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Bedouin special-education teachers as agents of social change

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ABSTRACT

This study probes the career motives of minority special-education teachers in the Bedouin Arab society of southern Israel. The results, obtained via in-depth interviews of teachers, show that the teachers aspire to become agents of social change in three spheres: In the external sphere, they aim for professional autonomy and independence within the Israeli Arab education system. The internal sphere includes a moral-awareness aspect of their society's view of special education. The personal sphere includes a practical aspect, in which the teachers wish to upgrade their professional qualifications in order to cope better with challenges that they face in the field.

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1. Introduction

As faculty members at a regional teachers’ college in Israel we were intrigued by an interesting phenomenon among many southern Bedouin teachers who teach in general education and decided in mid-career to pursue a second teaching certificate in special education. This phenomenon was unique because members of this population group chose this career change despite prevailing traditional views insufficient awareness of the needs of children with special needs in the southern Bedouin society (Raz, Atar, Rodnay, Shoham-Vardi, & Carmi, 2003; Strosberg, Naon, & Ziv, 2008). Therefore, this paper examines the motives of southern Bedouin teachers who elect in mid-career to make a significant change in their professional perspectives by taking specialized training in special education.

In this paper, we will first briefly describe southern Bedouin society in Israel and its educational system. Next, we will describe socio-cultural aspects of choosing a teaching career, followed by a description of some aspects affecting special education and children with special needs in southern Bedouin society. In the methodology section, we will explain the rationale for choosing grounded theory for our study and we will describe the participants and the stages of our data collection and analysis. Next, we will present the results, revolving around three spheres of change. Finally, we will discuss our findings in light of the extant literature, followed by suggestions for future research.

Our first step in learning about this phenomenon was to become better acquainted with the society and the education system of the southern Bedouin.

The Bedouin are Middle East tribes that differ from other Arab groups in this region because they inhabit deserts and in many cases are nomadic or semi-nomadic. The Bedouin of southern Israel (the Negev) are a small minority group, 2.09 percent of the total population of Israel and 12.8 percent of the country’s Arab-Muslim population (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Swirski, 2007). Compared with the rest of the Arab population in Israel, the Bedouin tend to preserve Arab-Muslim customs and traditions for a longer time (Abu-Ajaj & Ben-David, 1988). From the time Israel was established (1948) and especially after the Six-Day War (1967), Israel has made several attempts to promote sedentarization, urbanization and modernization, using an array of agencies (Abu-Saad, 2003; Law-Yone, 2003; Swirski & Hason, 2005). In the late 1960s, the government initiated a large-scale project in which many of the tribes were relocated to seven permanent settlements. Only Bedouin who relocated to the state-initiated towns receive government services and enjoy urban infrastructure amenities such as running water, electricity, and schools. Still, by 1998 only around 50 percent of Bedouin had relocated to these towns (Falah, 2004; Levinson, 1999; Swirski, 2007); other tribes and families built permanent structures on their own accord, in what are known in Israel as “unrecognized villages.” Infrastructure and municipal services remain underdeveloped in the permanent settlements; the situation in the unrecognized villages is far worse (Manor-Binyamini, 2007; Swirski & Hason, 2005).

The need for change in the southern Bedouin education system, which led to the phenomenon examined in the present paper, may originate in these socio-political processes.
2. Socio-cultural aspects of the choice of a teaching career

Some researchers suggest that the social and cultural background of pre-service teachers affects their motives for choosing a teaching career (Chivore, 1988; Ford, 1999; Goodwin, 1991; Goodwin & Genishi, 1994; Kyriacou & Coughland, 2000; Papanastasiou & Papanastasiou, 1997; Seng Yong, 1995; Su, 1996). For instance, some (Ilyan, Zidan, & Toren, 2007; McCarty, 2002; Su, 1996) claim that ethnic-minority students considers themselves agents of social change and some of them take on this mission for underlying reasons related to their personal educational encounters with inequality.

Little is known about the motives of pre-service teachers to teach children with special needs, beyond incentives such as a higher salary (in some but not all countries), fewer non-teaching duties, additional resources for teaching, and personal satisfaction (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Naggar & Enan, 2004). These motives may be strongly influenced by social and cultural constructions. Few studies examine the motives of Bedouin men and women to choose teaching as a career (Kainer, Rozenberg, & Munk, 2006; Weisen, 1997). To date, no study has examined the motives of southern Bedouin to choose a career in special education.

2.1. Aspects that affect special education in southern Bedouin society

2.1.1. Awareness and treatment of children with special needs

The number of children with special needs among the southern Bedouin is estimated at 4000 (9.1 percent of all Bedouin children) (Strosberg et al., 2008). As Strosberg and her colleagues suggest, this ratio is probably an underestimate due to evaluation difficulties, lack of parental awareness, and a tendency to conceal the child’s disability due to shame. Manor-Binyamini (2007) further describes challenges in accurate data collection about the ratio of these children, such as conflicting information reported about them by different government agencies (e.g., welfare services, the Ministry of Education and the National Insurance Institute).

Strosberg and colleagues collected data of children with special needs in southern Bedouin society (Strosberg et al., 2008). They suggest that the ratio of children with disabilities is higher among those aged six years or older than among younger children, probably due to an increase in referral to professional evaluation following enrollment in school. This population of children with disabilities is comprised of children with learning disability or emotional/behavioral problems (7.9 percent), chronic illness (4.9 percent), sensory disability (2.0 percent), physical disability (1.7 percent), or mental retardation (0.3 percent). Only one-fourth of these children receive some type of special-educational services. Notably, the percentage of Bedouin children with special needs (9.1 percent) is higher than the percentage of either Arab or Jewish children with special needs (8.3 and 7.6 percent, respectively).

Bedouin society is still largely unaware of the special needs of these children and their families, due to various factors: widespread incidence of low educational attainments (Bshara, 1998) and, in turn, unawareness of the deleterious genetic and developmental outcomes of intrafamilial (consanguineous) marriage, which is very common in this society (Raz et al., 2003), and of the lack of economically, geographically and culturally accessible prenatal medical testing. Manor-Binyamini (2007) noted additional factors that contribute to the challenging reality of southern Bedouin children with special needs. She pointed at the dire socio-economic situation of numerous Bedouin families; severe transportation and access problems, particularly in the unrecognized villages. Additional factors were the high cost of transportation services; restricted mobility of women due to a tradition that limits women’s mobility to the confines of their residential area; and large families with many children, in which the mother cares for numerous children, often unassisted.

As in any society, the Bedouin society that resides in many countries in the Middle East has many variations in characteristics and values and socio-demographic aspects (Al-Krenawi & Sionim-Nevo, 2008; Barakat, 1993). Still, Al-Krenawi (2004), a southern Bedouin researcher, claims that Bedouin culture and society share some common values and characteristics. In addition, he states that “many social and cultural factors have delayed the development of an appropriate educational system in the Bedouin communities in the Negev….” and that “Bedouins view the educational system as a threat to their traditions, and an attempt to sabotage their tribal ideology through modern concepts. Schools are acceptable only as long as they do not affect the social order and social values” (p. 10). One aspect of these attitudes and traditional views is Bedouin society’s adherence to traditional views on children with special needs. Some parents still believe that a child’s disability is the result of God’s will, making any intervention in his or her condition inappropriate, others perceive the disability as a predetermined and unalterable biological fact, and yet others consider it a defect that should be hidden in order to preserve the family’s status and social prestige.

Attitudes toward people with disabilities are influenced by various factors including religiosity, cultural and religious background, and level of education (Garcia, Perez, & Ortiz, 2000; Masood, Turner, & Baxter, 2007; Reiter, Marl’, & Rosenberg, 1986). Low educational attainment may contribute to parents’ lack of awareness of interventions and therapeutic or rehabilitative resources for their children with special needs and to the educational, health-related and financial rights of their child (Sandler-Lef & Shabak, 2006). Thus, many parents of children with special needs are not involved in their youngsters’ education.

2.1.2. Services for children with special needs and their families in Bedouin society

Medical, paramedical, and educational services for children with special needs and their families in Bedouin society are scarce, understaffed, underdeveloped, and underbudgeted, despite the high prevalence of children with severe disabilities in this population and late identification of special educational and developmental needs among them. Furthermore, available services are often poorly accessible, widely scattered, and characterized by little interagency coordination (Manor-Binyamini, 2007; Margalit, 2000; JDC-Brookdale Institute, 2000; Natur & David, 2002a, 2002b; Nebahan, 2000; Strosberg et al., 2008).

While the southern Bedouin education system is part of the Israeli education system, it has a separate curriculum and inspectorate. This system is typified by inadequate staff training and educational infrastructure (Abu-Saad, 2006) but the deficiencies are more conspicuous in services for children with special needs. There are substantial shortfalls in training of teachers and paraprofessionals, budgeting for supervision, mentorship for novice teachers, and in-service training programs. “The shortage of qualified and certified special-education teachers […] does not allow for effective and professional work with populations containing with complex developmental disabilities,” states Manor-Binyamini (p. 114).

In addition, the education infrastructure is in dire need of improvement: inadequate teaching and learning conditions in some special schools and classes, a paucity of after-school

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1 The results presented in this report do not distinguish between Southern Bedouin and other Arab populations.
programs, a shortage of high-school and early-education programs that would address the needs of children with special needs, and a dearth of psycho-educational services (Manor-Binyamini, 2007; Mendler & Naon, 2003). For many years, the lack of certified special-education teachers among the Bedouin resulted in the recruitment of Arab teachers from the central and northern parts of Israel (Abu-Saad, 1991). In turn, this practice created additional challenges, as discussed later in this article.

Furthermore, due to the insufficient number of special-education classes, schools, and para-professional services, even some children who are diagnosed as having special needs do not receive appropriate services and some with severe disabilities are often placed in special schools with other children who have very different educational needs (Hayek, 1998; Shatil, 2002; Stroberg et al., 2008), in contrast with the situation in the Israeli Arab education system and, particularly, in the Jewish education system.

In sum, despite the modernization that the Bedouin society has been undergoing, the attitudes toward children with special needs and toward special education still reflect traditional views. The dire shortage of trained Bedouin teachers who can address the needs of children with disabilities contrasts with the higher percentage of these children in southern Bedouin society than in the country at large. Starting in 2001, we have witnessed a marked increase of veteran southern Bedouin teachers to a special-education training program at a regional teachers’ college in southern Israel. Their number increased from approximately 15 students each year to an average of 75 students in the following four years—a five-fold increase. This unexplained and rapid increase in the number of experienced teachers who wanted to become certified in special education intrigued us. We wondered why such a relatively large number of teachers who already had a teaching certificate and worked as teachers in schools, decided to invest time, money and effort to be able to teach children with special needs. Our personal knowledge about the persisting stigmatization of children with special needs in the Bedouin society also raised a question why these teachers chose to specialize in special education. Therefore, our research question was: What motivates southern Bedouin teachers to move to special education in mid-career?

3. Methodology

We chose to use grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) as it was important for us to learn about the participants’ views using their own voice and respects their perspectives, and due to the careful analysis which takes into account each participant’s statement. In addition, grounded theory is more attuned to searching new understandings of social processes in natural environments (Hutchinson, 1988). We chose to analyze the data based on Strauss’ approach (1987), which includes four stages: Open coding, axial coding, selective coding and creating a core category.

3.1. Participants

The participants were seven male and eleven female teachers (N = 18) who teach in southern Bedouin schools and enrolled in a special-education training program at a regional college of education. Of the total, 37.5 percent were men and 62.5 percent were women. Their age range was 26–40 years and their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 15 years. Most participants (93.3 percent) lived in recognized (state-sponsored) settlements and the rest (6.6 percent) in unrecognized villages. Since this paper is exploratory in nature, it focuses on understanding the motives that all participants share regardless of their gender or place of residence.

3.2. Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study:

1) A personal-information questionnaire including items in three areas: personal information, education, and occupation.
2) An in-depth interview in which the participants were requested to tell the narrative of their career choice.

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Pilot study

To explore the efficiency of a tool for the collection of individually written personal narratives from teachers, we performed a pilot study with ten male and female southern Bedouin special-education teachers.

The information gathered revealed that the narratives, written in Hebrew (although the teachers’ native language is Arabeic), yielded insufficient data for analysis. Since all-Bedouin students in Israel study Hebrew as a second language starting in elementary school, and since all the participants’ studies during their teacher preparation program were in Hebrew, we assumed that they could express themselves well in that language. In hindsight, we should have considered more carefully language and cultural barriers that may limit the participants’ ability to freely share their personal narratives. Further consultation with Bedouin colleagues indicated that written Hebrew, as opposed to spoken Hebrew, is particularly difficult for many Bedouin teachers. An additional explanation is that the subjects found it somewhat intimidating to share personal and professional experiences and aspirations in writing was perceived as somewhat intimidating since it was documented in their own handwriting. Consequently, the authors decided to collect the data in the main study by using in-depth interviews that would be recorded and transcribed.

3.3.2. Main study

The participants were identified by using the enrollment lists of the college’s special-education program. All participants are southern Bedouin teachers who consented to participate in the study (and did not participate in the pilot study). Each interview lasted for about an hour and was recorded and then transcribed and printed as hard copies. All interviews took place at the college. In addition to the interview, each participant filled out a personal-information questionnaire.

3.3.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed on the basis of grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) in four stages. The main feature of this methodology is the demand that the theory will inductively emerge from the findings and that it will be carefully based on the data collected in the field.

In the first stage (‘open coding’, Strauss, 1987), the researchers independently read hard copies of the interviews and identified repeated themes or statements which had common characteristics. These common characteristics received initial code names or categories. All statements which related to the same code were listed in a table under that category. The units of analysis were words or phrases in each interview.

At the second stage (‘axial coding’), each researcher began to cluster individual codes with similar meaning from all interviews into general themes and differentiating among the themes, all the while adding more refined codes that continued to emerge.

At the third stage (‘selective coding’), the researchers shared their independent findings — codes and themes, followed by an
ongoing collaborative process of developing general themes and then more refined and specific themes which represented the interviews. The comparison of the initial results of each researcher and the ongoing development of mutually agreed-upon themes contributed to the reliability of the findings.

Then, each researcher returned to the individual interviews, trying to verify that each statement in the interviews could be identified with one or more of the specific themes.

Statements that could not be identified with any of these themes were later discussed by the two researchers in order to agree upon the themes to which they belonged. In the process of analyzing the interviews, the codes and themes were clustered into three spheres of influences, which are discussed in greater detail in the Results section: ‘The external sphere’, ‘The internal sphere’ and ‘The personal sphere’.

At the fourth stages, we examined commonalities among the three spheres, and that found motivation for change underlies all of them. Codes and themes relating to issues pertaining to the changes expected in Bedouin society at large, to its relation with the Arab–Israeli society, and particularly to its educational system. Thus, we clustered them into what we termed “The external sphere”: The high rate of children with special-educational needs; the paucity of Bedouin special-education teachers; the dependence upon northern Arab teachers; a need for independence (from external teaching forces); critical views of the recruitment of northern Arab teachers (substandard professional level, insufficient training in special education, and transience — returning to teach in northern Arab schools as soon as possible); and developing a local special-education teaching force.

Other codes and themes related to the wish for change in parents’ and teachers’ attitudes toward children with special needs, to the status of Bedouin special-education teacher, or to the wish to change the self-perception of students with special needs, which we termed “The Internal Sphere”. Codes and themes pertaining to the wish for change in others’ attitudes included the Bedouin community’s (which included regular education teachers, school principal, other children at school) treatment and negative attitudes toward children with special needs (ignorance, lack of awareness, myths of disability as a disease inflicted by God); greater acceptance of students with special needs (integration into society, greater independence, job placement, and services that will enable them to acquire literacy); attitudes toward and treatment of the child by his or her parents (shame, hiding at home); and the special-education teachers as a change agent (of parents of children with special needs, of parents of the other children in the classroom, of other teachers, of the principal).

Codes and themes pertaining to the status of Bedouin special-education teachers were stigmatizing special-education teachers; recent favorable changes in the status of special-education teachers; community’s awareness of the role of special-education teachers; The effects of spheres of functioning (family, school where the teacher works, Bedouin community) on the role of special-education teachers; the special-education teacher’s role to make favorable changes in these effects.

A third group of codes and themes pertained more the practical aspects that motivated them to become special-education teachers, which we termed “The Personal Sphere”. These included knowledge and skills that could improve regular education teachers’ teaching in a heterogeneous classroom: Regular classes include children with special needs; special-education training could help the teacher to better cope with disciplinary issues, and to assess and teach students with learning difficulties.

After all themes were defined and agreed upon, we found that change is the overriding concept that was common to all themes. That change will be detailed in the results section.

3.4. Ethical issues

The research proposal was approved by the college’s internal Institutional Review Board and the Intercollegiate Research Authority (which supervises research conducted in all teacher-training colleges in Israel), which examined the present study’s theoretical background, research design and ethical aspects.

To recruit participants for the study, the first researcher and the research assistants contacted by phone a randomly selected group of Bedouin teachers who were enrolled in the program. During this initial phone conversation, the general purpose of the study, the terms of the interview and how the data will be used were explained to the participants. In addition, it was promised that personal information collected during the study will remain confidential (using code numbers for each student), and that the taped interviews will be destroyed after completion of the study. Only students who gave their informed consent were included in the study.

Both authors serve as faculty members at the regional college where the study was conducted, and have taught Bedouin undergraduates in integrated courses of Jewish and Arab/Bedouin students for several years. The second author also taught in separate, all-Bedouin classes for several years and has visited a number of Bedouin schools to observe his students’ teaching. Since the second author taught two courses at the program in which the participants were enrolled, which could have created power differentiation and bias during the interviews, it was decided that this author will not interview any of the participants, and we sought collaboration with a southern Bedouin colleague to recruit participants and to conduct interviews with students who felt more comfortable being interviewed in their native language. The rest of the interviews were conducted in Hebrew by the first author, who did not teach any of the participants. Our Bedouin colleague was also helpful in facilitating any unfamiliar terms or expressions used by the participants during these interviews. All the interviews were given code numbers and then transcribed anonymously by a research assistant.

To maintain the participants’ anonymity, we used a pseudonym in each of the following quotation.

4. Results

Given the scanty information yielded by the written narratives of the participants in the pilot study, the results reported here refer only to data collected in the main study.

The overarching motive of most Bedouin teachers who chose to take special-education training in mid-career was to create change in their societal and professional spheres. The results are outlined by the three spheres in which the change was sought: (a) the external sphere — vis-à-vis the Israeli Arab education system, (b) the internal sphere — based on moral-value issues and directed at the southern Bedouin society, and (c) the personal sphere — based on practical issues and directed at themselves as teachers.

4.1. The external sphere: the status of southern Bedouin teachers in Israeli Arab society

The participating teachers described the discrepancy between the high prevalence of children with special needs (due to the high rate of intrafamilial marriages which result in a high prevalence of children with special needs for genetic reasons) and the scarcity of Bedouin teachers who are qualified to work with them. In light of this imbalance, they aspire to diminish the dependency of the Bedouin education system on non-Bedouin Arab teachers from areas north of the Negev. Here is what Fatma, one of the female participants, said:
First, we have those marriages with relatives, within the family. It caused many births of difficult children, which were born with hereditary diseases. And the parents bring the children into this world and do not care for their emotional needs and even for their physical needs [...]. Truly, I want to help. I want to teach little children and not older children with special needs, so that I can start [making the change] at an early stage.

Yusuf, a male teacher noted:

There are lots of children with learning problems and physical problems or mental retardation, so I thought I could really help them and I want to help, but if I didn’t train [in special education] I wouldn’t be able to help anyone.

On the topic of the aforementioned dichotomy of high prevalence of special-needs children and the shortage of southern Bedouin teachers who specialize in special education, resulting in dependency on Arab teachers from central and northern Israel, Na’ima, a female teacher said:

In our society there’s a shortage of special-education teachers and those that we have come from the northern part of the country. Whenever these teachers from the north find a job opening in the north, they move there and don’t come back.

Isma’il, a male teacher noted, “Most of our teachers are from the north. So it’s about time that we develop local teachers so that we’ll be independent of them. That’s why I went to college.”

Some of the participants also criticized the teachers from the north on the grounds of unsatisfactory training and education. For example, Muhamad, a male teacher said: “Let’s say that some teachers who come from the north are not very skilled teachers. Why should our children suffer because of that?” Ali, another male teacher claimed, “Unfortunately, many teachers [from the north] are still uncertified [...As for] the result […], I don’t want to talk about it.” Thus, it appears that the professional level of “northern” Arab teachers, as perceived by some of the participants, has motivated them to expand their own professional teaching skills and knowledge, and consequently support the development of a local, well-trained teaching staff.

4.2. The internal sphere – moral-value motivation to change Bedouin Society’s attitudes

4.2.1. Changing attitudes toward and opportunities for children with special needs

All interviewees discussed the need to change the prevalent perception of special education and of children with special needs in Bedouin society. They related to teachers, to parents and to the students themselves.

The teachers themselves were initially influenced by those negative attitudes, were unaware of children with special needs, and subjected them to rejection. After having changed their views dramatically, they felt a need to expand the circle of knowledge and awareness and create an atmosphere that would make it possible to provide these children an appropriate, immediate, and professional response. For example, Faiza, a female teacher said, “It’s important to note that people in Bedouin society take a negative view of special education, and I intend to use all the means and knowledge that I’ve learned to change this view.”

The teachers spoke with great pain about the emotional and social price that children with special needs in their society have paid over the years. In an example that was given, parents who were ashamed of their children with special needs hid them at home and brought them to school only when they reached the age of ten or twelve. One teacher even described how children with special needs suffered from scorn and violence by teachers in school.

The participants offered several explanations for the rejection of children with special needs, such as supernatural explanations stemming from ignorance and parents who perceived their children’s imperfections as extensions of their own flaws.

Most of the participants viewed themselves as missionaries who could influence both general-education teachers and parents to change their detrimental treatment of children with special needs. Na’ima, of the teachers mentioned:

[Our] society used to be tightly closed. Nowadays people can see advancement in the world, they watch TV, they go to lectures at the schools, they get family counseling that through the local health services, and some Arab and Jewish NGOs organize study days […]. At first it was difficult for many parents, but as time went by and [due to] the support they have received, many parents of children with special needs have started “mainstreaming.”

The participants pointed out another process of internal change that they felt obliged to mobilize. Propelled by their sense of altruism, it prompted some teachers to develop a sense of social obligation. They understood that merely feeling sorry for children with special needs would not suffice and that professional skills and knowledge to help such students advance were needed. Feeling sorry and wanting to help steered the teachers to the realization that they must acquire professional tools to generate the requisite change. For instance, Abdan, a male teacher said:

I used to work in business and I made a lot of money. But when I started teaching—you connect with people, with society, and it gives you a stronger connection and you see that you’re helping others, not with money but in humanistic ways.

Some teachers thought it was their responsibility to enhance the opportunities of students with special needs to integrate meaningfully into society, so they could eventually join the labor force and fulfill themselves. Those teachers were also determined to change the students with special needs’ self-perception so they could strengthen their enjoyment of school and advocate for their rights at school. Aisha, a female teacher said:

Being a teacher is a message. It’s a belief that I need to disseminate. I want to pass on to my students that there can be a change in their lives, that they should mainstream themselves in society, that they should be independent, that they should want more […]. I prefer to teach them about themselves, about their family, how to read and write, how to use money, how to travel, real important everyday things.

In sum, it seems that changes in Bedouin society in regard to special education are still very fluid and have not come to full fruition. While special-education teachers are increasingly appreciated, many members of Bedouin society still maintain a negative, marginalizing attitude.

4.2.2. The status of Bedouin special-education teachers

The participants described the beginning of a trend in special education that signals a shift from rejection and scorn of teachers (even within the teacher’s family) to respect and appreciation. Jamil, a male teacher said:

In the past there was no community awareness of the issue of special education. The first teachers who worked in special education, especially those who worked with mentally retarded students, suffered from remarks, especially from family members, that mental retardation is an infectious disease or
a cause of disease. Today there has been a change in the community's perception: people who work in special education are valued and their work is perceived as a societal mission and a righteous act.

Nevertheless, several teachers stated that their villages still apply a stigma and treat special-education teachers with scorn. Fatma said, “First, there isn’t any awareness of this issue, and besides, in our society they view special education negatively.”

Huda, another teacher said:

People in our society think negatively about special-education teachers and we need to work hard to improve and change this view [...] I intend to use all means and all the tools that I’ve received in my training to improve this issue.

Surprisingly, even within an educational setting, where one expects to find professional knowledge and at least a minimal understanding of special education and its implications, there are still cases in which faculty rejects the special-education teacher, contributing to the turnover rate of those teachers.

4.3. The personal sphere — practical motives of change directed at themselves as teachers

The teachers emphasized their choice of special education as a challenging one that addresses several needs. Most of them mentioned professional aspects that reflected in the teacher’s ability to respond to unique and diverse educational needs in the classroom.

Many of the teachers believed that the professional knowledge they had gained from training in special education could help their teaching in general-education classes as well. Some claimed that since any general-education class has several students with special needs, teaching in those classes entails professional knowledge in special education. Mahmud, a male teacher articulated this view: “[…] Every class is heterogeneous and has students with special needs; the kind of teacher who can help them is one who’s trained in special education.”

In addition, a trained special-education teacher may be useful in assessing children’s difficulties. Sarah, a female teacher claimed, “At least now I can put my finger on problems that my students have, without receiving help from others.”

Others spoke of the need and utility of special-education teaching skills for coping with nondisabled students, e.g., in regard to discipline problems. Hala, one female teacher stated, “The training will help us with discipline problems in general-education classes. In general education there are children who have hyper-activity problems and concentration problems.”

Aisha emphasized the competence that she acquired due to her studies, allowing her to promptly detect and intervene with children who have learning difficulties:

Since I started my studies, it helped me a lot and I’ve felt good because I could help. In my classroom I have kids with all kinds of difficulties: One had mental retardation, another had a developmental delay, and this year I have a kid with hearing problems. I can help him and if I need to refer him to a psychologist then at least I can identify his problems and help him this way. I don’t leave any kid behind without help. To allow him to be like everyone else, I start intervening at the beginning of the year.

Notably, the participants mentioned personal changes they went through following their studies, such as stronger professional efficacy, development of a respectful attitude toward students with special needs, or a change in emotions — from fear to confidence — in encounters with these children. Other shifts were from avoidance to wishing for closer contact with these children and from a generalized supernatural perception to a focused, rational perception that views these children as human beings who have learning or behavioral difficulties. Finally, many participants described a shift from ignorance to professional knowledge.

5. Discussion

The core essence of the educational process is the creation of change. Indeed, the main finding in the present study is that Bedouin teachers choose to specialize in special education in order to create change in three spheres that they inhabit: the external, the internal, and the personal. First we discuss the changes that the teachers wish to generate outside southern Bedouin society, i.e., vis-a-vis Israeli Arab society (the external sphere). The main novelty revealed in this study was the wish of southern Bedouin teachers to attain autonomy and mitigate their education system’s dependence on northern Arab teachers. While this dependency is characteristic of the entire southern Bedouin education system (Abu-Saad, 2006), it is particularly prominent in services for children with special needs (Strosberg et al., 2008). It is our understanding that the northern Arab teachers’ presence in this education system has created two conflicts: The first is reflected in criticism, expressed by many southern Bedouin teachers, of the insufficient training of some of the northern teachers. One may accept this criticism at face value. However, further inquiry is needed to determine whether the northern teachers’ professional competence is indeed inferior to that of their southern colleagues, or whether the criticism is an expression of frustration and anger over the southern Bedouins’ dependence on outside help.

The second conflict was created by the relatively high turnover rate of teachers from the north in Bedouin education system. On the one hand, we noted above that this turnover creates occupational opportunities in teaching for southern Bedouins. On the other hand, one may assume that the frequent turnover of the northern teaching staff also contributes to the frustration that the local Bedouin (or at least the participants who reported it in their interviews) feel due to a sense of lack of belongingness and transitionality. The southern teachers’ frustration may also be aggravated by the impression that northern Arab teachers choose to work in the south as a default and consider working there a matter of less value.

The dependence upon teachers from the north angered the participants in this study and motivated them to expand their education for the purpose of becoming a part of a local professional teaching force that can strengthen the southern Bedouin education system and be more closely related culturally and linguistically to the students and their families. This motivation to expand one’s education is also reflected in a growing trend of postsecondary studies among Bedouin men and women in the south (Abu-Saad, 1991; Barne’a, 1990; Pessate-Schubert, 2003) and in the north (Weisien, 1997).

Thus, the present study illuminates an important process that southern Bedouin society seems to undergo: the onset of professional maturation in education and health services and the mitigation of need for outside professionals (Bar-Meir, 2009; Barne’a, 1990). By extension, this society may have begun to demand independence and professional acknowledgment (probably on an ethnic and cultural basis) from the northern Arab education system and society. This is one possible outcome of the accelerated modernization processes that the southern Bedouin society has been experiencing in recent decades (Manor-Binyamini, 2007).

These processes are taking place for two reasons: the migration to permanent settlements and the need to integrate into the Israeli economy and labor force after years of isolation. This isolation,
which has been diminishing gradually over the decades, traces to two factors: the traditional Bedouin lifestyle and the segregation from the Israeli economy that was imposed on the southern Bedouin by life under Israeli military rule until 1966 (Abu-Saad, 2006). After military rule was abolished, southern Bedouin increased their interactions and relations with northern Arabs in workplaces and universities and at Bedouin schools where northern Arab teachers had come to teach, and with Israeli Jews (in the military, at work, and in higher-education institutes) (Abu-Saad, 2006). These factors, coupled with growing awareness of the importance of education (Hawaldi, 2003) and, especially, postsecondary education (Pessate-Schubert, 2003; Weisen, 1997), contributed greatly to these processes.

The next topic for discussion concerns changes directed at the internal sphere of Bedouin society itself. These changes are expressed in two aspects of moral values — changing attitudes toward children with special needs and changing attitudes toward special-education teachers.

First, we will discuss the attitudinal change that the teachers wished to generate toward children with special needs. As we have seen, such children are often treated with ignorance and its corollary, fear of contamination, to such an extent that some were hidden at home or not enrolled in the community’s kindergartens or schools. The participants wish to change this situation in southern Bedouin society. Notably, in recent years there have been some promising changes in parents’ awareness of the needs of children with disabilities and their right to services and education, and greater utilization of existing services. Nevertheless, as Strosberg et al. (2008) suggest, parents’ treatment of their children with special needs, especially those with mental retardation, still has a long way to go. The needed change may be even greater among parents who live in unrecognized villages than among those who dwell in permanent settlements.

Another attitudinal change that these teachers wish to generate concerns the self-perception of children with special needs. These children often internalize society’s view of them and, consequently, perceive themselves as inferior, helpless, and unentitled. The teachers who participated in the present study wish to help these children to view themselves as capable persons who can learn, advance, and succeed in their lives.

Second, the teachers aspired to change the prevailing attitude toward special-education teachers. Bedouin society’s prejudices against children with special needs resulted in stereotypes of the children’s teachers as people who should be kept at arm’s length. The participants in our study wished to change the attitude toward, and the treatment of, special-education teachers into appreciation of their professionalism and the educational challenges with which they cope. Shohat (1991) briefly described the changes that occurred in status of Bedouin teacher from the pre-Israel period to the 1990s. Thus, where teachers had once been figures of authority (based on their role, education, and social status) in the eyes of parents and students, their status has depreciated due to demographic and socio-political changes. Shohat’s description was echoed in our participants’ narratives, which indicated depreciation in society’s view of teachers. (Notably, however, this process is not unique to Bedouin society and parallels similar processes in Israeli society at large). The participants attributed the reasons for this process to the teacher’s loss of authority, the increase of violence in schools, the growing prevalence of local teachers and educated people in general (diminishing the uniqueness of people who hold teaching certificates), and the low level of teachers’ salaries.

In contrast to this general process, it seems that the status of special-education teachers has undergone an important and substantial change in the eyes of parents and colleagues, from scorn and rejection to appreciation and respect. Nevertheless, the stigma associated with working in special education has not disappeared completely. Consequently, special-education teachers still suffer from stereotyping and marginalization in a process that closely resembles the rejection that the community and teaching staff display toward their students. The participants claimed that these processes led in some cases to attrition among teachers. Thus, one possible conclusion is that while the wheels of the Bedouin special-education cart have started moving forward, they must still travel a long and bumpy road. Teachers who choose to work in this field will have to struggle to change the attitudes toward students with special needs and the professionals who work with them.

The third sphere of influence and change is the personal one, stemming from practical motives. Teachers told us that they chose to train in special education because they wished to become better teachers who could cope efficiently with the challenges of both general education and special education. By putting it this way, they expressed the wish to create change within themselves.

Special-education teacher-training programs in Israel equip students with a range of tools with which to cope with diverse learning difficulties and challenging behaviors. Children who present these challenges are often mainstreamed in general education by law and the general-education teacher has to respond to these needs. Thus, it was obvious to teachers who first trained in general education that the acquisition of the knowledge and skills that the special-education training program imparts would allow them to become better teachers in general education as well, enabling them to help their students with special needs to advance. This desire indicates not only a personal change (personal, professional, and social) but also internal motivation to help others while criticizing current practices within the social, political, cultural environment in which they function.

Interestingly, most of the participants did not single out school principals as persons who encouraged them to specialize in special education, despite growing awareness among general school principals of mainstreaming and the needs of children with special needs (Palti, 2004). The explanation may be twofold: first, although awareness of mainstreaming among principals has been growing, it has not been transformed into the development of personnel who would specialize in teaching children with special needs. Second, the participants may have wished to attribute their choice of training in special education to internal motives in order to reinforce their ideological self-perception as agents of social change.

In sum, the choice of special-education training reflects an important trend among teachers who are motivated to bring about changes in Bedouin society that will narrow the discrepancy between traditional Bedouin and modern Western education. The perception of education as leverage for change, advancement, social mobility, and empowerment is well documented in the literature. For example, Su (1996) found that about one-third of U.S. ethnic-minority students (as opposed to none of the Caucasian students) showed heightened awareness to the difficulties and inequality that face many students who belong to ethnic-minority groups or come from impoverished families, and wished to serve as agents of social change. Other researchers, who investigated the education of indigenous groups, emphasized the need to consider the unique local, cultural knowledge, perspectives and aspirations in the planning and implementation of education for children and youth (Chapagne, 2006; Krätli & Dyer, 2006). From a global perspective, the present study’s findings indicate that this issue is important for Bedouin teacher-training programs as well.

The choice of special-education training may instigate the most meaningful change in southern Bedouin society for several reasons. The first has to do with the discrepancy between the great need to provide special-education services to a large number of children with special needs, a need that has not received a proper response...
for many years, and the current opportunity to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills for the provision of professional services to these children and their families. The second reason, in our opinion, is that the teachers who participated in this study understood that special education is an arena in which they could create the greatest change in southern Bedouin society’s attitudes—from ignorance, fear, and marginalization to a more modern attitude of acceptance and professional services for this student population. This attitudinal change may transform the positioning of southern Bedouin society markedly—rendering it into a modern and advanced society within the larger society of Israel.

Finally, these teachers probably understood that changing the treatment of children with special needs is not merely a minute, limited change, but could become an all-encompassing change that will apply to all members of society—children, teachers and parents. Hence, the change that they are spearheading may cast a teaching career in special education in southern Bedouin society, 5.1. Implications for future research

5.1. Implications for future research

Future research should ask whether there are substantial differences between men and women in the process of choosing a teaching career in special education in southern Bedouin society, and to what extent the Bedouin community’s negative attitudes toward special education lead to burnout and attrition in the special-education field or even from the teaching profession altogether. In addition, it would be interesting to follow up this group of teachers after they have taught for several years, and investigate whether they have managed to generate the changes they aspire to create, and what supported or hindered these changes.

Is the choice of training in special education as a key for change also exists among the larger Arab–Israeli minority, and in other minorities in Israel (e.g., Ethiopian or former U.S.S.R immigrants)? Is this phenomenon similar to other minority groups in other cultures?

In a more practical sense, it would be interesting to examine whether teacher-training programs in which minority group members enroll address their ‘hidden agenda’, as was reflected in our study.

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