Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development 2024, 8(16), 9546.
https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd9546

Article

Learning together and building bridges: Shared education as a way to promote pluralism in a divided society

Samar Haj Yahya, Athar Haj Yahya*

Arab Academic Institute of Education, Beit Berl College, Kfar Saba 4490500, Israel
*** Corresponding author:** Athar Haj Yahya, atharhaj@hotmail.com

CITATION

Haj Yahya S, Haj Yahya A. (2024). Learning together and building bridges: Shared education as a way to promote pluralism in a divided society. Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development. 8(16): 9546.
https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd9546

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 10 October 2024
Accepted: 2 December 2024
Available online: 25 December 2024

Abstract: Shared education has the potential to foster pluralistic values and improve relations between individuals from diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of how shared learning experiences can promote pluralism and social equality by examining the pedagogical factors that influence their success. This study focuses on a shared English learning model implemented with 8th-grade Arab and Jewish students in homogenous Israeli cities. This qualitative study, involving observations, interviews, focus groups, and transcript analysis, engaged 42 students, two teachers, and two administrators. The findings suggest that shared education has positive social implications. It facilitated interaction between Arab and Jewish students and challenged negative stereotypes. Notably, the Jewish students' limited Arabic language proficiency led to complex interactions, stimulating critical thinking about linguistic inequality and increasing motivation to learn Arabic. While shared education improved intergroup relations, it also encountered logistical challenges that necessitated institutional support to optimize its effectiveness.

Keywords: shared education; Israeli society; Arab-Jewish relations; social interaction; meeting of languages; collaborative pedagogy

1. Literature review

1.1. Shared education

Shared Education is an educational model to promote partnerships between schools of different educational streams, located in the same geographical area, with the aim of improving educational achievements while at the same time improving relations between the different groups. This model was developed in Northern Ireland against the background of the Catholic-Protestant conflict (Gallagher, 2016).

Shared activities between two groups that are in conflict are grounded in Allport's (1954) "contact theory", which claims that in order to relieve tension between groups in conflict, interaction must be created between the group members. This theory stems from the assumption that negative relations between groups exist mainly due to a lack of knowledge, and if people got to know each other, they would be able to discover shared identities. Effective contact, according to this theory, should exist under four conditions: Equal status of participants; common goals; institutional support; and development of personal relationships.

It was found that shared study sessions caused a positive change in attitudes towards the other group, an increase in establishing relationships with members of the other group, as well as using each other's pedagogical resources (Yitzhaki et al., 2020). Additionally, shared study of two groups speaking different languages could contribute to raising awareness of the issue of multilingualism, as it made it possible

to feel the linguistic diversity, reduce linguistic racism, and increase motivation to learn minority languages (Or, 2018). It was also found that such meetings had a positive effect on the perceptions of teachers and students towards social issues of power and discrimination, in particular a change in the learning experience of students from disadvantaged groups who speak minority languages, which are usually not recognized. These studies validated their identity, thus benefiting them cognitively (Little et al., 2014; Or, 2018).

Pedagogically, shared education is often based on shared tasks that encourage social interaction between the partners (Cohen-Avron, 2020). Cooperation in the shared education model is constantly tested in light of difficulties and tensions arising during the teaching-learning process; therefore, tolerance, flexibility, mutual concession, and the development of methods for solving dilemmas are required (Villa, 2008). Teaching in this model is complex to implement, requiring the co-teachers to formulate a work plan and choose the study subjects in equal cooperation (Friend, 2008). Also, relationships of trust and mutual appreciation (personal and professional) are required between the leaders of the process and the presence of each of the teachers in front of the students (McDuffie, 2009).

1.2. The Irish shared education model

The Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland was characterized by severe violence and continued until 1998, when the "Good Friday Agreement" was signed (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017). Many believed that the segregation between the groups in the education system contributed to the violence, and therefore attempts were made to bridge the two communities through the implementation of a variety of educational interventions, such as the development of shared books and curricula, the same budgeting for Catholic and Protestant schools, and the development of integrated schools. The educational programs had limited impact because they were not based on direct contact between the communities, and the integrated schools did not expand because most students preferred to study in schools in their community (Hughes and Loader, 2017).

The failure of previous strategies brought about the development of the shared education model. This model, initiated in 2007, emphasizes partnerships between schools while maintaining the self-identity of each one and is based on four stages: Establishing a partnership, creating connections, sharing classes, and promoting economic, educational, and social results (Hughes and Loader, 2021). In less than a decade, the responsibility for co-education in Northern Ireland was nationalized, and in March 2016, the legislative authority passed the "Co-Education Act", guaranteeing that co-education would be encouraged and supported as an inseparable part of the education system. Today, co-education in Northern Ireland is integrated into the curriculum according to a fixed schedule (Gallagher, 2016; Payes, 2022).

Studies examining the Irish case showed that the joint education model had a positive effect on relationships, a positive change in attitudes towards the other group, and a reduction of anxiety (Hughes and Loader, 2017). Shared education also had a positive pedagogical effect. Researchers found that the test results of the co-curricular programs were better, despite them being short-term. The program's success was

related to institutional, legal support, and the end of the conflict. but also for the empowerment of the teachers, the commitment to work, and the professional and research support (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017; Gallagher, 2016; Hughes and Loader, 2017). The main challenges initially facing implementation of the program were logistic, such as transportation, building a common timetable, and budgets (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017).

1.3. Shared education in Israel

Israeli society is a deeply divided society; the relationship between the different communities is characterized by inequality, alienation, a lack of dialogue, and mutual repudiation (Samuha, 2010). There is also a separation between the different communities in different areas of life, such as in the education system and in residential areas (Shipman, 2016). The rift and separation are especially noticeable in the relationship between the Jewish majority group and the Palestinian-Arab minority (hereafter "Jewish" and "Arab"), which are 20% of Israeli society, and this in light of the long-standing national conflict (Abu-Baker and Yahya, 2023; Majadly and Yahya, 2024). The Arabs went through a historical process of alienation beginning with the War of Independence in 1948, during which approximately 450 Palestinian settlements were destroyed and half the Palestinian people became refugees. After the establishment of the State, Arabs became a minority, and their national struggle with State institutions developed against the background of land expropriation and social, political, economic, and educational inequality leading to the deterioration of relations between Arabs and Jews (Amara and Schnell, 2004; Karamsky and Mendel, 2022).

The inequality and the struggle for power relations between the two communities are also present in the language: Hebrew is the dominant language in the linguistic landscape and in public institutions. This dominance is reflected in the relegation of Arabic to the sidelines (Amara, 2018). The policy of suppressing Arabic in Israel took on a constitutional character a few years ago with the enactment of the "Nationality Law" (2018), which changed the status of Arabic from an official language to a language with a special status and indicated that Hebrew was the only official language in the country (Knesset website, 2018). In Israel, asymmetry and inequality are evident in the teaching of Arabic and Hebrew: For Arabs, mastery of Hebrew is seen as a condition for social mobility, while for Jews, Arabic is seen as a non-prestigious language, and therefore motivation to learn it is low (Or, 2022; Or and Shohami, 2016).

Following the separation between both Jewish and Arab educational systems in Israel, the contact between Jewish and Arab students is scant (Or and Shohami, 2016). Sometimes there are organized meetings between Jewish and Arab students through the education system or as part of informal social programs (Maoz, 2011). Attempts at shared study in Israel began in 2012 at the initiative of the Educational Technology Center (ETC) and inspired by the Northern Ireland shared education model with the aim of promoting partnerships between Arab and Jewish schools. As part of the program, pairs of schools hold shared classes in various fields of knowledge. The underlying premise of shared learning in Israel was that the shared work between the staff of the two schools would provide educational advantages to the learners, promote efficient use of resources, and promote social goals of equal opportunities and equality

between identities, respect for diversity, and partnership (Joint Learning Circles website, ETC). It should be noted that the shared education model has not yet received institutional support and has not been integrated into the formal curricula (Karamsky and Yitzhaki, 2018; Payes, 2018).

Payes (2018) examined the effect of the Shared Education program in Ramla on Jewish-Arab relations and found that although the program operated under conditions of unequal status, it could be argued that, similar to Northern Ireland, the adoption of the shared education approach created better conditions for effective intergroup contact. The study by Yitzhaki et al. (2020), following a series of meetings as part of a joint English study program in a mixed city, showed that such meetings have multilingual potential, inviting rich interaction between three languages despite the differences in their use and despite the dominance of Hebrew. At the same time, Peled and Rouhana (2004) maintained that in these types of meetings, political and social tensions were ignored and there was a lack of reference to the historical background of the conflict; therefore, their impact was limited to the short term. The contact created a positive feeling, but this disappeared over time in the face of the difficult political reality. Halavi (2000) even showed that in many cases stereotypes and prejudices were strengthened after the intergroup encounter.

2. This study

One of the educational initiatives taking place on behalf of the Headquarters for Civic Education and Shared Life and the Center for Educational Technology was the shared study of English, considered a "neutral" subject. The assumption was that the use of English could neutralize the hierarchy and the asymmetry between Arabic and Hebrew, despite gaps in English language skills between Arab and Jewish learners. In addition, the study of English gained special importance in light of the fact that all Israeli students, Jews and Arabs, are required to develop a sufficient level of literacy in English in order to integrate into the global world and the higher education system.

Previous researches have explored shared English learning among Arab and Jewish sixth-graders in mixed cities (Payes, 2018; Yitzhaki et al., 2020), but studies examining older students in homogenous cities have been scarce. To address this gap, the present study investigates a shared English program for eighth-grade students from neighboring, homogenous cities. Unlike earlier research that focused on younger learners who exhibited limited conversational skills in English, this study posits that older students are more equipped to engage in meaningful English discourse. By selecting participants from homogenous cities, this research aims to compare the effectiveness of shared learning programs across different demographic contexts and provide a more comprehensive understanding of this educational approach among Arab and Jewish students who do not come into daily contact with the other's language and culture. Based on the literature review and against the background of the unique reality in which English learning sessions took place together, two main research questions arose:

1) What social and sociolinguistic goals were realized in the shared English education program for Arabs and Jews?

2) Which pedagogical features in this program contributed to the establishment of social goals?

3. Methodology

This qualitative study was based on observations and transcripts of conversations, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups in order to look in-depth at students' phenomena and behaviors.

3.1. Sample

Two 8th grade classes from two schools—Jewish and Arab—from two non-mixed cities in the center of the country participated in this study. As part of a shared study program, students in both schools studied English together for four months, alternately. In total, there were four sessions of double lessons of 90 min. Each group included 21 students (7 Arab boys and 14 girls, 6 Jewish boys and 15 girls). In addition, two teachers and two principals participated in the study.

3.2. Research tools

Observations and transcriptions: According to Shakdi (2003), observations are a tool whose essence is a systematic recording of events, behaviors, and objects in the chosen social environment, helping the researcher to identify basic processes, difficulties, changes, work patterns, and behavior. After the observations were made, four summaries were recorded that included field notes, documentation of activities, teacher-student interactions, and other behaviors occurring during breaks. A number of audio-recorded conversation segments were also transcribed from each lesson.

Focus groups with students: Focus groups were held with students after the first meeting and at the end of the program; two separate focus groups were held for each group (Arabs, Jews). Each interview lasted about 45 min, and 8–10 students participated. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The questions raised referred to the following topics: Motivations for participating in the shared education program, preparation for the first meeting, description of their experience after the first meeting, their opinion on the shared English learning model, and parents' reactions to their participation. The interviews were conducted in focus groups to allow for a dynamic conversation among the participants. The group atmosphere can encourage sharing ideas and even responding to the ideas of other participants, providing the researcher with in-depth data on how the participants experienced the shared learning encounter.

Semi-structured interview: After the end of the program, two separate semi-structured interviews were conducted with the two teachers who ran the program. They were asked to describe the experience overall, its contribution, and their suggestions for improvement in the future. Two interviews with school principals were also carried out in order to look into the motives behind the school management's decision to participate in the programs, the institutional support, and their satisfaction with the program. Each interview lasted about 20 min and was recorded and transcribed. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing participants to express their thoughts spontaneously while maintaining a general structure that guided the

conversation towards central research themes. Interview questions were formulated openly to minimize the influence of researcher biases and reduce the likelihood of predetermined responses influenced by external or pedagogical factors. The interviews were conducted after participants' informed consent, whilst maintaining the privacy of anonymity, maintaining objectivity, and avoiding judgmental reactions to anything said by the interviewees in order to create reciprocity and partnership, to strengthen the sense of trust between researcher and participants, and to instill an atmosphere of confidential and friendly dialogue.

3.3. Data analysis

The data collected from the research tools were divided into idioms and reconstructed according to the "grounded theory" methodology, described by Gavton (2001), and according to the following stages:

Open coding: Organizing the data into an Excel file and dividing them into topics, ideas, viewpoints, etc. This stage included locating the initial categories.

Axial coding: Here, each category received a code, and sorting was done in Excel according to established codes, so that in the end we received each list of phrases under the category chosen according to the code.

Focused analysis: A chart was created arranging the categories into core categories.

Writing the findings: Presenting the most frequent and significant categories, citing the contents illustrating each category, writing explanations for the findings, and making operative suggestions for their improvement.

4. Findings

The analysis of the findings revealed that the shared education model served two main functions: Social, which included the desire to get to know the other and interaction between the two groups; and socio-linguistic, including the use of Arabic, awareness of linguistic inequality, and raising motivation to learn Arabic. The findings also revealed pedagogical aspects that contributed to the establishment of social functioning.

4.1. The social function of shared education

4.1.1. Getting to know the other

The analysis of the interviews revealed that one of the main motives for the participation of the students from both groups in the shared study program was the desire to get to know each other at different levels. Among Jewish students, this introduction included a curiosity to know the position of Arab students regarding the conflicting relations and controversial issues, even though the program did not allow discussion of such issues: *"We were not allowed to talk about the situation that we all want to talk about, about land, racism, and the Arabs, what interests all of us".*

Another aspect of the issue of getting to know the other that held a prominent place in the group interviews with students from both groups was getting to know the physical space. Students from both sides were impressed by the environment of the other's school and by the unique things in it. The Jewish students were impressed that

the Arab school was clean, well-kept, and stylish: *"The school is clean, new, and everything works properly, and that really surprised me"*. At the same time, Arab students connected to the natural landscape where the Jewish school was located: *"We went behind the school and saw the kennel […] I wish we could bring dogs to our school"*. The Arab students were also enthusiastic about teaching methods and the school's policy as a democratic school.

The students spoke of the desire to get to know each other's culture, including food, customs, holidays, and religion. The Jewish students showed great interest in in-depth understanding and learning about Islam. In addition, the hospitality and refreshments at the Arab school, which are seen as part of Arab society's traditions and customs, left their mark on the meetings, as described by one of the Jewish students: *"The food and hospitality that is part of their religion, I know that it is a commandment to host a person at the level you can"*. At the same time, the Arab students were exposed for the first time to Jewish religious concepts, such as "bar mitzvah" and "kosher and non-kosher food". *"We talked about mansaf (authentic Arab food), that we eat milk with meat, and they (the Jews) told us that it is forbidden for them to eat meat with milk"*.

Similarly to the students, staff members from both sides also stressed the importance of getting to know each other and expressed hope that this association would reach the community level. Their words showed that getting to know each other, their culture, religion, and lifestyle was an important step in promoting a shared life, and shared study enabled this. The Jewish teacher said, "*We wanted to get to know each other, meaning the goal was to get to know each other, the culture"*. The Arab teacher explained: *"They go to shopping malls but do not come into contact with other students, with Jewish people. Let there be some kind of friendship between them […] that's what makes me happy"*.

In response to the students' reservations mentioned above, the teachers stated that they did not want to bring up the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict because it is still early days and the students are not yet mature enough to conduct political discussions. As the Jewish teacher explained, *"First you need to get to know each other, to build common ground, to see it as an opportunity to sit in a conversation circle that doesn't get into a heated argument"*. The Arab teacher reinforced his words by saying, *"I was worried that they would get into political issues, the truth being that this was not the right time"*.

Another issue preoccupying the Arab participants in the issue of getting to know the others was that it was important for the others to get to know them and to change the prevailing perception towards Arabs as a community. One student explained: *"They always think that the Arabs are not good, and if they get to know us, they might change their minds and start treating Arabs better"*. The Arab principal added that getting to know each other would create among his students a sense of pride, self-sufficiency, and awareness of their strengths.

4.1.2. The interaction between the two groups

The data showed that the interaction between the two groups developed naturally and gradually. As one Jewish student described it: *"In the beginning we didn't fit in, and only a few sat together. Slowly we started […] In the second activity, I saw that*

there was much more togetherness". Another datum that arose was that the two groups created subgroups, finding points of contact that went beyond the dichotomy of Jews and Arabs. For example, two Jewish and three Arab students who recently immigrated to Israel from Canada and Spain talked to each other on personal matters. An Arab student said, *"Some students lived in Canada, some were in America, and some were in Toronto, very close to where I lived at the time"*.

The social ties between the students from the two groups expanded beyond the program and developed through social media. The Arab students took the initiative to open a shared WhatsApp group: *"We are the ones who started the group; we are the most active […] too enthusiastic"* (laughs). The students said that they spoke on WhatsApp in English, uploaded pictures from school trips to the group, and talked about the school and the food. Also, many students exchanged phone numbers after the first meeting and later followed each other on social media. A Jewish student concluded: "*Thanks to the phones, we finally opened up and discussed things that we really wanted to"*.

However, the students indicated some difficulties and challenges in the interaction between the two groups. First, there was no continuity between the meetings: *"If I don't see someone for two weeks and it's not someone I've known for many years, I saw him once and then again only two weeks later, so yes, it means starting a conversation again"*. Second, the limited time of the program was seen as a barrier to connecting: *"Four meetings is just too little; we didn't have enough time to connect"*. Thirdly, the desire of Arab teachers to encourage students to talk and connect bothered some of the Jewish students. They wanted to initiate contact naturally, without being asked. The Jewish teacher and his principal, similar to their students, expressed great reservations about the presence and involvement of teachers and other factors during the lessons and claimed that this interfered with the contact between the students, as the Jewish teacher reasoned: *"I think we should be careful about the number of adults who come to watch the activities because it reduces the ability of the children to connect with each other"*.

In interviews with staff members, the principals and teachers referred to the positive relationships that gradually developed between the students. Furthermore, there was reference to the relationship between staff members from both sides who believed that they should be good role models for their students. The principals were directly involved in the program and believed that their involvement would contribute to the program's success. The principal of the Arab school emphasized: *"For a school project to be successful, there must be active participation not only of the teachers but also of the school principal"*. The teachers indicated that they got along well together, enjoyed working together, and, above all, were connected and cohesive. Generally, both parties agreed on the choice of topics and activities, and there was a clear and mutual division of roles between them. The Jewish teacher explained*: "If the teachers are connected, then it is easier for the students to connect"*.

4.2. The sociolinguistic function

4.2.1. The use of Arabic

According to what emerged from the observations, the teachers mostly ensured using English in order for the students to experience and practice the language. However, it was possible to point to cases where Jewish staff members changed to Arabic for pedagogical and social purposes, including conveying pluralistic messages of respect, acceptance, and inclusion. In the first meeting, the Jewish teacher opened with the blessing "*Sabah al-Khir*" (good morning); he translated sentences or mixed Arabic words into what he said. For example, in one of the activities dealing with the topic of knowing each other's culture, the Jewish teacher used Arabic to explain the idea to the Arab students by using an Arabic concept with a cultural-social code: "*No one eats meat with milk; yes, that's true* (not kosher)". The teacher's choice of the term "*not kosher*" showed his knowledge of Islam and Arab culture. The Jewish teacher not only used Arabic and contributed to solidarity and closeness, but also demonstrated an impressive knowledge of Arab culture and Islam. In this way, the effect of the use of Arabic was twofold. The Arab principal was also asked in one of the meetings that took place at the Jewish school to give greetings in Arabic, and the Arabic teacher from the Jewish school was specially invited that day to the meeting in order to translate his words. At the same time, the Jewish principal respected the language of the guests at the reception when the Arab students came to them. Although he received them in English, he apologized for not knowing how to speak Arabic. Such examples actually carry a lot of socio-linguistic meanings.

Among the students, the Arab presence caused tensions and controversy. Sometimes the Arab students would speak Arabic to each other, and this caused discomfort and intolerance among some of the Jewish students because they were unable to understand what was being said: *"Yes, I was not comfortable that they were talking to each other in Arabic; it's annoying when you don't know what they're saying"*. In some cases, their anger was expressed by distrust: *"I would check on Google, because it's unpleasant if something is being hidden from us; I don't know; maybe they're laughing at us"*. Others argued that the Arab students were allowed to take advantage of their right to speak Arabic because maybe they had difficulty speaking Hebrew. The Arab students also felt that their speaking in Arabic created a misunderstanding among the Jewish students: *"They thought we were cursing"*. Another student added: *"Yes, if we speak to them in Hebrew, which is their language, they will feel comfortable, but for us it is a real problem. We are afraid to speak Hebrew"*. From this, it can be assumed that Arabic is not only a communication tool but a reflection of a tense reality between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority. As one Jewish student described it*: "By the way, I think that part of the language issue is also a large part of the ongoing conflict […] which, unfortunately, is not over"*.

Despite the tensions mentioned above, in many cases, Arabic as a minority language was seen in a positive light by Hebrew speakers. Many students tried to speak Arabic and practice the basic words they knew. As an Arab student happily said, *"They tried to speak in Arabic. Peace be with you, Ahlan and Shahlan"*. Another Arab student added, *"We taught them Arabic; they asked us to"*. Such attempts, even if few, to introduce Arabic helped a lot in creating an inclusive and easy atmosphere; they even influenced relations between the two groups, even though sometimes the use of Arabic between its speakers stressed out the Hebrew speakers.

4.2.2. The awareness of linguistic inequality and the motivation to learn Arabic

During the interviews of the focus groups, apparently most of the Jewish students were well aware of the issue of linguistic inequality in Israel and therefore felt embarrassed and uncomfortable not knowing Arabic: *"To be honest, when I knew that they (the Arabs) had been taught Hebrew since 1st grade and we started learning Arabic only in middle school, there was a sort of inequality"*. Some emphasized the importance of learning Arabic in order to maintain a linguistic and social balance: *"In my view, everyone should make the effort on their own so as to get to a place that is relatively balanced; if you want to know a little Arabic, then learn. The truth is that it is unpleasant that they know our language and we do not know theirs"*. The Jewish teacher also referred to the linguistic inequality and claimed that it affected the discourse between the students: *"In Arab society, they know three languages, and with us, there are those who know Hebrew and English on one level or another; it's not balanced"*.

Furthermore, the unpleasant situation of Jewish students not knowing Arabic caused them to change their perceptions of Arabic and increase their motivation to learn it in a way that allowed them to deeply understand each other and their culture: *"I really wanted to come only because of the English, and I put the plan aside. Yes, I left with some thoughts at the end of the program, because I realized that they live with us; just as they need to learn Hebrew, we need to learn Arabic"*. The Jewish students also admitted that they faced challenges making it difficult for them to acquire Arabic. For example, one student said that one of the difficulties of learning Arabic stemmed from the constraints of the school system: *"I went, but there weren't enough children; they closed the course"*. Another claimed that Arabic is seen as a difficult language, so many students do not choose to learn it: *"I know why some don't learn Arabic because they don't want to invest in it"*. That is, the Jewish students are aware that mastering the Arabic language as a language of communication will allow them to deeply understand the other person and their culture. However, they also admit that they face challenges that they perceive as making it difficult for them to acquire the Arabic language, for example, that the teaching of Arabic does not arouse interest, that the Arabic language is a difficult and challenging language, and that languages such as French and Spanish require less educational investment.

4.3. Pedagogical aspects and their effect on the relations between the two groups

From the observations, it emerged that the experience of learning English together was characterized by unique elements that differed in purpose from the traditional learning experience. The activities carried out by the teachers were carefully planned and adapted to the situation of shared study of two different ethnic groups. The adaptation of the learning process, the content, and the educational tools to the socio-cultural situation occurring in the shared study had a positive effect on the relations between the groups and created a positive learning experience. In all the meetings, the teachers used unconventional methods, and most of the learning was cooperative and took place in groups, inviting dialogue and talk between the participants of both groups both during the assignment and outside of it. During the

activities, equal participation, mutual help, listening, and respect for differences were observed. Furthermore, the choice of drama as a teaching method was not random; the two pantomime activities and the play in the theater room encouraged good communication between the students. According to one of the Jewish students, *"Drama is a subject that anyone can relate to; theater is not such a technical subject as mathematics; it is more of an art. They were constantly looking for a happy medium"*.

At the same time, this pedagogical process included quite a few challenges. When creating partnerships between schools, it sometimes happens that each school comes with a different educational philosophy. On the one hand, it can create tensions between the groups. For example, Jewish students who were educated according to the principles and philosophical approaches of democratic education found themselves in an unusual arena. They felt that the program did not give them the freedom of choice and learning that they were used to: *"We as students were less responsible. We are just used to taking part in things"*. On the other hand, the difference in the schools' educational concepts could provide the opportunity to be exposed to another world, share knowledge and resources, and create a true partnership. As the Arab principal said, *"For me, I learned what a democratic school is—the hierarchical structure, the internal structure—anyone who comes to school and doesn't want to enter the classroom sits outside. We would punish him (…) It's good to know that cultures are different, the principal's status is different"*. Another challenge facing teachers is time. The meetings require the teachers to plan activities, and this sometimes creates a burden and pressure on the teachers themselves.

Another issue emerging from the findings is that challenging pedagogical tasks caused tensions between the students of both groups and negatively affected their relationships. For example, in the third session, students were asked to work in groups to write scripts in English and present them in the fourth session. During the lesson, the students did not have time to finish the task, so the teachers suggested that they contact each other after the meetings and complete the work. This task was not adapted to all students since there were educational gaps between them. The Arab students, who were very good in English because they had been selectively chosen, managed to handle the task. A third of the Jewish students managed the task, cooperated, established contact with the Arab group members, and were even dominant during the script writing. An Arab student expressed satisfaction with the conduct of one of the Jewish students and said, *"I saw that Gadi (false name) was the initiator; he wrote the script; I liked that he initiates, prepares, and passes it on to the group members"*. However, about two-thirds of the Jewish students did not contact the Arab students and ignored messages sent to them. One of the Jewish students claimed: *"We only remembered that we had to do it the day before, so we simply improvised and created ideas that day"*. The Arab students felt that the Jewish students did not want to be in contact, while the reason behind the behavior of the Jewish students was related to the character of the Jewish school as a democratic school, where the commitment to homework was different from that in Arab schools.

Similar to the students, the two teachers from both groups also referred to the factors that hindered the connection between the students. First, they realized that difficult pedagogical tasks could have a negative effect on the interaction between the

students and even internalized that the students were unable to be in contact after the meetings and complete the tasks. Therefore, they decided to give the students free time to allow them to reconnect and strengthen ties between them that had foundered: *"In the last meeting, we gave them 40 min just to play and do things they wanted; I gave them time to initiate an activity"*. It is also important to note that the students felt that the meetings were loaded with educational activities and they were not permitted free interaction. The "three boom" game that the students themselves initiated to play in the yard at the last meeting, in the students' eyes, was more successful than the educational activities they did together and even helped strengthen their bond: *"I enjoyed most when we played 3 boom with them outside with a ball"*.

5. Discussion

Shared education may help promote pluralistic values, and it can have a beneficial effect on the relations between the participants belonging to different ethno-linguistic groups. The present study dealt with the shared English learning model of 8th grade Arab and Jewish students in homogeneous cities in the State of Israel and examined which goals were realized in the social and sociolinguistic context and which pedagogical characteristics contributed to the establishment of social goals.

In the social context, the results of the study showed that the meeting between the two groups helped create contact, allowing the Arab and Jewish students to expand their knowledge of each other, promote relationships, and develop the ability to change images, even though the contact was limited to the short term. In addition, the nature of the relationship between staff members from both schools, which served as a model for partnership, influenced students' willingness to establish contact as well as with each other. Staff members' involvement in the meetings played a significant role in promoting interaction between the participants, but in some cases this involvement interfered with the students seeking to have free time together. These findings, combined with other studies that established the contact theory (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017; Gallagher, 2016; Hughes and Loader, 2017), that holds that effective contact between two groups in a conflict situation contributes to reducing tensions and changing prejudices (Allport, 1954).

The research findings showed that the teachers chose to ignore the issue of the conflict and the asymmetric power relations between Jews and Arabs and focused on improving relations between the groups and changing prejudices on a personal level. On the other hand, some students believed that controversial issues should be brought up in the context of the conflict and allowed to bring the debate to the table. These findings are also similar to the research findings of Donnelly (2020) on co-education in Northern Ireland, which showed that while the curricula recommended teaching about the Protestant-Catholic conflict, many teachers avoided it because of the subject's complexity. This tension echoes the debate taking place in the professional literature (Maoz, 2011; Paul-Binyamin and Haj-Yehia, 2019) between proponents of the contact theory on the one hand and proponents of the conflict theory on the other, while the former believe that in such encounters the individual, his experiences and his personal identity should be emphasized, and the latter believe that in such meetings the collective dimensions, the conflictual issues, and the power relations between the

groups to which the participants belong should be emphasized, with the aim of awakening a deeper awareness and understanding of life in the shadow of the conflict (Maoz, 2011).

In the socio-linguistic context, the findings of the study showed that shared study called for an interesting interaction between Arabic, Hebrew, and English (Yitzhaki et al., 2020). It showed that English was the dominant language in the meetings and Hebrew was rarely used for the purpose of translation. The use of Arabic raised complex situations. On the one hand, the asymmetry in knowing each other's language created tensions and hindered the creation of communication between the students of the two groups. On the other hand, the desire of the educational staff to introduce Arabic as a way of conveying pluralistic messages of acceptance and inclusion, the willingness of the Jewish students to know and learn Arabic, the awareness of their concern about the marginal status of Arabic, and even the desire to function as agents of change establishing linguistic equality—all of these had a positive effect on the relations between the groups. This suggests that shared study sessions allowed the increase of motivation to learn minority languages, even though in unequal relations, it was easier for students to learn the dominant language and was difficult to develop skills in minority languages (Or, 2018). These meetings also made it possible to feel linguistic diversity (Or, 2018), to cultivate critical items that are agents of change promoting ideas of social justice (Giroux and McLaren, 1987), and to develop awareness of social issues of power and discrimination (Little et al., 2014), and specifically, awareness of the unequal power relations between Arabic and Hebrew in Israeli society in general (Amara, 2018) and in the education system in particular (Or and Shohami, 2016).

Pedagogically, in shared study sessions, emphasis was placed on experiential learning and group activities (Payes, 2018). The findings showed that the teachers' choice not to teach frontally aroused the students' interest and increased their participation in shared tasks, at the same time providing social benefits such as knowing and accepting each other. The integration of drama into teaching added an important layer to the learning experience, and working in small groups resulted in a safer place for self-expression and shared experiences and thoughts with others. The topics of the activities were taken from two areas: Topics dealing with each other's culture and universal topics dealing with social issues common to adolescent students. This made the students connect to the content, collaborate, and contribute to the shared tasks. These findings emphasized that shared action experiences promoted multicultural education (Heruti and Yahya, 2024; Paul-Benyamin and Yahya, 2019).

The research findings may serve as a basis for the development of future shared education programs, especially in the context of ethno-linguistic conflicts, and to guide an educational policy that promotes equality and mutual recognition between different groups. At the same time, the research findings pointed to a number of mainly logistical challenges that faced those involved in the program. First, the limited number of meetings posed a challenge to maintaining consistency and continuity both socially and pedagogically. Second, planning the meetings and preparing unique activities required much time and investment from the teachers. Third, implementing shared tasks outside the framework of the meetings held in the schools was not possible due to the geographical distance between the learners. These challenges were

partly similar to the logistical challenges faced by the shared education model in Northern Ireland at its inception, as described in the study by Duffy and Gallagher (2017). There, too, schools had to deal with issues such as transportation and budget, building a common time system, and coordinators were appointed to deal with these challenges and manage logistics. It seems that institutional support is one of the pillars of shared learning (Gallagher, 2016), and the lack of this support in the Israeli case makes it difficult to realize the maximum potential inherent in such meetings.

5.1. Limitations of the study

The findings of the present study were based on a limited number of meetings. The scope of the study was limited to the framework of four double 90-min sessions, which makes it difficult to create deep connections between the groups and does not allow to examine the effect of the contact in a more in-depth manner. The study also dealt with a certain age as well as shared study in specific areas of knowledge, and therefore conclusions from the study are limited in scope. Accordingly, it is necessary to examine the shared education model for different age groups and compare its effect on both the younger and more mature learners. It is also necessary to investigate the shared education model in different fields of knowledge, such as shared study of mother tongues, history, and citizenship. Furthermore, there is a need for a long-term follow-up study to examine the effect of the shared study sessions on both Arab and Jewish participants and to check whether the positive interaction created between the two groups in such sessions was copied into social reality. Especially due to the fact that the meetings were held against the background of an ongoing conflict between Jews and Arabs. And it is likely that those who choose to participate in joint Arab and Jewish encounters are people who come with perceptions of inclusion, acceptance, and tolerance towards the other and do not represent society as a whole. Such in-depth and comprehensive studies of co-education can provide wider practical insights to the educators involved and make available to them research findings to help them derive maximum benefit from co-educational programs at the ages they teach and in the fields of knowledge in which they are professionals.

5.2. Recommendations

In order to embed the program in the reality of an ongoing conflict and strengthen its practical effect, it is recommended to integrate it as an integral part within the curricula and in the teaching, learning, and assessment processes. For example, in a multi/interdisciplinary learning context, in a project-based learning context, etc. The above recommendations will allow educators to improve the implementation of the model in their schools and allow the decision-makers to develop a policy that supports this educational model:

1) Maintaining consistency and sequence of the meetings and their long-term expansion.
2) Setting shared and clear main goals for teachers and students alike.
3) Promoting linguistic equality by the basic practice of the students in the other's language and integrating teachers who speak both languages in the activities. The longer the period of joint study, the more it will be possible to balance the gap in

the use of both languages on the assumption that the contact over time will make the Arab students feel comfortable to present their language in meetings on an equal basis.

4) Adapting assignments and teaching methods to the students' needs and the logistical conditions related to the time and distance between the students. In particular, choosing interesting and undemanding content.
5) Planning social activities for the first meetings whilst allowing free and authentic interaction. The phase of realizing pedagogical goals would come later.
6) It is advisable to coordinate in advance how to select students for the program, careful or heterogeneous selection, so that there are no educational gaps between the students.
7) A combination of experiential pedagogical tools such as drama and informal interactions in future co-curricular programs, especially at the beginning of the sessions, to allow students to connect on an emotional and experiential level even before moving on to the academic tasks.
8) Building a partnership based on the sharing of resources and knowledge so that both parties benefit.
9) Balancing the degree of teacher involvement: The desire of the adults to be a model for the children may interfere with the natural dynamics between the participants.
10) Building teaching units and unique models for shared study programs by responsible parties and experts, with the aim of preparing pedagogical tools for teachers and saving them time and investment in preparing activities.
11) Institutional support and integration of shared curriculum officially within the basket of programs offered by the Ministry of Education to schools each year.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, SHY and AHY; methodology, SHY; validation, SHY and AHY; formal analysis, AHY and SHY; investigation, SHY; resources, SHY; data curation, SHY and AHY; writing—original draft preparation, AHY; writing—review and editing, AHY; visualization, AHY; supervision, AHY; project administration, SHY and AHY; funding acquisition, AHY. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments: This article is based on a thesis written as part of the master's degree studies in the Department of Multilingual Education at Tel Aviv University. Supervisors: Dafna Yitzhaki and Ilana Shohami.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Allport, G. (1954). The nature of prejudice. Addison Wesley.

Amara, M. (2018). Arabic in Israel: Language, Identity and Conflict. London & New York, Routledge.

Amara, M., and Schnell, I. (2004). Identity repertoires among Arabs in Israel. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 30, pp. 175–193.

Cohen-Avron, N. (2020). Teaching the Arts: Joint Training for Jewish and Arab Students 2021. In A. Paul-Benyamin and R. Rheingold (eds.), Shared Spaces in the Education System and the Academy (pp. 200–219). Inspectorate Institute.

Donnelly, C. (2020). Teaching about the past in Northern Ireland: avoidance, neutrality, and criticality. Irish Educational Studies, 40(1), pp. 3–18.

Duffy, G., and Gallagher, T. (2017). Shared Education in contested spaces: How collaborative networks improve communities and schools. Journal of Educational change, 18(1), pp. 107–134.

Friend, M. (2008). Co-teaching: A simple solution that isn't simple after all. Journal of Curriculum and Instruction, 2(2), pp. 1–9.

Gallagher, T. (2016). Shared education in Northern Ireland: school collaboration in divided societies. Oxford Review of Education, 42(3), pp.362–375.

Gavton, D. (2001). Content analysis and theory building: the leadership of the principal of the autonomous school. In: Zabar-ben Yehoshua, n. (Editor) Traditions and Currents in Qualitative Research (pp. 501–550). Lod: Dvir.

Giroux, H., and McLaren, P. (1987). Teacher education as counter public sphere: Notes toward redefinition. In T. Popkewitz (Ed.), Critical studies in teacher education (pp. 266–297). Falmer.

Halavi, R. (2000). Another Jewish-Arab meeting. In: R. Halavi. Dialogue between identities, meetings of Hebrews and Jews in Neve Shalom. Published by the United Kibbutz.

Heruti, V. and Yahya, A. H. (2024). "The things I see from here, you don't see from there": Multicultural Awareness in Intercultural Encounters in Two Museum Spaces in Israel. International Journal of Intercultural Relations. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2024.101979

Hughes, J., and Loader, R. (2021). Shared education: a case study in social cohesion. Research Papers in Education, 38(3), 305–327. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2021.1961303

Joint Study Circles website, Matach. https://lo.cet.ac.il/player/?document=de7ddd9d-b5df-4433-bc82-26e0daf6c349&language=he

Little, D., Leung, C., and Van Avermaet, P. (Eds.) (2014). Managing diversity in education: Languages, policies, pedagogies. Multilingual Matters.

Knesset website (2018). http://m.knesset.gov.il/News/PressReleases/pages/press01.05.18.aspx

Loader, R., and Hughes, J. (2017). Balancing Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion in Education: The Potential of Shared Education in Divided Contexts. British Journal of Educational Studies, 65(1), pp. 3–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2016.1254156

Majadly, H. and Yahya, A. H. (2024). Beyond the Language: Arabic Language Textbooks in Arab-Palestinian Society as Tools for Developing Social-Emotional Skills. Education Sciences, 14 (10), 1088. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14101088

Maoz, I. (2011). Does contact work in protracted asymmetrical conflict? Appraising 20 years of reconciliation-aimed encounters between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Journal of Peace Research, 48(1), pp. 115–125.

McDuffie, K. (2009). Differential effects of peer tutoring in co-taught and non-co-taught classes: Results for content learning and student-teacher interaction. Exceptional Children, 75(4), pp. 493–510.

Mendel, Y., and Karamsky, G. (2022). Arabic studies in the Hebrew school: reflections on the political and the need to engage in it. In A. Yuval, and D. Yizhaki (eds.), Ink Inscribed on Worn Parchment: Education in Israel and the Jewish-Arab Conflict (pp. 391–420). Resling Publishing.

Or, Y. (2018). Multilingual awareness. In A. Shohami and M. Tanenbaum (eds.), Final summary report: An innovative multilingual educational policy for Israel (pp. 92–105). Tel Aviv University.

Or, Y. (2022). Old dogmatism and new dogmatism in teaching Arabic in Israel. In A. Yuval, and D. Yizhaki (eds.), Ink Inscribed on Worn Parchment: Education in Israel and the Jewish-Arab Conflict (pp. 316–390). Resling Publishing.

Or, Y., and Shohami, E. (2016). Asymmetries and inequalities in the teaching of Arabic and Hebrew in the Israeli educational system. Journal of Language and Politics 15(1), pp. 25–44.

Paul-Benyamin, A., and Haj Yahya, K. (2019). Education for multiculturalism in academia: from dialogic discussion to egalitarian practice. Dapim, 71, pp. 83–108.

Paul-Binyamin, I., and Haj-Yehia, K. (2019). Multicultural education in teacher education: A shared experience and awareness of power relations as a prerequisite for conflictual identity dialog. Teaching and Teacher Education, 85, pp. 249–259.

Payes, S. (2018). Education across the divide: Shared learning of separate Jewish and Arab schools in a mixed city in Israel. Education, citizenship and social justice, 13(1), pp.19–35.

Payes, S. (2022). Joint learning from both sides of the wall: Jewish and Arab schools meet for learning in a mixed city. In A. Yuval, and D. Yizhaki (eds.), Ink Inscribed on Worn Parchment: Education in Israel and the Jewish-Arab Conflict (pp. 287–316). Resling Publishing.

Peled, Y., and Rouhana, N. (2004). Transitional justice and the right of return of the Palestinian refugees. Theoretical Inquiries in Law, 5(2), pp.317–332. https://doi.org/10.2202/1565–3404.1096

Samuha, S. (2010). Israeli society: like all societies or an exceptional case? Israeli Sociology, 11(2), pp. 297–302.

Shakdi, A. (2003). Words that try to touch: Qualitative research-theory and application. Ramot.

Shipman, A. (2016). Changes in the divisions used in the education system: between multiculturalism and ad hoc arrangements. In B. Bashir, C. Ben-Forat, and V. Yona (eds.), Public and Multicultural Policy (pp. 131–154). The Van Leer Institute and the United Kibbutz.

The website of the 20th Knesset (2018). http://m.knesset.gov.il/News/PressReleases/pages/press01.05.18.aspx

Villa, R. (2008). A guide to co-teaching: Practical tips for facilitating student learning. Corwin.

Woelfer, A., Jaspers, E., Blayblock, D., Wigoder, C., Hughes, J., and Hewstone, M. (2017). Studying positive and negative direct and extended contact: complementing self-reports with social network analysis. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 43(11), pp. 1566– 1581. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217719732

Yahya, A. H., and Abu-Baker, K. (2023). Children's Literature as a Chanel for Social-Emotional Learning: Reading Israeli Children's Literature Written in Arabic and Hebrew. Early Childhood Education Journal, 51 (6), pp. 1–14.

Yitzhaki, D., and Karamsky, G. (2018). Arabic and Hebrew; Learning the language of the "other". In: A. Shohami, and M. Tanenbaum, (editors). An innovative multilingual educational policy for Israel: Milestone I (pp. 46–76). Tel Aviv University.

Yitzhaki, D., Tannenbaum, M., and Shohamy, E. (2020). "Shared Education" and translanguaging; students at Jewish and Arab schools learning English together. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 25(3), 1033–1048. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1740164