Teachers' critical incidents: Ethical dilemmas in teaching practice

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore ethical dilemmas in critical incidents and the emerged responses that these incidents elicit. Most teachers try to suppress these incidences because of the unpleasant feelings they evoke. Fifty teachers participated in the study. A three-stage coding process derived from grounded theory was utilized. A taxonomy of critical incidents by means of the ATLAS.ti 5.0 revealed a multifaceted model of ethical dilemmas, among them clashing with rules, standards, or norms in school, as well as a multitude of derived responses. The results encourage the development of educational programmes based on teachers' critical incidents.

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1. Introduction

Teachers deal with many ethical problems in their practice. They encounter issues such as inappropriate allocation of resources, situations in which pupils are being discussed inappropriately, and irresponsible colleagues. When teachers' sense of proper action is constrained by complex factors in educational practice and decisions are made and carried out contrary to the "right course", critical incidents which involve ethical conflict and moral distress result. Hence, educational leaders can no longer afford to focus on academic curricula only, and may have to assume responsibility for empowering teachers to negotiate the diverse values in their schools (Husu & Tirri, 2007).

To meet this responsibility, a better understanding of critical incidences and ethical dilemma is needed. The aim of this study is to describe significant turning points in accounts that teachers defined as critical incidents and identify the ethical dilemmas and the derived responses that these incidents present. Teachers' heightened awareness and understanding of the ethical dilemmas they encounter may help them deal better with critical incidents they will face in the future.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Ethical dilemmas in teaching practice

Ethics draws on human dispositions, attitudes and behaviours such as valuing, selecting and acting, and is concerned with desirable actions associated with human relationships and responsibility for other people (Norberg & Johansson, 2007). An ethical dilemma is an inner conversation with the self-concerning two or more available propositions. It is a choice between two or more courses of action, when obstacles on each side hinder the decision as to which course to pursue (Berlak & Berlak, 1981).

Teaching involves moral action. Teachers are moral agents and thus classroom interaction in particular is inevitably moral in nature (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001; Shapira-Lishchinsky & Orland-Barak, 2009; Simpson & Garrison, 1995). However, according to earlier empirical studies, teachers are often unaware of the ethical ramifications of their own actions and overall practice (Husu & Tirri, 2007; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993; Tirri, 1999).

The literature on ethics in education covers a wide range of topics and dilemmas (Campbell, 2000; Colnerud, 2006; Husu & Tirri, 2001). Tension between caring for others (pupils, teachers) and maintaining formality (school rules, educational standards) stems from the tension between two ethical dimensions of the school climate — the *caring climate* and *the formal climate* (Victor & Cullen, 1988). The *caring climate* promotes attention to individual and social needs, while the *formal climate* emphasises adherence to organisational rules. Such tension can occur when a teacher has difficulty in deciding how to best care for a pupil or how to respond

to a colleague (Colnerud, 1997; Noddings, 1992) when they act against the rules (Tirri, 1999). According to Johnson (2003), our interactions with pupils frequently move beyond the classroom, and teachers must somehow strike "solidarity and authority" as a balance between being "allies" with pupils while simultaneously "retaining the kind of authority that will allow pupils to respect us" (Johnson, 2002, p. 103).

The second type of ethical dilemmas that can arise is the *tension between distributive justice and school standards*. *Distributive justice* refers to the fairness of outcomes (Greenberg, 1995), as when teachers use principles such as equity (outcomes allocated based on inputs such as effort) to evaluate the justness or unjustness of the outcome (e.g., rewards). *School standards* are the criteria that schools apply for reaching decisions. When these criteria are perceived as unfair when viewed against the outcome, an ethical dilemma arises. In conflicts regarding fairness, teachers must decide which principle of fairness is relevant in each situation – the principle of equal allocation and treatment or the principle of differential allocation and treatment. This is the case when teachers must decide whether to focus on one needy pupil or on all pupils equally (Colnerud, 1997).

Confidentiality versus school rules, the third type of ethical dilemmas, arises when teachers must choose between maintaining the trust of a confiding pupil and abiding by school rules which obligate them to report the confided information to administration and parents. In some cases, teachers knew something about the pupil that even the parents did not know, and found these situations uncomfortable, revealing worry about the pupils who had confided in them. The teachers asked themselves whether their role as a teacher included handling these types of situations, as such sensitive matters are usually referred to professional therapists. Here the dilemma of confidentiality encompassed the teacher's decision on their professional boundaries (Tirri, 1999).

The fourth type of ethical dilemmas is between *loyalty to colleagues and school norms* (e.g., protecting pupils). Teachers sometimes witness a colleague mistreating a pupil, or are informed of such mistreatment that is not in line with school norms, and find it difficult to confront the colleague (Campbell, 1996). Conversely, devoted teachers may be accused by their colleagues as being too soft. The latter situation reveals a paradox – while it is not acceptable to criticise a teacher for persecuting the pupils regarding school norms, it is acceptable to comment adversely on considerate teacher (Colnerud, 1997).

The literature also describes the recurrence of a fifth type of ethical dilemmas, when the *educational agenda of the pupil's family is not consistent with the school's educational standards*. Parents view teachers as the school's standard bearers. Teachers face a dilemma when their perception of the child's best interest differs from that of the parents (Campbell, 2000). Klaassen (2002) found that teachers were quite critical of the manner in which parents raise their children, and believe that parents should impose more rules and be more consistent in their child rearing. In turn, parents criticise teachers for lacking a clear pedagogical policy and for the minimal communication with parents regarding the values they teach. Klaassen (2002) found that some teachers tend to see parents as customers of the educational system. In keeping with the adage that the customer is always right, even when teachers are convinced that they are right and can justify their position as being in the best interest of pupils, they tend to adopt a reserved attitude.

These ethical dilemmas, and others not listed here, illuminate the complexity of the teaching profession, and the uncertainty and ambiguity that accompany the discussion of ethics in education (Johnston, Juhász, Marken, & Ruiz, 1998). Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2005) multiple-paradigm approach offers four distinct lenses through which contemporary educational dilemmas can be viewed:

the ethics of justice, the ethics of critique, the ethics of care, and the ethics of profession. Their model emphasises that practice in working through a multiple ethical paradigm will provide a broadened perspective when dealing with complex and difficult ethical dilemmas. Johnson (2002) also sees ethical dilemmas and clashing values as an inherent part of the relation between teachers and pupils.

In sum, the variety of ethical dilemmas which teachers encounter (Lovat & Clement, 2008; Mayhew & King, 2008) and the numerous functions and roles teachers are expected to fulfill are the source of teachers' critical incidents. Most studies indicate that teachers perceive themselves as powerless and lacking adequate tools for reaching decisions (Block, 2008; Campbell, 2006; Carr, 2005; Colnerud, 2006; Gore & Morrison 2001; Husu & Tirri 2007; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2009). Thus, there is a need for in-depth research on how teachers perceive and cope with ethical dilemmas in their work. The present study aims to tackle these very issues through critical incident analysis.

2.2. Critical incidents and education

The critical incident technique was developed during World War II as an outgrowth of the Aviation Psychology Program of the US Air Force for selecting and classifying aircrews (Flanagan, 1954). Today, critical incidents have become a widely used qualitative research method in such diverse disciplines as nursing (Kemppainen, O'Brien, & Corpuz, 1998), medicine (Humphery & Nazarath, 2001), organisational learning (Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002), counseling (Dix & Savickas, 1995) and education and teaching (Le Mare & Sohbat, 2002; Parker, 1995; Tirri & Koro-Ljungberg, 2002).

Critical incident is usually an undesirable situation that has been experienced by an employee (Keatinge, 2002; Pike, 1991; Rosenal, 1995; Wolf & Zuzelo, 2006). It "comes from history where it refers to some event or situation which marked a significant turning point or change in the life of a person…or in some social phenomenon" (Tripp, 1993, p. 24).

In the educational system, critical incidents are not necessarily sensational events involving a lot of tensions. Rather, they may be minor incidents that happen in every school. Their classification as critical incidents is based on the significance and the meaning that the teachers attribute to them (Angelides, 2001).

Critical incidents are important to identify. They may be detrimental to teachers' professional development as they may lead them to prefer one action over another when encountering similar situations (Measor, 1985; Woods, 1993). Nott and Wellington (1995) used critical incidents to help teachers deal better with pupils' inappropriate behaviour.

Griffin (2003) examined the effectiveness of using critical incidents in a supervised field experience in order to develop reflective and critical thinking skills. Her results showed that reflecting on critical incidents increased orientation towards growth and inquiry. Thus, by encouraging teachers to reflect on critical incidents, it is anticipated that they will know how to deal better with ethical dilemmas in the future (Nilsson, 2009).

Critical incidents reports can also be a valuable tool in mitigating ethical tensions in education as they facilitate error management, standards of support and professional autonomy.

2.2.1. Error management

Critical incident reports can offer a safe and "mistake-forgiving" method whereby both the people who recount the reports and the people who hear them learn from these errors without the risk of harming others (e.g., teachers, pupils, parents). Learning from errors is a key component of improving expertise (Griffin, 2003). Teachers sometimes handle educational mistakes by denial, discounting personal responsibility, and distancing themselves from

consequences (Colnerud, 2006; Husu & Tirri, 2003; Thornberg, 2008). In such cases, critical incident reports could help break the code of silence regarding undesirable outcomes and mistakes in teaching (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundsen, & Maglio, 2005).

2.2.2. Standards of support

Teachers and pupils have the right to receive the best care and support that can be reasonably provided (Tirri & Koro-Ljungberg, 2002). The use of critical incident reports can convey an ethical message to all educational leaders that teachers and pupils must be protected whenever possible.

2.2.3. Professional autonomy

Critical incident reports can promote teachers' professional autonomy in several ways: (1) Critical incident reports promote self-directed professional *action*, which means that teachers develop a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching practice via continuous reflection (Little, 1995); (2) Critical incident reports promote self-directed professional *development*, which means that teachers become aware of how pedagogical skills can be *acquired* through self-reflection (Smith, 2001); and (3) Critical incident reports enable teachers to have *control* over their professional actions and their professional development (McGrath, 2000; Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002). Limited professional autonomy often leads to defensiveness, uncertainty, and fear (Ashforth & Lee, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989), which are not conducive to dealing with critical incidents (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000).

An analysis of critical incidents involves a close examination of past events in order to enlighten us to the possibility of unproblematised values (Tripp, 1993). Johnson (2003) argued that critical incidents force us to reflect the clashing values in the school's educational process. Colnerud (1997) proposes that the best way to explore the issues of teachers' ethical dilemmas is by examining the critical incidents they face in their relationships with others in their professional life. He used the critical incident technique to investigate both the ethical conflicts teachers face and the conditions that contribute to those conflicts.

This study is an attempt for an in-depth understanding of teachers' ethical dilemmas through studying their critical incidents, which may help educational leaders to develop moral educational programmes focusing on requiring new ethical knowledge.

2.3. Teachers' ethical knowledge

Ethical knowledge is about an introduction into values and morality, to give teachers knowledge about how to relate to other people, together with the ability to apply the values and rules intelligently (Aspin, 2000; Thornberg, 2008). According to Taylor (1994), ethical knowledge may encourage exploration of choices and commitment to responsibilities and develop value preferences and an orientation to guide attitudes and behaviour. Ethical knowledge enables teachers to make conceptual and practical links between core moral and ethical values and their daily choices and actions. Its moves teachers beyond viewing teaching solely in technical and evaluative terms to appreciating the potentially moral and ethical impact of their practice, both formally and informally, on pupils (Campbell, 2006).

However, despite the magnitude of teachers' ethical dilemmas, worldwide studies (Bergdahl, 2006; Franberg, 2006; Mahony, 2009; Skolverent, 1999) indicate that teacher education currently pays insufficient attention to teachers' ethical understanding as a necessary element of their professional knowledge. Hence, the teachers appear to lack ethical knowledge based on educational theories, research and their own experience (Sockett & Lepage, 2002). With a lack of professional tools based on a common knowledge base,

teachers appear to be left to their own personal resources without any guidelines from ethical theories and educational sciences.

While the literature on education often addresses philosophy and moral education, these are not an integral and explicit part of routine teacher education (Ling, 1998). Based on a survey of 26 European countries, Taylor (1994) concludes that training teachers in teaching methods appropriate to values education is widely lacking. A survey study conducted in Australia, Ireland, Israel, Slovenia, and England indicates that teachers, in many cases, were unable to reflect critically on values and values education and to articulate their attitudes towards them (Stephenson, Ling, Burman, & Cooper, 1998). In pinpointing the dilemmas face in critical incidences and categorizing them, the findings of the present study could provide a foundation for constructing programmes for enhancing teachers' ethical knowledge.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The data were collected in 2009 from 50 teachers (40 women, 10 men) in 50 Israeli schools (secondary schools and high schools) in seven regional districts as defined by the Ministry of Education (7–8 teachers from each district). The teachers, who were interviewed for this study, worked in schools varying in size, type (state schools/religious state schools) and geographical location, yielding a representative cross-section sample of practising teachers in Israeli schools. The ratio of women to men in the study reflects the general composition of Israeli teaching personnel (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The teachers were from different disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., English, mathematics, special education), their average age was 39.80 (SD = 8.70) years and their average tenure was 15.2 years (SD = 10.70).

3.2. Data collection

After receiving approval from the Ministry of Education, the author approached principals of 50 different secondary schools and high schools, explained the goals of the study, and asked that one teacher per school participate. All the principals agreed. Research assistants were then interviewed and hired by the principal researcher. They were asked to randomly approach one potential participant from each school on our list (working with code numbers and no identifying details). In the case of refusal, another potential participant was randomly chosen. Of the teachers approached, 75% agreed to participate in the study and all of them were interviewed.

Next, a research assistant met each participating teacher at school and explained the goals of the study in greater detail. The participating teacher also received a formal letter which stated the researcher's obligation to preserve anonymity according to the Helsinki Committee, an obligation that was a contributing factor in attaining willingness to participate. The participants signed an informed consent form, including specific consent to audio-record the interviews. The interviews, conducted at the teachers' convenience, took place in an empty room at the school. Each interview lasted 45–50 minutes each and was audio-recorded.

In the interview, the teachers were asked to provide stories describing difficult ethical situations they had encountered. Because the study contained sensitive ethical issues, the research assistants were specifically instructed as to how and which questions to ask. Following are some sample questions from the interviews:

Focus on a critical incident, a turning point which you experienced in your educational practice:

- Can you share one or more ethical dilemmas with me?

- Can you give a detailed account of the incident/s?
- What were the general circumstances leading to the incident?
- What did you do in that situation?
- What did others involved in the incident do?
- How did other people's actions affect your behaviour?
- How could you have behaved differently?

3.3. Data analysis

Participants were identified by a code number, and information linking code numbers to individuals was destroyed upon completion of the data analysis. All participants' names were changed to ensure anonymity. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and processed as text. We selected grounded theory (GT) as our methodology because it emphasises the emergence of ideas and themes from raw data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In the words of Strauss and Corbin (1998): "Grounded theories… offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaning guide to action" (p. 12). Data analysis was conducted by the principal researcher and his research assistants in a three-stage coding process derived from grounded theory, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and described below:

3.3.1. Open coding

Open coding involves the examination, comparison, conceptualization, and categorization of data. Raw data are examined for similarities and differences, and initial conceptual categories are identified. In the open coding stage of data analysis for the current study, preliminary categories were identified by examining similarities in responses. Initial examination of the data revealed a considerable number of ethical dilemmas and derived responses to them. Categories were derived for only those responses where there was an obvious similarity in theme (e.g., "I had a pupil that I liked very much" and "I developed a close relationship with an enchanting and bright pupil" were coded as "caring climate").

3.3.2. Axial coding

In the axial coding stage, data are put together by making connections between categories and subcategories. A *category* is a problem, an event that is defined as being significant to respondents and has the ability to explain what is going on; a *subcategory* answers the questions about the phenomenon such as when, how, and with what consequences, thus, giving the category greater explanatory power.

Emphasis is on specifying categories based on context that influence various responses. The process of relating categories to their subcategories is called "axial" because coding occurs around the axis of a category. For example, in the current study we found five subcategories for the category "caring climate versus formal climate" (an example of one such derived subcategories is "be more familiar with the rules before action" which answer the question "when").

3.3.3. Selective coding

Selective coding involves selecting the core categories and organising them around a central explanatory concept. Categories are further integrated (e.g., by using diagrams), and a grounded theory is developed. Fig. 1 illustrates our main findings in this study. The figure shows a multifaceted model of ethical dilemmas involving the clash between different ethical values and rules, standards or norms in school. The central category found was "Teachers' critical incidents: Ethical dilemmas in teaching practice," with five core categories of ethical dilemmas related to it, each with subcategory or subcategories.

Previous studies have indicated that researchers sometimes fail to recognise the critical incident that a teacher considers critical (Angelides, 2001; Berlak & Berlak, 1981; Lyons, 1990). Therefore, to avoid this pitfall, it is recommended that each emerging theme be examined from different perspectives to better understand it (Schon, 1995). Accordingly, in this study, research assistants first analysed the data independently and then discussed the possible categories collaboratively. The principal researcher analysed the entire data set independently. Then, the principal researcher and research assistants used a cross-checking procedure of independently coding data. They met to reflect on the emerging categories, searching the data for disconfirming and confirming evidence to support the findings. The number of agreements over disagreements was calculated against the principal researcher's response codes, yielding 94% reliability scores. The cross-checking procedure was taken in order to establish the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis procedures (Boardman & Woodruff, 2004).

To ensure accurate analysis, we coded and analysed the data using ATLAS.ti 5.0 − a software package that performs qualitative analysis of textual data. The automatic coding allows the user to collect text passages from one or more text documents (Crego, Alcover de la Hera, & Martinez-Inigo, 2008) and to methodically organise and document themes within the data (Muhr, 2004). The software facilitates but does not replace the data analysis done by trained researchers who link abstract ideas to specific text and hypotheses (Miller, 2000)

4. Findings

4.1. The nature of critical incidents reports in teaching

From a total of 50 critical incidents, we formed five main categories as follows:

1. Caring climate versus formal climate.
2. Distributive justice versus school standards.
3. Confidentiality versus school rules.
4. Loyalty to colleagues versus school norms
5. Family agenda versus educational standards

The most frequently discussed category was "caring climate versus formal climate" (18 incidents), followed by "distributive justice versus school standards" (13 incidents) and "confidentiality versus school rules" (9 incidents). Cases relating to "loyalty to colleagues versus school norms" (6 incidents) and "family agenda versus educational standards" (4 incidents) were found less frequently. In the following sections, we elaborate on each of these categories and their subcategories.

4.1.1. Caring climate versus formal climate (18 incidents)

This category focuses on the teacher−pupil interaction whereby the teacher's dilemma lies in choosing between personal needs and obeying school rules; each of the five subcategories is a different response to the same type of dilemma. The first example is one of six critical incidents in the subcategory *"be more familiar with the rules before action"* in which the teacher's response was a resolve to be more familiar with the rules before deciding on an action in the future, especially regarding issues that may be seen as taking care of personal affairs.

There is one event from 21 years ago that is stamped in my memory. I had a family affair and I asked the secretary to be excused from the last hour. The secretary told me that she could not find a substitute teacher and that I should tell the pupils to stay in the library. The next day, when I came to work, one of the teachers met me and asked me: "Have you heard what had happened? Yesterday, your pupils had a fight during the last period and one of them is
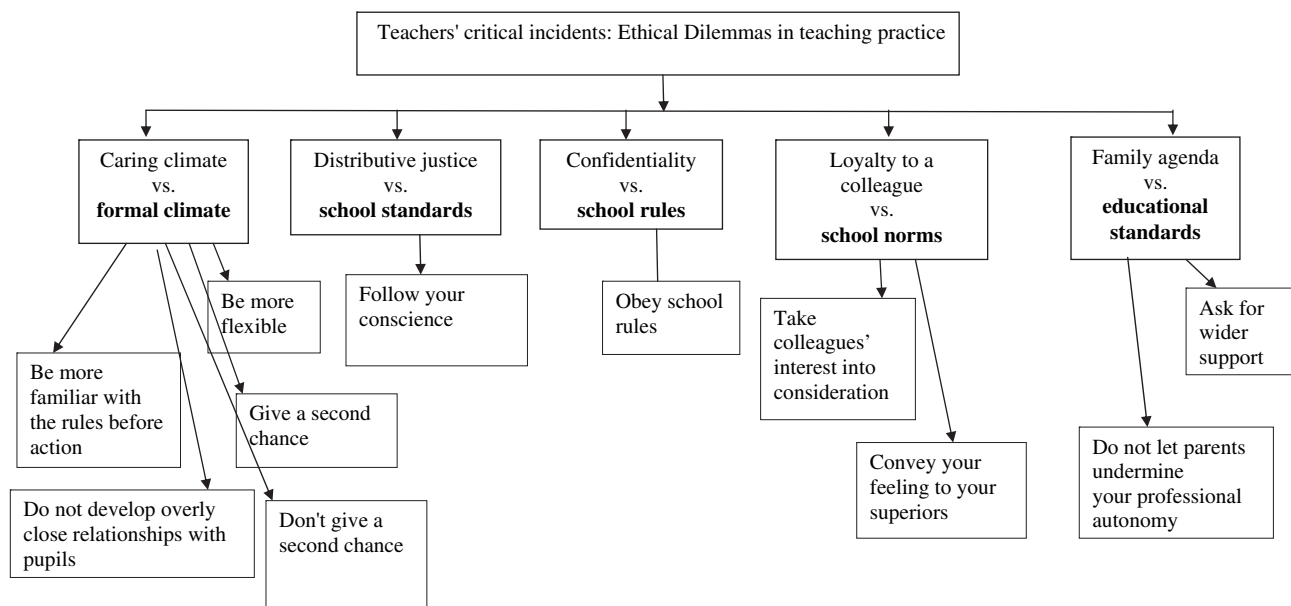
Fig. 1. The multifaceted nature of critical incidents reports: Categories and subcategories (The words in bold represent the formal aspect of teachers' ethical dilemmas).

hospitalised with an eye wound." I was totally shocked and felt responsible for what had happened. Legally, I don't know if there are rules about leaving school before the end of the day. I had a feeling that there might be a problem. This event is strongly etched in my memory, and I decided then that in the future, if I'm not sure about the rules, I'll always ask for clarifications (Rafi, male, 63 years old, coordinator in a high school).

In this incident, although Rafi was not sure that he was acting according to the rules, Rafi decided to leave, putting his personal affairs above caring for pupils. Because of this traumatic event, he decided that in the future, if he was not sure about the rules, he would always ask for clarifications.

The second example is one of five critical incidents in the subcategory *"be more flexible"*. In this example, the tension between caring for the pupils and school rules has led the teacher to an opposite conclusion, to be less formal in the future.

Josef was an excellent pupil. During the period of the pre-matriculation exams, he was also studying for the psychometric exams to get into medical school. He was under a lot of pressure… The day before the exam in Arabic, he asked me if he could do the test at a later date. I told him that there was no VIP treatment in the exams; the date of the exam had been set a month earlier and he should have been prepared. During the exam, he was caught trying to copy from a note and his exam was disqualified. He lost a whole year of university because of that one missing test even though he got a high mark in the psychometric exams. I was a little disappointed in myself. I may have made a rash decision without thinking about the outcome. I regret my lack of flexibility. Maybe I should have postponed the exam for him and for a few other pupils for whom the date of the exam was inconvenient (Shai, male, 40 years old, coordinator in a high school).

This example again demonstrates the tension between caring climate (the desire to bend the rules regarding the date of the test and allowing Josef to do the test at a later date) and formal climate (which focuses on following school rules regarding the date of the test). Shai's response after the incident is regret for not being flexible. He now believes that this case should have been treated with more sensitivity and flexibility, even though it meant bending school rules.

The third example is one of two critical incidents in the subcategory *"give a second chance"*. In this example, the teacher chose to be compassionate and give the pupil a second chance. She did not regret her response.

In the other class, there was a boy named Shuki who broke all the rules. He had dozens of police records. Due to his behaviour, his homeroom teacher refused to have him in her class any longer. Shuki was about to be expelled from school… The principal asked me time and again to take Shuki into my class, pleading with me that I was Shuki's last chance. I finally agreed. Shuki transferred to my class and promised that he would behave properly. Unfortunately, the reality was quite different. A month passed and I went to see him at his workplace. I talked to him. I did not realise at the time how much this talk had meant to him. He ended up receiving the 'best recruit award' at the end of his basic training in the army. … I am always willing to give a second chance and I believe in every pupil (Ruth, female, 55 years old, homeroom teacher in a high school).

According to school rules (formal climate), Shuki should have been expelled from school. However, Ruth gave him a second chance (caring climate) and thus probably saved him from becoming a criminal. Ruth responded to this ethical dilemma with a strong conviction that she would do whatever she could in order to help her pupil.

The fourth example is one of two critical incidents in the subcategory *"don't give a second chance"*. In this example, the teacher regretted being compassionate and giving a second chance, and believed, in retrospect, that the caring climate and formal climate were not in conflict, but rather are complementary.

I had a pupil that I liked very much, but he was a big troublemaker at school… He mixed in with a group of problematic kids who were doing drugs. The decision to let him stay at school hurt the other pupils to such an extent that on the day of the annual trip, we had to call the police because we had found drugs in several knapsacks. It turned out that he was a drug dealer who looked like a good kid. …I know that if I had expelled him from school a year earlier and found for him a smaller and more supportive setting, he might not have deteriorated and would certainly not have caused harm to others. I kept him at school out of pity. I know that today, if I came across

a similar situation, it would be much easier for me to be stricter and I would certainly be more focused on the good of the other pupils (Efi, 56 years old, educational coordinator in a high school).

Efi's critical incident shows that sometimes sticking to the formal rules may actually be an act of caring. According to school rules, because of the pupil's problematic background, he should have been expelled even before the drug incident. The teacher believed that expelling the pupil and finding him a supportive setting for his drug problems would have been a more caring act. It would also have been more caring for the other pupils who, without his presence, would not have been exposed to drugs.

The final example is one of three critical incidents in the subcategory *"do not develop overly close relationships with pupils"*. In this example, the tension between caring for the pupil and formal climate shows that excess caring for a pupil may sometimes harm the pupil's ability to deal with difficult situations.

This incident happened at the first school that I taught. I developed a close relationship with an enchanting and bright pupil and the school did not approve of it. Today I feel uncomfortable about it because this relationship was indeed a bit too much… after all I was her teacher… It started with math questions but then she started calling me about other problems. During one of my days off, that pupil left the class crying. The principal tried to help her but she insisted on speaking to me. The principal called me in for a talk and expressed her displeasure. She said that it was not my job to develop such a close relationship with a pupil. 'Teach math and leave the rest to those whose job it is to take care of such things. This girl needs professional help and not the help of a run of the mill math teacher'. Today I am much more careful about such things… (Dalia, female, 31 years old, mathematics teacher in a secondary school).

In this case, the conflict between the "caring climate" and the "formal climate" is about the degree of caring. Dalia's personal judgment exceeded the school's standards. Dalia came to the conclusion that it is not wise to develop overly close relationships with pupils as it may sometimes harm the pupils' well being. As a result, she is very careful after this incident not to develop overly close relationships with pupils.

4.1.2. Distributive justice versus school standards (13 incidents)

Here the focus is on teachers' perceptions of tension between distributive justice (rewards appropriate for effort) and school standards which follow clear criteria regarding decision making at school. In the following example, a single-item subcategory, the teacher was unhappy with the school criteria and vowed that in the future, he would *"follow his conscience"*.

Iris deserved to be sent abroad as part of a school delegation. However, I was put under a lot of outside pressure to exclude her because the municipality was only willing to pay for residents, and Iris was a dorming pupil. Iris's family was too poor to pay for the trip. I believed in her, but instead of helping her I caved in. Iris lost her trust in me and in adults in general. I am very angry at myself. I folded. There were other ways to fund her trip. I should have listened to my own truth, my values. Sometimes, by avoiding conflicts we cause even bigger and more acute problems (Yossi, male, 43 years old, coordinator in a secondary school).

Yossi believes that although the school employed a fair justice process in using its set criteria for selecting the delegation, it created an imbalance between Iris' reward and her investment (distributive justice). Iris deserved to be part of the delegation because she was an excellent pupil, and did not go because of funding criteria. This resulted in an unjust outcome, whereby the school preferred a residency overruled entitlement. Yossi responded to this dilemma

by expressing emotional involvement and disappointment at his behaviour, and resolving that in the future, he would fight for what he thought was fair and would follow his personal values.

4.1.3. Confidentiality versus school rules (9 incidents)

This category depicts the dilemma between a teacher's desire to be discreet and the obligation to obey school rules. Teachers' work often includes confidentiality issues. When pupils confide in a teacher, they create a dilemma for the teacher whether to betray that trust or not. In the following example, a single-item subcategory, the teacher responded to this incident with a decision that he would *"obey school rules"*.

It happened during an annual school trip a few years back. … That evening, the coordinator gathered everyone for a talk and told the boys not to wander outside the hostel and not to drink alcoholic beverages… She warned that whoever was caught breaking the rules would be suspended… Later that evening, at the mall, I met two boys from our trip. They asked me to buy them a bottle of vodka. I refused. They begged me not to tell anyone. On the way back, I felt that I might not have done the right thing, but I didn't want to "tattle" on those boys… and then the coordinator called me in for a talk… I didn't understand how she knew about this. …I decided that I would never do that again. I was not going to take such risks any more, if only not to feel that way again (Dan, male, 28 years old, geography teacher in a high school).

This ethical dilemma caused Dan considerable emotional distress. Dan's reluctance to report the event because of his pupils' request conflicts with his obligation to obey school rules. These rules require that pupils not go outside the youth hostel, nor buy alcoholics drinks. In Dan's narrative, the tension between the need to tell the truth and the pupils' request not to tell stems from his loyalty to school rules, which call for reporting transgressions to the school administration.

4.1.4. Loyalty to colleagues versus school norms (6 incidents)

Relationships between colleagues and pupils and relationships among colleagues are the topic of this category. Two examples will illustrate the topic. The first example is one of four critical incidents in the subcategory *"take colleagues' interest into consideration"*. The teacher witnessed a colleague (her principal) treating a pupil unfairly, but didn't confront her.

As a remedial teacher, I take pupils out of the classroom for private lessons. …That day, while I was in my private lesson with a certain pupil, the rest of the class had a music lesson during which they destroyed school property. The music teacher relayed the names of the troublemakers to the principal, including the name of the pupil who had been with me. The principal suspended the pupils… That pupil's mother called the principal and told her that during the time of the incident, her son had been with me. The principal did not bother checking with me and said that I had probably let him out 15 minutes before the end of the lesson. The next day, I talked to the music teacher and he admitted that he could have made a mistake. …Then the principal called me in for a talk and said that she felt that I was not loyal … having conversations with the mother. I was a young teacher at the time… That event was so upsetting… As a result, I decided to be more careful with my colleagues' needs (Miri, Female, 29 years old, special education teacher in a secondary school).

Although Miri believed that her pupil was being unjustly accused, she also understood the principal's demand for collegial loyalty. Miri's response was that in the future, she will be more loyal to the system and more sensitive to the principal's expectations from her.

The second example is one of two critical incidents in the subcategory *"convey your feeling to your superiors"* which deals with relationships between colleagues. The critical incidents in this subcategory are characterised by the problematic behaviour of one of the people involved. In this example, the teacher witnessed a colleague doing something unprofessional which she sees as morally improper. In contrast to the previous example, this teacher responded by deciding that in the future, she would not hesitate to confront her colleagues under similar circumstances.

> *The coordinator asked me to develop a new study unit. Two months later, at a staff meeting, she handed out a brochure about the new study unit that I had developed, but she put her name on it instead of mine… For quite some time, I was moping around, not knowing what to do. I was afraid to confront her and embarrass her. After all, we were colleagues. …Now I am a little sorry because in hindsight, I think that I should have said something. Today I would have acted differently because I think that if you feel that an injustice has been done to you, you should openly talk about it* (Rona, female, 35 years old, homeroom teacher in a high school).

Rona's narrative conveys a strong tension between remaining loyal to a colleague and the need to express her feeling to her coordinator, that the coordinators' behaviour is inconsistent with basic norms and principles. Rona believed that the right thing to do was to confront her coordinator, but her strong sense of collegiality and the fact that this was her coordinator, who should have served as a role model, prevented her from convey her feeling to her.

Rona's response to this incident was that in the future, she would speak up, even if it means reporting a superior's transgression.

4.1.5. Family agenda versus educational standards (4 incidents)

Teachers are often physically close to their pupils and notice emotional problems. They wish to act professionally according to educational standards and help the pupil, but are reluctant to do so out of respect for family beliefs. The first example is one of two critical incidents in the subcategory *"do not let parent undermine your professional autonomy"*, a subcategory characterised by a sense of failed responsibility towards a pupil and a problematic situation regarding teachers' professional autonomy. It describes a clash between a teacher's desire to make a professional decision and family norms, with which teachers do not always agree. In this incident the teacher bent under the parents' pressure.

> *I was the homeroom teacher for seventh grade. In that school, the parents were constantly interfering. For me, it was a real shock since it was my first year of teaching. One mother, who was a supervisor at the Ministry of Education, was displeased with the girl that I assigned to sit next to her daughter. She wanted me to have her daughter sit next to a more popular child in class so that her daughter would have an easier time socialising. I did not believe that this change was good for her daughter, but she insisted and accused me of not doing enough promote class social life in class. I felt that I did not stand a chance trying to convince her. I knew it was a mistake but I bent under pressure. In the end, her daughter suffered because she did not know how to cope being next to a popular child. …I am willing to listen to a parent only up to a point … but I am not willing to get all bent out of shape* (Yaarit, female, 41 years old, homeroom teacher in a secondary school).

Yaarit's narrative expresses tension between her desire to act professionally according to educational standards and the parent's expectations. In this narrative, Yaarit mentioned that the incident shocked her, perhaps more so because it was her first year of teaching, and she reflected on feeling powerless faced with this ethical dilemma. Her response is that next time she will not let parents compromise her educational standards. She has defined her rules and expects the pupil's mother to respect them.

The second example is one of two critical incidents in the *"Ask for wider support"* subcategory. In this example, the teacher's response was to ask for her employers' support.

> *This happened two years ago, with parents who were against the school lunch program.… They refused to bring the groceries and left the children without food. I know this was not because of financial difficulties. I took this very hard. I know that I should not expect thanks and that what I'm doing is a mission, but this? …I contacted the municipality's education office… They supported me. You should know that you can't accomplish anything in the system if you do it on your own. There is a large staff that is there to support you and you must rely on that support. …That is what I did and I won the battle with those parents… I would have done the same thing today. If I believe something is important, I will fight for it even if it means going against parents. I know what is important for my pupils. I am also open to suggestions, but the parents have to understand that we make the decisions in school* (Moran, female, 35 years old, special education teacher in a secondary school).

While in the previous example, Yaarit bent under the parents' pressure, in this example, Moran decided to ask for wider support in order to stand by her professional values. This course of action has made the dilemma easier to handle.

The formal aspect of school appeared as a component in all categories of ethical dilemmas (school rules, school norms, school standards, educational standards). This finding (summarised in Fig. 1) shows the formal aspect to be a significant factor in a teacher's professional decision making process.

5. Discussion

Previous studies of ethics and education usually focused on teachers' ethical dilemmas (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001; Colnerud, 1997, 2006; Husu & Tirri, 2003; Klaassen 2002). The present study went further and explored teachers' responses and the resolutions they made for handling future dilemmas. In this study, we first collected critical incidents that teachers tried to suppress because of the unpleasant memories they evoke. We then analysed the incidents to identify and categorised ethical dilemmas and teachers' responses to them.

We found that many ethical dilemmas stem from lack of confidence in educational abilities and a sense of failure to act properly. In recounting the critical incidents, teachers expressed not only regret but also negative emotions and painful memories. This may explain why many of the teachers in this study chose stories that had happened at the beginning of their career. It seems that they were trying to minimise their unpleasant experiences.

We indentified five main categories of ethical dilemmas in critical incidents: caring climate versus formal climate; distributive justice versus school standards; confidentiality versus school rules; loyalty to colleagues versus school norms and family agenda versus educational standards. We found the critical incidents to be multifaceted, whereby the same ethical dilemma may have generated different responses. For example, the tension between family agenda and educational standards led one teacher to bend under parents' pressure, while another teacher decided to ask for wider support so she could stand by her professional values. In another dilemma, the tension between caring for a problematic pupil and the formal climate led one teacher to obey the rules, while leading another to be less formal and follow his personal values. These findings may reflect the fact that there are many ways to respond to similar incidents.

The findings of this study suggest that ethical guidelines could provide tools for teachers to deal with ethical dilemmas. When faced with a dilemma, ethical guidelines may provide limits and tools for teachers to prevent partiality which may distort judgment. Thus, although much of the literature suggests that teachers value their autonomy and are not keen on being told what to do (Kauffman et al., 2002), our findings could be indicative of an occasional need for clear guidelines that would help teachers choose a course of action when facing a dilemma.

Thus, this study may encourage the construction of ethical guidelines for teachers facing critical ethical dilemmas. We call for guidelines, not rules because the multifaceted nature of ethical dilemmas requires critical thinking, not blind compliance. Developing ethical guidelines may be accomplished through ethical educational programmes for teachers based on their critical incidents. Enhancing teachers' ethical knowledge through ethical programmes can empower them to develop pluralistic attitudes and more complex moral understanding of the choices open to them.

The most frequent ethical dilemmas we found were those involving tension between caring climate and formal climate, indicating that caring for others (e.g., pupils, colleagues) is one of the most important values that teachers consider when dealing with ethical dilemmas. The findings regarding the dilemma between distributive justice and school standards show that limited resources of the educational system heighten teachers' sensitivity to issues of justice and just division of resources for their pupils. The tension between confidentiality and school rules shows that teachers are mostly uncomfortable being pupils' confidantes and are often thrown into such situations against their will. Another dilemma, choosing between loyalty to colleagues and school norms, raises the question of what collegial relationship means. Organisations often encourage comradeship among workers to develop a positive climate (Coleman, Mikkelson, & LaRocque 1991). The study results suggest, however, that at times, collegial relationships may be harmful to the school because teachers do not wish to hurt their colleagues and report their misconduct.

The tension between family educational beliefs and educational standards indicate that teachers had difficulty in standing firmly behind their professional decisions when families exert pressure upon them to act differently. Parents and teachers use different points of reference when they consider what is important for the children. Parents are emotionally involved in their children's upbringing, while teachers' main point of reference is the function of both the class and the child.

In sum, critical incidents revealed ethical dilemmas in which teachers' autonomous practice was constrained by feelings of powerlessness. Teachers struggle with difficult ethical dilemmas because they lack the knowledge as to how to deal with them. The dearth of professional tools grounded in teachers' experiences leaves them to their own ethical judgment with no guidelines to follow. Thus, while teachers usually try to hide their difficulties when dealing with critical incidents and especially when they believe they have made the wrong decision, this study tries to empower these incidents as a way to help teachers deal more successfully with their ethical dilemmas.

According to Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory, perceptions lead to behaviours. Studies show that people who deal differently with ethical dilemmas also differ in their perceptions (Felton & Sims, 2005; Peppas, 2002; Swanson, 2005). If we apply this theory to our study, we can expect that by studying teachers' critical incidents and the ethical dilemmas they raise, teachers will be exposed to a wide range of critical incidents and ethical dilemmas long before they encounter their own ethical dilemmas.

Exposure to a variety of critical incidents will provide teachers with the tools to develop autonomy in making ethical decisions.

6. Conclusions and implications: towards ethical education for teachers

The study findings indicate that we need more clarification and discussion on teachers' ethical knowledge and the values and beliefs that underlie that knowledge. A more transparent sense of ethical knowledge could provide teachers with a more comprehensive sense of professionalism and basis for renewed school cultures in which the moral dimensions of all aspects of teachers' work are discussed. Without a moral vocabulary, it is difficult to see how teachers can address the complexity of moral judgments they must make with competence, develop moral understanding and teach children to reflect moral issues.

The study findings contribute to the existing literature on ethical dilemmas. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis of ethical critical incidents sheds light on teachers' perceptions concerning ethical dilemmas which they are usually reluctant to discuss. From a practical perspective, the results may guide teachers and their leaders in developing educational programmes based on teachers' critical incidents.

These programmes may contribute to develop a moral language with an explicit moral base, and to introduce teachers to pragmatic views of negotiating moral education. The dialogue is necessary to build a new ethically oriented approach towards jointly discussing objectives and establishing shared ethical guidelines. This dialogue is necessary in order to build school communities that will use another vocabulary, replacing the prevailing formal approach. These ethical programmes could increase teachers' autonomy as they will provide teachers with the opportunity to deal with critical incidents in a realistic context, but without the unethical actions that exist in real-life situations.

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