

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Student`s Willingness to Seek Help from
School Rabbis in Coping with School
Violence**

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Abstract

Bullying rates in Israel and around the world are quite high. In recent years, however, bullying rates have experienced a decline (RAMA, 2016). A range of research has shown that victimization via bullying is associated with a wide range of factors such as, anxiety, depression, and a variety of psychosomatic symptoms (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld & Gould, 2007; Nordhagen, Nielsen, Stigum, & Kohler, 2005). Reporting acts of bullying to educational staff is considered to be a successful strategy in coping with acts of violence (Eliot et al., 2010). Various research studies have shown that only about a third of all victimized students have actually approached educational staff for help (RAMA, 2014), and that certain characteristics of the victimized student (e.g. gender, age, duration of violence) have been shown to be associated with the tendency to approach staff for help (Benbenishti, Churi-K'Sabri, Astor, 1996; Hunter & Mark, 2006; Schonert-Reichel, & Muller, 1996). Further, certain characteristics of the staff member approached for help (e.g. role, availability, relationship with the student) have also been associated with the tendency for students to approach him or her for help (Yablon, 2013; Megan et al., 2010).

The present study focused on students' willingness to seek help from school rabbis. School Rabbis were initially absorbed into the school system in order to meet the religious needs of the schools (Noiman, 1995). However, over time the school Rabbi's role began to encompass more elements, including assisting students with academic, religious, and personal matters (Bozaglo, 2005).

In general, it seems that pastoral care plays a role in eliminating bullying. This is apparent, for example, in British schools that have experimented in incorporating pastoral presence into their educational framework (Kendal, Keeley & Callery, 2014).

Aside from one study that examined students' willingness to approach school Rabbis for help, this phenomenon has never been researched (Yablon, 2013). Therefore, the purpose of the current research is to examine the role of the school Rabbi as a help resource for victimized students to receive assistance and to examine the factors that encourage students help seeking.

In order to examine the aforementioned, we used questionnaires (for the school Rabbi and for the students), interviews, observations on seminars provided for the school Rabbis, and the documentation regarding the school Rabbi's role, as defined over the years, and the guidelines and instructions provided to the school Rabbi.

Five hundred and twelve students in grades 7 through 12 participated in the study. Students were randomly sampled from 14 religious public schools in Israel that employ a school Rabbi. Five of the schools are female-only religious high schools, five are religious high schools, and four are *yeshiva* (male-only) high schools. The sample included 279 girls (54.5%) and 233 boys (45.5%). The age of the students ranged from 12 through 18 ($M = 14.21$; $SD = 1.67$). About half of the participants were victims of violence (51.4%) and about a third (32.4%) asked for help in response to the violence. 12.6% of the participants who asked for help had approached their school Rabbi for help. In other words, the school Rabbi acted as a significant address for assistance for victimized students in the

aftermath of school violence.

The findings show that students were more likely to seek help from Rabbis who have religious and academic extensive training. This is in accordance with our research hypothesis. It is possible that school Rabbis who received extensive training were perceived by the students as more professional or better able to help, a factor that has been associated with the likelihood of being approached for help (Furman & Buhrmeter, 1985). It is also possible that their extensive training also included education and counseling, which may have endowed these Rabbis with more skills for creating supportive relationships with students who will, in turn, be more likely to approach them for help.

In addition, research findings suggest that the type of academic interaction between the school Rabbi and the student was also associated with the tendency to approach the Rabbi for help. For example, students were more likely to approach Rabbis who had actually taught them in school. Further, students were more likely to approach Rabbis who also acted as primary educators or principals than they were to approach Rabbis that were subject teachers or just acted as Rabbis. This finding is in accordance with previous findings which have shown that students are more likely to ask for help from staff that are available to them and with whom they have a good relationship (Gefen, 2003; Schwartz & Gini, 2007).

Lastly, it was found that boys were more likely than girls to approach the school Rabbi for help and that high school students were more likely than *yeshiva* and female-only religious high school students to ask the school Rabbi for help. These

findings suggest that student characteristics encourage students' tendency to approach Rabbis for help as well.

In an attempt to obtain a global perspective on students' tendency to approach school Rabbis for help, the current study also examined the frequency of students' requests for help from school Rabbis about non-violence related matters. Research findings show that about half of the students approached the school Rabbi about academic and religious matters and about 20% approached the school Rabbis about personal matters. Further, it was found that students were more likely to approach Rabbis that had relevant training in the matter of concern (e.g. academic training about academic matters, religious training about religious matters, and counseling training for personal matters).

In summary the findings show that school Rabbis are a significant address for students in search of assistance in dealing with violence, and in dealing with religious, academic, and other personal matters in school. It appears that the school Rabbi's training plays a significant role and is closely related to students' tendency to approach him for help. These findings are important for the supervisors of school Rabbis and for those responsible for the training programs intended for Rabbis. Future research should examine the differences between boys and girls in their tendencies to approach school Rabbi's for help and should examine additional characteristics that may be related to this phenomenon.