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## Draft

### To Sir with Love: Advancing Civic Awareness through Cross Communal Teachings

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One of the most iconic school movies, "To Sir with Love," features Sidney Poitier as a teacher in an inner-city school who generates a transformative marvel of the kind Hollywood loves to admire. The movie reflects our expectations of the ideal teacher who, by the mere power of his charisma, overcomes all difficulties, unveils his students' hidden skills, and eases their way into maturity. But there is a twist in the plot. The teacher is Black; when the movie came out in the late 60s that wasn't at all to be taken for granted.

Poitier was elevated into an icon; the admirable young black man who defied all expectations and captured the hearts and minds of his students and all other viewers. Awarding him the Medal of Freedom, Obama defined Poitier not as a movie star or film-maker but as an instigator of artistic excellence and American progress. A milestone in American life.

The film score, sung by Lulu, became a hit, reiterated in endless graduation ceremonies. As she leaves school she sends a message of gratitude to the person who shaped her life: "I know that I am leaving my best friend / A friend who taught me right from wrong / and weak from strong. That's a lot to learn / What! What can I give you in return?"

This paper examines the likelihood that 'the Poitier effect' can be reproduced in the new reality of diversity and polarization. Poitier was an embodiment of all consensual values – this was his ticket into the mainstream.<sup>1</sup> "To Sir with Love" is, then, a movie characteristic of an age of thin diversity in which each player, including 'the other,' plays by the rules of the majority. In a polarized age characterized by a lack of common rules, where there is no agreement on how to distinguish "right from wrong and weak from strong," can teachers in general, and teachers from minority groups in particular, pave their students' way into civic maturity, preparing them to become virtuous, active citizens?

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<sup>1</sup> We are well aware of that the Poitier Effect is a double edged sword. As Hollywood's first black leading man, Poitier came to signify to the white status quo a form of racial reconciliation. His roles as a teacher overcoming the prejudice of students in To Sir with Love, carried a silent (false) message that race no longer matters. (Sharon Willis The Poitier Effect (University of Minnesota Press, 2015) As the paper unfolds we hope that it will be clear that we seek a different effect that dignifies the identity of the participants. Moreover, it wishes to make diversity, and the complexity it carries, present in the life of children and the general community.

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Based on research done in Israel we argue that meeting an admirable teacher who belongs to 'the other' has the potential to be transformative, teach children how to respect diversity, and ameliorate social and political polarization.

In 2020 the Israeli prize for the 'Teacher of the Year' was awarded to Alya Wadi Kadach, a Muslim woman, who covers her head with a hijab and wears traditional garments. Entering a mall or a coffee shop she is a security suspect. In her school she is hero. She is an outstanding math teacher who works in Eilat, a city that votes mostly for right wing parties and is not known for its progressiveness. And yet parents and students alike recommended Alya for the prize. Children testified that they love studying with her because she is not only a good teacher but also attentive and generous. Parents loved Alya because her students passed exams with distinction. Everyone agreed that Alya is one of the best assets of their school. For the lucky students, teachers and parents who know Alya the stereotype of traditional Arab women was shaken. Through their relationship with her they were able to humanize 'the other' and give it a name. When Alya's students meet Arab women wearing traditional garments, rather than being afraid they are curious and say: "They look like Alya; let's ask if they know her."

### **From Liberal Diversity to Effective Polarization**

The Sidney Poitier kind of diversity is grounded in one of two social conditions:

- (a) Members of the diverse groups that constitute a society share an agreed upon set of basic norms and principles or;
- (b) The dominant group dictates the norms and principles while members of other groups abide by these rules.<sup>2</sup>

Under such conditions civic education can nurture respect for consensual norms and rules and foster productive social dialogue. It teaches children the importance of a democratic theory of education that "in the face of our social disagreements, helps us judge (a) who should have authority to make decisions about education, and (b) what the moral boundaries of that authority are." [Gutmann, 1987, p. 11].

While many assume that in modern democracies thin diversity is a stable state of affairs, thick diversity was brewing underneath the surface; in recent years it has erupted, leading to growing polarization. The move from diverse to polarize societies, (or from thin to thick diversity), marks the erosion of the foundations of social agreement and undermines the power of civic education.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a similar distinction to thin and thick multiculturalism, I offer in Two Concepts of Multiculturalism. (Tamir 1995)

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Polarization is not the same as disagreement about how to solve public policy problems, which is healthy and natural in a democracy. Polarization is more than just having a different opinion from your neighbor about certain issues. Polarization occurs when we refuse to live next to a neighbor who doesn't share our politics, or when we won't send our children to a racially integrated school. The force that empowers polarization is tribalism: clustering ourselves into groups that compete against each other in a zero-sum game, where negotiation and compromise are perceived as betrayal, whether those groups are political, racial, economic, religious, gender, or generational. (Jilani, Adam-Smith 2019)

Gidron, Adams and Horn (2020) define this kind of polarization as **effective polarization** that results from the breakdown of epistemological and moral norms and leads to growing social isolationism, geographical segregation, partisan sources of information and territorial voting patterns.

In polarized societies attempts to draft an agreed upon civic curriculum lead to the realization that ALL views are contested. No opinion can be sheltered under the protection of 'neutrality' and all need to be balanced. Disagreement is everywhere. Each group tries to gain more ground. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2021 a bill was passed in the Wisconsin Assembly declaring that all schools must follow a statewide civics curriculum, and all students obliged to take at least half a credit in civics education in order to graduate. The required civics curriculum would have to include teaching the history and context of the Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights and “a sense of civic pride and desire to participate regularly with government at all levels.” It was passed in the Assembly in a 60-38 party-line vote, stirring a nationwide controversy. (Associated Press 2021)

Opponents argued that the bill intends to prevent teachers from teaching Critical Race Theory. Supporters suggested that the theory is racist as it assumes that all white people, due to their race affiliation and regardless of their doings, are to be blamed for past injustices towards blacks. It forces children to feel shameful and blameworthy for something they did not do.

In testimony before a joint meeting of the Assembly and Senate education committees in August, Rep. Chuck Wighers, one of the co-authors of the bill, outlined a list of terms and concepts that the authors believe violate the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution and should be prohibited from discussion in classrooms. The very long list makes one wonder what moral and political issues could be discussed in schools if the following 100 concepts are banned:

Critical Race Theory (CRT); Action Civics; Social Emotional Learning (SEL); Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI); Culturally responsive teaching; Abolitionist teaching; Affinity groups; Anti-racism; Anti-bias training; Anti-blackness; Anti-meritocracy; Obtuse

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meritocracy; Centering or de-centering; Collective guilt; Colorism; Conscious and unconscious bias; Critical ethnic studies; Critical pedagogy; Critical self-awareness; Critical self-reflection; Cultural appropriation/misappropriation; Cultural awareness; Cultural competence; Cultural proficiency; Cultural relevance; Cultural responsiveness; Culturally responsive practices; De-centering whiteness; Deconstruct knowledges; Diversity focused; Diversity training; Dominant discourses; Educational justice; Equitable; Equity; Examine “systems”; Free radical therapy; Free radical self/collective care; Hegemony; Identity deconstruction; Implicit/Explicit bias; Inclusivity education; Institutional bias; Institutional oppression; Internalized racial superiority; Internalized racism; Internalized white supremacy; Interrupting racism; Intersection; Intersectionality; Intersectional identities; Intersectional studies; Land acknowledgment; Marginalized identities; Marginalized/Minoritized/Under-represented communities; Microaggressions; Multiculturalism; Neo-segregation; Normativity; Oppressor vs. oppressed; Patriarchy; Protect vulnerable identities; Race essentialism; Racial healing; Racialized identity; Racial justice; Racial prejudice; Racial sensitivity training; Racial supremacy; Reflective exercises; Representation and inclusion; Restorative justice; Restorative practices; Social justice; Spirit murdering; Structural bias; Structural inequity; Structural racism; Systemic bias; Systemic oppression; Systemic racism; Systems of power and oppression; Unconscious bias; White fragility; White privilege; White social capital; White supremacy; Whiteness; Woke. (Riley Vetterkind, 2021)

A desire to rephrase the language to shape moral discourse is not unique to Wisconsin. Recently Brandeis University published a “suggested language list” including concepts that should not be used in the classroom as they may be considered violent. The list is described as a compilation of alternatives to words and phrases with “roots, histories, and/or current usage that can serve to reinforce systems of oppression” and flags words like “victim” and “survivor.” A Brandeis spokesman stated that while Brandeis is firmly committed to principles of free expression, the list is an accessible resource for anyone who wants to consider their own language “in an effort to be respectful of others who may have different reactions to certain norms and behaviors.”

Under these circumstances civic education, and many other fields of knowledge, become volatile, with each discussion likely to trigger insoluble conflicts which schools are eager to avoid. (Hess 2018, 2009; Paul Benjamin and Hayosh 2021), Schools thus adhere to teaching the remnants of social agreement, mostly structural and procedural issues. The moral heart of civics as a field of study is uprooted from the curricular body that remains lifeless. No wonder less teachers want to teach civics and less students are eager to study it.

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When discourse is silenced, one needs to seek for a set of actions that will allow for a safe meeting space; taking actions that have the potential to reduce hostility, humanize others, and promote attentiveness to their needs. One way of humanizing the other is personal contact. We thus turn to the Contact Theory examining its effects on mitigating conflictual, polarized realities and nurturing civic virtues.

Rather than attempting to overcome differences and reduce hostility by rational deliberations, the Contact Theory posits humanizing others by getting to know them, spending time together doing things all participants enjoy and care about. Are such meetings effective in creating a common ground for shared citizenship?

### **Israel as a case study**

As the Israeli education system preceded the state, pre-state separatism replicated itself in the formal state system and led to the formation of 4 separate public-school systems: General Jewish, Religious Jewish, Arab, and Ultra-orthodox, each serving its own community. In the absence of a joint school system children and teachers from the different communities rarely meet and engage with each other.

Proponents of shared society attempt to structure opportunities for teachers and students to engage in cross-cultural, cross-religious contacts hoping that such meetings will ignite a sense of community, of mutual responsibilities, and common goals. Aware of the explosive power of direct dialogue meetings are usually set up not to solve social and political conflicts but to involve children in playing or studying together; meeting 'the other' in a friendly environment allows participants to open up and see 'the other' in a different light. When, playing together children may find that 'the other' is a good sport, or a generous teammate, or that they share a sense of humor or a love of music. They may want others to be on their team or teach them something they don't know.

Meetings set to break the separatist reality bring children together to a limited number of joint activities. Despite their discontinuous nature such meetings offer direct, unmediated interaction between members of estranged and hostile groups. In his book "The Nature of Prejudice" the social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954) claims that prejudice can best be reduced when interactions occur between individuals of equal status who cooperate to promote common interests. Positive effects are stronger when social institutions and the public sphere legitimize the encounters.

Based on this theory thousands of encounters between conflicted groups were initiated in Israel with an attempt to fight prejudice and racism, or advance active and egalitarian citizenship. Yifat Maoz, (2011), flowed and analyzed Jewish-Arab encounters over 20 years, investigating

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their effects. In her meta-analysis she argues that contacts attempting to promote coexistence or stimulate joint projects tend to preserve and perpetuate the dominance and control of the Jewish majority group, encouraging Arab submission and passivity. Contacts that were structured to deal with more controversial issues positively influence trust and empathy, and increase understanding of the intricacies of the conflict; yet they also stimulated verbal violence and led to the escalation of the conflict. Finding the right balance is a difficult task. Paul-Binyamin & Haj-Yehia who examined the structure of encounters between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, found that folkloristic encounters frustrated the participants while conflictual meetings kept them apart. Paul-Binyamin & Haj-Yehia, (2019), Jayusi (2011) and Rosen & Perkins (2013) claim that though sporadic cross communal encounters contribute to a short-term change in standpoints of young adults. They have negligible long-term effects, participants feel that the encounters are an external "project" that invades their daily routine and will soon fade away.

Aiming to reduce hostility between conflicting groups requires a more permanent investment. Cross-cultural teaching that places Israeli Palestinian teachers to teach in Jewish schools and Jewish teachers to teach in Arab schools – is an attempt to create continuous engagements that become an integral part of school life. When teachers enter the school of ‘the other’ they create relationships are not merely between equal-status partners as the Contact Theory recommends; they also turn the existing social and political hierarchy turns bottom up. The teacher is an authority; being the owner of knowledge, defining the educational agenda and evaluation methods. The encounter enables students to experience the teacher not only as a human being, but also as a knowledgeable person, an authority, and often as a beloved educational figure.

### **Minority teachers in majority schools**

It is a widely-held assumption that placement of minority teachers in majority schools helps overcome cultural and lingual barriers (Irvine, 1989; Strasser & Waburg, 2015). In the United States, for instance, the issue of integrating teachers of color in majority schools has been researched since the 1970s (King, 1993). Researchers unanimously agree that teachers from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds contribute extensively to creating a more open and egalitarian school system (Easton-Brooks, Lewis, & Yang, 2010; Irvine & Fenwick, 2011). Similarly, Cherg and Halpin, (2016), claim that students who were exposed to minority teachers had a more favorable perception of Black and Latino teachers than of non-minority teachers. McNamara and Basit, (2004), examined the experiences of British teachers of Asian and African/ Caribbean origin teaching outside their communities, concluding that the majority of the teachers found their schools supportive and their instruction process valuable; moreover,

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they felt that they play an important social role in building bridges between antagonistic communities and countering prejudice and racism both within schools and in the wider society.

Strasser & Waburg, (2015), found that in Germany hiring more minority teachers is considered a promising means of dealing with existing difficulties in diverse schools. Santoro, (2007), investigated the experiences of indigenous teachers and ethnic minority teachers in Australian schools, suggesting that the teachers' “knowledge of self” regarding ethnicity and social class enabled them to empathize with diverse groups of students from perspectives not available to teachers from the dominant cultural majority. In Hong Kong, Hue and Kennedy, (2014), examined 12 minority teachers (American, Canadian, Indian, Nepalese, and Pakistani), indicating that ethnic minority teachers were able to create a culturally responsive environment.

In 2013, the Israeli Ministry of Education decided to step-up cross-cultural teaching, aiming to incorporate 500 Israeli Palestinian teachers into Jewish schools. Merchavim, an Israeli non-governmental organization, was recruited to support Arab teachers in Jewish schools and study the progress they made. In the first year 465 Arab teachers were recruited and approximately 100 more have been recruited each year since, reaching almost 1,400 teachers by 2021 (out of Israel's 200,000 teachers) These teachers teach not only Arabic but a variety of other subjects such as English, science, special education, and other subjects. (Merchavim, 2021).

This indeed is a small sample, but following its impact is important when aiming to scale-up. Research shows that crossing the cultural and communal lines affects both teachers and students. Fragman, (2008), investigated the integration of Israeli Palestinian teachers teaching spoken Arabic in elementary schools and found that they are satisfied with their position and feel empowered by their self-definition as “ambassadors of good will.” (And yet, as the term “ambassador” indicates, they perceive themselves as external to the community, teaching their language to ‘others.’ That meant that, for the most part, they also often felt lonely, isolated, and vulnerable.)

Gindi and Erlich Ron, (2019), examined the way 163 Israeli Palestinian teachers placed in Jewish schools handled power relationships within their work place and found that they were forced to navigate between their national and professional identities. And yet Jayusi and Bekerman, (2019) conclude Israeli Palestinian teachers in Jewish schools experience a strong sense of self-efficacy, they believe their work helps reduce prejudice and increases mutual understanding among the groups in conflict. As one of them reports:

I had many experiences that changed and shaped my professional identity as a teacher and also changed and shaped the attitude of the students, parents and colleges towards

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the society from which I came. My presence in a Jewish school makes a difference. My students were curious to learn more about the ‘other,’ not to judge, [but rather] accept differences. My message is clear, the fact that we are different doesn’t make any of us less worthy of care and respect.”

The presence of Israeli Palestinian teachers in Jewish schools is too sporadic to have more than an anecdotal effect. Nevertheless, three preliminary inferences can be drawn from what we have learned so far: ongoing encounters can reduce hostility and diminish alienation when highly qualified teachers who teach a variety of subjects (not just Arabic) enter Jewish schools; when the schools are coached how to accommodate these teachers; and when the teachers themselves are well prepared to teach cross-culturally receiving ongoing support.

### **Majority teachers in minority schools**

Very few studies examine the influence of teachers from majority groups teaching in minority schools. Some evaluate the influence of white teachers on the achievements, attitudes and academic performance of black students. (Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott and Grison-Wade, 2008; Bidwell Westinson, 2016). A cross-sectional study examined the attitudes of 174 minority pre-adolescents (aged 9–13) towards the Dutch majority, indicating that Turkish and Moroccan students who studied with a teacher from the majority group had more positive attitudes toward the Dutch out-group. In such cross-communal teachings the positive aspect of the relationship (‘closeness’) was more important than the negative aspect (‘conflict’) (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2012).

In recent years a limited number of Jewish teachers were placed in Arab schools in order to help Arab students learn fluent Hebrew. Gara, (2021), investigated this process and found that most teachers reported they had a good and interesting experience. They saw their work as an opportunity to win the hearts of Arab students, reducing prejudice and misconceptions.

In cases of cross-cultural teachings an 8-stage process could be identified:

#### **Stage 1 - Cultural Alienation**

In the first stage estrangement is the prevalent as the differences embedded in the way of life, religious beliefs, norms and values, and habitual behavior distance the participants and emphasizes their otherness. In the Israeli case national ceremonies are the most stressful occasions: “It is especially difficult for me to sing the anthem at school events; days like Independence Day, Memorial Day or Holocaust Day emphasize my otherness,” says an Israeli

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Palestinian teacher. "On Memorial Day," says a Jewish teacher, "it feels awkward to see an Arab teacher standing next to the memorial site commemorating fallen students from our community."

## **Stage 2 - Creating a Community**

'Warming up' happens in the second stage. It allows communication among members of the various groups, blurring the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' in an attempt to create a joint community – 'the Teachers' Room' - where all members have equal rights. The 'Teachers' Room' is a new community embodying the principles of tolerance, respect, and trust. "The atmosphere in the staffroom is positive," reported an Israeli Palestinian teacher "I think I succeeded in reducing prejudices among a lot of teachers. The most moving moment was when a teacher who had lost her son in war and conveyed explicit hostility at the beginning of the year saying she hates all Arabs, befriended me later on".

## **Step 3 – Cross-Cultural Dialogues**

Willingness to learn about each other, and comparing differences and similarities, opens the door for more honest, personal conversations based on respectful dialogue motivated by a desire to work together in the newly created community of 'the Teachers' Room'.

## **Step 4 - Blurring Stereotypes**

The open-mindedness acquired in the initial stages allows teachers to de-emphasize the role of stereotypes and external indicators that played a major role in the first stages. Teachers now see each other as individuals with an independent identity and personality rather than anonymous members of the group of 'the other.'

## **Step 5 - Communication about Professional Aspects**

The transformation of culturally identified individuals into 'persons' allows teachers to continue to the next stage, focusing on professional issues and seeking solutions to common problems while getting to know each other. They work together on pedagogical issues, discuss way to cope with their students' difficulties and complain about school life. Mothers exchange experiences about child rearing, marriage life, communal celebrations – they bring food to the teachers' room, eat together and exchange receipts

## **Step 6 - Accepting the Other as a Member of the Profession**

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Professional communication, openness, the desire to hear the ‘other’ and perhaps even learn from them, gives teachers an opportunity to view teachers as colleagues. (Both sides attest that: “She is just like any other colleague of mine; regardless of being Jewish or Arab.”) Teachers who have reached this stage see themselves as having a joint professional identity and affiliation, emphasizing similarities rather than differences, seeking possible collaborations in an attempt to solve mutual problems. For them ‘the Teachers’ Room’ represents a unified professional space: “It’s our school,” both Jewish and Arab teachers say. “We have a common mission to succeed.”

### **Step 7 – Germs of Friendship**

In a few cases professional communications led to personal closeness: “Being honest, having open conversations, expressing empathy”; “When you know each other the relationship deepens, and you find more and resemblances.”

### **Step 8 - Accept the Other as a Personal Friend**

At the end of the process teachers belonging to different cultural groups, who started from a point of mutual alienation, establish friendships and share thoughts and hopes for a better future. The fact that they coalesce into a community reflects also on their students and the way they perceive the role of ‘the other’ in their educational community.

A functional and inclusive school community teaches by example. Coexistence is created before entering into lengthy discussions that could exacerbate tensions. Through living and working together teachers and students practice self- and mutual-respect across religious, national and gender communities, embodying civic virtues even when they cannot verbalize them. As Aristotle says:

### **Conclusions**

There is certainly room for more research on cross cultural cross communal exchanges. Yet, based on existing findings we offer the following conclusions: Teaching civics in a polarized society often increases rather than decreases social and political tensions. Educational segregation leads groups to converse within themselves in ways that intensifies polarization. Internal and external intervention pressurizes teachers to shy away from dealing with core issues that could trigger violence and accentuate social cleavages. The result is that the most volatile and important civic questions are left out of the curriculum and schools focus on technical issues, procedures, and institutions. (Tamir, 2015)

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The creation of a community of common concern and respect is best pursued by other means. Following the Contact Theory, we examined the effect of numerous cross-cultural, cross-religious encounters and found that they had a short-term effect. We then examined the option of cross-cultural/religious/ethnic teaching and discovered that it has a deeper, more lasting effect.

In order to learn more, we intend to follow teachers trained at Beit-Berl to teach in cross-communal settings. We are quite sure that cross-cultural, religious, ethnic teaching alone is not enough to hold a society together, other means must be implemented in order to revive civic spirit. And yet, cross-teaching has an exceptional potential to contribute to the development of an inclusive society and the nurturing of civic virtues. Most of all it is an effective means of humanizing the other. As Seneca wrote at the end of his treatise on the destructive effects of anger and hatred. "Soon we shall breathe our last. Meanwhile, while we live, while we are among human beings, let us cultivate our humanity." (Nussbaum, 1997, Harvard 301)

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**The American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy is distributing this draft to its members and registrants for our Zoom conference on “Civic Education in Polarized Times,” October 30, 2021, <https://political-theory.org/event-4317945>. Please do not distribute the draft further or quote or cite it without the permission of the authors: ilanapb@beitberl.ac.il; wurudj@gmail.com; yulit@beitberl.ac.il.**

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