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"For Them, The Hijab Means Dangerous Arabs" – Between Policy And Practice: Challenges In Implementing The Integration Of Arab Teachers In Hebrew Schools

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Article History:

Received: 19-05-2025
Revision: 25-06-2025
Accepted: 30-06-2025
Publication: 19-08-2025

Cite this article as:

Eliyahu-Levi, D., & Gvura, A. (2025). "For Them, The Hijab Means Dangerous Arabs" – Between Policy And Practice: Challenges In Implementing The Integration Of Arab Teachers In Hebrew Schools. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 25(3), 127-139. doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v25i3.1186

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Abstract: This study investigates the challenges associated with implementing the Israeli Ministry of Education's policy to integrate Arab female teachers into Hebrew-speaking schools, guided by Social Identity Theory and Realistic Conflict Theory. Employing a qualitative-phenomenological approach, the research is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 23 teachers (14 Jewish and 9 Arab) working across various levels of the Hebrew education system. The findings reveal four central challenges: visible cultural and religious distinctiveness, particularly the wearing of the hijab, linguistic barriers, socio-cultural knowledge disparities, and tensions within the teachers' lounge. Arab teachers report navigating these challenges through a range of coping strategies, including emotional suppression, avoidance, and, at times, direct confrontation or the assertion of alternative narratives. These strategies reflect both personal resilience and systemic limitations. The study further reveals a stark contrast between Arab teachers' experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and inequality, and the relative sense of belonging and cultural dominance experienced by their Jewish counterparts. By amplifying the voices of both Arab and Jewish educators, this study contributes new empirical insight into the lived realities of intercultural integration in education. It calls for the adoption of culturally responsive and structurally supportive policies aimed at fostering equitable participation, mutual recognition, and meaningful professional inclusion of Arab teachers within Hebrew-speaking schools. The findings carry significant implications for policymakers and educational leaders seeking to move beyond symbolic representation toward genuinely inclusive and just educational environments in a divided society.

Keywords: Teacher Integration, Majority-minority Relations, Socio-cultural Diversity, Professional Identity

1. Introduction

The integration of Arab teachers into Jewish schools represents an expanding phenomenon and a significant socio-educational initiative, with the potential to advance values of coexistence, tolerance, and cultural pluralism within the Israeli education system. On the one hand, research demonstrates that integrating minority-group teachers into schools predominantly staffed and attended by members of the dominant majority can help address issues of social diversity, national, religious, and cultural, while enhancing social sensitivity and reducing inequality, alienation, and racism (Strasser & Waburg, 2015; Mantel, 2018; Rosen, Jacob, & Panagiotopoulou, 2018). These teachers may serve as role models for coexistence and intercultural engagement, fostering democratic values such as tolerance, mutual respect, and openness among students (Smootha, 2014). Their presence in the classroom offers opportunities for authentic encounters with Arab culture, enriches students' cultural awareness, and contributes to the reduction of prejudice, while simultaneously strengthening a sense of belonging and equality among both teachers and students (Maoz, 2011).

On the other hand, the process of integrating Arab teachers into Hebrew schools is accompanied by considerable tensions and challenges. These interpersonal encounters reveal complex issues tied to intercultural relations and are shaped by the broader sociopolitical context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a result, feelings of alienation, prejudice, and contested belonging often arise (Jabareen & Agbaria, 2010; Amir et al., 2013; Alayan, 2018). Implementing integration policies thus poses significant difficulties for policymakers, school principals, teachers, and students alike. These challenges stem from the fundamental tension between the aspiration for integration and the divisive sociopolitical reality of a protracted national conflict.

This study seeks to examine the primary challenges involved in implementing the policy of integrating Arab teachers into Hebrew schools, drawing on two theoretical frameworks: Social Identity Theory and Realistic Conflict Theory. The research focuses on interpersonal encounters and the ways in which this integration policy affects teaching and learning processes. The uniqueness of this study lies in its attention to the experiences of both groups involved in the integration process, rather than concentrating solely on the Arab teachers, as is often the case. While many previous studies have primarily explored the difficulties faced by Arab teachers and their coping mechanisms (Hayesrik et al., 2025; Gindi & Ron-Ehrlich, 2020; Eliyahu-Levi & Gvura, 2024), this study aims to offer a broader and more balanced perspective and addresses a gap in both the educational literature and the scholarship on intercultural policy

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in Israel by examining the impact of integration policy on the entire school community, students, teachers, and principals, while placing particular emphasis on the patterns of interaction between Jewish and Arab stakeholders. In doing so, it provides an original contribution to the understanding of intercultural relations within the education system in a context marked by ongoing sociopolitical tension. The article presents empirical findings and authentic examples from the educational field that illuminate the complexities of the integration process and propose potential directions for improving policy implementation within the Israeli education system.

Before presenting the study's theoretical framework, the literature review will clarify two foundational pillars that underpin the research: the cultural gaps between Jews and Arabs in Israel, and the national policy of integrating Arab teachers into Hebrew-speaking schools. These two dimensions, together with the theoretical frameworks, shape the conceptual lens through which intergroup dynamics and tensions are analyzed. This study aims to explore the challenges associated with implementing the Israeli Ministry of Education's policy of integrating Arab teachers into Hebrew schools, as perceived by both Arab and Jewish female teachers. The research is guided by two central questions:

1. What are the main challenges in implementing the integration policy of Arab teachers in Hebrew schools?
2. What coping mechanisms do Arab and Jewish teachers employ in response to these challenges within the Hebrew educational context?

This study contributes to the theoretical and scholarly discourse on the integration of minority-group teachers into majority-populated schools by offering new empirical insights into the lived experiences of educators from both communities. Its distinctive contribution lies in amplifying the personal voices of Arab and Jewish teachers and in highlighting their authentic coping strategies in the face of intercultural tensions within classrooms, staff rooms, and the wider school environment. Furthermore, the study adds a practical dimension to the discussion on inclusive education by proposing strategies to support the meaningful integration of Arab teachers, foster equitable and inclusive school cultures, and promote equal opportunities while addressing prejudice, stereotyping, alienation, and manifestations of racism.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural differences

Cultural differences between groups frequently lead to divergent worldviews and varying levels of willingness to engage with or understand the "other" (De Leersnyder et al., 2014). These cultural gaps can result in interactions where one party's responses appear unclear or unpredictable to the other, leaving both participants uncertain about whether they are accurately interpreting each other's communicative intentions. Consequently, mutual fear of being misunderstood or hurt often constrains the development of trust and expressions of closeness (Finuras, 2019).

Such dynamics of cultural negation and separation are particularly evident in the relationship between the Jewish majority and the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel, largely due to the persistent national and historical conflict (Smootha, 2010). The identities of Jews and Arabs are frequently perceived as oppositional, with significant religious, cultural, national, and linguistic differences between the two groups. These differences are a primary source of sociopolitical tension and underscore the structural inequalities embedded in the power relations between them (Shdema & Martin, 2022).

Arab in Israel are largely excluded from centers of power and are often not viewed as a legitimate part of the educational system, which plays a pivotal role in shaping collective identity and attitudes toward other groups. In accordance with government policy, Arab students are educated in separate school systems. This systemic reality of discrimination, segregation, and inequality obstructs the formation of a shared foundation for genuine multicultural education, reciprocal engagement, and recognition of the "other" (Abu-Saad et al., 2020; Lustick, 2019; Levy, 2023). Nevertheless, within the educational field, there is a growing discourse advocating for greater socio-cultural interaction between Jews and Arabs. These efforts aim to open a window into each group's life, culture, and perspectives, thereby reducing tensions and mutual alienation. Educational settings remain one of the few spaces where direct and authentic intercultural encounters can occur, settings that are inherently political, shaped by broader discourses, and influenced by prevailing power dynamics (Ali-Saleh, 2020; Habib & Asalia, 2019).

2.2. Arab Teachers in Hebrew Schools

The growing shortage of Jewish teachers has created an urgent need to recruit educators from the Arab community, who are increasingly contributing pedagogical support to the Israeli education system (Shaked, 2016; Abu Asbah, 2007). Beyond addressing immediate workforce demands, the integration of Arab teachers offers a unique opportunity to enrich Jewish students' learning experiences and expand their understanding of Israel's multicultural fabric. Researchers have found that Arab teachers working in Hebrew schools often report a combination of positive experiences and challenges, particularly those arising from cultural gaps and mistrust linked to national identity and the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Halabi & Fa'or, 2021; Finuras, 2019; Rajput & Talan, 2017; Jayusi & Bekerman, 2019). Almelek (2020) notes that Arab teachers are frequently expected to suppress their political views and personal beliefs in order to ease national-political tensions and build trust with colleagues and students. According to Ladson-Billings (2021), such a climate of tension and constraint can impede holistic development and perpetuate broader social inequalities.

Despite these challenges, Arab teachers have reported that their presence contributes meaningfully to dismantling stereotypes, reducing prejudice and racism, and fostering greater awareness of Arab society. Many express a desire to continue working in Hebrew schools, citing the positive impact they believe they make (Finuras, 2019; Rajput & Talan, 2017). The integration of minority employees in multicultural workplaces has been examined in various global contexts (Ramanathan, 2006; Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2021), with studies showing that such individuals often employ a range of negotiation strategies to achieve personal and professional success (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2020; Sion, 2014). Similarly, studies by Jayusi and Bekerman (2019) reveal that most Arab teachers report positive integration experiences, satisfaction with their roles, and favorable relationships with principals, colleagues, students, and parents. Gilat et al. (2022) further found that Arab teachers view themselves as agents of cultural exchange, exposing Jewish students to Arab culture and helping to enhance communication and inclusion within the school environment.

2.3. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel in the 1970s, offers a conceptual framework for understanding how individuals' affiliations with various social groups, national, religious, gendered, and cultural, influence self-conception and shape attitudes toward members of other groups (Turner, Brown & Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). A core premise of the theory is that people derive a sense of identity and self-worth from their group memberships and tend to compare their in-group with relevant out-groups.

This comparison process often leads to the formation of hierarchical evaluations, whereby one's in-group is viewed more favorably than out-groups (Orian Harel, Maoz, & Halperin, 2020). Even in the absence of tangible resource competition, the mere act of categorizing individuals into "us" and "them" can generate intergroup tension. The desire to affirm a positive social identity and emphasize group distinctiveness may give rise to perceived superiority or inferiority hierarchies. These psychological processes help explain the emergence of prejudice and hostility between groups (Porat, Halperin, & Tamir, 2016).

Social Identity Theory thus positions the psychological dimension as a fundamental driver of intergroup competition and conflict. Individuals seek to maintain a favorable self-image by enhancing the status of their in-group, often at the expense of others, even in situations devoid of material rivalry (Turner, Brown & Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). However, despite its widespread application, the theory is not without criticism. Some scholars argue that it oversimplifies the complexity of intergroup relations by neglecting individual-level differences such as personality traits and sociocultural backgrounds (Brown, 2020). Moreover, its assumption of intra-group homogeneity overlooks the intersectional and multilayered nature of individual identities (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Intergroup bias, the tendency to evaluate one's own group more positively than others, can manifest in behavior (e.g., discrimination), attitudes (e.g., prejudice), and cognition (e.g., stereotyping), and may even escalate to aggression toward out-group members (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018). Nonetheless, the core principles of Social Identity Theory provide a useful foundation for designing educational programs aimed at fostering mutual recognition and understanding across group lines (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). Research supports the idea that greater awareness of identity-based dynamics can inform efforts to reduce intergroup conflict and improve social cohesion (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Due to its limitations, however, scholars often complement this framework with other theories, such as Realistic Conflict Theory, to gain a fuller picture of intergroup relations.

2.4. Conflict Theory

Conflict Theory, originally conceptualized by Karl Marx and further developed by theorists such as Max Weber, C. Wright Mills, and Ralf Dahrendorf, posits that society is composed of competing groups vying for power, resources, and influence. According to this view, social structures are inherently marked by inequality, with conflict serving as a central force driving social change (Marx & Engels, 1848; Collins, 1975; Dahrendorf, 1959; Coser, 1956).

At the heart of Conflict Theory are the concepts of "power" and "authority." Power refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to impose their will despite opposition (Lukes, 1974), while authority, according to Weber (1946), is power that is perceived as legitimate. Conflict theorists argue that dominant groups maintain control through coercive means, including the monopolization of legal, economic, and cultural institutions (Gramsci, 1971; Gramsci, 2004). This theory views social inequality as an embedded structural reality that systematically advantages certain groups while marginalizing others. Dahrendorf's expansion of Conflict Theory beyond economic contexts enabled the analysis of power relations within other spheres such as education, politics, and family life. In multicultural societies, minority groups often face struggles for recognition, equitable access to resources, and influence over systems dominated by the majority (Wimmer, 2008; Reza-Rashti, 2015; Tilly, 1978).

Empirical research has highlighted the persistent exclusion of minority groups from key educational structures due to entrenched power disparities (Santoro, 2015). In the Israeli context, Arab teachers, positioned as a minority, frequently face barriers to advancement, limited influence over policy, and insufficient professional recognition. As a result, they are often compelled to advocate for fair representation, equitable employment conditions, and meaningful opportunities for professional growth (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Sleeter, 2004).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methods

This study explores the experiences of Arab teachers working alongside Jewish teachers in Hebrew-speaking schools, with particular attention to intercultural interactions in diverse educational settings. To achieve this, we adopted a qualitative-phenomenological approach that focuses on closely examining a specific phenomenon by exploring participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This approach is grounded in the assumption that human experience carries intrinsic meaning for those who live it, meaning that precedes theoretical interpretation and serves as a valid and significant source of knowledge.

Accordingly, all objective understanding is rooted in subjective perception. The study aims to uncover the essential meaning of the teaching experience as it is lived, perceived, and interpreted by Arab teachers. Through this lens, the research offers a holistic understanding of these experiences as expressed through participants' actions, attitudes, and reflective interpretations (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This methodological stance enables a deep exploration of subjective realities and provides an interpretive framework for understanding the broader integration process and the intercultural dynamics within the educational context.

3.2. Participants

The study involved 23 female teachers, including nine Muslim Arab teachers and fourteen Jewish teachers. All participants were between the ages of 25 and 37, with 2 to 18 years of teaching experience. Each held a bachelor's degree and a teaching

certificate from teacher education colleges in Israel. As part of their training, they had completed four years of practicum experience working with heterogeneous populations in either Hebrew or Arabic. The participants taught various subjects, including mathematics, English, science, and Hebrew, across elementary, middle, and high school levels in Hebrew-speaking schools.

Participants were selected through snowball sampling, beginning with one teacher personally known to one of the researchers, who then referred additional interviewees. To minimize potential bias, we deliberately sought diversity in terms of age, professional seniority, subject matter, and educational level. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, that is, when no new themes emerged and core topics began to repeat (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Although the study does not claim statistical generalizability to the entire Arab teacher population, the diversity of participants' backgrounds enabled a rich and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The fact that all participants were women may be explained by the gendered composition of the Israeli teaching workforce, particularly within the Arab sector, which is predominantly female (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2008). Recent economic and social transformations in Arab society have contributed to higher education levels among Arab women and greater participation in the workforce, mainly in education and healthcare. Nevertheless, Arab women continue to face significant barriers in pursuing independent careers due to prevailing gender hierarchies within a patriarchal social structure (Zoabi & Savaya, 2016). In this context, Arab women are not only members of a national minority but also occupy a marginalized position within their own community's social hierarchy (Sa'di-Sabbah, 2007).

3.3. Research Tool

The primary research tool was a semi-structured interview, designed to elicit participants' teaching experiences with attention to personal, educational, social, cultural, national, and religious dimensions. These thematic domains served as entry points for understanding how participants interpret the integration process within their educational settings.

A semi-structured format allowed for flexibility and responsiveness, enabling researchers to adapt questions to individual interviewees, explore emerging issues, and deviate from the pre-defined structure when necessary. In some instances, interview questions were modified during the conversation in response to the evolving dynamics of interaction. This openness often led participants to share experiences beyond the core questions, resulting in the identification of new themes and offering fresh dimensions to the phenomenon under study (Berg, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The central question posed to participants was:

“Describe your teaching experience in the school. Please address the social, cultural, and professional challenges you have encountered, as well as the main strategies you use to cope with them.”

During the interviews, both Arab and Jewish teachers shared their feelings, beliefs, and pedagogical perspectives, offering rich narrative accounts of classroom experiences, interactions in the teachers' lounge, and participation in school events such as ceremonies. These narratives included authentic examples, personal reflections, and emotional-pedagogical interpretations. Participants also discussed broader aspects of their family, cultural, religious, and national backgrounds.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted outside school premises, in a location chosen by the participant to ensure a safe and open environment for discussion.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an approach that identifies key themes emerging from participants' subjective narratives. This method aligns with the phenomenological-interpretive framework underpinning the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The analysis followed a hybrid strategy, combining inductive coding to allow themes to emerge organically from the data, with a theoretically informed lens, drawing on Social Identity Theory and Realistic Conflict Theory to guide interpretation. The process involved several steps: open coding of transcripts, identification of recurrent patterns, clustering themes into overarching categories, and interpretation of shared meanings expressed across the interviews (Merriam, 2009). Coding was conducted independently by two researchers through repeated reflective readings of the transcripts, aiming to ensure high inter-rater reliability, which reached 84%.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was secured from the institutional ethics committee (Approval No.: 2024012601). Given that qualitative research involves studying human subjects, often in sensitive or vulnerable contexts, rigorous ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process (Kassan & Krummer-Nevo, 2010).

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Each was fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the interview, guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, and signed a consent form.

We are cognizant that researchers' identities influence data interpretation in qualitative research. Both authors are Jewish scholars working within multicultural teacher education institutions where Jewish and Arab students study together. Our longstanding engagement with issues of diversity, identity, and integration informed our approach to the research. As outsiders to the lived experiences of Arab teachers, we maintained ongoing reflexivity throughout the study, engaging in repeated readings, collaborative discussions, and critical examination of emerging themes.

Our commitment was to authentically represent participants' voices, avoiding the imposition of preconceived notions. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that interpretation is never entirely neutral, and this transparency reflects our ethical responsibility as scholars..

4. Findings

This chapter presents the main findings of the study, as derived from the analysis of interviews with Arab and Jewish teachers working in Hebrew schools. The findings highlight the sociocultural complexity of the integration process, as reflected in daily tensions and interactions. Four key challenges were identified: visual difference, the linguistic challenge, cultural knowledge gaps, and interactions in the teachers' lounge. In response to these challenges, the participants employed a range of coping strategies, from repression and avoidance to direct confrontation and the presence of their narratives.

4.1. Challenges

4.1.1. Visual Difference and Traditional Dress

The Muslim Arab teachers arrive at school wearing traditional attire, which includes a long garment and a hijab, sometimes covering the face and leaving only the eyes visible, and sometimes covering only the head. This distinctive visual appearance is described in the accounts of both Arab and Jewish teachers as one of the most prominent, troubling, and evocative factors contributing to feelings of otherness and distance. It serves as a visible reminder of the social, national, and religious differences between the groups.

Students make comments about the clothing and the hijab, not always with bad intentions, sometimes just out of curiosity. They don't approach the Arab teacher, probably because of the difference, the appearance, the fear. The students asked me: "Why does she wear that in the summer when it's so hot?"; "Does it mean she's religious?" The Arab teachers are aware that their clothing is different, but they have no choice; it's part of who they are, part of where they come from. I can also understand the students' fear; to them, the hijab means dangerous Arabs. These are probably things they hear at home. (Dorit, Jewish teacher)

Dorit's words reveal a confrontation with one of the most troubling challenges related to visibility and sociocultural difference within the educational space. The external appearance, long garment, and hijab are likely familiar to students from media representations, associated with fear and danger, and prevent them from approaching the Arab teacher, who is perceived as representing the out-group, while they see themselves as belonging to the dominant Jewish in-group.

The students' questions, "Why does she wear that in the summer when it's so hot?"; "Does it mean she's religious?", reflect, on the one hand, openness and curiosity, on the other hand, a lack of clarity or understanding of social and cultural differences. The mediation of this cultural gap is carried out by Dorit, the Jewish teacher, who empathizes with the fear and articulates it as: "To them, the hijab means dangerous Arabs," referencing a security-based reality shaped by the ongoing Jewish-Arab conflict.

The authentic encounter between two social groups in conflict presents an opportunity for open, non-judgmental recognition of difference, for expanding the boundaries of social identity, and for enhancing students' capacity to effectively engage with the other.

On the topic of visual difference and traditional dress, we turn to the words of Rania, an Arab teacher:

At first, I was afraid that my background and appearance, with the head covering that shows only the eyes, would scare the students, because they're not used to seeing a Muslim Arab teacher. I don't look like the teachers they're used to. But over time, they got used to it, and today it doesn't matter to me at all." (Rania, Arab teacher in a Hebrew-speaking school)

It is evident that Rania sees the hijab not merely as part of her religious attire, but also as a marker of identification with a particular group in a country marked by ongoing political and social tension. She is aware that her appearance is perceived by Jewish students as a negative symbol of "the other," associated with the enemy, particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this sense, she bears a kind of social "cost" she is forced to pay, even though this attire is an inseparable part of her identity.

Rania, as an Arab teacher, may interpret the students' initial fear as a reflection of distorted or superficial perceptions of Arabs, perceptions that have been shaped and reinforced by society and the media. She recognizes that the source of this fear does not necessarily lie within the students themselves, but rather in what they absorb from their homes and surrounding environment.

The final sentence of her statement, "They got used to it, and today it doesn't matter to me at all", carries particular significance. Her remark illustrates that, over time and through sustained positive contact, the students come to see her not solely through the lens of the group she represents, but as an individual. This mitigates the identity-based tension. In other words, the classroom interaction gradually shifts from being centered on cultural differences, such as clothing and appearance, to one grounded in trust and personal familiarity, redirecting attention from group identity to interpersonal connection.

4.1.2. The linguistic challenge

Both Jewish and Arab teachers report a linguistic challenge faced by the Arab teachers in pedagogical contexts. The fact that teachers from both groups acknowledge the same gap highlights its authenticity and significance, underscoring the need for systemic attention and intervention. Below are testimonies from two teachers:

Arab teachers who come to schools haven't always completed their academic studies in Hebrew. For example, some hold degrees in education and teaching certificates from the Arab Institute but did not study their degree in Hebrew, even if the teacher training college is a Hebrew-speaking institution. You can clearly see the language gaps, significant mistakes, including in pronunciation. This is highly problematic. There's a lack of language proficiency, even in the most basic Hebrew rules: masculine and feminine, singular and plural, roots, there's a significant and noticeable gap. Of course, we all speak with some kind of accent, but when you come to teach first grade, where children learn by ear, if the teacher mispronounces words, it really impairs the learning process. (Osnat, Jewish teacher, first-grade homeroom teacher)

Osnat describes the situation from the standpoint of the “in-group,” emphasizing the differences between the groups. Her arguments regarding linguistic challenges, manifested in inaccurate pronunciation, grammatical errors, and an accent that marks the speaker as someone for whom Hebrew is not a native language, may reinforce the dichotomy between “Jewish teachers” and “Arab teachers.” Implicit in her words is a preference for Jewish teachers, who are perceived as more “suitable” for teaching in Hebrew.

From a critical perspective, such a preference may influence professional relationships and affect how Arab teachers are integrated into the educational staff. Her remarks, which express concern about the quality of Hebrew instruction delivered by Arab teachers, risk fostering both overt and covert tensions among colleagues, especially when Jewish teachers feel their own standards or professional roles are being challenged by what they perceive as linguistic inadequacies in their Arab counterparts.

Osnat’s account offers a critique of a fundamental issue in the training of Arab teachers. According to her, the fact that many Arab teachers have not been trained in Hebrew-speaking academic settings, for instance, some studied at the Arab Institute, ultimately affects students’ learning due to linguistic gaps. This report exposes a structural conflict that exacerbates the challenges Arab teachers face in integrating into Jewish schools. It points to a systemic issue that goes beyond individual language proficiency, highlighting the need for more thoughtful planning at the institutional level.

Here is the testimony of Suha, which, to some extent, supports and even justifies Osnat’s remarks regarding the language gap:

“When I was studying at the college, unfortunately, I didn’t do my practicum in the Jewish sector, so I didn’t really know the Hebrew language well, and it was a bit difficult for me. I do have difficulties with the language, and I have to study a lot at home and prepare every word for the lesson. I learn the lesson and practice it before I teach it.” (Suha, Arab language teacher in Grades 1–2)

Suha’s words illustrate the professional advantage enjoyed by Jewish teachers who have undergone academic training in Hebrew-speaking frameworks, while Arab teachers are often forced to “bridge the gaps” on their own. Suha testifies to the significant time and effort she invests in self-study and preparation, highlighting the additional labor required to reach a comparable level of readiness. She voices criticism of the fact that her teacher training did not include practice in Hebrew-speaking educational settings. Her words suggest that, had she undergone such training, she might have faced fewer linguistic challenges that directly affect her classroom teaching methods.

From the perspective of conflict theory, when Jewish teachers describe the language gaps, they may be emphasizing their own proficiency in Hebrew as superior, thereby reinforcing their status as educational “authorities.” This dynamic contributes to the construction of Hebrew as the dominant language and positions Jewish teachers as members of the majority group with structural advantages. The discourse around language gaps can thus become a tool for marginalizing Arab teachers or establishing a hierarchy in which they are perceived as less competent professionals.

4.1.3. Knowledge Gaps

Gaps in knowledge can create feelings of alienation, social isolation, or misunderstanding between different groups within schools:

These include gaps in general knowledge or world knowledge, relating to history, culture, and social events, that are not always shared or familiar to all parties. For example, Jewish holidays and commemorative events, or global discoveries and prominent historical figures. Such gaps can significantly affect educational communication and the ability to foster meaningful and respectful learning. Familiarity with Jewish holidays and traditions may differ greatly between Arab teachers and students. They are often only superficially acquainted with the Jewish calendar. “An Arab teacher cannot teach Torah or Israeli culture, she simply doesn’t have the knowledge.” (Michal, Jewish teacher)

Yael’s report, presented below, reinforces Michal’s criticism:

Holocaust Remembrance Day and Memorial Day for IDF Soldiers are extremely difficult. Due to gaps in knowledge, it is impossible to ask an Arab teacher to teach about the Holocaust, Memorial Day, or the new October 7th Memorial Day. In such cases, a Jewish teacher will teach. If there is a ceremony at school, the Arab teacher comes, but does not take part” (Yael, Jewish teacher).

Yael’s words, “Holocaust Remembrance Day and Memorial Day for IDF Soldiers are extremely difficult”, highlight the emotional dimensions that accompany social knowledge gaps in the context of national memorial days. This difficulty reflects the challenge of bridging the national tension between two groups engaged in an ongoing conflict. The fact that the Arab teacher does not take part in formative collective rituals of Jewish-Israeli identity, such as Memorial Day, illustrates the conflict she faces between her Palestinian Arab identity and her role as a teacher in a Jewish school. The Arab teacher is perceived as part of the “them” group (outgroup), as her experience and narrative may differ from, or even oppose, the Jewish national narrative. Yael describes a situation in which the Arab teacher is excluded from educational activities and ceremonies, guiding, teaching, and preparing students for the event, likely stemming from a perception that she either cannot or should not identify with the values and messages conveyed in them, and perhaps also from concern that she may experience an internal national conflict. This exclusion reinforces the distinction between the groups and accentuates the sense of belonging to the Jewish “we.”

According to the testimony of the Arab teacher, Dunia, knowledge gaps about the other culture are also evident among the Jewish majority. Her students are unfamiliar with the historical-national narrative of the Palestinian people, and in her view, memorial days offer an opportunity to share a personal story and reduce these gaps:

On Memorial Day, there are ceremonies, people stand in silence, and sing the national anthem. It’s not a national day because it doesn’t represent everyone. I don’t feel part of this day, and sometimes I force myself to participate, to stand or to sing. I know everyone is watching me, checking what I do. I feel torn between my people, my parents were expelled from their home by Jews, and the place where I work. Because of this situation that I and other Arab teachers are in, I decided to initiate a conversation in class, even though the topic is painful and difficult for me. But it’s important for

me to be heard. This may be the only chance to tell my story and to help others understand the complexity.” (Dunia, Arab teacher).

The personal and national narrative shared by Dunia illustrates the challenges faced by individuals navigating power relations between groups. Dunia takes a courageous step in light of the difficult circumstances she finds herself in. Despite her fears, she musters the courage to share her personal, familial, and national story with her students, revealing the Arab narrative through her words: “The Jews expelled my parents from their home”. Her choice to share this story, despite the pain and the fear of how others might react, reflects her aspiration to foster understanding and empathy among her students.

The dialogue Dunia initiates with her students may, on one hand, serve to challenge prejudices, stereotypes, and feelings of alienation and discrimination toward Arabs, helping to bridge cultural gaps and foster a sense of closeness between the two national groups. On the other hand, she is aware of the risks involved: student reactions are unpredictable, and she may face social, political, and cultural criticism.

Dunia stands at the crossroads of complex educational, professional, and ethical dilemmas, forced to navigate between her inner world as an Arab and the external expectations and norms of the school system: “I know everyone is watching me, checking what I do.” She experiences an internal, ambivalent struggle, as an Arab teacher conscious of the history and heritage of Arabs in Israel, and as an educator aware that her students lack familiarity with the Arab narrative. She represents a marginalized minority group that was displaced from its home and now contends with emotions of pain, anger, and frustration, without feeling a need to identify with Israel’s Memorial Day for fallen soldiers. Yet she forces herself to participate in Jewish rituals, singing the anthem and standing in silence during the siren at a Jewish school.

From a critical perspective, this action departs from the conventional role of teachers, who often avoid political discourse and prefer to stay within the boundaries of subject matter. As Bekerman (2007) indicates, the Israeli education system typically functions as a tool for reinforcing national and patriotic identity among students, which limits the integration of alternative narratives. Dunia subverts this convention by using her role as a teacher to foster critical classroom dialogue.

4.1.4. The Teachers’ Room as a Microcosm

Arab teachers may face difficulties integrating into existing teaching staff and sometimes experience a lack of belonging, as reported by both Jewish and Arab teachers:

“In the teachers’ lounge, everything seems normal on the surface. But after October 7th, Nura cried; she suddenly felt unsafe, as if everyone was looking at her with accusing eyes. These days, whenever the topic comes up in the teachers’ lounge, it’s not simple. There’s division; not everyone supports integrating teachers from the Arab sector. It has become difficult. Some teachers are hypocritical. Others, like myself, truly care; we talk about personal things, and it’s mutual. But there are other staff members who, when Nura isn’t around, express extreme views.” (Smadar, Jewish teacher)

“I feel like a guest in the teachers’ lounge; it’s always a challenge. People try, they maintain a pleasant atmosphere, but I constantly feel I have to prove myself. When political topics are discussed, I feel I have to be careful with my words; anything I say can be misinterpreted. Sometimes I ask myself whether they truly see me as part of the staff, or if I’ll always be slightly on the outside.” (Lina, Arab teacher)

Smadar and Lina carefully choose words that reveal a false sense of normalcy, pointing to the gap between outward behavior and inner feelings of division in the teachers’ room: “everything seems normal,” “there’s a lot of hypocrisy,” “do they really see me as part of the team?” These expressions reflect that the social dynamics in the teachers’ room are neither transparent nor reflective of a real effort to promote the integration of Arab teachers in Jewish schools. The duality in interactions, authentic dialogue on the one hand and hypocritical discourse on the other, suggests that the dominant group maintains its status through an ideology that serves its own interests. What appears to be integration, “we’re all in this together,” is in fact a form of “covert ideology” that conceals norms of exclusion and separation. The voices expressed in the teachers’ room behind Nura’s back illustrate the persistent presence of the “other,” who has never been fully accepted into the collective.

Lina, for example, describes her experience as that of a “guest” in the teachers’ room, indicating her sense of marginalization and the ongoing need to “prove herself” in order to gain recognition and a sense of belonging. This gap reflects a clear power dynamic in which members of the minority group must exert extra effort to gain legitimacy. Furthermore, Lina’s caution and self-monitoring when speaking point to the pressure on Arab teachers to suppress aspects of their identity and national pride.

The teachers’ room is expected to serve as a space for professional collaboration, supportive teamwork, and positive communication among staff (Ben-Peretz & Shimoni, 2013; Griffin & Care, 2015). However, the teachers’ testimonies reveal it as a microcosm of the broader sociopolitical landscape in Israel, where each side seeks to preserve its group identity amid uncertainty and fear. This is especially pronounced during times of heightened tension, such as following terrorist attacks like that of October 7th, when polarization intensifies, disrupting any sense of normalcy and bringing the underlying conflict to the surface. Lina’s statement, “anything I say can be misinterpreted”, may be read as an expression of anxiety and discomfort with the militaristic discourse that characterizes Israeli society.

5. Coping Mechanisms

5.1.1. Repression and Avoidance Among Arab Teachers

An examination of Arab teachers’ responses reveals individual-level strategies of repression, such as silence, avoidance of discussion, or a deliberate separation between their professional and personal identities. These mechanisms of repression function as essential survival tools, enabling Arab teachers to operate within a complex and tension-filled reality. However, it is important to acknowledge the long-term implications of such strategies and to develop supportive systems and professional tools that can foster healthier coping with the unique challenges they face:

I sometimes see her avoiding activities related to holidays, national ceremonies, or discussions in the teachers' room. She stays on the sidelines, keeps quiet, or finds a reason to busy herself with something else during the activity. Sometimes I think she's doing it on purpose or is afraid of how others will react. It's a bit frustrating. I wonder if anyone in the administration even notices or tries to talk to her about it. (Anat, Jewish teacher)

I usually stay silent. I don't say what I think and don't get involved. Politics does no good anywhere. When I enter the classroom or the teachers' room after an incident where a Jew was killed, I know it's important to speak from the Arab perspective, but I stop myself and stay silent. I don't say anything, I don't intervene, because it causes problems. I keep everything inside. (Lucy, Arab teacher)

Repressive coping mechanisms, manifested in silence and avoidance of participation in emotionally charged events, such as national ceremonies and sensitive discussions, such as political debates, tend to surface particularly in moments of internal conflict, when lived reality clashes with deeply held values, beliefs, or worldviews (Vaillant, 2011). Lucy's conscious and deliberate choice to remain silent and uninvolved, akin to "burying her head in the sand," allows her to preserve the status quo and avoid confrontation. She seems to believe that this approach helps prevent further tension or interpretations that could harm her.

The dynamics in the teachers' room, viewed through the lens of social identity theory, reflect the tension between the majority and minority groups, with the minority required to adapt to the norms dictated by the dominant group within the school. Lucy experiences a profound inner conflict between her personal and national identity and the need to maintain harmony in the professional sphere. Lacking a safe space in which to express her views, she resorts to deliberate avoidance of political conversations. Both Lucy and Anat recognize that the school's leadership does not actively attempt to create a safe and shared space that could foster deeper mutual understanding and allow minority teachers to voice their perspectives and engage meaningfully. The administration's inaction enables mechanisms of control to persist, as it continues to serve the needs of the dominant group and, in doing so, perpetuates the existing social order rather than challenging it.

5.1.2. Direct Confrontation

This is my opportunity to tell the story of my people, to give voice to the silenced Arab society, and I must stop being afraid. Maybe, finally, the other side will recognize our story, how the Jews expelled us from our home. Let them hear me and understand that there is another narrative that deserves to be acknowledged and respected. (Nasrin, Arab teacher)

Arab teachers are being given more opportunities to play meaningful roles, to create projects that expose students to Arab culture and the Islamic faith. Nur, an Arab teacher, initiated a joint project between our school and a school in the Arab city of Tira. I believe they should share their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs, even if there is conflict or tension; we must confront it. (Zehava, Jewish teacher)

Drawing on social identity theory and conflict theory, the statements made by Nasrin, the Arab teacher, and Zehava, the Jewish teacher, reflect the complexity of encounters between collective identities and the potential for breaking the cycle of silencing through the acknowledgment of the Arab narrative, its culture, religion, traditions, history, and way of life. Their positions express a shared recognition of the importance of making the Arab narrative visible, alongside the need to embrace national and emotional complexities within the school context.

Nasrin consciously adopts a new role as a mediator for the marginalized and silenced Arab society: "Let them hear me and understand that there is another narrative that deserves to be acknowledged and respected." Her professional integration into a Jewish school becomes an opportunity to undertake the task of giving voice to the suppressed Arab narrative, to speak of the experience of displacement and national pain. Her words, "maybe, finally, the other side will recognize," express a hope for breaking down barriers of separation and alienation, and for creating space for Arab presence within Israeli society.

From a systemic perspective, Zehava's words suggest that the school is making efforts to cultivate a shared social foundation by fostering deep familiarity with the other group and encouraging intercultural and narrative-based collaboration. Zehava is acutely aware of the tension and sense of otherness felt by Arab teachers and stresses the importance of direct engagement with the challenge. In other words, she highlights the necessity of expressing feelings, thoughts, and beliefs, even in moments of tension and conflict, as a precondition for meaningful dialogue and reconciliation.

5.1.3. Request for system support

There must be intervention from the school leadership because it sets the tone and policy. How can we engage the Jewish staff in supporting Arab teachers? Sometimes we ourselves don't know what to do in moments of tension and conflict. There should be enrichment activities for the staff to promote shared living and civic integration, and efforts to diversify the teaching faculty. Without the proper tools, it's really hard to bring about change. (Shira, Jewish integration teacher)

I'm a Muslim Arab living in Israel, and I know I need to integrate with Jews. But I feel a bit of racism and prejudice at school. It's hard for me, and I'm not ashamed to say that the principal should help us. I hope she really sees me and cares about me, that she knows what's happening in the classroom and in the teachers' room. If we're meant to coexist peacefully in the same school, she must help us with conversations involving the whole staff and with emotional support. (Samira, Arab teacher)

Shira and Samira voice concerns about the absence of a safe space for personal or group dialogue, as well as the lack of intercultural tools and competencies needed to foster openness toward norms, perceptions, and beliefs that differ from their own. According to both, one way to promote more effective professional and social integration of Arab teachers in Hebrew schools is to call upon school leadership to increase its involvement within the school environment. The two teachers expect that this support would be expressed primarily through emotional support and responsiveness in complex situations involving conflict, dilemmas, uncertainty, or inappropriate behavior, such as expressions of racism, alienation, or resistance from Jewish teachers.

Samira identifies the principal as a figure in a position of power, someone who can mediate between groups, acknowledge diverse and complex perspectives, and create a sense of safety for Arab teachers within the school. Yet, from a critical standpoint, Samira's words, "I hope the principal really sees me and cares about me", convey dissatisfaction with the principal's current approach, and perhaps disappointment at the structural inequality between the social groups, which renders Arab teachers nearly invisible. In striving for the ideal that "we coexist peacefully in the same school," Samira highlights the importance of creating a supportive environment, one that she needs, through initiatives that encourage open dialogue with school leadership.

4. Discussion

Arab teachers face persistent challenges related to cultural and national identity, as well as issues of integration and acceptance within Jewish educational spaces. As part of their integration process, they must navigate a delicate balance between preserving their personal identity and conforming to the norms and expectations of the Jewish majority (Shwed et al., 2018; Gibson, 2022). Although professional frameworks emphasize cooperation and collaboration, national tensions often permeate the school environment, giving rise to dynamics of avoidance, social distancing, and difficulty in establishing trust. These tensions become even more acute during periods of political unrest or security crises, when the national divide becomes particularly salient and all teachers are compelled to maintain professional relationships under heightened pressure.

This study identified four central challenges in the integration process: visible difference, language gaps, socio-cultural knowledge disparities, and tensions within the teachers' lounge. Although both Jewish and Arab teachers reported experiences indicative of social inequality and asymmetric power dynamics, it is the minority group, Arab teachers, who consistently bear the burden of coping with alienation, racism, exclusion, and stereotypical perceptions.

For example, language gaps are not merely technical deficiencies in linguistic competence; they reflect deeper systemic power dynamics. The linguistic errors and accented speech of Arab teachers are frequently interpreted as a lack of professionalism, particularly in elementary schools, where accurate and fluent language use is considered a pedagogical imperative. From the perspective of conflict theory (Gramsci, 1971; 2004), the absence of adequate Hebrew-language training for Arab teachers in Hebrew-speaking academic institutions constitutes a structural barrier that entrenches the dominance of the majority and obstructs full professional integration.

From a critical standpoint, the preference for native Hebrew-speaking teachers can affect staff dynamics and subtly hinder the inclusion of Arab educators. Perceptions of Arab teachers' Hebrew proficiency may lead to both overt and covert workplace conflicts, particularly if Jewish teachers perceive a threat to their own status or qualifications. Previous studies have confirmed that Hebrew fluency is one of the most significant factors affecting access to higher education and the labor market. As such, language barriers are a major obstacle to meaningful integration in environments where Hebrew is the dominant linguistic and cultural code (Thahaokho et al., 2020; Haddad Haj-Yahya, 2021).

In addition, external appearance, particularly the hijab, functions as a highly visible marker of cultural and religious identity. For Muslims, the hijab symbolizes modesty and adherence to Islamic values; however, within the Jewish-Israeli context, it is frequently associated with Palestinian identity and, by extension, conflict (Siraj, 2011; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). When individuals identify strongly with an in-group, they often emphasize distinctions from perceived out-groups. Students may therefore view the hijab as a symbol of "the other," reinforcing a dichotomous "us versus them" mindset and the perception of superiority of the dominant group (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018). Jewish teachers' testimonies reveal the prevalence of such stereotypical views and illustrate how socialization at home and in the broader society shapes long-standing internalized prejudices. Dahan-Kalev (2018) further reinforces this point, linking visual markers such as traditional dress with intensified social tensions in multicultural educational settings.

The teachers' lounge, often idealized as a neutral and collegial space, instead emerges as a microcosm of broader societal tensions, especially for Arab women teachers. It becomes a space where exclusion, hypocrisy, and power asymmetries are experienced on a daily basis. The militaristic-political discourse often dominant in Israeli society infiltrates this space, marginalizing Arab teachers, who fear being perceived as threatening or disloyal. Despite being intended as a zone of collaboration and professional solidarity, the teachers' lounge in practice becomes a site of silent struggle for recognition, belonging, and self-expression, far removed from the ideal of inclusive and egalitarian school environments.

In response to these tensions, Arab teachers employ coping strategies that range between two extremes: repression, avoidance, and silence on one end; and direct confrontation on the other. Repression is a widely acknowledged psychological defense mechanism, allowing individuals to avoid direct conflict and preserve emotional stability when faced with cognitive dissonance or social hostility (Cramer, 2015). From a psychoanalytic perspective (Freud, 1977; Cohen, 2001), repression enables Arab teachers to navigate a deeply conflicted educational space without constant exposure to antagonism. In contexts marked by ethnic, political, and religious polarization, such defensive mechanisms may seem not only understandable but necessary.

Nevertheless, from a critical educational standpoint, the continued reliance on repression and avoidance is unsustainable. These strategies reinforce the status quo, stifle authentic dialogue, and ultimately exacerbate feelings of isolation and professional exhaustion among Arab teachers. Repression restricts the potential for systemic transformation by limiting opportunities for discourse around justice, inclusion, and equity. The absence of safe and inclusive spaces for Arab teachers to voice their concerns perpetuates existing power hierarchies and reinforces institutional silence. As demonstrated in prior research (Hisherik et al., 2025), comprehensive professional training focused on intercultural competence and shared dialogue is essential for reducing tensions and fostering successful integration.

The broader national conflict, and the emotions of anger, trauma, and resentment that accompany it, make it exceedingly difficult for Arab teachers to express their perspectives or receive recognition for the complex identities they embody. Their silence is symptomatic of a deeper structural imbalance, an education system that claims to embrace multicultural values while often falling short of actual implementation. In this context, repression is not only a personal coping strategy but also a reflection of institutional failure. The lack of open, dialogical environments leaves Arab teachers suspended between the pressure to

assimilate and the need to preserve their cultural integrity. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle: the more teachers suppress their voices, the less likely it becomes that real transformation can occur.

In contrast, acts of direct confrontation, though emotionally and professionally risky, represent critical interventions that challenge prevailing norms and open space for structural change. Teachers who share their personal narratives, challenge dominant discourses, or initiate intercultural projects signal a shift from symbolic inclusion to substantive engagement. These acts of resistance disrupt hegemonic educational norms and carve out space for alternative voices.

Given this reality, the responsibility of school leadership becomes paramount. Educational leaders must recognize that interactions with Arab teachers unfold within a fraught context shaped by national, religious, and political tensions. This recognition requires a deliberate commitment to providing tools and training for all staff, helping them develop empathy, cultural sensitivity, and openness to different perspectives. Such efforts can break down stereotypes, humanize the “other,” and foster a more inclusive educational climate.

A widely noted critique of minority teacher integration highlights the danger of symbolic inclusion, where minority educators are present, yet excluded from decision-making, curricular influence, or professional validation (Santoro, 2013; Almansori & Paskaran, 2025). This study lends partial support to that critique. Arab teachers frequently report exclusion from key school activities such as national ceremonies, marginalization due to language and cultural differences, and constant pressure to “prove themselves” as equals. These experiences underscore that integration remains largely rhetorical if not accompanied by institutional transformation and shared authority.

At the same time, the findings reveal that Arab teachers are not passive actors. Many take on leadership roles, initiate educational projects, and actively shape intercultural dialogue within their schools. These efforts reflect not only resilience but a desire to be seen as agents of pedagogical and social change, rather than merely representatives of cultural diversity. The tension between symbolic and substantive inclusion thus remains a central issue, and one that requires targeted institutional responses.

5. Conclusion

This study has underscored the complex and multifaceted challenges encountered by Arab teachers working within Hebrew-speaking schools. The findings reveal that integration is not merely a logistical or procedural matter but a deeply emotional, cultural, and political process. Arab teachers frequently confront systemic barriers such as linguistic exclusion, stereotypical perceptions, marginalization from school discourse, and the psychological toll of navigating national and religious tensions. While these challenges often lead to coping strategies characterized by silence and repression, they also give rise to acts of agency, leadership, and resilience among Arab educators.

The evidence presented highlights that current integration efforts often fall short of achieving genuine inclusivity. Many Arab teachers remain symbolically included yet excluded from meaningful participation in professional dialogue, pedagogical decision-making, and institutional leadership. Despite these limitations, numerous teachers have taken proactive steps to assert their presence, articulate their narratives, and lead educational initiatives, demonstrating a clear commitment to their pedagogical and social roles.

In light of these findings, there is a critical need to re-evaluate the forms of support available to Arab teachers within the Israeli education system. A shift toward a holistic and long-term integration strategy is essential. This includes not only emotional and professional support for Arab teachers but also a systemic transformation of school environments, leadership practices, and teacher training programs. Professional development must include comprehensive training in multicultural competence, anti-racism, and intercultural communication for all staff members. School leaders, in particular, must view the integration of Arab teachers as a core ethical and educational mission and take responsibility for cultivating a school climate rooted in empathy, respect, and openness to diversity.

Moreover, mentorship frameworks should be established to offer continuous guidance to Arab teachers, linguistically, emotionally, and professionally, throughout their integration journey. Teacher education programs for Arab educators must also be revised to include practical training in Hebrew-speaking environments and deeper engagement with Jewish-national curricular content, ensuring their preparedness for work in Jewish-majority schools. In parallel, promoting joint initiatives between Arab and Jewish schools can foster mutual understanding, reduce tensions, and build bridges across identity groups.

Ultimately, the findings of this study point to a pressing need for the Israeli education system to move beyond symbolic rhetoric and toward substantive practices of inclusion. This entails embedding structural changes that recognize and support the complex identities of Arab teachers, empower their professional roles, and foster equitable, democratic, and culturally responsive educational spaces. Only through such comprehensive and sustained efforts can integration policies fulfill their transformative potential and contribute meaningfully to a shared, inclusive future in education.

Acknowledgement Statement: The authors would like to thank to all participants and the reviewers for providing comments in helping this manuscript to completion.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Authors' contribution statements: D.E.L. and A.G. jointly designed and conducted the research. Both authors collaborated equally in performing the experiment, writing all sections of the manuscript, and supervising the project throughout its development.

Funding statements: As there was no external funding received for this research, the study was conducted without financial support from any funding agency or organization.

Data availability statement: The research data consist of interview transcripts collected from study participants. These transcripts are securely stored by the authors in accordance with ethical guidelines and participant confidentiality. Data sharing may be considered upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval and data protection considerations.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect JICC's or editors' official policy or position. All liability for harm done to individuals or property as a result of any ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content is expressly disclaimed.

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