Building "Restorative Relationships" in Arab Schools in Israel: An Actionable, Practice-based Model of Inclusive School Practice

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Abstract

Exclusion is a relationship gone wrong. Inclusion requires building "restorative relationships" that expand the role of the teachers as "caregivers," rethinking the definitions of success that guide teaching practices and involve the emotional work necessary to ensure the well-being of teachers and other school staff. We present an actionable model of inclusive school practice that specifies the knowledge and skills that educators need, to build restorative relationships. We present the implementation of the model in Arab schools in Israel, which implies consideration of deep cultural aspects, especially regarding the subjective-emotional aspect.

Lately, after Covid-19 crisis, educators report aggravation in the behavior of teenagers in schools compared to what was known before the pandemic. We see, on the one hand, an increasing case of violence in schools, and on the other hand, more students who are disconnected from learning and are isolated. The premise is that these extreme behaviors, both extroverted and introverted, are expression of great distress among students. There is a greater need, today, to build mechanisms in the education systems that will connect the learning processes with social-emotional processes. We offer a model for the promotion and construction of these mechanisms. Teachers cannot build restorative relationships with their students unless their own emotional needs are addressed. Dealing with the inner world of students and teachers is sometimes at odds with cultural concepts. Therefore, the model describes the emotional work and reflection on practices necessary to ensure teacher well-being.

Keywords: *Action-research, teachers-as-caregivers, inclusive school, multicultural teacher training, cycle-of-exclusion*

Introduction

In the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, we are seeing a significant and increasingly challenging situation within schools. This is manifesting itself in increased violence, turmoil among children and teachers, mass departures of teachers from the profession, heightened parental anger towards schools, and feelings of loneliness, despair, and alienation. Contrary to the expectation that post-pandemic life would return to its previous course, it is now becoming clear that we are in an ongoing crisis for which we are not prepared.

In this complex situation, it is critical to deal with the well-being of both individuals and communities. In Israel, most schools concern themselves with academic attainment in isolation, ignoring the surrounding circumstances and their emotional consequences. In this article, we propose a holistic educational approach to build resilience through the education system. This approach addresses the emotional aspects of all partners in the system. We maintain that effectively dealing with crises and building resilience must be achieved through the implementation of educational practices that strengthen a sense of belonging and connection to the broader community, empathy, caring and dialogue. Schools are the natural place to provide children with the necessary tools and skills to cope with crises. This is doubly true of Arab schools in Israel, which work within the context of an already-marginalized community. This article will demonstrate the application of a working model to strengthen resilience among students and teachers in Arab schools in Israel.

Arab Education in Israel

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, Arab education has suffered from systemic discrimination, manifested through a dearth of resources and in centralized state control over school curricula and activities. The Ministry of Education pursues an approach of "education for Arabs" rather than "Arab education", an approach based on separation and control. The educational establishment does not recognize the Arab community as an ethnic Palestinian minority, ignores references to identities within Arab society, and dismisses national identity in favor of an emphasis on civic identity. This approach creates alienation among students and educational personnel alike. This is expressed in anger towards the system and leads, among other things, to high dropout rates, violence and low motivation and initiative. Arab educators find themselves torn between their loyalty to Arab society and loyalty to the education system and the state [2]. Consequently, teachers and administrators often choose to focus solely on educational matters and attainment and to forsake political-social-emotional issues entirely. This exacerbates the problems facing marginalized students from low-status economic backgrounds, contributing to an outsized student dropout rate, as well as the number of children who enter cycles of risk and violence.

Restorative Relationships: Association-Based Inclusive Teaching

The model that we present is based on the development of restorative relationships [4] between teachers and students, teachers and officials, schools and families, and amongst teachers. Building restorative relationships encourages a holistic educational approach that recognizes behaviors associated with risk and distress and seeks to understand how school education staff can work more effectively with struggling students. While school counselors, psychologists and other educational experts play an important role within the school environment, teachers' daily interactions with students gives them an unrivalled ability to effect change. The primary focus should be on expanding the traditional role of teachers beyond imparting knowledge by turning them into caregivers, who are also able to address the connection between the academic needs of their students and their emotional, developmental and social needs. The educator's ability to do so requires delving into complex emotions while teaching and being able to provide alternative interpretations to events [3].

Method: Action Learning and Action Science

The model we developed was built over several years and is rooted in the action research method. It is designed to provide practical knowledge to assist Jewish and Arab schools in Israel to support at-risk and excluded students. We led an action research process that included creating educational teams consisting of administrators, teachers, counselors and other school faculty. These were supported by external advisors with expertise in holistic education. Arab schools also had experts in Arab education. Bi-weekly meetings are generally held at the schools, in which members of the educational team present and discuss events they are struggling with. The group analyzes these cases through an action learning cycle [1],[5] to produce alternative ideas and practices.

Case Study:

The following case demonstrates how the method works with a team of teachers in an Arab municipal high school. At a staff meeting, one of the teachers brings up an issue that is bothering her. The discussion that takes place is designed to help the teacher and teaching staff to effectively address issues.

Mahmoud's story: Muhammad is a 9th grade student with little interest in his studies. He hangs out with a group that is a negative influence on him, and his father is very angry. The teacher suspects that Mahmoud is being beaten by his father, who demands that he sit down and study. There were several discussions in the group about the child and the family and how they could be helped. Following these discussions, the teacher began to hold personal conversations with the student. In these conversations, the teacher mostly asked about his wellbeing, listened to him, and later highlighted his strengths and encouraged his presence in class. Little by little, the student improved both academically and socially. The teacher met with the parents and told them about Mahmoud's progress. At some point the teacher shared with the group:

> The Teacher: *I want to tell you all about what happened a few days ago with Mahmoud's father. I invited him in to tell him about Mahmoud's progress. The father was waiting for me outside. Standing outside the classroom, the father noticed that the teacher was*

dictating a text and Mahmoud was not writing in his notebook, unlike the other students. When Mahmoud came out of the classroom, his father immediately began to berate him loudly: "Why aren't you writing?" Mahmoud answered: "I didn't have time; I'll get the material from one of my friends." The father started yelling at him, scolding him, and using harsh language, within hearing range of all the students in the classroom. Mahmoud did not respond. His face was red, and tears came to his eyes. I pulled him over and suggested he go to the bathroom to wash his face. I wanted him to run away. I was afraid that if he stayed his father might beat him, but Mahmoud decided to go back to class. I started to tell his father that Mahmoud was a good student, but he didn't have time to write, which happens sometimes, and he will make up the material, but while I was trying to calm him down, he angrily walked away and left the school.

The teacher had wanted Mahmoud's father to be proud of him, so she invited him to the school. The father's behavior shocked and confused her. She felt she had done the right thing, but the results were the opposite of what she had anticipated. She felt anger, distress and helplessness, and wanted to complain about the father. However, one of those present raised the thought that the change the teacher had created in the relationship with the parents had aroused suspicion and confusion with the father. He was not used to hearing good things about his son and being invited to the school to hear about it. It can be assumed that the father was unsure how to react to the encouragement. His natural pattern was to scold, shout and fulfill his familiar role as father. The idea was not to justify the father's behavior but to try to understand and empathize with his circumstances and frame of reference.

After the teacher told the story to the group, the following conversation took place:

Advisor: "I hear your excitement and frustration, and also your panic and sense of responsibility as an educator."

The teacher: "Of course, I don't know what to do."

Advisor: "Let's try to understand together what happened and what your role is in such a case. Is that OK?"

The teacher: "Of course."

Advisor: "Let's first try to focus on the student. Did you talk to him after the incident?"

The teacher: "Actually, not yet. What should I tell him?"

The advisor turned the question over to the group of teachers: "What do you think? What are the child's needs?" The members of the group helped the homeroom teacher identify a different interpretation to the father's behavior, one that did not stem from cruelty or a violent nature, but from caring and a deep sense of frustration and helplessness. They then gave practical suggestions. With the help of the advisor, the homeroom teacher defined what she wanted to achieve in the conversation with the student.

The homeroom teacher returned to the classroom and had a conversation with the child, based on what she learned in the group:

The teacher: "Mahmoud, I understand that you are going through a lot of things at home."

Mahmoud: "Nothing is happening at home."

The teacher: "When difficult things happen to us, we often don't feel like talking about it. [...] I understand."

Mahmoud: "There's nothing to talk about. [...] You know my father, but I don't care."

The teacher: "The truth is, I know your father cares about you and sometimes he expresses it in an unpleasant way. [...] I guess you care about him too, but sometimes you're also mad at him. [...] No?"

> Mahmoud: *"He comes home only to get angry. [...] Just drop it."*
>
> The teacher: *"What you are telling me hurts, and I would like you to know that I completely understand the pain that can sometimes cause you to be disruptive in class."*

Following work on the case and the guidance she received from the advisor, she tried to establish a caring relationship with the student as a person, and not just as an "academic" entity.

She reflected the pain she ascribed to him and let him know that he was important to her and that she "saw" him. She gave him an opportunity to talk about his feelings and communicated to him that she was willing to hold his pain and anger.

Working with the group gave the teacher a vital opportunity to express, process and legitimize her conflicted emotions. This allowed her to act out of consideration for the child's welfare, wellbeing and development rather than out of anger, disappointment and frustration.

Discussion

A change in the perception of the role of a teacher working with at-risk and excluded students requires an ability to connect with the latter's personal and emotional circumstances, among other things, as well as to the external world.

Society in general and Arab society, in particular, is facing increasing challenges that can be traced back to racism, discrimination, poverty and exclusion. As a result, violence among young people is on the rise. This makes emotional discourse and providing space for the expression of difficult feelings more important than ever. To create meaningful change, it is necessary to produce a large-scale working model that addresses this difficult situation. The model and approach we developed are based on the characteristics of society and education in Israel, but we believe that they have the potential to resonate with teachers everywhere.

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