

THE IMPACT OF JEWISH-ARAB INTERCULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL ENCOUNTERS: QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This paper will report on the methodology and results of two case studies aimed at Jewish-Arab relationship building and transformation in the higher educational setting in Israel. The first case study was a pioneering course in Jewish-Arab Inter-religious Dialogue involving both Jewish and Arab students undertaken at Bar-Ilan University. Based on qualitative and quantitative results the efficacy of the intercultural approach for promoting perception change, transformation and relationship building was affirmed. The second case study evaluates the impact of current joint study of Jewish and Arab students in two courses in the health management program at the Shaar Mishpat Academic College. Data available also points to the positive outcome of these educational encounters which have been conducted against the background of the Corona crisis which has required classes to be held virtually and has also brought about the mobilization of healthcare personnel.

Keywords: Dialogue, Israel, Jewish, Arab, Education, Intercultural, Inter-religious, Health Systems

INTRODUCTION

The goals of this paper are to : (1) describe the educational process and impact of a pioneering course in “Jewish-Arab Inter-religious Dialogue” at Bar-Ilan University, Israel as an effort in intercultural education; and (2) report on the impact of joint Jewish-Arab study in two academic courses part of a program for preparing health care professionals and managers at the Shaare Mishpat Academic College in central Israel currently being undertaken. In the first case study, qualitative and quantitative data. has been compiled which corroborates the positive impact of the inter-religious educational encounter; in line with other studies; and the second case study quantitative and qualitative in orientation, will be useful for assessing the impact of the contact hypothesis in the higher educational setting particularly against the background of divisive events such as the Trump Middle East Peace Plan and most recently the constraints and need for mobilization of medical staff during the Corona crisis and the necessity of teaching via virtual means.

FIRST CASE STUDY:METHODODOLOGY

The Jewish-Arab Inter-religious Dialogue course was organized and run by the first author as course lecturer in the 2018-2019 academic year. Participating were 30 students, part of the Bar-Ilan University’s School of Communication International Program, comprised of approximately 50% Jews, 30 % Arabs (all Moslems with the exception of one Christian Arab student) and 20% Christians primarily from Europe and Asia, and two Chinese Confucian students. (The Jewish students were either visiting students from abroad for their B.A. studies or had become permanent residents and/or citizens with some having completed service in the Israeli Army; the Arab students were all residents and citizens of the State of Israel.)

Assisting the lecturer were two student assistants (one Jewish and one Arab) who in the year prior had helped initiate a student branch at Bar-Ilan University of the Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA), active throughout the State of Israel. The course reflected best practices of inter-religious dialogue encounters used by the IEA over the years. The rationale for the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue as a means of furthering perception change and relationship building and transformation across the Arab-Jewish divide has been described elsewhere [1];[4];[6],[7],[8].

This effort has also has been rooted in important social psychological theory based on of the contact hypothesis [2]; [3] and the importance of discovering commonalities between groups [9]. Thus the course was structured around common religious themes in Judaism and Islam, based on the knowledge that both Judaism and Islam are the most similar of all of the monotheistic faiths in terms of structure and practice. Each of the 23 session dialogue course was constructed around student presentations on common themes in Judaism, Islam and Christianity such as dietary laws, Halacha and Shariah, prayer, main festivals and observances and value oriented themes such as charity and proper interpersonal relations. Particularly

poignant was a session devoted to pilgrimages in the three faiths, with Moslem students describing the powerful experience of the Haj to Mecca including the sense of solidarity with Muslims the world over, and Jewish participants describing the pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem; with one participant describing an interfaith visit to the Temple Mount and the transcendent spirituality experienced which the Moslem students could readily identify with. In addition a number of joint holiday celebrations were held such as a joint Channukah candle lighting ceremony and a joint Iftar dinner (hosted by a Jewish religious student in the course) which substantially helped to reinforce the strong interpersonal ties which the course engendered. This was in line with the goal of promoting of sustained dialogue and relationship transformation [5];[10].

Institutional support was also forthcoming particularly through a special visit to the home of the President of Israel, whose vision of "Hope for Israel" has sought to spearhead intergroup understanding in Israel, of the type advanced in the Bar-Ilan course. (Indeed the course lecturer and his two student coordinators, Ms. Sariba Feinstein and Ms. Fama Amer received a special prize of recognition from the President for the contribution of the course to advancing intercultural understanding within Israeli society.)

RESULTS

Evaluation/impact of the course was measured by both quantitative data and qualitative reactions by the students who were required to submit both research papers for knowledge acquisition and written personal reflections on the impact of the course. Significantly quantitative questionnaire data responses indicated a substantial degree of perception and attitudinal improvement, attesting to the positive impact of the course (See Table 1).

Quantitative Results

Data Categories

In conducting the quantitative research questionnaires used previously [6] were distributed to Jews (designated as "J") and Arabs (designated as "A") in the course both at the beginning of the course ("Before") and at the end of the course ("After").

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The results of the questionnaires were analyzed and divided into five factors as dependent variables for an attitude and vis - a - versa.

Each factor was measured according to different questions.

FACTOR (A) Considered willingness of subject to have contact with other side (Direct attitude)

FACTOR (B) Inquired into the subject's perception of him/her (Perception)

FACTOR (C) Considered willingness of subject to have contact in other areas (Contact willingness)

FACTOR (D) Assessed general attitude regarding the other side (General Attitude)

FACTOR (E) This factor examined how each side evaluates the other's characteristics (Traits)

Each question could be answered on a scale from 1-5; with 1 representing the most favorable attitude.

Table 1

			N	Mean	Std. Deviation	
JBefore JAfter ABefore AAfter	FactorA_	1.00	9	2.0159	0.39412	
		2.00	10	1.5571	0.34634	
		3.00	11	1.7662	0.30821	
		4.00	3	1.4762	0.16496	
JBefore JAfter ABefore AAfter	FactorB_	1.00	9	2.5556	0.59658	
		2.00	10	2.3667	0.43780	
		3.00	11	2.5000	0.47434	
		4.00	3	2.2500	0.25000	
JBefore JAfter ABefore AAfter	FactorC_	1.00	9	1.8889	0.57434	
		2.00	10	1.6750	0.56581	
		3.00	11	1.7045	0.55698	
		4.00	3	1.2500	0.43301	
JBefore	FactorD_	1.00	9	2.1778	0.52387	

JAfter		2.00	10	1.9300	0.47152	
ABefore		3.00	11	1.8318	0.54142	
AAfter		4.00	3	1.5333	0.41633	
JBefore	FactorE_	1.00	9	3.4568	1.31872	
JAfter		2.00	10	2.7444	1.24727	
ABefore		3.00	11	3.0013	0.53115	
AAfter		4.00	3	2.9259	0.16973	

As evident, in almost all categories both Jews and Arabs in the course experienced positive perception and attitudinal changes with the most substantial registered by Jews in Factor A; Arabs in Factor C; and Jews in Factor E.

Qualitative Results

Knowledge acquisition and intercultural relationships were furthered in the course by research papers written by students in mixed groups of two or three, including Jews, Moslems, Christians and Confucians. High level papers featuring comparative analysis were produced on themes such as prayer, dietary laws, fasting, charity, marriage, family and life from an inter-religious perspective.

The written reflections were most instructive and strongly attested to the efficacy of such a course organized around inter-religious themes. A number of students recalled their initial anxieties when they began their participation in the course, fearing discord and conflict; however later were enthusiastic about the strength of relationships building which had occurred. Other students referred to the great knowledge of Islam, Judaism and Christianity which they had acquired along with an understanding of their commonalties and its impact on their perceptions of the “other”. One student in particular who had served in the Israeli Army and proudly identified as a politically conservative religious Zionist came to believe that “peace is an option”.

SECOND CASE STUDY: METHODOLOGY

A second case study currently involving joint study involving approximately 125 Arab and Jewish students in the Shaar Mishpat Academic College in central Israel, in two courses currently taught by the second author in the public health administration program. This affords the opportunity to evaluate the impact of joint educational encounters in another context based

on the contact hypothesis [3]. This higher educational venue is particularly suited for such co-existence educational encounters as the College has a significant Arab student body along with its Jewish students with positive interactions taking place between them. In addition health care is an area in which Arab students have increasingly chosen careers in Israel. Furthermore medical and healthcare settings such as hospitals and clinics, have been increasingly acknowledged as spheres in which Jews and Arabs have established positive and cooperative relationships [11].

Quantitative questionnaire based data measuring mutual perceptions and attitudes was collected at the start of the courses (See Table 2). The questionnaires administered were identical to those used in the first case study. The intended plan was to administer the questionnaires currently to test perception changes following the period of joint study to evaluate perception and attitudinal changes. However due to the constraints of the Corona crisis it has not been possible to distribute the questionnaires currently. However we have been able to collect anecdotal qualitative impressions from a sample of the students concerning the impact of joint study which has now been done on line virtually. It is also important to note that the questionnaires were distributed against the background of the Trump Peace Plan which was considered highly divisive particularly among the Arab students, as it called for the involuntary redrawing of borders which would leave many of the Arab students' locales /towns and villages within a future Palestinian State as opposed to remaining within the State of Israel,

RESULTS

Quantitative

Table 2

Participants were 14 Jewish and 60 Arab students. 19 men and 49 women.

Average age 23.5, (1.7). Range 19-44.

	Arab	Jewish	t-test value	significance	
Factor A Direct Attitude	2.28 (0.57)	2.31 (0.57)	0.14	Ns	
Factor B - Perception	2.94 (0.73)	2.50 (0.59)	2.11	P < 0.05	
Factor C Contact Willingness	2.44 (0.86)	2.43 (1.18)	0.43	Ns	
Factor D General Attitude	3.04 (0.90)	2.67 (1.07)	1.33	Ns	
Factor E Traits	3.54 (1.37)	3.33 (0.92)	0.54	Ns	

We found it interesting that in most categories the Arab students surveyed held more negative perceptions and attitudes towards their Jewish student counterparts than vice versa. We hypothesize that this may indeed have been due to the negative impact of the Trump Plan on Arab sentiments which carried over into Arab-Jewish relations.

Qualitative

As noted we have been unable to administer a second round of quantitative questionnaires due to the constraints of the Corona situation which has prevented face to face encounters in favor of virtual study. However the second author was able to conduct a number of qualitative interviews and acquire anecdotal impressions of the impact of the joint study. Due to the fact that the health system in Israel required maximum mobilization of manpower to deal with the emergency situation in the hospitals many of the students contributed their efforts often working in dangerous coronavirus wards. The participation of both the Arab and Jewish students in these medical facilities carried over into perceptions and attitudes in the classes. Indeed the Arab students functioning in emergency medical capacities won the admiration of co-workers, patients and their fellow students. When asked why they choose to so enthusiastically enlist in these efforts they generally responded that they felt a sense of responsibility and desire to help their fellow Israelis in this time of difficulty. Conversely Jewish students in the program who may have felt some ambivalence about the willingness of the Arab students to fully serve Israeli society, both Jews and Arabs, expressed their deep respect for their fellow students who so willingly gave of themselves during this time of medical crisis.

We hypothesize that when a second round of questionnaires will be distributed after regular frontal classes are eventually resumed that the qualitative impressions pointing to improved Jewish-Arab relations, perceptions and attitudes will be reflected in these quantitative data.

CONCLUSIONS

As set forth in this paper the methodology and results of two case studies aimed at Jewish Arab relationship building and transformation in the higher educational setting in Israel have been reported upon. The first case study was a pioneering course in Jewish-Arab Inter-religious Dialogue involving both Jewish and Arab students undertaken at Bar-Ilan University. Based on qualitative and quantitative results the efficacy of the intercultural approach and its

educational progression yielded positive perception change, transformation and relationship building. This further affirmed, the positive impact of the inter-religious approach to dialogue and relationship transformation which has been reported upon in existing literature. The second case study evaluated the impact of current joint study of Jewish and Arab students in two courses in the health management program at the Shaar Mishpat Academic College. Unexpectedly the two courses involving health care personal have been taking place against the background of the Corona crisis which has required the mobilization of maximum numbers of healthcare personnel. . In many cases both Jewish and Arab students have enlisted to assist in emergency healthcare facilities, participation which has also appeared to impact favorably on mutual perceptions and attitudes of the two groups of students.

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