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Perceptions of Heutagogy among Members of an Educational Community: A Case Study of an Arab Local Authority

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Abstract

Introduction

Heutagogy is defined as an innovative paradigm of learning oriented toward self-determined learning, positioning learners as agents who are responsible not only for selecting goals and content but also for creating meaning, revisiting and transforming underlying assumptions, and developing capability for learning in conditions of uncertainty (Panta, 2025).

The present study seeks to examine perceptions of heutagogy among members of an educational community within an Arab local authority in Israel. The study focuses on the potential tension between core principles of heutagogy, particularly the transfer of agency, responsibility and pedagogical power to learners, and cultural norms that emphasize hierarchy, authority and respect for elders. In this context, heutagogy is examined as a pedagogical innovation that may challenge established intergenerational relationships and role structures within the education system.

Materials and Methods

The study employed a qualitative case study approach and focused on an Arab local authority in Israel. In 2025, a municipal-level deliberative process was conducted regarding the establishment of a new elementary school based on the heutagogical approach, with the first author serving as an academic consultant. The process included eleven meetings involving key stakeholders in the local educational community: the authority's CEO and deputy CEO, the head of the innovation and development unit, the director of the education system, an inspector, three principals of existing schools as well as an ICT coordinator and teaching staff, the chair of the parents' committee and parent representatives, all involved in the new school initiative. The researchers conducted ten semi-structured interviews with participants in the meetings. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis of the meeting

protocols and the interview transcripts.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis revealed a range of attitudes toward heutagogy, spanning from support and enthusiasm, through conditional acceptance emphasizing the need for cultural adaptation and gradual implementation, to concern and resistance. The findings further indicate that the local context indeed generates cultural constraints, which are reflected in the ways heutagogy is interpreted and understood. Two groups emerged as central actors in the implementation of heutagogy within a conservative context: parents, given the importance of their cooperation with schools, and teachers, who are required to transition from authoritative teaching practices to flexible facilitation.

Based on the findings, recommendations were formulated to promote the implementation of heutagogy within the local authority, including the development of partnerships with all members of the educational community, a focus on teacher professional development, and the establishment of supportive systemic conditions. These recommendations are particularly significant in contexts where tradition shapes the boundaries of pedagogical innovation.

Keywords: Heutagogy, Traditional society, Arab local authority, Pedagogical innovation