TEAM BASED SIMULATIONS AMONG TEACHER TRAINEES:

COPING WITH ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN CASES OF

VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

Ph.D. Thesis

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Abstract

Social, physical and verbal school violence is a concerning and widespread global phenomenon that disrupts educational activity. This issue causes a significant proportion of students to feel that school is an unsafe environment for them. The problem attracts much public, social and academic attention, and is globally considered to be a key problem in societies that see school as an agent of socialization (Education, Culture and Sports Committee, Israeli Knesset, 2012; Rigby, 2000; Yablon & Addington, 2010). Teachers confronted with ethical dilemmas related to school violence feel powerless and unsupported by the system of education, and report their acute need for tools to manage the violence (Shavit & Blank, 2010a).

The main objective of this research is to identify the characteristics of the ethical dilemmas; the operative <u>principles</u> and the psychological empowerment perceptions of teacher trainees, following processes of different group reflective discussions: one of which is characterized by a simulated-operative approach, and the other by a theoretical approach.

Therefore, this study investigated the way teacher trainees cope with ethical dilemmas related to incidents of school violence. The investigation used simulative processes (i.e., role-playing) and reflective group discussions focused on ethical issues.

A comprehensive review of the research literature on ethical dilemmas and the use of simulations as a method of professional development for teacher trainees, reveals that this study is the first of its kind in that it deals with developing a behavioral model based on teachers' ethical dilemmas related to school violence by means of group simulations.

The decision to use ethical dilemmas in this study is underpinned by educational research, which concluded that the ability to handle ethical dilemmas contributes to teachers' social and moral development. This ability enhances teachers' commitment to their students' welfare and promotes an understanding of ethical principles, which in turn, improves their ability to find alternative ways to solve these dilemmas in the future (Aloni, 2006; Carmi, 2003; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2009, 2011, 2013; Shefler, 2006).

The choice of simulation groups is based, among other things, upon cognitive science studies according to which simulations are an operative instrument for practicing and memorizing teaching skills, understanding social situations and enhancing empathy through putting oneself in the 'shoes of different characters', such

as teacher, student, parent, school advisor or principal (Atance & Hanson, 2011; Baron–Cohen, 2001; Barslou 2003, 2005, 2009; Samuel, 1997).

The participant population comprised 90 elementary school teacher trainees in their 3rd year of training at a college in Jerusalem, Israel. After receiving permission from the Ethical Committee of Bar Ilan University, and of the college where the research was conducted, the students were divided randomly into two study groups and a control group, all of equal sizes. The study groups participated in 30 hours of workshops comprising 10 sessions of 3 academic hours each. The workshops took place after study hours, once every 2 weeks spanning a whole academic year (5 sessions each semester, throughout 2014). Every 2 sessions, the scenario of a different violent incident was addressed. Each scenario covered social, physical and verbal violence. In the first stage, the experimental groups held discussions on the characteristics of the violent incident presented to them. In the next stage the first study group discussed the ethical dilemmas raised by these scenarios and role-played 2 to 3 simulations for each incident. This group recorded the simulations on video. Having watched the simulations, the students then worked on possible ways of solving these ethical dilemmas through reflective discussions. The second study group underwent a similar process on the same violent incidents, the central difference being that they did not perform role-play simulations as part of their reflective discussions.

The influence of the intervention process on the psychological empowerment of the study groups was examined through questionnaires – responded to by all participants, including the control group (that had no intervention process at all). These questionnaires were administered before the study processes and one year later. In addition, a year after the process had finished and when all of the participants were working as independent teachers in different primary schools, 10 participants, randomly chosen from each study group were met for semi-structured interviews, intended to reinforce the research findings and verify longitudinal effectiveness. For the analysis of the study's main findings we used Mixed Methods (Lieber & Weisner, 2010).

The research results indicate that the study group that held simulative sessions demonstrated much higher awareness than the group that had no simulations. The difference between the groups was examined in a the following aspects: teacher's insistence on creating a relationship built on understanding, empathy, warmth and containment with his/her students from the very start, as a basis for cooperation when coping with school violence; the importance of conversing in an atmosphere

appropriate in terms of the physical and emotional conditions for the participants; the drawing of clear lines so as to create a cultural, egalitarian and attentive discourse; assigning importance to integrating parents in treating and reducing violence; and, finally, grasping the class teacher's role as continuous and significant influence in the student's life, not limited to school attendance hours.

These aspects have been treated in the research literature as being of utmost importance to success in treating and reducing violence (e.g., Aloni, 2013; Anderson & Lawton, 2009; Burger et al., 2015; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2012, 2013; Strohmeier et al., 2012). In addition, the findings indicate that the simulations contributed significantly to the trainees' psychological empowerment in terms of their self-confidence, sense of control and their view of themselves as capable of taking rational decisions regarding the handling of violence. By contrast, students of the second study group indicated that the workshop process they had, which included theoretical discussions but no simulations, caused a significant decrease in their psychological empowerment regarding the above-mentioned aspects.

On the theoretical side, this study broadens the ethical landscape of school violence and contributes to the development of a unique and novel methodology for teachers and teacher trainees in confronting school violence through simulative, metacognitive processes.

On the practical side, this study suggests that simulation is effective for teacher trainees as an empowering instrument for managing ethical dilemmas related to school violence. It has been proven that the use of simulations and reflective discussions contributes to the assimilation of a wide variety of possible solutions for ethical dilemmas faced by teachers and teacher trainees. These solutions remain in the participants' operative memory, and can be used daily in their capacity as teachers. Furthermore, the simulations that take place in a supportive and risk-free environment offer a method for learning that is enjoyable and experiential. Due to simulations being a collaborative experience, they enhance team cooperation, strengthen personal relationships among participants, and promote openness in confronting one of the most complex ethical challenges in the school system. Moreover, the use of simulations raises self-confidence, sense of control and the quality of rational decision-making regarding school violence. Eventually, it is expected to reduce teachers' feelings of helplessness in violent situations encountered daily at work.