ACADEMIC STUDIES ARE AN OBSTACLE: THE DIFFERENCES IN ARAB AND JEWISH STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the impact of the difficulties encountered by Arab students in Hebrew academia in Israel on their academic achievement. The study was conducted on undergraduate students in a education college in northern Israel. The academic achievements of the Arab students were compared to those of the Jewish students, based on an analysis of data obtained from the college administration.

The findings demonstrated a gap in achievement between Arab and Jewish students. The gap was approximately 10% to the detriment of the Arab students in their first year of study, but decreased from year to year. This gap was found to stem primarily from language difficulties.

In order to help the Arab students and create a comfortable, supporting atmosphere for them at the college, I recommend that they be allowed to study courses in their own language, particularly in the first year.

INTRODUCTION

One of the issues facing humanity in recent years is the issues of minorities in a nation state, and their ability to integrate into society in a suitable and appropriate way for their own benefit and for society as a whole. Israel, which is a multicultural country, faces this issue in full force, where the most severe problem in this context is the relationship between Jews and Arabs, and the integration of Arabs into society in light of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One of most symbolic aspects of this issue is academia-due to the frequent contact taking place between Jewish and Arab students on campus, and the fact that the future elites from both sides, who are politically conscious, meet in this location.

A number of studies in recent years have focused on the relationships between Jewish and Arab students on campus, as well as the integration of Arab students in this "bastion" of democracy. Their findings point to partial integration, but often indicate a complete lack of integration or even a feeling of alienation towards the institution in which they learn (Halabi, 2016; Lev Ari & Mula, 2016).

In the present study I examined a new issue, which to the best of my knowledge has yet to be studied in Israel: the academic achievements of Arab students in light of the abovementioned difficulties they face in academia, particularly in their first year. In this study I examine the academic achievements of Arab students, in a college in northern Israel, in their first year, in comparison to their second and third year, as well as comparing the achievements of Arab students with those of Jewish students. I performed this research in light of similar studies conducted around the world; I analyzed the data in the context of multicultural education theory.

Difficulties in the transition to university studies

The difficulties students experience in the transition from high school to university, and their integration during their first year on campus, have been studied extensively (Jackson & Swan, 1991; Allen et al., 1991). The vast majority of studies have concluded that it is more difficult for students from other cultures to integrate than for those belonging to the dominant culture in the country, who are the majority group. Students from cultural or racial minority groups encounter greater physical and mental stress situations than those from the majority group (Allen, 1985; Smith et al., 2007). A comprehensive study by Allen et al. (2018), which examined the situation of African-American students in the USA over the last 40 years, found that little had changed from the situation described above in older studies.

Many studies have focused on the integration of African-American students at White universities. The vast majority of studies found that African-American students have much more difficulty studying and integrating socially than White students (Allen et al., 1999; Ogbu, 2003; Allen et al. 2018). They also found that the academic achievements of African-American students studying at White universities are lower than those of White students at the same universities (Allen et al., 1991). Furthermore, Black students studying at Black universities had higher achievements than those studying at White universities (Fleming, 1984; Fries & Turner, 2002).

This probably stems from the warm, accepting atmosphere that surrounds them. It was also found that African-American students studying at Black universities had a positive self-image, were proud of their race, and were highly motivated, compared to their compatriots studying at White universities who felt they were marginalized, and even experienced routine racism on campus (Allen et al., 1991; Solorzano et al., 2000; Flowers, 2003; Stanley, 2006)

Head (1989), in a study on 1439 public universities, found that Black students in their first year had lower achievements than White students at the same universities. Another study on 18 academic institutions in the USA, which examined learning ability, achievements prior to academia, and social variables, found that White students had higher achievements than Black students in critical thinking, mathematics, and reading and writing skills, in the first three years of study. Furthermore, there was no significant change over time in the gap in achievement between the groups (Flowers & Pascarella, 2003).

One reason proposed for the low achievements of Black students compared to White students is the Black students' feeling that their learning environment and campus are not friendly, and are even hostile towards them. They feel unwanted and even discriminated against (Lewis et al., 2000). Similarly, Flowers (2003) found that the learning environment has a great impact: when the university is more comfortable and inviting, African-American students are more involved in their faculty and interact more with their fellow students and with the lecturers and administration, leading to higher motivation and greater academic achievement.

Jackson and Flowers (2003) found that four conditions can ease the acceptance and integration of African-American students in White academic institutions: 1) an atmosphere of fairness on campus; 2) a framework that guides and supports African-American students; 3) administrative encouragement of African-American students to enable them to succeed; and 4) provision of better conditions to those who are employed to look after matters related to African-American students.

Studies have also found that the presence of lecturers from the minority group helps students from the minority group in academia. The presence of Black lecturers and lecturers from other minority groups on the campuses of White universities creates an atmosphere that is tolerant and accepting of students from minority groups, and even encourages the aspirations and success of these students (Edwards & Ross, 2017). A study conducted in the USA found a relationship between the representation of Black lecturers at White universities

and the percentage of Black students enrolling at those universities, and even the level of perseverance and success of those students (Darden et al., 1998). A study by Milner (2006) showed that Black students integrate better and are more successful when they have Black teachers. This is because the teachers understand the students and their culture, and serve as a model and example for their success.

Education for multiculturalism

The mutual, peaceful coexistence of culturally and ethnically different groups is a major challenge for modern society. According to Berry (1998) we must recognize the differences between such groups on a psychological level as well as recognizing their historical and cultural differences in our efforts to build a multicultural society, particularly since cultural diversity-the presence of groups differing in ethnicity, race and culture—is a common feature of most countries and societies today.

Cultural diversity requires a multicultural approach to education. This approach seeks to correct imbalances in the education system and its programs with the aim of affording each student an equal opportunity while recognizing the historical and cultural differences among students (Banks, 1995). This approach aims to instill in students a humane and respectful approach towards others, and dissuade them from racism, chauvinism, prejudice, and discrimination (Ladson-Billing, 2004).

Multiculturalism in higher education became an important issue and research focus in the USA during the 1980s. The body of research that has developed since then has shown that multicultural education in colleges and universities usually empowers students from minority groups and strengthens their identity. When learning in a multicultural environment, students tend to feel more at ease and are more likely to be involved in activities on campus; this raises the chances that they will become involved in pushing for social change (Dahms, 1994; Milem, 2001).

A culturally sensitive faculty, comprising representatives of the different cultures in society, is a key factor in the successful education of students for multiculturalism. Such diverse faculty can teach students multiculturalism by providing them with myriad cultural perspectives reflecting the reality of society, and integrating knowledge and experience from the geographical and social periphery as well as from the inner city, the stronghold of the White middle class (Jenks et al., 2001; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). Students from minority groups must also be assisted through dedicated programs that are run by the academic faculty and administrative staff.

The provision of equal opportunity to minority groups through multicultural education is achieved, among other ways, through consideration of language issues (Banks, 1995). An education institution that prides itself in being multicultural must consider both the language and culture of minority groups, since these are the most important aspects of the student's academic experience (Ovando & Combs, 2018). In this context, bilingualism has the power to overcome tensions arising from social and cultural differences in the education system (Slavin & Cooper, 1999), as well as encouraging equal opportunities for academic achievement, the development of a favorable attitude towards self and others, and a multicultural personality (Skutnabb-Kangas & Garcia, 1995). The introduction of minority group languages and bilingual programs into the educational environment generates a climate in which students from minority groups can reestablish their own identity and build healthy relationships with students from the majority group (Valdes, 1997).

The impact of the school's social climate on students' academic achievement and integration has been studied extensively at both the college and K-12 levels (Rogoff, 1990; Berndt & Keefe, 1992). The students' sense of belonging was determined to have a great

impact on their chances of success at each educational level (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1993). Indeed, Goodenow (1993) found that the students' treatment by individuals, and by their institution as a whole, was the main determinant of their sense of belonging and acceptance. This sense of belonging to the educational institution was found to increase the students' motivation, leading them to put more effort into their studies, resulting in improved academic achievement. This was particularly important for students living in the social and geographical periphery, such as those from immigrant groups.

These studies support the fundamental arguments of multicultural theory. According to Berry (1998) and Kymlicka (1995, 1997), when we enable minority groups to maintain and strengthen their identity and language their self-confidence increases, they find it easier to integrate into society, and they develop a greater sense of belonging to their country of residence. These studies also emphasize the effectiveness of bilingual programs in education, and are in line with theories focusing on the ability to recognize and respect others, thus improving self-respect and self-image. Such abilities are critical for generating a sense of belonging and improving achievement and integration.

Arab students in Hebrew academia

According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) (2022), Israel's Palestinian Arab population currently numbers 1,995,000 people, constituting approximately 20% of the total population. With respect to the Israel's Palestinian-Arab minority, most studies conducted to date have concluded that the Arabs cannot enjoy equal citizenship in Israel, which is defined a Jewish state, and that their national identity has attracted systematic discrimination and exclusion on the part of the establishment (Ghanem & Khatib, 2017; Manaa', 2017).

The state strives to control Palestinians in any way it can by expropriating their land and removing their livelihoods, thus creating economic dependence, and by dividing the Palestinian population into its constituent groups—Muslims, Christians, and Druze (Abu-Saad, 2004). This policy, which was implied since the establishment of the state, and later clearly identified through research and investigation, was recently institutionalized through the nation-state law that explicitly reveals the official policy of Arab exclusion (Ghanem & Mustafa, 2018).

Israel's education system serves as a prime example of the government's "divide and rule" policy for the Palestinian minority. Separate schools were instituted for Arabs, but these schools are under direct government control. Furthermore, in line with the general approach of the government towards the Arab population, the Arab education system has suffered discrimination regarding infrastructure quality, budget distribution and curriculum development (Abu-Saad, 2004; Al-Haj, 1996).

As well as discriminating against Arab schools with respect to their material needs, the Ministry of Education imposes its agenda through educational goals and content in the context of identity construction. The government strives to produce students who are loyal and obedient to the Jewish state and identify with its goals, and are alienated from their Palestinian-Arab identity (Abu-Saad, 2004, 2006; Al-Haj, 1996).

The discrimination experienced by Arab students in Israel's public school system continues when they enter institutions of higher education. Their only option is to learn at a Hebrew university because there are no Arab universities in Israel, despite an ongoing request over the years by the Arab leadership to approve such a university (Abu- Saad, 2006). Arab students experience difficulties on Israeli-Jewish campuses due to the language barrier and campus structure, resulting in a disproportionately low Arab-to-Jewish student ratio in academia, particular in graduate degrees. In the 2019–2020 academic year Arab students

comprised 19.2% of students enrolled in undergraduate degrees, 14.6% in Master's degrees, and 7.2% in PhD programs. (CBS, 2020). However, the percentage of Arab lecturers is very low in comparison to the percentage of Arab students; only 4–5% of lecturers are Arab, and only 2.5% of senior academic faculty members are Arab (Ilan, 2021). These difficulties lead some Arabs to study outside the country, particularly in universities in the Palestinian Authority and Jordan (Shalev, 2022).

Studies on Arab students and their integration in Hebrew academia report on difficulties related to the uncomfortable, uninviting atmosphere that generates hostility. A study by Lev Ari and Mula (2016) on Arab and Jewish students in their first year at four colleges found that Arab students experience many more difficulties than Jewish students with respect to learning and social interaction. Interactions between the two sides are almost non-existent, despite the desire of the Arab students for recognition and familiarity.

In a previous study on the integration of Israeli-Arab students in Hebrew academia (Halabi, 2016) I found that students, particularly in their first year, encounter many difficulties in their studies and in the campus space. The greatest difficulty in the first year of study is language, which according to the students leads to them feeling lost and may result in low achievements. Another difficulty is the new learning methods they did not experience before they came to the university. They also suffer from cold and sometimes even hostile treatment by both the Jewish students and the administration, leading them to feel alienated and foreign.

In another study on Master's students at a teachers' college (Halabi, 2018) I found a marked difference with respect to the atmosphere at the college. The students reported a comfortable, accepting social environment and a good relationships with both their fellow students and the lecturers. In contrast, I found no difference with respect to their ability to speak and express themselves, in particular with respect to issues of politics and identity. Although this study focused on graduate students, students still reported difficulties participating in classes and expressing themselves because of language difficulties and the feeling of being in a minority.

In a further study at the same college, and with the same student population (Halabi, 2022) I examined the effect of two courses taught in Arabic to Arabic students. I observed a clear impact of language: these courses strengthened the students' confidence and identity on one hand, and their feeling of belonging to the college and connecting to their fellow Jews students and lecturers on the other hand. Students reported that learning in their mother tongue released them and they felt free; they spoke about a family atmosphere, release and freedom, and the Jewish other who does not enable them full expression and sometimes even castrates them. They also reported increased participation in their regular classes in Hebrew, and improved overall learning achievements.

Studies conducted on the status of the Arabic language in academia have corroborated and supported my findings about the difficulties faced by Arab students due to the language barrier. The Arabic language has no special status in academia in Israel. In fact, a recent report by the Van Leer Institute in cooperation with the Sikkuy Association and the Dirasat Center on the obstacles faced by Arab students in academia in Israel demonstrated that Hebrew is the dominant language in academia, while Arabic has been completely marginalized, being almost completely absent and lacking any support for promoting its presence in this sphere (Abu Raas and Ma'ayan, 2014).

Similarly, Amara et al. (2016), who conducted the first major study on the status of Arabic in academia in Israel, found that Arab students felt alienated on campus because of the absence of Arabic as an academic language. Indeed, Hebrew is the language of instruction of the Arabic language. The researchers concluded that promoting Arabic on campus will benefit Arab students and improve their sense of belonging, since the enhanced status of the

language will improve attitudes towards those who speak it. Thus, the Arab students will become better integrated in academia and in Israeli society in general.

All of the studies that I have presented until now, on Arab students in Israeli academia, at both universities and colleges, demonstrated difficulties in integration, particularly in the first year. These difficulties, according to the students interviewed, have a negative impact on academic achievement, particularly in the first year. Therefore, in the present study I examine the extent of the impact of the difficulties encountered by Arab students on their academic achievement. My research focused on a teachers college in northern Israel. To the best of my knowledge, such a study has not been conducted previously in Israel.

METHODOLOGY

The data I present here were obtained from the information system of Oranim College in northern Israel. They include the average grades of both Arab and Jewish students in the different disciplines in which they studied for an undergraduate degree at the college. The students' average grades were obtained for the first, second and third years of study. The Arab students do not study in all of the disciplines in which the Jewish students study; therefore, I calculated the average grade of all Arab students, and compared it to the average grade of the Jewish students in those disciplines in which only Jewish students study.

For technical reasons and due to college policy, I was given the average grades without standard deviations and without the students' personal details such as socioeconomic background, etc. During those years, there were 404 Arab students and 1053 Jewish students in the undergraduate degree program. In addition to grades, I will also present the ages of the Arab and Jewish students. Similarly, I will present the average matriculation grades of both the Jewish and the Arab students. I will use these two background variables to analyze the students' academic achievements during 2020-2022.

Background variables

Table 1							
AGE AT COMPLETION OF ACADEMIC STUDY AND HIGH SCHOOL MATRICULATION GRADE OF JEWS AND ARABS, BY YEAR OF COMPLETION OF ACADEMIC STUDY							
	Jews				**Arabs**		
	2020	**2021**	**2022**	**Average**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**Average**
Average age	27.98	27.1	26	27.06	25.23	24.96	23.8	24.66
Average matriculation grade	94.29	95.4	95.3	95.04	96.46	96.3	98.5	97.09

The average matriculation grade of the Arab students who have studied at Oranim College during 2020–2022 is slightly higher than the average matriculation grade of the Jewish students who have studied at the college during the same period (Table 1). Furthermore, the average age of the Jewish students studying at the college during those years was two and half years more than the average age of the Arab students. This difference exactly reflects the issue of military service, since the Jewish students are required to enlist in the army (women for two years and men for three years), while the Arab students are exempt from this service. Thus, the Arab students begin studying at the college very soon after completing their high school studies, around the age of 20, while the Jewish students do so after their military service, around the age of 24.

RESULTS

Table 2 OVERALL AVERAGE GRADES IN EACH YEAR OF STUDY, BY NATIONALITY			
	Year of study		
Nationality	**First**	**Second**	**Third**
Jews	91.8	93.14	94.07
Arabs	81.35	86.96	89.81

There is a clear gap in the average grades of Jewish and Arab students (Table 2), where those of Jewish students are consistently higher. Moreover, the greatest gap, of >10%, exists during the first year of study, decreasing to <7% in the second year and 4% in the third year.

Table 3 AVERAGE GRADES IN THE DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES DURING EACH YEAR OF STUDY, BY NATIONALITY				
		Year of study		
Discipline	**Nationality**	**First**	**Second**	**Third**
English	Jewish	81.73	80.41	84.73
	Arab	79.1	80.06	83.9
Art	Jewish	89.15	90.57	91.04
	Arab	87.63	90.2	90.59
Mathematics and natural sciences	Jewish	91.52	92.42	95.15
	Arab	89.69	90.84	93.69

When we isolate the issue of language, and compare the grades of Jewish and Arab students in subjects in which language does not play a central role, we obtain a completely different picture of their academic achievement (Table 3). In English, art, and mathematics and natural sciences there is a small difference to the benefit of the Jewish students in the first year, but in the second and third years this difference disappears completely.

Table 4 AVERAGE GRADES IN DISCIPLINES AND PROGRAMS IN EACH YEAR OF STUDY IN THE ARAB STUDENT POPULATION				
		Year of study		
Discipline	**Program**	**First**	**Second**	**Third**
Special education and Arabic	Special education and a second major for elementary school	84.86	84.97	85.48
	Special education for ages 6-12 and second major for secondary school	93.88	94.4	93.36
Arabic and civics	Secondary school 7th-10th grade	87.83	88.96	90.59

The average grades of Arab students studying the Arabic language and Arabic study programs (Table 4) demonstrate that when studies are conducted in the Arabic language, the mother tongue of the Arab students, there is almost no difference in their grades from the first year to the second and third years.

DISCUSSION

Using quantitative data, the present study verifies findings from previous studies on Arab students studying in Hebrew academia in Israel, in which Arab students claimed that their achievements were negatively impacted and were lower than their potential, particularly during the first year, due to the difficulties they encounter in their studies (Halabi, 2016, 2018, 2022). Indeed, the consistently higher matriculation grades of Arab students studying at the college during 2020-2022 show that the gap in academic achievement between Jewish and Arab students is not related to the abilities of the Arab students, but rather to the environmental conditions, which depend on the college and its learning structure, and the obstacles encountered by Arab students in Hebrew academia. However, the Arab students manage to overcome these obstacles from year to year, and we can safely assume that for those who continue to a Master's degree, these obstacles will shrink further to the point of equality.

The findings from this study are in line with studies conducted in the USA with respect to African-American students at White universities, which found that the achievements of African-American students were lower than those of white students during their first three years of study towards their undergraduate degree (Allen et al., 1991; Allen et al., 2018; Fries & Turner, 2002). Studies that examined the reasons for the lower grades of African-American students in the USA found that the foreign, alienating, and even hostile learning environment led to psychological and mental stress, resulting in a lack of confidence and eventually, low academic achievement (Ancis et al., 2000; Lewis et al., 2000; Flowers, 2003).

In studies conducted in Israel on Arab students, the learning environment was reported by the students as one of the obstacles, together with new learning methods that were different from those practiced in Arab schools, but the according to the students, the greatest obstacle was language (Amara et al., 2016; Halabi, 2016, 2022). This was clearly proven in the present study, which demonstrated that the gap in average grade between Jewish and Arab students decreased from >10% in the first year to 4% in the third year, but with respect to subjects in which language does not play a central role, the gap was initially only 2% and almost disappeared by the second and third years. Furthermore, when Arab students studied in Arabic, there were no differences in their grades between the three years of study.

It seems reasonable and logical that in the USA, all students share the same language, English, while in Israel there are different languages, and although Arab children study Hebrew in school they do not have a sufficient command of the language before entering academia. Another factor that may contribute to the difficulties of the Arab students, and which is usually not reported in research, is the age issue. The Arab students are approximately two and half years younger than the Jewish students; the entrance of Arab students to academia at an earlier age further exacerbates the difficulties, particularly with respect to language, which is the main obstacle. We can assume that if the Arab students had already integrated into Israeli society prior to their studies they would gain confidence and improve their Hebrew language skills. This could be examined by conducting a similar study on Master's students.

The multicultural education approach offers a suitable solution for this issue and for the difficulties faced by students from minority groups. Studies have shown that multicultural education at colleges and universities creates a comfortable atmosphere for students from minority groups, empowers them, and encourages them to be involved in campus life (Dahms, 1994; Milem, 2001). One significant factor in this context is cultural diversity and the presence of lecturers from minority groups. These lecturers serve as an example and

model for students from the same group and boost their self-confidence (Edwards & Ross, 2017; Allen, 1987; Jenks et al., 2001).

Likewise, the language issue can be resolved through implementation of multicultural education. In this respect, many studies have proven that implementing bilingual education reduces stress and mental and psychological difficulties among students from minority groups, generates a pleasant atmosphere, boosts their self-confidence and strengthens their identity, and leads to improved academic achievement (Berndt & Keefe, 1992; Goodenow, 1993; Valdes, 1997).

The multicultural education approach is not practiced in Israel, and it is doubtful whether it will be adopted in the near future, due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the unequal treatment of Palestinian citizens. Similarly, employment of more Palestinian Arab lecturers requires a decision by the establishment and investment of resources and its adoption will surely take time. However, strengthening the Arabic language by introducing courses in Arabic for Arab students is easy to implement and requires no financial investment.

A very successful trial-introduction of two courses in Arabic to the Master's degree program-was conducted at the college where the present study was carried out. This trial was considered a great success, improving the Arab students' wellbeing on campus and generating a sense of belonging to the college (Halabi, 2022). Following the present study, and based on Halabi (2022), my recommendation to the college and to academia in Israel in general is to introduce classes in the Arabic language for Arab students, particularly during the first year of their undergraduate studies. During this year, they are most in need of an accepting, supportive atmosphere; one or two courses in Arabic could make a great difference with negligible financial investment.

Despite the unequivocal findings arising from this study, further studies at other colleges and universities are required, particularly studies that focus on graduate students, to examine whether the differences in academic achievement disappear or at least decrease, once the language issue has been resolved, even if only partially, and the Arab students have already gained experience in Hebrew academia and are more confident.

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