Abstract

Simulation-based learning is a learning method based on the experiential learning approach that simulates real-life interpersonal conflict situations in order for learners to acquire strategies and skills for coping with such situations in a professional context (Eisenhower et al., 2022). Using this method, learners can train and experience different practices and make mistakes freely and fearlessly in a safe space (Eryka & Baykara, 2017). Furthermore, simulation workshops provide learners with the opportunity to reflect upon and get feedback regarding decisions they made throughout the simulation, thus allowing them to reexamine their behavior and to acquire potential solutions to complicated situations (Bravender & Staub, 2018).

Simulation-based learning has been integrated in many fields as a method that combines theoretical knowledge with practical experience (Ran & Ben-Yehoshua, 2021). The use of simulations in education and teacher training programs throughout the entire sequence of professional development stages has increased in the last few decades. This method affects the individual, the staff members and the whole organization (Ran & Ben-Yehoshua, 2021). Simulation workshops in teacher education are aimed at a large variety of target populations such preservice teachers, teacher interns, new and experienced teachers, as well as education administrators at different stages of their professional development (Ran & BenYehoshua, 2021). The simulation-based learning experience in education was created to help mediate the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical training, and to enable the development of the intra- and interpersonal skills that are required of professional teachers and education administrators (Yablon, Iluz & Eisenhower, 2022). It is a unique tool in the teacher training and professional development process and is mainly suited for training teachers to handle the interpersonal conflict situations that occur in the field of education.

The object of this study was to examine, describe, and analyze the role of the simulation workshop facilitator as perceived from their personal point of view. In addition, we examined the challenges the facilitators face, the solutions they find for those challenges, and whether the composition of the participating group (ethnic, professional sectoral or any other affiliation) has an effect on their facilitation style.

The simulation workshop consists of several components: group learning, simulated real-life scenarios with professional actors, video-based debriefing, actor feedback, and professional facilitation. The workshop facilitation is carried out by professional group facilitators who specialize in simulation-based learning. The importance of the present study lies in its examination of the contribution of the simulation tool, with a renewed and profound understanding of the facilitator's role.

Group facilitation is described as a process in which a person who is neutral, external to the group, and accepted by all its members, intervenes to help the group improve the way it identifies problems, solves them, and makes decisions, in order to enhance the group's efficiency (Wardale, 2013). Facilitated workshops help the participants develop different strategies such as problem solving, decision-making and goal-setting (Stewart, 2006). The term workshop facilitator may be used in different contexts, but it usually refers to a person who is in charge of the group process (Kolb et al., 2008).

The main role of a facilitator can be described as managing the group discussion and the group dynamics, and encouraging the group members to achieve planned objectives that are based on positive interactions and an atmosphere of cooperation (Kolb et al., 2008). According to Schwarz (2002 from Kolb et al., 2008), the term "facilitator" refers to people who carry out a variety of roles in groups, including the role of a leader, a mediator, a subject matter expert and a guide. Likewise, Kolb and her colleagues (Kolb et al., 2008) offer a definition in which a group facilitator is someone who remains neutral when group decisions are made in practice, but takes upon themself the responsibility of managing the group process while its members

attempt to solve a problem or reach a decision. Hence, the workshop facilitator's qualifications are vital for its success (Stewart, 2006).

The facilitation of an experiential learning workshop is unique mainly in the utilization of the group process in integrating didactic and experiential elements (Warkentin, 2017). Constructing and integrating these two domains requires an ability to identify and provide the content material that the learners need at the right moment while they are engaging with experiential learning. Participation in the group gives the individual a better opportunity for growth (Tzignalov, 2017). Whether it is a therapeutic, psycho-educational, interpersonal relations, or any other type of group, the purpose of the group experience is to produce independent learning can bring about change.

The research on the use of simulations in education is still at an early stage. While quite a few aspects of the simulation experience have been studied, for example their contribution to different aspects of professional development (Eyikara & Baykara, 2017), the differences between different groups, for instance gender, and religious identity (Yablon, Iluz & Hershkowitz, 2021; Bernstein, 2017; Lubelski, 2019; Raskin & Oppenheimer, 2018), their impact on the participants (Wasserman-Gutwillig, 2017; Hominer, 2020) or the group coordinators (Mopsik, 2021), and in experience type (Wilner, in print), the specific aspect of the facilitation of simulation workshops has not yet been explored. Furthermore, this study examines group facilitation from a unique perspective, adding another level of understanding to the growing body of knowledge about simulation-based learning. The results of the study illuminate how simulation workshop facilitators perceive their role and help identify the unique features of this role in simulation-based learning settings.

The present study focused on group facilitation in the field of simulation in education from the point of view of the facilitators themselves, using a qualitative research method that involved the use of a repetitive process to lead to an improved or renewed understanding of a phenomenon through new significant discernments derived from approaching the studied phenomenon closely (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The study included three stages: in the first stage, six unstructured observations of simulation workshops were conducted in order to get familiar with the workshop's characteristics and with the special qualities of the facilitator's job. In the second stage, interviews with facilitators from HaLev Center (The Center for Simulation in Education) were held. In the third stage, after the data brought up in the interviews had been analyzed, 30 semi-unstructured observations of recorded simulation workshops held at HaLev center that were facilitated by the participants in this study were conducted. Throughout the observations, the researcher examined the coherence between the content of the interviews and the themes identified in their analysis with what was going on in real time. The analysis of the interviews and the transcripts of excerpts from the observations were used as examples to complement what the facilitators had said.

The participants interviewed in the study are 13 group facilitators out of the 18 facilitators employed at HaLev Center; 2 are men, 11 are women, 9 are from the Jewish community and 4 come from the Arab sector. The participants' age ranged from 32 to 53. and their years of experience ranged from three to ten years. All of them have academic degrees in different fields such as psychology, social work, art therapy, human resources, etc. The interviews dealt with the different problems that are distinct to the role of facilitator in simulation workshops, such as role perception and the responsibilities derived from the unique structure of the simulation workshop, special challenges and more. Data analysis point to five main aspects reflecting both the simulation workshops' uniqueness and the perception of the role of facilitation in these workshops from the simulation facilitators' point of view.
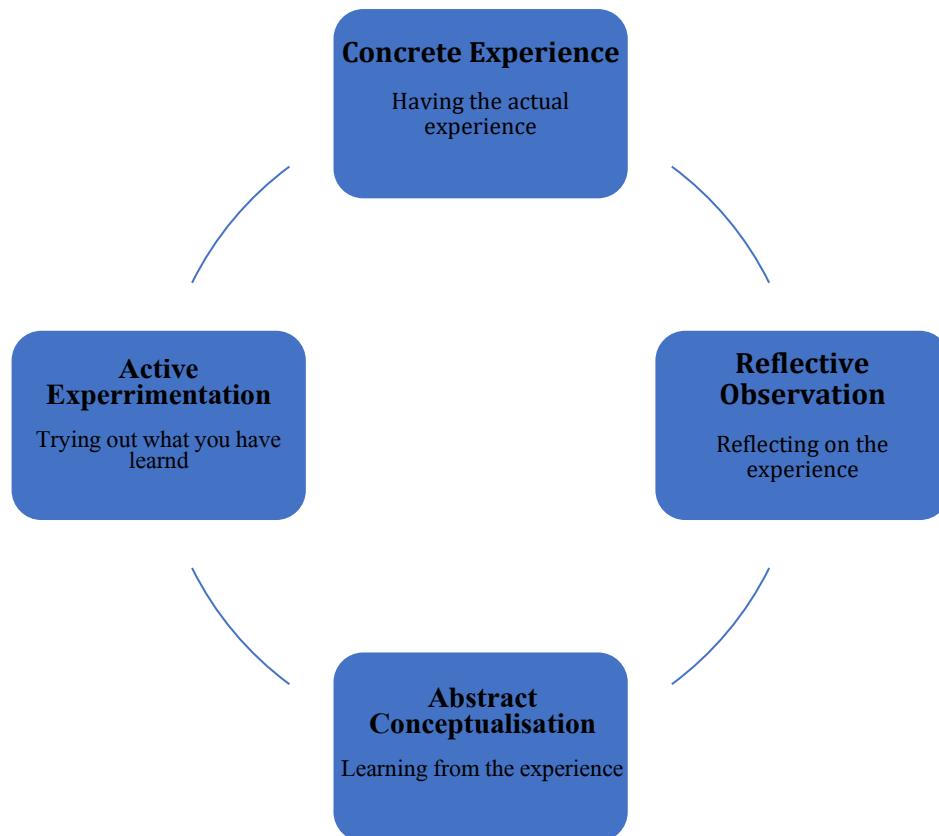
The study findings present the five main aspects elicited in the interviews. These aspects reflect main features of the facilitator's role in simulation workshops: the facilitator's duties, the distinct features of the simulation workshop, challenges during facilitation, ways of handling these challenges, and differences between learner groups. These findings illuminate

the ways in which the facilitator's role in simulation workshops is perceived by the facilitators themselves, as well as the distinct features of the facilitation role in experiential settings.

These findings can be understood by observing Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2018) as the simulated experience is based on experiential learning principles (Eisenhower et al., 2022). According to Kolb, learning takes place in a cyclical, recurring process in which there are reciprocal relations between the learner's external environment and their inner world (Kolb & Kolb, 2018). The cycle of experiential learning consists of four stages: in the first stage a concrete experience takes place, in the second stage the experience is analyzed through reflective observation that enables the participants to think together and individually about the experienced simulation. In the third stage, there is a process of abstract conceptualization done by focusing on understanding the significance of the experience in such a way as to conceptualize the insights gained into new knowledge (Lattacher & Wdowiak, 2020; Kolb & Kolb, 2018). Finally, in the fourth stage, there is active experimentation with the new knowledge, which enhances the internalization and application of the new learning into the learners' practical work (Kolb & Kolb, 2018). The simulation workshop facilitators have a significant and important role in the participants' learning process during the simulation workshop. Since they are the ones who lead the workshop, the facilitators undertake the task of ensuring that a number of four-stage learning cycles occur in each workshop.

In addition, the content of the interviews and the observations show that simulation workshops consist of several distinct components that distinguish them from other types of workshops. Simulation workshops are unique in their **structured facilitation model**. The learning process in the workshop is based on cycles of simulation experiences (Ran & Nahari, 2018). Using a predefined structure enables the facilitator to guide the discussion that takes place in the debriefing (Sawyer et al., 2016). Accordingly, the findings of the present study also show that notwithstanding the difficulty involved, following a strict timetable and sticking to a facilitation model are essential for the workshop's progression. The simulation components are interrelated and are vital for the optimal progression of the workshop. The simulation scenario is both structured and flexible, focuses on conflict situations (Kaufman & Ireland, 2019), enhances authentic experiential learning and is adaptable to any specific learners' group and to its own learning objectives (Theelen et al., 2019). The debriefing following the simulation consists of feedback given by the other participants and by the actors, and facilitates individual reflection in a supportive and safe environment. Integrating these elements - the scenario, actor, debriefing, facilitator - yields a holistic setting that reflects the perception of simulation-based learning as a qualitatively distinct practice (Ran & Yosefsberg Ben-Yehoshua, 2021). The findings of the present study show that the facilitators perceive the actor's role as an indispensable and invaluable part in the simulation workshop. Therefore, professional cooperation between the actor and the facilitator is necessary for the simulation to be successful.

Diagram 1: Kolb's Learning Cycle

Concrete Experience
Having the actual experience

Reflective Observation
Reflecting on the experience

Abstract Conceptualisation
Learning from the experience

Active Experimentation
Trying out what you have learnd

One of the experiential simulation's remarkable benefits is clearly the personal attitudes on which the individual's behavior is based. (Hollombe & Yablon, 2022). The experience enables the **revelation of** the attitudes of the learners, of the rest of the observing participants and of the debriefing facilitator, whereas the debriefing stage addressesthe overt and covert layers of the participants' behavior, both individually and collectively (Ran & Yosefsberg Ben ‐ Yehoshua, 2021). Furthermore, the fact that the simulative experience takes place in **a safe environment** enables participants to **experience** scenarios, inquire into their attitudes and to evaluate an array of ways to respond to such cases as well as their implications (Nahari, 2022). Moreover, the goal of the experience is not to practice automatic response skills in emergency cases, on the contrary, the aim is to acquire and reinforce more conscious responses, while reducing automatic responses in times of emotional stress that arise from confrontation and uncertain situations (Yablon et al., 2022). From a broader perspective, it can be stated that the simulative training allows the participants to experience situations and learn from them under "laboratory conditions" (Levin & Frei-Landau, 2019).

An additional finding in the present study is that another benefit of the simulation workshop that differentiates it from other workshop types is its power **to expose the gap between the participants' statements and their performance in practice**. According to the facilitators, the concrete experience allows the practicing learners and the rest of the group to understand how they actually behave. It may happen that the experience does not align with the learner's stated attitudes and with the way they perceives their abilities and behavior in similar previous situations. The experiential aspect of the workshop enhances the learners' awareness of their difficulties, likewise, it allows the facilitators to identify the participants׳ needs and respond to them (Ireland, 2021). Another remarkable difference between simulation workshops and other workshops is their single occurrence as opposed to other, multi-occurrence workshops (such as therapeutic ones) that consist of several sessions. Facilitators report that although the workshop occurs once, it is so powerful and intensive, unlike other workshops, that it seems to act as a shortcut to the process as compared to other process workshops.

In addition, the facilitators reported several **challenges** typical to their role. The role of a workshop facilitator involves distinct features derived from the workshop characteristics, from its participant population and from the facilitator's numerous duties. Some of these challenges arise from the cultural and language gaps between the facilitator and the group, as the groups arriving at HaLev Center originate from various backgrounds (such as secular, religious, ultra-orthodox Jews, and Arabs). Throughout the interviews the facilitators referred to a number of **challenges, derived from cultural and linguistic gaps** between themselves and the groups: understanding and communication based on language differences, gaps between the facilitator and the group based on cultural affiliation and challenges based on organizational culture. The facilitators emphasized that they try to bridge these gaps and face these challenges by finding common ground with the participants, by connecting to their world and by adjusting the workshop structure.

Furthermore, the facilitators reported that they often encounter different kinds of **objections** from the group to various aspects of the simulation workshop such as - participating in the simulation with an actor, filming the workshop and the simulation, the actor's feedback, and the values advanced by the workshop. According to Barak-Stein (2008) objection refers to any phenomenon in the group that prevents the group from attaining its goal - lack of cooperation, not fulfilling tasks, showing up late, harming effective group communication, offending participants or the facilitator. Objections prevent the group from addressing the content, which is the task itself, thus prevent the group from achieving its purpose. Objections are a manifestation of difficulty and of the group's distress. These are situations when anxiety arises and triggers defense mechanisms that make it impossible for the original emotion to be expressed. Throughout the interviews the facilitators pointed out that objections to the learned subject matter might arise, such as refusing to use communication skills taught in the workshop and objections to the scenarios or to the actor's feedback, to the simulation tool (for example objecting to the filming of the workshop, to taking an active part in it, or objection to the setting, such as the time or schedule of the workshop, and so on. The types of objections encountered by the facilitators manifest as actively direct, passively indirect and inactivity during the session.

Another challenge the facilitators face during simulation workshops is that of **managing the discussion**, especially after a complicated simulation. Facilitators point out that handling the debriefing after a complicated simulation is challenging because it can be difficult to highlight the participant's strengths during the simulation, and they feel the need to defend the participant from the group's criticism. In addition, the group may support the participant's objections, for example to using compassionate communication skills, and can instead blame the actor for escalating the conflict. Moreover, an "unsuccessful" simulation might lead to the discourse during the debriefing being very emotional, wherein the participant and/or the group feel the need to defend themselves. Consequently, at this stage, the challenge that the facilitator faces is in protecting the participant and the actor who have just finished the simulation from the group members' criticism, and in creating an appropriate environment that enables learning and development in spite of the negative feelings, the criticism and objections.

Furthermore, since the study took place during the Covid19 pandemic, a significant number of the workshops took part via the Zoom platform. This new format led to **special challenges for online workshops** that the facilitators mentioned in the interviews, such as technical challenges, greater difficulty in drawing the participants' attention as they were more likely to be distracted by physical occurrences at home and or feeling less committed to the workshop, difficulty in non-verbal communication, some participants' refusal to turn on their video cameras, difficulty in generating a safe environment, etc.

Moreover, there are facilitators who spoke about the **feeling of loneliness** they experience in their work as facilitators. They described their job as a lonely one. Likewise, interview analysis revealed facilitators' feeling of alienation vis-à-vis the simulation group participants,

and the group of actors, who they consider to be a social group in itself, different from that of the group of facilitators. Therefore, the findings show that facilitators group might feel lonely and alienated and might have an unsatisfied need to share the experience they had with the learners' group with their peers.

Thus, the results of the present study illustrate the characteristics of the role of simulation facilitation in education that arise from the distinct nature and structure of those workshops. In addition, these findings reflect the significant perspective of the workshop facilitators that in their role they are responsible for the workshop in practice and in leading the groups through the educational and emotional process involved (Levin & Flavian 2020). The facilitators' reports reveal a broad and fascinating picture of what their role is like, as well as the sense of professional vocation and sympathy for the values reinforced in the simulation workshop in education.

The contribution of the present study is evident in several ways. On the theoretical level, the study contributes to the comprehension of the role of facilitation in simulation workshops from the group facilitator's perspective, their professional experience and their worldview. Furthermore, the present study is one of the first ones carried out in the field of simulation group facilitation, as previous studies on simulation in education dealt with the participants (Wasserman-Gutwillig, 2017; Hominer, 2020) with the group coordinators (Mopsik, 2021) with the type of experience (Wilner, in print) and so on. The present study represents a unique angle of facilitation research and adds another level to the knowledge of simulation-based learning. From the findings of this study one can learn about how the facilitation role is perceived in simulation workshops and about the unique characteristics of this role in learning and experiential settings.

The group facilitator is a key figure in simulation workshops and they hold a great deal of responsibility in ensuring the workshop's success. Therefore, on the pedagogical level, the study promotes the role of the facilitator, by refreshing and deepening the practical outlook on the simulation workshop facilitators' areas of responsibility, as well as by reinforcing the importance of facilitation for experiential learning and the ways in which it enhances the workshop. Finally, the results of this study reveal that the role of a group facilitator in simulation-based learning workshops is different in its nature, its features, and the areas of responsibility it involves, from facilitation roles under other kinds of frameworks. Hence, this study sheds light on the definition of the role of group facilitation in simulation workshops as a field which is unique and essential for the workshop's success, and which is distinct from other types of group facilitation.

The study's limitation derives from the fact that it was conducted during the Covid19 pandemic. During this period, many workshops were given on-line and some were even canceled. Due to these special circumstances, it is possible that some of the facilitators did not facilitate any face-to-face workshops for quite a long period of time, which might have affected their recollection of the workshops and even biased their responses to the interview questions. Also, the present study is the first one to research the perception of a simulation workshop facilitator's role and the challenges involved in it. It is possible that the fact that the participating facilitators were all from HaLev Center influenced the results. Therefore, it is recommended that a comprehensive quantitative study on various and different facilitation models be conducted. Furthermore, conducting a study during a time period with more frequently held face-to-face workshops may result in findings that reflect the simulative process at its best. Further studies that focus on specific aspects of the role of facilitation, may both reinforce the results of this study and complete them with for example research on how the facilitator role is perceived by the other roles in the workshop, such as the actors, the participants, and the group coordinators. In addition, studies dealing with different models of simulation workshops (for instance: general facilitation, multiple experiences, shorter debriefing times and more) may also shed further significant light on the role of facilitation in experiential learning settings.