Check for updates

Educators in Israel define cultural competence

Noa Shapira[1]*, Miri Shonfeld[2], Daniela Friedman[3] and
Janan Faraj Falah[4]

[1]Kinneret Academic College, Community and Education, Tzemach, Israel, [2]Kibbutzim College of
Education, Technology and the Arts, Tel Aviv, Israel, [3]Ministry of Education, Headquarters for Civic
Education and Shared Life, Jerusalem, Israel, [4]Department of Multidisciplinary, Western Galilee College,
Acre, Israel

How do Israeli teachers perceive the concept of cultural competence? To answer
this question, we employed a questionnaire survey marking each participant's
degree of agreement with 19 statements defining cultural competency. The
questions were open-ended, allowing participants to share their opinions on
cultural competence. A quantitative analysis of their responses reveals equal
treatment of every person, the ability to receive and provide exact non-injurious
messages, cultural awareness, and the ability to communicate in a multicultural
environment to be the descriptions most connected to cultural competence.
A qualitative analysis discovered several categories of understanding cultural
competence such as knowledge, skills, and values related to the role of teachers
in their classrooms. The participants also reflected on Israel's idiosyncrasies and
the expectations from educators in such a context. Israeli society is complex and
heterogenous: Its education system segregates students, such as through distinct
secular, religious, ultraorthodox, and Arabs schools, which, in turn, have their
own subcultures, for example. Such layered heterogeneities require an essential
understanding of how educators must grasp and define cultural competence in
the Israeli educational system.

KEYWORDS

cultural competence, multicultural education, teachers, educational system, Israel

1. Introduction

The cultural competence of teachers who teach in heterogenous and multicultural
educational systems in the world is garnering increasing interest (DeJaeghere and Zhang, 2008;
Cushner and Mahon, 2009; Dusi et al., 2017). Cultural competence is a type of social–emotional
skill formally termed "social–emotional and intercultural" competencies (Müller et al., 2020).
Teachers with intercultural competence can think, communicate, and engage in socially different
interactions while adopting diverse viewpoints (Cushner and Mahon, 2009).

Israel, including its educational system, has multiple cultures and deep socio–cultural rifts.
Its idiosyncrasies make it an interesting case for presenting the challenges that teachers face in
their classrooms. Israel's education system is divided into several sectors, with segregated
schools that rarely interact with one another (Katz, 2010; Sabbagh and Resh, 2014; Anav, 2020).
Nevertheless, the schools and classrooms are ethnically heterogenous in both the Jewish and
Arab sectors. The heterogeneity in Jewish schools comes from the immigration of Jews from
different countries. In Arab schools, this heterogeneity is derived from the different religions
of the students—Islam, Christianity, and Druze—as well as from other sub-groups (Dar and
Resh, 2003; Ben-Eliezer, 2004; Mola, 2018). Owing to the simultaneous existence of broad

segregation and an internal heterogeneity, prejudice, generalizations, and racism toward different groups and sectors is discernable in the Israeli education system (Elias and Kemp, 2010; Mola, 2018; Amzalag and Shapira, 2021).

Until today, neither the cultural competence nor the factors that influence this competence of teachers and students studying to become teachers have been researched in the Israeli context. Hence, this research examines the perceptions of teachers who come from different groups in Israeli society in relation to their cultural competence. That is, this study aims to answer the main research question: *How do educators in the diverse Israeli society perceive the concept of cultural competence?*

2. Theoretical background

2.1. What is cultural competence

Multiculturalism is an open and ambiguous concept lacking a strict or explicit definition in the existing literature (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019). However, it is helpful to define multiculturalism through three dimensions: demographic, structural or political, and philosophical or ideological (Sever, 2016). The demographic dimension describes a culturally diverse society with people from different cultural backgrounds living alongside each other. The structural or political dimension is one where society ensures equal life opportunities for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Sever, 2016). Lastly, the philosophical or ideological dimension outlines the way that society should celebrate diversity, perceiving it not as a threat but as an asset and a potential resource for internal enrichment (Sever, 2016; Banks and Banks, 2019). Along these lines, cultural competence is an accepted approach today in the Western world. It refers to the ability of organizations, professionals, systems in general, and the educational system in particular to function effectively intercultural situations (Naot-Ofarim, 2021).

Cultural competence among teachers is defined as successfully teaching students from cultures other than yours. It entails developing particular personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, learning specific cultural knowledge bodies, and mastering skills that underlie effective cross-cultural teaching. Individuals begin this journey with specific life experiences and biases; and working to accept multiple worldviews is a difficult choice and task (Moule, 2011).

Indeed, Bennett (2017) developed a dynamic model that explains how people respond to cultural differences and how their responses develop over time. The *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* has six stages, beginning with one's ethnocentric view of isolation and separation and ending with a worldview of cultural relativity. These stages are explained as follows:

- *Stage 1 – The denial of differences*. This stage includes neglect of singular cultural differences and the superficial declaration of tolerance toward people from the other group. There are two ways in which the person can maintain the feeling of denial: *isolation* or *separation*. Isolation (also called insulation), be it physical or social, from people who are perceived as different reinforces the selective perception in which the person only sees the events that he or she wishes to see. The meaning of separation is that people are aware of the differences but that

they view these differences with suspicion. This stance represents ultimate ethnocentrism, in which the person's worldview is not upset.

- *Stage 2 – Defense against the differences*. This stage is characterized by acknowledgment and negative appraisal of cultural differences and "us vs. them" dualistic thinking that includes manifest and latent stereotypes. For people in this stage, differences are considered as threatening to one's identity and self-esteem. A person can defend himself or herself from the differences perceived as threatening by humiliating other people, using or feeling superiority, and/or engaging in reaction formation. Humiliation is the response in which the person responds to differences by having a negative judgment or negative stereotypes. Superiority serves as a positive evaluation of one's own culture without manifestly slandering the other group's culture. Reaction reversal, while rare, is a method that serves to diminish one's own culture in order to demonstrate the superiority of the other culture. People who adopt this strategy present themselves as being more culturally sensitive than the ethnocentric "others."

- *Stage 3 – Reduction of the differences*. In this stage, the individual emphasizes the similarities between people by only acknowledging superficial cultural differences. However, the differences are not perceived as threatening. This stage emphasizes the belief that there are universal values that apply to all people. Nevertheless, these values might derive from one's own culture.

- *Stage 4 – Acceptance of the differences*. The individual identifies, appreciates, and respects cultural differences. The person understands that honoring the differences of the other culture demands the ability to accept and access another worldview.

- *Stage 5 – Adaptation to the differences*. Here, the person consciously tries to adopt the viewpoint of the other. As a result, the individual is more effective in interactions with people from other cultures. Moreover, the adaptation is based on effort and attempts to use knowledge of cultural differences in order to improve relations with different people, culturally speaking.

- *The final stage is the integration of the differences*. In this stage, a person has internalized more than one cultural perspective and, as a result, has an identity that can enter and exit different cultural value frameworks. People in this stage can effectively communicate with many cultural groups (Van Hook, 2000; Endicott et al., 2003; Bennett, 2017).

The term *cultural competence* is also connected to terms such as intercultural communicative competence, trans-cultural communication, intercultural appropriateness, intercultural sensitivity (Sinicrope et al., 2007), and, as mentioned earlier, social emotional intercultural competencies (Müller et al., 2019). Some researchers emphasize the ability to be acquainted with and understand multicultural aspects. However, there is a difference between knowing or understanding a subject—such as multiculturalism—and cultural competency, action, and activity (Hammer et al., 2003). While a person may have knowledge of the theories connected to multiculturalism, the person may not necessarily apply them when he or she is in a multicultural encounter or situation in daily life (Golden and Baram, 2012). Indeed, most researchers relate to multicultural competencies and abilities and not

just to knowledge (Hammer et al., 2003; Fantini, 2007; Sinicrope et al., 2007).

Such competencies or abilities can be the ability (a) to express respect; (b) to respond to others in a non-judgmental manner; (c) to accept knowledge and other viewpoints; (d) to be empathetic; (e) to engage in self-reflection, expressed as flexibility, problem-solving, and problem-mediation; (f) to have discussions and interactions; and (g) to respond to new and ambiguous situations (Ruben, 1976).

In this study, we seek a definition of cultural competence that will suit the context of the Israeli education system. Israel, with its deep rifts, is a case worth studying for the presentation of the challenges that teachers face in their classrooms.

2.2. The Israeli education system

Israeli society is diverse because of its cultural and religious aspects. However, it cannot be characterized as a "multicultural society" in the full sense of the word. In a 2013 survey undertaken by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Israel ranked second to last (out of 34 countries) in terms of social multi-diversity and 28th in its measurement of social cohesiveness (Gilat et al., 2020).

Israel's educational system is divided into a number of sectors: governmental, religious governmental, Arab, and Ultra-orthodox. Each sector has its own schools that do not interact (Katz, 2010; Sabbagh and Resh, 2014; Anav, 2020). However, the classrooms are ethnically heterogenous in both the Jewish and Arab sectors (Dar and Resh, 2003; Ben-Eliezer, 2004; Mola, 2018). For example, the Jewish schools include *Ashkenazim* or Jews of European or North American descent, *Mizrachim* from Mediterranean countries or North Africa, Jews of Ethiopian descent, and Jewish and non-Jewish students from the former Soviet Union. In some of the Jewish schools in mixed cities, Arab students also study. The great majority of the teachers there are either *Ashkenazi* or *Mizrachi*, a minority from the former Soviet Union, and a smaller minority are Arabs or of Ethiopian descent (Gilat et al., 2020; Powell-Benjamin and Reingold, 2020).

An interesting example is the mixed schools in the mixed cities of Arabs and Jews. Most of these schools are in mixed neighborhoods characterized by a low socio-economic status. The population defined as Jewish in these schools usually includes many children of immigrants from the former Soviet Union or Ethiopia, whose Jewishness, at times, is questioned. In most schools, the majority of students, regardless of their ethnic or national belonging, come from economically poor homes and only a few have educated parents (Shwed et al., 2014).

In the Israeli school system, we find prejudices, generalizations, and racism within the different groups and sectors. From an inter-ethnic viewpoint, Jews of Ethiopian descent or from countries of the former Soviet Union are exposed to different mechanisms of discrimination and stigmatization derived from their religious belonging (Elias and Kemp, 2010; Mola, 2018; Shapira and Mola, 2022). Israel also has a large native minority population of Arabs from different groups and religions (Orgad, 2009). The heterogeneity is further reflected in the refugees and migrant workers who are not Jewish.

All these sectors are represented in the Israeli educational system, which is also characterized by inter-group separation. As a result, teachers' cultural competence is extremely important in general, and in a heterogenous country that has such unique characteristics like Israel in particular.

2.3. Role of teachers in a heterogenous classroom

Teachers as agents in heterogenous classrooms do not just rely on the passive beliefs that they bring to their practice; instead, being an agent is something that teachers do. More specifically, agency denotes a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal–relational contexts-for-action (Biesta et al., 2015). The way teachers approach and relate to their students from different cultures has a strong influence on the degree of student success in school, in both social and academic terms. Students internalize the negative perceptions and stereotypes directed at them; they develop a poor self-perception and feel that their academic, social, and professional status lacks any chance of changing (Karnieli, 2004; Shapira and Mola, 2022). The main responsibility for changing this dynamic of exclusion and racism in the educational system is placed on the shoulders of the adults, and specifically, on the teachers (Mola, 2018; Shapira and Mola, 2022). The teachers are the adults responsible for the students' physical and spiritual well-being. As a result, they can determine, through a look, a word, or an action, the future of the adolescent (Mola, 2018). Teachers who have cultural competence with multicultural experiences have more positive beliefs and approaches to cultural diversity (Kyles and Olafson, 2008; Sturdivant and Alanís, 2019) than those who do not. Teachers who possess cultural competence are understanding, and they possess a wide ability to think, communicate, and engage in interactions in different ways, in terms of culture, and from many perspectives (Cushner and Mahon, 2009; Shapira and Mola, 2022). Moreover, teachers' cultural competency is related not just to their students but also to the students' parents. From teachers' perspectives, immigrant parents who preserve their own culture may be considered "alien" socialization agents who might threaten the mainstream culture. As a result, immigrant parents are marginalized by the system and excluded from influencing it. Educators should modify their "transparent parent" perception and accept that immigrant parents who wish to maintain their culture are not a threat to the dominant culture; teachers should be familiar with the immigrants' culture of origin and the unacknowledged human capital and unique educational techniques that immigrant parents possess (Sever, 2017; Shapira and Mola, 2022).

Research on educators with cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching in heterogenous schools proposes that several dimensions are needed for cultural competence. These include cultural self-awareness or consciousness-raising; awareness and acceptance of differences and the cultural worldviews of others; awareness of the social construction of race, prejudice, and discrimination in historical and current social contexts; awareness of specific cultural and specific patterns; knowledge and skills when using different learning and communication styles; knowledge and skills for engaging in different strategies for managing the classroom; the ability to adapt the study content so that it reflects the cultural diversity of the students; and skills for implementing different pedagogies, including discourse, participation, and evaluation, which are culturally relevant for the students (DeJaeghere and Zhang, 2008; Shapira and Mola, 2022).

2.4. Teachers' professional development programs for cultural competence

The more schools become heterogenous, the more teachers need to possess cultural competence to support their diverse students, offer expressions of diversity, and create a learning and social space that makes room for this diversity (Jokikokko, 2005), which underscores the importance of cultural competency for teachers (Delk, 2019; Toms et al., 2019). One example can be seen in a study that examined Finnish teachers' beliefs about multilingualism and teaching multilingual Finnish language students. Most of the surveyed teachers believed that examining school policies was beneficial, and they emphasized the teachers' role in supporting multilingual learners. However, students' home languages were only sometimes considered resources for learning, particularly in subject area instruction. Moreover, children were not allowed to speak their home languages at school. The results indicate that there is a need for professional development for all teachers in Finland to promote a move away from maintaining monolingualism to advocating for multilingualism to better reflect the realities of the classrooms (Alisaari et al., 2019). In another study conducted with four ethnic German teachers working in the same highly diverse high school in Germany, their degree of cultural responsiveness and beliefs differed. Those findings support the assumption that culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to hold beliefs that consider cultural diversity a valuable resource in teaching and learning. Continuous efforts should be directed toward offering practicing teachers more possibilities to reflect critically on their teaching behaviors. These efforts should be cultivated throughout teachers' careers and not be limited to initial teacher preparation (Civitillo et al., 2019).

However, teachers in Israel do not receive ongoing and organized *teacher's professional development* (TPD) programs in topics that are connected to cultural competence in a heterogenous society such as Israel (Bekerman, 2010; Golden and Baram, 2012). According to the State Comptroller (2016), the state does not engage in logical and satisfactory usage in the educational system to create bridges between the sectors of society, and teachers are not trained in this important field. Throughout the years, the Ministry of Education's administration has avoided taking all necessary steps to create an organization, budgetary, operative, and pedagogical infrastructure for the provision of a systemic, active, and long-range action to prevent racism among the students. Under these circumstances, the topic has been placed on the Ministry of Education's agenda in a happenstance and restricted manner, and only as a result of discovering extreme and violent racism that reaches a climax once every couple of years (State Comptroller, 2016). In this regard, the present study also aims to aid in the planning of a suitable TPD program for teachers in Israel by examining how teachers in Israel perceive cultural competence.

3. Methodology

In the current research, we asked participants to mark their degree of agreement with 19 statements defining intercultural competency based on Deardorff's (2004) typology; one example is the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural situations (see Appendix A).

The current research represents a preliminary stage in the Delphi method (Grime and Wright, 2016), which will be used to reach a common definition of cultural competency. In the Delphi method, a

consensus of expert opinions is gathered in the face of complex problems or definitions. This method is based on the belief that more opinions are better than an individual's opinions and that structured group efforts lead to a more accurate definition. The Delphi method follows a basic structure. Anonymously, individuals offer numerical responses to a series of questions – such as one related to the definition of cultural competence. An aggregate of the responses is then generated and fed back to the group, sometimes with the reasons for the responses. Individuals are then given the option of revising their responses based on the feedback or can restate their earlier responses. The iteration and controlled feedback process continues until a predesignated stopping point is reached (Grime and Wright, 2016). In the current research, we first gathered information from teachers through open questions and solicited their degree of agreement with Deardorff's (2004) statements. In subsequent research, we will gather information from experts in the field of multiculturalism through interviews and questionnaires. We will then aggregate all the responses and begin the iterations to reach a common definition of cultural competency.

The first item in the questionnaire was an open-ended question inviting to teachers to share their opinions on cultural competence. The participants filled out the online questionnaire (on Google forms) in January and June 2021 during the TPD program and course, which did not affect the program processes.

3.1. Sample

The participant sample comprised 300 teachers, 100 of whom were studying in a teacher training college (30 of whom were pre-service teachers). Two hundred teachers were participating in a TPD program facilitated by one of the researchers. The students who were learning in a teacher training college were overseen by another researcher. We explained the research to the participants and received their full consent.

3.2. Data analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics through means and standard deviation, while the rest of the data were analyzed following a qualitative approach by categorizing the participants' responses. In the first stage, a thematic analysis was conducted through the Narralizer software.[1] Small information units that consisted of groups of words or phrases were defined as codes, which were grouped into categories identifying interconnections and emerging patterns (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Shkedi, 2011; Gläser and Laudel, 2013).

3.3. Ethical issues and protection of the research participants' rights

The study received the approval of the Head Scientist of the Ministry of Education. Prior to obtaining consent, researchers

---

1 http://www.narralizer.com

emphasized that the questionnaires were both anonymous and voluntary, and participants were assured that no identifying information about the courses would be processed. Moreover, the details of the participants were concealed and have been saved in a temporary database that was created solely for the comparison of the data and will be erased upon the completion of the research.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative results

In the first stage, the questionnaires were distributed to 300 teachers who were all asked to rate the different statements (on a Likert scale, from 1, "do not agree at all," to 5, "highly agree"). The statements that were found to be the most connected to cultural competence were as follows: equal treatment of every person, the ability to receive and provide exact non-injurious messages, cultural awareness, and the ability to communicate in a multicultural environment. Table 1 presents the means of the different statements.

4.2. Qualitative results

The participants also provided their own definition of cultural competence in their responses to the open-ended question. Based on their answers, several categories and subcategories were found (see Table 2).

Some answers were related to cultural competence in general:

(1) **Knowledge** about culture, multiculturalism, and different cultures:

> "Areas like heritage, lifestyles, family life, gender relations, inter-generational health customs, community institutions, ceremonies,

language, history, folk tales, leisure, and more. Approaches and theories about multi-culturalism…acquaintance with different approaches to topics such as multi-culturalism, community, and society."

(2) **Skills**, both interpersonal and intrapersonal:

> "Intellectual flexibility…awareness of biases, openness, optimism – the ability to deal with disappointments and difficulties when carrying out a task."

> "Listening, containment, tolerance…sensitivity to the other, caring, communicative containment, being considerate."

(3) **Values**, especially equal rights for all the students:

> "Equal rights for all; freedom of expression and freedom of choice."

> "Desire and work toward extending equal opportunity to everyone, regardless of race, sex and religious differences, sexual tendencies, socio-economic status, and more."

The teachers also emphasized the teacher's role from the **emotional** and **cognitive** aspects as well as the **reinforcement of knowledge of the topic**.

> "…to identify and be sensitive to the students' different cultures."

> "Awareness of the existence of the cultural differences that influence the values, learning, and behavior of the students."

TABLE 1 Means and standard deviations of the statements on cultural competence (*N*=223).

Item	Mean	SD
Treating each person equally	4.43	0.83
The ability to receive and accept exact and non-injurious messages	4.33	0.81
Cultural awareness: understanding the differences between cultures	4.33	0.85
The ability to communicate in an effective way in a multicultural environment	4.30	0.82
The ability to engage in the best kind of communication possible in a multicultural environment	4.27	0.87
The ability to engage in effective and appropriate communication, which takes into consideration the different identities in different multicultural environments	4.27	0.85
The ability to achieve goals in constructive interaction in a multicultural environment	4.23	0.82
Good social skills that are applied in a multicultural environment	4.22	0.84
The ability to identify behavior rooted in an unfamiliar culture and to be involved in it	4.19	0.88
High-level social skills	4.16	0.90
The ability to adapt, to be flexible, and to act according to a cultural environment	4.15	0.92
The ability to work and function effectively and with full confidence in another culture	4.14	0.93
Appropriate and effective behavior in multicultural situations	4.08	0.97
The ability to connect people in a multicultural environment	4.07	1.01
Cultural sensitivity: Positive feelings toward cultural diversity	4.05	1.04

TABLE 2 Categories tree.

• **Knowledge** (about the topic of culture, multi-culturalism, and different cultures)
• **Skills**
• Intrapersonal
• Interpersonal
• **Values**
• **The teacher's role**
• Emotional aspect
• Cognitive aspect
• Reinforcement of knowledge
• **Behavioral role of the teacher**
• Containment of different students
• Contact with the students
• Acquaintance with the students and their cultures
• Discourse, dialogue, and connection between the students
• Adaptation
• Multicultural education
• **Teaching methods**
• **Self-knowledge of the culture**
• **Recommendations for the system**
• **Israel's uniqueness**
• **Paternalism**
• **Catchwords**

The bold text presents the main categories raised from the participants' answers.

> *"Being acquainted with the existing cultures in the classroom."*

> *"…the teacher who has a student who immigrated from Ethiopia needs to have basic knowledge about the stories of Ethiopian immigrants."*

Many teachers discussed the **behavioral** aspects of the teacher's job that include the following subcategories: containment of different students, contact with students, acquaintance with the students and their cultures, dialogical discourse and connection between the students, and adaptation and education for multiculturalism.

> *"The ability to deal with and contain different students from different cultures, to accept every person for who he is, to discern and find the uniqueness and the special quality of each person and to empower them."*

> *"Being acquainted with the existing cultures in the classroom."*

> *"…the teacher who has a student who emigrated from Ethiopia needs to have basic knowledge about the stories of Ethiopian immigrants."*

The teachers discussed the importance of **teaching methods** in a multicultural classroom:

> *"Culturally-mediated teaching – when the teaching contains and integrates a diversity of ways of knowing, understanding, and representing information in culturally-mediated ways."*

Some teachers noted the importance of **acquaintance with one's own culture**:

> *"The ability of the teacher to be acquainted with his culture."*

The teachers also offered **systemic recommendations**:

> *"Redesign of the curriculum – the curriculum should be a combined, multi-disciplinary, and meaningful program focused on the student. It should include relevant issues and topics from the students' background and culture."*

The teachers related **Israel's uniqueness,** the fact that the educational system is segregated, and the need for more intergroup meetings:

> *"In my opinion, the teacher's intercultural competence is, first, the knowledge that he has amassed on the topic and close acquaintance with people from the different cultures that comprise Israeli society. We, in Israeli society, comprise a variety of cultures… The educational system is obligated to arrange encounters between the students from the different cultures to create understanding and non-violent communication… Only when there will be ongoing encounters in the educational system…will we be able to understand one another…"*

A minority of the teachers expressed a **patronizing** attitude, and some of them wrote **catchwords**:

> *"A positive view of the parents and the… The teachers explain their limitations and invite them to be partners in their children's education in certain ways."*

That is, the teacher thinks she has to teach the parents because they have limited knowledge, whereas she has the knowledge.

> *"Openness, flexibility, willingness to know the other, (being) non-judgmental, acceptance, diversity, goodwill."*

The teachers were often content with single words or phrases and do not specify or explain what they mean.

5. Discussion

This study examined how Israeli teachers perceive the concept of cultural competence. The survey results outlined the statements found to be the most connected to cultural competence according to respondents as follows: equal treatment of every person; the ability to receive and provide exact non-injurious messages, cultural awareness, and the ability to communicate in a multicultural environment. In other words, the participants pointed out the importance of values and skills.

The qualitative analyses of the teachers' responses to the open-ended question led to several categories of understanding and applying the concept of cultural competence in general such as knowledge concerning culture, multiculturalism and different cultures, and skills—both intrapersonal and interpersonal values. The

respondents also wrote about the teacher's role—including emotional and cognitive characteristics, the necessity for a teacher to strengthen their knowledge on the topic, the behavioral aspect including containment of different students, connection with the students, acquaintance with the students and their cultures, dialogical discourse and connection between the students, and adaptation of and education for multiculturalism. They pointed to the importance of choosing the appropriate teaching methods, and some of them underlined the importance of being acquainted with one's own culture. They also offered recommendations for the educational system based on Israel's unique context. Some of the respondents provided a theoretical explanation of cultural competence. Finally, some of the teachers wrote catchwords and a small part of the sample wrote patronizing responses.

It is important to note that most of the categories discerned in our research reflect the empirical literature that has connected knowledge to culture and demonstrated that different cultures can contribute to cultural competence (Hammer et al., 2003). Indeed, some of the teachers noted the importance of knowledge. However, they also described abilities or skills in a general manner as well as the role of the teacher as a whole. In other words, in most cases, knowledge does not stand on its own, as also noted in the empirical literature. A person might know things about other cultures or understand what a multicultural approach is, but that does not necessarily teach us about the person's actual treatment, attitudes, competency, or behavior of the person toward the cultures that the person encounters (Hammer et al., 2003; Golden and Baram, 2012).

The academic literature presents different abilities and skills that are part of cultural competence. These include, for example, the abilities to adapt to other cultures; engage in intercultural communication; express respect; respond to others in a non-judgmental manner; take in knowledge and other points of view; be empathetic; engage in self-reflection, and demonstrate this by being flexible, by finding solutions, and by mediating problems; engage in discussions and interactions; and respond to new and ambiguous situations (Ruben, 1976; Hammer et al., 2003; Sinicrope et al., 2007; Bennett, 2017; Sturdivant and Alanís, 2019). All these also appeared as skills described by the teachers.

The teachers who emphasized the role of the teacher or gave recommendations for action, in essence, described the fifth stage of Bennett's (2017) model, in which adaptation to intercultural differences is based on effort and an attempt to use the knowledge about the cultural differences to actually improve relationships with people who have different cultures than the teachers. Those and similar recommendations can be found in other research that focuses on the need for preservice teachers' training on multiculturality and diversity (Delk, 2019; Toms et al., 2019). The teachers indeed discussed the containment of the different students, being acquainted with the students' cultural worlds, connecting to the students, and the importance of choosing adequate teaching methods in the classroom. They noted Israel's uniqueness and described the great amount of heterogeneity and many problems that exist thereof, such as generalizations and prejudice, similar to the findings described in the empirical literature (Ben-Eliezer, 2004; Raijman, 2010; Shwed et al., 2014). The educators mentioned the need to know the cultural heritage of

their students coming from different cultures. They referred to the importance of including different points of view in the curriculum. They noted that teachers should know their own culture and the need for meetings between the different and segregated groups in Israeli society. Indeed, the theoretical background refers to the lack of intergroup meetings in the educational system of Israel (State Comptroller, 2016).

Nevertheless, a few teachers, who also described skills and values as relating to cultural competence, used catchwords and made declarations similar to the first stage of Bennett's model (2017). In the educational system, most teachers declare that they hold a multicultural approach; however, in essence, they do not actually implement multicultural education. There is also a gap between the multicultural discourse and implementation of the knowledge and skills that have been developed by educators despite the fact that there are few programs for training teachers in intercultural competence (Golden and Baram, 2012). In a few responses, the teachers even wrote condescending and paternalistic content and tried to teach and explain what is "correct" from the viewpoint of their culture, similar to the second stage in Bennett's (2017) model. This also reflected the literature that describes the lack of suitable and satisfactory training in the field of cultural competence (Bekerman, 2010; Golden and Baram, 2012) and the existence of generalizations and prejudice in the classrooms from the teachers' point of view concerning students and parents (Mola, 2018; Shapira and Mola, 2022). It is important to note that only a very few teachers expressed themselves this way.

To summarize, in most cases, teachers know and are aware of the meaning of cultural competence and they are connected to the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are related to this competence. Furthermore, they have expanded their perceptions to their role in the classroom. Some of them discussed what makes Israeli society unique, and others also expressed awareness of their roles and the need to work to change the situation. While awareness is the first step toward change, knowledge or awareness do not ensure a change in attitude or behavior during an encounter with different cultures in the staff room or in the classroom. Although there were differences between the teachers, even the teachers who show awareness or knowledge about multiculturalism sometimes behave differently in the classrooms. That is, there may be teachers who know what to say but do not necessarily apply it in practice. However, teachers unaware of their own expressions towards different cultures may be less sensitive and culturally competent.

5.1. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

The respondents are students of the researchers; this might limit their ability to refuse to participate in the research or enhance their tendency to answer according to social desirability. Moreover, present study investigated the participants' perspectives but did not examine their actual functioning as educators. Therefore, there may be a discrepancy between declared stances and actual practice. This is a broad issue that invites future research that should include observations in the classrooms and interviews with educators and stakeholders in the Israeli educational system.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, in the Israeli educational system, which segregates student populations within largely heterogenous classrooms, it is very important for teachers to possess cultural competence. Teachers greatly influence all students' self-image, self-confidence, sense of capability, and sense of belonging, which also affects students, especially those from minority populations. Nonetheless, teachers' perceptions regarding diverse groups in the population concerning cultural competence have not yet been studied in general, particularly in Israeli society, which is a unique case of a complex, heterogenous society. Therefore, it is vital to examine how Israeli educators perceive cultural competence. Moreover, this study taught us what needs to be emphasized when planning a program for the professional development of educators in cultural competence, which includes the following:

1. The uniqueness of Israeli society (as opposed to a general discussion on multiculturalism),
2. The importance of reflexivity and internal observation of our attitudes and perceptions, and,
3. The role and importance of action and influence on the educational system.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the participants was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

NS, MS, DF, and JF contributed to the conception and design of the study, performed the qualitative analysis. NS wrote the manuscript. MS performed the statistical analysis. All authors contributed to revising and reading the manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

Alisaari, J., Heikkola, L. M., Commins, N., and Acquah, E. O. (2019). Monolingual ideologies confronting multilingual realities. Finnish teachers' beliefs about linguistic diversity. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* 80, 48–58. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2019.01.003

Amzalag, M., and Shapira, N. (2021). Improving Intergroup Relations Through Online Contact. International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning., *Int. Rev. Res. Open Distance Learn.* 22, 111–134.

Anav, Y. (2020). *Chinuch B'merchavim Rav-Tarbuti'im: Mifgashim Ben Tarbu'yot B'veit Hasefer U'bhachsharat Morim. [Education in Multicultural Spaces: Encounters Between Cultures in School and in Teacher Training]*. Tel Aviv: Resling.

Banks, J. A., and Banks, C. A. M. (Eds.) (2019). *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* John Wiley & Sons.

Bekerman, Z. (2010). Israel: unsuccessful and limited multicultural education. *Educ. Ethnicity Comp. Persp.* 6, 132–145.

Ben-Eliezer, U. (2004). Becoming a black Jew: cultural racism and anti-racism in contemporary Israel. *Soc. Ident.* 10, 245–266. doi: 10.1080/1350463042000227371

Bennett, M. J. (2017). A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. *Int. Encycl. Intercult. Commu.* 1:10. doi: 10.1002/9781118783665.ieicc0182

Biesta, G., Priestley, M., and Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers Teach Theory Pract.* 21, 624–640. doi: 10.1080/13540602.2015.1044325

Civitillo, S., Juang, L. P., Badra, M., and Schachner, M. K. (2019). The interplay between culturally responsive teaching, cultural diversity beliefs, and self-reflection: a multiple case study. *Teach. Teach. Educ.*. Elsevier Ltd 77, 341–351. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2018.11.002

Clauss-Ehlers, C. S., Chiriboga, D. A., Hunter, S. J., Roysircar, G., and Tummala-Narra, P. (2019). APA multicultural guidelines executive summary: ecological approach to context, identity, and intersectionality. *Am. Psychol.* 74, 232–244. doi: 10.1037/amp0000382

Cushner, K., and Mahon, J. (2009). "Intercultural competence in teacher education" in *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*. ed. D. K. Deardoff (Sage), 304–320. doi: 10.1057/978-1-137-58733-6

Dar, Y., and Resh, N. (2003). Social disadvantage and students' perceived injustice in socially integrated schools in Israel. *Soc. Just. Res.* 16, 109–133. doi: 10.1023/A:1024248003808

Deardorff, D. K. (2004) The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization at institutions of higher education in the United States. Dissertation. North Carolina: North Carolina State University

DeJaeghere, J. G., and Zhang, Y. (2008). Development of intercultural competence among US American teachers: professional development factors that enhance competence. *Intercult. Educ.* 19, 255–268. doi: 10.1080/14675980802078624

Delk, T. D. (2019). Are teacher-credentialing programs providing enough training in multiculturalism for pre-service teachers? *J. Multicult. Educ.* 13, 258–275. doi: 10.1108/JME-01-2019-0003

Denzin, N. K., and Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) (2011). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* Sage.

Dusi, P., Rodorigo, M., and Aristo, P. A. (2017). Teaching in our society: primary teachers and intercultural competencies. *Procedia Soc. Behav. Sci.* 237, 96–102. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2017.02.045

Elias, N., and Kemp, A. (2010). The new second generation: non-Jewish Olim, black Jews and children of migrant workers in Israel. *Israel Stud* 15, 73–94. doi: 10.2979/isr.2010.15.1.73

Endicott, L., Bock, T., and Narvaez, D. (2003). Moral reasoning, intercultural development, and multicultural experiences: relations and cognitive underpinnings. *Int. J. Intercult. Rel.* 27, 403–419. doi: 10.1016/S0147-1767(03)00030-0

Fantini, A. E. (2007). Exploring and assessing intercultural competence: CSD research report." (CSD Research Paper No. 07-01). St. Louis, MO: Washington University, Center for Social Development. Available at: http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/RP05-39.pdf (Accessed April 22, 2021).

Gilat, I., Gindi, S., and Sedawi-Massri, R. (2020). I am living proof of coexistence: the experience of Israeli-Arab teachers in Jewish schools. *Int. Stud. Soc. Educ.* 31, 367–385. doi: 10.1080/09620214.2020.1766374

Gläser, J., and Laudel, G. (2013). Life with and without coding: two methods for early-stage data analysis in qualitative research aiming at causal explanations. *Forum Soc. Qual. Res.* 14, 1–37. doi: 10.17169/fqs-14.2.1886

Golden, D., and Baram, H. (2012). Hanochachut Hachamakmaka Shel "Rav-Tarbutiyot": Pe'anuach U'peula Bsadeh Hachinuch. [the Elusive Presence of "Multi-Culturalism": Deciphering and Action in the Field of Education]. *Mifgash L'avodah Chinuchit-Socialit* 35, 15–36.

Grime, M. M., and Wright, G. (2016). "Delphi method" in *Wiley StatsRef: Statistics Reference Online*. eds. N. Balakrishnan, T. Colton, B. Everitt, W. Piegorsch, F. Ruggeriund and J. Teugels (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons), 1–6.

Hammer, M. R., Bennett, M. J., and Wiseman, R. (2003). Measuring intercultural sensitivity: the intercultural development inventory. *Int. J. Intercult. Rel.* 27, 421–443. doi: 10.1016/S0147-1767(03)00032-4

Jokikokko, K. (2005). Interculturally trained Finnish teachers' conceptions of diversity and intercultural competence. *Intercult. Educ.* 16, 69–83. doi: 10.1080/14636310500061898

Karnieli, M. (2004). *"Hamoreh – She'lo Tagidi Sh'anachnu Dfukim" – Mikoman Shel Ma'arechet Hachinuch V'hakhila B'hitpatchuta Shel tat Tarbut Neged. ["teacher – Don't say that we are stupid/bad": The role of the educational system and the Community in the Development of subversive counter-cultures]*. Tel-Aviv: Mofet Institute.

Katz, Y. (2010). The state approach to Jewish and non-Jewish education in Israel. *Educ. Rel. Glob. Press. Local Respons.* 46, 325–338. doi: 10.1080/03050068.2010.503741

Kyles, C. R., and Olafson, L. (2008). Uncovering preservice teachers' beliefs about diversity through reflective writing. *Urban Educ.* 43, 500–518. doi: 10.1177/0042085907304963

Mola, S. (2018). *Ani Regila L'gamrei, Yehudiot, Yisraeliyut U'.Levanut K'ognaim Zehuti'im B'tahalich Hitmodedutam Shel Talmidim Etiopim Im Gizanut B'yisrael. [I Am Like Everyone Else: Jewish, Israelis and Whiteness as Identity Anchors in the Process of Ethiopian Students' Coping with Racism in Israel]*. Kibbutzim College of Education, Gilu'I Da'at 14.

Moule, J. (2011). *Cultural Competence: A Primer for Educators*. Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.

Müller, F., Denk, A., Lubaway, E., Sälzer, C., Kozina, A., Perše, T. V., et al. (2020). Assessing social, emotional, and intercultural competences of students and school

staff: a systematic literature review. *Educ. Res. Rev.* 29:100304. doi: 10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100304

Naot-Ofarim, Y. (2021). Kshirut Tarbutit [Cultural Competence]. Ministry of Education. Available at: https://www.archive.mop.education/wp-content/uploads/%D7%9B%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%AA%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%AA.pdf (Accessed February 10, 2023).

Orgad, L. (2009). *Hagira, terror V'zchu'yot Adam: Mdiniyut Haknisa L'yisrael B'etot Cherum (B'ikvot Bagatz 7052/03 Adalah v, Sar Hapnim). [Immigration, Terror and Human Rights: The Policy of Entrance into Israel in Emergency Times (As a Result of the Appeal to the Supreme Court 7052/03, Adalah v. Minister of Interior)]*. Mechkarei Mishpat: In Hebrew, 485–525.

Powell-Benjamin, I., and Reingold, R. (2020). *Merchavim Meshutafim B'ma'arechet Hachinuch U'bakademia. [Shared Spaces in the Educational System and in Academic Institutions]*. Tel Aviv: Mofet Institute.

Raijman, R. (2010). Citizenship status, ethno-national origin and entitlement to rights: majority attitudes towards minorities and immigrants in Israel. *J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud.* 36, 87–106. doi: 10.1080/13691830903123245

Ruben, B. D. (1976). Assessing communication competency for intercultural adaptation. *Group Org. Stud.* 1, 334–354. doi: 10.1177/105960117600100308

Sabbagh, C., and Resh, N. (2014). Citizenship orientations in a divided society: a comparison of three groups of Israeli junior-high students – secular Jews, religious Jews, and Israeli Arabs. *Educ. Citizensh. Soc. Justice* 9, 34–54. doi: 10.1177/1746197913497662

Sever, R. (2016). Preparing for a future of diversity - a conceptual framework for planning and evaluating multicultural educational colleges. *Malta Rev. Educ. Res.* 10, 23–49.

Sever, R. (2017). The transparent parent phenomenon – Unintended consequences of immigrant-assimilation policies, the 5th international conference on unintended consequences (may), University of Warsaw, Poland.

Shapira, N., and Mola, S. (2022). Teachers 'looking into a mirror' - a journey through exposure to diverse perspectives. *Intercult. Educ.* 33, 611–629. doi: 10.1080/14675986.2022.2143694

Shkedi, A. (2011). *The Meaning Behind the Words: Methodologies in Qualitative Research—From Theory to Practice*. Tel-Aviv Univesity: Ramot.

Shwed, U., Shavit, Y., Dellashi, M., and Ofek, M. (2014). "Integration of Arab Israelis and Jews in schools in Israel" in *State of the Nation Report 14*. ed. D. Ben-David (Jerusalem: Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel), 323–342.

Sinicrope, C., Norris, J., and Watanabe, Y. (2007). Understanding and assessing intercultural competence: a summary of theory, research, and practice (technical report for the foreign language program evaluation project). *Second Lang. Stud.* 26, 1–58.

State Comptroller. (2016) Chinuch L'chaim Mishutafim U'lminiyat Gizanut: Doch Miyuchad. [education for shared life and the prevention of racism: A special report]. Available at: https://www.mevaker.gov.il/(X(1)S(5yjhtfe4gd31ugxgsa1dampp))/he/Reports/Pages/546.aspx?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1 (Accessed May 18, 2021).

Sturdivant, T. D., and Alanís, I. (2019). Teaching through culture: one teacher's use of culturally relevant practices for African American preschoolers. *J. Multicult. Educ.* 13, 203–214. doi: 10.1108/JME-03-2019-0019

Toms, O. M., Reddig, K., and Jones-Fosu, S. (2019). Assessing the diversity-related professional development needs of pre-service teachers. *J. Multicult. Educ.* 13, 236–248. doi: 10.1108/JME-03-2019-0029

Van Hook, C. W. (2000) Preparing teachers for the diverse classroom: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. Presented at the Proceedings of the Lilian Katz Symposium November (Idi). Available at: http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED470878.pdf (Accessed June 2, 2021).

Appendix A

Please relate to the following statements and mark the degree of your agreement with each statement using the scale (from 'do not agree at all' to 'highly agree'). Which of the following statements are connected to cultural competence, in your opinion?

1. The ability to communicate in an effective manner in inter-cultural situations
2. Good social skills in inter-cultural experiences
3. Equal treatment of each person
4. Good social skills/abilities which will be implemented in inter-cultural frameworks
5. The transmission and receipt of exact and non-injurious messages
6. The possibility of adapting, being flexible, and acting according to the cultural environment
7. The ability to identify behavior that is guided by an unfamiliar culture and to become involved in it
8. The ability to achieve goals in constructive interaction in a multicultural environment
9. Appropriate and effective behavior in multicultural situations
10. The ability to engage in effective and appropriate communication, which takes into consideration other identities in multicultural environments
11. The ability to work and function effectively and with full confidence in another culture
12. The ability to engage in optimal communication in a multicultural environment
13. Multi-cultural awareness: understanding the differences between cultures
14. Multi-cultural sensitivity: positive emotions toward cultural diversity
15. The ability to connect people together in a multicultural environment
16. The ability to see oneself in the way that others see him/her
17. The ability to see others the way that they see themselves
18. The ability to communicate while taking into consideration social constraints
19. The ability to communicate with people from another culture in a foreign language