From ethical reasoning to teacher education for social justice

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HIGHLIGHTS
- Ethical decision-making was based on morality of care and morality of justice.
- The findings show that teachers have the ability to use both moral orientations.
- The categories were: democratic education, culturally responsive and critical pedagogy.
- We found multifaceted ethical dilemmas nested in different categories.
- Teachers’ professional development programmes should focus on social justice.

ABSTRACT
The goal of this study is to explore teachers’ ethical decision-making process in order to redesign teacher professional development programmes. Twenty teachers shared their critical ethical incidents; then another 50 teachers responded to those incidents. Findings relating to aspects of care and justice were nested into three categories: ‘democratic education,’ ‘culturally responsive’ and ‘critical pedagogy.’ The disparity we noted among participants between perceived behaviours expected by educational policy and the perceived behaviours that they would choose reveal that it is recommended for teachers’ professional development programmes to focus on social justice by learning how to integrate between justice and care.

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1. Introduction

Studies around the world note that teachers often find themselves dealing with critical ethical incidents (e.g., Bullough, 2011; Ehrich, Kimber, Millwater, & Cranston, 2011). Despite their experience in the field, teachers often articulate a lack of self-confidence as to how they should respond to these incidents (Mahony, 2009; Tirri & Husu, 2002). This lack of self-confidence becomes even more problematic when one considers that many countries do have laws, school regulations, and codes of ethics that teachers ought to be able to consult with in order to deal with these critical ethical incidents (e.g., French-Lee & Dooley, 2013; O’Neill & Bourke, 2010; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010). Therefore, the main goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of teachers’ ethical decision-making. More specifically, the sub-goals of this study are:

(a) To explore teachers’ ethical decision-making by analysing what perceptions and knowledge characterise this process.
(b) To investigate whether, and how, teachers’ awareness of expected behaviour (e.g., educational management circulars, school rules) shapes their ethical decision-making.
(c) To rethink and redesign teachers’ professional development programmes.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Ethical reasoning

The term “ethical reasoning” as used in this study describes the process by which an individual deals with an ethical dilemma (Abdolmohammadi, Read, & Scarbrough, 2003). There are two central components of reasoning about ethical dilemmas: ‘morality of justice,’ and ‘morality of care.’ ‘Morality of justice’ implies endeavoring to follow universal rules, societal rules, and individual...
rights. Kohlberg’s (1986) research is based on the ‘morality of justice’. His framework provides three broad levels of cognitive moral development; each comprises two stages. Moral development involves an individual’s passage between stages. The characteristics of the levels and stages define the construct “moral judgment”.

Morality of justice in schools may be reflected by legitimising rights and obligations, such as parents’ and students’ rights to a ‘good’ education, and a teachers’ obligation to provide that. Thus, success is determined by quantitative attainment published in international reports such as TIMSS, PISA and OECD. Therefore, schools are required to employ measures that are designed to demonstrate the progress of students. As a result, education becomes a political issue, insofar as it requires consideration of the ways in which student achievements are monitored and controlled (Adams, 2015).

The concept ‘morality of care’ reflects a less formal approach. Its focus centers on the notion of providing care by which the appropriateness of response can be appraised in a particular case. ‘Morality of care’ is a standard that allows one to say that a certain thing was the appropriate action for a particular individual to take, but not that it would be necessarily the right action for each person in that situation. Knowing what to do involves knowing others and being connected in ways that involve both emotion and cognition (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1997). ‘Morality of care’ is distinct from ‘morality of justice’ in that it does not attempt to follow universal rules or ensure equitable treatment. It focuses on responsiveness to another’s needs.

Previous studies indicated that morality of care is typically reflected in teacher statements about professionalism, and the way in which teachers defined themselves was in terms of care (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010; Tirri & Husu, 2002). What is relevant, however, is the way in which care as an aspect of interpersonal relationships aligns itself with the issue of education. The positions adopted by the psychology of morality within a caring framework propel us toward the heart of education-caring relationships with students (Adams, 2015).

2.2. Morality of care and morality of justice

According to Adams (2015), there are two primary approaches to the relationship between morality of justice and morality of care: (1) The superiority approach. This approach holds that one ethic is superior to the other. In most cases, it is argued in favor of justice, although some do argue for care as the superior approach; (2) The integration approach seeks to find one monistic theory; that care and justice are intertwined. The latter view is that justice cannot exist without care and vice versa. In support of that approach, Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) witnessed care and justice intertwined: care as conceived through the prism of justice and care as a perspective on moral action. They concluded that the justice perspective is incomplete without an accompanying care perspective. Based on the duality of justice and care, this study will focus its investigation on ‘morality of care’ and ‘morality of justice’ by examining critical ethical incidents.

2.3. Critical incidents in an ethical context

The term ‘critical incident’ has been defined in various ways: vivid happenings that are considered significant or memorable (Brookfield, 2005), a uniquely problematic situation that promotes reflection (Bruster & Peterson, 2013), and episodes with enormous consequences for personal change and development (Sikes, Measor, & Woods, 2001). In schools, uncertain conditions may be categorised as critical incidents (Tripp, 2011). According to Halquist and Musanti (2010), it is our interpretation of an event’s significance that makes it critical.

In order to turn an event into a critical incident, we must do more than simply categorise or label it. We need to investigate some of the underlying structures that produce that type of incident. To be critical, an event has to be shown to contain a more general meaning and indicate something of greater importance in a broader context. According to Angleides (2001), for the most part, the majority of critical incidents are not at all dramatic or obvious. It is only through analysis that these rather typical incidents come to be viewed as critical.

In an ethical context, critical incidents labeled as critical ethical incidents (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011) involve the need to discover the underlying ethical meaning of what is usually taken for granted, and entail interpretation of what events constituted turning points. Small, sometimes even unnoticed events or situations can turn into critical ethical incidents. Their criticality is based on the justification and meaning accorded to them in the ethical context, eliciting a need for reflection on that particular event, thereby rendering it visible and susceptible to further analysis and interpretation.

2.4. Using critical ethical incidents to promote reflective practice

Reflection is the active, purposeful process of exploration and discovery; it often leads to rather unexpected outcomes. It is an activity that helps to bridge an actual experience with the learning derived from that experience. It involves both cognition and feeling (Halquist & Musanti, 2010). As such, reflection differs from developing an understanding. It is an attempt to understand an issue or doubt that triggered the reflective process. This process goes beyond a search for understanding in the quest for personal meaning. A new concept becomes absorbed into a personal knowledge structure, and is then linked to other knowledge and experience. Learning takes place via active critical reflection, wherein reflection precedes further action (Harrison & Lee, 2011).

Hence, the particular attributes of a critically reflective teacher can include disbelieving what was previously held to be true. Furthermore, trying to distinguish reflection (a way of justifying one’s beliefs) from critical reflection (checking one’s assumptions by examining both the sources of evidence and consequences of the action) may lead us to the notion of learning at a higher, transformative level via processes of critical reflection that critique the pre-suppositions on which individual beliefs are based (Bruster & Peterson, 2013).

As Tripp (2011) emphasised, reflecting on significant critical incidents in ethical contexts is essential to the development of teachers’ professional judgment when we take into consideration that teachers often make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. However, encouraging teachers to reflect on critical ethical incidents in uncertain conditions can elicit their ethical dilemmas in educational practice (Mahony, 2009).

2.5. Exploring ethical dilemmas by reflecting critical incidents

Ethical incidents in school become critical because they present the teacher with a dilemma in which there may be at least two mutually exclusive courses of action. They provide an opportunity for reflective processes by questioning the way things in school operate. Those sorts of questions provide an opportunity for more scholarly analyses of a teacher’s perceptions of meaning, rather than just the experience of the actual incident (Sanger & Ogusthorpe, 2011).

Ethical dilemmas will exist wherever different principles lead to different resolutions. This may happen in any situation where different ethical principles come into conflict, where there is no evident right answer and we must make a tough choice between
two or more conflicting answers (Stith & Roth, 2010). The literature mentions numerous ethical dilemmas in education. One of the most common is the tension between caring for the other (students, teachers) and sticking to formal rules (i.e., Ministry of Education rules). This dilemma can arise when a teacher encounters difficulty in deciding how best to look out for a student or how to deal with other teachers (e.g., Eyal, Berkovich, & Schwartz, 2011).

A different ethical dilemma may arise with regard to the question of teachers’ independence to pursue their goals at school. Teachers may have different ideas as to what is ‘acceptable,’ leading to questions of whose viewpoint ought to be accepted (Bullough, 2011). The literature also describes another type of ethical problem arising from a clash between the school’s vision and the beliefs of the student’s family. This friction occurs when a teacher questions whether the parental conduct is in the student’s best interests (Mahony, 2009). In any case, when dealing with ethical dilemmas, we may consider competing forces, each illuminating critical ethical incidents within its own particular bias, such as political climate, professional ethics, legal issues, policies, the public interest, and the community (Enrich et al., 2011). All of these ethical dilemmas emphasise the need to study ethical decision-making.

2.6. Ethical decision-making in education

A teacher’s cognitive moral developmental stage helps to determine the ethical decision-making process of deciding what is acceptable or unacceptable in an ethical situation (Spendlove, Barton, Hallett, & Shortt, 2012). However, cognition is not enough. Work, social, political climate, family and peer group contexts all interact with the cognitive factor to determine how an individual is likely to behave in response to an ethical dilemma (Enrich et al., 2011).

The cognitive reasoning aspect of ethical decision-making emphasises the reasons an individual uses to justify an ethical choice, rather than the behaviour itself. Thus, ethical decision-making is related to teachers’ cognition—how teachers think about ethical dilemmas, rather than their particular behaviour. It would seem that the two ought to be related, due to the consistency between thought and action. However, research indicates that there is only a moderate relationship between thought and action (Barrett, Casey, Visser, & Headley, 2012). Thus, ethical decision-making is a necessary but insufficient condition for ethical behaviour. Therefore, in this study, we will also consider aspects of social justice, in order to determine whether adding it may better explain the relationship between care and justice, which can help teachers deal with ethical challenges.

2.7. Social justice

When ‘social justice’ is used in the context of teacher education, it is a particularly malleable expression that encompasses multiple meanings. Moreover, considerable research and literature related to a broader concern with social justice chooses to focus on or employ other descriptive terms (Boylan, 2009). Our understanding of social justice is rooted in the importance of adopting both a distributive and relational perspective as well as recognising a participative dimension (Fraser, 2009).

The distributive aspect refers to the importance of equitable distribution of access to educational goods and to outcomes. Socially just relationality includes the recognition of, and respect for, social and cultural difference. The participative dimension addresses the capacity and opportunity to actively participate in decision-making (Cochran-Smith, 2009). Given that social justice is enacted in and through embodied relationships, attention must be given not only to the social and the macro issues—such as school organisation and societal outcomes—but also to the personal and the micro, as well as the interplay between them (North, 2008).

2.8. The different dimensions of social justice

Whereas contemporary approaches to teaching for social justice are influenced by a diverse array of educational, philosophical, and political movements, published accounts of teaching for social justice draw most heavily from three pedagogical philosophies: democratic education, critical pedagogy, and culturally responsive education:

Democratic education emphasises the civic functions of schooling, including community engagement and experiential education (Dewey, 2007). Democratic educators teach skills intended to promote civic participation. Most democratic educators centralise students’ responsibility for their actions, active participation in school-based society as well as out-of-school society, and exertion of agency in promoting societal change (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Critical pedagogy challenges the political neutrality of curriculum, pedagogy, and education systems; it seeks to develop students’ sociopolitical consciousness via co-investigation, problem-posing, and dialogue. Central to critical pedagogy is an analysis of the relationship between sociopolitical power, social processes, and the construction of knowledge, reflecting on its own sociocultural realities and taking ownership over class processes and products (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Culturally Responsive Education is centralised in teacher identity and students’ academic outcomes. Specifically, culturally responsive educators call for an analysis of teachers’ political ideologies, preservice preparation, technical skills, and readiness to effect change, asserting that teachers must be specifically trained to interrupt social and educational inequity (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006). Culturally responsive teachers are attuned to hegemonic classroom practices and are willing to examine and reflect upon their own social, educational, and political identities. They consider their students’ out-of-school lives, family structures, interests, beliefs about schooling, and the demographic, religious, and sociopolitical context of the community in which they teach (Dover, 2013).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The study included 70 Israeli teachers (20 teachers for the first phase and 50 teachers for the third phase), 56 women and 14 men, each from a different school. All the teachers (first and third phases) taught at Hebrew-speaking schools in central Israel and hailed from different disciplines (e.g., English, Math, Science, Geography, Hebrew) and different school levels (25 teachers from elementary schools, 25 teachers from middle schools, and 20 teachers from high schools); they represented a cross section of non-religious (50 schools), religious (14 schools) and ultra orthodox (6 schools), as well as public (60 teachers) and private schools (10 teachers) in Israel.

The average age was 38 years, ranging from 36 to 42 years; their average teaching seniority was 11 years. 73% of the participants were tenured; the others were employed via temporary contracts. 55% of the participants worked at full-time jobs, and the rest worked part-time. All of the teachers had a B.A. degree. These figures are roughly representative of the teaching population in Israel’s educational systems in general (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015).
3.2. Data collection

Ethical considerations regarding study procedures were made on the basis of guidelines taken from the NIH Office of Extramural Research (2011). Permission to perform the study was obtained from the university ethics committee. We then explained our study goals and the need for teacher volunteers to participate in this study, which we publicised on the 100 school principals' website in the Ministry of Education’s Central district. School response rate was 70% (namely, 70 school principals agreed to have their schools participate). Together with my research assistant, I asked the principals to disseminate our message among their school teachers via the school email system and encourage participation.

The school receptionists then sent us lists of teachers who had volunteered to participate; we chose one teacher at random from each school. We contacted these teachers, met them and explained our research aims and methods, including the study’s three phases (please see below), and asked whether they preferred to participate in the first or third phase. Thus, all the teachers took part in the first or the third phase voluntarily; they filled out the questionnaires/surveys at home and were assured that their statements could not be traced back to them upon publication of the findings. Each teacher was identified by a code number, and the key linking the code numbers to the participants was destroyed after the data analysis was completed. Each teacher also received a formal letter describing the study goals, a promise to protect their confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

More specifically, in the first phase, research assistants informed teachers in group information meetings that were held after school hours that each of them would be required to report anonymously on their own time (e.g., at home) about one significant and meaningful ethical case that he or she experienced, and pass that on to the research coordinator. We decided to prompt teachers to describe critical ethical incidents which they themselves experienced so that the questions that would be laid out for the third phase would be most relevant to the teachers.

In the second phase, we collected the 20 participants’ critical ethical incidents (that were mentioned in the first phase). We found that these cases fit Halquist and Musanti’s (2010) criteria for critical incidents: (1) each event held some degree of conflict; (2) the incident ‘surprised the researcher’, providing stimulus for reflection regarding its criticality (e.g., the decision to act against school rules); and (3) it represented some of the patterns of the teachers’ interactions, as shown through a thematic and preliminary analysis of the data. We then developed a qualitative questionnaire listing 20 ethical critical incidents (based on the first phase) with the following reflective questions organised in columns for each critical ethical incident: ‘What is/are the ethical dilemma(s)?’, ‘How would you behave?’, and ‘What do you think is the expected behaviour that law, management circulars, or school rules would recommend?’

Then, in the third phase, an additional 50 teachers were asked to answer those questionnaires for each case. We used the ‘critical incident technique’ to enable reflective writing (Halquist & Musanti, 2010). All of the teachers were asked to reflect upon the questionnaire’s critical ethical incidents using the above questions. It is important to stress that the first-phase participants were not the same people as the third-phase participants, in order not to bias the findings. There was a risk that a few of the participants might recognise their own ethical critical incidents and what they ought to do according to the rules because they had already experienced these critical incidents.

3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis by four readers (namely, I did so, together with my research assistants) was based on qualitative thematic analysis. The coding process focused on open and axial coding, referring to key phrases and words in order to determine themes of the 50 teachers’ qualitative questionnaires (in the third phase). The data was analysed using a step-by-step method: *First*, each questionnaire was read by all readers to get a general idea and identify the ethical dilemmas involved by examining and then reexamining the narratives, enabling turning points for understanding, allowing discovery of perspectives; and revealing layers of meaning and multiple truths presented in each research context.

Second, each reader used inductive reasoning to analyse all questionnaires by identifying recurring words and phrases, yielding a variety of ethical dilemma subcategories (e.g., the duty to report vs. caring for students). More specifically, each critical incident was read and analysed separately through all questionnaires to confirm subcategories and ensure that all viable possibilities for analysis were considered. Each reader tallied all similarly coded text to determine the frequency of all subcategories. Following independent coding, the readers compared teacher’s reflections based on an analysis of the language used to determine common words, phrases, and emerging categories until consensus reached. As such similar experiences of ethical dilemmas (e.g., conscientiousness vs. parents’ interference) were clustered and classified as subcategories.

Third, the content of similar subcategories was combined and clustered through axial coding (Creswell, 2013) around the categories of the following scenarios: ‘democratic education,’ ‘culturally responsive education’ and ‘critical pedagogy’. To ensure accuracy, the data was organised using the ATLAS.ti 5.0 software package that assists in qualitative analysis of textual data (Paulus & Bennett, 2013).

Mindful of Guillenmin and Heggen (2012)’s thesis that argues that research involving participants starts from a position of ethical tension between researcher and participants, and that conflict could be reduced by ‘inviting’ participants to take ownership over the research together with the researcher, our team discussed our findings with the participant third-phase teacher in randomly selected groups of 4–5 participants. This methodological approach was supported by previous critical incident research efforts that recognised its contribution: engaging participants by a process of critically questioning their experiences that enabled them to construct a more refined understanding of their practices, interactions, and experiences as teachers (Halquist & Musanti, 2010).

3.3.1. Validity

In order to ensure the study’s validity, we used Anderson and Herr’s (1999) criteria for: *process validity*—to reexamine underlying assumptions; *democratic validity*—to engage collaboratively with participants who dealt with the critical incidents; and *catalytic validity*—to involve participants in opportunities to deepen their understanding of the social and political reality under study. As such, we attempted to reframe trustworthiness in terms of *interpersonal validity* (Kirkhart, 2010), meaning that the interpretations’ credibility and validity grew out of personal interactions with our participants, making it possible to integrate the insights awakened via the interpersonal dimension of our research approach.

We were open to different possibilities, continually seeking alternative explanations of our interpretations. Each theme that emerged in this study was examined from different perspectives to attain a richer understanding. Actually, akin to the methodological approach of Halquist and Musanti (2010), it provided an opportunity to reflect on our own thinking and possible biases during the interpretation process.
4. Findings

Qualitative analysis of the 50 questionnaires revealed that for most of the critical ethical incidents (16 out of 20 critical incidents), participants evoked the two aspects of ethical reasoning for each critical ethical incident: ‘morality of care’ and ‘morality of justice’, as reflected by perceptions of actions complying with or contrary to the perceived expected behaviours. The analysis revealed subcategories of ethical dilemmas that were nested in a scenario of categories.

The scenario categories of ‘democratic education,’ ‘culturally responsive education’ and ‘critical pedagogy’ included a variety of subcategories of ethical dilemmas. Consider the category of scenarios: where narratives were relevant to more than one category, we found it most helpful to distribute each participant’s narrative into its most salient category in order to assess the important issues they raised. We mentioned the ethical dilemmas that were relevant to more than one category of scenario, taking into account that the same participant might refer to the same ethical dilemma for different critical ethical incidents (for which we counted each mention). See Fig. 1 for a description.

In order to demonstrate the study findings, I will now present two random examples from each category (“democratic education,” “culturally responsive education” and “critical pedagogy”) and the related subcategories (ethical dilemmas) generated in this study.

4.1. Democratic education

(18 out of the 50 participants from the third phase mentioned this category). The following incidents focused on democratic educational aspects of social justice; for example, how teachers may promote students’ responsibility for their actions during the school’s annual trip (incident 1):

4.1.1. Incident 1

During the high school’s annual trip, a few students were rowdy at night in their dormitory and broke two windows. None of the students was willing to report who was the one who broke the windows.

4.1.1.1. The ethical dilemmas. Our analysis found that the incident led its participants to reflect on the following dilemmas: the duty to report vs. caring for students, i.e., on the one hand, the responsibility to report to the police that an act of vandalism has occurred (morality of justice), or whether it’s more important to display concern for the students because it is a matter of youthful folly, and turning to the police could harm students who face police prosecution (morality of care). Another ethical dilemma: collective sanction vs. individual sanction. The question is whether the teacher should punish all of the students for sheltering their guilty classmates, since the teacher is not interested in actually confronting individual students and pressuring them to ‘snitch’; or whether the teacher ought to strive to ascertain the truth and punish only the guilty parties. An additional ethical dilemma is this: confidentiality vs. the duty to report, in case the teacher believes that reporting to the police will curtail the student’s opportunities in the future (morality of care) versus the teacher’s belief that reporting to the police is mandated (morality of justice).

4.1.1.2. Perceptions of action complying with perceived expected behaviour. We found that 6 out of 18 participants referred to the ‘democratic education’ category, noting that there is a parallel between the mode of conduct chosen by the teacher and the conduct perceived as required by the Ministry of Education (morality of justice), such as in the following example:

I’d say that if we don’t find out who broke the windows, the trip is over. There are rules. Before the trip started the students sign our trip contract, forswearing any vandalism or violent behavior. They should know that they have committed to behave in a normative way, and a promise is a promise. If we forgive them, they will continue breaking the rules in school, and in the future, in real life ... ’ was how one teacher said she would deal with this incident. In the column asking for perceptions regarding expected behaviour, she responded: ‘In my opinion, whatever I decide needs to be done’ (female, non-religious public high school, grade coordinator, tenured, 15 years of experience).
4.1.3. Perceptions of actions contrary to perceived expected behaviour. In the case of 3 out of 18 participants referring to the ‘democratic education’ category, we found a gap between how participants perceived they would act (morality of justice) and the behaviours expected of them. For example:

‘If despite discussions with the principal or counselor, the students are unwilling to name the student who caused the damage, the entire class should pay for the damages, and if the students don’t pay, we’ll cancel some extra-curricular activities’ vs. a teacher’s perception of the expected behaviours: ‘In my opinion, according to the policy circular, we have no way to force parents to pay.’ (male, private religious middle school, homeroom teacher, tenured, working full time, 6 years of experience).

4.1.4. Perceptions of unawareness of the expected behaviour. In the case of 4 out of 18 participants referring to the above category, we found that when queried about the expected behaviour, participants responded ‘I don’t know, it is a real problem. On one hand, they are only children, and children sometimes make mistakes. On the other hand, because they are children, we need to educate them to act according to the rules’ (male, public religious middle school science teacher, tenured, working part-time, 4 years of experience).

In sum, in light of our findings, it appears that participants reflected ignorance and ambiguity concerning how to deal with problems of violence on school trips, despite the high prevalence of this sort of phenomenon. Clearly, some of the statements made by participants as to how they would act reflected ‘morality of justice’ (11 out of 18 participants related to the above category), for others, ‘morality of care’ (3 out of 18 participants related to the above category), while in a few cases (4 out of 18 participants related to the above category) participants were unaware that regulations exist.

The following incident illustrates democratic aspects of social justice via community engagement and active participation in which a student called her teacher after school hours (incident 2):

4.1.2. Incident 2
You are a homeroom teacher. Your middle school student calls you sobbing from the park at about 6 p.m. Her parents are at home (verbally, not physically – they are shouting at each other), and she says she’s afraid to return home. She asks you to come to talk with her in the park because she does not want others to see her sobbing and asks you not to tell anyone.

4.1.2.1. The ethical dilemmas. In our analysis of this case, the following dilemmas appeared: (1) Showing sincere care for the girl vs. following Israeli Ministry of Education procedures that prohibit teachers from meeting with students after school in cases of violence without involving a professional figure. (2) The duty to report such cases to a school counselor vs. the girl’s request to protect her confidentiality.

4.1.2.2. Perceptions of action complying with the perceived expected behaviour. Our findings indicated that only a small number of participants (4 out of 18) were aware of the fact that the expected behaviour does not encourage, let alone mandate, meeting with the girl for a non-school-related subject, such as a violence case, without the presence of a professional figure such as a school counselor (morality of justice). For example, one teacher claimed:

‘I would not go to the park after school hours. It is not my job. I don’t know how to deal with this case; I don’t have the training to deal with this complex situation. I would talk to her on the phone and direct the student to a school counselor, and immediately after the conversation would report to the principal and school counselor to deal with this situation’ conforms to the perceived expected behaviour: ‘telling the relevant authorities such as a school counselor’ (female homeroom teacher, tenured, working full-time, 6 years of experience).

4.1.2.3. Perceptions of action contrary to the perceived expected behaviour. While most participants (10 out of 18 participants) did know that they have to involve a professional figure such as a school counselor, they still chose to help the student immediately (morality of care) and concurrently notify the authorities.

‘I would immediately pick her up and take care of her. You cannot leave a girl in this situation alone, she needs help, she is afraid. Meanwhile, I would call the school counselor to provide support for the girl. They have the knowledge and experience of what to do in these cases.’ vs. the perceived expected behaviour: ‘It is mandatory to inform the school counselor’ (female, private non-religious elementary school, teacher of physical education, tenured, working full-time, 6 years of experience).

In other cases (4 out of 18 participants), participants claimed that they would notify the school counselor only after receiving the girl’s permission, despite knowing that it was their duty to notify the school counselor. For example:

‘I’d go to the park, support her, implore her to get the school counselor or psychologist involved, and I’d try to convince her to agree to report the case, but I wouldn’t report it unless she agreed. I’m her homeroom teacher, and she needed to know that she can trust me, tell me all her difficulties and troubles in her situation, in her own way, vs. the perceived expected behaviour: ‘reporting to social welfare authorities’ (male, public non-religious middle school social coordinator, tenured, working fulltime, 9-years of experience).

4.2. Culturally responsive education
(17 out of the 50 participants in the third phase mentioned this category). The following incidents reflect teachers concern for their students’ lives beyond the purview of school, for example, family beliefs about schooling and how to promote achievement (incident 1):
4.2.1. Incident 1
You are a homeroom teacher in a high school. One of your students (polite, studies well, good grades) asks you not to send his parents his computer password in order to be updated about his lateness, absenteeism, behavior and grades. If you do not send the password, they will forget that there is an option to be updated. He is a “big boy”, he knows what he is doing. For example, he argued that if they were to find out that he was absent from one of his lessons, they might be upset, angry, impose sanctions on him, and limit his social activities or pocket money.

4.2.1.1. The ethical dilemma. This incident involves the following dilemmas: (1) Confidentiality, complying with a student's request vs. the obligation to update according to school regulations. (2) The student's autonomy vs. obeying regulations.

4.2.1.2. Perceptions of action complying with the perceived expected behavior. One way (12 out of 17 participants) of dealing with this situation is simply to obey regulations (morality of justice):

‘... and so long as there's no question of the child's welfare, such as an abusive father, court decision, and so long as his parents are his legal guardians, I would inform both parents; they are responsible for him and they should know what he is doing, even if he is a good student, he can't do what he wants, there are school rules'; this response conforms to the perceived expected behaviour: 'Informing the father and mother, they are his guardians till the age of 18' (female, public religious high school, homeroom teacher, tenured, working part-time, 20 years of experience).

4.2.1.3. Perceptions of actions contrary to the perceived expected behaviour. Our analysis of the participants' data reveals that they were all aware of the duty to report to both parents (morality of justice). In a few cases (5 out of 17 participants), participants wrote that they would grant the student's request (morality of care), despite their obligation to update both parents. For example:

'Since he functions, gets good grades, I think we can accommodate his needs and be more flexible. He is a responsible student, a teenager, and at that age they are very sensitive, so no damage will result if the parent won't be his “big brother” vs. awareness of what they're required to do: 'The homeroom teacher must update the parents; in accordance with school rules, they need to be involved in their child's life' (male, private non-religious elementary school, homeroom teacher, in a full-time position, 15 years' experience).

The culturally responsive education also raises aspects of unacceptable perceptions on the part of the community (Incident 2):

4.2.2. Incident 2
You are the homeroom teacher at a prestigious private elementary school. Some of the parents oppose the admission of a new child with a facial skin condition to your class, even though his condition is not contagious. These parents argue that other children are afraid of him; because it is a private school, there is an option to not admit the child.

4.2.2.1. The ethical dilemma. This incident presents an ethical dilemma between a homeroom teacher's conscientious desire to accept a child with a facial skin problem into his/her class, and the request of some parents to afford their children a protective environment without exposing them to frightening situations (parents' interference).

4.2.2.2. Perceptions of action complying with the perceived expected behavior. All of the teachers (17 out of 17 participants) tended to morality of care. For example, one teacher argued:

'I'd of course explain to the parents the great advantages that can be gained from this kind of experience, and I'd do my best to allow that the child remain in school. They should know that this boy could be their son. Since the skin condition is not contagious, they should educate their children to care for other kids, even if they look different from us’. This reaction is commensurate with the perceived expected behaviour: ‘the parents can’t force the school to exclude a student. It's a kind of racism, and so the parents' request should be ignored (male, public non-religious high school social coordinator, tenured, working fulltime, 10 years of experience).

Our findings for this incident reflected the ‘morality of care', believing that the child ought to be integrated into the private school community: proposing attempts to persuade the parents to accept the child.

4.3. Critical pedagogy
(15 out of the 50 participants from the third phase mentioned this category). The following incidents elicited the category of critical pedagogy; for example, challenging the pedagogy curriculum toward adopting new teaching methods that may reduce academic gaps among students.

4.3.1. Incident 1
You are a mathematics teacher at an elementary school. The father of one of your pupils calls to complain about your teaching method; he asks you to shift from the 'Pathways' method to the 'Singapore' method because he heard that it is more effective for low-achieving students.

4.3.1.1. The ethical dilemma. This incident reflects an ethical dilemma between an obligation to one's subject (a pedagogic decision by the staff that is also supported by the school superintendent to use the Pathways method) and parental intervention (according to the principal's understanding) in favor of the Singapore method.

4.3.1.2. Perceptions of action complying with the perceived expected behaviour. We found that in the majority of cases (10 out of 15 participants), teachers were aware of procedures and perceived the incident as unwarranted interference by the parent (morality of justice). They tried to prevent this interference, either by explaining procedures to the parent:

'I'd explain to the parent in a respectful way [that] parents do not have a say in the choice of teaching methods. We possess the knowledge about what and how to teach. The parent does not know how complicated it is to assimilate new educational methods among teachers. It takes time to train teachers in the new method. What fits one school may not fit another. He should know he needs to rely on us'; this reaction is congruent with the perceived expected behaviour: 'A parent cannot determine the educational program. It is a decision [taken] by the Ministry of Education’ (male, pubic ultra-Orthodox middle school, teacher of history, without tenure, working less than full-time, two years of experience).
Another response (3 from 15 participants) was to show more flexibility (morality of care), for example:

‘If his request makes sense and the program is approved by the Ministry of Education, I would consider implementing both programs, or only his. But I would explain to the parent that the final decision is not his to make. We are the professionals, and along with the Ministry of Education have the authority to decide what and how to teach maths;’ this reaction conforms with the perceived expected behaviour: ‘The parent is not authorised to determine what program will be used in class. The Ministry of Education and school staff are those who decide’ (female, public non-religious elementary school, teacher of Hebrew, without tenure, working full-time, two years of experience).

4.3.1.3. Perceptions of unawareness of the expected behaviour. Others (2 out of 15 participants) were aware that this question is regulated by the Ministry of Education yet unsure of the exact procedures. For example:

‘The educational programmes used by the teacher are set by the superintendent. If the parent has objections to the program, he should see the superintendent. Most of the time teachers teach according to the syllabus set by the superintendent’ vs. ‘I’d find out from the superintendent, I don’t know exactly’ (male, private non-religious elementary school, homeroom and math teacher, tenured, working full-time, 7 years of experience).

The critical pedagogy dimension also surfaced when parents criticised teacher activity to develop their children’s citizenship consciousness rather than study exactly by the book (Incident 2):

4.3.2. Incident 2

You are a science coordinator in a middle school. The parents complain that every year the standardised tests (‘Meitzav’) grades in science are very low in classes taught by Sara, a tenured teacher. They argue that she does not teach according to the book, she teaches according to actual science news occurrence in the world, but the standardised tests don’t ask about these events. They argue that they’ve already spoken with her, but she insisted that her method was the right way to teach science; she cares more that her students become critical and useful citizens by learning actual science events rather than focus on grades. Therefore, the parents want to have their children assigned another teacher.

4.3.2.1. The ethical dilemma. In our analysis, we found that the ethical dilemma involved in this incident is between an obligation to the educational programme and the desire to prepare students to become critical and useful citizens by learning from actual science news. In this incident, all participants (15 out of 15 participants) chose to act more according to the ‘morality of care’ than the perceived behaviour required by the Ministry of Education, which would be to report to the school superintendent (morality of justice). They preferred to speak with the science teacher, either directly or through a colleague. For example:

‘I’d call the teacher to order, demanding that she teach according to the standardised test requirements; of course, she can encourage by giving examples from actual science news, yet she ought to relate to them in the context of the curriculum. If she does not do it well, and the students are not successful, she needs to change her pedagogical approach. Grades are just as important as becoming critical and useful citizens, and you can do both, rather than one at the expense of the other’ vs. the perceived expected behaviour: ‘Teachers must conform to program requirements and prepare the students adequately for the standardised tests’ (male high school homeroom teacher, tenured, working more than fulltime, 8 years of experience).

Or:

‘I’d help her become more professional and improve students’ achievements, getting help from the subject mentor, continuing education programmes, and close supervision. There are many strategies that can help teachers … become more focused in their teaching. It seems that she has the potential to improve her teaching method, since she uses a creative approach in her teaching, actual events,’ vs. the perceived expected behaviour: ‘refer her to the school superintendent. She needs to know her job, especially after the parents talked to her’ (female, public religious high school, grade coordinator, history teacher, tenured, working full-time, 10 years of experience).

It seems that in this case, there was clear awareness on the part of those surveyed of the fact that the teacher is obligated to teach according to the standardised program (morality of justice), but all of the participants chose to act according to their ‘morality of care’ and not report to the school superintendent.

In conclusion, all of the above incidents raised different reactions to the same incident based on care and justice perceptions, reflecting a generally flexible approach among the participants; this elicited a softened approach of three central dimensions of social justice complying or contrary to the perceived expected behaviour.

5. Discussion

I began my study with two key approaches of ethical reasoning—superiority and integration—which reveal an emerging softened approach of social justice that focuses on three-dimensions of ‘democratic education,’ ‘culturally responsive education’ and ‘critical pedagogy’. In light of the theory of consistency between thought and action, we focus on ethical reasoning and social justice among teachers, in order to better understand teachers’ ethical decision-making and as a result, rethink and suggest improvements to teacher education.

The present study shows that teachers have the ability to reason using either ‘morality of care’ or ‘morality justice’, or even combine them in order to evaluate and understand the same critical ethical incident, whereas the final decision lacks any significant preference for one dimension or another.

Concerning previous studies that indicate that teachers defined themselves and their professionalism in terms of care (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010; Tirri & Husu, 2002), the findings indicated that teachers’ ethical reasoning does not tend significantly toward either care or justice. These findings rejected the binary proposition of care vs. justice and elicited a softened approach of social justice.

Notably, it seems that our study’s findings reflect the integration approach; namely that care and justice are intertwined, offering different, mutually enriching viewpoints of social justice (Bradner, 2013). This findings supports previous studies that indicate that the justice perspective is incomplete without the addition of the care perspective and vice versa (Adams, 2015; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988), and that we are capable of adopting one or both of the orientations (Sherblom, 2008). More specifically, some teachers may be oriented towards ‘care’ or ‘justice’ in their moral reasoning, but according to the context, may be required to use justice or caring reasoning (correspondingly). The tension between care and justice, based on the fact that teachers aren’t trained to balance these two factors, demands a sort of integrative approach that is reflected by social justice.

In order to better understand why participants focused on these main scenarios, we may refer to an international perspective. The ‘democratic education’ category addresses violence in schools, a
Pervasive problem in schools worldwide (Burger, Strohmeier, Spröber, Bauman, & Rigby, 2015). In the U.S. as well as in European countries, such as Austria and Germany, laws even impose a legal duty of care upon teachers to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their students. Thus in those countries, teachers have both a professional and moral obligation to intervene in violent episodes (Byers, Caltabiano, & Caltabiano, 2011).

Our study supports previous research that suggests that despite the development of school prevention programmes for reducing violence, teachers and other school staff are overwhelmed by school-related violence and are unsure of how to deal with it (Sela-Shayovitz, 2009; Thornton, Craft, & Dahlberg, 2000). This atmosphere of disregard for school rules may explain the study’s findings about students who broke windows during the annual school trip.

The second dimension of ‘culturally responsive education’ is explored in this study via the example given of parents who opposed admitting a new student. We found previous studies from different countries that suggest that more interactions with parents will increase school ethical climate worldwide (e.g., Lewis, Kim, & Bey, 2011). In the U.S., for example, parental involvement improves children’s academic achievement (e.g., Hill & Tyson, 2009) and reduces misbehaving (McNeal, 2012; Sheldon, 2007). In the United Kingdom, parental involvement at home and in school is one of the factors thought to improve children's affective and academic performance (Harris, Chapman, Muijs, Russ, & Stoll, 2006).

In the 21st century, many studies in the U.S. (e.g., Kim, 2009), U.K. (e.g., Tett, 2001) and Canada (e.g., Li, 2006) have begun to critically examine previous work and shift the focus from parental deficiencies to increased parental involvement.

However, only a few studies have discussed the issue of interaction with parents that progresses from involvement to interference. For example, various reforms (e.g., decentralization in schools) have shifted power relations; the empowerment of both parents and teachers has intensified and aggravated conflicts between them. A possible reason is that teachers’ professional work has become observable and subject to greater public scrutiny and susceptible to more external pressures and demands than at traditional bureaucratic schools (Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009).

In this context, previous findings indicate that teachers perceive that parental empowerment decreases their wellbeing, introduces uncertainty into their work, and raises questions about their professional discretion (e.g., De-Caravalho, 2001). Parents may thus be regarded as troublesome because they may challenge teachers’ professional power.

The example of parental resistance to including a new student may be explained by an erosion in the status of Israeli teachers, alongside parents’ mistrust of the school decision-making process. This combination has allowed parents to make inappropriate demands, possibly leading to the sensitive relations between teachers and parents in Israel (Shavit & Blank, 2012). This finding may be supported by previous international studies that have indicated that although teachers have great interest in cooperating with and being supported by parents, they express discomfort with parental intervention (Paris, DeVoe, Ross, & Acker, 2010). Teachers attempt to preserve their social position as a professional group by controlling a particular type of knowledge; they resent parents interfering in their work (De-Caravalho, 2001).

The scenario depicted under the heading of ‘critical pedagogy’ offered the examples of a parent who wanted to promote his son’s math knowledge by effective learning; another example involved parents who complained about the standardised tests grades in science. The focus on math and science as examples of effective learning may be explained by Mullis and Martin (2013), who argued that because the information learned in science and mathematics is essential to becoming a knowledgeable and functioning individual and a contributing member of society, students in school are almost universally encouraged to get good grades in these fields, with parents concurrently becoming involved in and intervene in the school academic process in order to promote their children’s achievements.

As a result, we found a variety of national policies in different countries encouraging high academic achievements. For example, in the last TIMSS (2011) report, East Asian countries lead the world in mathematics and science achievements, while the Russian Federation, Israel, Finland, the United States, and England were included in the top high-achieving countries.

To summarize, on the matter of our first study goal, namely, to explore teachers’ ethical decision-making process, we found that teachers’ ethical decision-making was rooted in two aspects of ethical reasoning: ‘morality of care’ and ‘morality of justice’. However, there is an intrinsic difficulty in balancing between these two dimensions. On the matter of the second study goal, which was to investigate whether and how teachers’ awareness of expected behaviour affects their ethical decision-making process, we found that in most cases teachers reflected that they were aware of the required behaviour. However, we did not find a pro- or con-preference for the required policy. A possible explanation for this might be that teachers generally find the norms and procedures required of them difficult to square away with their caring tendency. Congruent to the third study goal, namely, to rethink and redesign teachers’ professional development programmes, the emerging dimensions of social justice education may promote the development of these programmes rooted in social justice principles.

6. Concluding reflections: towards enhancing teachers’ social justice education

Mindful of the fact that the cognitive reasoning aspect of ethical decision making emphasises the reasons rather than the action itself, the inconsistency we noted between teachers’ behaviour choices and perceived required modes of behaviour, whether deliberate or inadvertent, suggests that teachers’ professional development programmes should consider preparing experienced teachers to deal with critical ethical incidents and expose them to the requirements of the educational system and what is expected of them, based on social justice values.

Considering the different dimensions of social justice elicited in this study, teachers would benefit from instruction on how to identify the difference between morality of justice and morality of care, and how they can combine them, recognising that morality of justice may support morality of care rather than work against it. Through teachers’ professional development programmes, we can boost teachers’ orientation to social justice values by sharing ethical dilemmas with other participants and revealing the multiple forces at play. In this fashion, teachers will learn about ethical relativism based on the principles of Mahony (2009), who argued that no universal standard exists to assess the truth of an ethical proposition.

We propose that teachers’ professional development programmes should consider focusing on the duality of justice and care based on the three main scenario categories found in this study: ‘democratic education,’ ‘culturally responsive education’ and ‘critical pedagogy.’ More specifically, the present results strongly suggest that teachers’ professional development programmes would gain from focusing on how to deal with violence in schools by discussing how to balance the tension between care and justice based on social justice values, thereby reducing uncertainty and amplifying teachers’ ability to deal with these cases.

Because the issue of interaction with parents does not get
enough attention in these programmes (Kim, 2009), teachers ought to practice reducing the tension between care and justice based on a variety of dimensions of social justice. Utilizing the scenario of parental intervention may afford them tools to graduate from parental intervention to parental involvement.

In sum, enhancing teachers’ professional development programmes by focusing on social justice education and reflective practice will offer teachers the possibility of exploring novel strategies to deal with ethical challenges.

7. Limitation and future studies

The relatively small sample size of this study makes it difficult to draw generalisations from its findings. Therefore, future studies should examine whether these findings can be generalised to other educational systems. In addition, the present study did not specifically examine the effect of context, timing, or school ethical climate. One can assume that teachers would respond differently when considering other contexts (class vs. schoolyard), timing (beginning vs. end of the academic year) or school ethical climate (caring vs. formal). These limitations highlight the need for further research.

References


Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.