which revealed the highest agreement for concrete knowledge types such as "teaching context knowledge" (92.1% agreement) and "Chinese subject knowledge" (89.7% agreement), while the lowest—though still acceptable—agreement was for more inferential categories such as "teaching belief knowledge" (84.2% agreement) and "reflective knowledge" (83.5% agreement). This gradient is expected in qualitative research, as more abstract and inferential categories inherently involve greater interpretive flexibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We acknowledge the epistemological tension between reporting inter-coder reliability statistics and the interpretivist/constructivist stance of this study. While Kappa coefficients and percentage agreement are traditionally associated with positivist research paradigms, we report them here not as claims to objective truth or statistical generalisability, but as procedural transparency measures that demonstrate the systematic and rigorous nature of our coding process. In qualitative inquiry, such consistency checks serve to enhance the dependability and confirmability of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), rather than to establish universal validity. We therefore present these figures as evidence of researcher reflexivity and analytical diligence, not as positivist validation of immutable facts. This approach is consistent with established practices in qualitative teacher cognition research (Borg, 2006), where methodological transparency is valued as a marker of trustworthiness. We explored this possibility using NVivo's cluster analysis function (based on Pearson's correlation coefficient). However, given our modest sample size (seven participants) and the resulting uneven coding frequencies across teachers, we found that the cluster analysis output was insufficiently stable to support robust conclusions. In qualitative research with small samples, cluster analysis can produce patterns that are heavily influenced by individual participant responses rather than reflecting genuine

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underlying structures (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). We therefore chose not to include cluster analysis results in the main text. Instead, we have addressed the relationships between knowledge types qualitatively throughout Section 5, particularly through our analysis of the mediating role of reflection and the developmental trajectories presented in the development curve diagrams (Figures 4–10).

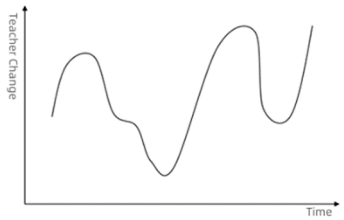


Figure 4. W1's and Teacher H's double N-type development curve chart.

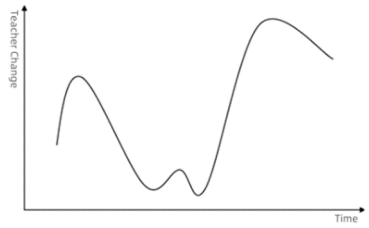


Figure 5. W1's and Teacher H's double N-type development curve chart.

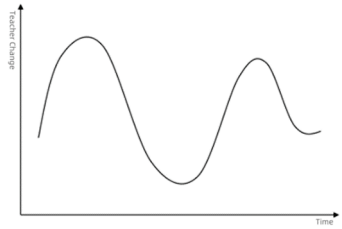


Figure 6. Teacher W2's and Teacher L1's M-shaped development curve chart.

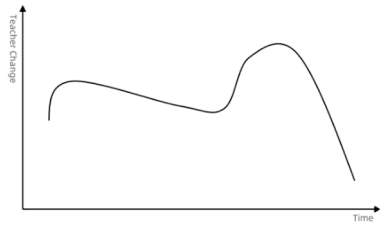


Figure 7. Teacher W2's and Teacher L1's M-shaped development curve chart.

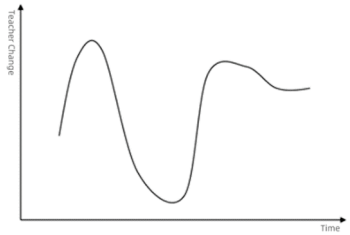


Figure 8. Teacher M's M-shaped and Teacher Z's W-shaped development curve chart.

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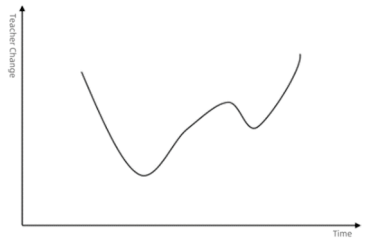


Figure 9. Teacher M's M-shaped and Teacher Z's W-shaped development curve chart.

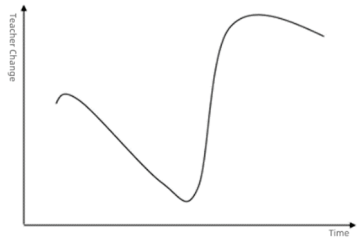


Figure 10. Teacher L2's V-shaped development curve chart.

Measures to reduce bias. In the data collection and analysis process of this study, the following measures were taken to control bias: (1) Control of classroom observation bias: The researchers entered the classroom as non-participating observers, informing the teachers that the purpose of the observation was only for the research and not for evaluation of teaching, minimizing the Hawthorne effect as much as possible; each teacher observed 3–4 different stages of classes, avoiding the randomness of a single observation; during the observation records, "objective description" and "subjective inference" were distinguished, for example, "The teacher paused for 5 s" was an objective description, while "The teacher seemed confused" was marked as an inference and needed to be verified through subsequent interviews. (2) Control of interview bias: The interview outline was determined through discussion by the research group, and open-ended questions were used during the interviews, avoiding leading questions; all interviews were conducted by the same researcher, maintaining a consistent questioning style. (3) Control of coding bias: In addition to the above coder consistency test, the researcher re-coded the same text after two weeks of completing all coding, with a consistency of 91.2%, indicating internal stability of the coding.

Test of theoretical saturation. Following the principles of qualitative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006), theoretical saturation was assessed through an iterative process. After completing the initial coding of all seven teachers' interview data, the research team engaged in ongoing comparative analysis. When no new conceptual categories or thematic patterns emerged from the analysis of the sixth and seventh participants' data, the researchers conducted a systematic re-coding of one participant's complete interview materials. This re-coding confirmed that all emergent themes had been captured in the existing coding scheme. Additionally, interview data from an informal respondent (a CFL intern teacher who met the same selection criteria but was not among the seven participants) was coded and analyzed; no new themes beyond those already identified were discovered. Based on this systematic process, we concluded that theoretical saturation had been achieved. We acknowledge that our sample size is modest and that saturation claims in qualitative research are always provisional and context-dependent; however, the iterative coding process described above provides reasonable evidence that the core categories identified in this study are sufficiently grounded in the data.

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5. Findings

5.1. The Content of the Practical Knowledge Construction for Chinese as a Foreign Language Teachers

Based on the results of the three-level coding and in combination with existing literature (Elbaz, 1981; Shulman, 1987), this study classified the practical knowledge of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) teaching assistants into seven categories. Through repeated reading, refinement, and classification of the interview texts of seven teachers, it was found that the original cognitive knowledge of teachers in the teaching process could not be fully applicable to the classroom, resulting in varying degrees of opposition and conflict. These difficulties and conflicts can be regarded as "key events" that promote the growth of teachers. In the opposition and conflict, implicit thoughts and teaching concepts can be discovered, the existing problems in the teaching behavior can be faced squarely, and thus the construction type of practical knowledge can be clarified.

Table 5 presents the frequency distribution of nodes of the seven types of practical knowledge. As shown in Table 5, teaching belief knowledge was the most frequently coded category in our data (61, 20.5%). This frequency may reflect the intensive belief fluctuations characteristic of the internship stage, rather than indicating an inherent hierarchy of knowledge importance." The relatively low frequency of teaching context knowledge coding references (20, accounting for 6.7%) should be understood in light of the online teaching context in which all internships were conducted, which limited interns' exposure to the full richness of physical classroom environments and face-to-face cross-cultural interactions.

The operational definitions and coding bases for the above seven types of knowledge are as follows:

Self-knowledge: Teachers' understanding of their own personality traits, teaching strengths and weaknesses, emotional states, and professional values. The coding basis includes teachers' statements about aspects such as "teaching style", "the influence of personality on teaching", "self-efficacy", and "professional identity" (e.g., "I am more gentle in personality, so I am not good at managing classroom discipline").

Chinese language subject knowledge: Teachers' mastery of the subject matter of Chinese language (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, Chinese characters) and its teaching content. The coding basis includes descriptions by teachers about "explanations of language points", "error analysis", "comparison between Chinese and the native language of international students" (e.g., "I spent a lot of time preparing the grammar rules of the 'put' sentence").

Student knowledge: Teachers' understanding of the learning background, language proficiency, learning motivation, learning style, psychological state, and cross-cultural characteristics of international students. The coding basis includes mentions by teachers about aspects such as "nationality and cultural background of students", "learning difficulties", "classroom responses", "individual differences" (e.g., "I found that African students are actually very hardworking, unlike what I imagined").

Strategic knowledge: Specific teaching methods, classroom management skills, strategies to motivate students, and contingency strategies for handling unexpected problems used by teachers in the teaching process. The coding basis includes descriptions by teachers about "adjustment of teaching steps", "design of classroom activities", "discipline management", "use of technical tools" (e.g., "Later, I learned to reserve online classes in advance to avoid software crashes").

Reflective knowledge: Teachers' ability and awareness to review, analyze, evaluate their own teaching practice, and thereby improve it. The coding basis includes reflection behaviors mentioned by teachers such as "post-class review", "identifying the causes of problems", "trying new methods", "comparing with others' teaching" (e.g., "I realized that

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assuming the difficulties of international students based on Chinese thinking was wrong. I will do as I like based on what I like about my teachers").

Teaching belief knowledge: Deep-seated concepts and value orientations in the mind of teachers regarding teaching, students, learning, and the role of teachers. The coding basis includes statements by teachers about "standards of good teachers", "teacher-student relationship", "teaching philosophy", "stereotypes or changes in perceptions of international students" (e.g., "I think that beliefs and ideas have been influenced comprehensively. I will act in the way I like based on what I like about my teachers").

Teaching context knowledge: Teachers' cognition and adaptability to the specific environment in which teaching occurs (including online/offline teaching platforms, school culture, cross-cultural communication atmosphere, class atmosphere, etc.). The coding basis includes descriptions by teachers about "online teaching environment", "cross-cultural interaction", "school support", "classroom atmosphere" (e.g., "When the network is bad, you are explaining something very interesting, but they don't hear clearly. I don't want to repeat it a second time").

The operational definitions of each of the above types of knowledge are derived from the corresponding secondary categories in the three-level coding of this study, ensuring consistency and reproducibility of the coding. The following will further analyze the internal and external factors influencing their construction based on these seven types of knowledge.

5.2. The Influencing Factors of Chinese as a Foreign Language Teachers' Practical Knowledge Construction

5.2.1. Internal Influencing Factors

The operational definitions of each of the above categories of knowledge are all derived from the corresponding secondary categories in the three-level coding of this study, ensuring the consistency and repeatability of the coding. In the following text, based on these seven categories of knowledge, we will further analyze the internal and external factors that influence their construction.

Reflection

The seven teachers repeatedly mentioned that the reflection mainly stemmed from negative experiences. Using a Chinese way of thinking, Teacher M hypothesized that the difficulties faced by international students led to poor classroom outcomes, prompting reflection on teaching methods. Due to not understanding the psychological changes of students, Teacher W1 caused excessive stress for the students and reflected on the insufficiency of her own psychological knowledge. After reflection, the teachers generally proposed improvement measures, such as strengthening the study of language points, improving teaching styles, and learning more about the students' backgrounds, etc. Positive experiences can also trigger reflection. For example, Teacher H discovered that students were interested in the topic of "food", so she actively designed related interactive content after class.

Reflection on the Growth of Teaching Practice

After the internship, the teacher's ability to match teaching content with methods improved significantly, their grasp of key textbook points became more accurate, and their teaching anxiety decreased. L2 teacher mentioned: "The biggest improvement after the internship was in the grasp of the course. Seeing the textbooks, I could better master the key points and difficulties." Teacher H adjusted his teaching style through a positive event (students expressed their love for the gentle teacher) and encouraged students more, especially helping the underperforming students build confidence.

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Teaching Experience

Five teachers felt that the first class was very impressive. Teacher Z's first class was dull and frustrating, which led to her long-term lack of interest in teaching and even a sense of frustration; while Teacher W2's first class received positive responses from the students, which greatly encouraged her and kept her teaching state consistently positive. Teacher H gained a positive experience by helping a student with poor foundation improve their listening scores, expressing that "it was quite inspiring for the teacher". Different teaching experiences significantly affect teachers' teaching enthusiasm, confidence and subsequent attitudes.

Teaching Beliefs

Teaching beliefs are influenced by various factors such as previous teachers, peers, expert teachers, and students. L1 teacher said, "I will do as I think the teachers I admire do." This statement reflects how intern teachers' teaching beliefs are shaped by their admiration for and identification with significant others in their learning history. Under the guidance of an expert teacher, M teacher abandoned the original belief of "explaining every sentence thoroughly" and instead focused on key vocabulary words, saving time. L2 teacher and Z teacher changed their stereotypes of international students: L2 teacher discovered that "Africans are not as poor as we imagined; they respect teachers very much"; Z teacher realized that the difference in countries does not affect the smoothness of teaching. Z teacher also found that theoretical knowledge is rarely used in actual teaching, and communicative exercises are not applicable to students with poor foundations.

Previous Professional Knowledge Learning Experience

Professional studies at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels provide theoretical guidance and a foundation for teaching. Teacher W1 believes that "these fundamental knowledges were all gradually discovered by previous teachers through trial and error." At the same time, the teaching styles of previous teachers will be unconsciously imitated. As L1 teacher noted in a different interview context, "the way I teach is often influenced by the teachers I liked during my own student years." Previous experiences laid the foundation for the initial stage of the internship. Based on this, teachers continuously added, reduced, and adjusted, gradually constructing their own practical knowledge.

5.2.2. External Influencing Factors

Position Held

Seven teachers hold different positions: full-time classroom teachers, one-on-one tutoring teachers, and class advisors. Different positions bring about different practical experiences. Teacher W2, who is the class advisor, stated that the responsibilities of a class advisor are greater, they handle more issues, and they have richer practical knowledge. Teacher L1, who used to be a full-time classroom teacher, confessed: "Before, as a classroom teacher, I had no idea about the learning styles and characteristics of students at all." One-on-one tutoring teacher Z is better at identifying and correcting deficiencies for students of different types.

Auxiliary Teaching Methods

The teaching log helps teachers identify their own problems, but most teachers lack the habit of keeping logs (Teacher L1 stated, "I usually don't write teaching logs. I'm rather lazy"). In terms of educational technology, Teacher H learned to make appointments in advance when the software couldn't start the class during online teaching, thus

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avoiding accidents. The application of online technology has helped teachers accumulate technical experience.

Environment

The cross-cultural working environment leads to the emergence of particularities in teacher-student relationships and the status of teachers. The online teaching during the pandemic has had a significant impact: Teacher L2 mentioned, "When the network is poor, you speak passionately but they don't understand. You don't even want to repeat it a second time." The online environment affects the teaching state and thereby hinders the construction of practical knowledge.

Teaching Training

The training provided new teachers with initial support and reference. The L1 teacher said, "The learning community (collective lesson preparation) has been very helpful to me." They worked together to solve classroom problems and gained experience. The W2 teacher suggested adding practical lectures on students' psychology, teacher-student relationships, etc., to help alleviate anxiety and build confidence.

The Influence and Help of Others

Five types of external influences: apprenticeship training by mentors, other teachers, graduate supervisors, expert teachers' guidance, and observation of expert teaching sessions. Teacher W1 truly realized the importance of theoretical support during the graduate stage through V's classes. The observation and feedback from expert teachers had a significant impact on trainee teachers. Teacher H said, "Because he came to listen to your class, you would be extremely nervous, and he would give you feedback... You would correct according to the suggestions of the expert teacher." Observing the same teaching content courses by expert teachers prompts trainee teachers to reflect and compare, accumulating experience.

Student

In a cross-cultural context, the influence of students on teachers' practices is particularly prominent. Specifically, it is manifested as follows: (1) Understanding students' backgrounds and learning situations is conducive to targeted teaching; (2) Paying attention to students' psychological states, such as when a L2 teacher notices that an international student is copying homework, it might indicate excessive pressure; (3) Learning attitudes and classroom feedback affect teachers' teaching experiences; (4) Positive student evaluations give teachers confidence, as L2 teacher noted, "He is particularly active in class, and all of this affects me"; (5) Students' novel explanations broaden teachers' knowledge frameworks, as a W2 teacher called it "an unexpected delight"; (6) After the teacher-student relationship shifts from "ordinary teachers and students" to "friend-like", the classroom atmosphere and interaction have significantly improved (Z teacher, H teacher).

Career Choice

Most teachers choose to become primary and secondary school teachers rather than teaching Chinese as a foreign language due to the pandemic and family pressure. The L1 teacher said, "In the future, I prefer to be a primary and secondary school teacher. Due to the pandemic, it's not convenient to go abroad." This career choice led the intern teachers to pay more attention to the methods and models of primary and secondary school teaching during their internships (W2 teacher), influencing the direction of the construction of their practical knowledge.

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5.3. The Influence Mechanism of Chinese as a Foreign Language Teachers' Practical Knowledge Construction

By classifying the development curves of the seven CFL intern teachers' internships (all selected at the same internship stage), four types were summarized: the Double N type, the M type, the W type, and the V type. The development curves of Teacher W1 and Teacher H are of the Double N type (Figures 4 and 5). The Double N type involves experiencing two processes of teaching enthusiasm and teaching confidence rising from low to high and then falling again and rising again throughout the internship. Teachers W1 and H have relatively high teaching enthusiasm and confidence in the early and late stages of the internship, with strong self-efficacy. There are two relatively obvious teaching trough periods in the middle and late stages, and during the first trough period, the teacher makes teaching adjustments, and the teaching enthusiasm recovers somewhat. However, soon after, there will be fluctuations and entering a trough period again. In the final stage of teaching, the teacher gradually recovers the teaching enthusiasm due to the influence of the school or personal factors. Teacher W2, Teacher L1, and Teacher M have the M type (Figures 6–8). The M-shaped curve indicates that teachers become less confident in the early stage of the internship but gradually gain teaching confidence as teaching progresses. Teaching enthusiasm gradually increases. However, in the middle and late stages of the internship, multiple trough periods appear, during which teaching enthusiasm is low and teachers lack confidence. Only Teacher Z drew the W-type development curve (Figure 9), which refers to the development curve that has experienced two trough periods. In the early and late stages of the internship, the teacher is highly enthusiastic, but during the middle stage, there is a significant trough period in teaching. In the later stage of the internship, the teacher regains teaching enthusiasm. Teacher L2 drew the V-type development curve (Figure 10). The V type is that the teacher has high teaching expectations in the early and late stages of the internship, but there is a significant trough period in the middle stage. CFL intern teachers' understanding of international students is particularly limited due to the cross-cultural nature of their teaching context. Unlike traditional educational environments, foreign language teaching faces students from different countries with different languages and cultural backgrounds. Although foreign language teachers have undergone systematic learning and training, their understanding of international students is more limited to textbooks and second-hand materials. They have limited understanding of the basic situations of different countries. Therefore, when predicting the thoughts of international students based on their own experiences, there are often significant differences. The teaching objects of foreign language teachers are adult students, and they also have expectations and teaching requirements for students, resulting in a great deal of teaching pressure for the teachers. To avoid unnecessary cultural conflicts in and outside the classroom, the focus of foreign language teachers during the entire internship period is more on students.

To further illuminate the mechanism, we conducted a comparative analysis of positive and negative key events, which revealed three key differences in their mechanisms of influence. Among the 63 key events extracted, 45 were negative (accounting for 71.4%), and 18 were positive (accounting for 28.6%). Negative events dominated in terms of quantity, and teachers described negative events in more detail and had stronger emotional reactions during the interviews. The comparative analysis revealed the following differences in the mechanisms of influence:

First, the triggering mechanisms are different. Negative events usually occur in the form of "problems" or "conflicts" (such as preset failures, classroom chaos, and teacher-student misunderstandings), directly challenging the teacher's original cognitive schema and forcing the teacher into a "confused dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991), thereby triggering deep

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reflection. Positive events, on the other hand, often occur in the form of "pleasant surprises" (such as students' positive feedback and successful teaching cases). They are more about verifying or reinforcing the teacher's existing effective behaviors rather than overturning the existing cognition. For example, the positive event that Teacher H obtained from the students' interest in the "food" topic only prompted her to adjust her content preferences within the existing teaching framework rather than reconstructing her teaching beliefs.

Second, the depth of reflection is different. Negative events trigger reflection that often involves fundamental questioning of the teacher's teaching philosophy, students' cognitive styles, and even professional identity (such as M teacher questioning her teaching presuppositions, and Z teacher experiencing frustration with teaching). This kind of reflection is more likely to lead to the substantial reconstruction of practical knowledge. Positive events trigger reflection that is more about minor adjustments at the strategic level (such as adjusting the questioning method and adding interesting topics), and the "increment" of knowledge construction is relatively smaller.

Third, the persistence of the impact is different. The impact of negative events is often more lasting. Many teachers mentioned in the interviews that the negative experience in the first class led them to lack interest and confidence in teaching for a long time (such as Z teacher); while the inspiring effect of positive events is relatively short-lived, and teachers will quickly enter a low point period as they encounter setbacks in subsequent teaching (such as W2 teacher, although she was inspired in the first class, she still experienced multiple declines in teaching enthusiasm in the later stage of the internship).

In conclusion, negative key events exceeded positive events in quantity, depth of reflection, and impact persistence, which explains their dominance in this study. However, this does not mean that positive events are not important—positive events have a positive effect on maintaining teachers' self-efficacy and consolidating effective teaching strategies. In future teacher training, we should consciously guide novice teachers to focus on and reflect on positive events to balance the excessive frustration that negative events may bring.

To further interrogate the relationship between event valence and knowledge construction, we conducted a matrix coding query in NVivo to examine the co-occurrence of negative versus positive key events across the seven knowledge types (Table 6). The results reveal that negative events were most frequently associated with teaching belief knowledge (18 references, 40.0% of all negative event references), followed by student knowledge (12 references, 26.7%) and self-knowledge (10 references, 22.2%). In contrast, positive events were most frequently associated with strategic knowledge (7 references, 38.9% of all positive event references) and teaching belief knowledge (5 references, 27.8%). This pattern suggests that negative events predominantly challenge teachers' deep-seated beliefs and their understanding of students and themselves, whereas positive events tend to reinforce and consolidate specific teaching strategies.

Table 6. Co-occurrence of event valence with knowledge types.

Knowledge Type	Negative Events (n = 45)	Positive Events (n = 18)
Teaching belief knowledge	18 (40.0%)	5 (27.8%)
Student knowledge	12 (26.7%)	3 (16.7%)
Self-knowledge	10 (22.2%)	2 (11.1%)
strategic knowledge	3 (6.7%)	7 (38.9%)
reflective knowledge	2 (4.4%)	1 (5.6%)

Note: Percentages represent proportions within each event valence category. Numbers indicate coding references. Only knowledge types with at least one co-occurrence are shown.

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As shown in Table 7, class advisors generated substantially more references to student knowledge (19.2% vs. 13.2%) and teaching belief knowledge (21.9% vs. 17.1%) than one-on-one tutors. This pattern suggests that the broader responsibilities of class advisors—including classroom management, inter-teacher coordination, and student affairs—exposed them to a wider range of student behaviours and challenges, thereby deepening their understanding of individual learners and prompting more frequent reflection on their professional beliefs. Conversely, one-on-one tutors showed higher proportions of teaching context knowledge (10.5% vs. 5.5%) and strategic knowledge (13.2% vs. 10.0%), reflecting the adaptive and individualised nature of remedial teaching, which requires tutors to flexibly adjust their instructional strategies to address diverse learner needs in varied learning situations. These findings confirm that different internship roles afford qualitatively different learning opportunities and shape distinct practical knowledge profiles.

Table 7. Distribution of knowledge type references by teacher role.

Knowledge Type	Class Advisors (n = 4)	One-on-One Tutors (n = 2)
Teaching belief knowledge	48 (21.9%)	13 (17.1%)
Student knowledge	42 (19.2%)	10 (13.2%)
Self-knowledge	35 (16.0%)	13 (17.1%)
Chinese subject knowledge	34 (15.5%)	14 (18.4%)
Reflective knowledge	26 (11.9%)	11 (14.5%)
strategic knowledge	22 (10.0%)	10 (13.2%)
Teaching context knowledge	12 (5.5%)	8 (10.5%)
Total	219	76

Note: Percentages represent proportions within each role category. Total coding references differ due to varying numbers of participants (4 class advisors vs. 2 one-on-one tutors).

To visualise the developmental trajectory of practical knowledge construction, we disaggregated the coding frequencies by internship stage (early, middle, and late). As shown in Table 8, teaching belief knowledge and student knowledge showed the most substantial growth from early to late internship (increases of 27.8 and 30.8 percentage points, respectively), indicating that these two knowledge domains are most sensitive to practical teaching experience. Reflective knowledge also showed considerable growth (+35.1 percentage points), confirming that interns' reflective capacity develops substantially through the accumulation of classroom experience. Teaching context knowledge remained relatively stable (+5.0 percentage points), reflecting the consistent online teaching environment throughout the internship period. Strategic knowledge showed the greatest increase during the middle stage (from early to middle: +25.0 percentage points), reflecting interns' rapid accumulation of practical teaching techniques as they gained classroom experience. This staged pattern suggests that practical knowledge construction is not linear but follows distinct developmental rhythms across different knowledge domains.

Table 8. Distribution of knowledge type references by internship stage.

Knowledge Type	Early Stage	Middle Stage	Late Stage	Change (Early to Late)
Teaching belief knowledge	12 (19.7%)	20 (32.8%)	29 (47.5%)	+27.8 pp
Student knowledge	10 (19.2%)	16 (30.8%)	26 (50.0%)	+30.8 pp
Self-knowledge	12 (25.0%)	18 (37.5%)	18 (37.5%)	+12.5 pp
Strategic knowledge	6 (18.8%)	14 (43.8%)	12 (37.5%)	+18.7 pp
Reflective knowledge	5 (13.5%)	14 (37.8%)	18 (48.6%)	+35.1 pp
Teaching context knowledge	6 (30.0%)	7 (35.0%)	7 (35.0%)	+5.0 pp
Chinese subject knowledge	11 (22.9%)	17 (35.4%)	20 (41.7%)	+18.8 pp

Note: Percentages represent proportions within each knowledge type across the three internship stages. pp = percentage points. Early stage = first 1/3 of internship; Middle stage = middle 1/3; Late stage = final 1/3.

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Additionally, we conducted a coding query examining the co-occurrence of "reflection" with the seven knowledge types. The results show that reflection references most frequently co-occurred with teaching belief knowledge (23 co-occurrences) and student knowledge (19 co-occurrences), followed by self-knowledge (14 co-occurrences), strategic knowledge (11 co-occurrences), Chinese subject knowledge (9 co-occurrences), reflective knowledge (8 co-occurrences, which is largely a methodological artifact of nested coding), and teaching context knowledge (5 co-occurrences). This gradient further confirms that reflection serves as the primary mediating mechanism through which key events—particularly negative ones—drive the reconstruction of teachers' foundational beliefs and their understanding of learners. The relatively low co-occurrence with teaching context knowledge may be attributable to the online teaching environment, which limited interns' exposure to the full richness of physical classroom contexts and thus constrained opportunities for context-related reflection.

Through the analysis of key events, three characteristics of CFL intern teachers' practical knowledge construction can be summarized as follows:

First, the occurrence of key events often becomes the starting point of "epiphany" for pre-service teachers. Key events enable teachers to discover problems that they were not aware of before and change their understanding and concepts of teaching. Key events for Chinese as a foreign language teachers play a crucial role in the construction of practical knowledge. The teacher's teaching beliefs, knowledge accumulation, and the construction and development of practical knowledge is a gradual process. However, key events often have a disruptive impact on teachers' teaching, which indicates that the construction and development of teachers' practical knowledge also has another "epiphany" approach. This epiphany often occurs when teachers encounter "unexpected" situations, break through their original cognition, and solve problems, "quickly" improving their teaching practice ability and generating practical knowledge "immediately".

Second, different key events have different positions in the construction and development process of practical knowledge for Chinese as a foreign language teacher. Compared with positive key events, negative key events have a greater and deeper impact on the accumulation of practical knowledge and the speed and direction of pre-service teachers' practical knowledge construction.

Thirdly, key events can truly influence teaching practice and thereby affect the construction of practical knowledge only through the reflection of the teachers themselves. There is an intermediary factor between key events and the construction and development of teachers' practical knowledge, which is the reflection of the teachers on these events. Without reflection, key events would merely be a minor incident that occurred regularly but was not noticed. Negative key events have a greater impact because they are more likely to prompt teachers to think. The reflection of prospective teachers on key events will inevitably deepen their understanding of teaching and promote the construction of teachers' practical knowledge.

6. Discussion

This study conducted a qualitative analysis of the key teaching events of seven CFL intern teachers, revealing the composition, influencing factors, and construction mechanism of their practical knowledge. The following will discuss the core findings in depth, combining existing theories and related research.

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6.1. Content of Practical Knowledge Construction: The Specificity and Contextuality of the Seven Types of Knowledge

This study found that CFL intern teachers formed seven types of practical knowledge, with "teaching belief knowledge" having the highest coding frequency (20.5%) and "teaching situational knowledge" the lowest (6.7%). This distribution overlaps and differs from the teacher knowledge classification in existing studies (Elbaz, 1981; Shulman, 1987). Compared to experienced teachers, the "teaching belief knowledge" of interns is more susceptible to the influence of external others (such as previous teachers, peers, and expert teachers) and key events, and is in a state of rapid change. This finding supports a core tenet of teacher cognition theory: teachers' beliefs are not static but are constantly tested, revised, and even reconstructed in practice (Borg, 2006). The internship stage is a "sensitive period" of intense belief fluctuations, which warns us that teacher education should not only impart skills but also focus on and guide the healthy development of interns' beliefs.

It is notable that "teaching situational knowledge" was generated the least in this study (accounting for only 6.7%). This phenomenon is closely related to the online teaching environment during the pandemic. Interns conducted teaching entirely online, lacking face-to-face cross-cultural interaction with international students, and had extremely limited perception of the school's physical environment, the real classroom atmosphere, and non-verbal communication (such as body language, cultural rituals, etc.). Although online teaching provides technical convenience, it also weakens the richness and complexity of the teaching situation, thereby limiting teachers' in-depth understanding of "the situation". This finding suggests that future research can compare the differences in practical knowledge construction in online and offline internship environments to better understand the role of the teaching situation.

It should be noted that the frequency counts reported in this study are descriptive statistics that reflect the distribution of coding references within our specific sample. They should not be interpreted as inferential statistics that measure the "importance" or "significance" of different knowledge types in any absolute sense. The higher frequency of teaching belief knowledge references indicates that this knowledge type was more frequently discussed by participants in relation to key events, which may reflect the intensive belief fluctuations characteristic of the internship stage rather than an inherent hierarchy of knowledge importance.

6.2. Mechanism of Impact of Key Events: Dominance of Negative Events and Supplementary Role of Positive Events

Among the 63 key events extracted in this study, negative events accounted for 71.4%, and their depth and duration of impact were significantly greater than those of positive events. This finding is consistent with Tripp's (1994) classic discussion on key events, which states that negative events tend to trigger teachers' reflection and professional growth more effectively. However, this study further reveals the internal mechanism of the greater impact of negative events: Negative events directly challenge teachers' original cognitive schemas, triggering the "confused dilemma" in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), forcing teachers to conduct in-depth reflection, thereby leading to the substantive reconstruction of practical knowledge. In contrast, positive events more often validate and reinforce existing effective behaviors, resulting in a smaller "incremental" change in practical knowledge.

This discovery does not negate the value of positive events. Positive events play a positive role in maintaining teachers' self-efficacy and consolidating effective teaching strategies (Christ et al., 2017a). However, this study shows that the reflections triggered by positive events are mostly "confirmatory reflections" rather than "questioning reflections", and this aspect has been discussed less in existing literature. In future teacher training, we should consciously guide trainee teachers to conduct equally in-depth analyses of

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071159

positive events (such as "Why was this class successful?" "Which behaviors are worth consolidating?"), in order to balance the excessive sense of frustration that negative events may bring.

6.3. Reflection as an Intermediate Mechanism: Dialogue with Schön's Reflection Practice Model

This study reveals that reflection is the core intermediary mechanism connecting key events with the construction of practical knowledge. This finding aligns closely with Schön's (1983) "reflective practitioner" model. Schön distinguished between two forms of reflection: "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action". In this study, the immediate adjustments made by the trainee teachers in the classroom (such as Teacher H adjusting the questioning strategy after noticing that students were interested in the "food" topic) are a specific manifestation of "reflection-in-action"; while the behavior of retrospectively analyzing key events, correcting subsequent teaching plans, and adjusting teaching methods after class (such as Teacher M questioning her own Chinese-style assumptions and adjusting the teaching method) belongs to "reflection-on-action". However, this study further reveals the particularity of the trainee teachers' reflection, providing a contextualized supplement to Schön's model. Firstly, the trainee teachers' "reflection-in-action" ability is significantly weaker than that of expert teachers. Due to a lack of sufficient practical experience and cognitive schemas, they often have difficulty effectively identifying problems and making quick adjustments in the classroom. Most deep reflection occurs after class (i.e., "reflection-on-action"). This finding supports Korthagen's (2004) view that reflection ability needs to be gradually cultivated in practice, with an initial focus on structured post-class reflection. Secondly, this study finds that positive events can also trigger reflection, but the reflection is mostly "confirmatory reflection" rather than "questioning reflection", a point that is less discussed in Schön's original model. Therefore, this study suggests dividing the trainee teachers' reflection practice into two subtypes: "problem-driven deep reflection" and "success-driven confirmatory reflection", to more accurately describe the path of their knowledge construction.

Furthermore, this study finds that the actual implementation of reflection shows significant individual differences. Although all teachers are aware of the importance of reflection, only a few can persist in systematic post-class reflection (such as writing teaching logs). This finding is consistent with Allas et al. (2020)'s research on guiding reflection procedures: structured, guided reflection is more effective in promoting practical knowledge construction than spontaneous, scattered reflection. Therefore, in teacher education, it is not only necessary to emphasize "the importance of reflection", but also to provide specific reflection tools and frameworks (such as reflection log templates, peer evaluation, video review, etc.) to help trainee teachers transform occasional reflection behaviors into institutionalized reflection practices.

6.4. Students as the Core Factor: Specificity in Cross-Cultural Contexts

This study finds that students are at the core of the trainee teachers' practical knowledge construction. The development curves and key event descriptions of the seven teachers all show that, whether at the peak or trough of teaching enthusiasm, the core triggering factors are students (such as student feedback, learning status, teacher-student relationship, etc.). This finding differs from the conclusions of general teacher education research (Beijaard et al., 2004): the latter usually indicates that novice teachers focus more on themselves and teaching content rather than students in the early stages of teaching. The reason why the CFL intern teachers exhibit an "early student-centered" characteristic is likely closely related to their cross-cultural teaching environment. Facing adult international students from different countries and language cultural backgrounds, the

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071159

trainee teachers' uncertainty and curiosity about "foreign cultures" make them highly concerned about students' reactions and differences from the very beginning. This particularity suggests that the training of Chinese as a foreign language teachers should start by strengthening the cultivation of cross-cultural communication skills and students' analytical abilities, rather than undergoing the gradual transformation from "concerning oneself" to "concerning students" as in ordinary teacher education.

6.5. Interaction of Internal and External Factors: An Integrated Perspective of Teacher Cognition Theory

The research results indicate that the factors influencing the construction of practical knowledge for Chinese as a foreign language teachers can be divided into internal factors (reflection, teaching experience, teaching beliefs, previous learning experiences) and external factors (position held, auxiliary teaching methods, environment, teaching training, influence from others, students, career choice). These factors do not exist independently but are intertwined through the teacher's cognitive process. Teacher cognition theory (Borg, 2006) provides an integrated framework for understanding this interaction: The existing beliefs and knowledge structure of the teacher (internal factors) "filter" external information (such as training content, others' suggestions, student feedback), determining which information is noticed, interpreted as meaningful, and integrated into practical knowledge. For example, in the same situation where expert teachers provide guidance, Teacher M chooses to change his teaching assumptions, while another teacher may only make superficial adjustments. This difference stems from the different internal cognitive schemas.

Among the many influencing factors, the coding frequency of "teaching belief knowledge" was the highest (20.5%), and teachers mention the "student" factor most frequently and emotionally in interviews. The reason why teaching beliefs have a stronger influence is that they constitute the "filter" of the teacher's cognition—when teachers choose which events to pay attention to, how to interpret events, and whether to integrate experiences, they are guided by their existing beliefs. When beliefs are challenged (such as negative key events), the cognitive conflict is the most intense, thus more likely to lead to substantive reconstruction of practical knowledge. In contrast, the adjustment of strategy knowledge or Chinese subject knowledge is more of a technical repair, not involving deep beliefs, and thus has a relatively smaller influence. "Student" factors occupy a core position because of the cross-cultural nature of Chinese as a foreign language teaching: Facing adult international students from different language and cultural backgrounds, the intern teachers are highly concerned about students' reactions from the very beginning, making students the most direct and frequent stimulus source influencing the teacher's teaching enthusiasm, confidence, and behavioral adjustment.

The interaction of internal and external factors is bidirectional. Internal factors determine how external factors are processed, and the continuous effect of external factors will also reshape internal factors: The accumulation of multiple negative key events may gradually change the teacher's teaching beliefs, shifting from "believing that theory guides everything" to "practicality outweighing theory". This two-way interaction constitutes a dynamic cycle of practical knowledge construction: Internal factors → selective attention to external information → processing and generating new practical knowledge → new knowledge becomes the basis for the next cognitive filtering.

6.6. The Theoretical Explanation of the Dynamic Nature of Practical Knowledge: The Perspective of Cognitive Schemas and Identity Recognition

This study has repeatedly pointed out that the construction of practical knowledge for Chinese as a foreign language intern teachers is "dynamic"-manifested as alternating between gradual and sudden changes, fluctuating due to key events. This dynamic nature

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071159

is not accidental but is determined by interrelated theoretical mechanisms. The dynamic nature of practical knowledge observed in this study can be attributed to the assimilation and accommodation mechanisms of cognitive schemas (Piaget, 1970), as well as the continuous negotiation process of teacher identity recognition (Beijaard et al., 2004; Coldron & Smith, 1999). These perspectives are offered as possible explanatory angles for interpreting the developmental patterns observed in our data, rather than as independent theoretical frameworks. Consistent with our integrative approach, we draw on these perspectives only insofar as they help frame observed patterns; we do not claim to have empirically tested the schema mechanics or identity negotiation processes themselves.

6.7. Dynamicity of Practical Knowledge Construction: Interweaving of Gradual Change and Insight

This study found that the construction of practical knowledge for Chinese as a Foreign Language teachers is a "gradual and sudden alternation of a tortuous process". The development curve graph shows that most teachers have experienced multiple periods of low points and rebounds in teaching enthusiasm and confidence (double N-type, M-type, W-type, V-type), indicating that the construction of practical knowledge is not linear growth but presents volatility. The phenomenon of "insight"—that is, the rapid cognitive restructuring brought about by key events—is particularly worthy of attention. Transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) explains this insight as a "fundamental transformation of the meaning structure". The contribution of this study lies in visualizing this insight through the development curve graph and pointing out that the insight often occurs after negative key events and requires teachers to actively engage in in-depth reflection to achieve it. This finding has direct guiding significance for teacher education practice: trainers should help intern teachers identify and utilize key events as "learning opportunities", rather than merely regarding them as indicators of teaching failure.

In conclusion, this discussion moves beyond merely reiterating the findings, engaging in a substantive dialogue with teacher cognition theory, transformative learning theory, and Schön's reflective practice model. The study reveals the particularity of practical knowledge construction for Chinese as a Foreign Language intern teachers within an online teaching environment. This particularity manifests as an integrated set of interrelated characteristics operating at three interconnected levels: the online teaching environment served as the overarching contextual condition; the cross-cultural teaching context shaped the specific content and focus of knowledge construction; and negative key events functioned as cognitive triggers for rapid, insight-based restructuring. These three dimensions are not independent findings but mutually reinforcing aspects of the same phenomenon—the dynamic construction of practical knowledge in a cross-cultural online internship context. The study further refines the types of reflection (confirmatory vs. questioning) within this integrated framework.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

This study conducted a qualitative exploration of the practical knowledge construction of CFL intern teachers through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. However, it still has the following limitations.

First, the scope of the research subjects is limited. This study focused on seven CFL intern teachers from a single university who participated in the same online internship program. The study's modest sample size (seven participants) limits the generalisability of the findings, as qualitative research with a small sample is not intended to produce statistically generalisable results but rather to provide in-depth, contextualised understanding. All participants lacked prior K-12 teaching experience and were trained within the

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same institutional context. Consequently, the findings of this study are context-specific and should not be generalised to all CFL teachers, particularly those teaching in different cultural contexts (e.g., overseas CFL teachers), offline teaching environments, or with different professional backgrounds. Future research should include a more diverse sample—teachers from multiple institutions, with varied teaching experiences, and in both online and offline settings—to examine whether the patterns identified in this study hold across different contexts.

Second, the research method is single. This study employed a qualitative approach, which could deeply reveal the construction mechanism, but lacked the support of quantitative data. Future research can combine questionnaire surveys or experimental studies to conduct quantitative measurements of core variables (such as reflection frequency, changes in teaching beliefs), to enhance the generalizability of the conclusions.

Third, there are limitations in data collection. The number of classroom observations for each teacher was limited (a total of 83 class hours), making it difficult to capture all key events; and the research mainly relied on classroom observations and interviews, failing to fully explore the collected data. Future research can increase the frequency of observations and introduce video review, peer evaluation, etc., as diverse data sources.

Fourth, there are constraints imposed by the online teaching environment. All internships were conducted online, which not only prevented observation of non-verbal interactions such as body movements and expressions but also limited the generation of teaching context knowledge among the participants. The online environment reduced interns' exposure to physical classroom dynamics, spontaneous student-teacher interactions, and the full complexity of cross-cultural teaching contexts. Consequently, the relatively low frequency of teaching context knowledge coding references in this study should be interpreted as a consequence of this design constraint rather than as a generalisable finding about CFL intern teachers' practical knowledge. Future research conducted in offline environments may reveal richer and more diverse patterns of teaching context knowledge construction.

Fifth, the analysis of influencing factors is not comprehensive. This study only examined such factors from two dimensions: internal and external factors, without involving aspects such as teaching evaluation, teacher status, and policy support. Future research can explore the interactive relationships among various factors from more perspectives.

8. Conclusions

This study analyzed the key events of seven CFL intern teachers and reached the following conclusions.

First, the trainees generated seven types of practical knowledge in practice, among which the knowledge of teaching beliefs accounted for the highest proportion (20.5%), and the knowledge of teaching situations was affected by online teaching the least (6.7%). The operational definitions of these seven types of knowledge provided a basis for repeatable verification for this study.

Second, negative key events outnumbered positive events in terms of quantity (71.4%), the depth of reflection, and the persistence of impact. Negative events triggered deep reflection and knowledge reconstruction through the "confused dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991); positive events mainly played the role of verification and consolidation.

Third, reflection is the core mediating mechanism connecting key events and the construction of practical knowledge. The "reflection-in-action" ability of trainees is weaker than that of expert teachers, and the reflection is mostly "problem-driven" rather than "success-driven". This suggests that teacher education should provide structured reflection tools rather than merely emphasizing the importance of reflection.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071159

Fourth, student factors occupy a core position in the knowledge construction of CFL intern teachers, which is closely related to the cross-cultural teaching environment. Teacher training should strengthen the cultivation of cross-cultural communication and student analysis abilities from the beginning.

Fifth, the construction of practical knowledge is dynamic, manifested as "alternation between gradual and sudden changes". This dynamic nature is intertwined with two contextual conditions: the cross-cultural teaching environment (which shapes the specific challenges interns face) and the online teaching mode (which constrains the richness of teaching context knowledge). Together, these conditions contribute to the "insight" effect triggered by key events-particularly negative ones-which prompt rapid cognitive restructuring. These aspects should be understood as an integrated set of interrelated findings rather than as separate contributions. The dynamic nature can be explained from two theoretical perspectives: assimilation/accommodation (Piaget, 1970) and the continuous negotiation of teacher identity recognition (Coldron & Smith, 1999).

In summary, the internship stage constitutes a critical and sensitive period for the construction of CFL intern teachers' practical knowledge. By identifying and deeply reflecting on key events (especially negative events), trainees can effectively reconstruct their practical knowledge system. This study provides empirical evidence for optimizing the internship training of CFL intern teachers and lays a theoretical foundation for subsequent cross-cultural teacher education research.

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Durable Professionalism in Contested Spaces: Evaluating the Conversion of Teacher Readiness into Stable Professional Tenure in Politically Contested Multicultural Settings, 2022–2025

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Abstract

This study examines the systemic and political dynamics shaping the professional trajectories of Palestinian educators trained for boundary-crossing roles in Jewish state schools in Israel. While specialized programs successfully cultivated intercultural competence and pedagogical readiness, these gains were undermined by entrenched structural and ideological barriers. 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 Palestinian teachers were analyzed as well as findings from a telephone survey with 99 graduates. Findings reveal that institutional absorption failure, manifested through contractual precarity, geographic misalignment, and organizational inertia, prevented the conversion of individual readiness into stable tenure. Inclusion was found to be conditional, requiring sustained emotional labor, linguistic self-censorship, and political alignment, particularly during periods of heightened sociopolitical tension following 7 October 2023. These patterns reflect deeply rooted power asymmetries that marginalize Palestinian citizens and perpetuate tokenistic integration. This study argues that durable professional integration in contested spaces demands a paradigmatic shift: from viewing inclusion as a temporary concession to embedding stability and equity as structural principles. Such transformation requires dismantling institutional mechanisms that reproduce asymmetry and investing in long-term ecological supports, such as permanent contracts, culturally responsive leadership, and inclusion protocols. Without these systemic reforms, intercultural competence remains insufficient to overcome the political and structural forces.

Keywords: Palestinian teachers; systemic barriers; Israeli-Arab conflict; boundary-crossing teachers; sociopolitical tension

1. Introduction: From Preparation to Professional Rupture in Boundary-Crossing Pedagogy

The mandate for teacher preparation in pluralistic societies extends beyond traditional pedagogy to the cultivation of intercultural competence (IC) (Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Cushner, 2025; Dervin & Hahl, 2015). This educational imperative acquires profound political and social urgency within deeply divided, high-intensity conflict environments, such as Israel, where the structural segregation of educational streams necessitates deliberate, high-risk policy interventions (Allport, 1954; Abo-Zaed Arar, 2025; Krakowski, 2008). The integration of minority educators, specifically Arabic-speaking teachers entering Jewish state schools, serves as a strategic mechanism to address chronic staffing shortages while fostering elements of a shared civil society (Hisherik et al., 2025; Jayusi & Bekerman, 2019).

The present inquiry provides a detailed, longitudinal qualitative analysis of the professional trajectories of graduates from the "Orientation Program for Arabic-Speaking Teaching Candidates", which was implemented during 2022–2023, and follows their professional integration from 2022 through 2025. This initiative was established to equip Palestinian educators with the requisite linguistic, cultural, and intercultural skills for boundary-crossing roles (Gindi & Erlich Ron, 2025). However, the framing of this program often emphasizes the utility of the Palestinian teacher to the majority system, positioning them as a solution to Jewish institutional deficits (e.g., teacher shortage) rather than foregrounding their own professional agency. While prior scholarship confirms the efficacy of such specialized training in fostering individual readiness (e.g., Abo-Zaed Arar, 2025; Jayusi & Bekerman, 2019), a critical policy lacuna persists: the failure to convert this enhanced individual competence into stable, long-term professional tenure. Research consistently indicates that minority educators face disproportionately high turnover rates, often due to deficiencies in the institutional ecology of the receiving schools rather than individual teacher deficits (Achinstein et al., 2010; Yip & Ji, 2024).

We investigate the systemic and political factors that promoted and impeded the stable tenure of these educators over a three-year arc, contextualized by the dramatic shift from the routine tension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the heightened sociopolitical volatility following the events of 7 October 2023, and the subsequent war in Gaza. The Hamas large-scale, coordinated attack that killed approximately 1,200 people in Israel and involved the kidnapping of over 240 civilians and soldiers triggered a profound national trauma and reconfigured social expectations across Israeli institutions, including schools (Shechory Bitton et al., 2026). The attack's scale and shock, widely described as Israel's 9/11, intensified public scrutiny of expressions of loyalty, belonging, and national solidarity, leading to an environment where deviations from dominant emotional or political norms were perceived as suspect. In this climate, teachers who were already positioned as "other" encountered heightened pressure to mute or manage their cultural and emotional expressions. This study ultimately argues that the observed professional rupture is a function of systemic absorption failure, where institutional structures and political asymmetry undermined the individual resilience and competence successfully cultivated during the training period.

2. Literature Review: Intercultural Competence, Asymmetry, and the Ecology of Retention

To understand the trajectory of Palestinian teachers in Jewish schools, it is necessary to move beyond generic theories of multicultural education and engage with the specific structural realities of the Israeli context, as well as critical theories of power and boundary crossing.

2.1. The Israeli Education System and Boundary-Crossing Teachers

The Israeli education system is not a monolithic entity, but a segregated structure composed of four distinct streams: State-general (Jewish), State-Religious (Jewish), Ultra-Orthodox (Jewish/Haredi), and Arab (State-run) (Al-Haj, 2002). While all streams are theoretically funded by the Ministry of Education, they remain administratively and culturally distinct (Abu-Saad, 2016). The Arab education system, serving Palestinian citizens of Israel, has historically suffered from chronic underfunding, overcrowding, and significant infrastructure deficits compared to the Jewish streams (Golan-Agnon, 2006).

This separate and unequal reality creates a powerful push factor for Palestinian teachers to seek employment in Jewish schools. Many seek employment in Jewish schools not necessarily out of an ideological desire for integration, but in search of professional

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dignity, better resources, and organized working environments that are often absent in the under-resourced schools of their home communities (Jayusi & Bekerman, 2019).

However, crossing into the Jewish stream means entering a space where the curriculum, calendar, and national ethos are exclusively Jewish-Zionist (Ichilov, 2004). The "State-Secular" stream, while not religious, is heavily imbued with Zionist narratives, Jewish holidays, and national symbols that exclude the Palestinian narrative (Jamal, 2007). Thus, the Palestinian teacher enters not as a neutral professional, but as a representative of the "Other" within a hegemonic space designed for the majority (Jamal, 2007; Jayusi & Bekerman, 2019).

2.2. Intercultural Competence as Survival Mechanism

Intercultural Competence is a multifaceted capacity spanning cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains, enabling effective interaction across diverse cultural contexts (Deardorff, 2006). For teacher preparation, the Intercultural Teaching Competence (ITC) model provides a useful structure, categorizing skills into three levels (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Okken et al., 2022). The Foundational Level includes essential attitudinal prerequisites, such as openness and empathy; the Facilitation Level addresses observable behaviors, such as classroom management and effective cross-cultural communication; and the Curriculum Design Level pertains to integrating culturally relevant materials (Hisherik et al., 2025).

However, in the context of asymmetric conflict, IC is not merely a professional soft skill; it transforms into a survival mechanism. For the minority teacher, IC involves the high-stakes management of Controversial Political Issues (CPI) and the navigation of constant identity threats. (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2025; Gindi et al., 2024; Muszkat-Barkan, 2022; Ting-Toomey, 2009). The development of IC in these settings is complex, often progressing from initial knowledge gaps and mutual apprehension toward building trust through structured encounters (Hisherik et al., 2025). However, this delicate process is perpetually challenged by the entrenched perceptions of irreconcilable goals characteristic of intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2011).

2.3. Boundary-Crossing and Power Asymmetry

Boundary-crossing teachers are educators whose distinct backgrounds stand out within the school context, particularly because of differences from the student body or the staff (Gindi et al., 2020). In the Israeli context, however, the boundary is not merely professional or organizational; it is a militarized, national, and linguistic border enforced by the state (Saada & Gross, 2019). The power asymmetry is such that Palestinian teachers are expected to be fluent in Hebrew and knowledgeable about Jewish culture (Zionism, holidays, Bible), whereas their Jewish colleagues rarely possess reciprocal knowledge of Arabic or Palestinian heritage (Erlich Ron, 2025). This imbalance imposes a significant, unequal burden on minority teachers, demanding continuous cultural vigilance and rigorous identity negotiation, often manifesting as self-censorship, to preserve professional legitimacy within the dominant cultural institution (Gindi & Erlich Ron, 2019; Saada & Gross, 2019).

This continuous expenditure of self-regulation and emotional energy is recognized as emotional labor and is a significant factor contributing to the disproportionately high attrition observed among minority teachers, regardless of their intrinsic motivation or pedagogical skill (Karakus et al., 2024). The success of IC is therefore conditional on the system's capacity to recognize and alleviate this asymmetrical burden, ensuring that professional tenure is not contingent upon identity reduction.

Power asymmetry is deeply rooted in Israeli society, where the Palestinian citizens are marginalized (Ghattas, 2025). Like Indigenous people in other countries, they often

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confront systemic resistance, which manifests as institutional inertia, tokenism, and policies designed to uphold the status quo (Povey et al., 2024). The influence of interest convergence means that systemic changes frequently favor the interests of dominant groups, making genuine minority agency and sovereignty difficult to realize.

2.4. The Ecology of Teacher Retention

Long-term teacher stability is fundamentally determined by the institutional ecology of retention, the policy-amenable, school-level conditions that sustain professional commitment (Achinstein et al., 2010). For boundary-crossing educators, the core measures of this ecology include the provision of stable financial capital (e.g., permanent contracts), supportive human capital like high-quality mentoring and leadership, and robust multicultural capital, such as an organizational culture that actively values diversity and protects against prejudice (Rutherford et al., 2024). The failure to provide standard, permanent employment undermines the efficacy and morale of these educators, transforming them into temporary, flexible labor and accelerating systemic turnover (Gindi et al., 2020; Yip & Ji, 2024).

3. Materials and Methods

The current evaluation employed a qualitative, short-term longitudinal design rooted in a contextualist epistemology to explore the multifaceted experiences of graduates of a teachers' training program (Silverman et al., 2024). This approach was critical for capturing the depth, nuance, and political sensitivity inherent in the boundary-crossing teacher's professional arc. The methodology was purposefully constructed to move beyond mere measurement of training outcomes toward a structured exploration of the systemic and psychological factors that either supported or undermined the long-term conversion of individual readiness into stable professional tenure.

3.1. The Research Context

The present study is based on the evaluation of the 'Orientation Program for Arabic-Speaking Teaching Candidates to be Placed in Schools in the Jewish Sector' (henceforth—the Orientation Program), which operated between August 2022 and 2023 across two cohorts. The Program was established to address a dual mandate: practically, to mitigate the chronic shortage of teachers in the Jewish state education system by utilizing the oversupply of qualified Arab educators; and ideologically, to promote a shared society by reducing prejudices and stereotypes rooted in the structural segregation of the Israeli educational system (Abo-Zaed Arar, 2025; Hisherik et al., 2025).

The Program was explicitly designed to prepare Palestinian graduates for boundary-crossing roles by enhancing their linguistic command of Hebrew, deepening their knowledge of Jewish culture and heritage (e.g., holidays and memorial days), and developing the IC required for optimal integration. It functioned as a preparatory phase for the integration of the teachers into Jewish schools, thereby complementing a program named "Meshalvim u'Mishtalvim" ("Integrating and Being Integrated"), which has been operating in Israel since 2013, and provides ongoing professional support to Arab teachers during their integration into Jewish schools.

However, the Orientation Program was ultimately discontinued following the events of 7 October 2023, and the ensuing war, which placed the program in a challenging political and security context (Jayusi, 2025; Silverman et al., 2024).

3.2. Participants and Sampling Strategy

In October 2025, a comprehensive telephone survey was conducted with 99 graduates (from a list of 364 teachers who graduated from the program) to map their current em-

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ployment status and professional trajectories. This preliminary mapping procedure was designed to identify retention patterns. Additionally, we purposefully sampled 12 teachers for in-depth interviews from the list of 364 graduates. The 12 participants were selected primarily because they remained in the system (or had recently left), allowing for a deep investigation into the mechanisms of survival and the specific points of friction. We specifically sought diversity in subject matter (STEM vs. Humanities) and geographic location to see if these factors influenced retention.

The qualitative component focused on 12 graduates interviewed in the summer and fall of 2025. Table 1 tracks the career paths of 12 teachers who completed the Orientation Program and their employment history immediately following graduation. The graduates represent a diverse group in terms of age, ranging from 24 to 47, and cover a wide array of teaching subjects, including Mathematics, Art, Hebrew, and Sciences. The employment records reveal that while a fair number of the interviewees secured positions in Jewish schools, the trajectory for many was marked by instability and discontinuity in the years immediately following the program. Only two individuals, Fadia and Amal, show clear, consecutive employment in a single Jewish school setting right after graduation, suggesting a smooth transition. However, this stability contrasts sharply with the experiences of most others.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

Name	Age	Teaching Subject Area	Education	Instruction History
Rania	37	Mathematics and Computer Science	M.A.	Three different Jewish schools in three years, all middle schools.
Wurud	29	Art	M.A.	Taught in a Jewish elementary school for two years after the program, and now teaches in an Arab elementary school.
Nadin	36	Kindergarten teacher	M.A.	Two years in a Jewish school, followed by a year in an Arab elementary school, and back to a Jewish school.
Dania	38	Early childhood	B.Ed.	A third of her position is in a Jewish school and the other two-thirds in the Arab education stream.
Khawla	30	Mathematics	B.A.	Worked part-time (50%) in the first year and full time in the second year.
Amal	32	Hebrew Literature and Education	B.Ed.	Her second year of teaching in a Jewish high school.
Najakh	27	English	B.Ed.	First year teaching in a Jewish high school as a substitute teacher.
Hiba	38	Hebrew	M.A.	Taught one year in a Jewish school, followed by teaching Hebrew privately for two years, and going back to teach at a Jewish school part-time.
Lubna	24	Math and Science	B.Ed.	Teaching in a Jewish special education school for the past two years.
Latifa	44	Art	B.Ed.	Since graduating from the program, has been working in three different Jewish schools simultaneously.
Jihan	31	Sciences	B.Ed.	Did not work in the first year after graduating from the program, and has worked in a Jewish middle school for the past year.
Fadia	47	Physics	B.Ed.	Has been working in a Jewish middle school for three years straight since graduating from the program.

3.3. Procedure

The research focused on Palestinian teacher-graduates who were placed in Jewish state schools from the two cohorts of the Orientation Program (2022 and 2023), two or three years after they completed the program. The evaluation team conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a sample of 12 teachers in the summer and fall of 2025. The participants were purposefully sampled, and the timing of the interviews

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ensured a longitudinal perspective, allowing for reflection on long-term professional stability following the post-7 October 2023 massacre.

Data collection was designed to prioritize interviewee comfort and rich narrative production. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, allowing participants flexibility, and were conducted in either Hebrew or Arabic, based on the interviewee's preference. Interviews conducted in Arabic were led by an Arabic-speaking researcher from the evaluation team. All interview transcripts were translated into Hebrew before being subjected to thematic analysis.

The analysis was a team-based thematic analysis informed by reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis team operated from a contextualist framework, viewing knowledge generated as context-specific and recognizing that the researchers' interpretation was influenced by partial perspectives (Haraway, 1988). The team included researchers with expertise in qualitative methodology and a deep understanding of the study's social and educational context.

This analysis integrated both deductive and inductive approaches to ensure theoretical grounding while remaining responsive to the data. Initially, a deductive framework was operationalized using the ecology factors defined by Achinstein et al. (2010), specifically focusing on financial, human, and social capital to systematically identify structural deficits. This top-down analysis was complemented by inductive open coding, which was essential for capturing emergent phenomena in the post-October 7th context that traditional, US-centric retention literature often overlooks. Through this dual-modal process, several novel codes surfaced, including "linguistic policing" regarding the use of Arabic, "the principal as a protective barrier" against parental interference, and the "demand for political alignment." This synthesized methodology allowed for a nuanced exploration of teacher retention that accounts for both established structural factors and localized political frictions.

This team-based approach enhanced rigor by incorporating diverse perspectives in an agreement-based approach rather than seeking simple inter-rater reliability. This process involved six stages: separate reading and initial impressions, comparison across interviews focusing on agency and professional resources, condensation of codes into topic groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006), deep scrutiny of these topic groups by the team, generation of final themes, and final refinement by the entire research team. Any disagreements were resolved through focused discussion in which team members revisited the relevant excerpts and clarified their interpretations until a shared understanding was reached. The goal of the analysis was to identify recurring themes related to motivation, the application of IC skills, the influence of administrative support, and the psychological and structural costs of tenure maintenance.

3.4. Research Positionality

The present qualitative investigation was led by a Jewish Israeli researcher with extensive experience in the field of intercultural education and conflict-affected societies. This leadership perspective, rooted in the majority society, inherently risks privileging the institutional viewpoint and potentially overlooking or understating the subtle dynamics of emotional labor and identity suppression experienced by the minority educators. This limitation, often termed 'partial perspective' (Haraway, 1988), necessitates transparency and proactive measures to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Bourke, 2014; Holmes, 2020). To mitigate these inherent biases and enrich the interpretive process, the research was conducted by an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural team. This team included one Jewish PhD specializing in religious studies, two Arab PhDs specializing in education, one Jewish PhD in sociology, and one Jewish MA in psychology. The benefit of this diverse research ecology was multi-layered. The presence of Arab colleagues was important for

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ensuring the fidelity of the data interpretation, particularly for interviews conducted and transcribed in Arabic, offering critical insight into culturally embedded meaning and the political subtext of the narratives (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019; Kerstetter, 2012). When disagreements arose between Arab and Jewish team members regarding the interpretation data, these tensions were used as analytical data. The team adopted a dialogic consensus model, where the Arab researchers' interpretation of cultural nuances and Arabic-language interviews was prioritized in the analysis of identity and safety themes. This reflexive process highlighted that even within the research team, power asymmetries regarding who gets to define reality were present and had to be actively managed.

The collaboration between colleagues specializing in sociology, education, and psychology provided interdisciplinary depth, allowing the research team to analyze the complex themes not merely as educational or administrative problems, but as manifestations of power asymmetry (Sociology), organizational culture (Education), and psychological coping mechanisms (Psychology). The juxtaposition of Jewish and Arab perspectives, coupled with the disciplinary diversity, ensured that the final thematic findings—particularly those concerning conditional inclusion and emotional neutrality—were critically challenged and triangulated across multiple cultural and theoretical frames, ultimately strengthening the rigor and validity of the qualitative results (Foote & Gau Bartell, 2011; Kezar, 2002).

4. Findings: Readiness, Resilience, and the Institutional Failure of Stable Tenure

Data from a telephone survey of 99 graduates, conducted in October 2025, revealed that 39.4% of the graduates were working in Jewish schools at the time the interviews were held, while 60.6% were not. The survey revealed that 15 teachers had left their Jewish school posts because they were hired only on a substitute basis, covering for teachers on sabbatical or maternity leave, and were subsequently dismissed or had their hours drastically reduced when the permanent teacher returned.

The thematic analysis reveals a compelling pattern: the successful cultivation of individual IC skills among the graduates stood in stark contrast to the institutional resistance encountered in the pursuit of stable professional tenure. The central thematic structure emerging from the analysis consists of three overarching themes and their respective subthemes, as shown in Table 2. Theme 1 focuses on the internal resources and competencies developed by the teachers; Theme 2 details the external, structural impediments that drove attrition; and Theme 3 captures the psychological and political costs of maintaining a sense of belonging in the majority-dominated institutions.

Table 2. Results of the Thematic Analysis.

Themes	**1. The Cultivation of Intercultural Competence and Professional Agency**	**2. Systemic Absorption Failure and the Mechanisms of Attrition**	**3. Conditional Inclusion and the Cost of Identity Negotiation**
Subthemes	1A. Professional Agency and Foundational IC.	2A. The Geographic Barrier.	3A. The Principal as a Protective Barrier.
	1B. Cultural Knowledge and Facilitation Skills.	2B. Contractual Precarity.	3B. Enforced Self-Censorship and Linguistic Policing.
			3C. The Demand for Emotional and Political Alignment.

4.1. Theme I: The Cultivation of Intercultural Competence and Professional Agency

Graduates consistently reported that the Orientation Program provided them with essential professional and cultural capital. Contrary to the deficit model often applied to minority teachers, the graduates emerged with high levels of professional agency.

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4.1.1. Professional Agency and Foundational IC

While all participants reported high motivation, the realization of that agency was dependent on the school context. The motivation to join the program was deeply linked to seeking greater professional agency and stability, elements perceived as more abundant in the Jewish state system compared to the Arab sector. The program was seen as a vital channel for accessing stable employment, often contrasting sharply with the scarcity of positions and perceived bureaucratic inefficiencies in the Arab sector. Rania, for example, described her choice to join in clear occupational terms:

> There, [in Jewish schools] it's more ordered, more organized... I can't have a job in the Arab sector. If you want to work at an Arab school, you need to wait in line, unless you have connections, and I am one of those who don't have connections... I'd have to wait until my children have grandchildren, then I'll be able to enter.

This search for professional legitimacy was reinforced by the perception that the Jewish sector provided greater autonomy and validation for their pedagogical capital, which is a core component of Foundational IC (Hisherik et al., 2025; Okken et al., 2022). Nadin articulated a stark contrast, highlighting the administrative support and autonomy she found in the Jewish school:

> In the Jewish sector there is more order than in the Arab sector. Also, I never approached my principal and told her: 'I want something' and she told me 'no', or 'no budget'. . . The management. . . is different. I always found inclusion and support in the Jewish sector. . . If I bring an idea and the principal loves the idea. . . [for example, once] she told me: 'Nadin, I have the hours, what can we do with them?', I told her: 'Let's do this for fourth grade. . . we have the national assessments soon. We will work on the assessment, give them learning strategies,' she accepted it happily. In the Arab sector, that happens less.

Nadin's experience confirms that supportive leadership valued her initiative, reinforcing her sense of efficacy and self-worth. Wurud presented a similar vocational motivation, stating that the Jewish school system was where her specific subject—art—was valued: "I would prefer a Jewish school... we don't have [it]... say in my village there is no art class. So there is no work... so I chose to be in a place that is good for me... for me as an art teacher, who appreciates the art, what I do." This confluence of factors, the search for order, financial stability, professional autonomy, and validation of specialized skill, is critical as it confirms the program's initial success in providing a pathway to enhanced agency and belonging.

4.1.2. Cultural Knowledge and Facilitation Skills

A core success of the program was its contribution to the acquisition of Cultural Knowledge (Cushner, 2025), particularly regarding Jewish heritage, holidays, and social norms. Khawla reflected on how the formal training provided depth beyond mere social exposure:

> I lived in [a Jewish city], I know the culture. . . [but still] the [Orientation] program. . . deepened my knowledge. . . even things that were new. . . and that's how you can connect things. . . understanding the reasons. . . what are the customs, it also adds to you more. . . It's true that you experience it in your life, but you don't sit and study it. . . learning adds a different aspect in my opinion.

This specialized instruction enhanced the teachers' ability to navigate the social and educational context, improving their Facilitation Level competence and bridging the gap between academic proficiency and the pragmatic, cultural literacy required for sustained cross-cultural interaction.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020285

4.2. Theme II: Systemic Absorption Failure: Structural Barriers to Tenure Stability

Despite the demonstrated individual readiness and high motivation of the graduates, the overarching institutional system consistently failed to support the formation of stable professional tenure. The mechanisms driving long-term attrition were consistently structural, pointing to a profound dysfunctionality within the retention ecology, which systematically utilized, then discarded, boundary-crossing educators (Achinstein et al., 2010).

4.2.1. The Geographic Barrier

The most severe and pervasive structural barrier reported was the pronounced geographical mismatch between the teachers' residences (the majority of graduates reside in North Israel), and the positions actively promoted for placement (concentrated overwhelmingly in the Central region). In spite of having known about this in advance, this created an untenable logistical and financial burden, transforming the pursuit of tenure into an exhausting and impractical endeavor, especially for those with family responsibilities. Wurud, for instance, noted the immediate difficulty: "They sent me to places far from my sector, from the area". For many, the travel requirements rendered the position incompatible with a sustainable work–life balance, leading to resignations and a search for jobs closer to home. Lubna explained the immense logistical burden this imposed on her as a mother:

> Most of the jobs that they offered me were in the center [of Israel]. . . Now I am a mother, and I have small children. . . a work in the [center] is something like, that is disconnected from reality. . .. It's true that I. . . want to work and I love to work, and also like that to fulfill my ambitions. . . but still, I am a mother. . . So no, they (the program) are not the ones who found me the job. . . That's why I didn't immediately start teaching after I finished the program.

The systemic failure was further underlined by explicit pressure placed on the graduates to accept these distant placements without institutional adaptation. Najakh recalled being informed of the limited options: "They put pressure at the beginning, [they told us] there are no nearby schools, 'you will go to far away schools'... They said there are no nearby schools, [and if] you do not want to receive far away schools. . . you will leave the program. I said I will try. . . I said: 'that's it, what will happen will happen, I want to start'". This pattern confirms a fundamental disconnect between the stated political goal of integration and the administrative logistics of placement, which prioritized the needs of the central institutions over the geographical constraints of the trained cohort.

4.2.2. Contractual Precarity

A critical institutional failure that actively sabotaged the long-term professional stability of the graduates was the persistent reliance on temporary contracts and the refusal to convert posts into stable, budgeted standard hours. This instability directly attacked the financial capital component of the retention ecology (Achinstein et al., 2010). As mentioned above, 15 teachers left their Jewish school posts because they were hired only on a substitute basis, and were subsequently dismissed or had their hours drastically reduced when the permanent teacher returned. This systematic utilization of prepared Arab teachers as flexible, short-term labor rather than permanent staff demonstrated a lack of institutional commitment to their long-term tenure.

This atmosphere of contractual ambiguity was compounded by a lack of clarity regarding professional incentives, which created distrust and eroded morale. Khawla, for instance, mentioned the dispute over promised benefits:

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020285

> Something came up in the [orientation] program I remember very well, which is a guarantee of employment... They promised us... and that was a very big dispute. And the matter of the in-service training was not clear either. . . if there is in-service training, there is no professional development bonus. . . You promised a bonus, then stand by your word because in the end. . . there wasn't any.

This ambiguity concerning both contract stability and professional benefits, often paired with managerial excuses regarding budget cuts, revealed that the institutional system was structurally designed to support short-term staffing gaps, not long-term career progression. The unstable nature of employment was the decisive factor forcing prepared, motivated teachers back into the Arab education system or out of the profession entirely.

4.3. Theme III: Conditional Inclusion and the Cost of Identity Negotiation

The political environment, exacerbated by the post-October 7th crisis, sharpened the boundaries of professional acceptance, revealing that inclusion was often contingent upon the suppression of the teacher's national and emotional identity.

4.3.1. The Principal as a Protective Barrier

The principal's leadership proved critical in determining the teacher's psychological safety and professional tenure. The stability and efficacy of the Arab teacher were often contingent upon the principal's willingness to act as a mediator of interethnic relations and a protective shield against institutional and communal prejudice (Achinstein et al., 2010). Hiba illustrated how a strong principal provided the necessary human and social capital:

> If there is someone. . . who is not comfortable with an Arab teacher teaching him, there is a way to deal with the matter... The principal does not agree. . . If the principal is strong. . . if the principal accepts you, the whole school will accept you. . . If the principal is good, then you won. . . She listens to us, listens to all our problems.

This protective function was important to teachers, providing institutional loyalty when teachers faced antagonism. Latifa, for instance, recalled the deep personal investment of her principal, which validated her professional legitimacy: "She [the principal] told me, Latifa, I will fight for you, I won't give up on you." This commitment from the leadership creates an essential climate of trust, mitigating the generalized fear of sanctions common among minority groups in high-conflict societies.

This supportive role extended to actively managing microaggressions and challenges from other staff members to the teacher's presence. Nadin faced repeated intrusive questioning from a Jewish teacher assistant who questioned her loyalty and intentions: "One assistant used to ask me: 'Why are you here? Why don't you work in the Arab sector? Why did you come here? You come a long way... are you thinking about something?... Are you thinking about something you want to do to us?'", Nadin reported that when she shared this with the principal: "she would... set a boundary." This decisive intervention by the principal protected the teacher from interpersonal antagonism and preserved Nadin's professional efficacy by ensuring the institutional space remained manageable.

Furthermore, after the post-October 7th massacre, the principal's role became a critical defense mechanism, offering vital institutional defense against community pressure (Silverman et al., 2024). Wurud, for example, was falsely accused by a student of making a provocative political statement—speaking badly of the prime minister. Her principal immediately managed the situation, protected Wurud from parental backlash and provided decisive support:

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020285

> The principal called me after the last class and told me: 'Wurud, everything is fine. . . you can go home calm.'. . . I told her: 'If you want to come to school on Sunday and find all the parents standing outside the school gate, either they will beat me up, or they will break my car. . . I am not going home before this matter is dealt with.' She said to me: 'You are not entering the classroom, because now if you enter, they will say you entered to improve their opinion. I will send the school grade coordinator.' The coordinator is strong. The coordinator went in and said to them: 'I want to understand what happened. . . The children told her: 'Not true, Wurud did not say that. Wurud said such and such.' The coordinator reprimanded them and told them not to invent things, not to lie.

This professional, swift intervention ensured the teacher was protected from false accusations and external communal pressure, but it should be mentioned that this would not have happened if Wurud had not been attentive and vigilant to the possibility of escalation.

At the same time, not all interviewed teachers encountered principals who functioned as a source of support, protection, and professional containment. Several teachers described managerial relationships marked by distance, heightened scrutiny, and limited pedagogical or emotional accompaniment, dynamics that significantly complicated their integration and undermined their capacity to remain in the Jewish educational system over time.

Rania's words illustrate how the same position of authority that can enable belonging and professional stability may also operate as a mechanism of control, regulation, and identity constriction. Rania, who has moved between three Jewish schools since completing the program, described a professional trajectory marked by feelings of partial visibility and non-belonging, which she attributed to inconsistent and insufficient managerial support. Reflecting on her first placement, she recalled that "the principal told me. . . [that] there wasn't a good connection between me and the students", despite later asking her to remain as a substitute teacher for maternity leave. In her second school, the absence of meaningful accompaniment was especially salient: "No one came to observe me, no one, no principal, no vice principal. . . and in the end they said that I don't speak well to the children and that the parents didn't want me to stay." Even in her current school, the third, despite reporting close relationships with students, she continues to encounter linguistic regulation by the principal, as will be further elaborated in the next subtheme.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate how managerial commitment can provide the indispensable human capital necessary to sustain the minority teacher's presence and psychological safety within the contested institutional ecology. Conversely, when such commitment is absent, managerial authority may exacerbate professional precarity, weaken teachers' sense of belonging, and undermine the conditions required for their long-term retention within the Jewish educational system.

4.3.2. Enforced Self-Censorship and Linguistic Policing

This subtheme reveals how professional acceptance frequently mandated the suppression of core identity components, compromising the IC goal of identity work (Ting-Toomey, 2009). The pressure to conform was exerted not only by colleagues but often implicitly by management through linguistic constraints. Rania reported direct instructions regarding linguistic self-censorship, indicating that the use of her mother tongue was viewed as a professional transgression: "She [the principal] told me: 'a word in Arabic slipped out, be careful, don't do that'."

This prohibition on using Arabic, even spontaneously, functions as a powerful symbolic boundary, signaling that the Jewish school is a strictly Hebrew-speaking space where the minority language is unwelcome. This requirement for linguistic self-monitoring imposes a heavy cognitive load. Dania elaborated on the pervasive self-regulation required to

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maintain legitimacy, highlighting the asymmetric power relations: "You keep your identity and your culture, but to express and speak in my language is impossible. . . You focus on what you teach... [but] you can't just come and start speaking with your language and start freely, no."

This necessity for identity containment means the teachers internalized the rule that only their professional self, the subject matter expert, was welcome, while their cultural self had to be suppressed. Rania also noted managerial attempts to disrupt the formation of supportive peer networks among Arab teachers, framed as encouragement for integration, but experienced as controlling: "The principal wanted to disperse the Arab teachers: 'All the colleagues who speak Arabic sit together there, that is not acceptable to me. . . My goal is not to separate you... but I also want you to be in contact with all the teachers, as if to disperse.'" This experience of being policed both linguistically and socially demonstrates that while the principal's power can be protective, it can also be used to enforce assimilation, demanding that the teachers dilute their cultural identity to appear integrated.

4.3.3. The Demand for Emotional and Political Alignment

The highest psychological cost was revealed in the wartime context, where the system demanded emotional compliance with the majority narrative. Wurud recounted a highly charged dialogue with her principal following a difficult incident, which exposed the conditional nature of her belonging:

> I told the principal: "If you can understand me, I am a mother. My heart aches for all mothers in the world, the side does not matter." The principal responded by saying: "Between us. . . there is no one who is not empathetic to their people, and I understand. I cannot tell you, 'you are an Arab, don't be empathetic to Arabs.' I am Jewish, I will be empathetic to Jews. . . I understand that a person is empathetic to their people, but there is no need for the students and the school to feel it". . . And that's exactly what happened, and that's what is happening. . . I (Wurud) try as hard as I can not to show any empathy [for Palestinians]. . . I know that she always wants to hear from me that I am empathetic to Jews, with the situation of the Jews, and that. . . And she is very. . . happy with my answers.

This quote shows that demands go beyond professional neutrality. It is a demand for emotional assimilation. The Palestinian teacher must perform empathy for Jewish trauma while suppressing all visible grief for their own people. This emotional labor is the steep psychological tax of conditional inclusion. This exchange vividly illustrates that while the teacher's IC fostered universal empathy, the institutional reality demanded its explicit suppression when directed toward the minority group's experience. This political boundary effectively forced the teacher to engage in profound emotional labor, transforming the maintenance of tenure into an act of sustained identity reduction.

5. Discussion: The Durability of IC Versus the Resistance to Systemic Change

This qualitative analysis confirms a fundamental paradox: the program successfully achieved its pedagogical objectives, cultivating competent and resilient educators, yet this success was hampered by systemic and political barriers to stable tenure. The teachers who graduated from the program showed resilience in the face of the inherent difficulties of being Palestinian teachers in the Jewish education system, and despite the political tensions that followed the October 7th massacre and the Israel-Gaza war (Silverman et al., 2024; Jayusi, 2025). However, the very fact that these teachers were required to demonstrate exceptional and sustained resilience underscores a deeper structural problem: resilience became a compensatory mechanism for navigating conditions that should not have been

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so hostile in the first place. In this sense, their perseverance is not simply evidence of individual strength but a marker of systemic failure, an indication that the educational system relies on extraordinary personal coping rather than addressing the institutional inequities that produce such strain.

The primary finding, exemplified in the systemic absorption failure, is that the high rate of attrition (60.6% turnover from Jewish schools) is a structural issue, not a deficit in individual teacher capacity. The graduates successfully built the human capital (pedagogical skills, Hebrew proficiency) and positive psychological capital (self-efficacy, motivation) necessary for the role, as evidenced in their cultivation of agency. However, this readiness was undermined by deficits in the structural capital and financial capital of the receiving institutional ecology (Achinstein et al., 2010; Rutherford et al., 2024). The pervasive reliance on temporary contracts and the rigidity of geographic placement demonstrate a systemic failure to provide the foundational structural stability required for tenure. The institutional system utilized the minority teachers primarily as short-term labor rather than investing in them as permanent assets.

Furthermore, the qualitative data illuminates the political and emotional cost of integration exemplified by the teachers' conditional inclusion. While the training successfully enhanced the IC of the graduates, particularly at the foundational and facilitation levels (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Okken et al., 2022), the receiving environment placed severe conditions on their ability to enact the core IC component of identity work (Muszkat-Barkan, 2022; Ting-Toomey, 2009). As shown in Figure 1, the evidence of linguistic policing and the explicit demand for emotional and political alignment demonstrates that the system enforces an assimilatory framework, where the minority educator must continuously engage in emotional labor to secure professional legitimacy (Saada & Gross, 2019). The presence of a supportive principal offered vital social capital and protection, but even this important human buffer could not erase the inherent political asymmetry or the demand for self-censorship. This persistent extraction of emotional labor destabilizes long-term professional belonging, confirming that individual resilience, even when successfully cultivated (Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Cushner, 2025; Dervin & Hahl, 2015), is insufficient to overcome entrenched power asymmetry and systemic deficits. The silver lining may be in that despite the difficulties, teachers mostly spoke of the logistical and geographic barriers rather than the political divides. This may indicate that relatively simple accommodations and resource allocations can preserve these teachers.

The persistence demonstrated by the interviewed Palestinian educators, despite the profound systemic failures and political hostility, represents a key finding of contextual adaptive resilience (Jayusi, 2025). This resilience is defined not merely as a passive individual trait but as a dynamic, adaptive process of professional survival within escalated conflict-ridden environments (Ungar, 2011). The qualitative data revealed that teachers employed specific resilience strategies, including maintaining rigorous emotional boundaries, utilizing strategic silence to navigate confrontation and suspicion (Saada & Gross, 2019), and sustaining their function as cultural mediators between students and staff (Jayusi, 2025). Their commitment to their professional identity, even when faced with explicit loyalty tests and the threat of professional precarity (Achinstein et al., 2010), underscores how the teachers' internal human capital and positive psychological capital served as anchor points for endurance (Rutherford et al., 2024). This sustained professional courage confirms that individual agency and IC, when developed, can resist external pressures.

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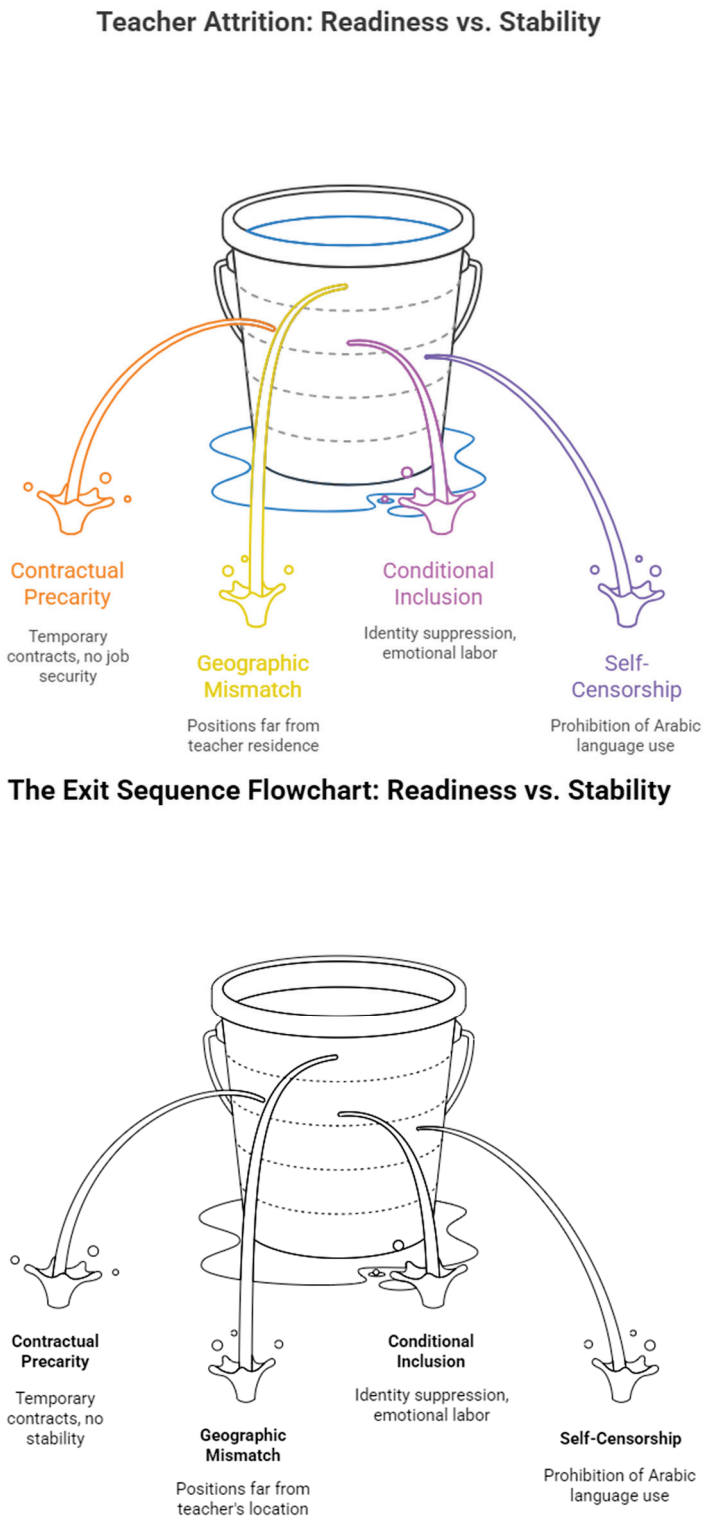


Figure 1. Teacher attrition.

Research Limitations and Future Directions

The current investigation, while providing rich longitudinal qualitative insights, is subject to specific methodological limitations that influence the generalizability of its findings. The research focused on a purposefully selected sample of program graduates who had some experience in Jewish schools. Furthermore, the study was conducted within a period of acute socio-political conflict (post-7 October 2023), which, while providing invaluable data on coping with crisis, renders the conclusions highly context-specific,

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potentially affecting their long-term durability. Future research should employ complementary methodologies, including comparative studies across diverse contexts, such as other high-intensity conflict zones or societies with entrenched power asymmetry (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019; Povey et al., 2024). Longitudinal mixed-methods designs are necessary to systematically track the long-term professional persistence and well-being of the full cohort over time, helping to distinguish between temporary crisis coping mechanisms and sustainable factors of retention (Rutherford et al., 2024). It would also be interesting to examine the coping of teachers who are the only Palestinian teachers in their school compared with teachers who have more than one Palestinian colleague. Finally, it would be of value to examine multiple case studies of boundary-crossing teachers and their principals.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that while the specialized preparation program for Palestinian boundary-crossing teachers in Jewish schools achieved success in cultivating individual IC and readiness, this achievement was curtailed by severe systemic and political barriers. The resulting professional rupture underscores that the viability of cross-cultural teaching initiatives in politically contested environments is conditional upon the host system's political will to provide structural stability and non-assimilatory inclusion (Povey et al., 2024).

The events of October 7th stripped away the veneer of shared living, revealing the raw power dynamics beneath. For boundary-crossing to be sustainable, the Israeli education system must move beyond the deficit model of training teachers to fit the system, and engage in the structural reform of the system itself. Without this, the integration of Palestinian teachers will remain a revolving door, fueled by individual hope but stalled by institutional inertia and political erasure. While high levels of individual capital were successfully developed through preparation (Cushner, 2025; Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Dervin & Hahl, 2015; Muszkat-Barkan, 2022), the ultimate retention and integration were significantly impeded by structural and political resistance (Rutherford et al., 2024). This suggests that the successful conversion of initial individual readiness into stable, long-term tenure depends heavily on the systemic capacity and support of receiving institutions.

Furthermore, the conditional inclusion and suppression of the Palestinian identity demonstrated that belonging was provisional, requiring teachers to engage in emotional labor and identity containment, particularly during the intense political period following 7 October (Saada & Gross, 2019; Silverman et al., 2024). The willingness of the Palestinian teachers to pursue integration, despite these high personal and structural costs, confirms the strategic importance of this initiative for promoting shared societal outcomes. For boundary-crossing initiatives to serve as meaningful agents of sustained social change and professional stability, policy must shift its focus from training the minority workforce to aggressively reforming the majority-dominated structures that actively undermine their long-term tenure conversion.

The study shows the importance of training programs for boundary-crossing teachers focusing on language, culture, and identit.y (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2025). The demonstrated effectiveness of the program in imparting competence and resilience, combined with the teachers' willingness to teach in the Jewish educational stream despite the high political cost, underscores its strategic importance for social cohesion. Shared living requires a fundamental shift in mindset, from viewing inclusion as a temporary concession to recognizing it as a structural principle of equity. In societies where power asymmetry is deeply entrenched, the institutional inertia, tokenistic gestures, and policies designed to preserve the status quo are especially important to overcome (Ghattas, 2025; Povey et al., 2024). When employment stability becomes foundational rather than conditional,

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it disrupts patterns of marginalization and compels long-term investment, signaling a genuine commitment to dismantling structural barriers (Achinstein et al., 2010; Rutherford et al., 2024).

The institutional ecology of receiving schools must be reformed to ensure genuine inclusion (Povey et al., 2024). This requires the development and mandate of specialized training for principals and educational teams in receiving schools, focusing on cultural inclusion protocols, power dynamics, and professional protocols for managing political tension in a non-assimilatory manner (Muszkat-Barkan, 2022). Teacher as well as principal training must move beyond cultural sensitivity to actively address organizational biases that enforce identity policing. A formal system of continuous professional and emotional support must also be institutionalized for all boundary-crossing teachers, extending beyond the first year. This support structure should provide sustained guidance on navigating organizational politics, identifying microaggressions, and the high emotional labor demands associated with the role.

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Article

Navigating the Intersecting Divide: The Role of Induction and Mentoring in Negotiating National and Cultural Tension for Palestinian Teachers in Jewish Schools

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the induction experiences of Palestinian Arab novice teachers in Jewish-majority schools in Israel during a period of intense national tension (2023–2025). Amid ongoing teacher shortages in the Jewish sector and a surplus of qualified teachers in the Arab sector, Boundary-Crossing Teaching (BCT) has become a notable phenomenon. Using semi-structured interviews and reflective journals of 23 beginning teachers and eight mentors, the study investigates how minority educators navigate cultural and political divides in a conflict-affected society. The findings reveal that during periods of heightened tension, teachers' professional identity is often overshadowed by ethnic suspicion, leading to a "dual burden" of professional and national representation. The data shows that teachers navigate national ceremonies through "strategic ambiguity"—performing outward compliance (e.g., standing for the siren) while maintaining internal identity boundaries. Furthermore, the study identifies a paradox in language dynamics: while Palestinian Arabic is often "securitized" and viewed with suspicion in staffrooms, teachers successfully leverage their linguistic background as "intercultural capital" to build empathy with students. The research finds that shared-identity mentors provide an essential "third space" for processing experiences of racism that are otherwise silenced within the school hierarchy. These empirical results demonstrate that teacher retention in conflict zones requires active institutional protection to prevent professional status from collapsing into national categorization.

Keywords: Boundary-Crossing Teaching; Palestinian Arab teachers; teacher induction; Implicit Resistance; Burden of Representation; Institutional Architecture

1. Introduction

1.1. Boundary-Crossing Teaching (BCT) in a Conflict Society

The global educational landscape increasingly prioritizes critical interculturality, necessitating tailored professional development that addresses the unique cultural needs of teachers (Karni Vizer et al., 2025; Liu, 2024). As classrooms diversify, teachers must navigate ethically and politically sensitive differences beyond standard pedagogical expertise (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Silverman et al., 2024). These expectations are particularly pronounced in societies marked by protracted conflict, where education systems often mirror broader patterns of segregation and inequality (Gutman et al., 2023).

The Israeli education system provides a clear example in this regard. Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel are mostly educated in separate school systems that differ in administration, curriculum, language of instruction, and national narratives, which limits

opportunities for meaningful intergroup contact (Lengyel & Rosen, 2015; Saada & Gross, 2019). In this segregated context, recent demographic changes and labor-market developments have encouraged increased integration of Palestinian Arab teachers into Jewish schools, a phenomenon known as Boundary-Crossing Teaching (BCT). This trend has been fueled by a significant shortage of teachers in the Jewish education sector, alongside a surplus of qualified Palestinian Arab teachers who face limited employment options within their own sector (Silverman et al., 2024).

BCT has sociopolitical implications in a deeply divided society. For Palestinian teachers, entering Jewish schools is tied to unequal power dynamics, increased visibility, and ongoing suspicion (Jayusi, 2025; Hisherik et al., 2025). These tensions intensify during the induction year, a Survival Stage for most novice teachers, compounded for minority teachers by marginalization and microaggressions (Arviv-Elyashiv et al., 2022; Saada & Gross, 2019). Consequently, the process transcends the standard need for effective mentoring and supportive conditions to prevent attrition (De Neve & Devos, 2017; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011); it becomes a critical period for navigating institutional barriers, during which professional, national, and moral identities are continuously negotiated.

The events of 7 October 2023 and the subsequent war (2023–2025) further intensified these dynamics. Heightened national suspicion, increased demands for loyalty, and the politicization of everyday interactions profoundly shaped Palestinian teachers' experiences within Jewish schools, often raising doubts about the possibility of shared living during wartime (Adam, 2023; Jayusi, 2025; Gindi et al., 2024). Against this backdrop, the present study examines how formal induction and mentoring programs support Palestinian Arab novice teachers as they face intersecting professional and identity-related challenges in Jewish-majority schools. Using qualitative data, the study introduces two conceptual lenses, Implicit Resistance and the Burden of Representation, to analyze how induction frameworks serve not only as sites of professional support but also as arenas where national boundaries, belonging, and legitimacy are continually negotiated.

1.2. Boundary-Crossing Teaching and Minority Teachers in Majority Contexts

Scholarships for boundary-crossing teachers and minority educators working within majority-dominated educational systems highlight their unique position in divided societies. Such teachers offer students rare opportunities for ongoing, everyday contact with members of the 'other' group, interactions that, under certain conditions, have been linked to reduced prejudice and increased empathy (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Karni Vizer et al., 2025). In the Israeli context, placing Palestinian Arab teachers in Jewish schools represents one of the few continuous and institutionalized forms of Jewish–Arab cooperation within the education system (Gilat et al., 2022; Jayusi & Bekerman, 2019).

Research further suggests that many cross-border teachers perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, as symbolic figures or informal ambassadors tasked with normalizing the presence of Palestinian Arabs in Jewish public spaces and challenging stereotypes through everyday pedagogical interactions (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2023; Saada & Gross, 2019). At the same time, this ambassadorial role is frequently imposed rather than voluntarily assumed, shaped by asymmetrical power relations and dominant expectations that minority teachers will represent their entire community in exemplary ways. Consequently, professional legitimacy becomes conditional, contingent upon conformity with hegemonic norms and ongoing self-monitoring and impression management.

1.3. Structural Segregation, Power, and National Identity in Israeli Education

The structural separation of Jewish and Arab education in Israel forms the broader sociopolitical context within which BCT unfolds. Parallel schooling systems not only repro-

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duce linguistic and cultural differences but also transmit divergent, and often competing, historical narratives and civic imaginaries (Lengyel & Rosen, 2015; Saada & Gross, 2019). Within Jewish schools, Palestinian teachers encounter institutional cultures shaped by Jewish national symbols, commemorative practices, and implicit expectations of loyalty, positioning them simultaneously as partial insiders and marked outsiders.

Empirical research indicates that these structural asymmetries become especially pronounced during periods of political crisis, when national identity is rendered hypervisible, and minority teachers are subjected to intensified scrutiny and suspicion (Jayusi, 2025). Under such conditions, professional identity is frequently overridden by ethnic or national categorization, transforming routine pedagogical spaces into sites of symbolic boundary-making and exclusion (Erlich Ron, 2025).

1.4. Induction, Mentoring, and Identity Negotiation in Conflict Settings

The induction year is widely seen as a crucial period in teachers' careers, characterized by emotional vulnerability, identity negotiation, and a greater need for institutional support (Arviv-Elyashiv et al., 2022). For minority teachers, induction often involves managing not only pedagogical challenges but also experiences of marginalization, microaggressions, and threats to their identity (Saada & Gross, 2019). Recent scholarship defines this challenge as the struggle to convert initial teacher readiness into 'durable professionalism,' particularly within politically contested spaces where professional tenure is constantly tested by national tensions (Gindi, 2026).

Emerging research emphasizes the potential of culturally responsive mentoring and induction programs to serve as third spaces where minority teachers can reflect on experiences of exclusion, express ambivalence, and negotiate hybrid professional identities (Bhabha, 1994; Hisherik et al., 2025). However, much of this research has focused on relatively stable political environments, providing limited insight into how induction functions during active national conflict, heightened surveillance, and loyalty policing.

1.5. Institutional Architecture: From Buffering to Betrayal

To analyze the organizational context of induction, this study utilizes the concept of Institutional Architecture, grounded in New Institutional Theory (W. R. Scott, 2014). We examine how the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars of schools shape the novice teacher's entry into the profession. Within this architecture, we identify two opposing dynamics: Institutional Buffering, in which school leaders filter out external sociopolitical toxicity to protect teachers, and Institutional Betrayal, occurring when the institution fails to protect individuals or actively perpetuates harm through neglect or exclusion. This focus allows us to move beyond individual resilience to examine structural accountability.

1.6. Implicit Resistance and the Burden of Representation

The present study is theoretically grounded in J. C. Scott's (1990) seminal work on the 'hidden transcript', which conceptualizes the subtle agency of subordinates within hierarchical power structures. While Scott's framework traditionally addresses general social relations, this research extends its application to the specific professional sphere of education during an active national conflict (2023–2025). We identify how 'implicit resistance', expressed through strategic silence and calibrated compliance, functions as a necessary professional survival mechanism for minority teachers in a securitized environment. Complementing this lens, we also utilize the Burden of Representation (Iheduru-Anderson, 2025) to analyze the emotional weight borne by Palestinian teachers who feel compelled to function as 'ambassadors' for their entire community.

Regarding the second concept, the Burden of Representation, this study builds on the framework established by Iheduru-Anderson (2025), who defines this burden as the

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combined emotional and social weight borne by professionals from underrepresented groups. While Iheduru-Anderson's (2025) analysis identifies a paradox of invisibility and hyper-visibility within academia, the present research extends this analysis to the context of active conflict (2023–2025). Within this framework, Palestinian teachers navigate a structural pressure to function as representatives of their social group, transforming routine pedagogical conduct into a form of high-stakes ethnic performance. Together, these lenses illuminate how the induction year, traditionally a survival stage for novice teachers, becomes a site where professional socialization intersects with identity negotiation under sustained political tension.

This study addresses three core research questions:

1. How do Palestinian Arab novice teachers navigate the intersection of professional and national identities in Jewish-majority schools during wartime?
2. What strategies of 'implicit resistance' and identity management do these teachers employ to cope with hegemonic national rituals?
3. In what ways does the institutional architecture (induction workshops vs. school leadership) support or betray these teachers' efforts to sustain their professional standing?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the subjective, emotional, and political dimensions of BCT during the induction year. A qualitative approach was chosen for its suitability to explore processes of identity negotiation, belonging, and agency in conflict-affected educational contexts, where professional experiences are deeply embedded in relational, institutional, and national power structures (Ruslin et al., 2022).

The study focuses on Palestinian Arab novice teachers employed in Jewish-majority schools in Israel during wartime (2023–2025), as well as on the mentors who accompanied them during their induction year. The research seeks to understand how these actors interpret, navigate, and respond to the intersecting demands of professional socialization and politicized identity positioning within segregated and conflictual educational settings.

2.2. Participants

Novice Teachers: The study cohort comprised 23 Palestinian Arab novice teachers in their induction year, employed in Jewish-majority schools across the Central, Northern, and Jerusalem districts. They taught a diverse range of subjects, including English, mathematics, science, special education, the arts, and the humanities. The final sample size of 23 novice teachers was determined by a combination of thematic saturation and contextual constraints. By the 23rd participant, recurring patterns of identity negotiation and implicit resistance became evident across the triangulated data sources. Furthermore, the data collection period coincided with the 2023–2025 war, which imposed logistical and security challenges. Several potential participants declined to be interviewed due to heightened national tensions, resulting in the cancelation of planned focus groups and several individual interviews. Data collection relied on the triangulation of sources: 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews and 15 reflective journals, with four participants contributing both data types (see Table 1). This combination enabled access to both retrospective accounts and contemporaneous reflections.

Mentors: In addition, eight induction workshop mentors were interviewed to provide institutional and pedagogical perspectives. The mentor group included six Palestinian Arab and two Jewish mentors with professional experience ranging from 2 to 15 years in facilitating induction workshops (see Table 2). Mentors played a central role in mediating

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institutional norms and supporting identity negotiation, making their perspectives essential for contextualizing teachers' accounts.

Table 1. Characteristics of Novice Palestinian Teachers (N = 23) (Interviewees and Journal Contributors).

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Region	Subject	School Type	Data Source
Shams	31	Woman	Haifa	Photography/Cinema	High School	Interview + Journal
Ibtisam	37	Woman	Taybe	Special Ed.	Special Ed.	Interview
Areen	24	Woman	Triangle	Special Ed. (Math/Sci)	Special Ed.	Interview + Journal
Sawsen	30	Woman	Triangle	Special Ed.	Special Ed.	Interview
A'jwan	40	Woman	Jerusalem	English	Elementary	Interview
Rauda	27	Woman	Haifa	Music	Special Ed.	Interview + Journal
Rawan	25	Woman	North	Hebrew Lit.	High School	Interview
Amal	27	Woman	North	Spoken Arabic	Elementary	Interview
Amira	29	Woman	North	Arabic	Elementary	Interview
Wurud	29	Woman	North	Art	Elem. + Middle	Interview
Abir	34	Woman	Triangle	Mathematics	Elementary	Interview + Journal
Kamal	27	Man	Jerusalem	Science	High School	Interview
Lina	29	Woman	Triangle	Inclusive Special Ed.	Special Ed.	Journal
Samira	32	Woman	Triangle	Special Ed.	Kindergarten	Journal
Reem	28	Woman	Triangle	English	Special Ed.	Journal
Layla	22	Woman	Triangle	Special Ed.	High School	Journal
Manal	23	Woman	Triangle	Special Ed.	Special Ed.	Journal
Shiryn	31	Woman	Triangle	Secondary	High School	Journal
Yasmin	23	Woman	Triangle	Elementary	Elementary	Journal
Miriam	26	Woman	Triangle	Elementary	Elementary	Journal
Hanin	26	Woman	Triangle	Special Ed.	Special Ed.	Journal
Nasreen	31	Woman	Triangle	Secondary	High School	Journal
Ali	26	Man	Triangle	Elementary	Elementary	Journal

Table 2. Characteristics of Induction Workshop Mentors (N = 8).

Pseudonym	Degree	Experience (Years)	Origin	Region
Mona	PhD	2	Arab	North
Sabrin	PhD	8	Arab	Center
Raja'a	PhD	13	Arab	North
Adil	PhD	2	Arab	Center
Barbara	PhD	15	Jewish	Center
Alia	PhD	11	Arab	North
Pazit	MA	10	Jewish	Haifa
Marwa	PhD	15	Arab	Jerusalem

2.3. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

In accordance with the requirements for methodological integrity in critical qualitative research, we include a reflexivity statement. The research team consists of scholars specializing in teacher induction and multiculturalism in divided societies. Our positioning is defined by an 'ethical attentiveness' to the participants' emotional safety during active conflict. We recognize that our own identities influence the power dynamics of the interviews.

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To mitigate bias, we employed triangulation across data sources (interviews, journals, and mentor accounts) and conducted iterative peer debriefing (Levitt et al., 2021) to ensure that the themes emerged from participants' lived meanings rather than being imposed by our theoretical predispositions.

2.4. Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with novice teachers and mentors, these were conceptualized as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interview guide was designed to discuss the induction workshop experience and elicit narratives about professional challenges, identity negotiation, experiences of belonging or exclusion, and perceptions of institutional support. Given the political sensitivity of the research context, interviews were conducted with heightened ethical attentiveness to participants' emotional safety.

Reflective Journals: Produced throughout the induction year as part of formal requirements, these journals documented ongoing reflections. They captured everyday encounters with students, parents, and colleagues, as well as emotional responses, moments of uncertainty, and experiences of microaggressions. The journals were valuable for accessing 'hidden transcripts' (J. C. Scott, 1990), experiences that participants were hesitant to articulate in interviews due to fear or self-censorship. The workshop mentors gave the novice teachers letters from the research team describing the research and consent forms to be filled out if they agreed to participate. The research team received the reflective journals only from the teachers who consented to participate.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six-phase framework of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). Analysis began with repeated close readings to achieve deep familiarity with the data. Initial coding focused on recurring patterns related to professional vulnerability, national identity, emotional labor, and coping strategies. Themes were then developed through sustained engagement between participants' narratives and relevant theoretical frameworks, specifically implicit resistance, the burden of representation, and institutional architecture. Rather than imposing predefined categories, themes were refined to capture both participants' lived meanings and the structural conditions shaping their experiences. To enhance methodological transparency and demonstrate the thematic filtering process, Table 3 provides concrete examples of the transition from raw participant narratives to initial semantic codes and analytical themes, illustrating how empirical data were synthesized with the study's theoretical lenses.

Table 3. Examples of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and Filtering Process.

Raw Data Excerpt (Participant Narrative)	Initial Semantic Codes	Analytical/Latent Theme
"I stand [during the siren], everything is normal. . . [But inside I say]: I do not want to stand. . . these are your soldiers, I cannot." (Ibtisam)	Performative compliance; Internal monolog; Symbolic nonconformity.	Implicit Resistance (J. C. Scott, 1990)
"I changed from Rawan, the colleague, to Rawan, the Arab. . . this instability is very unpleasant." (Rawan)	Ethnic profiling; Fragile professional status; Frame-switching.	Conditional Belonging & Politicized Professionalism
"I need to be the representative. . . in my behavior. . . so I change all the stereotypes they have in their minds." (A'jwan)	Ambassadorial role; Impression management; Collective accountability.	Burden of Representation (Iheduru-Anderson, 2025)

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Table 3. *Cont.*

Raw Data Excerpt (Participant Narrative)	Initial Semantic Codes	Analytical/Latent Theme
"The principal gave me full backing. . . she did not protect the child because of a mother who has connections." (Rawan)	Managerial protection; Moral signal; De-securitizing identity.	Institutional Architecture: Buffering
"He [the principal] told me, 'You see that door? That is the exit door. If you are not comfortable. . . leave'." (A'jwan)	Conditional hospitality; Professional precarity; Active exclusion.	Institutional Architecture: Betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014)

As shown in Table 3, themes were filtered through a recursive process. We first identified semantic patterns in the narratives (e.g., mentions of white shirts or sirens). These were then 'filtered' and elevated to analytical themes by applying the conceptual lenses of Implicit Resistance and the Burden of Representation, ensuring a synthesis between empirical evidence and theoretical depth.

2.6. Ethical Rigor and Trustworthiness

The study's methodological integrity was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, journals, and mentor accounts (Levitt et al., 2021). The research was conducted during an ongoing war (2023–2025), which created significant constraints, including interview cancelations and the cancelation of a planned focus group due to security concerns. Participants' hesitation and self-censorship were treated not merely as limitations but as meaningful empirical data, reflecting the climate of surveillance and precarity. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed to ensure confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained, and ethical approval was secured in accordance with institutional guidelines.

3. Results

3.1. Theme 1: Politicized Professionalism and Conditional Belonging

For Palestinian Arab novice teachers in Jewish-majority schools, professional identity is constituted within a highly politicized field, where national belonging and security issues permeate everyday pedagogical spaces. Consequently, these teachers operate under a regime of conditional belonging, in which professional legitimacy is fragile and contingent on hegemonic norms (Gilat et al., 2022). Within this structure, the burden of representation (Iheduru-Anderson, 2025) forces them to constantly navigate the tension between acting as individual educators and being profiled as representatives of a stigmatized collective, rendering their professional standing perpetually vulnerable to securitized scrutiny.

3.1.1. The Hyper-Visible School: From Colleague to Security Threat

National tensions, particularly during the 2023–2025 wars, transformed schools into what participants described as environments of intense scrutiny, approximating a space of hyper-visibility where minor deviations carried severe consequences. The case of Ibtisam illustrates the speed at which professional status can collapse under such conditions. During the war, an inside joke circulated in a private WhatsApp group was inadvertently forwarded to the school staff group:

They handed out popsicles. . . on the note, they wrote sentences like 'We will eat popsicles in the sea of Gaza'. . . I took a picture for my friends. . . someone wrote 'We are all candies in the wrapper of the Israeli flag' and someone else wrote 'Pigs'. . . I accidentally

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forwarded the picture to the teachers' group… They sent me to a disciplinary hearing… and fired me.

Ibtisam's account demonstrates how an unintended act was swiftly transformed into a political indictment. Her established professional reputation and positive relationships with parents and colleagues ("There are parents I visit, and we ask about each other") proved insufficient to protect her. This incident exemplifies how the security logic overrides pedagogical logic, and errors are treated as evidence of disloyalty rather than as human lapses (Jayusi, 2025; Gindi et al., 2024).

A similar instability was articulated by Rawan, who described the rapid shift from collegial belonging to ethnic suspicion following security events: "If a terror attack happens, I feel discomfort from my colleagues… they look at you as if it is your fault, you Arabs… I changed from Rawan, the colleague, to Rawan, the Arab… this instability is very unpleasant."

This forced frame-switching underscores how professional identity is subordinated to national categorization, revealing the tenuous nature of inclusion within Jewish school spaces during times of crisis.

3.1.2. Experiencing Hostility as a Symptom of Structural Power

Within this broader structure of politicized professionalism, direct hostility from students and parents manifests as a reflection of societal narratives that breach the classroom walls. Manal described a parental accusation that reframed her religious identity as a security threat: "The parents wrote that there is an Arab teacher who is teaching our children the thoughts of the terrorists… He told me: 'My father said anyone who fasts and prays and is Muslim is a terrorist.'"

This illustrates identity threat, whereby normative religious practices are essentialized and weaponized to delegitimize professional authority. The emotional toll of such encounters is expressed in Sawsen's account of a young child's rejection:

He told me, 'Are you Arab'? … I do not want you here… [he was] talking about Hamas and the security situation… I brought it up in the induction workshop… And I received guidance… I felt I was this little [hand gesture] … I felt like I could not survive… I was blessed with a very good, perfect counselor; she is like a sister, like a friend, and like a mother… She accompanied me and strengthened me… It took a lot of time to watch, help, and connect me with this child, and thank God we succeeded. We got to the point where he would hug me and forget about it [the politics].

Sawsen's description of feeling 'small' reflects the embodied impact of racism and exclusion. However, her ability to process the incident within the induction workshop and eventually restore the relationship with the child demonstrates a form of constrained agency, resilience enacted within a hostile structure.

3.1.3. The Ambassadorial Role: Survival Strategy and Emotional Labor

Faced with these high risks, teachers described adopting an involuntary ambassadorial role as a strategy for professional survival. This aligns with the concept of the Burden of Representation, in which minority educators feel compelled to demonstrate exemplary professionalism to counter collective stereotypes (Iheduru-Anderson, 2025). A'jwan articulated this form of identity management:

I do not think I am an 'Arab teacher in a Jewish school'… I am an English teacher, that's it… but I sometimes tell myself I need to be the representative… in my behavior… so I change all the stereotypes they have in their minds.

This constant self-monitoring reflects intense emotional labor and impression management, transforming routine teaching into a form of political performance. As Alia, an

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16030394

experienced mentor, observed: "They are convinced they are really doing good… they want to represent their society positively… so the students recognize good people, not necessarily terrorists… and all the stereotypes they think about Arabs."

This internal pressure was palpable in Yasmin's journal, where she noted the cognitive exhaustion required to calibrate her reactions to microaggressions constantly:

A student might ask an inappropriate question related to Arab origin in a negative context… I struggled to find the right way to react, whether to ignore it, not to escalate… or react firmly… It requires great mental resilience to handle such situations while maintaining professionalism.

Taken together, these findings reveal that for these teachers, the burden of representation is not episodic but structural. It intensifies during periods of national crisis, amplifying the emotional load and reinforcing the fragility of their professional standing.

3.2. Theme 2: Navigating National Memory: Implicit Resistance in Rituals

National memorial days—specifically Holocaust Remembrance Day and Memorial Day—emerged as acute flashpoints, transforming the school into a space of heightened national performance. The findings reveal that for Palestinian teachers, these events represent a collision between their professional obligations and their national memory. Rather than succumbing to a choice between assimilation and overt rebellion, the teachers adopted sophisticated strategies of implicit resistance and identity navigation. By maintaining a hidden transcript (J. C. Scott, 1990) behind a facade of compliance, they safeguarded their internal identity as they navigated the demands of the hegemonic Jewish space.

3.2.1. Strategic Ambiguity and Agency Under Constraint

A central strategy employed by the teachers was strategic ambiguity, allowing them to evade political confrontation without explicitly validating the Zionist narrative. A'jwan demonstrated this in a dialog with her students regarding the siren on Memorial Day[1], navigating the tension between professional safety and ideological integrity:

They asked me: 'If you hear the siren, do you stand and show respect?' I told them: 'If I am at home and sitting, no.'…It was hard for me to explain to them that everyone… for them it is Independence, for us it is something else.

A'jwan's discourse is calculated and cautious. She avoids explicit terms like 'Palestine' or 'Nakba,' which are considered taboo in Jewish-Israeli society, particularly since October 2023. This act represents agency under constraint (Karni Vizer et al., 2025). She does not lie to the students, nor does she capitulate; instead, she carves out a linguistic space that hints at a counter-narrative without exposing herself to sanction. Notably, even within the safe space of the research interview, she uses a vague phrase, "something else". Yet despite her caution, her implicit opposition is evident when she reveals details of her conduct at home to the students, even though she had the opportunity to avoid it. In doing so, she maintains a boundary between her professional persona and her personal truth.

Ibtisam described a similar process of performative loyalty, creating a split between her physical actions—standing when the memorial day siren sounds—and her internal monolog. While her body performs compliance (standing when the siren sounds), her consciousness maintains a rigid identity boundary: "It is fine, like standing… I stand, everything is normal, you cannot be different… [But inside I say]: Come on, I do not want to stand… these are your soldiers, I cannot… also, this is about respect."

This internal splitting represents a mechanism of the hidden transcript (J. C. Scott, 1990), in which the subordinate group enacts a public performance that satisfies the powerful while privately rejecting its meaning. For Amal, participation in ceremonies was an act of instrumental compliance designed solely to avoid the panoptic gaze of the school

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16030394

community: "They sang songs out of pain, and I did not have a feeling for it. . . I stood with everyone. . . A white shirt is a white shirt, why not a black shirt? I did not like to be exceptional."

Amal's focus on the 'white shirt' reduces the national ritual to a mere dress code. This instrumentalization allows her to participate physically while remaining emotionally absent, thereby neutralizing the event's threat to her identity. Shams summarized the profound personal cost of this silence, highlighting the dissonance between professional role and personal self:

Even when I disagree with the content at school or with students' behavior, I avoid expressing my opinion. I knew my role was professional, not personal, but deep down, I wanted to maintain my identity and the principles I grew up with.

3.2.2. Respectful Detachment Versus Universal Empathy

Other teachers employed a strategy of respectful detachment, framing their participation not as identification with the narrative, but as a professional duty to respect the 'other.' Shirin defined this boundary clearly: "I participated in the ceremony, stood with them in cooperation and with some empathy. . . I stopped out of respect for the situation, out of an internal sense of the importance of these memories for others."

The emphasis on 'for others' serves as a cognitive buffer, allowing Shirin to validate Jewish grief without appropriating it. Similarly, Samira found agency in silence, using it to maintain a safe distance:

I felt disconnected. . . especially when I stood as an Arab among teachers radiating strong feelings of heritage, while I experienced the events completely differently. . . I chose to be in a respectable place, to be there in silence. . . even if I did not experience everything everyone else experienced.

In contrast, Reem navigated this tension through strategic avoidance, physically absenting herself from the preparation phase to preserve her sense of belonging during routine times:

A week before Memorial Day, there was always talk among the staff about preparations. . . I was not involved because I would not be present on this day, so I did not take part in the arrangements. . . Usually, I feel part of the team.

Conversely, a minority of teachers bridged the conflict through a universalist humanist narrative, creating a third space (Bhabha, 1994) of shared emotion. Lina described a moment of genuine convergence: "It was a moving day. Very, very sad to hear crying. . . I felt I was part of the school because they told us what this day means." Nasreen reinforced this approach, bypassing the national conflict through human empathy: "The survivors' personal stories deeply touched my heart. . . I dealt with the feelings by listening. . . identifying on a basic human level."

In summary, the negotiation of national narratives reveals that Palestinian teachers do not act as passive recipients of hegemonic rituals. Instead, they employ a spectrum of implicit resistance strategies, ranging from the internal rejection described by Ibtisam to the instrumental compliance of Amal and the strategic avoidance of Reem. Even those who connect emotionally, like Lina, do so through a universalist lens that transcends specific national boundaries. These findings suggest that for minority teachers, professional survival involves continuous, invisible identity work. They succeed in functioning as Israeli teachers externally while safeguarding a distinct Palestinian 'self' internally, preventing total assimilation into the dominant narrative.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16030394

3.3. Theme 3: Institutional Architecture: Buffering, Brokering, and the Third Space

This theme examines the structural capacity of the educational ecosystem to support the boundary-crossing teacher. The findings reveal that resilience is not solely an individual trait, but a product of an institutional architecture (W. R. Scott, 2014) composed of two distinct arenas: the school (the site of practice) and the induction workshop (the site of processing). Effective alignment of these support mechanisms is essential for mitigating the 'reality shock' (Veenman, 1984) intrinsic to the induction phase, thereby serving as a critical factor in preventing attrition and ensuring the retention of minority teachers within the system. When aligned, these arenas function as a protective shield; when fractured, they lead to institutional betrayal.

3.3.1. Within School: Management and Mentoring as Protective Shields

Effective school leadership proved critical in stabilizing the BCT's position. Institutional buffering went beyond mere technical support; it served as a moral signal redefining the community boundary. Rawan's account of her principal's intervention when a student exhibited exclusionary views regarding Arab culture illustrates this dynamic. By refusing to capitulate to racist parental pressure, the principal effectively disrupted the external political logic: "The principal gave me full backing. . . she did not protect the child because of a mother who has connections. . . I really appreciate her for that."

This act de-securitizes the teacher's identity. The principal used her institutional authority to assert that professional norms supersede ethnic prejudices. Similarly, the in-school mentor acted as a cultural broker, translating implicit codes and leveraging social capital. Barbara, a Jewish mentor, demonstrated this by actively intervening to dismantle social isolation:

So, one of them [Arab intern]. . . said she feels alienated. . . Immediately. . . I turned to the pedagogical coordinator there. And then the coordinator did a very nice job and gave her a place. . . and now she is part of the team.

Here, the mentor acts as a bridge, converting her own status into access for the marginalized teacher. This active buffering fosters a broader sense of safety and peer acceptance.

3.3.2. The Workshop as a Third Space: Unmasking and Identity Work

While the school provides professional protection, the induction workshop emerged as a unique third space (Bhabha, 1994), a home away from the hegemonic gaze where teachers could shed their professional masks (Goffman, 2023). Unlike the school, where teachers often engaged in self-monitoring, the workshop, facilitated mainly by Palestinian Arab mentors, enabled the authentic processing of political pain and identity conflicts.

Samira described the workshop as an emotional and professional anchor: "We waited for Thursday. . . I learned things that helped me, for example, about the holidays. . . [The mentor] provided crucial information. Beyond pedagogy, the workshop functioned as a site for identity validation." Sawsen, who faced racist remarks from a student, "I do not want you here. . . Hamas", used the workshop to process the trauma that she had to repress in the classroom: "I raised it in the workshop. . . and received guidance. . . on how to solve it. . . I felt I could not survive [without it]."

The shared national identity with the mentor allowed for 'back stage' discourse (Goffman, 2023). As Sabrin, a mentor, noted: "They are free to talk. If it were [a Jewish mentor], it would be harder. . . Because I am Arab, it helps them open up". This space transformed the sense of alienation into a collective professional strength, allowing teachers to return to the 'front stage' of the school with renewed resilience.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16030394

3.3.3. The Collapse of the Buffer: Institutional Abandonment and Conditional Hospitality

Conversely, when this architecture fails to protect the employee, the result is institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014). A'jwan's experience with a principal who designated the exit door as a solution to her distress exemplifies conditional hospitality. She describes how a single statement can shatter a new teacher's confidence: "He [the principal] told me, 'You see that door? That is the exit door. If you are not comfortable in this school, leave.' Meaning, he really made me feel. . . as if he was telling me, you do not belong here."

This interaction creates a professional environment defined by precarity. Similarly, Shams described social avoidance as a form of passive exclusion. The staff's refusal to engage directly, using the counselor as a buffer, relegated her to a 'sterile' professional zone: "I noticed that they are afraid to ask me questions. . . every time they wanted something, they sent the counselor".

In conclusion, a successful induction architecture requires dual-layered support: active buffering and brokerage within the school to manage the 'front stage,' combined with a safe, identity-affirming third space in the workshop to process the emotional labor of the back stage arena. Resilience is therefore not merely an inherent trait of the teacher, but a collaborative product of an ecosystem willing to invest in the inclusion of minority staff.

3.4. Theme 4: Linguistic Power Dynamics: Between Securitization and Intercultural Capital

Language and cultural differences emerged as contested terrain within power relations. The findings reveal tension between the stigmatization of linguistic difference, in which Palestinian Arabic becomes an object of suspicion, and teachers' capacity to convert their cultural backgrounds into 'intercultural capital.'

3.4.1. Converting Vulnerability into Relational Assets

At the classroom level, certain teachers exercised pedagogical initiative by reframing linguistic deficiency as a resource for connection-building. Wurud leveraged her Hebrew errors to disrupt conventional power dynamics between teachers and students. By inviting student corrections, she humanized her authority and narrowed cultural distance: "Yes, the kids would. . . sometimes I would make mistakes in words, and the kids would, like, correct me . . . it was educational."

When institutionally supported, Arab culture shifted from disadvantage to 'intercultural capital.' Amira commended her principal for recognizing Muslim holidays not as a symbolic gesture but as legitimate institutional knowledge, an approach consistent with intercultural pedagogy principles (Banks, 2015):

During the holidays, on the Prophet's birthday, the principal would always share with the group. . . he would explain what [the holiday] was. He did not settle for 'Happy Holiday.' Instead, what is the holiday. . . what is its definition, and what do they do about it? So that was very helpful.

Similarly, Abir noted how the religious observance of Ramadan became a point of empathy and connection, shifting the gaze from suspicion to curiosity: "Always in Ramadan they pity me. . . The teachers and kids too, 'Abir, when will it end?'. . . I did a unit on it. . . I also entered the 3rd grade, and they are interested."

3.4.2. Systemic Barriers: Cognitive Load and Bureaucratic Neglect

Despite these individual successes, the structural toll of the language barrier remains heavy. Adil emphasized the cognitive load of juggling multiple linguistic systems: "We are talking about science teachers. . . dealing with four language systems. . . it creates a cognitive challenge." Sabrin pointed to bureaucratic failures in language support, which teachers interpreted not as technical delays but as symbolic systemic rejection: "They get

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language support. . . but unfortunately, all this is done toward the end of the year. . . This leaves them exposed and makes them feel that the system does not really want them."

3.4.3. The Securitization of Arabic

Most critically, Raja'a revealed how the Arabic language undergoes securitization within the staffroom. Her observation exposes a hierarchy of foreignness in which Arabic is perceived as a threat. At the same time, other languages are accepted as benign diversity: "There was a comment from one of the teachers: 'It's not okay that they speak Arabic'. . . They compared them with Russian teachers. . . why don't they comment on them? Why? Two teachers speaking Arabic is problematic."

This theme reveals the dual character of language and culture during the induction process. Teachers like Wurud and Amira demonstrate that with institutional affirmation and strategic engagement, cultural differences can foster connection and enrich school communities. Yet the systemic reality remains constraining. The politicization of Palestinian Arabic (as Raja'a describes) and institutional neglect (as Sabrin notes) indicate that the educational system has not yet entirely shifted from pathologizing difference to valuing it as an asset. Genuine integration demands the de-securitization of Palestinian Arabic and recognition of Palestinian teachers' cultural resources as essential components of the school's pedagogical richness.

4. Discussion

4.1. Theorizing Survival and the Conditions for Critical Interculturalism

The integration of Palestinian Arab teachers into Jewish-majority schools has traditionally been examined through the lens of professional socialization or cultural adaptation. However, the findings of the current study suggest that during periods of intractable conflict, this framework is insufficient. We propose reframing the induction year not merely as a phase of career entry, but as a high-stakes arena of political survival. By synthesizing the participants' narratives through the conceptual lenses of Implicit Resistance (J. C. Scott, 1990) and the Burden of Representation (Iheduru-Anderson, 2025), we argue that behaviors often interpreted as compliance, such as standing for the siren or rigorous self-monitoring, function as calculated survival mechanisms within a securitized institutional architecture. This synthesis indicates that for these teachers, professional identity is not a fixed asset but is continuously negotiated against the threat of national suspicion.

4.2. The Induction Workshop as a Third Space for Identity Negotiation

The findings confirm that the induction workshop functions as a third space (Bhabha, 1994), where teachers can shed the masks (Goffman, 2023) they are compelled to wear in the Jewish school. This framework enables the authentic processing of the intense emotional labor and identity conflicts inherent in boundary-crossing teaching, (Darr, 2020). The study, however, nuances this finding by illustrating that the workshop's status as a sanctuary is contingent rather than guaranteed, depending mainly on a shared national identity between mentor and mentee. The presence of a Palestinian Arab mentor transforms the space into a backstage arena (Goffman, 2023), thereby removing the need for self-censorship and enabling authentic engagement with professional identity amid conflict.

4.3. Implicit Resistance as Professional Survival

The study offers a new theoretical lens for understanding minority teacher behavior: implicit resistance. This functions as a rational response to structural power asymmetries within Jewish-majority school systems. Rather than engaging in overt opposition, which entails professional risk, boundary-crossing teachers adopt strategic compliance, including

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16030394

silence, ambiguity, and emotional distancing, to preserve their identity while maintaining professional legitimacy. This perspective identifies these behaviors not merely as pedagogical adaptations or difficulties with induction, but as political survival mechanisms. This dynamic extends J. C. Scott's (1990) concept of the hidden transcript into the professional sphere of education in conflict contexts. Examining the experiences of Palestinian Arab teachers during this period of heightened national tension (2023–2025) may provide a helpful perspective on the intersection of professional identity and political survival. Within this framework, participation in national commemorative practices exposes a latent political curriculum in which alignment with dominant national narratives becomes a condition for professional inclusion.

The application of J. C. Scott's (1990) lens in this study was guided by empirical data, particularly participants' descriptions of their conduct on national memorial days. The findings, such as teachers standing for the siren while internally rejecting the Zionist narrative, revealed a clear 'hidden transcript' where professional compliance serves as a mask for identity preservation. We used Scott's framework to conceptualize the rational survival strategies identified in teachers' accounts of navigating hegemonic rituals in Jewish-majority schools.

4.4. The Heavy Cost of the Burden of Representation in Conflict Settings

The findings of this study reinforce the conceptualization of the burden of representation as a 'minority tax' that compels educators from marginalized groups to work harder to reach the professional 'starting line.' In Jewish schools, Palestinian teachers are frequently required to engage in ongoing impression management (Goffman, 2023) to counter negative stereotypes, turning everyday professional conduct into a form of ethnic and national performance (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). Although they seek to be recognized simply as educators, the system constantly interprets them as representatives. This research aligns with Iheduru-Anderson's (2025) assertion that underrepresentation creates a paradox of simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility, where the personal conduct of minority professionals is intensely scrutinized as a reflection of their entire community. While Iheduru-Anderson identifies this burden as a product of systemic racism and gendered exclusion within academia, the present study extends this conceptualization by applying it to the context of active national conflict (2023–2025).

For Palestinian teachers in Jewish-majority schools, the pressure to perform as ambassadors is not merely an effort to navigate professional hurdles in career advancement, but a fundamental mechanism for political survival. The study shows that this emotional labor is structural: routine pedagogical conduct is transformed into a form of high-stakes ethnic and national performance, where any minor lapse or 'hidden transcript' can be swiftly turned into a political indictment. This relentless demand to counter negative stereotypes or to function as 'super-teachers' drains the cognitive and emotional resources needed for teaching, placing these educators at heightened risk of burnout and attrition, a dynamic widely associated with increased teacher turnover (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

The study moves beyond the focus on individual resilience described by Iheduru-Anderson (2025) as a survival tool, toward a proposed Whole-Ecosystem Approach (WEA). The research argues that the burden of representation during conflict cannot be effectively navigated through personal fortitude alone, as reliance on individual strength often masks systemic failure. Instead, it requires robust institutional architecture to prevent institutional betrayal. This includes creating identity-affirming 'third spaces,' such as induction workshops facilitated by shared-identity mentors, that enable teachers to process the political and emotional costs that must remain suppressed on the classroom's front stage.

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4.5. Toward a Whole-Ecosystem Approach (WEA)

The findings indicate that effective support for Palestinian Arab teachers in Jewish-majority schools must extend beyond the confines of induction workshops. Our data reveals a critical structural gap within the 'institutional architecture' (W. R. Scott, 2014) of the induction process: while these workshops successfully function as a 'third space' for identity validation, they often operate in isolation from the school's 'first space'. Without consistent 'institutional buffering' from school leadership, the professional resilience fostered in these workshops becomes difficult to maintain. The diverse experiences of participants highlight that a sustainable ecosystem requires a deliberate alignment of pedagogical mentoring with administrative advocacy. When these systems are decoupled, a form of 'institutional betrayal' (Smith & Freyd, 2014) occurs, wherein the institution provides professional training but fails to protect the teacher from external political pressures. Consequently, this study proposes a Whole-Ecosystem Approach (WEA). By extending existing ecological models (e.g., Zavelevsky & Lishchinsky, 2020) to the specific context of intractable conflict, the WEA framework posits that a viable ecosystem must synchronize pedagogical support with active political protection to ensure long-term professional integration.

First, pre-service preparation would do well to shift from liberal cultural competence to critical intercultural pedagogy (Karni Vizer et al., 2025). This includes structured engagement with dominant national narratives and advanced professional Hebrew training prior to entry, reducing the cognitive load and linguistic insecurity described in the findings. Furthermore, institutional accountability is paramount, as school leadership, particularly principals, serves as the primary safeguard against institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Administrative support is a key predictor of resilience, whereas institutional silence signals complicity; therefore, training for Jewish principals on managing diverse staff in wartime is essential. Finally, mentoring roles should be expanded beyond pedagogy to include institutional mediation and advocacy, positioning mentors as identity brokers who actively dismantle barriers within the school system. Taken together, these findings suggest that the induction of Palestinian teachers into Jewish-majority schools represents a complex professional context shaped by power asymmetries and ongoing national conflict. Novice teachers must navigate dual pressures of professional socialization and representational burden, often employing implicit resistance strategies to maintain personal and professional integrity. However, when induction workshops provide protected reflective spaces, and schools offer institutional support through leadership and mentoring, BCT can enable professional growth rather than mere survival. Sustainable integration requires a shift from viewing identity as a hurdle to be mitigated, to recognizing it as a site of active negotiation where minority teachers' cultural resources are valued as intercultural assets.

4.6. Limitations and Future Research

A significant limitation was the methodological impact of the ongoing war (2023–2025), which reduced the planned sample size and necessitated canceling several focus groups and individual interviews due to security concerns and participants' hesitation. While thematic saturation was reached within the current cohort of 23 interviews, as recurring patterns of implicit resistance and conditional belonging became evident, the climate of fear and self-censorship during wartime likely influenced the depth of political discourse. This constraint, however, underscores the 'hidden transcript' (J. C. Scott, 1990) that characterizes the induction of minority teachers in conflict zones, where silence is a form of survival. Future research should employ focus groups to examine how peer networks among minority teachers facilitate collective strategies for navigating political identity. Additionally, longitudinal studies following teachers into their second and third years are needed to

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examine whether the representational burden leads to burnout or to the development of stronger coping mechanisms. Finally, future inquiries should assess the impact of structured institutional training for Jewish principals and staff on minority teachers' sense of safety and professional integration.

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Notes

[1] The Memorial Day siren is a steady, continuous tone that brings all of Israel to a complete standstill. Unlike emergency alarms that fluctuate in pitch, this siren is a flat sound designed to signal a collective moment of silence and reflection for Jewish citizens of Israel. When it sounds, life in most of the country physically freezes with the exception of Arab and ultra-orthodox town: pedestians stop walking, businesses pause, and drivers pull over on busy highways to stand at attention beside their vehicles.

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Article

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

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

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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.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020178

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.

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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.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020178

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.

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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.

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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:

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020178

> 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:

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020178

> 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.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020178

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

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020178

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.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020178

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).

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020178

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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Article

The IMAGINE Programme: Inspiring Innovative Practice for Intercultural and Democratic Teacher Education in Europe

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Abstract

In increasingly multicultural societies, preparing teachers to engage effectively with human diversity and to foster inclusive, equitable, and democratic learning environments has become a central priority for teacher education. This study examines (1) how a human diversity perspective contributes to the conceptualisation and development of intercultural and democratic competences in teacher education, and (2) how non-formal, participatory, dialogical, experiential, and heritage-based pedagogies support the development of these competences among pre-service and in-service teachers through participation in the IMAGINE programme. Moving beyond approaches that primarily frame diversity in terms of cultural difference, minority status, or racialised identities, the study conceptualises human diversity as an inherent condition of contemporary democratic societies and explores its potential as both a conceptual framework and a pedagogical resource for competence development. Drawing on established international frameworks, particularly Deardorff's model of intercultural competence and the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), the study adopts a qualitative longitudinal case study design to examine IMAGINE, an annual residential teacher education seminar implemented since 2021. The analysis explores participants' understandings of human diversity and examines how participatory, dialogical, experiential, and heritage-based pedagogies create the conditions that support intercultural and democratic competence development across successive editions of the programme. The findings highlight the relevance of a human diversity perspective for teacher education and identify a set of interconnected pedagogical conditions that support competence development. These include engagement with minority narratives and lived experiences, dialogical and collaborative learning, emotional and experiential engagement, critical reflection, the creation of safe spaces for dialogue, and heritage-based educational experiences. Rather than operating independently, these conditions appear to reinforce one another by enabling participants to encounter different perspectives, critically examine assumptions, engage emotionally with experiences of diversity, and negotiate meaning collaboratively. The study contributes to research on intercultural and democratic teacher education in two main respects. First, it provides empirical insights into the potential of human diversity as a broader conceptual lens through which diversity may be understood as constitutive of democratic

societies, thereby opening discussion on the possibility of moving beyond predominantly culture-centred understandings of diversity towards a more encompassing human diversity perspective. Second, it provides empirical insights into the pedagogical conditions through which intercultural and democratic competences can be fostered, demonstrating the potential of dialogical, experiential, collaborative, and heritage-based learning environments for the professional development of both pre-service and in-service teachers.

Keywords: intercultural and democratic competences; human diversity; innovative teacher education; non-formal education pedagogy; criticality

1. Introduction: Values, Diversity and Education in the EU

Although the EU establishes the dignity of the person as a cornerstone—and therefore recognises cultural diversity as an asset in its foundational treaties—European societies find themselves at a critical moment where discourses of a populist, nationalist and radical nature are emerging and invading the public and civic space (Bar Cendón, 2023, 2026).

Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) establishes that "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities". These values are common to Member States (MS) in a society in which "pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail" (Art. 2 TEU). Furthermore, Art. 3(3) of the TEU states that "The Union shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity". In the same vein, Art. 167(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) stipulates that "The Union shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity". Respect for cultural diversity is also enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (hereinafter "the Charter"). The Preamble affirms that "The Union contributes to the preservation and to the development of these common values while respecting the diversity of the cultures and traditions of the peoples of Europe". This commitment is further reinforced in Article 22, which states that "The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity" (Shuali Trachtenberg & Bar Cendón, 2023).

As previously indicated, all forms of discrimination are expressly prohibited under Article 21(1) of the Charter:

> Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000/C 364/01, Article 21(1), (European Union, 2000)).

However, despite these clear legal and political commitments to respecting cultural diversity across EU Member States, there is still a significant gap between the proclaimed values and their effective translation into educational practice. This discrepancy is reflected in persistent challenges in addressing diversity within curricula, teacher education, and classroom interactions, where intercultural competence is often insufficiently integrated.

Recently, the EU has sought to address this gap through a renewed emphasis on European Citizenship Education as a strategic priority within its educational agenda. Education for European citizenship can be understood as a transformative educational approach aimed at fostering democratic and intercultural competences, enabling learners not only to acquire knowledge about the European project, but also to critically engage with

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cultural diversity and participate actively in democratic life (Shuali Trachtenberg & Centeno, 2025) This perspective moves beyond a purely cognitive or institutional understanding of citizenship, emphasising the development of attitudes, values, and skills necessary for living together in plural and complex societies.

This conceptualisation is strongly aligned with European policy frameworks. The European Parliament highlights that citizenship education seeks to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to become active and responsible citizens at local, national, and European levels, fostering participation, social cohesion, and democratic engagement (European Parliament, 2023). Likewise, the Council of the European Union underlines the importance of education and training in strengthening common European values—such as democracy, equality, and respect for human rights—while promoting inclusive learning environments that reflect and embrace cultural diversity (Council of the European Union, 2023).

Furthermore, EU policy documents stress that citizenship education should adopt a holistic and competence-based approach, integrating formal, non-formal, and experiential learning opportunities that allow learners to actively practice democratic participation and intercultural dialogue (European Commission, 2023).

However, despite this policy commitment and conceptual advancement, significant challenges persist in ensuring its effective and coherent implementation across Member States, where structural inequalities, fragmented curricula, and unequal teacher preparation continue to hinder the realisation of education for European citizenship as a transformative and lived educational experience (European Parliament, 2023).

In the field of teacher education, research demonstrates that teachers struggle to address the increasing diversity in classrooms due, among other factors, to the lack of appropriate competences to deal with this diversity (OECD, 2019; Public Policy and Management Institute [PPMI], 2017).

As illustrated above, although the EU promotes cultural diversity and democratic values, their effective implementation in education remains a challenge. Education for European citizenship provides an important framework, but its impact depends largely on teacher education. A key challenge lies in the insufficient conceptual understanding and lack of innovative pedagogical approaches based on intercultural competences development. Therefore, prioritising teacher education for the development of intercultural competences through experiential intercultural learning and the endorsement of non-formal education methodology is highly valuable. Such preparation is fundamental to fostering inclusive, democratic, and culturally responsive classrooms.

In what follows, this study seeks to address these challenges by drawing on evidence derived from both a comprehensive literature review and research on innovative practice aimed at fostering intercultural and democratic competences among teachers. Two main research questions guide this study. The first examines the theoretical foundations of intercultural and democratic competence development in teacher education, while the second focuses on the pedagogical and methodological conditions that support their effective development.

RQ1: How does a human diversity perspective contribute to the conceptualization and development of intercultural and democratic competences in teacher education?

RQ2: How can non-formal, participatory, and dialogical pedagogies grounded in a human diversity perspective facilitate intercultural and democratic competences development in teacher education?

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2. From Cultural Diversity Towards Human Diversity: A Conceptual Shift

One of the main difficulties hindering the development of intercultural and democratic competences (IDCs) among teachers in the European Union lies in the lack of a shared understanding of what the concept of diversity in education represents (Shuali Trachtenberg et al., 2020). European societies are characterised by a complex and multidimensional diversity that goes beyond national plurality, encompassing cultural, religious, ethnic, social, ideological, and individual differences. In this context, recent scholarship calls for a shift from narrow interpretations of cultural diversity—often limited to migration or ethnic minority status—towards a broader and more inclusive notion of human diversity (Shuali Trachtenberg & Centeno, 2023).

Traditionally, educational policies in Europe have approached diversity mainly through the lens of special educational needs, focusing on inclusion as a response to disability (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014). Although this perspective has been crucial in addressing segregation and promoting equity, it has also contributed to a limited conceptualization of diversity, often neglecting its broader social, cultural, and political dimensions. Inclusive education research highlights that a key challenge for teachers is not only to respond to specific learner needs, but to develop the knowledge and dispositions required to engage with diversity as a universal and relational condition of learning (Florian et al., 2007). In response to this limitation, contemporary approaches advocate for the concept of *human diversity* as a multidimensional and dynamic reality, encompassing all forms of difference that shape individuals' identities and experiences within democratic societies. This reconceptualization aligns with the need to prepare teachers to address diversity not as an exception, but as a fundamental characteristic of educational contexts (Cerna et al., 2021). Some of the prevailing modules identified by experts for the development *of intercultural competences* (IC) share this approach to diversity (Lopez, 2015). Within this theoretical landscape, Deardorff's model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009), endorsed both by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), provides a coherent framework linking human diversity with the development of intercultural competence. She conceptualises IC as a process through which individuals acquire attitudes, knowledge, and skills that enable them to interact effectively and appropriately across differences. Crucially, the model places foundational importance on attitudes such as respect, openness, and curiosity, which allow individuals to engage constructively with diversity. These dispositions facilitate the development of cultural self-awareness and understanding of others' perspectives, ultimately leading to internal outcomes such as empathy and adaptability, and external outcomes reflected in effective intercultural behaviour. From this perspective, human diversity is not merely a contextual condition, but the very catalyst that drives the development of intercultural competence.

Similarly, Barrett's work within the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) (Council of Europe, 2018a) reinforces this relationship by situating intercultural competence within a broader democratic framework. The "butterfly" model conceptualises competence as an integrated system of values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge that enables individuals to live together in culturally diverse societies. Central to this approach is the recognition that interculturality and human diversity are essential conditions for democratic life, requiring active engagement, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility. Rather than treating diversity as a challenge to be managed, the framework views it as a resource that enriches social interaction and democratic participation. The *Addressing Educational Needs of Teachers in the EU for Inclusive Education in a Context of Diversity* (INNO4DIV) research project—promoted by the Joint

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Research Centre of the European Commission—has endorsed the conceptualisation of human diversity in its recommendations on how to address teachers' educational needs within contexts of cultural diversity (Shuali Trachtenberg et al., 2020, 2022, 2023). Within the framework of the research, 21 innovative cases in teacher education were analysed with the aim of identifying effective and innovative practices, as well as key enabling components for the development of intercultural and democratic competences (IDCs). The findings revealed that the absence of a shared understanding of diversity constitutes a major barrier to teachers' attainment of these competences (Shuali Trachtenberg et al., 2023).

In this essay, the authors consider this conceptual approach to be an important step towards mainstreaming and prioritising teacher education for diversity, as the human diversity approach aligns with a broader educational policy perspective that moves beyond categorical or deficit-based frameworks and situates diversity within a paradigm of social justice, participation, and well-being (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). It also challenges the traditional focus of European educational policies, which have largely addressed diversity through special education frameworks, primarily targeting learners with disabilities. Although this approach has contributed significantly to inclusion, it has also narrowed the conceptual scope of diversity, often overlooking the relational and societal dimensions of difference.

Within this evolving conceptual landscape, the development of intercultural competence becomes inseparable from the recognition of human diversity as a foundational condition of education theory and practice. As highlighted by inclusive education research, the key challenge for teachers is not only to respond to specific learner needs, but to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and pedagogical approaches that enable them to work effectively with diversity as a universal characteristic of all learning contexts (Florian et al., 2007). In this regard, both Deardorff's model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009) and Barrett's conceptualization within the Council of Europe's (2018a) RFCDC offers a robust theoretical articulation of how individuals develop the capacity to engage with human diversity. From this perspective, human diversity is not merely a contextual variable but the very condition that activates and sustains the development of intercultural competence. Central to this approach is the recognition that interculturality and human diversity are intrinsic to democratic societies and require active engagement, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. Rather than viewing diversity as a challenge to be managed, the framework positions it as a resource for social cohesion and democratic participation. The shift from cultural diversity to human diversity thus has important theoretical and pedagogical implications.

The INNO4DIV case studies demonstrate that the development of intercultural and democratic competences (IDC) is deeply rooted in engagement with human diversity in complex and real-world educational contexts. Evidence from boundary-crossing teaching (BCT) in conflict settings, as well as joint training programmes involving Palestinian and Jewish teachers, shows that intercultural competence emerges through structured encounters, dialogue on controversial issues, and shared practical experiences. These initiatives highlight that IDC development goes beyond technical training, requiring critical self-reflection on identity, belonging, and conflict, which fosters empathy, openness, and the ability to navigate ambiguity (Hisherik, 2026).

INNO4DIV findings further indicate that such competences are strengthened through reflective and dialogical learning environments, where diversity is treated as a pedagogical resource rather than a challenge. Overall, the cross-case analysis confirms that IDCs are relational, context-dependent competences that develop through interaction with human diversity, contributing to inclusive education, democratic participation, and social cohesion.

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Crucially, the findings in the deferent studies indicate that IDC development is not an individual process alone but depends on systemic conditions. Effective practices combined pedagogical support—such as mentoring and reflective spaces—with strong institutional backing, enabling teachers to transform diversity into a resource for learning and professional growth.

Furthermore, the cross-case analysis of the 21 cases in the INNO4DIV project, further demonstrates that sustainable development of IDC requires a whol-system approach, where policies, institutional culture, and teaching practices are coherently aligned. In this sense, human diversity becomes a central driver of intercultural and democratic learning.

Taken together, the preceding analysis suggests that adopting a human diversity perspective in teacher education for interculturality enables a more coherent and inclusive understanding of intercultural competence—one that transcends reductive categorizations and responds more effectively to the complexity of contemporary societies. Moreover, it supports the development of educational policies and practices that position diversity as a central political and pedagogical priority, fostering not only inclusion but also the conditions necessary for democratic coexistence and individual well-being. This perspective provides the conceptual foundation for the IMAGINE programme and for the present study.

2.1. Developing Intercultural and Democratic Competences in Teacher Education: International Frameworks

Joint intercultural teacher education programmes based on dialogue and shared experiences are essential for developing intercultural and democratic competence, although they require demanding processes of critical reflection, especially in conflict contexts (Hisherik et al., 2025). What are intercultural and democratic competences, and how can teacher educators address its development?

To answer this question, we must first examine the meaning, significance, and implications of the concept of competence in Western educational systems. The use of the concept of competences entered the EU discourse with the publication of the Delors Report "Learning: The Treasure Within" (UNESCO, 1996). Despite its valuable contribution to an educational shift in terms of innovative pedagogy and vision of education, Delors' pillars were integrated in a reductionist way. These pillars—in many cases—were reduced by policymakers, and curriculum developers, to a pragmatic instrumental dimension. The concept of competence was interpreted as a tool for measuring a student's academic outcomes in a very primary and superficial dimension. It became a standardising measure for learning outcomes, instead of being a pedagogical benchmark for the significant process of teaching and learning, as it was originally conceived (Muller & Young, 2014; Sosa, 2010).

As scholars dedicated to the study and development of IDC in teacher education, and following leading research in the field (Banks & Banks, 2019; Barrett & Borghetti, 2025; Byram, 2020; Deardorff & Tatebayashi, 2024), we can confirm that intercultural democratic competence (IDC) can only be meaningfully developed when grounded in a profound ethical commitment to democratic values, inclusion, and social justice, and sustained by critical thinking and a reflective engagement with diversity.

There are several competence frameworks, such as the UNESCO Intercultural Competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework (UNESCO, 2013), the OECD Framework on Global Competence (OECD, 2018), or the Council of Europe Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), all of which deal with the analysis of the processes and dimensions that are required for the development of competences for an intercultural democratic culture. Although these frameworks differ in emphasis, they share a common recognition of the importance of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values for engaging constructively with diversity.

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The EU framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2006; European Council, 2018) represents a milestone in defining competences in Europe, conceptualising them as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for personal development, social inclusion, and active citizenship. Within this framework, social competence is described as encompassing personal, interpersonal, and intercultural dimensions that enable individuals to participate effectively in social and professional life, supported by an understanding of social norms and cultural diversity. In the 2018 revised framework, civic competence complements this perspective by emphasising knowledge of democratic values, justice, equality, and citizenship, empowering individuals to engage actively in democratic participation.

The Council of Europe publication Intercultural competence for all Preparation for living in a heterogeneous world (Council of Europe, 2012) positions intercultural competences as a lifelong and essential competence for all individuals, grounded in empathy, sensitivity, knowledge, and efficacy, and oriented towards collective social practice. It emphasises that IC is not only an individual capacity but also a societal requirement in increasingly diverse contexts. This perspective is further reinforced by the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (Council of Europe, 2018a), which expands IC into a broader set of competences needed for democratic coexistence. The RFCDC highlights the importance of integrating IC development through key dimensions such as teacher education, curriculum reform, innovative pedagogies, formative assessment, and whole-school approaches.

The UNESCO framework (UNESCO, 2013) *conceptualises intercultural competence* as a combination of interconnected knowledge, skills, and attitudes organised into five key dimensions. These include knowledge of one's own and others' cultures ("savoirs"), the ability to interpret and relate to cultural diversity ("savoir comprendre"), the capacity for discovery and interaction ("savoir apprendre"), attitudes of openness and curiosity ("savoir être"), and a critical engagement with culture in multicultural contexts ("savoir s'engager").

The OECD framework on Global Competence (OECD, 2018) defines global competence as the ability to understand and engage with intercultural and global issues through respectful interaction and informed action. It emphasises the central role of values, particularly valuing human dignity and diversity, understood as guiding principles that shape individuals' judgments, attitudes, and behaviours across contexts. These values underpin individuals' capacity to interact appropriately with others and act for collective well-being and sustainable development.

In light of the above, among these contributions, the Council of Europe framework stands out for placing values at the core of competence development. Particularly, it highlights values such as human dignity, human rights, democracy, and respect for diversity as the ethical foundation that shapes attitudes, guides behaviour, and informs decision-making processes. From this perspective, IDCs are not only relational and context-dependent capacities but also value-driven competences, developed through dialogue, critical reflection, and lived experiences—especially in complex intercultural contexts. As a working definition of IDC, the authors suggest the following: IDC is the value-based, relational capability to engage critically and constructively with human diversity, through knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable inclusive practice and democratic participation in complex societies.

Considering the above, the RFCDC provides a particularly valuable framework for understanding how intercultural and democratic competences (IDC) can be developed through educational processes grounded in values, critical reflection, and meaningful engagement with diversity. The framework emphasises that competence development is not limited to the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also involves the cultivation

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of attitudes and values that enable individuals to engage constructively with others in democratic and culturally diverse societies. From this perspective, IDC can be understood as a value-based and relational capability that is developed through dialogue, critical reflection, and lived experience.

To exemplify how these principles can be translated into educational practice, the following section examines Children's Voices for a New Human Space (CVS) as an illustration of teacher education aligned with the rationale of the RFCDC. The case is particularly relevant because it operationalises many of the framework's core assumptions, including competence-based learning, democratic participation, critical reflection, experiential learning, and the recognition of diversity as an educational resource. By analysing CVS, it becomes possible to gain a deeper understanding of the pedagogical conditions that support the development of intercultural and democratic competences in teacher education.

2.2. The CVS and Its Contribution to the Understanding of IDC Development in Teacher Education Following the RFCDC Rationale

Children's Voices for a New Human Space (CVS) was an Erasmus+ project implemented between 2018 and 2021 that explored how teacher education can contribute to the development of democratic culture and intercultural competence. Grounded in the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC), the project adopted a competence-based approach that integrated knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, critical reflection, and democratic participation within teacher education (Tenenbaum et al., 2023).

A central premise of CVS was that the development of democratic culture and intercultural competence among learners depends on strong teacher education. Consequently, the project focused on supporting teachers as facilitators of democratic participation, inclusion, and intercultural dialogue (I3, personal communication, 29 October 2020). Through non-formal educational methodologies, dialogical learning, and the exploration of controversial issues, participants were encouraged to reflect critically on their assumptions, identities, and positionalities while engaging constructively with diverse perspectives (Ingoglia et al., 2021). Particular emphasis was placed on promoting a broader understanding of diversity in terms of human diversity, moving beyond essentialist and group-based interpretations of difference.

Research conducted within CVS identified several conditions that supported the development of Intercultural and Democratic Competences (IDC), including reflective practice, critical thinking, collaborative learning, empathy, teacher agency, and the creation of inclusive and democratic learning environments. Findings suggested, in alignment with J. W. Thomas (2000), that competence development was strengthened when teachers actively participated in knowledge construction, engaged in meaningful dialogue, and connected learning with real-life experiences and social issues.

The project also highlighted the importance of competence-based curriculum design and the integration of IDC across educational processes. Rather than focusing exclusively on knowledge transmission, learning was approached as a transformative process involving reflection, participation, dialogue, and democratic engagement. In this sense, diversity was understood not as a challenge to be managed but as a pedagogical resource capable of enriching learning and promoting social cohesion (Ingoglia et al., 2021).

Taken together, the CVS findings provide valuable insights into the pedagogical conditions that support IDC development in teacher education. These include critical reflection, dialogical learning, experiential approaches, democratic participation, and the recognition of diversity as a resource for learning. These principles subsequently informed the pedagogical design of the IMAGINE programme and provide an important foundation for understanding the educational rationale of the case examined in this study.

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2.3. IMAGINE Pilot Programme: Towards the Development of IDC in Teacher Education

The IMAGINE pilot programme builds on the Council of Europe's Competences for Democratic Culture framework and the CVS pedagogical approach to intercultural and democratic competence development. It is designed for both pre-service teachers enrolled in teacher education programmes and in-service teachers, with the overarching goal of strengthening intercultural and democratic competences. The project promotes a transformative understanding of diversity by moving beyond traditional conceptions of cultural diversity towards a broader and more inclusive perspective of human diversity. Through personal narratives and experiential learning, participants are encouraged to explore their identities, values, assumptions, and lived experiences while engaging meaningfully with those of others. The programme provides a safe and inclusive environment that supports dialogue, critical reflection, and mutual learning, enabling participants to challenge stereotypes and prejudices, develop empathy, and deepen their understanding of social inequalities and diverse human experiences. By fostering reflection, collaboration, and democratic engagement, IMAGINE seeks to empower current and future teachers to create inclusive learning environments and contribute to more equitable and socially cohesive communities. Dialogue is a key pedagogical tool throughout the programme, while intercultural learning is approached as an experiential process that connects personal experience with educational practice.

The general aim of the case study is to understand how the IMAGINE project fosters the development of intercultural and democratic competences among pre-service and in-service teachers by examining the pedagogical processes, learning experiences, and educational conditions that support transformative learning within a non-formal teacher education programme.

The specific objectives are:

(a) To explore the contribution of a human diversity perspective to the conceptualisation and development of intercultural and democratic competences in teacher education.
(b) To identify the pedagogical processes and educational conditions that facilitate transformative learning within the IMAGINE programme.
(c) To examine how narrative, experiential, and dialogical pedagogies foster critical self-reflection, empathy, democratic agency, and intercultural learning among pre-service and in-service teachers.

3. Methodology of the Case Study

3.1. Research Design

The research design follows a qualitative, inductive, and context-sensitive approach.

In particular, the study employed a longitudinal qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), following the implementation of the same programme ("IMAGINE") over five consecutive academic years.

Table 2 illustrates the participant recruitment and selection process implemented in the IMAGINE programme. The process aimed to ensure diversity in terms of educational background, professional experience, gender, and involvement in intercultural and democratic education initiatives.

Although participants differed each year, the educational intervention, data collection procedures, and analytical framework remained unchanged, allowing comparison across successive cohorts and examination of the stability and evolution of the findings over time. Rather than imposing predefined theoretical categories, the study seeks to understand the case from the perspective of the social actors involved, emphasising their lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. At the same time, attention is given to maintaining a

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balance between theoretical guidance and openness to emergent findings, thus avoiding the imposition of artificial conceptual frameworks on the empirical reality.

Within this methodological orientation, the case study approach is particularly appropriate because it enables an in-depth analysis of a practice as it unfolds within a specific social, institutional, and historical context. It focuses on understanding the logic of social relations and practices that intersect in the social space that characterises the case, while interpreting them in light of a conceptual framework that takes into account the geographic, social, cultural, economic, and historical context (George & Bennett, 2005; Gustafsson, 2017; G. Thomas, 2011). In this sense, the case study makes it possible to emphasise the idiosyncratic aspects related to the particularity of the practice being analysed, while also contributing to later conceptualisation.

This general methodological orientation is translated into a set of operational procedures designed to ensure both contextual sensitivity and analytical consistency across cases. Operationally, the case study is implemented through a common research protocol designed to ensure consistency while preserving sensitivity to the specificities of each context. Data collection is based on information provided by key actors involved in the practice, including interviews and focus groups with relevant informants and the review of contextual and institutional materials where available. The research questions guide the identification of the main dimensions of analysis, but the analysis remains open to themes emerging from the empirical material. The data are examined with attention to the characteristics of the practice, the pedagogical approaches involved, the contextual and structural conditions that enable or constrain its development, and the ways in which it contributes to the development of IDC.

The methodological design is aligned with the study's overall aim of understanding how the IMAGINE programme fosters the development of intercultural and democratic competences among pre-service and in-service teachers. This aim is operationalised through research questions that examine both the contribution of a human diversity perspective to the conceptualisation and development of these competences and the pedagogical processes, learning experiences, and educational conditions through which non-formal, participatory, and dialogical approaches support transformative learning.

A case study protocol, previously developed and approved by the UCV ethics committee (UCV/2020-2021/003), is used. The relevant privacy and authorization documents were used to ensure the consent of interviewees/informants participating in the research. Interviewees expressed interest in being acknowledged in the case study reports. Together, the protocol and reporting template support systematic documentation, facilitate discussion within the research team, and provide a common basis for subsequent cross-case analysis.

3.2. Data Collection

In terms of data collection, IMAGINE consists of a three-day intensive programme conducted in non-formal educational settings. The programme is designed for both university students enrolled in teacher education programmes and secondary school teachers currently in service. Each edition brings together approximately 30–41 participants, and, to date, five editions have been implemented (2021–2025) in meaningful locations such as Toledo, Sagunto, and Simat de la Valdigna—sites that reflect Spain's rich cultural diversity and historical heritage. Three of the five editions were held in Toledo, while the other two took place in Godella and Simat de la Valldigna.

Participation in the programme is based on a selective recruitment process through which candidates are chosen according to their demonstrated interest in and commitment to intercultural and democratic education. The selection process aims to ensure a high

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

level of engagement with the themes addressed and create a learning community that is receptive to critical reflection and transformative learning.

Importantly, participation in IMAGINE involves more than attendance at the three-day programme. Applicants are expected to demonstrate a willingness to engage in follow-up activities and ongoing work related to the project's core themes, including intercultural dialogue, democratic participation, inclusion, and respect for human diversity. This requirement reflects the project's commitment to fostering sustained learning and long-term engagement beyond the duration of the programme itself, reinforcing the transformative goals of the pedagogical approach.

Throughout the selection process, particular attention is given to achieving a balanced representation of men and women, as well as ensuring diversity in participants' ages and professional experiences. This intentional composition of the group is designed to foster peer learning and intergenerational dialogue, creating opportunities for participants to learn from one another's perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds. By bringing together individuals with varied profiles, the programme encourages mutual enrichment, collaborative reflection, and the co-construction of knowledge within a diverse learning community. Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of participants across the five editions of the programme, highlighting diversity in gender, age, professional background, and institutional affiliations.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants across the five editions of the IMAGINE programme.

Variable	IMAGINE I (2021)	IMAGINE II (2022)	IMAGINE III (2023)	IMAGINE IV (2024)	IMAGINE V (2025)
Total participants (N)	41	27	39	28	31
Age years (range)	15–57	16–50+	15–50+	16–50+	20–50+
Sex, *n* (%)					
Women	27 (65.9)	21 (77.8)	27 (69.2)	20 (71.4)	17 (54.8)
Men	13 (31.7)	6 (22.2)	12 (30.8)	8 (28.6)	14 (45.2)
Participant profile, *n* (%)					
Upper-secondary students	22 (53.7)	8 (29.6)	17 (43.6)	8 (28.6)	0 (0.0)
University students	5 (12.2)	8 (29.6)	11 (28.9)	8 (28.6)	18 (58.1)
Teachers	3 (7.3)	2 (7.4)	3 (7.9)	2 (7.1)	1 (3.2)
University lecturers/researchers	9 (22.0)	6 (22.2)	7 (18.4)	10 (35.7)	10 (32.3)
Education practitioners	2 (4.9)	3 (11.1)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (6.5)

Note. Values are presented as *n* (%). N = total number of participants in each programme edition. Age range indicates the minimum and maximum participant age in each edition. Participants older than 50 years are reported as 50+.

The Data collection applied in the research uses multiple qualitative techniques:

- Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted across the five editions of the project with organisers, trainers, education professionals, university students, and secondary school students, allowing for the collection of diverse perspectives and experiences. For the first edition of IMAGINE, 10 participants were selected for semi-structured interviews, including 3 trainers from the non-formal education sector (2 women and 1 man), 4 university students (3 women and 1 man), and 3 secondary school students (2 women and 1 man). Overall, the sample comprised 7 women (70%) and 3 men (30%), ensuring the representation of different educational backgrounds and roles within the programme. The IMAGINE II sample included three organisers (all women), three social education professionals (all women), two university students (one woman and one man), and two secondary school students (one woman and

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

one man). Overall, the interview sample comprised 7 women (70%) and 3men (30%), ensuring the inclusion of perspectives from a range of educational and professional backgrounds. For the third edition of IMAGINE, 10 participants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews, including 3 trainers from the non-formal education sector, 4 university students, and 3 social education professionals. Women represented 80% of the sample (n = 8), while men accounted for 20% (n = 2), ensuring a diversity of educational and professional perspectives. The fourth and fifth editions of IMAGINE involved a more extensive interview process, reflecting a deliberate effort to strengthen the evidence base and expand the research component of the programme. In each edition, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with trainers and university pre-service teachers, including 6 trainers (4 women and 2 men) and 6 university students (4 women and 2 men). Women comprised 66.7% of the sample (n = 8), while men represented 33.3% (n = 4). This participant profile provided valuable insights from both educational practitioners and future teachers.

- Focus groups: Across the five editions of the IMAGINE programme, six mixed composition focus groups were conducted to foster meaningful interaction among participants from diverse educational, cultural, and professional backgrounds. Each focus group included between 12 and 14 participants and reflected the demographic profile of the programme, with women representing most of participants. As the groups emerged naturally from the programme cohorts and workshop activities, they provided a trusting environment in which participants could openly discuss sensitive and controversial issues. The composition of the focus groups varied across editions. In the first edition, the focus group consisted of 6 university students, 4 secondary school students, and 2 trainers (n = 12). The second edition brought together four university students, 4 secondary school students, 1 in-service teacher, 2 social education professionals, and 1 trainer (n = 12). In the third edition, t 3 social education professionals representing civil society organisations joined participants from the educational sector (n = 12). The fourth and fifth editions adopted a more research-oriented approach. In each edition, the focus groups comprised 14 participants, including 6 university students, 6 trainers, and 2 organisers. This heterogeneous composition ensured the participation of stakeholders from different educational levels, professional backgrounds, and social contexts. The discussions were structured around case studies and scenarios addressing topics such as discrimination, prejudice, cultural identity, diversity, interreligious dialogue, alterity, democratic culture, racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, and anti-Muslim hatred. Participants were encouraged to relate theoretical perspectives to their own experiences and interpretations of diversity, belonging, and democratic coexistence in multicultural societies. The focus groups generated valuable insights into participants' learning processes, critical awareness, attitudinal development, and conceptual understanding. All participants provide informed consent for data collection, ensuring confidentiality and ethical use of information.

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis combines descriptive and interpretative dimensions. First, a detailed case description is developed, including contextual, methodological, and pedagogical elements. Subsequently, the case is analysed using a structured framework-based case study protocol that was developed and approved in the framework of the INNO4DIV research project. In the case of the IMAGINE programme, the data analysis also integrates the study of recorded interviews, of both staff and participants, posterior to the implementation of the programme. The analytical process was explicitly guided by the two research questions. While the thematic analysis allowed categories to emerge inductively from participants'

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

accounts, the interpretation of findings focused on understanding: (a) how a human diversity perspective contributed to participants' conceptualisation and development of intercultural and democratic competences (RQ1), and (b) how the pedagogical processes, learning experiences, and educational conditions embedded in the IMAGINE programme supported such development (RQ2). This approach ensured coherence between the study aim, research questions, data analysis, and interpretation of results.

4. The IMAGINE Programme: Context, Pedagogical Design and Findings

The IMAGINE case represents an innovative practice in IDC teacher education, as it introduces new approaches compared to previous educational and training models or adapts innovation to specific contextual conditions (OECD, 2018). Its innovation lies in rethinking policies, theoretical and pedagogical conceptions, methodologies, or tools to better address the challenges of developing intercultural and democratic competences amongteachers. Importantly, the case shows that innovation is context dependent, as it is shaped by the specific circumstances in which the practice is implemented, highlighting its role in transforming existing processes and the enhancement of IDC development.

4.1. IMAGINE Programme Case Study: Piloting the Development of IDC Through Non-Formal Pedagogies in Teacher Education

The IMAGINE programme, led by European Institute of Education for Democratic Culture of the Catholic University of Valencia (ECUDEM-UCV), was first launched in 2021 and has continued as an ongoing annual initiative ever since. The programme is held once a year and has a geographical scope focused on Spain. The partner organisations include the Council of Europe North-South Centre, the Regional Government of Valencia, and other organisations that participate in different editions according to their areas of expertise. The programme is aimed at pre-service and in-service teachers, teacher educators, and school students. Key stakeholders involved in the initiative include teachers, teacher educators, and trainers from the non-formal education sector.

Technical Summary of the Case

The IMAGINE programme is an annual residential initiativelasting 3 to 5 days, organised by researchers from the European Institute of Education for Democratic Culture (ECUDEM) at the Catholic University of Valencia (UCV). The programme brings together 30–41 participants, selected through a competitive application process. The selection criteria are based on the analysis of applicants' narratives, their demonstrated interest in issues related to social justice, migration, and globalisation, as well as their experience in voluntary or community-based work.

The selection of participants took place through a written application and is described in the following Table 2.

Both in-service teachers and practitioners from the social environment are invited to participate. The teachers are in charge of the high school students, who will normally come by invitation of the same teacher.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

Table 2. Comparison of selection components for university and secondary school student participants.

Selection Component	University Students	Secondary School Students
Recruitment Scope	An open call is distributed across the Catholic University of Valencia and partner secondary schools.	Organisers contact committed in-service secondary education teachers willing to foster their intercultural and democratic competences and assume educational leadership roles.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Selection Component	University Students	Secondary School Students
Application Form	Candidates provide personal and academic information, including age, educational background, and motivation to participate.	Candidates provide personal and academic information, including age, educational background, and motivation to participate.
Social Engagement Profile	Applicants describe previous experiences related to volunteering, community engagement, diversity, inclusion, and social action.	Applicants describe previous experiences related to volunteering, community engagement, diversity, inclusion, and social action.
Contribution to the Group	Candidates reflect on the contributions they can make to the programme, both academically and through informal, cultural, or recreational activities.	Candidates reflect on the contributions they can make to the programme, both academically and through informal, cultural, or recreational activities.
Commitment to Follow-Up Activities	Participants must be willing to engage in two post-programme activities aimed at applying and disseminating the learning outcomes in culturally diverse settings.	Participants must be willing to engage in two post-programme activities aimed at applying and disseminating the learning outcomes in culturally diverse settings.
Selection Criteria	• Demonstrated social commitment and interest in global issues, intercultural dialogue, and social justice. • Recommendation letter from a current or former teacher. • Community-oriented approach.	• Demonstrated social commitment and interest in global issues, intercultural dialogue, and social justice. • Recommendation letter from a current or former teacher. • Community-oriented approach.

Note. Created by the authors.

The programme teaching staff consists of both academic scholars and non-formal education trainers with expertise in areas such as anti-racism education, discourse analysis, sociology of religion, as well as intercultural education, human rights education, Shoa education, European Union values and policies, anthropology, or history. A distinctive feature of the IMAGINE programme is its adoption of a human diversity perspective as the conceptual framework for learning. Rather than focusing exclusively on cultural or ethnic differences, the programme approaches diversity as a multidimensional human condition that encompasses cultural, social, linguistic, religious, generational, socioeconomic, and experiential dimensions. This perspective encourages participants to move beyond essentialist understandings of identity and to recognise diversity as an inherent characteristic of all human beings and communities. An important highlight of the programme is the fact it takes place in historically and symbolically significant environments, such as Toledo or Sagunto, whose cultural and historical legacies represent key examples of intercultural dialogue during Spain's Golden Age. This geographic scenario inspires participants and provides them with an opportunity to explore the location's cultural heritage as a source for inclusive narratives in historical perspective and to identify cultural diversity as a

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

feature embedded within Spanish society. Another interesting element of the IMAGINE programme is the fact that participants come from both pre-service and in-service teachers' settings. This diversity of roles enables the establishment of meaningful synergies between theory and practice and fosters collaboration between the teacher education and school education sectors. In this sense, pre-service teachers can not only establish meaningful partnerships with schools and network with in-service teachers for potential joint work during their internships, but in-service teachers—practitioners—can also actively contribute to theoretical development and to the improvement and adaptation of the official curriculum for this subject in pre-service teacher education. Moreover, this reciprocal exchange nurtures epistemological reflection, as both groups engage in a shared process of knowledge construction that integrates theory and practice. From the experiential point of view, the coexistence of varied professional experiences and perspectives enriches the dialogue, enhances its critical dimension, and creates valuable opportunities for teacher educators to assess the impact of their pedagogical design. The pedagogical rationale underpinning this criterion is grounded in the recognition that cooperative learning among professionals at different stages of their careers contributes significantly to the development of more nuanced and informed educational approaches (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

The IMAGINE programme aims to provide compelling practice-based examples that demonstrate how intercultural and democratic competences (IDCs) can be effectively operationalised. By actively engaging through narrative-based learning, participants gain a deeper understanding of human diversity, recognising the plurality of identities and experiences, and explore their own biases.

4.2. Specific Goal of the IMAGINE Programme

Across its five editions (2021–2025), IMAGINE has focused on cultivating core democratic and intercultural values, including human dignity and the recognition of human diversity as an asset. Among the core attitudes associated with IDC development, the programme aims at fostering participants' civic-mindedness and tolerance of ambiguity, as much as intercultural dialogue skills, while engaging them with controversial social and political issues such as racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, hate speech, or anti-Roma hatred. The programme content and workshops promote not only critical thinking but also the development of criticality, understood as a reflective, ethical, and socially engaged form of reasoning. A distinctive feature of the IMAGINE programme is its use of local environments and cultural heritage as educational resources for fostering intercultural dialogue, strengthening participants' sense of belonging, and recognising the contribution of minority cultures to shared historical narratives. The programme is therefore often organised in locations of concrete historical and symbolic significance, such as the city of Toledo, whose rich heritage reflects the coexistence of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities during important eras of intercultural exchange in Spanish history.

Through guided visits to Jewish quarters, synagogues, and sites associated with Islamic heritage, participants are encouraged to explore how cultural and religious diversity has shaped Spain's collective past. Similar educational experiences have also been developed in Sagunto and at the Monastery of Santa María de la Valldigna in the Valencian community, both of which offer valuable opportunities to engage with Spanish cultural heritage.

This experiential approach allows participants to construct knowledge through direct engagement with places, histories, and cultural narratives. In doing so, they discover that cultural expressions often associated with minority groups are not peripheral to society but constitute an integral part of the shared historical and cultural heritage. The use of heritage-based learning is therefore a defining characteristic of the IMAGINE programme, enabling

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

participants to develop a deeper appreciation of diversity, recognition, and belonging while fostering intercultural understanding and democratic citizenship.

Experiential learning through cultural heritage enables participants to explore human diversity as a lived and shared reality. By engaging with multiple historical, cultural, and social narratives, learners develop a broader understanding of identity as a collective and evolving construction. This approach fosters recognition, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging, ensuring that all participants feel represented and valued within the shared story of the community.

4.2.1. IMAGINE First Edition: 19–21 Novembre 2021 (Toledo)

The first edition of the IMAGINE programme was implemented within the framework of the Council of Europe's iLEGEND GEW2021 Grant and as part of the Council of Europe's Global Education Week. It was jointly funded by the Council of Europe and the Catholic University of Valencia (UCV) through its Science Week dissemination activities. The participants came from several Spanish universities, including the Catholic University of Valencia, Jaume I University, the University of Valencia, the University of Barcelona, and the University of Alicante, and also included students from secondary schools such as Martí Sorolla, Sagrado Corazon, and San Bartolomé secondary schools. The programme represented one of the first attempts to translate the conceptual and educational findings of the INNO4DIV project into an applied learning experience aimed at promoting democratic culture, intercultural dialogue, and global citizenship education.

The main objective of the programme was to familiarise participants with the Council of Europe's Global Education resources, including the RFCDC and the Addressing Controversial Issues tool, and promote the recognition of human diversity as a valuable asset in a multicultural society. Grounded in the *Peer Community of Learners* model, the programme promoted experiential and collaborative learning while fostering trust, openness, and constructive dialogue. Consistent with the Council of Europe's educational approach, it encouraged inclusive participation, critical reflection, and the exploration of diverse perspectives within a safe learning environment. The training team brought together members of the Council of Europe RFCDC working group, representatives of youth and civil society organisations such as the Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe (DARE) network and *Movimiento contra la Intolerancia* (MCI), international specialists in human rights and Holocaust education, and Spanish academics whose expertise included racism, xenophobia, discourse analysis, interfaith dialogue, and remembrance education.

In line with the rationale of global education, which seeks to prepare learners for participation in interconnected and democratic societies, the IMAGINE programme aimed to develop participants' understanding of global interdependence and contemporary challenges while strengthening the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes required to address controversial issues in culturally diverse contexts. Attention was given to the role of media, social networks, and public discourse in shaping young people's perceptions of complex social issues. The programme therefore created safe spaces for dialogue and debate, enabling participants to engage critically with controversial topics.

A key feature of the 2021 edition was the intentional interaction between secondary school students, undergraduate and postgraduate students, and schoolteachers. This diverse learning community fostered peer learning and mutual exchange, enabling teachers to observe and experience innovative participatory methodologies firsthand. Through this process, they were encouraged to transfer these approaches to their own educational settings, particularly when addressing controversial issues and questions related to cultural diversity, inclusion, and democratic culture. The programme culminated in the design of

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

awareness-raising campaigns aimed at fostering respect for diversity, countering prejudice, and contributing to more inclusive and democratic societies.

4.2.2. IMAGINE II Edition: 25–27 Novembre 2022 (Toledo)

The second edition of the IMAGINE programme focused specifically on fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue, promoting the recognition of alterity, and encouraging participants to identify the "other" within their own personal and collective narratives. Building on the methodological and process-oriented foundations established during the first edition, the programme continued to employ participatory and dialogic approaches aimed at strengthening democratic and intercultural competences. In the second edition, most participants both from university and secondary education had already taken part in the first cohort. Consequently, the majority came from the same institutions: the Catholic University of Valencia, Jaume I University, the University of Valencia, the University of Barcelona, the University of Alicante, and the secondary schools Martí Sorolla (Valencia), Sagrado Corazón (Godella), and San Bartolomé (Godella).

The main goal of the programme was to analyse racism and xenophobia as complex social phenomena, fostering a critical understanding of human diversity as an inherent and enriching characteristic of democratic societies.

Unlike the previous edition, the programme brought together experts exclusively from the Spanish national context and addressed one of the most significant challenges facing contemporary Spanish society: prejudice and exclusion based on religious and ethnic identity. Strong emphasis was placed on amplifying the voices of religious and ethnic minorities, creating opportunities for participants to engage with current debates surrounding recognition, alterity, sense of belonging, and the contribution of cultural and religious diversity to society. Through dialogue-based learning and critical reflection, participants were encouraged to examine dominant social narratives, challenge stereotypes and prejudices, and develop a deeper understanding of the role that intercultural and interfaith dialogue can play in fostering more inclusive and democratic societies. Another distinctive feature of this edition was the active involvement of civil society leaders and educators representing a range of minority communities within Spanish society. These included representatives of Roma and Jewish organisations, as well as activists and community leaders from migrant, African, and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. Through their direct participation, these actors brought lived experiences, alternative perspectives, and community-based expertise into the learning process.

4.2.3. IMAGINE III Edition: 17–19 Novembre (Godella and Simat de la Valdigna)

The third edition of the IMAGINE programme was focused on strengthening participants' capacity to engage in meaningful intercultural and interfaith dialogue. The programme was designed in response to a growing paradox. While young people today have unprecedented access to information and learning opportunities, many continue to experience distrust, fear, social polarisation, and feelings of exclusion. At the same time, many teachers report lacking the competences and confidence required to address cultural and religious diversity effectively in their educational settings. The programme also responded to the challenges posed by contemporary digital societies, where social media, misinformation, and polarised public discourse frequently shape young people's attitudes towards cultural and religious difference.

Participants came from the same groups of in-service teachers, teacher educators, and secondary school students from the institutions involved in previous editions: the secondary schools Martí Sorolla (Valencia), Sagrado Corazón (Godella), and San Bartolomé (Godella); and partner institutions the Catholic University of Valencia, Jaume I University,

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

the University of Valencia, the University of Barcelona, the University of Alicante. This included participants from previous editions as well as newly enrolled students.

The main goal of the programme was to address antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and anti-Roma and -Sinti discrimination through personal narratives that foster empathy, intercultural dialogue, and democratic competences.

The third edition of the IMAGINE programme was developed based on the growing need for intercultural and interfaith dialogue expressed by participants in previous editions. In this edition, priority was given to the participation of students from the Valencian region to establish a Regional network of young interculturalists. The aim was to literally engage the participants in a meaningful intercultural and interfaith dialogue. The programme also responded to the challenges posed by contemporary digital societies, where social media, misinformation, and polarised public discourse frequently shape young people's attitudes towards cultural and religious difference. Issues such as antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate were specifically address through *Stories that Move* tool (the Anne Frank House's educational platform for fighting discrimination). In terms of pedagogical aspects, a major priority was given to facilitators from the non-formal education sector, while young participants were encouraged to take an active role in leading workshops and learning activities. Additionally, students from the UCV Master's Programme in Inclusive Education facilitated the Stories that Move workshop, using the online educational platform to explore situations of discrimination and reflect on strategies for promoting inclusion and diversity.

4.2.4. IMAGINE IV Edition: 22–24 November 2024 (Toledo)

IMAGINE IV edition was designed as an immersive intercultural learning experience that combined historical memory, heritage education, personal narratives, and critical reflection on diversity and discrimination.

In this edition, participants ranged from secondary school students to doctoral candidates and education professionals. They were drawn from the Catholic University of Valencia (UCV), the University of Valencia, Universitat Jaume I, the University of Alicante, the University of Barcelona, and the secondary school Martí Sorolla, while a new secondary school, Pureza de María School (Valencia), and its teaching staff joined the programme for the first time.

The main goal of the programme was to strengthen intercultural and democratic competences by valuing minority narratives within a shared cultural heritage.

Through workshops focusing on the topic "The Toledo of the Three Cultures: Myth or Reality?", participants explored the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 by assuming the role of Jewish families forced to migrate, developing historical empathy and an understanding of how different narratives shape our interpretation of the past. The programme also included community-building activities that encouraged participants to share their personal stories, cultural backgrounds, aspirations, and experiences, creating a safe space for dialogue and mutual recognition. The "Arab Jew: Cultural Diversity and Multiculturalism" workshop participants essentialist views of identity were challenged by examining the complexity of cultural, national, and religious belonging and highlighting diversity within communities often perceived as homogeneous. Participants were invited to critically examine the links between heritage, identity, memory, and social inclusion. Following on previous editions' outcomes, the topic of "Racism and Antisemitism" were explored from a sociological perspective. A distinctive element of this edition is the protagonism given to individuals who were interested in sharing autobiographies and used personal testimonies to explore experiences of discrimination and/or interculturality in higher education.

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4.2.5. IMAGINE V Edition: 21–23 Novembre (Sagunto)

The IMAGINE 5th edition focused mainly on "Stories that Move"—personal narratives—as an educational resource for engaging with intercultural dialogue and developing a sense of belonging in multicultural societies.

This edition brought together university lecturers and students from the Master's Degree Programme in Secondary Education to explore educational responses to racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and diversity. A major part of the participants, pre-graduate and postgraduate, came from the Faculty of Education of UCV. A minor number of the group came from other regional universities such as University of Valencia or Jaume I University.

The main goal of the programme was the use of personal narratives as an educational resource for engaging with diverse itineraries, fostering empathy, intercultural dialogue, and building a sense of belonging in multicultural societies. Participants worked with the *Stories that Move* educational platform, developed by the Anne Frank House, and engaged in lectures, personal narratives, intercultural heritage activities, and collaborative workshops. The programme examined concepts such as otherness, stereotypes, stigma, belonging, intercultural dialogue, and social inclusion. Emphasis was placed on empathy development through personal storytelling, including the narratives and lived experiences shared by participants themselves. The programme promoted a conceptual shift from a focus on cultural diversity to the broader notion of human diversity, encouraging critical reflection on discrimination related to disability, gender inequalities, and contemporary global challenges affecting human well-being. These issues were explored from a sociological perspective, enabling participants to analyse the social processes that shape prejudice, exclusion, identity construction, and belonging. The programme also examined the historical presence and cultural contributions of Jewish and Muslim communities in the Valencian region and included participation in a cultural event celebrating European Jewish Day heritage and cultural traditions in Spain.

Across its five editions (2021–2025), IMAGINE has focused on cultivating core democratic and intercultural values, including human dignity and the recognition of human diversity as an asset. Among the core attitudes associated with IDC development, the programme aims at fostering participants' civic-mindedness and tolerance of ambiguity, as much as intercultural dialogue skills, while engaging them with controversial social and political issues such as racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, hate speech, or anti-Roma hatred. The programme content and workshop promoted not only critical thinking but also the development of criticality, understood as a reflective, ethical, and socially engaged form of reasoning.

4.3. Pedagogical Foundations and Approach to IDC Development

As we can see, the IMAGINE programme adopts a strongly pedagogical, experiential, and dialogical approach, grounded in structured debates, interactive workshops, peer learning, and engagement with real-world societal challenges such as racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, and hate speech. In this sense, it builds on two major elements that were previously identified in the INNO4DIV research project as crucial for teachers' IDC development (Shuali Trachtenberg et al., 2023). The first element is the need for a shared conceptual understanding of cultural diversity, shifting towards a human diversity approach. The second element consists of fostering experiential knowledge of interculturality, understood as engagement in situations of an intercultural nature. This involves situating learning within authentic and meaningful contexts, thereby enabling participants to connect theoretical knowledge with lived experience.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

At the core of the programme lies a strong emphasis on critical thinking and criticality as foundational dimensions of intercultural and democratic competence. For the programme team, critical thinking is understood not merely as a cognitive skill, but as a reflective, ethical, and socially situated process (Danvers, 2016; Paul & Elder, 2009). In this sense, IMAGINE aligns with perspectives that conceptualise criticality as a dialogical and relational practice, intrinsically linked to inclusion and cultural diversity (Davies, 2015). Participants are encouraged to question assumptions, deconstruct prejudices, and engage in ethical reflection, recognising that values, beliefs, and emotions influence interpretation and decision making, just as established by Brookfield (2012). Interview data consistently revealed that emotions, trust, and meaningful interpersonal relationships played a pivotal role in fostering participants' critical understanding of the complex realities they encountered through engagement with diverse social and cultural contexts. These relational and affective dimensions enabled participants to interrogate assumptions, appreciate multiple perspectives, and develop a more nuanced understanding of diversity. These findings are consistent with Zheng (2022), who argues that social-emotional competence enables individuals to develop empathy, build meaningful relationships, and navigate cultural differences through emotional awareness and perspective taking. Such capacities are essential for fostering reflective judgement and critical engagement with diversity, as they allow individuals to approach complex social realities with openness, sensitivity, and a commitment to mutual understanding (extracted video no. 1 testimony, October 2025). They highlighted the visibility that the programme offered to minority perspectives and narratives, a fact that enabled a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of social realities. Within the IMAGINE programme education paradigm, reflection is not detached from experience; rather, it is deeply embedded in the affective and relational dimensions of learning. This is evident, for example, in the use of pedagogical resources such as *Stories That Move* (https://www.storiesthatmove.org/es/, accessed on 15 January 2026), which provide learners with a critical understanding of complex situations that challenge prejudices, biases, and discrimination through an interactive platform (Carmona et al., 2023). These pedagogical strategies allowed participants to explore complex ethical concepts—such as the "banality of evil"—while fostering critical dialogue on responsibility, prejudice, and moral decision making.

Through these experiences, participants not only can develop analytical skills but are provided with the opportunity to engage in ethical and transformative processes of criticality, connecting cognition with emotion and lived experience. As will be demonstrated through an analysis of participants' insights, critical reflection becomes a powerful pedagogical vehicle for the development of intercultural and democratic competences (IDC), as it enables learners to question their assumptions, understand the impact of collective historical and social narratives, and reconsider their own positionality in relation to others.

4.4. Innovative Dimension in the Case

The IMAGINE programme consists of an innovative educational initiative as it is pedagogically sustained by a non-formal educational approach and experiential learning. These pedagogical foundations draw on Dewey's legacy of experiential learning (Dewey, 1897/1972) and Freire's critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), together with key insights from the INNO4DIV research project previously described in this essay (Tenreiro et al., 2020). The innovative character of the IMAGINE programme lies in its context-sensitive approach, the incorporation of innovative learning resources, and the application of participatory and experiential pedagogies typical of non-formal educational environments. These features create meaningful learning opportunities that foster critical reflection, engagement with diversity, and transformative learning processes. Very specifically, we can consider the

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

programme innovative as it involves experimentation, creativity, disruption, and a degree of risk, and is characterised by moving away from traditional lecture-based models toward the development of higher-order skills, such as critical thinking and creativity (OECD & Eurostat, 2018). The innovation is also expressed in the shift towards a competence-based approach.

4.5. Qualitative Findings and Results of the IMAGINE Case Study

The qualitative findings presented in this section are based on participants' feedback, interview data, and personal testimonies collected in relation to the IMAGINE programme. The data were analysed thematically, with attention to recurring patterns in participants' accounts of their learning experiences, their engagement with diversity, and their perceptions of the pedagogical conditions that supported the development of intercultural and democratic competences (IDC). The analysis identified five interrelated thematic dimensions: (1) human diversity as an interpretative framework; (2) safe dialogical spaces, exposure to diverse perspectives, and minority narratives; (3) emotional and experiential learning; (4) engagement with tangible and intangible cultural heritage; and (5) the development of critical thinking and criticality.

The findings are presented in relation to the two research questions guiding this study. The first research question explored how a human diversity perspective contributes to the conceptualisation and development of intercultural and democratic competences. The second research question examined how the pedagogical design of IMAGINE, particularly its non-formal, participatory, and dialogical approaches, fostered competence development. The five thematic dimensions identified through the analysis provide empirical evidence addressing both questions and reveal the interrelationship between conceptual understandings of diversity and the pedagogical conditions that support transformative learning.

First, in relation to RQ1, *human diversity* emerged as a cross-cutting theme and central interpretative framework throughout participants' accounts. Interviews conducted after participation in the programme activities revealed a shift in participants' understanding of diversity and a broader perspective on how diversity is experienced and understood. As one participant explained: "Through the IMAGINE Seminar, I gained a deeper understanding of the causes of inequality, racism, and xenophobia and was able to explore these issues first-hand" (P6, personal testimony, Video 4, November 2025). Rather than understanding diversity primarily through ethnic, cultural, or religious categories, participants increasingly described it as a broader human condition encompassing multiple identities, experiences, beliefs, and life trajectories. Collectively, the findings indicate that participants understood cultural diversity within a wider framework that extended beyond religious and ethnic differences to include historically marginalised groups and diverse life experiences. Participants frequently associated this broader understanding of human diversity with dialogical, experiential, heritage-based, and emotionally engaging learning experiences).

Second, addressing RQ2, *the creation of safe dialogical spaces* emerged as a key pedagogical condition for learning. Participants emphasised that respectful interaction, trust, and the possibility of disagreement without fear of judgement enabled deeper reflection and more meaningful dialogue. As one participant explained:

> "The IMAGINE Seminar offered new perspectives on issues that we do not always critically examine in our daily lives." (P2, personal testimony, video 1, November 2025)

This account illustrates how non-judgemental learning environments facilitated critical engagement with diversity and controversial issues. Participants' accounts further suggest that exposure to diverse perspectives and minority narratives played a central

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

role in challenging preconceived ideas and broadening their understanding of social reality. Engagement with issues such as racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, hate speech, and anti-Roma discrimination encouraged participants to reconsider dominant narratives and reflect on their own assumptions. As another participant stated:

> "I leave with a very positive experience, and it has enriched me as a person by allowing me to see different perspectives from different cultures. It also contributed to our personal development by exposing us to different points of view, including the personal experiences shared by people from other cultural backgrounds." (P1, personal testimony, video 1, November 2025)

These accounts suggest that IDC development requires not only exposure to diversity but also carefully facilitated spaces in which participants can engage with complex and sensitive issues through dialogue and reflection.

Third, also related to RQ2, the findings indicate that *experiential and emotionally* engaging learning processes played a central role in competence development. Participants described the workshops as meaningful because they connected intellectual reflection with personal experience, emotional engagement, and interpersonal interaction. As one participant noted:

> "As my colleague mentioned, the seminar enriched us culturally, helped us become more open-minded, and encouraged us to think more deeply and be more empathetic towards others." (P3, personal testimony, video 2, November 2025)

Similarly, another participant emphasised the personal impact of the experience:

> "The IMAGINE Seminar provided us with a great deal of self-awareness. It also gave us the opportunity to interact with people with whom we would not normally engage in our usual environments." (P4, personal testimony, video 2, November 2025)

Likewise, another participant reflected " I take away from this the belief that non-formal education is increasingly becoming a vital space for learning about cultural diversity." (P4, personal testimony, video 2, November 2025)

These accounts highlight how the programme's experiential design supported forms of learning that extended beyond cognitive understanding and incorporated emotional, interpersonal, and relational dimensions.

Fourth, with regard to RQ1 and RQ2, engagement with tangible and intangible cultural heritage contributed both to participants' understanding of human diversity and to the development of IDC through heritage-based learning experiences. Exploring Jewish and Muslim narratives in the Spanish context enhanced participants' awareness of the plurality of identities, experiences, beliefs, and historical trajectories that shape democratic societies. As one participant explained:

> "Before attending the seminar, I was unaware of Spain's Jewish heritage, and the experience sparked a strong interest in learning more about this community." (P5, personal testimony, video 3, November 2025)

This account suggests that heritage-based learning enabled participants to connect historical narratives with contemporary issues of diversity, belonging, and democratic participation. Another participant expressed the idea that "exploring Jewish, Muslim, and Christian heritage sites allowed me to see diversity not as something external or recent, but as an integral part of our shared historical and cultural heritage" (P7 personal testimony, video 2, November 2025). This experience enabled participants to connect historical narratives with contemporary issues of diversity, belonging, and democratic participation. Together, these accounts indicate that heritage-based learning can make

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human diversity visible through concrete historical experiences fostering a sense of shared belonging and **awareness of the multicultural character of democratic societies.**

Fifth, in response to RQ2, participants reported that structured debates, real-life stories, and critical engagement with historical and social narratives contributed to the development of critical thinking and criticality. The findings suggest that participants not only acquired knowledge about intercultural and democratic issues but also developed the ability to recognise bias, question dominant narratives, and reflect on their own positionality. As one participant remarked:

> "For me, the seminar gave me many valuable experiences. I feel that it has enriched me as a person by allowing me to see different perspectives from a variety of cultures. Furthermore, it contributed to our personal development by helping us understand different points of view, particularly through the personal experiences shared by people from different cultural backgrounds." (P4, personal testimony, video 3, November 2025)

Although participants often described criticality indirectly through references to perspective taking and openness to alternative viewpoints, their accounts suggest that engagement with diverse narratives and structured dialogue encouraged them to question assumptions, reflect on their own perspectives, and develop a more critical understanding of social and intercultural issues. As one participant explained:

> "Engaging with different historical narratives made me aware that the version of history I had previously learned was incomplete." (P7, personal testimony, video 5, November 2025)

Another participant, commenting on current geopolitical conflicts, reflected:

> "I realised that life is not black and white. The seminar helped me recognise that I had often been taught to think in line with the majority rather than question different perspectives." (P8, personal testimony, video 4, November 2025)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that criticality developed through participants' willingness to question previously taken-for-granted assumptions, engage with alternative perspectives, and reflect critically on complex social and intercultural issues.

5. Discussion

Before discussing the findings, it is important to distinguish between the study's theoretical contribution and its empirical contribution. The theoretical framework adopted in this study proposes human diversity as a broader conceptual lens for understanding intercultural and democratic competence development. However, the empirical evidence presented here does not test **comparatively** this framework against alternative conceptualisations of diversity. Rather, the empirical findings provide insight into how participants interpreted diversity following their engagement in the IMAGINE programme and how particular pedagogical processes supported their learning. Therefore, the discussion distinguishes between arguments derived from theory and those supported directly by participants' accounts and experiences.

This discussion interprets the findings in direct relation to the two research questions guiding the study. The first question examined how a human diversity perspective contributes to the conceptualisation and development of intercultural and democratic competences (IDC), while the second explored the pedagogical processes and educational conditions through which the IMAGINE programme supports such development. The discussion therefore focuses on how the empirical findings contribute to answering these questions and to extending current knowledge on intercultural and democratic competence development in teacher education.

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Regarding the first research question, the findings suggest that *adopting a human diversity perspective* significantly broadens the conceptual foundations of intercultural competence. Traditionally, intercultural competence has been defined as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with individuals perceived as belonging to different cultural groups (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2009). While this perspective has made a substantial contribution to the field, it may inadvertently reinforce the assumption that diversity primarily resides in specific cultural, ethnic, or religious populations rather than constituting a fundamental characteristic of all human beings (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2017).

The human diversity approach challenges this assumption by viewing diversity not as an attribute of the "other" but as an inherent dimension of human existence. From this perspective, cultural identity is only one among multiple dimensions shaping individual experience, alongside social, religious, linguistic, ideological, generational, and personal characteristics. Such an understanding aligns with Appiah's (2006) critique of essentialist notions of culture and with Arendt's (1958) conception of human plurality, which recognises both equality and uniqueness as defining characteristics of the human condition. Consequently, the focus shifts from understanding individuals as representatives of fixed cultural groups toward recognising the multidimensional, dynamic, and evolving nature of human identities (Bekerman, 2012). This reconceptualization contributes to overcoming several limitations frequently identified in intercultural education. First, it reduces the tendency to essentialize identities by avoiding the assumption that individuals are primarily representatives of cultural categories (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2017). Second, it challenges the widespread tendency to associate diversity exclusively with minority groups, thereby positioning diversity as a universal human reality rather than a characteristic of populations (Appiah, 2006). Third, it helps prevent processes of othering by emphasising common human dignity alongside individual uniqueness. This perspective resonates with philosophical approaches that stress plurality and relationality as fundamental aspects of human coexistence, particularly the work of Arendt (1958) on human plurality and Tenreiro Rodríguez (2017) on the ethical responsibility that emerges through encounters with the Other.

Another important contribution to RQ1 was participants' understanding of how cultural heritage can make human diversity visible while contributing to the construction of a shared sense of belonging. Interview participants emphasised belonging and group cohesion as fundamental elements of the IMAGINE programme. They reported that narrative-based activities, encounters with cultural heritage, and dialogical exchanges created a supportive environment for reflection, trust, and intercultural learning. Importantly, participants did not describe belonging in terms of attachment to a single cultural identity. Rather, engagement with diverse historical narratives and shared heritage appeared to foster a broader understanding of belonging as a dynamic and inclusive process that accommodates multiple identities and experiences. Heritage emerged not merely as content to be learned but as a pedagogical resource that enabled participants to connect abstract concepts such as diversity, discrimination, and social cohesion with concrete historical experiences and places. Beyond increasing historical knowledge, heritage-based learning appeared to function as a mediating space through which participants could negotiate the relationship between difference and belonging. Importantly, participants did not simply acquire information about minority histories; rather, they appeared to reinterpret contemporary debates on diversity and citizenship through these historical experiences. This finding resonates with recent literature on heritage education, which argues that encounters with heritage can foster both recognition of plurality and the construction of shared civic identities (Achour, 2025; Staničić & Sioli, 2024; UNESCO, n.d.). This suggests that heritage may play a reflective rather than merely informative role in IDC development.These findings are consistent with

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

the literature suggesting that meaningful intercultural learning is fostered through a sense of belonging, engagement with personal narratives, and encounters with diverse perspectives (Barrett & Borghetti, 2025; Carmona et al., 2023; Deardorff, 2020). They also support the idea of relational conceptions of belonging as a socially constructed process emerging through participation, recognition, and engagement with shared narratives (Osler, 2016; Stewart & Barrios Aquino, 2026). From this perspective, cultural heritage may contribute to creating inclusive forms of belonging grounded in a human diversity perspective while simultaneously fostering social cohesion.

From a theoretical perspective, the Human Diversity framework has been proposed as a broader way of conceptualising intercultural and democratic competence by recognising diversity as a multidimensional and universal characteristic of democratic societies. The empirical findings of this study do not allow for a comparison between the different diversity frameworks. However, participants consistently described a shift towards more relational, multidimensional, and less essentialised understandings of diversity following their participation in the programme. In this sense, the findings are compatible with the theoretical assumptions underpinning the Human Diversity perspective. Rather than focusing primarily on relations between predefined cultural groups, this perspective emphasises the multidimensional nature of human identities and the shared conditions through which diversity, belonging, and democratic participation are experienced. In doing so, it offers a broader conceptual foundation for intercultural and democratic education that may contribute to reducing essentialist interpretations of culture and fostering more inclusive forms of citizenship.

Addressing RQ2, the findings indicate that IDC development within the IMAGINE programme did not emerge from exposure to diversity alone, but from the interaction between relational, experiential, dialogical, and diversity-oriented learning processes. This finding aligns with Byram et al.'s (2022) conceptualisation of intercultural learning as a reflective process grounded in meaningful encounters. From this perspective, competence development does not result from exposure to difference itself, but from critically examining one's assumptions, values, stereotypes, and responses to diversity through guided reflection.

A key pedagogical condition enabling this reflective process was the creation of safe dialogical spaces, which participants identified as one of the most valuable aspects of the programme. These spaces enabled participants to question assumptions, engage with multiple perspectives, and critically examine their own interpretations and experiences.

The pedagogical value of safe and non-judgemental spaces does not lie in avoiding disagreement, but in creating the conditions for respectful dialogue and thoughtful engagement with complex issues. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasising the role of dialogue and critical reflection in intercultural competence development (Cushner & Mahon, 2009). Likewise, Coulby (2006) argues that intercultural education should move beyond the recognition of cultural diversity to cultivate the capacity to negotiate difference through dialogue and critical inquiry. The present findings extend this perspective by suggesting that IDC development emerges not from exposure to diversity itself, but from dialogical processes embedded within pedagogical environments that encourage critical reflection, engagement with uncertainty, and exploration of complex social realities.

Beyond reflection and dialogue, the findings highlight the emotional and experiential dimensions of IDC development. Within IMAGINE's non-formal and dialogical pedagogical approach, participants emphasised the value of sharing personal experiences and emotions while engaging with diverse perspectives. They described these experiences as meaningful because they connected cognitive reflection with emotional engagement and interpersonal interaction. This finding is particularly relevant because competence

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

frameworks often describe empathy, openness, and perspective taking as outcomes of competence development, while paying less attention to the pedagogical mechanisms through which such dispositions emerge. Participants' accounts suggest that emotional engagement may operate as a mediating condition linking intercultural encounters to deeper reflection. Rather than being peripheral to learning, emotions appeared to create the conditions under which participants were willing to reconsider assumptions, engage with complexity, and recognise alternative perspectives. This interpretation aligns with recent scholarship emphasising the inseparability of cognitive and affective dimensions within transformative intercultural learning processes (Barrett & Borghetti, 2025; Zheng, 2022).

These findings support the view that intercultural competence development involves both cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions of learning (Barrett & Borghetti, 2025; Council of Europe, 2018a; Dolev & Shapira, 2026) and are consistent with transformative learning theories that emphasise reflection on lived experience as a catalyst for personal and social transformation (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970). Participants' accounts suggest that emotionally meaningful encounters fostered ethical awareness, enabling them to relate to others not merely as members of cultural groups but as individuals with unique experiences, perspectives, and dignity. From a Deweyan perspective, this highlights how experiential learning can contribute to the development of ethical judgement and democratic dispositions through reflection on experience and engagement with human relationships. These emotional, experiential, and dialogical learning processes were facilitated by the non-formal educational environment in which IMAGINE was implemented.

A cross-cutting finding relevant to both RQ1 and RQ2 concerns the central role of non-formal pedagogies in enabling the outcomes of the IMAGINE programme. While RQ1 focused on how a human diversity perspective contributes to the conceptualisation and development of IDC, and RQ2 examined the processes through which such development occurs, the findings suggest that both dimensions were deeply interconnected through the programme's non-formal educational approach. Participants consistently highlighted the value of the residential format, participatory methodologies, and the relative distance from conventional classroom structures, which created opportunities for sustained interaction, trust building, dialogue, experimentation, and reflection.

These pedagogical conditions enabled participants to engage openly with sensitive and controversial issues, including racism, antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, and anti-Roma and -Sinti discrimination, within an atmosphere characterised by trust and mutual respect. The findings indicate that non-formal education functioned not merely as the setting in which learning occurred, but as a pedagogical framework that facilitated many of the processes identified throughout this study, including critical reflection on diversity, dialogue across differences, emotional engagement, ethical awareness, experiences of belonging, and engagement with shared heritage. Furthermore, the participation of pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, teacher educators, university and upper-secondary students, and non-formal education practitioners enriched the learning process by enabling the interaction of theoretical, professional, community-based, and autobiographical perspectives.

In line with Mompoint-Gaillard and Lázár (2018), the findings suggest that the educational value of non-formal learning lies not in its informality per se, but in its intentional pedagogical design, skilled facilitation, and the progressive creation of trust that enable meaningful participation and critical engagement with diversity. Taken together, the findings indicate that IDC development in IMAGINE emerged through a reflective learning process supported by dialogical, experiential, emotional, and relational pedagogies. Rather than resulting from exposure to diversity alone, competence development was fostered through pedagogically mediated experiences that enabled participants to critically engage with difference, develop ethical awareness, construct inclusive forms of belonging, and recognise human

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

diversity as a fundamental dimension of shared human experience. In this regard, non-formal education constitutes the key integrative element linking the conceptual contributions identified in RQ1 with the pedagogical processes examined in RQ2. Importantly, this conclusion derives directly from the empirical evidence rather than from the theoretical framework alone. Participants repeatedly associated their learning with opportunities for sustained dialogue, collaborative reflection, experiential activities, and engagement with diverse perspectives in non-formal settings. While existing theories of intercultural and democratic competence emphasise the importance of these processes, the IMAGINE case illustrates how they can be operationalised within a coherent educational design. The contribution of this study therefore lies not in validating a specific theoretical model, but in providing empirical insight into how competence development may be facilitated through the interaction of human diversity, heritage-based learning, and non-formal pedagogies.

6. Conclusions

The present exploratory study examined how the IMAGINE programme contributes to the development of intercultural and democratic competences (IDC). The findings provide insights into the two research questions guiding the study while contributing to current debates on intercultural and democratic education.

Regarding the first research question, the findings suggest that a human diversity perspective broadens prevailing understandings of intercultural competence by moving beyond approaches centred primarily on cultural, ethnic, religious, or other predefined group differences. Rather than viewing diversity as a characteristic mainly associated with minority groups, participants came to understand it as an inherent and multidimensional feature of the human condition. Their reflections extended beyond identity-based categories to encompass a plurality of experiences, social positions, beliefs, and life trajectories. Importantly, this perspective did not emerge as a theoretical construct imposed upon participants but developed through their engagement with diverse perspectives, intercultural encounters, dialogical learning processes, and heritage-based experiences. The findings suggest that participants engaged with diversity in ways that extended beyond conventional cultural or group-based categories. Although the study does not compare alternative theoretical frameworks, these experiences appear consistent with the assumptions of a Human Diversity perspective and indicate its potential relevance for inclusive, context-sensitive, and intercultural democratic approaches to education.

The study further highlights the contribution of cultural heritage as a meaningful pedagogical resource for making human diversity visible and fostering inclusive forms of belonging. Through engagement with diverse historical narratives, places, and collective memories, participants connected abstract concepts such as diversity, discrimination, inclusion, and social cohesion with concrete human experiences. Heritage-based and place-based learning therefore emerged as important mechanisms through which participants explored both commonality and difference, recognising diversity not as an exception to social life but as one of its constitutive dimensions. In this respect, the findings point to the potential of heritage education to promote intercultural dialogue, recognition, and a shared sense of belonging within multicultural societies.

Regarding the second research question, the findings indicate that IDC development did not emerge from exposure to diversity alone. Rather, it was fostered through the interaction of reflective, dialogical, experiential, emotional, and relational learning processes. Safe dialogical spaces, opportunities for critical reflection, emotionally meaningful encounters, engagement with diverse perspectives, and participation in heritage-based activities enabled participants to question assumptions, examine biases, develop ethical awareness, and strengthen democratic dispositions. These findings support the view that intercultural

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

and democratic competence development is a relational and context-dependent process shaped by pedagogically mediated experiences rather than by contact with diversity itself.

A central contribution of the study concerns the role of non-formal education pedagogies as the key integrative element linking the conceptual and pedagogical dimensions of IDC development. The residential format, participatory methodologies, intentional facilitation, and diversity of participant profiles collectively created the conditions through which reflection, dialogue, emotional engagement, belonging, and intercultural learning became possible. In this sense, non-formal education functioned not merely as the context in which learning occurred but as the pedagogical framework through which the programme's educational aims were realised. The interaction between pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, teacher educators, university students, researchers, and non-formal education practitioners further enriched the learning process by creating opportunities for peer learning, professional dialogue, and shared knowledge construction.

The findings also suggest that fostering critical thinking constitutes an important component of teacher education for IDC development. Rather than emerging exclusively through the analysis of social issues, criticality appeared to develop through dialogue, encounters with diverse perspectives, and the capacity to reflect upon one's own assumptions and experiences. This observation highlights the importance of preparing future teachers to understand and respond to increasingly complex educational realities from ethical, relational, and democratic perspectives.

Two additional observations emerged that were not originally included among the study objectives and may merit further investigation. First, the age diversity observed across all editions of the programme suggests that IMAGINE may be understood not only as a learning experience for students but also as an intergenerational learning community. The interaction among participants with different educational backgrounds, life experiences, and professional trajectories appears to enrich dialogue and support collaborative learning. Second, the consistent predominance of female participants raises questions regarding the factors that shape participation in intercultural and democratic education initiatives. Although the present study does not allow conclusions to be drawn regarding the causes or implications of this pattern, future research could explore whether gender influences engagement with these forms of educational experiences.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relied on voluntary participation and non-probability sampling procedures, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Women were overrepresented across the different editions of the programme, and most participants were drawn from educational and socio-educational contexts, suggesting the possibility of selection bias due to pre-existing interests in diversity, inclusion, human rights, and intercultural dialogue. In addition, the composition of the samples varied across editions in terms of age, educational profile, and size, while the programme itself was implemented in a limited number of Spanish locations. These factors suggest that the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and contextually situated.

Despite these limitations, the study provides initial evidence regarding the potential of combining a human diversity framework, heritage-based learning, and non-formal educational pedagogies for the development of intercultural and democratic competences.

Taken together, the findings provide preliminary empirical support for considering Human Diversity as a promising framework through which intercultural and democratic competence development can be understood. However, further comparative research would be required to determine how this perspective differs from or complements other established approaches to diversity in education.

By integrating reflection, dialogue, emotional engagement, heritage learning, and non-formal pedagogies, IMAGINE offers a promising educational model for fostering

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16081323

inclusive forms of belonging, ethical awareness, and democratic participation. Future research should examine the transferability of this approach across different socio-cultural contexts, involve more diverse participant groups, and explore its longer-term educational impact through longitudinal and comparative designs.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

BCT	Boundary-Crossing Teaching
CoE	Council of Europe
CVS	Children's Voices for a New Human Space
EC	European Commission
ECUDEM-UCV	European Institute of Education for Democratic Culture Catholic University of Valencia
EU	European Union
IC	Intercultural Competence
IDC	Intercultural and Democratic Competences
INNO4DIV	Addressing Educational Needs of Teachers in the EU for Inclusive Education in a Context of Diversity
JRC	Join Research Center
KECs	Key Enabling Components
MS	Member States
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPMI	Public Policy and Management Institute
TEU	Treaty on European Union
RFCDC	Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UCV	Catholic University of Valencia
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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Article

Self-Determined Learning in a Multicultural Context of Teacher Education

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Abstract

This theoretical–conceptual article examines the ongoing challenges of teacher education in multicultural contexts, focusing on the tension between uniform, mandatory curricula and the needs and identities of diverse cultural groups. The central problem discussed is that contemporary pedagogical structures, often grounded in a hegemonic cultural framework and in a disciplinary canon perceived as "objective," create barriers, exclusion, and inequality for minority groups in teacher education. This article aims to critically examine the suitability of traditional pedagogical models for multicultural teacher education and to propose a principled alternative based on self-determined learning (heutagogy) as an alternative educational paradigm. The analysis draws on theoretical and philosophical literature in the philosophy of education, multicultural education, and theories of knowledge and learning, juxtaposing approaches that emphasize a binding disciplinary canon—commonly associated with conservative-liberal thought—with critiques that challenge its authority, objectivity, and universality. The article's central proposal is the adoption of heutagogy in multicultural teacher education—an approach that places the learner at the center and enables students to define their learning pathways, research questions, and knowledge sources in accordance with their cultural and social contexts. Within this framework, "melting pot" conceptions and standardized curricula are rejected in favor of fostering an equitable, reflexive, and culturally responsive educational environment. The article concludes that implementing heutagogy in multicultural teacher education is not merely a pedagogical–technical move but requires a conscious philosophical and value-based choice between learner-centered educational models emphasizing autonomy and cultural pluralism, and society-centered models grounded in a shared knowledge canon and disciplinary authority.

Keywords: heutagogy; self-determined learning; multicultural teacher education

1. Introduction

This theoretical–conceptual article outlines the foundations for a practical solution to a real problem. It proposes a paradigmatic change in teacher education—a change that bears directly on unresolved issues related to multicultural education within this preparation process. The proposed change is grounded in a normative agenda that does not settle for describing the current state of affairs or for presenting the theoretical positions of the main actors in the academic educational sphere but rather calls for concrete action in the field.

Teacher education in Israel serves in this article as a central—though not exclusive—case study, because Israel's social reality is characterized by a large indigenous national minority, a culturally separatist minority, new immigrants who are newly naturalized

citizens, and migrant workers. In this sense, teacher education in Israel appears to resemble many other deeply divided societies, in which the education system and teacher education are challenged by one or more of these characteristics.

Although the article is fundamentally theoretical–conceptual, it includes empirical illustrations drawn from the literature as well as from documented experience.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part lays out the main features of the problematic situation that currently characterizes multicultural education in teacher education. This section does not aim to offer anything new, but to serve as the basis for the second part, which presents self-determined learning (hereafter: heutagogy) as a solution or, at the very least, as an improvement over the existing situation.

The third and final part raises philosophical-critical doubts about the proposal. It questions, in particular, the status of knowledge and knowing in a multicultural environment generally, and specifically with regard to the heutagogical approach proposed here as the principal path for multicultural teacher education.

2. Part One: On Culture, Multiculturalism, and Teacher Education

At the outset, the multicultural context of learners and instructors in teacher education will be illuminated—individuals whose cultural diversity is expressed across various dimensions. This will be followed by a discussion of the problems and difficulties that surround the existence of a traditional teacher education program within a multicultural context, with particular emphasis on the inequality between members of the majority group and those belonging to cultural minority groups. Examples of these issues will be drawn, among other places, from the reality in Israel, where separate educational frameworks typically exist for young learners belonging to the secular Jewish majority, to religious Jewish students, and to Arab–Palestinian students. However, in many Israeli institutions for teacher education, student teachers from these different cultural groups study together. Within each of these groups, too, there is further subdivision ("superdiversity") into subcultures that differ from one another along numerous dimensions—for example, national, religious, ethnic, or political (Gindi & Erlich Ron, 2023; Paul-Binyamin & Potchter, 2020; Shapira & Amzalag, 2024). The Israeli case is not unique, and the points raised below are relevant to teacher education in many countries around the world (Yip & Xu, 2025).

There are various definitions and characteristics of the concept of culture in the scholarly literature. For the purposes of this article, as will become clear below, I do not require an in-depth examination of the nuances of the concept or its full range of definitions. I limit myself to adopting one characteristic that is common across the broader literature—a feature that appears in diverse ways in different cultures and will be detailed below. I do not claim that this cultural characteristic is essential or permanently ingrained in every member of a given culture, such that one cannot detach oneself from it. Rather, I argue that it is relevant and exerts influence on educational practice, particularly on teacher education.

I refer to the societal–cultural characteristic, on which the Canadian scholar Will Kymlicka focused, and which describes culture as providing its members with meaningful ways of life in the domains of social life, religion, leisure, and the economy—and, for our purposes here, in the domain of educational activity (Kymlicka, 1996). For Kymlicka, members of a cultural group characterized in this way share values, narratives, and communal memories, as well as a common vocabulary that covers most of their communicative needs in everyday life. The experience of being exposed to the same language, traditions, and stories, as well as similarities in family and community structures, leads members of a cultural group to feel that they share an identity and a unique way of perceiving and understanding the world. In other words, culture is primarily a symbolic, conceptual, and epistemic phenomenon (Banks, 2016). This societal–cultural characteristic largely guides

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members of a cultural group in choosing their path among the options before them and helps them make sense of their meaning (Lenard, 2020).

Even if the boundaries between cultures are not always clear and fixed, this characteristic typically manifests itself distinctly among the different cultural groups that make up Western societies (e.g., in Britain, Australia, and Canada), which are multicultural rather than homogeneous (Banks, 2016).

To examine possible relationships between such groups, Tamir (1995) distinguished between "thick" multiculturalism and "thin" multiculturalism.

Certainly, this distinction between "thick" and "thin" multiculturalism is schematic and conceptual. In practice, the degree of multiculturalism in a society moves along a continuum between these two poles. The closer a society approaches the "thin" end, the more dominant becomes a liberal language of dialogue that seeks common ground among subcultures and aims to achieve consensus and social harmony by emphasizing similarity, shared elements, and agreement over difference and division (Gindi et al., 2023). Conversely, the closer a society approaches the "thick" end of multiculturalism, the more pronounced becomes an agonistic ethos that values disagreement, confrontation, struggle, and conflict as conditions that enable non-hegemonic groups to make their voices heard (Mouffe, 2000; Ruitenberg, 2009). In the first case, the core values held by members of different cultural groups are so deeply opposed that it becomes impossible to maintain a shared educational discourse between them or reach any educational agreements. In the Israeli context, for example, it is not feasible to bring secular and ultra-Orthodox student teachers together in a single academic course and reach agreement on shared educational content in general, and particularly not on multicultural education. This is because the ultra-Orthodox seek to preserve their insular way of life and separate educational systems (Dödtmann, 2023; Moskovich & Liberman, 2018). Indeed, even in earlier stages of schooling—schools and kindergartens—Israel maintains complete separation between those coming from secular culture and those coming from ultra-Orthodox culture (Haller et al., 2024). In North America, as another example, most Amish send their children to their community's separate schools (Yang, 2022), and the same is true for Hutterite and Mennonite communities (Zimmerman, 2015).

Accordingly, teacher education within the context of "thick" multiculturalism takes place separately—within, and in accordance with, one particular culture—and participants usually do not encounter competing cultures during their training. Thus, for example, Canada maintains teacher-education programs for Indigenous teachers who will teach in First Nations schools (Uzoruo, 2024) and programs for training Hutterite teachers (Lee, 2025).

In the second case—"thin" multiculturalism—which will be the focus from this point onward, the different cultural groups can at the very least agree on a number of shared liberal-educational principles. In particular, they are able to engage in an open, albeit sometimes conflictual, dialogue regarding the rights, duties, and developmental opportunities of members of the various groups within a shared overarching educational framework.

In the spirit of "thin" multiculturalism, teacher-education institutions in the United States increasingly include "persons of color"—including Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Alaska Native students—alongside White student teachers. A similar situation exists in England (NCTQ, 2021; Sharp & Aston, 2024). A comparable "thin" multicultural ethos prevails in Israel as well, and in many teacher-education institutions students from different cultural groups study together in joint programs (Paul-Binyamin & Haj-Yehia, 2019). These exclude ultra-Orthodox students but include immigrants and native-born students, secular and religious students, and Jewish and Arab students (Barak et al., 2020).

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Gorski (2009) sought to highlight that institutions operating under the ethos of thin multiculturalism typically exhibit two types of approaches. The first includes approaches to multicultural education, which seek ways to instill 'multicultural knowledge' in student teachers and introduce possible pedagogical methods for teaching such knowledge. The second includes approaches to 'multicultural teacher education,' which seek ways to make the curriculum accessible to student teachers of all cultural backgrounds.

Following Gorski's distinction, this article similarly seeks to highlight two forms of multicultural engagement in teacher education: value-oriented multiculturalism and pedagogical multiculturalism.

2.1. Value-Oriented Multiculturalism in Teacher Education

The value-oriented dimension of multiculturalism in teacher education is expressed in education for multiculturalism, through which future educators in a liberal-democratic state learn to accept and include, as equals with full rights, members of the broader society who belong to cultures different from their own. In this way, when their time comes, they too will educate their students within diverse educational systems toward this same inclusive and accepting multiculturalism (Alismail, 2016).

At the center of discussions surrounding the value-oriented concept of multiculturalism in teacher education are issues of justice, morality, equality, redressing historical wrongs, and the like. In fact, multiculturalism in this context constitutes a normative moral requirement whose characteristics derive from various approaches in political philosophy concerning rights to justice, equality, and the rectification of cultural injustices (see, for example, Kymlicka, 2017). These discussions are undoubtedly highly important and necessary—both in the socio-political dimension and in the educational dimension concerned with value education. However, the aim of this article is more modest, and the discussion that follows will focus primarily on the second concept: the narrower and more focused notion of pedagogical multiculturalism within the domain of teacher education.

2.2. Pedagogical Multiculturalism in Teacher Education

The pedagogical dimension of multiculturalism in teacher education seeks to enable all pre-service teachers to fully realize their learning potential, thereby overcoming the cultural–pedagogical barriers faced by some learners. The need to address this dimension arises from the fact that teacher education programs—typically operating in the spirit of the hegemonic cultural group in society—include students from diverse cultural backgrounds: national, religious, ethnic, and political. Students from minority cultural groups often feel pushed to the margins of academic life.

In England, for example, certification rates for teacher candidates from ethnic minority groups are significantly lower than those of their white counterparts. Minority students experience negative situations (such as isolation, alienation, racism, and ignorance) during their training, both from fellow students and from instructors, especially in courses in which they constitute a small minority (Sharp & Aston, 2024). An Israeli study found a connection between teacher education students' cultural background, their psychological mechanisms, and their academic achievements (Zysberg, 2018).

Similarly, in the United States, research has consistently documented an academic achievement gap between African American students and White students, a gap closely linked to socioeconomic disparities (Banks, 2016; Hu & Morgan, 2024). In Australia, students from minority cultures on average score lower than those from the dominant cultural group, partly because standardized examinations—structured in the language and format of the Anglo-Celtic hegemonic culture—pose an obstacle for them (Hilton &

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

Saunders, 2024). The issue of language, in the broad sense of the term, illustrates and highlights the challenge.

According to Bourdieu (1991), in a non-homogeneous society there exists a multiplicity of meanings of the spoken language. Language contains no "innocent" words that are understood uniformly by all; rather, it is reinterpreted and understood differently by speakers who occupy different positions in the social space. Consequently, members of different social strata do not understand everyday language in the same way, and power resides with members of the hegemonic group, who both articulate and recognize what is considered appropriate and legitimate to say. The social uses of language thus reproduce the system of social differences among speakers. In educational institutions, this process gives rise to a new hierarchy of linguistic practices: speakers who lack the competence required to use legitimate academic language are effectively excluded from the educational discourse in which such competence is demanded or are relegated to silence.

In Israel, for another example, in most teacher education institutions that include members of the Jewish hegemonic group, instruction takes place in Hebrew, a language that minority students often command only to a limited degree (Lapidot-Lefler et al., 2025). In courses I taught at a teacher education college in Israel, some students were native Hebrew-speaking Jewish Israelis with full mastery of the language, while others had varying and lower levels of proficiency: new immigrant Jewish students whose mother tongues were Russian, Amharic, French, Ukrainian, or English, and Arab students whose mother tongue was Arabic.

Even students' understanding of what is permitted and prohibited with regard to plagiarism and questions of originality is culturally contingent. For example, students from East Asia are required to adapt to a norm rooted in Western Enlightenment thought, which underpins education systems in the Western world and views originality, self-expression, and independent inquiry as virtues. By contrast, East Asian cultures often regard imitation as a value associated with modesty (Bialystok, 2024).

Cultural–linguistic differences (again, in the broad sense of "language") may lead members of non-hegemonic social groups, especially high-achievers, to attempt to adopt the hegemonic majority language (Barak et al., 2020) and even to deny their origins and unique identities.

Moreover, pre-service teachers from ethnic minority groups—typically with little experience in multicultural environments different from their own—often fear the diversity-related or even racist challenges they may face in schools once they begin working (Miller et al., 2024; Sharp & Aston, 2024).

Thus, the existence of distinct, and in many respects conflicting, cultures among pre-service teachers in teacher education institutions cannot be denied. The overview above suggests that various scholars (such as Banks, 2016; Kymlicka, 1996) were not entirely accurate in claiming that in the United States and other modern societies there exists a broad, flexible shared culture that integrates a rich variety of cultural groups. This inaccuracy is also evident in the claim (Banks, 2016) that even if there is not a single culture in the United States, there is at least a dominant culture that encompasses most Americans. One may assume that these scholars would revise such claims in light of, for example, the emergence of ideologically—culturally opposed camps for and against the teaching of CRT in American schools (see Gusacov, 2025), or the political polarization between the conservative-Republican and the progressive-Democrats camps, or the religious polarization found even in institutions of higher education.

Such developments, among others, often result in groups "talking past one another," hindering dialogical communication and illustrating a condition of incommensurability and the absence of shared cultural ground (Gamm et al., 2024; Zimmerman, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

Modern Israeli society likewise does not conform to these two scholars' assumptions: secular culture, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Haredi cultures, national-religious culture, and Palestinian-Arab-Israeli cultures operate with very different practical and conceptual languages and do not converge under a single cultural umbrella.

Given these initial conditions culturally responsive instruction in teacher education appears to be required (see, e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). This normative demand of pedagogical multiculturalism should be directed at teacher education institutions so that they enable all students to cope successfully with the existing cultural diversity (Gindi et al., 2024); bridge cultural differences between learners and instructors, and between learners and the curriculum; and apply practical learning principles that ensure equal opportunities for academic success for members of all cultural groups. The appropriate time to implement this demand is the present moment of training, even if its implementation aims to prepare students for pedagogically multicultural practice in their future work in schools and kindergartens.

Following the conventional literature (e.g., Carignan et al., 2005; Gorski, 2009), three approaches can be outlined for addressing pedagogical multiculturalism in teacher education in contexts of "thin" multiculturalism.

The first approach may be called conservative, and it leads to cultural assimilation—absorbing minority-culture pre-service teachers into the hegemonic majority culture. The intended goal of instruction in teacher education institutions following this direction is alignment with the hegemonic culture, which guides teaching methods with the aim of ensuring that graduates possess the tools for optimal educational success in the public educational sphere governed by the cultural majority. This approach effectively abandons the multicultural dimension of education, promoting instead a mono-cultural education that all students, from all cultural backgrounds, are expected to adopt and internalize. Institutions sensitive to multicultural issues may offer support to minority-culture students as they attempt to integrate into the majority culture (Yip & Xu, 2025). The mainstream of teacher education institutions in Israel generally operates—albeit implicitly—in this direction (Basman-Mor, 2025; Paul-Binyamin & Reingold, 2014).

Another conservative possibility aligns with Elizabeth Anderson's idea of integration, which also aspires to one shared, learned culture in the context of "thin" multiculturalism. Anderson proposed cooperation on equal terms among people from diverse social groups—that is, a process of collective construction of shared democratic norms across all groups. For example, she argued that such integration across class, ethnicity, and religion is possible within the British educational system (Anderson & White, 2019).

The second approach has a distinctly liberal character. Within it, all cultures are regarded as legitimate, and their various characteristics are learned and preserved, as far as possible, within the shared public spaces of teacher education institutions (Yonah, 2006). Liberal multicultural education requires a comprehensive reform that promotes educational equality for diverse cultural, ethnic, and economic groups, and that enables these groups to express their unique voices. It involves the thoughtful integration of contents and perspectives from a variety of cultures organically into different disciplines, alongside the development of students' critical capacity to understand how cultural assumptions, frames of reference, and cultural biases shape the construction of knowledge.

In addition, liberal multicultural education is committed to reducing prejudice through the positive and consistent representation of different groups and through fostering respectful attitudes toward them. Equitable pedagogy is expressed in adapting instruction, as much as possible, to the needs and learning styles of students from different cultural backgrounds, in maintaining high yet tailored academic expectations, and in employing

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

participatory learning methods that promote the success of students from marginalized groups (Banks, 2016).

The common metaphor in the literature describes the first approach as a 'melting pot', which fuses all elements thrown into it into a single substance, whereas the metaphor for the second approach is a 'salad bowl', which preserves the presence of its individual components (Berray, 2019).

The third approach is a critical one, expressing opposition to both the historical and contemporary imposition of hegemonic power mechanisms on minority cultures—mechanisms that shape the education system as a whole and, in particular, teacher education institutions. At the core of this critique are certain institutional features that systematically deny equal educational opportunities to some students.

Advocates of this approach seek to reform educational institutions, regarding curriculum issues and beyond, so that learners from all groups and cultures have an equal opportunity to learn and succeed.

It seems that this third approach is most likely to be adopted by institutions led primarily by individuals belonging to non-hegemonic cultures. For example, in the American context, an emphasis within teacher education institutions on the ideas of Critical Race Theory (CRT) would constitute a step in this direction (Aronson & Meyers, 2022).

The discussion in the second part of this article introduces a fourth approach: heutagogy, which offers a remedy for many of the difficulties described, particularly those faced by members of minority cultures during their studies in teacher education programs. It is important to note the shift in emphasis here from teaching to learning. Gorski (2009) outlined a typology of approaches to multicultural education in teacher preparation, and all of them began with the word "teaching": (1) teaching the "other"; (2) teaching with cultural tolerance and sensitivity; (3) teaching from multicultural competence; (4) teaching within a sociopolitical context; (5) teaching as resistance and anti-hegemonic practice.

By contrast, the fourth approach proposed in the second part of this article focuses on learning rather than teaching. As will be shown, facilitation and guidance replace the act of teaching in this model.

3. Part Two: Heutagogy in Teacher Education

This section presents heutagogy as a potential contributor to solving many of the injustices and inequalities in teacher education that stem from the cultural diversity among teacher candidates, as discussed above. This is so even if the advantages (and limitations) of this educational approach are not unique to multicultural issues.

The following discussion does not exhaust the full range of heutagogical principles; rather, it seeks to highlight and focus on the points of intersection between heutagogy and teacher education in a multicultural context.

3.1. What Is Heutagogy?

Heutagogy is an educational approach centered on self-determined learning, first introduced in the early 2000s by Stewart Hase and Chris Kenyon (Hase & Kenyon, 2000). It builds on pedagogical and andragogical theories but placing the learner at the center of the learning process: her needs, her questions, and the investigative paths she defines for and by herself.

At the core of the approach stands the learner, who determines what she needs to learn, which questions she will investigate, what her sources of information will be, and how she will present her research outcomes. She is also a central partner in evaluating both the process and its outcomes. Accordingly, the role of the teacher or lecturer shifts from being a provider of knowledge to being a mentor, guide, and facilitator—supporting,

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

mediating, and assisting when the learner requests it (Glassner, 2022; Glassner & Back, 2020; Pulos et al., 2020).

Heutagogy rejects linear and rigid "top-down" curriculum models and instead encourages free movement across human and digital knowledge spaces. The learner's inquiry is accompanied by constant reflection: on the learning process, on her relationship to the subject matter, and on the collaborative work that heutagogy typically promotes (Moore, 2020). The approach emphasizes the development of lifelong learning skills, particularly those essential for learning in the digital age (Blaschke, 2021; Kamrozzaman et al., 2020).

Blaschke and Hase (2021) distilled heutagogy into five core principles:

1. The learner is both the agent and the subject of her learning process: She makes decisions about what and how to learn, which information sources to use, and how to acquire knowledge. She also determines whether and to what extent she has met her learning goals, that is she evaluates her own work.
2. The heutagogical learner possesses self-efficacy and learning capability and is able to demonstrate this capability in new and unfamiliar contexts. These capacities allow for redesigning and transforming the learning process.
3. The learner directs her own learning path. It is no longer predetermined; the learner is not required to progress systematically or according to a pre-planned sequence. Learning is flexible and non-linear.
4. Heutagogy is characterized by reflective and critical self-thinking about what has been learned and about the learning process itself. Thus, it promotes double-loop learning: learning the specific content (the first loop) and learning about the learning process that produced that content (the second loop).
5. From all this, the heutagogical learner also learns how she ought to learn.

To function effectively in a heutagogical environment, teachers/lecturers must develop advanced mentoring skills, including task organization, identification and clarification of difficulties, mediation, and support.

In sum, heutagogy offers a flexible, reflective, learner-centered model that fosters capability, creativity, and independence, positioning learners as active investigators capable of navigating a complex and ever-changing world of knowledge.

3.2. How Might Heutagogy Help Address the Issue of Multiple Cultures in Teacher Education?

The three approaches to multiculturalism in teacher education described above—focusing on a single culture to which learners are expected to conform, studying a variety of cultures, and critiquing the existing situation—do not, in today's context, guarantee justice and fairness for teacher candidates from cultural minority groups. Teaching and learning in a language other than the learners' mother tongue, pedagogical practices foreign to minority cultures, instructors representing the dominant culture—all of these hinder equal opportunities for success in teacher education, in every possible sense of the concept of success.

A paradigmatic shift in teacher education, in which all courses are taught using a heutagogical approach, would move the program toward a more equitable, just, and fair pathway. In self-determined learning, each individual can autonomously guide their own learning and inquiry in ways that align with the culture they wish to engage with. This is not intended to produce cultural "color blindness" in teacher education, ignoring the unique characteristics of each culture, but rather to allow each learner to choose the "color" that will shape their learning experience.

The shift is reflected in learners selecting, within the content area of a course, a topic that particularly interests or concerns them and investigating it. The topic may relate to a specific micro-culture—either the learner's own or one they wish to understand better—or

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

to the dominant culture under which the learner seeks to study, whether for intellectual, pragmatic, or other reasons. Consequently, the heutagogical shift rejects placing the idea of a "melting pot" at the center of multicultural teacher education and the insistence on a uniform curriculum for all teacher candidates in a given subject ("cohort-based learning"). Instead of a single curriculum shaped by the dominant culture, the change proposes a curriculum that accommodates, affirms, and enables the cultures of all individuals or groups within the teacher education program.

Examples of this approach can be found in practice. For instance, in a heutagogical teacher education course in Israel titled "Education for Social Activism" (Gusacov, 2023), Palestinian-Arab students investigated education for activism concerning the issue of femicide in their community, while a LGBTQ+ student explored how schools can support LGBTQ+ students. In another heutagogical course, "Academic Learning Skills," ultra-Orthodox female students studied within a secular college. The course instructor encouraged learners to choose topics of personal significance, recognizing the central role their religious worldviews played in their lives. One group chose to research "Equal educational opportunities within the ultra-Orthodox community", while another studied "Integration of ultra-Orthodox men into the labor market." In a different heutagogical course with Bedouin-Muslim and Jewish participants, one student examined "Violence in schools" in the Bedouin community (Soffer-Vital et al., 2025).

Heutagogical teacher education allows members of every cultural group to study and investigate a topic of their choice within a given discipline, using human, written, or audio sources sensitive to their group's unique cultural language. The research and learning process concludes with the presentation of results to all participants in the program. In other words, a group whose research emphasizes the perspective of its culture presents the findings from its viewpoint to a multicultural audience, thereby exposing all learners, even if only briefly, to multiple cultural perspectives.

This approach liberates future educators during their training to select learning partners based on "thick" pre-political cultural ties (such as shared religion or nationality), based on "thin" connections of participation in a shared political culture (Banting & Kymlicka, 2017), or even on personal human relationships that transcend barriers of culture, ideology, or politics.

3.3. The Role of the Mentor-Facilitator

Even though heutagogy is not a rigid approach with fixed, agreed-upon rules, there is broad consensus in the relevant literature that the transition to self-determined learning changes the role of what was traditionally the teacher or lecturer. In heutagogy, there is no longer a requirement for a knowledgeable instructor to impart knowledge to a learner who lacks it. The new role, hereafter referred to as a learning facilitator, is a combination of supporter, facilitator, coach, learning partner, guide, mentor, knowledge source, or pathfinder. The relative contribution of each of these roles varies across different interpretations of heutagogy.

At the beginning of each course, the learning facilitator presents the learners with the general ideas and concepts as well as the main topics and questions of the subject being studied in a way that encourages and motivates them to explore issues that interest them. The facilitator also remains alongside the learners throughout their self-determined learning, supporting them through reflective dialogue and by trusting their abilities, helping, when requested, to remove obstacles along the path of research and learning (Glassner, 2022).

Reflective discourse supports the advancement of learning quality, and within it, students are called upon to maintain clarity of their research questions, coherence of argumentation, transparency of their reasoning, reflexivity regarding underlying assump-

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

tions and positionality, and justification for the use of the specific sources they employed (Blaschke, 2012, 2021; Glassner & Back, 2020).

These quality-maintenance criteria are meta-academic and apply to learners from diverse cultural backgrounds without privileging a particular worldview, thereby enabling a certain integration of academic rigor and epistemic justice.

In light of learners' diversity, learning facilitators cannot and are not required to master all the cultural and subcultural languages to which students belong; therefore, students are asked to translate their ways of upholding these criteria into a cultural language shared by themselves and the learning facilitator.

From this it follows that multicultural teacher education in the spirit of heutagogy necessitates an additional, significant change in the role of those who were formerly teacher educators and are now heutagogical learning facilitators in the multicultural context.

3.4. Heutagogy as a Practical Answer to Multicultural Teacher Education

Gorski (2009) identified five principles defining what constitutes multicultural education:

1. It is a political process and movement seeking to ensure social justice for students who have been historically marginalized and continue to be marginalized today.
2. It recognizes that social justice is institutional and cannot be achieved solely through isolated classroom practices but rather requires comprehensive systemic reform.
3. It demands a critical analysis of power structures and privilege.
4. It aims to eliminate educational inequality.
5. It is good education for all students.

The heutagogical approach, as presented here, appears to adopt and reinforce these principles as follows:

1. Future teachers from minority cultural groups will not feel inferior compared to the majority group.
2. The entire educational institution undergoes a paradigmatic shift that promotes and supports social justice.
3. The institution can incorporate a dedicated heutagogical course into the curriculum focusing on critical analysis of power structures and privilege, allowing learners from various cultural groups to examine these systems from their unique perspectives.
4. All learners will have equal access to information sources aligned with their cultural background and can assess their learning through their specific cultural lens.
5. Members of all cultures can benefit from and participate in this paradigmatic shift.

Indeed, self-determined learning represents a paradigmatic change in the perception of the learning (and teaching) process and is already found in teacher education institutions worldwide (see, e.g., Chamo et al., 2023; Mwinkaar & Lonibe, 2024; Soffer-Vital et al., 2025). As demonstrated here, it addresses key challenges in multicultural education, both in education overall and specifically in teacher education.

The proposal presented here has a modest aim. It enables the development of culture-dependent practical skills based on the free choice of teacher candidates according to the culture guiding their learning. It is not a tool for improving interpersonal relationships nor a means of social change, as teacher education institutions have often seen it (Gorski, 2009). It is also not intended as a socio-educational instrument to retroactively correct longstanding injustices inflicted on minority cultural groups, even though it recognizes this historical injustice.

It does, however, open a small window for cultural encounters through the classroom presentation of culturally dependent learning outcomes at the end of courses, though it does not claim to teach all teacher candidates all the cultures and subcultures they may encounter in educational institutions after graduation. Rather than aiming for a utopian

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

solution, it offers a feasible response to the problem of multicultural education. While it circumvents the problem rather than confronting it directly, this circumvention is based not on escape but on choosing what is possible.

In summary, in the multicultural context of teacher education, and in contrast to centering teaching and demanding changes in teaching methods (Gorski, 2009), the approach presented here emphasizes the keyword "learning" and seeks to change learning practices, particularly in relation to multicultural issues:

(1) Each learner studies each content area from a cultural perspective of their own choosing. This unique perspective is recognized as legitimate and respected.
(2) Learners study the subject of "multicultural education" according to their choice: From the unique perspective of their own culture; from a desire to understand the culture of the "other" or "others"; from the perspective of opposing the existing hegemony; or from a desire to understand the hegemonic perspective on multicultural education.

Clearly, the proposal outlined here is primarily intended to teach future teachers content areas in a way that suits them. It does not claim to be multicultural education designed to redress longstanding injustices against certain minority cultural groups. Nor is it intended to teach future educators to respect cultural diversity or the culture of the other. These aspects should be taught in teacher education institutions through dedicated value-based courses, not through heutagogy.

3.5. Heutagogical Assessment

Heutagogical assessment foregrounds the learning process, thinking skills, collaboration, and knowledge construction, and is grounded in learners' self-assessment based on self-defined goals and criteria (Blaschke & Hase, 2019; Blaschke & Marin, 2020). Rejecting externally imposed learning outcomes, heutagogy positions learners as agents of their own learning trajectories—an approach that is especially relevant where standardized outcomes privilege dominant cultural perspectives and marginalize minority groups.

Instead of uniform, criterion-referenced assessment (Lok et al., 2016), heutagogically oriented courses employ diverse self-assessment models, including instructor-designed rubrics (Mohammad et al., 2019), co-constructed rubrics (Kaplan et al., 2021), and learner-defined criteria that most clearly depart from traditional practices (Glassner & Back, 2020). In multicultural classrooms, such flexibility enables culturally responsive assessment attuned to diverse learning styles, communicative norms, and knowledge traditions.

Despite its promise, heutagogical self-assessment raises institutional and pedagogical challenges (Blaschke, 2021; Moore, 2020). Universities' reliance on standardized grading for accreditation limits acceptance of learner-determined grades (Stoten, 2023). Learners often report limited experience and low confidence in self-assessment (Yan et al., 2023), particularly in multicultural cohorts shaped by educational cultures emphasizing teacher authority, high-stakes testing, or collective judgment. Research also shows weaker alignment between self-assessment and instructor-assessment than between peer-assessment and instructor-assessment (Iglesias Pérez et al., 2022), while instructors themselves largely reject individualized grading (Stoten, 2023).

Studies further indicate that students tend to overestimate their performance when self-assessment affects final grades (Akyildiz, 2019; Andrade, 2019; Blaschke, 2021; Glassner & Back, 2020). Accuracy correlates with prior achievement, self-efficacy, and age, with higher-achieving and older students demonstrating greater accuracy and more positive attitudes (Rinn & Walker, 2022; Yan et al., 2023). Accordingly, training in self-assessment has been proposed as a partial remedy (Glassner & Back, 2020). Such training may function as culturally responsive scaffolding, though transparency in sharing self-assessments can

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

reduce honesty and raise persistent concerns about reliability and integrity in grading (Panadero et al., 2016; Andrade, 2019).

4. Part Three: On Knowledge and Knowing in Multicultural Teacher Education

Heutagogy in general, and particularly in multicultural teacher education, presents both advantages and challenges, both of which have already been extensively described elsewhere (see, for example, Chun & Abdullah, 2021; D'Souza, 2024; Moore, 2020; Mukuka & Tatira, 2025; Ramas et al., 2023; Verma & Varghese, 2025).

In this third and final part of the article, I aim to raise for conceptual discussion one of these challenges of heutagogy, which is strongly connected to the central issues addressed earlier in the paper: the challenging question of the nature and place of knowledge and knowing in teacher education, particularly the role and place of the disciplinary canon.

The purpose of examining this challenge, as will become clear below, is to show that multiple justifications can be offered for either accepting or rejecting a shift toward heutagogical learning in teacher education. Ultimately, however, as with many fundamental questions in education, the decision will be shaped primarily by ideological considerations.

To remain precise and focused, the discussion will address, albeit in outline, the question of engagement with the canon is approached across different content areas. This issue has many deep dimensions, and the present section cannot fully explore them, let alone survey all the answers proposed in the literature. Therefore, I will limit myself to pointing out two major directions of engagement with it, without attempting, and without being able, to determine which approach is more appropriate for multicultural teacher education.

4.1. A Shared Canon as a Challenge to Heutagogy

The concept of a canon is understood here as describing a body of rules, works, or ideas related to a specific subject, which has been accepted or authorized as binding by those considered authorities in that particular field. For example, the scientific canon is the accepted framework of knowledge, investigative methods, theories, and values recognized by the scientific community as valid. The literary canon, by contrast, is a collection of "required works" of literature considered central and important within a given culture. In our context, the canon in teacher education is the collection of knowledge, texts, skills, values, and practices regarded by the education system as important, valid, and central, and therefore worthy of inclusion in the mandatory curriculum for every pre-service teacher.

Consistent learning in the spirit of heutagogy within any content area leaves no room for a mandatory canon in that field. Therefore, a conservative-ideological perspective, for which a binding canon is a foundational pillar of educational construction, constitutes a challenge to the heutagogical approach regarding this matter.

For example, conservative-liberal philosophers concerned with education and motivated by a desire to orient schooling toward what they regard as the "proper" culture seek to transmit the intellectual canon from the generation of parents and teachers to the generation of students. In their view, all learners in a contemporary humanistic and democratic society, without exception, must study and internalize the same cultural touchstones of Western civilization (Adler, 2000). As Bloom (1987) famously asserts: "Men may live more truly and fully in reading Plato and Shakespeare than at any other time, because then they are participating in essential being and are forgetting their accidental lives" (p. 380).

Accordingly, the educational ideal championed by these conservative-liberals is a literate education: one grounded in reading, studying, and internalizing the canonical texts. If, as heutagogy proposes, each learner is permitted to direct her own cultural acquisition

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

or development, without a canon binding her and her peers in teacher education, we risk being left with mass culture—a diminished form of culture that can be acquired through the lowest means, without any intellectual or moral effort. As Strauss (1968) warns, "Liberal education is the counterpoison to mass culture, to the corroding effects of mass culture, to its inherent tendency to produce nothing but 'specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart'" (p. 5).

Strauss, the American conservative-liberal philosopher, likens this canon-based, literate education to a ladder that alone can lift learners out of mass culture and elevate them toward a superior cultural realm: "Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. . . Liberal education reminds those members of a mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness." (Strauss, 1968).

From a conservative-liberal perspective on the other side of the Atlantic as well, the shared, compulsory canon is seen as the very basis of culture—and thus of education. As Scruton (2019) writes:

> Artistic and philosophical traditions therefore provide our paradigm of culture. . . creating the canon of masterpieces, the received monuments, the 'touchstones' [. . .] which it is the goal of humane education to appreciate and to understand.. . . Fundamental to that enterprise is the love of beauty (p. 159).

A related conservative position recommends, out of necessity and in the absence of sufficiently capable teachers, that learners read the canonical texts directly: "Those teachers [. . .] the greatest minds [. . .] are extremely rare. . . For all practical purposes, pupils. . . have access to the greatest minds only through the great books." (Strauss, 1968, p. 3).

Otherwise, if each heutagogical learner is allowed to determine for himself the meaning of culture based solely on his own inquiries, then, Strauss argues, "it is as if someone would say that the cultivation of a garden may consist of the garden's being littered with empty tin cans and whisky bottles" (Strauss, 1968, p. 4).

Needless to say, from a conservative standpoint, such an outcome cannot count as culture.

The American educator E. D. Hirsch similarly sought to establish a national canon in his influential work outlining what every American child must know in order to achieve higher levels of national literacy and to build national unity through a shared cultural foundation (Hirsch, 1987). In England, the Secretary of State for Education attempted to adopt and implement Hirsch's ideas (Hodgson & Harris, 2022). In the same spirit demanding a clear canon to shape the nation, the British Education Secretary Michael Gove asserted: "Our education system should give all children the tools they need—mastery of English, fluency in arithmetic, the ability to reason scientifically, a knowledge of these islands and their history—to take their place as confident, modern citizens" (Gove, 2013). For Gove, this shared and obligatory knowledge forms the basis of a nation-building project intended to foster social harmony (Hodgson & Harris, 2022).

In a related critique of heutagogy, contemporary conservative thinker Jordan Peterson argues that a shared cultural framework stabilizes human interaction. In such a framework, not all cultural values are equal; rather, a hierarchy of values exists in which some things are rightly granted priority and significance. In the absence of such a hierarchy, Peterson contends, social action and human functioning become impossible (Peterson, 2018).

Even proponents of a canon within my own field—the philosophy of education—maintain that meaningful teacher preparation in philosophy, much like preparation in more "hard" disciplines such as physics education or language instruction, cannot be open to any direction learners may choose to pursue. According to this view, teacher education in

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

the field requires a canon and must be grounded in the work of particular past and present philosophers (Bialystok, 2017).

We have therefore seen that conservative thinking, which places a single worthy culture at its center, demands the existence of a compulsory canon, whether it is taught by teachers or learned through reading books. In other words, this approach exemplifies a position opposed to the heutagogical stance, which rejects the very idea of a binding canon.

The canon is not unique to the social sciences and humanities; it is firmly rooted—indeed especially so—in the natural sciences, even if, as Thomas Kuhn showed, the canon (or "paradigm," in his terms) changes from time to time when a scientific revolution occurs (Kuhn, 1996).

We may say that in the canon of the social sciences and the humanities, truth operates on a cultural-value plane, and deviation from it is perceived as cultural decline (Bloom, 1987). By contrast, as will be shown below, the scientific canon purports to establish objective-empirical truth through method and a professional community, and the canon functions as a filtering mechanism between valid and invalid knowledge. This does not mean that the scientific canon is final, and the theories it adopts are those that have high explanatory power and have thus far withstood attempts at falsification (Popper, 2002).

In light of this, the established scientific canon certainly does not share heutagogy's understanding of appropriate scientific education. It determines what is scientific and correct, and deviation from this determination is not permitted.

Thus, for example, the scientific canon confidently holds that: "Evolutionary theory, as many researchers have pointed out, is one of the cornerstones of biology, whose understanding facilitates the study of all its other fields since it offers general and dominant explanations for the phenomena it examines" (Christina & Penelope, 2024, p. 1).

Anyone seeking to challenge this claim, for instance in the name of creationism, will be dismissed with disdain by the scientific establishment (Russo & André, 2019).

Those who hold to the idea of a scientific canon, and to the obligation of transmitting it to science teachers and their students, are confident that scientific practice is an objective process that requires evidence and can therefore be relied upon. "Objectivity" here is understood broadly: first, in the sense that the world or reality exists independently of us, and the way the world exists does not depend on us or on how we think it exists; second, in the sense that the truth expressed by science about the world (even if only temporarily true) is objective, meaning that it does not depend on what a scientist believes or wishes to be true, but only on the way the world actually is; and third, in the sense of epistemic objectivity grounded in the scientific method as depicted by Popper (2002), which excludes from scientific inquiry subjective factors such as biases, personal interests, or political inclinations (Sankey, 2024). The concept of objectivity does not integrate well with heutagogical learning as described here, especially in a multicultural environment.

None of this implies that those who demand a canon necessarily agree on its specific contents (see, for example, Drozdova, 2024). Nor does it imply that every canon is fixed or static, for such a description ignores its character as constantly expanding and developing. Moreover, even if the scientific canon taught in the education system does not permit deviation from it, it may still include contradictory theories—Newton and Einstein, as noted, may reside within it together (Kotsis & Vakarou, 2025). It should also be noted that a canon does not necessarily "toe the line"; it may contain subversive counter-positions, as demonstrated, for example, by works included in the literary canon that challenge the economic, moral, gendered, and cultural hegemony of the Western establishment (Williams, 2021).

Given all this, what is the status of heutagogical research and learning that are not necessarily scientific? Can an educational institution—and especially an academic institution

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

for teacher education—permit or endorse research that does not meet scientific criteria and does not adhere to a canon? What educational message is conveyed by rejecting clear and firm scientific standards?

4.2. Critique of the Canon

The following discussion presents objections to the very idea of a canon and to the possibility of scientific objectivity. The central claim of this critique is that the canon, like the ostensibly objective scientific research that produced it, is not free of cultural and subjective influence and is, in fact, contingent. Therefore, there is no inherent necessity to adhere exclusively to canonical scientific knowledge.

The philosopher Bruno Latour criticized the traditional separation between culture and society, on the one hand, and technological and scientific matters, on the other, positioning both as essential components in the development and stability of knowledge. For Latour, "culture" or "social factors" do not exist as independent entities that precede "pure science" and influence it. Nor is there, in his view, any closed, ready-made science available for use. Science, rather, is a process in constant motion and activity. According to his perspective, if someone deviates from the path charted by scientists, they will be accused of irrationality or ignorance stemming from cultural differences between the "correct," rational culture of the scientists and the "other" culture of those who diverge. Science does not develop by distancing itself from cultural influence, for culture is not an external cause of scientific facts but an integral element of them. Culture does not operate as a mystical force that distorts some prior scientific truth, and a well-established scientific fact is not "less social" or "less cultural." Latour criticized scientists for assuming that accusations of irrationality are typically grounded in conceptions of cultural difference—on the gap between "us," the scientists with our universal claims, and "them," bound to their particular culture. Scientists, he argued, mistakenly believe that rational knowledge is explained objectively by natural phenomena, whereas only irrational claims require special explanations tied to the people involved, such as their culture, race, or "social factors" (Latour, 1987).

A similar critical stance can be extrapolated from the possible implications of the science philosopher Feyerabend's (1993) view for heutagogical ideas. Feyerabend denied the existence of a shared structure underlying all scientific processes or of factors present in every scientific inquiry but missing from non-scientific investigations. In his view, there are no general standards that characterize successful research, and since they do not exist, they cannot be found in scientific inquiry. He did not deny that science achieves successes; he rejected the validity of inferring from these successes a justification for quantifying human actions as the path that guarantees such success. Sometimes, he argued, quantification succeeds; at other times, it fails. A scientist's success or failure can be assessed only retrospectively once research is complete. But if scientific achievements can be judged only at the end of the research process and not at its beginning, Feyerabend concluded, then research conducted by "scientific" methods is not inherently superior to other forms of inquiry dealing with the same issues. For this reason, he believed that the public at large can participate in discussions about research topics without jeopardizing the research's success. Public involvement, in his view, is democratically appropriate and does not conflict with science itself, but only with those who fear non-scientific research paths and who deploy a fossilized and closed image of science in order to intimidate and silence those unfamiliar with scientific practices.

According to Feyerabend, it is unreasonable to require student-researchers to ensure that the theories they propose in response to their research questions remain strictly consistent with existing theories. Such insistence on consistency would perpetually preserve the older theory rather than necessarily the better one.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

Feyerabend encouraged taking an anarchistic approach to inquiry. In his view, theoretical anarchism advances progress more than alternatives that are bound to "law and order." Moreover, he argued that not a single rule of scientific research has remained unbroken throughout history, and these violations did not arise from ignorance of research norms or from negligence. On the contrary, he maintained that breaking the rules is essential for progress. For any given rule of scientific inquiry—however rational or fundamental—there will always be circumstances in which it is preferable not only to ignore it but even to adopt its opposite.

Feyerabend emphasized that humanity learned and understood things long before Western science emerged, and that knowledge has been produced and preserved in ways that are not scientific. He believed that Western scientific knowledge is hegemonic because it holds power, not because all other forms of knowledge lack value. Thus, for example, the success of Western medical science does not entirely negate the usefulness of other medical traditions.

In his view, the only principle that does not hinder progress is "anything goes". In our context, "anything goes" means that the heutagogical learner-researcher is no longer required to attend to everything previously said or written in the relevant literature about the question that interests her. She must choose for herself whom or what to rely on in her unique and individual research path. She should read what interests her in the course of her particular inquiry. Humanity, Feyerabend believed, needs people who adapt quickly and who possess inventiveness, not rigid imitators of familiar and established behavioral frameworks. For him, the declaration "anything goes" is not a foundational methodological rule that replaces one set of rules with another; it serves to emphasize that all rules have limits, none is absolute, and no comprehensive rationality exists.

According to Feyerabend, science is merely one among many perspectives on reality. It is not the sole or exclusive path to truth. There is no reason to prevent the acceptance of hypotheses, research programs, or cultures that are not scientific if their adherents freely choose them. People who grow up within different social-cultural backgrounds, he believed, will approach knowledge of the world in diverse ways and will learn different things about it—and this should be allowed.

We learn similar lessons from Foucault (1972, 1979), who held that one must also consider various forms of non-hegemonic knowledge—that is, knowledge absent from canonical and authoritative textbooks. According to Foucault, it is no longer sufficient to rely solely on canonical texts, whose authority derives partly from their very inclusion in the canon, and whose authors' status as the exclusive and authoritative interpreters of their texts can be questioned.

Additional postmodern and postcolonial challenges to the canon and to the process of canon formation can be found, for example, in contemporary literary theory, which proposes new ways of engaging with literature in an era where the once-clear canon has become complex and blurred, and where considerations such as identity, memory, and cultural tradition in a multicultural society play significant roles (Meyer, 2021).

It is easy to see that such voices, which weaken the authority of the canon, open wide the door to heutagogical learning—a mode of learning that includes no requirement to study or internalize any specific, necessary content. In this view, learners determine for themselves the sources of information on which they rely, and these need not be canonical.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The article opened by outlining various characteristics of culture and multiculturalism and discussing the desirable mode of practice within teacher education in multicultural contexts. In addition to the three familiar approaches—placing a single, uniform culture

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16020303

at the center of teacher preparation; allowing for the simultaneous expression of (most) cultural voices; or focusing on critiquing the hegemonic stance that marginalizes minority cultures—the article proposed self-determined learning (heutagogy) as an approach that overcomes many of the multicultural difficulties characteristic of the teacher education system. It is important to emphasize that this proposal is not an all-or-nothing alternative, nor does it preclude the partial incorporation of heutagogical principles within teacher education, whether in individual courses or in parts of courses, alongside continued reliance on the traditional canon in various content areas. That is, one may consider a hybrid model in which the educational institution determines the extent to which it allows learners' autonomy, inter alia on the basis of the multicultural characteristics present within it.

This proposal is not without challenges, and the third part of the article illustrated one of them: the difficulty posed by self-determined learning in teacher education with respect to the question of the required canon. This section presented both the voices of those who view a disciplinary canon as essential and the opposing view of those who reject the need for such a canon. This debate was not resolved here, precisely because it does not belong to the logical-rational domain and cannot be settled by research-based judgments of educational scholars. It is not merely a pedagogical question about the effectiveness of a mode of learning; it is also a normative question about what constitutes appropriate learning in a multicultural environment. The decision required in this context is a value-laden, ideological one.

It may even be possible to pursue a middle path between a canon as a non-binding point of departure (Feyerabend, 1993) and a canon as a final, hierarchical, and rigid authority (Peterson, 2018). This path recognizes the importance of the scientific canon as an organizing framework and as an initial shared language yet rejects its transformation into an exclusive or criticism-immune standard. Within this framework, the canon is conceived as an open educational-epistemic hypothesis, one that demands rigor, justification, and critique, while allowing deviation, a plurality of perspectives, and recognition of non-hegemonic knowledge.

Choosing heutagogy—particularly in multicultural contexts—reflects an educational philosophy that places the individual at the center and seeks to grant learners autonomy and the freedom to choose their own learning paths throughout their lives. This constitutes an application of the Learner-Centric Ideology ("individuation")," in the spirit of Lamm (2000) or Egan (1997).

Those who reject heutagogy, including in multicultural contexts, regard the society in which the educational act takes place as paramount, and they seek to cultivate it and promote solidarity among its members. That is, they aim to realize the Society-Centric Ideology ("socialization") according to Lamm's and Egan frameworks.

As noted, the choice between these two approaches requires a normative-ideological and value-based decision on the part of the teacher-education institution regarding the preferred path by which it seeks to guide future educators in a culturally diverse society. Such a decision may adopt Dewey's (1897) dialectical approach and, without relinquishing the individual or abandoning the broader society, propose the hybrid learning model mentioned here.

These considerations have practical implications for teacher education in multicultural environments.

Teacher educators should be prepared for a significant change in their role: from transmitters of canonical knowledge to facilitators of self-determined learning that is open to, and enables the articulation of, multicultural voices. Attention should be paid to possible resistance on the part of some lecturers to this shift.

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A conceptual shift is also required on the part of the relevant state institutions regarding the certification process of teacher education graduates. For, according to what is proposed here, graduates' success is not measured solely by traditional academic grades but rather by a series of developmental milestones and behavioral changes: their transition from passive recipients of knowledge to active, self-directed learners.

Teacher education institutions are required to develop flexible training frameworks that combine heutagogical courses or components with courses grounded in a traditional disciplinary canon. Such flexibility will allow for adaptation to changing multicultural contexts and to varying levels of students' readiness for autonomy in learning.

Institutions should make the question of the canon in a multicultural society an explicit pedagogical issue in teacher education, in which future educators engage together with their trainers as preparation for their integration into education systems.

As preparation for these actions, or in parallel with them, empirical studies are needed to examine partial and hybrid implementations of heutagogy in multicultural teacher education: Which heutagogical components in particular contribute to a sense of belonging, autonomy, and fairness among minority groups, and which components instead provoke resistance or difficulties? Empirical studies are also needed to examine the value orientations of institutional leaders and educational staff regarding the integration of heutagogy in multicultural teacher education. In addition, theoretical research is required to examine the long-term implications of heutagogy for teachers' professional identity and status.

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Article

Multidimensional and Burgeoning Leadership: Literacy and Multilingualism

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Abstract

This design-based research study worked with 25 teachers with specialized early literacy training. Researchers investigated the impact of professional development advancing their multilingual learner (ML), literacy, and leadership capacity, addressing gaps in the research merging the fields of literacy, multilingual instruction, and leadership. Spanning two years of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis including teacher, student, and district surveys, teacher logs, research logs, and teacher interviews, the researchers capture the iterative nature of the needs of teacher professional development to serve MLs. The researchers describe the needs of teachers for professional development, the micro modifications made to adapt to these needs, and the resulting significant growth in teacher self-efficacy and knowledge of literacy practices for MLs. Implications are given regarding pedagogy and future research with specific macro modifications outlined for future iterations. The research builds upon frameworks and research for literacy and multilingual instruction as well as teacher leadership.

Keywords: multilingual learner; professional development; teacher leadership; design-based research

1. Multidimensional and Burgeoning Leadership: Literacy and Multilingualism

There are two key points of tension in effectively serving multilingual learner (ML) education in the United States. While this is the fastest-growing population in the United States (NEA, 2020), teachers are often not qualified to leverage their specific linguistic and cultural assets in instruction, creating not only a shortage of teachers but also a vacuum of leadership and expertise among those qualified to train others to fill this gap (E. Howell et al., 2025; Pennington et al., 2024). Compounding this problem of a growing student population met with a shortage of teachers is the political context of the current administration curtailing support for teaching these students, such as incapacitating the Office of English Language Acquisition, rescinding published guidance for teaching MLs, and slating to eliminate Title III funds in 2026, threatening a civil rights issue of unequal access to education (AERA, 2025; Belsha, 2025; Najarro, 2025). Thus, it is a pertinent time to consider how to increase instructional capacity for MLs and teacher leaders of this instruction who can continue to facilitate this growth for their districts' future.

For early learners, literacy development is especially important as students must meet both challenges of language development and content learning and learn the fundamentals of literacy according to developmental stages appropriate for their expanding linguistic repertoire (Lee & Maerten-Rivera, 2012; Santau et al., 2010; Uribe, 2019). However, there is a gap in the research merging ML instruction and early literacy leadership in both trending Science of Reading and previous literacy intervention efforts (Dunham et al., 2024; Rowe et al., 2026; Sharratt & Wynn, 2018). In this study, we address this gap by focusing on a group of interventionists and teachers (using both titles throughout) with at least six graduate credit hours of specialized early literacy training, thus giving them the potential to be change agents in their districts (Bussell, 2001; Sirinides et al., 2018). However, these teachers, like many across the nation, desired more development in ML instruction. We examine a professional development (PD) intervention for the first of two cohorts of potential literacy leaders, due to their specialized training, and examine its impact on ML instructional capacity through a design-based research (DBR) study. We address the research question: how did the DBR intervention prepare early literacy teachers and leaders for ML instruction? We use theories germane to literacy and ML instruction combined with the needed lens of teacher leadership to understand teachers' background and growth, developing ML expertise, and burgeoning though hesitant leadership, concluding with implications for both practice and research.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

This study is grounded in perspectives important to both a developing ML and leadership teacher identity.

2.1. Mainstream to ML Instructional Practice

With the rising ML population across the United States and internationally, all teachers are increasingly asked to be ML instructors (M. R. Coady et al., 2016). We draw from M. R. Coady et al.'s (2016) framework that includes three central components to instructional practice for MLs: (a) teacher knowledge of teaching and learning of MLs, (b) teacher education, background and experiences, and (c) teacher knowledge of MLs. While this framework originally used the term English Language Learners (ELLs) to refer to students learning English as a second language in school, this study uses MLs to reflect a more contemporary asset-based theorization. We adapted the framework, replacing ELLs with MLs, thus acknowledging students' full linguistic repertoires rather than focusing on their English proficiency. However, we retained M. R. Coady et al.'s (2016) core constructs as the three dimensions are relevant to our context. Applied to our research, this framework highlights the need for teachers to develop specialized knowledge to identify, draw on, and expand multilingual and cultural resources to support both language and content learning. This theory divides teacher knowledge of teaching and learning of MLs into three subcomponents: teachers understand how language works, MLs learn language and use it as a vehicle for learning, and teachers understand how to differentiate instructional practices to build on MLs' linguistic practices and lived experiences. The framework argues teachers receiving specific training for MLs can make more informed pedagogical and advocacy decisions for their MLs and that this preparation would ideally include working directly with MLs. Finally, teacher knowledge of MLs includes their knowledge of these learners, including their linguistic, literacy, and cultural backgrounds. This framework acknowledges the importance of specialized ML teacher training, but how well teachers are receiving such training deserves more exploration. The tenets of this theoretical perspective guided our analysis of the impact of PD targeting ML instruction on literacy teachers with advanced literacy training, honing their potential to lead such PD in the future. To this end,

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our study contributes to these theoretical underpinnings by describing potential leadership capabilities and qualities of future teachers addressing ML instructional needs.

2.2. ML Instruction and Teacher Leadership

Lieberman and Friedrich (2010) discuss elements of teacher leadership, such as identity, community, productive conflict, and practice, and that teacher leaders are needed because of their intimate knowledge of students, the curriculum, and instructional practices. We focus here on their component of identity in teacher leadership. This identity component is critical as many teachers are skeptical of calling themselves leaders due to hierarchical ideas of leadership. Teachers often fear other teachers will disavow them from communities of practice should they share their practices with other colleagues. Teachers may need opportunities to continuously improvise leadership through interaction with others. These researchers give three components to consider in developing teacher leaders: (a) their identity as a leader is in constant flux; (b) this identity is social; and (c) teacher leaders need room to develop their leadership.

This leadership identity and its development is important as it not only helps their students but other educators, and this identity is often multidimensional. Leaders may identify with more than one community: for instance, in the present study, as teachers, as leaders, as teachers of literacy, and as teachers of MLs. Increasingly, calls for leadership in schools have (a) requested more decentralization, so teachers can be more responsive to the needs of their students, and (b) developed teacher leadership and other types of "middle leadership," those assuming leadership roles between teachers and principals (Li et al., 2021, p. 226). This decentralized leadership has potential to impact teachers adopting new pedagogies. Spheres of teacher leadership can be individualistic or communal, formal or informal. Fairman and Mackenzie (2015, p. 63) identify nine of these spheres:

> Individual teacher engages in learning about his or her own practice; individual teacher experiments and reflects, teacher shares ideas and learning; mentors, coaches other teachers; teachers collaborate and work together on collective work; teachers interact in groups and through relationships to re-culture the school; teachers question, advocate, build support and organizational capacity; teachers engage in collective school-wide improvement, focus resources, and distribute leadership; teachers collaborate with the broader school community, parents; teacher (or group) shares work outside of school/in professional organizations.

These roles of leadership are negotiated socially and not only change the person becoming the leader but may impact the leadership role itself.

In the present study, we use M. R. Coady et al.'s (2016) tenets to describe teachers' development of specialized expertise to serve MLs and Lieberman and Friedrich's (2010) perspective to examine how that expertise is involved or triggered by teacher leadership identity. By bringing these two theories together, we seek to explore how teachers' expansion of their capacity for literacy and ML instruction developed and was reconciled over the course of their PD as their leadership skills emerged. ML teachers experienced professional dissonance, recognizing their existing pedagogical knowledge was not enough for their ML instruction (Von Esch, 2021). This growing professional dissonance disrupted their previous knowledge about MLs and was done socially. Such work done with MLs in classrooms suggests PD that was job-embedded was helpful in creating teacher leaders specific to ML instruction. Thus, these two perspectives offer insight into the building of teacher capacity for ML instruction and their potential to lead in that instruction.

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3. Literature Review

As the teachers in this study were teachers and interventionists (those who provide supplemental, targeted instruction) with specialized literacy background who wanted to gain more PD to improve their ML instruction and potential leadership, we structure our review of the literature into three components: (a) teacher background and literacy expertise, (b) essential elements of the intervention, and (c) leadership with MLs.

3.1. Teacher Background and Literacy Expertise

The teachers participating in this study had six graduate hours of advanced literacy training and some were in positions of literacy interventionists while others were classroom teachers. The teachers' prior graduate training was in Reading Recovery®, which has shown impact on student outcomes (U.S. DoE, 2013). Reading interventions and assessments are needed early for MLs though they are often neglected as teachers wait for these learners to reach proficiency in English (Dussling, 2018). MLs need similar instruction to that of their peers in the early grades with a specific focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and writing instruction (August, 2018). Reading Recovery was developed as a short-term early intervention for first-grade students having difficulty learning to read and write (Clay, 2001) and was shown in What Works Clearinghouse to have positive effects in these areas of early reading (U.S. DoE, 2013).

Recently, the Science of Reading (SoR) movement requires an explicit, systematic focus on phonics in contrast to embedding phonics in instruction in writing and teaching this component in more multifaceted or differentiated manners (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021; Gabriel & López, 2024; Graham, 2020). The SoR has been implemented nationwide, including in the state in which this study took place, and involves the implementation of Language Essentials for Teaching Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training. LETRS training may be problematic in its limitation of addressing MLs and its tendency to adopt a deficit-oriented perspective, missing opportunities to address students' cultural capital and oral language development needs (Goldenberg, 2020; Rowe et al., 2026). Thus, there is a gap in the research merging both efforts focused on MLs and literacy instruction, missing the complications that arise as students are simultaneously learning a language for speaking and understanding as they are learning to read, such as the need to focus on oral language development (Goldenberg, 2020; Rowe et al., 2026; Sharratt & Wynn, 2018). In fact, in the reading wars, MLs have often been marginalized; the treatment of MLs has been described as not even reaching a "side skirmish" (Goldenberg, 2020, p. 5132). High-quality instruction is essential as teachers who are not specifically trained to support MLs often view them from a deficit perspective (Vogt, 2020). Research shows teachers with explicit literacy training have the potential to serve as change agents in sharing their learning with other teachers and stakeholders in their respective districts but may need specific training on how to reach MLs with specific literacy recommendations (Bussell, 2001; E. Howell et al., 2025; Sirinides et al., 2018).

3.2. Essential Elements of the Intervention

There were three essential elements defining the intervention of this design-based research (DBR) study. In DBR, essential elements are those factors that define the intervention, without which the intervention would lose its meaning and are important to highlight as much is in flux due to the iterative nature of such studies (E. Howell et al., 2017; Philippakos et al., 2021). The first two essential elements were that teachers would be provided evidenced-based ML literacy practices in their PD and teacher and student self-efficacy would be a gauge of these practices.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

Teacher PD is especially important for teachers of MLs. PD is needed for teachers to respect MLs' funds of knowledge or resources they bring to the classroom (González et al., 2005), preventing a deficit view of these learners that has lent to their overrepresentation in special education classrooms (Vogt, 2020). Education reforms regarding MLs have had successes and challenges over recent decades, including increased services for MLs and PD of teachers; however, more needs to be done to address the "education debt" in the literacy achievement of MLs (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 3).

Thus, among recommendations from Vogt (2020) are creating professional learning opportunities for teachers about the assessment and instruction in both language and content for MLs. The PD of teachers in this study was disseminated in the form of a university-based master's in literacy program and focused on both language and content instruction. Master's courses aligned with the four recommendations given by What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) for academic content and literacy for ELs in elementary and secondary grades (Baker et al., 2014) as well as certification for being a literacy teacher, a literacy coach, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) add-on certification in the state. These recommendations include focus on academic vocabulary, integration of oral and written language in content-area instruction, writing instruction, and small-group intervention. To understand teacher and corresponding student growth related to these literacy best practices, the researchers examined self-efficacy related to each.

Self-efficacy is important for MLs as it relates to how capable they feel toward their learning and conveys how they will respond to academic difficulties and learning outcomes and how much they will use learning strategies (Deng & Trainin, 2020). Deng and Trainin (2020) studied 112 university students using four vocabulary strategies and rated their self-efficacy for this strategy use. They found students' English proficiency was an important factor in their self-efficacy for vocabulary and that students who were MLs had lower self-efficacy than their English-speaking peers. Taboada Barber et al. (2015) studied a literacy intervention in the social studies content area for MLs and English-speaking students in a middle school by first giving their teachers PD and then evaluating their outcomes. They found changes in MLs' self-efficacy were related to changes in reading comprehension. This research is supported by other researchers (Soland & Sandilos, 2021) demonstrating that, for secondary MLs, self-efficacy may be an important construct to develop in order to lower achievement discrepancies compared to non-MLs. Unrau et al. (2018) reviewed research on reading self-efficacy and intervention. They found that interventions impacted reading significantly regardless of the study design and that "the reading self-efficacy of children in elementary grades may be more susceptible to enhancement than in higher grades" (p. 196).

Self-efficacy is valuable to teachers as well as students, with self-efficacy influencing "teachers' activities, effort, and persistence with students" (Schunk, 2020, p. 157). Teachers with higher self-efficacy are more likely to challenge students, including those with learning difficulties, and are often more experienced (Goddard et al., 2000; Schunk, 2020). Researchers such as Goddard et al. (2000) have studied collective teacher efficacy and found that teacher efficacy may depend on organization at the school level and similar influences such as support from administrators, but this factor was necessary for school reform and improvement as well as student achievement. He and Bagwell (2025) noted self-efficacy for teachers of MLs was an area crucial to the success of MLs, but one lacking research, because pedagogical strategies are not useful without the confidence to implement them.

The final essential element of the DBR project was acknowledgement that the success of multilingual instruction is not dependent upon classroom learning in a vacuum, but needs to value cultural resources (González et al., 2005). Thus, the researchers developed a course for caregivers to support their implementation of literacy practices with community

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

input, such as suggestions from the advisory council representing key advocates of the ML community; what the teachers in the community were learning through their PD; and families' insights. We use the term caregiver as well as parent and family to denote a holistic perspective of all those who may support MLs in their education (E. Howell et al., 2024; Vega et al., 2026). We hoped to engage community resources to acknowledge the cultural capital MLs and their families bring to literacy learning and support a dynamic relationship between the community and school (E. Howell et al., 2024; Vega et al., 2026). Further, the courses in the PD highlighted the need to support students' cultural resources supported with their full linguistic repertoire as a foundational support for their literacy learning (Mallikarjun et al., 2017).

3.3. Leadership with MLs

If focus on best literacy practices for MLs is limited in educational research (Goldenberg, 2020), then leadership in these practices is teetering on the edge of that gap (McGee et al., 2015). In fact, a search using 134 EBSCO databases for the terms "English learners and literacy and teacher leadership" returned only four texts: two dissertations, one periodical, and one peer-reviewed article. The study found was by Borman et al. (2025) investigating a reading intervention, like Reading Recovery but in the students' home language of Spanish, for first-grade MLs and PD for teachers and teacher leaders. The sample for the study included 170 students from 27 schools across 10 districts and five states. Students with intervention outperformed 82% of control students, but this study focused on the cost analysis of providing intervention for students rather than the leadership development of the teachers providing the intervention. Thus, this work does not address how to prepare teachers to lead literacy instruction for their MLs and other educators. McGee et al. (2015) suggested the following for leadership in ML education in schools: setting goals and direction, providing leaders with knowledge of ML instruction, delivering PD for teachers and those in leadership positions, and empowering ML teaching and learning with support needed. The present study focused on providing teachers with knowledge of ML teaching through their master's program, described in detail subsequently.

Overall, this literature review focused upon the literacy expertise needed for teachers to support MLs, the essential elements of the intervention of this study providing PD for these teachers, and aspects of leadership needed and often missing for those teachers to then lead others in their school and districts to support ML capacity. Next, we address how these components were assessed through our research design.

4. Method

This study used a DBR method (Reinking & Bradley, 2008; Philippakos et al., 2021) with the goal of increasing effective early ML instruction by preparing early literacy teachers to teach MLs and support caregivers of MLs. DBR researchers investigate an intervention to reach such a goal, and our intervention was defined by three essential elements discussed previously in the literature review: (a) provide evidence-based practices of ML instruction in PD, (b) assess self-efficacy for both students and teachers, and (c) develop resources for ML caregivers based on evidence-based practice and teacher feedback. DBR uses iterative research in which micro modifications are made to the intervention, informing larger macro modifications for future implementation cycles. This study centers on the intervention for the first of two cohorts of teachers. DBR was useful in allowing us to investigate how PD impacted capacity for ML instruction and leadership while including and addressing participant and community input (i.e., advisory council). In this article, we focus on the research question: how did the DBR intervention prepare early literacy teachers and leaders for ML instruction?

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

4.1. Context

The teachers recruited for this study were from six school districts across a state in the Southeastern United States with an ML student population at or above the state average of 6% MLs at the time of recruitment (NCES, 2021). This state is now a *destination state* for Latino immigrants: "States where the foreign-born population grew at or above twice the national rate between 2000 and 2009" (Terrazas, 2011, para. 6). This population growth continues today according to the state's Commission of Minority Affairs in 2025: from 2013 to 2023 in this state those who did not identify as US citizens increased by 27.8%, compared to the national jump of 3.7%. In the districts participating in this study, many languages were represented with the top language other than English being Spanish. Other languages included Amharic, Arabic, Bisaya, French, Greek, Gujarati, Hmong, Kekchi, Lao, Mandarin, Russian, Tagalog, Telugu, Tamil, and Vietnamese. Two districts were classified as suburban, one as a small city, two as rural, and one as a fringe town (NCES, n.d.-b). Most of the districts' populations were White with median household incomes for the communities ranging from $46,000 to $100,000 (NCES, n.d.-a). The state of the present study is currently facing vacancies for ML teaching positions with districts reporting a need to fill 699 certified teaching/service vacancies starting the 2020-21 school year according to a state research agency. This agency reported 25.63% unfilled ESOL positions. Due to these dueling needs of increasing numbers of MLs combined with little capacity to teach MLs, this has designated ESOL as a critical need area.

4.2. Participants

We used purposive sampling to reach early literacy teachers with six hours of advanced literacy training as potential leaders in their school districts who did not yet have an ESOL certificate nor a master's degree in literacy (Cash et al., 2022). In fact, none of the participants had passed either the literacy or ESOL Praxis exams required for certification at the state level in these areas. The population was reflective of advanced literacy leaders in the state in that it was majority White and female. These participants had the potential to lead MLs in literacy instruction but desired more PD in ML instruction and literacy. Seventeen were between 31 and 45 years of age, six were between 46 and 60, and two were between 18 and 30. None of the participants considered themselves bilingual, but three reported some proficiency in another language. They had a wealth of teaching experience, with the average years being 16–20. We recruited 25 participants but one had to drop out of the program in her fifth semester due to personal reasons; thus, we maintained a 96% retention rate throughout their two-year program. We did not include the data of this participant for the last two semesters.

4.3. Data Sources and Analysis

The study used mixed methods of data collection common to DBR (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). We used three surveys and a teacher log, including qualitative and quantitative questions collected each semester over a two-year period and exit interviews with teachers at the end of the intervention.

4.3.1. Data Sources

The following section describes each data collection instrument.

Surveys: We used surveys to gather data from teachers, principals/supervisors, and students. The teacher survey included five-point Likert scales for teachers to report their levels of knowledge, self-efficacy, and implementation of literacy practices for MLs based on Baker et al.'s (2014) recommendations. Open questions inquired about their PD needs, their learning in family engagement practices and leadership, and recommendations for

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

the course for caregivers. Teachers' supervisors filled out a district survey that mirrored the quantitative scale in the teacher survey and included qualitative data about observed teacher strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the students of the participating teachers took a survey that consisted of a five-point scale, going from 'cannot do at all' to 'highly certain can do' to report their self-efficacy for practices, such as understanding the meaning of new words, understanding the meaning of informational texts, or writing about texts they have read. Open questions included how they received help from the teacher and sharing any areas of difficulty about the literacy practices.

Teacher log: This log recorded a day of the teachers' practice focused on ML instruction. Quantitative data included rating self-efficacy items or describing instructional activities, materials, or goals from multiple options. Qualitative data included description of collaboration with colleagues, student needs, and future plans for instruction based on identified needs.

Exit interviews: Twenty-four teachers were interviewed by members of the research team during their last semester of the program. Questions required teachers to assess if their goals for the program had been met, share valuable learning experiences about teaching MLs, and explain how they were using or planned to use what they learned. Interviews were recoded and then transcribed and they ranged from approximately twenty minutes to an hour.

4.3.2. Data Analysis

Analysis of this data consisted of concurrent methods in which the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately and then brought together to inform findings (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The quantitative data from these instruments were analyzed using paired *t*-tests. To evaluate the magnitude of the standardized difference between the mean scores while correcting for the upward bias of standard effect-size estimators in small samples, Hedges' *g* was calculated (Lakens, 2013). It expresses the magnitude of change in standard-deviation units, making it independent of the original measurement scale and comparable across outcomes. The effect size estimated in this analysis can be interpreted using established magnitude thresholds: 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8 represent small, medium, and large effects, respectively.

Qualitative data included open-ended responses from the teacher surveys and logs and exit teacher interviews conducted in the final semester to gauge growth from the needs assessment. Analysis of this data involved grouping initial thoughts and actions into initial codes, forming themes, which were then organized in focused codes. These focused codes were compared with quantitative data when relevant and shaped by theoretical perspectives to form theoretical codes, but not all theoretical codes included quantitative data (Charmaz, 2014). See Table 1 for theoretical codes on the left to initial codes and their references from the data on the right.

4.4. Intervention and Modifications

Participants were enrolled in an online master's in literacy program, taking 36 credit hours inclusive of coursework toward three certifications: literacy teacher, coach, and ESOL. Each semester, participants completed six hours of coursework for a total of six semesters. This coursework included five courses (15 h) toward their ESOL certification, three courses toward their literacy teacher certification (9 h), two courses toward their literacy coach certification (6 h), and two courses toward literacy coaching and pedagogy required for their master's degree (6 h). The micro modifications made for the initial cohort were based on participants' ongoing feedback and included designing PD content in the form of online modules: writing, translanguaging, and understanding SoR training

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

in terms of ML instruction. In addition, informational resources were provided on the following topics: understanding and communicating district ML resources, ML cultural and linguistic resources, supporting newcomers, communicating with caregivers, collaborating with colleagues, and highlighting PD for the participating teachers' administrators (E. Howell et al., 2025). Suggestions for macro modifications are included in the discussion.

Table 1. Initial, focused, and theoretical codes.

Theoretical	Quantitative Data	Focused	Initial (With Number of References)
PD and literacy background and growth		PD growth overall	Benefitting from program, 14
			Describing goal for program, 26
			Discussing impactful coursework, 40
			Explaining how goals were met, 21
			Implementing technology, 2
			Meeting goals through program, 9
		Making change	Collaborating between teachers, 20
			Making modifications to participant perspective, 51
			Making personal connections to teacher lives, 2
			Responding to modifications made, 37
ML expertise: strategies and context	Teacher knowledge and self-efficacy statistically significant gains from teacher survey	PD growth with ML instruction	Defining evidence-based practice for MLs, 28
			Describing confidence in ML instruction, 45
			Describing ML population, 3
			Describing typical ML practices, 23
			Gaining pedagogical knowledge for MLs, 28
			Taking the Praxis, 3
			Teaching MLs prior knowledge, 2
			Using learning in future practice, 21
	Student growth, statistically significant from pre- to post-intervention across three semesters from student survey	Understanding ML student and caregiver context	Desiring further caregiver interaction, 7
	Confidence in student literacy and content knowledge, statistically significant change from teacher survey		Gaining more interaction with caregivers, 8
	Confidence in suggestions for caregiver courses, statistically significant change from teacher survey		Identifying student needs, 2
			Interacting with caregivers, 62
			Listing district ML resources, 9
			Suggesting content for caregiver course from teachers, 1

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Table 1. *Cont.*

Theoretical	Quantitative Data	Focused	Initial (With Number of References)
Burgeoning, hesitant leadership	Statistically significant change across constructs of four WWC practices (vocabulary, content instruction, writing, and small group) in leadership	Leadership identity	Gaining new positions, 11
			Leading other teachers, 78
			Needing more time for leadership development, 1
			Reactions of nonparticipant teachers, 2
			Setting goals specific to leadership, 1
		Identifying district need	Describing district PD needs for MLs, 36
			Describing needs of further PD, 12
			Explaining current priorities of ML PD in district, 1
			Needing further PD for participants, 9
			Needing further PD with teachers and caregivers, 5

5. Results

Results show the relevance of PD in terms of teacher literacy background and growth, their ML expertise, and their assumption of leadership. These results explore theoretical codes, based on both quantitative data and focused thematic coding seen in Table 1.

5.1. PD and Literacy Background and Growth

M. Coady et al. (2011) and M. R. Coady et al. (2016) discuss teacher knowledge and background as a fundamental component of teacher knowledge for MLs. We build upon that as we look at what participants needed in terms of MLs and their response to the PD intervention. When discussing their goals for this project, the participants felt confident overall in their teaching but wanted more experience applying this learning for MLs. For example, Sophia (all participant names are pseudonyms) was an interventionist with many years of teaching experience, yet she explained:

> I feel my goals for this grant was to learn how to teach in more diverse classrooms. We've seen definitely an increase in our ML population within my school district, and I felt I was a great teacher, but making those kids successful in my classroom was really hard because I didn't know the strategies to effectively support these students.

This quote is representative of most of the teachers, who not only wanted to improve for their students, but also wanted to lead other teachers in their district. For example, Emma, another experienced teacher, discussed her desire for leadership:

> Yes, I think one of the biggest goals was really understanding and reflecting on my knowledge of those multilingual learners or really lack of knowledge. I felt fairly decent about the reading intervention aspect of it, but obviously I was very interested in the coaching dynamic.

Rose, an elementary school interventionist with over 15 years of experience, described that this potential for growth in leadership of other teachers for ML learning had not been a previous offering:

> And that was something that I didn't know a lot about, just because the PD... I don't really remember any professional development centered around ESOL students and how to help them so I just thought that I would be another person

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

> in the building that teachers could come to if they were needing supports or ideas on what to do in the classroom.

Discussing impactful coursework toward this leadership, there was a resounding response that one of the most impactful courses was the practicum experience. As practicums are increasingly online, research has called for a study of their impact (E. S. Howell et al., 2020). The majority of the teachers discussing how the PD met their goals mentioned the practicum as being impactful. In one practicum class the teachers went through rounds of instruction where they recorded their lesson working with an ML student and received coaching from the instructor and colleagues in the class and self-reflected on their lesson. The teachers also completed a practicum on coaching during the program. Grace, an experienced interventionist, discussed the benefits of this process:

> I think the practicum that I did last spring, I think it was last spring. At the time it was a little overwhelming [laughter], but it was very helpful and very useful, as far as helping me kind of look at best practices and where to start and where to go with the students. So, I probably felt like that was very beneficial, that practicum, videotaping myself, watching that video and realizing, 'Oh man, I should have said this, I should have asked that.' I think it was very reflective, and I don't think I do enough of that, reflecting. So, I feel like that was a good experience.

Other teachers discussed the benefits of such "hands-on" learning that was perhaps only possible in their in-service roles:

> I think this would be very difficult to do if I wasn't immersed in teaching. I definitely think the day-to-day implementing what I'm learning made a big difference, because, as I implemented the strategies, if I had questions, I could go back and talk to the instructors and say, 'Hey, I tried this and I just didn't seem quite right. Did I do it right?', or whatever, or 'Was there something better I could've done?'

However, flexibility and modifications were necessary and impactful. In the initial code, *Responding to Modifications*, the participants discussed implementing content from multiple modifications described previously. Regarding the translanguaging module, Samantha, a first-grade classroom teacher, described why that was, for her, the most impactful of the modifications made to support the PD curriculum:

> All were very helpful, but I think the translanguaging during the writing was like a big a-ha moment for me, that you can use your own language, you can do it native plus English. I loved that, that was a really strong one that I really felt was very beneficial.

Regarding the SoR and writing modules, Nancy, a literacy coach, described both the benefit of tying them into her context and the curriculum she was being provided, and addressing high-need areas:

> Everything's the Science of Reading so it allowed me to build my capacity in that area with multilingual learners, and the writing module is just. . . I feel like that we neglect writing very, very often. And that it just provided me with good reminders and refreshers and strategies to help support, not only multilingual learners, but all of our students and teachers as writers. And teachers of writing.

Another modification needed was collaborative opportunities between literacy and ML professionals, so a micro modification made was coordinating with a partner district the participation of their interventionists in our program in a book study with ML educators. The response to this modification was discussed in the code *Collaborating between Teachers.*

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

Teachers asserted it was not necessarily the content learned in this modification but the perspective shared across these groups that was most impactful.

Thus, the data in this focused code showed that literacy professionals, even those that are experienced and had advanced coursework in literacy, needed and grew from literacy coursework tailored to MLs, and they needed this content knowledge as well as opportunities to experience leadership in this area. This learning was better when it was hands-on, and participants appreciated and used modules modified for their specific needs and context. Next, we look at how their ML expertise grew.

5.2. ML Expertise: Strategies and Context

Two focused codes merged to form the theoretical code *ML Expertise, Strategies and Context*: *PD Growth with ML Instruction* and *Understanding ML Student and Caregiver Context*. Both describe literacy professionals learning more about what M. Coady et al. (2011) and M. R. Coady et al. (2016) described as teacher knowledge of teaching processes and of MLs as students, areas of teacher learning needed for MLs in addition to the aforementioned teacher knowledge and background. Regarding their knowledge of teaching processes specifically for MLs from the teacher survey, the teachers had statistically significant growth in both knowledge and self-efficacy on the averaged 16 literacy items reflecting vocabulary, oral and writing instruction in content-area teaching, writing, and small group instruction for literacy of MLs (see Table 2 for teacher growth across literacy items). This growth was consistent at a statistically significant level across four semesters but did not become significant with a large effect size until their third semester in the program, suggesting the duration of content was important as suggested by research on the necessary components of PD (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; E. Howell et al., 2018). The teachers' qualitative responses supported this quantitative growth. The two most frequently referenced initial codes within the focused code *PD Growth with ML Instruction* were *Describing Confidence in ML Instruction* and *Gaining Pedagogical Knowledge for MLs*. Samantha, a first-grade classroom teacher, described her confidence growing from reading and then implementing research:

> Learning from the coursework and then being able to take that and put it into action. I mean, I would read this article about what this researcher did or use this tool and immediately the next day I would try to fit it in, in our lessons. And I could see it benefiting the students right then and there.

Table 2. Teachers' overall average growth across literacy items.

Construct	Needs Assessment (n = 25)	Sem1 (n = 25)	Sem2 (n = 25)	Sem3 (n = 25)	Sem4 (n = 25)	Sem5 (n = 24)	Sem6 (n = 24)	% Growth (Needs Assessment—Sem6)
Knowledge	4.26	4.26	4.50	4.81 *	4.68 *	4.78 *	4.96 *	16% *
Knowledge Effect Size		0.02	0.49	1.03	0.87	1.06	1.03	
Self-Efficacy	3.75	3.89	4.19	4.57 *	4.37 *	4.33 *	4.69 *	25% *
Self-Efficacy Effect Size		0.26	0.70	1.31	0.87	0.95	1.48	

Note: * indicates statistically significant difference from the baseline term at 0.05 sig. level from the teacher survey. Sem is short for semester.

Repeatedly, teachers mentioned the importance of learning specific strategies, but also about knowing their MLs. For example, Margaret, an elementary-school interventionist, discussed going beyond just academic strategies:

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

> Knowing who they are and what they already know, being able to use their language to help them with our language. . . Whereas before, I've been teaching, this is my 25th year teaching, I've had ML students in my classroom every year, and I would always try to help them, but I never looked through the lens of the actual cultural aspect and the language aspect.

Marcia, another school interventionist, described this increased confidence impacting how she viewed MLs:

> I mean, that part of my thinking has changed. It's not, "I have to work with these students," "I get to work with these students." Not, "I have to figure out how to communicate with their families," but now "I get to communicate with their families."

Lorraine, another interventionist, described how this gained confidence changed her treatment of intervening for MLs:

> In the past, when I had multilingual learners in my school building, I very rarely pulled them, because they were. . . with the ESOL teacher. . . And now in the last year, year and a half, it's really been, "Let's get them at the early stages and work with the ESOL teacher" so they're getting classroom, they're getting ESOL, and they're getting me as well.

Samantha discussed in *Gaining Pedagogical Knowledge for MLs* the need for learning and strategies in relation to self-reflection on biases, inclusion of cultural materials for her students, and understanding their language, embracing it, and starting with comprehensible input for her students.

The aforementioned knowledge of students and their culture and language also speaks to the teachers' gained knowledge of their MLs and families. In the code *Understanding ML Student and Caregiver Context*, teachers discussed understanding student needs and resources for them but also focused on their caregivers. The most frequently coded initial code within this focused code was *Interacting with Caregivers* in which participants discussed learning translation tools, being more conscious of giving parents information in their languages, but also about being more dynamic in their relationships with caregivers. For instance, Samantha explained: "I want just them to come in, have fun too and enjoy not letting school be this scary place, or I don't know. We just need to make that bridge stronger." Julia, another participant, described the importance of conversations with caregivers:

> I think it was one of the courses where we really had to have a conversation more in person versus just, we use a lot of like the Remind app and things like that, but having a conversation. . .I really enjoyed it because I could get to hear their voice, and get to hear their tone, their excitement and their concerns. I might not be able to understand the words as they're speaking in their home language, but I could tell their feelings behind it, and that was really, really eye-opening.

Several points of quantitative data support this qualitative discussion of increased knowledge of both learning strategies for MLs and knowledge of MLs, including student survey data and data from the teacher survey in which teachers made suggestions for a future caregiver course, helping the caregivers support their ML student's literacy. Regarding student outcomes, the student survey showed all students, including MLs, recorded statistically significant growth at the 0.05 level in average overall scores from pre- to post-intervention in three semesters: the second, third, and fifth. The ML student population surveyed ranged from 15 to 20% in the semesters administered. The students did not complete surveys in the teachers' second and fourth semesters due to it being the summer semester and the students being out of school. This growth was supported by the teacher

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survey which showed their confidence in student literacy (third, fourth, fifth, and sixth semesters in the program) and content knowledge (third, fourth, fifth, and sixth semesters in the program) increased at a statistically significant level with a large effect size. However, this change did not happen until further into their programs, suggesting once again the importance of the duration of PD. The teachers were also asked to give suggestions for a caregiver course to support student literacy. Their quantitative ranking of their ability to make these suggestions grew as they described qualitatively getting to know students and caregivers better (see Table 3 for the quantitative scores of teacher ability to provide input for the caregiver course). These recommendations qualitatively showed increasing awareness of strength-based perspectives towards families' cultural and linguistic assets (Vega et al., 2025).

Table 3. Teachers' ability to provide input on developing course content.

	Needs Assessment	Sem 1	Sem2	Sem3	Sem4	Sem5	Sem6
Average Rating	3.04	3.32	3.76 *	4.24 *	4.08 *	4.29 *	4.42 *
Effect Size		0.29	0.78	1.27	0.99	1.35	1.37
n	25	25	25	25	25	24	24

Note: * indicates statistically significant difference from the baseline term at 0.05 significance level from the teacher survey. Sem is short for semester.

One limitation is that this teacher growth was not triangulated in the district survey completed by their supervisors. Regarding overall teacher knowledge, from the needs assessment to the final semester, the average knowledge ratings of teachers by their supervisors decreased by 2.3%. Based on a paired *t*-test, the difference is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Regarding self-efficacy in the district survey, the results also noted a slight decrease of 2.3%. While not significant, it is important to note the lack of alignment, elaborated on in the Discussion.

5.3. Burgeoning, Hesitant Leadership

While M. R. Coady et al. (2016) discuss the three components needed for knowledge of teaching and learning for MLs—teacher background and experiences, teacher knowledge of teaching and learning, and knowledge of MLs as learners—they do not address the leadership needed to support the implementation of this knowledge in schools. We began asking teachers in their fourth semester about not just their self-efficacy, knowledge, and implementation of literacy practices for MLs, but also their self-efficacy for potentially leading PD or coaching colleagues on these topics. As shown in Table 4 through confidence levels, participant leadership did not significantly change until their final semester with a moderate effect size in the intervention, suggesting that duration was an important element in establishing teachers who not only feel confident in ML literacy practices, but who also feel capable of leading.

Leadership Identity was a focused code in the qualitative data as well. This focused code showed participants were gaining new leadership positions in their districts and leading other teachers but were still hesitant to identify as leaders and set goals for future leadership. *Leading other Teachers* and *Gaining New Positions* were the most frequently referenced initial codes composing this focused code. At the time of the exit interview, five different participants discussed changing positions, three moving into ML specialist roles and two becoming literacy coaches or interventionists, suggesting their growing leadership in both areas of ML and literacy practice. The teachers who gained new positions cited their new content expertise as giving them the confidence and drive to assume a new position. For instance, Barbara, who moved into an ML position, said "I have increased

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

my knowledge greatly." Similarly, Emma, who changed from a classroom teacher to an interventionist, described her needed confluence of ML and content knowledge: "Because I had the ESOL background from this program. . . so this one kind of hit reading and ESOL which was golden for the population that we had." Others expressed interest in applying for new positions based on their increased confidence from gained knowledge, such as Kimberly: "There is a position open that's early literacy, family engagement leader. I think I would be great at that so hopefully I get an interview. Everything I've learned from this grant I can do it." Others were hesitant in their discussion of leading other teachers or calling themselves leaders.

Table 4. Teachers' level of confidence in successfully leading.

	Average Confidence Level		
	4th Semester	**5th Semester**	**6th Semester**
Teach a set of academic vocabulary words intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities.	71%	70% ES: −0.06	83% * ES: 0.70
Integrate oral and written English language instruction into content-area teaching.	72%	69% ES: −0.10	83% * ES: 0.60
Provide regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills.	74%	70% ES: −0.18	84% * ES: 0.62
Provide small-group instructional intervention to students struggling in areas of literacy and English language development.	83%	81% ES: −0.08	90% * ES: 0.48
n	25	24	24

Note: * indicates statistically significant difference from the fourth term at 0.05 significance level from the teacher survey. ES = effect size.

While teachers did not want to necessarily deliver whole-school PD, they were sharing ideas with other teachers who sought them out for advice. As one participant, Ashley, described: "It's been more informal, just through various conversations." She also discussed how their school was trying to use professional learning communities to incorporate teacher-led PD for one another. However, the less frequently coded initial codes of this focused code, *Needing More Time for Leadership* and *Setting Goals for Leadership*, showed that even though the focused code of *Identifying District Needs* showed teachers were aware of the PD needs of their district, they were still hesitant to call themselves leaders and address those needs. For example, Elizabeth, a classroom teacher, described her district need of teachers learning more about connecting with families. However, though she recognized that need, when asked if she felt comfortable leading, she laughed and said: "Me? I don't know." Instead of leading PD, she was more secure collaborating with teachers: "I think I've learned more about how to assist teachers, of telling them what to do, kind of bringing the ideas out from them, and trying to work more as a team of to help the students learn."

6. Discussion

Building upon teacher leadership frameworks (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010), we thread discussion of the findings with implications for both the practice of PD and future research, building on the micro modifications of this study and looking toward the macro modifications needed in the future.

6.1. Implications for Practice

Kayla, a classroom teacher, when asked about why she said stepping into leadership was something she wanted but was daunting, described her conflict:

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

> Just in general I wouldn't say I have any big leadership role or anything like that… I kind of asked to pump the brakes just because I was a little overwhelmed… So I've been really just trying to work very hard to hone into my leadership skills, working with adults, things that, on top of my academic knowledge also, just overall well-rounded for the future in general, working with parents, things like that, working with other admin, things like that, as much as I can, whatever's in my control.

Kayla is representative not only of other participants in this study but also of many experienced teachers who may already be literacy professionals, but who are hesitant to label themselves as leaders, particularly in new areas of practice such as working with MLs. However, we saw from the experiences of teachers in this study that their leadership was often multidimensional, collaborating with other teachers on matters of both literacy and ML practice. They took on roles of emerging coaches and ML advocates, moving from literacy to ML leadership, or co-leading in literacy and ML practices, but preferred collaborative leadership roles rather than hierarchical forms of leadership. Further, their growth was over a six-semester duration, and they did not seem to recognize their growth until the final semester of their PD though they discussed how pivotal their new knowledge was to their conception of leadership. This reluctance was even as their self-efficacy and knowledge grew for these practices.

This delayed connection between content and leadership learning suggests that leadership is not intuitively linked to growth, and teachers may need help by recognizing their expertise and linking it to leadership potential. While this study affirms previous research, such as M. R. Coady et al.'s (2016) finding that knowledge of teaching and the learning of MLs is important for teachers being prepared to teach MLs, it also points to the need to explicitly connect and support this developed content knowledge with leadership potential. The participants in this study focused on their gained knowledge as a basis for future leadership. Further, efforts need to be made to make room for more multidimensional roles in leadership that blend areas of expertise such as literacy and ML practice and allow for informality and flexibility (Yoon, 2023). The teachers in this study were within the spheres of leadership identified by Fairman and Mackenzie (2015), especially building and sharing pedagogical knowledge. However, this knowledge was not necessarily recognized. For example, even though results showed teachers growing in statistically significant ways with large effect sizes starting in their third semester in the knowledge and self-efficacy that they believed prepared them for leadership, the views of leaders in their own schools were seemingly not aligned. The district surveys showed that the supervisors of the participants were not seeing significant change in their participating teachers from the intervention baseline to the final semester in either knowledge or self-efficacy, which is a different story than the data from teachers and their students tell. Thus, there may be room for administrators to discuss learning and leadership opportunities with their teachers, and this was a macro modification noted for the second cohort of teachers. Teacher expertise is fundamental to advancing teaching and learning, and principals are a strong influence on their potential leadership, so we made a modification to explicitly invite principals/supervisors to encourage teachers with leadership opportunities in the future (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Further, not mentioned in Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) but noticed in this research, was the potential and need for these participants to merge previously siloed areas of expertise such as literacy and ML practice. Thus, another sphere of influence that this research adds that future practice and studies should address is building bridges as a sphere of leadership impact that goes beyond collaboration and breaking "barriers of teacher autonomy" to warrant more intentional mergers (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015, p. 69).

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16071112

These implications for practice can inform pedagogical considerations in teacher education programs. Concretely, coursework can make explicit connections between teacher expertise and leadership competencies in assignment and discussions. For instance, different types of leadership can be explored, including distributed approaches that are more collaborative in nature and merge areas of expertise. Teachers can identify their instructional growth points and recognize ways and areas in which they are already leaders or can influence their schools through advocacy, mentoring, and new initiatives. Taking this perspective can help teachers recognize that leadership is a process that they may already be practicing. Another way to scaffold leadership through a program can be to examine district expectations for their emerging leaders or those who can influence decision-making, particularly in ML-related matters. In our research, we observed this disconnect between administrators and teachers. It would be helpful to have both stakeholders in dialog so that teachers can communicate their learning and how that can contribute to their immediate context while administrators can clarify needs and role expectations.

6.2. Implications for Research

Regarding implications for research methods, there is a need in both literacy research overall and multilingual research in particular to overcome deficit-based thinking that has saturated this research to date (McCarty et al., 2021). Atkinson (2002, p. 539) suggested that although quantitative, experimental, or quasi-experimental research has a place in researching language development, "studying real humans in real human contexts and interactions, including classrooms, entails methodologies that do not denature phenomena by removing them from their natural environments." DBR is a method that allows researchers to not only study an intervention and how it works in participants' ecological context, but also to make modifications for their specific needs (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). This type of research proved important here for the modifications made within the intervention, specifically the micro modifications made within the first cohort as participants had specialized knowledge they were blending. For example, these trained literacy teachers desired not only more PD in writing, but in particular found the PD on translanguaging specific to ML writing instruction to be a helpful modification. Further, modifications are still needed; as these participants advance toward thinking of themselves as leaders but hesitate to identify with traditional roles of leadership, they will need open dialog and conversations at their respective schools for where they can lead confidently rather than the burgeoning leadership discussed herein. We worked within this study to merge opportunities for leaders in literacy and MLs to work together that were previously siloed, yet the data here show that school leaders were still not recognizing the leadership the teachers saw within themselves.

Thus, this type of research was necessary not only to see quantitative data on where teachers were making gains and needing more support, but also to hear their voices in the qualitative data and, perhaps more importantly, be able to respond to those needs. We encourage future researchers to use methods that incorporate participant voice and the flexibility to respond to it. Such research methods often need specific considerations when focusing on MLs, such as partners capable of understanding MLs' cultural and linguistic assets (McCarty et al., 2021) that may be missing from current research methods.

While this study combines robust data collection methods for a prolonged period to measure teacher learning, it is not exempt from limitations. As acknowledged by Desimone (2009), duration is a critical element of effective professional development. The results from this research also show that teachers started to experience confidence in their leadership potential towards the end of the intervention. This delayed shift implies that more time could be beneficial to explore the development of leadership skills. Within

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a grant-funded research context, this extension may be challenging as it requires extra resources and extensive participation from teachers. However, one way to address this is to conduct follow-ups with teachers and district leaders to examine after-intervention impacts. We have done this through additional surveys with some degree of success, but incentives may be necessary for more participation. Additionally, our sample was specific and small, including teachers with specialized literacy knowledge. Even though the size and the expertise of this cohort may not yet allow for generalization, our study includes sound statistical measures and fulfills its purpose of building ML capacity. This research complemented teachers' advanced literacy knowledge with evidence-based ML instruction through ESOL certification.

7. Conclusions

MLs are a growing and vital student population. Looking at just their economic impact, 90% of U.S. employers rely on multilingual employees and predict this demand will grow in the future, suggesting their importance in a globalized economy (ACTFL, 2019). Yet, there is a national shortage of teachers to prepare these students, and even fewer leaders to help develop these teachers (McGee et al., 2015). This research shows that even teachers with advanced training in literacy may not feel adept at addressing the needs of MLs (E. Howell et al., 2025), yet with PD they can gain the pedagogical knowledge and self-efficacy necessary to support these students. Further, these teachers will need to carry that knowledge forward in their respective schools and districts by becoming leaders. Despite leading through coaching and PD in their schools, they may resist labeling themselves as leaders and need collaborative, multidimensional roles and venues to display this leadership. The present study adds to research such as Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) showing confidence is needed by describing how PD addressed such self-efficacy gaps and also the sustained duration required for such efforts. Further, research methods to meet the needs of MLs and their teachers must be similarly dynamic. This study addresses the research gap in leadership for MLs by identifying the specific needs of teachers of MLs, how those needs were addressed including research methods that identified and addressed modifications made and needed, and discussing their progress toward leadership. We not only address the areas of ML instruction that teachers need but also what is neglected for potential leadership (M. Coady et al., 2011; M. R. Coady et al., 2016) and suggest an additional sphere of influence, building the existing research base (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015).

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