Multiculturalism in teacher education institutes – The relationship between formulated official policies and grassroots initiatives

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We find a gap between multicultural discourse and policies in two colleges.
- Lack of official multicultural policy does not inhibit grassroots initiatives.
- Findings indicate the importance of having both shared and separate spaces.
- Multicultural policies emphasize the importance of relationships within the college.
- Multicultural policies are significant to any multicultural society with similar tensions.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the multicultural policies advocated and the actual practices in two teacher education colleges in Israel. Qualitative methods included analysis of documents and official college Websites, interviews with academic staff members and high level officials in the colleges, and observations conducted in the public sphere. Findings provided insights regarding the relationships between official policies and grassroots activities, the function of separate and shared spaces in advancing multicultural policies, and the links between the college structure, the place of the minority group within a given structure, and the group's ability to advance a multicultural agenda.

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1. Introduction

The importance of multiculturalism in the education system in general and in academic teacher education colleges in particular has been the focus of a great deal of academic research in the field of education (Jennings, 2008; Moss, 2008). In Israel, the majority of studies to date on multicultural teacher education have examined differences in the attitudes of Jewish and Arab students or compared the academic achievements of groups of various cultures (Oshrat & Lapidot-Berman, 1998; Sagie, Steinberg, & Pachiraldin, 2002; Shamai & Paul-Binyamin, 2004). Other studies presented models of multicultural education or sought to raise awareness of the significance of such models (Reingold, 2007; Gur-Zeev, 1999; Israeli, 2001; Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002). The current research aims to address a significant lacuna, namely, the issue of academic institutes' policies and attitudes towards the multiplicity of cultures that can be found within their realms. To this end, this study focused on the policies and the patterns of activity of two teacher education colleges, which differ in terms of their academic structure: one contained three separate and autonomous schools, while the other operated as a single unit containing various study programs, among them, two program tracks specifically intended for two designated minority groups. The relationship between the official college policies on multiculturalism and their actual practices in various types of activity was examined.

1.1. The social-political context of the study – Israeli society: between multiple cultures and multiculturalism

Israeli society, not unlike many other countries in the world, is characterized by multiple cultures; however, there is no multicultural ideology or policy to complement this state of affairs (Kimmerling, 1998; Yona, 1999; Yona & Shenhav, 2005). Israeli society is composed of a highly diverse amalgamation of different

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national, ethnic, and religious groups that live side by side. Since the establishment of the state of Israel more than 60 years ago, Israeli social policy towards the Palestinian minority could hardly be characterized as multicultural. Instead, individuals, non-governmental institutions, and non-profit organizations voluntarily initiated the vast majority of attempts to create a dialog between Jews and Arabs and to improve the social, economic, and educational realities of the non-Jewish minority in Israel (Reingold, 2007). The national, ethnic, and cultural variance in Israel poses challenges to policy makers, demanding a new approach to public policy and highlights the need for policies that can be adapted to suit Israel's complex and ever-changing reality. However, despite the numerous sectors in this society, no multicultural agenda has ever been introduced, and the reciprocal relationships among the various groups are characterized by mutual rejection and the absence of either dialog or mutual recognition (Mautner, Sagie, & Shamir, 1998; Shafir & Peled, 2002). This is especially conspicuous in the relationship between national groups: Arabs and Jews. The absence of a multicultural policy has many and varied implications for the state, the society, and the individual. In fact, in a democratic society with multiple cultures, this absence can be potentially destructive, increasing the likelihood of severe social crises (Kimmerling, 1998), and undoubtedly jeopardizing the current delicate democratic fiber (Zisser & Cohen, 1999).

In addition to these negative implications that stem from the absence of social arrangements, there are significant effects on the life of the individual and the manner in which the individual perceives his or her place in society. Taylor (1992) claimed that identity is formed on the basis of recognition, lack of recognition, and especially the others' imprecise recognition of the individual. According to Taylor, whose views are aligned with the communal approach to multiculturalism, a positive self-image is a necessary condition for the individual's optimal self-realization, both on a personal level and as a member of a civic society. Also Kymlicka (1995), whose views are aligned with the individual approach to multiculturalism, sees individual self-realization as possible only within the framework of a community with common values and a shared cultural heritage. Yona and Shenhav (2005), who follow in Kymlicka's footsteps, suggest that the moral and effective way to ensure Israel's democracy, on the one hand, and its legitimacy and stability, on the other hand, is by formulating official rules derived from the ideal of a multicultural democracy (Yona, 1999; Yona & Shenhav, 2005). Arrangements guaranteed by the state would ensure an appropriate reflection of the differences between the groups and their conflicting interests in the framework of Israeli society.

Banks (1996) studied the link between a national state, the characteristics of a society with multiple cultures, and the educational endeavor. In his opinion, without an established basis of multicultural content and skills, the peoples of the US would be unable to communicate with each other in the 21st century, due to the continuously increasing differences. Consequently, the (American) nation should strive not only for a liberal democracy, but for one in which the values of justice and equality are practiced. In other words, multicultural education should be transformative, rather than function as a mere fig leaf. Moreover, not unlike educators who advocate for a critical pedagogy (Neito, 1999), Banks favored multicultural education which combines theory and practice. He assumed that multicultural education has the power to liberate the oppressed minority, thus constituting the first step in creating a democratic and just society. According to Nieto (1999), educating for active and critical civic engagement requires an understanding of the society's complexity, including its multiple voices and perspectives.

The integration of a multicultural approach in an establishment as important as the education system would constitute a clear sign of official sanctioning. People spend a great deal of time in this framework, during which they fashion their personal beliefs and way of life. The theoretical literature emphasizes the important role of the teachers in ensuring the successful implementation of a multicultural curriculum and the inculcation of corresponding moral values (Avisar, 2005; Lam, 2001). Giroux (1992) and Freire (1998) noted teachers' potential role as leaders of social change. In their view, teachers are capable of border-crossing and guiding an intercultural dialog; hence, they are fit to serve as cultural workers and agents of change. Freire (1998) specifically emphasized teachers' role as agents of change, who work to develop critical thinking among their students. Coping with the challenges that education poses, not only in Israel, but also in many other countries, requires a cadre of well-educated and well-trained teachers, capable of conducting a fair and open discussion on numerous complex and difficult topics. This implies that the teacher training programs should aspire to enhance pre-service teachers knowledge of these topics and equip them with tools and skills relevant to this task.

In Israel, the process of teacher education is comprised of two major parts: the first takes place while attending a teacher education institute of higher education, and the second takes place on the job, as teachers learn from professional peers and participate in specially designed seminars and workshops for teachers. The current study chose to investigate the issue of multiculturalism in the Israeli teacher education colleges.

The findings of this study regarding the existence of a multicultural policy in teacher education institutes in Israel may be relevant to many countries around the world, particularly since this is a case of a society with many cultures, which is governed by ethnocentric policies, while the relationship between the two main nationalities is characterized by ongoing hostility. In the colleges under discussion, the group of national minority students is fairly large, yet the policies of the colleges represent those of the Israeli establishment. In this context, the emergence of grassroots, "bottom-up" initiatives that aim to alter these policies, as well as the "top-down" response of the institutions, could offer an alternative model and a point of comparison for other countries that are home to numerous cultures engaged in continuous conflict.

1.2. Analytical distinctions and comments

In the next section we describe in detail the current study's theoretical foundation on issues of educational policy, multicultural educational policy, multiculturalism in the curricula, and multiculturalism in teacher education colleges. This foundation guided our analysis of the findings.

1.2.1. Educational policy

An educational policy is a system of principles which form the basis for a communal identity and which are a product of the existing ideological-political system; consequently, a policy is perceived as an ideological-political act (Arieli, Shlaski, & Kashti, 1997). Policy setting is the outcome of a process of planning and decision making. Nonetheless, occasionally an unplanned policy is set in motion, usually as an immediate response to urgent and unexpected needs. An educational policy can result from a variety of processes: In contrast to the traditional top-down model, a developmental model has also emerged in which the process is bottom-up process, it was disorganized, a product of localized changes, which cumulatively led to a far-reaching, deep-seated, grassroots trend change (Avidov-Ungar & Eshet-Alkalay, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2000). The Islands of Innovation model: Many