

Trapped in a Maze: Arab Teachers in Israel Facing Child Sexual Abuse Among Their Pupils

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Abstract

Cultural contexts are formative of and fundamental to how individuals understand, conceptualize, and act within a context of violence. Conceptually and methodologically, however, research from a culturally informed perspective on the experiences of teachers contending with the violence of child sexual abuse (CSA) in particular is broadly limited. As educators frequently confront cases of CSA in their everyday work, their ability to promote detection, disclosure intervention, and especially prevention gives them the potential to be agents of social change; however, while their responsibilities are critical, they are simultaneously members of their communities and cultures, and their interactions are bound by these dynamics. The purpose of the study is to analyze the experiences of Arab teachers in Israel who confront CSA in their everyday work. The findings are based on qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 female Arab teachers working within the Arab school system in Israel. Results indicate that when facing CSA, the teachers experience an ongoing conflict between their cultural and professional codes, trapping them in a maze of intertwining and oppositional demands. On the one hand, they are constrained by the norm of protecting the honor and maintaining the status and reputation of those involved, including themselves; on the other hand, as empathetic professionals, they desire to aid their pupils. While the participants do not accept the status quo, they are effectively at a

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loss as to how to change it. In order find a way out of their entrapment in coping with CSA among their pupils, the only currently available path is to act as a lone hero; there is, however, the potential to foster the development of a secondary culture within the school to inaugurate cultural change in coping with CSA. Implications for future research, policy, and practice are discussed.

Keywords

Sexual abuse, child abuse, cultural contexts, prevention of child abuse, treatment/intervention

Literature

The cultural backgrounds of those involved in child sexual abuse (CSA) affect their emotional reactions, understanding, and operational actions such as their willingness to disclose the abuse (Eisikovits et al., 2015; Faller, 2007; Ibanez et al., 2006; Tener & Sigad, 2019). Hence, given that CSA crosses cultural boundaries as a near-universal phenomenon, the lived experience of and intervention in cases of CSA differ across the millions of boys and girls annually affected (Corwin & Keeshin, 2011; Srivastava et al., 2017) and their front-line caregivers.

Educators around the world are a notable instance of this problem of cultural context. As they frequently confront cases of CSA in their everyday work, they are especially well-positioned to promote detection, disclosure, and intervention in instances of CSA and thus to reduce the short- and long-term consequences of this abuse. Furthermore, educators have the capacity to act as social agents for the prevention of CSA through educational intervention. However, all of this potential is mitigated by the fact that the definition and understanding of CSA are far from uniform across cultures (Fontes et al., 2001; Fontes & Plummer, 2010), particularly with regard to perspectives on childhood, sexuality, sexual development, virginity, and family discipline and boundaries (Cohen et al., 2001).

While different cultural contexts result in varied conceptualizations of and responses to CSA, the overwhelming negative short- and long-term consequences are universally documented (Almuneef, 2019; Stiller & Hellmann, 2017). As such, there is a critical need for schools worldwide and from diverse cultural contexts to pursue the early identification, and if possible, the prevention, of CSA. CSA is damaging to children's ability to learn and progress (e.g., Chinyoka et al., 2016), their memory (Harris et al., 2016), their social interactions and emotional well-being (e.g., Amédée et al., 2019), and their ability to succeed in a school setting (e.g., Choudhary et al., 2019; Zainudin & Ashari, 2018).

As CSA is defined by the World Health Organization (2012), it encompasses the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is not developmentally prepared for, and to which he or she cannot give full or informed consent; or, the involvement of a child in sexual activity that violates the laws or social taboos of society. CSA can occur between a child and an adult, or between one child and another who by age or development is in a position of responsibility, trust, or power relative to the first. Peer CSA, in which a child is subject to unwanted or otherwise harmful sexual contact, can also occur in relationships where this power differential is absent (Tener & Katz, 2019). CSA may be perpetrated by men and women, strangers, close friends, peers or family members, and people of all sexual orientations, socioeconomic classes, and cultural backgrounds (Finkelhor, 1993; Murray et al., 2014; Pereda et al., 2009; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015; Tener & Katz, 2019). However, educators of different cultures (Faller, 2007; Ibanez et al., 2006; Tener & Sigad, 2019) will have different personal responses to CSA and will contend with different pressures in relation to intervention. Such cultural pressures are one of several reasons that reporting failures are common in education systems around the world (Goldman & Padayachi, 2005; Haboush & Alyan, 2013; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; Kenny, 2005; Mathews, 2011; McKee & Dillenburger, 2012).

Accordingly, to gain full understanding of the CSA phenomenon, it is beneficial to apply the lens of context-informed theory, which purports that all behaviors that occur should be understood as grounded in multiple changing and intertwined contexts, whether sociocultural, economic, ethnic, or religious (Nadan et al., 2015; Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Roer-Strier, 2016). As we seek to understand the nature and consequences of CSA, we must attend to the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the social agents involved (Ajzenstadt & Cavaglian, 2005; Eisikovits et al., 2015).

The Context of Israeli Arab Society

Israel's population includes multiple ethnic and religious groups (Roer-Strier, 2001), the two largest being Jews (approximately 75% of the population) and Arabs (approximately 20.7% of the population). This Arab minority, while comprised of various subgroups, is culturally distinctive (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2005) and can be characterized as highly heterogeneous and conservative with regard to sex roles, the centrality of the family, and sociocultural hierarchy (Benbenishty et al., 2002; Zeira et al., 2002). Discussion of sexual matters is made difficult by the emphasis on modesty as a matter of family honor (Abdullah & Brown, 2011; Haboush & Alyan, 2013) and a cultural aversion to discussion of personal issues, such that sexual education is often shunned

(Haboush & Alyan, 2013). Thus, when a teacher is exposed to CSA, he or she enters into a subject area that is an ultimate taboo in the Arab family (Abu-Baker, 2005).

Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on the collective responsibility towards the *Hamula*, or extended family clan, whose members rely on one another for social and economic support (Abu-Baker, 2013; Pely, 2011); that is to say, any individual action must be considered in light of how it reflects on and affects the *Hamula* as a whole (Pely, 2011). As respect for and obedience to one's elders are also a strongly held value (Khalaila, 2010), this principle applies all the more so to children, whose individual needs may take on a secondary importance to the collective good of the family (Haboush & Alyan, 2013). In cases of sexual violence, this means that the application of a Western-style intervention may result in the entire family blaming the victim for destroying the structure and reputation of the *Hamula*. This is particularly true in cases of CSA, which are liable to affect the family's honor (Abu-Baker & Dwairy, 2003; Haj-Yahia & Tamish, 2001). Not only can the damage to the family have extensive social consequences, but there may be risk of physical retaliation to those involved, particularly women, as some families engage in "honor killings" to restore lost honor relating to sexual matters (Khalid, 2017; Pely, 2011). Teachers have at times been among those targeted by this practice (Kalifa, 2017; Masarwa & Bruno, 2018).

The rate of sexual abuse in Arab communities in Israel is difficult to measure. While abuse is reported at a low rate relative to Jewish communities (Kalifa, 2017; Weisbly, 2010), empirical evidence suggests that in this instance, low reporting rates do not actually correlate with low incidence (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2017; Weisbly, 2010). At present, however, the available data remain unreliable (Moshe, 2013).

The Current Study

This cultural context provides the backdrop against which Arab teachers in Israel conceptualize and act with regards to CSA. The purpose of the present study was to describe and analyze their experiences and how they understand and contend with CSA in their everyday work and personal lives. We ask: (a) How do they view their roles and responsibilities regarding CSA cases? (b) How do they perceive the role of Arab culture in general and that of Arabs residing in Israel specifically in the context of CSA? (c) How, in their view, does the cultural context of the Arab community in Israel within which they work in effect intervention in CSA cases?

Methods

The research in this article is guided by a descriptive phenomenological-psychological perspective. This view allows us to capture the lived experiences of the participating Arab teachers and to conceptualize how they make sense of the phenomena of CSA among their pupils as a part of their everyday professional lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Spinelli, 2005). Through close examination of individual experiences, phenomenological analysts seek to capture the meaning and common features or essences of an experience or event (Sokolowski, 2000). The study aims to illustrate how, in light of cultural constructs, the experience of contending with CSA both professionally and personally becomes part of a changed self (Giorgi, 2012).

Population

30 Arab teachers, including both homeroom and subject teachers, were recruited through key informant connections as part of a purposeful sample. Their ages at the time of interviews ranged from 35 to 50. All were married women and had families with children; male Arab teachers were not included, as it was highly difficult to reach this very minor population during the recruitment phase. Furthermore, it appears that male teachers in Arab society work primarily in administrative roles, which may create different experiences and require a separate study. The participants included both Christian and Muslim Arabs whose level of religiosity ranged from secular to religious. Their teaching experience ranged from 10 to 25 years, with all research participants having significant experience in coping with CSA as part of their role as teachers.

Procedures

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author, who also invited research students in various courses to participate as interviewers in the study. An additional 24 interviews were thus conducted by graduate education students who received in-depth training in order to do so. These students took part in the study as part of their fulfillment of the requirements for a seminar on the topic.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The content categories in the interview guide included: the perceived role of educators in CSA cases (e.g., what do you think is the role of educators in relation to the phenomenon of CSA?); responses to CSA disclosure (e.g., from your own experience, what are the responses of official figures in cases of CSA that occur/are disclosed in the

education system?); and perceived effects on the educators' personal lives (e.g., how does being an educator dealing with cases of CSA affect your personal life?). The interviews were taped, translated from Arabic and transcribed.

Data Analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis included open coding to identify the units of meaning, followed by cross-case analysis in which segments from each interview were condensed until core themes emerged (Patton, 2002). During the first stage, the interviews were read several times until familiarity with and full immersion in the experiences presented in the texts under scrutiny were obtained and each transcript was entered into the Dedoose software. The second stage focused on identifying and organizing the relevant units of meaning from the interviews (Roulston, 2010), that is, the recurring statements that greatly influenced the participants' interpretations. Next, codes or code groups were synthesized into themes and subthemes. In the third stage, similar units of meaning were clustered together and synthesized into the themes that constitute the study findings. When no new issues arose, saturation was reached. Themes considered to make only a minor contribution to understanding the examined phenomenon were rejected. The authors then referred back to the transcripts for any information required to develop the themes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Throughout, themes were identified using data-driven inductive analysis without trying to fit them into preexisting coding frames or the authors' preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When the analysis was complete, the quotes selected as representative were translated into English. To check the translation, randomly selected quotes were retranslated into Hebrew.

Trustworthiness

Audit trail, peer debriefing, and member checking were used to achieve trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015). The audit trail consisted of detailed documentation throughout the research. Excerpts of raw data were attached to all interpretations and the peer debriefing process was documented in writing (Bowen, 2009). Peer debriefing was used in several stages of the thematic data analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). In the initial coding, the two authors analyzed each interview with weekly meetings to ensure systematic work, as well as the uniformity and accuracy of the coding system. In subsequent stages, when themes emerged, the authors met regularly to discuss thoughts and ensure systematic analysis of all data. Finally, the authors verified that each theme and subtheme had a coherent pattern (Nowell et al., 2017).

Credibility was achieved through the systematic presentation of quotations and their analyses, allowing the reader to evaluate the ways in which reality was constructed and the themes derived from the interviews (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Maxwell, 2005). For example, the theme: “‘Fear takes over me’: Arab teachers experience fear in facing child sexual abuse” is presented in the following manner: (a) personal context of a given research participant; (b) quote from the research participant; (c) analysis of the quote, including its context, structure, and relationship to the unified theme and the subsequent quotes. This detailed presentation of findings is open to scrutiny by readers, who are invited to make their own judgments and to validate or reject the interpretations suggested (Angen, 2000; Patton, 2002). The authors also discussed their work with experts on CSA and qualitative research (Henry, 2015). Member checking was initially conducted during data collection, when participants were asked to clarify, elaborate, and provide examples of their perceptions, as well as respond to issues raised in previous interviews (Morse, 2015).

Ethics

The ethics committees of the college and university with which the researchers are affiliated approved the project. The participants’ informed consent was obtained and special attention was devoted to their confidentiality and dignity: pseudonyms were used and all identifying details removed from the dataset. The interviewees were also informed in advance that should they experience emotional distress during or after the interview, the researchers would be able to refer them to professional help, and were provided with a list of phone numbers of helping resources at the end of each interview.

Findings

Complexities abound for Arab teachers in Israel coping with CSA among their students; in our study, we chose to focus on the subjective experiences of these teachers. In the testimony, we encountered, one of the most frequently cited and significant aspects of the experience was the sense of being trapped in a maze of intertwining and often oppositional demands, as Arab teachers experience an ongoing conflict between their cultural and professional codes. When faced with CSA, Arab teachers are, on the one hand, constrained by the norm of protecting the honor and maintaining the status and reputation of those involved, including themselves; on the other hand, as empathetic professionals, they desire to aid their pupils. This conflict was experienced by teachers when facing the victims; when facing victims’

families; when facing their own families; when weighing their own professional identities and prestige; when dealing with the educational system; and when engaging with their communities as well as their greater societal and cultural contexts.

Analysis of the data revealed prevalent patterns that were observed among at least two-thirds of the participants. Three key themes emerged that illuminate the ways in which the participants' sense of entrapment is constructed and experienced:

1. **“Honor is everything!.” Between the cultural value of honor and the educational value of child welfare.** Teachers experience a clash of values between that of protecting the honor and reputations of themselves and others and the strong personal and professional value of protecting their students from the harms of abuse.
2. **“Fear takes over me.” Arab teachers experience fear in facing child sexual abuse.** Teachers experience multi-faceted forms of fear in facing CSA, including fear for their pupils, fear from repercussions to themselves, and fear of the idea of CSA and coping with it.
3. **“Unless there is a brave teacher, you would not hear of these cases.” The strain of individual coping and hope for collective solutions.** Despite the entrapment of their conflicting personal, cultural and professional roles, teachers aim to form and ultimately utilize empathetic and professionally oriented coping methods to manage their fears, protect the honor of the individuals involved, and still contend with CSA among their pupils.

“Honor Is Everything!.” Between the Cultural Value of Honor and the Educational Value of Child Welfare

When Arab teachers are confronted with CSA in their professional work, their primary experience is circumscribed by their culture's emphasis on protecting the family's reputation, good name, and honor, all of which are threatening by sexual scandal. The vast majority of the participants encounter problems due to the cultural obligation to uphold honor in all relevant ecological realms: their selves, their families, the victims' families, the schools, and the community. This falls into dissonance with a strong personal and professional value, that of protecting the safety of their pupils and fostering their positive development. Thus, the teachers are caught in a conflict between the ever-present and potent cultural need to uphold honor in all its facets and the importance of child welfare.

Teachers describe the ways that the cultural code of upholding the honor of the various social actors involved in cases of CSA colors and shapes reactions and proceeding actions. Suhad, a mother of three, works as a homeroom teacher in an elementary school. She explains the role of honor for a family learning that their son has perpetrated peer CSA in school settings:

Any exposure of the topic of sexual assault is considered damage to family honor. The first reaction of any family will be: "We are a family of honor and we will not allow that someone will hurt our honor!"

Yasmine, a teacher with 15 years' experience, adds detail to the cultural weight of honor and how this can place it before children's needs in Arab culture:

There's the difficulty in the culture when you expose a case of sexual assault it's as if you're pulling a blanket off someone naked, it's considered shameful, it creates a lack of honor and isn't accepted. You're exposing intimacy, as if you're hanging the dirty laundry in front of everyone. They don't understand that the student has needs, a student who is suffering, hurt, everyone thinks about their own interests.

Exposure is seen as so severe that it overcomes all other factors.

Riham, an English teacher in an elementary school, shows how educators adhere to this value, with implications for the children in their care.

A principal protects the school's name, parents protect the family's name and honor, and a teacher protects the reputation of her class. Everyone prefers less of a headache. The moment they hear that a sexual assault is taking place somewhere, immediately they start looking for the adults to blame: parents that didn't discipline; teachers that didn't teach; a counselor that didn't give guidance, protect the reputations and the most important part. Pass the responsibility onto someone who isn't them!

In Riham's account, various educators at various levels of the education system, such as the classroom and the school, seek to keep their reputations intact. The mentality of passing the buck appears to be a significant ingredient in reactions to CSA.

The participants stress how the dishonorable implications of blame are a factor in contending with or exposing CSA. If the shameful act of intimacy, as Yasmine elucidates, is exposed, someone must pay the price. Suhad, too, details how the exposure of peer abuse threatens the honor of all a child perpetrator's caretakers:

Reporting ... will lead to stigmas, as if they didn't take care of their kids and didn't discipline them well. The only thing the community does if the assault is exposed is blame and stigmas.... Our society always blames! Parents are afraid that they will be blamed that they didn't take care of their son, or that they didn't educate him as they should have.

In Sahud's clearly critical view of both the family and the culture at large, a child's developmental needs will be overlooked due to the need to protect honor:

For a family it is better and easier to have a son that will have serious emotional problems, for all his life, than to face the fear in Arab society that will know that their son is a sexual perpetrator.... There still isn't thought of a suffering or hurting child, a child who can carry the assault with them for their whole life. A child who could deteriorate as a result of the assault, yet, the most important thing is their honor.

Thus, while all the teachers surely aim for child welfare in their wishes and values, the role of honor is like a cloud hanging over them, restraining them.

At the same time, the teachers are not detached outsiders to the importance of honor. While Yasmine's own value of advocacy for the children is clear, she also shows empathy for and identification with the value placed on honor over other considerations. It is also notable that when Suhad describes the state of the community, her framing is distant and hypothetical, as if she herself is disconnected from this role. Societal criticism and emotional disconnect may serve as means to distance her from the predicament that she herself has a role in.

“Fear Takes Over Me:” Arab Teachers Experience Fear in Facing Child Sexual Abuse

All of the teachers who participated in the study noted the salient experience of fear when contending with CSA. Their fear was multi-faceted and diverse both in its forms and extremities and encompassed a broad range of contexts: fear of learning of the sexual abuse; fear of facing the victims; fear of facing victims' families as well as their own families; fear of repercussions for themselves and their own professional identities and prestige; fear of contending with their educational systems; fear of their communities and greater societal and cultural contexts.

Teachers often cope in loneliness with the fear they experience when faced with CSA (Tener & Sigad, 2019). Manal, a 48-year-old math and homeroom teacher and mother of three teenagers, described how while fear is

ever-present among all educational professionals, teachers must handle it on their own:

According to the law, the principal, the educational counselor, parents and psychologist should be working together, but the truth is that the teacher is alone. Everyone is afraid from their perspective positions. Afraid for their jobs, that's why everyone tries to "pass the buck" from one to another. The teacher to the counselor, the counselor to the principal, the principal to the psychologist, and the psychologist returns it the principal or sometimes the parents and sometimes social welfare. This despite the fact the of the ministry of education is rather clear on what needs to be done. The culture of our society is stronger than that. There is fear and thus a lack of will to cope with sexual abuse.

Manal recounts a game of professional hot potato in which the explosive responsibility of coping with CSA is tossed around, leaving teachers on their own. The law and regulations are both acknowledged and clear to the professional community of educators, yet cultural codes of fear and distance easily overpower them, leading to systematic fear that undermines all attempts and will to treat CSA.

Sawsan, a 40-year-old middle school teacher with two young children, is representative of the majority of our research participants in her fearful emotional reaction when learning that one of her students was a victim of peer CSA by other children. She learns of the incident from the educational counselor:

I felt a black screen coming up in front of my eyes, we're talking about a student from a respected and traditional family ... I was frightened by how this would happen, I was very scared of his parent's reaction when they find out, I was very angry at the abusing students. When the counselor was speaking, I wanted to tell her to "shut up" and not continue. By the time she finished speaking the tears started coming down, I was very worried about him, I wanted to leave the meeting and run to the class to hug him, she was speaking and I was thinking about the next step, why did this happen? How will I act? It was very difficult for me. I was overcome with fear, shame, anger with pain, all together.

Interestingly, we can see that Sawsan simultaneously goes into freeze, flight, and fight mode when learning of her student's experience of abuse from the school counselor. While she is in shock, she yearns for time to stand still so she can process the information; at the same time, she wants to fly away from the professional meeting, compelled by a motherly urge to protect and care for her student. Her mind races, too, in panic over how the parents will react while showing fight in considering her next actions and need for autonomy.

The fear of the family is significant because a family's need to protect their honor is often so strong that it can lead to the threat of retaliation against those who divulge information, such as teachers, as Sahud notes:

[F]ear of embarrassment is what causes them to seek revenge if ... the homeroom teacher would expose their family connection to sexual abuse. If teachers are to risk affecting a family's honor, they risk being the brunt of blame and even revenge.

For the large majority of teachers in our study, the fear is not only for the child and those around them but for their personal name and safety. Sawson described how fear of reporting is coupled with coping with violence itself:

We are afraid and fearful of the reactions and implications of reporting, especially the reactions of the parents. Often it happens that homeroom or subject teachers are hurt in the most violent way: Cursing, hitting, all types of violence. Sometimes, in Arab society, there can be a boycott on a homeroom teacher who exposes sexual abuse.

Violence and marginalization may result from teachers reporting the violence experienced by their pupils, whom they desire to protect. The fear is overpowering, constraining the teachers' reactions and forcing them into silence.

Amal, a 33-year-old special education teacher and mother of two young boys under 5, further describes this experience, revealing the complete paralysis that results when she faces CSA among her students. Amal explains:

I can do nothing because maybe I will be threatened! I decided not to report and to keep it among myself and the other teachers and the girl (the student) herself. If I think of the girl who has experienced sexual abuse and I have not the strength to ask the parents. They can threaten my life and use a weapon against me, and that happens. I love the students, but I am not willing to endanger my own children and my family for someone else. I keep my distance. Once I had my own family, fear takes over me.

Amal's fear goes beyond that of professional damage to her reputation and even her personal safety, extending to a fear of violent threats to her family's welfare. Unlike Sawson, who demonstrates diverse, simultaneous reactions to her fear, the fear that she experiences creates supreme clarity; she has a decisive pyramid of priorities with her family placed at the top. Nevertheless, love and care for her pupils are ever-present, so she still chooses to contend with the abuse, albeit within the closed doors of the school community and in her personal interactions with the abused, in cases where the abuse is ongoing. Fear is in control and determines Amal's path for contending with CSA.

As we have shown, the teachers of our study are all guided by fear and the need to protect honor and reputation. While this experience is true for all our participants, they do not easily nor passively accept the negative implications for the welfare of their pupils. There is a yearning to change this overpowering status quo. Samach, a teacher who works outside the community where she lives, is representative of this voice:

Well when I'm outside of the village it was easier for me to speak, because the teachers in the village usually don't dare to, there's consideration of the community, of family, it's a topic that's considered shameful in our culture, it's not spoken of ... I personally don't care about anyone, if the thing hurts my student, you need to be with lots of bravery and courage. But the thing is that they try to shut you up even if you want to speak.

All the teachers, even those frozen in fear, yearn to protect the development of their pupils. While circumstances prevent most from acting, they take the opportunity when it arises. This is the case even despite the strong codes of honor and experience of fear that they too as members of the community and the culture are a part of.

“Unless There Is a Brave Teacher, You Would Not Hear of These Cases:” The Strain of Individual Coping and Hope for Collective Solutions

When faced with the dangers and challenges of reporting, teachers are left with limited options and end up reacting to CSA with various forms of compromise between their conflicting needs and values. For example, Samach, age 33, describes the way some teachers inform other caregivers of cases of CSA, thus avoiding direct involvement but still living up to the responsibility they feel towards their students:

All teachers in the Arab sector deal with sexual assault in a very discreet manner. They might inform the counselor, but even that usually doesn't happen because the educators prefer less hassle: why deal with a sensitive topic like this? After they inform the counselor, they keep the assault a secret ... they prefer to remain in silence and not keep track of the assault and what follows. It is as if the moment they inform the counselor, the ball is in the counselor's court and the educator lives with doing his part.

Samach is both critical, yet accepting, of what appears to be a known and common scenario: teachers passing on the information and not looking back. Distance from the danger may be crucial for coping among Arab teachers when faced with CSA.

This same distancing is enabled by the parents themselves, as it is also part of their coping; those who seek treatment, for example, usually do so with a non-school therapist and without school-parent communication. Riham explains:

A student who is hurt sexually is attended to in all types of ways, all different forms of combinations and “deals”—just as long as it won’t be known. If parents come “out of the box” they will attend to it (the abuse) with an outside therapist and most don’t inform the school and don’t inform the school about the context of the treatment. There is a lack of trust with the school.

It is the basic norm to shun communication in the name of maintaining honor. Yet some teachers, principals, and schools are willing to take a true risk and come into conflict with this norm. Salwah, a language middle school teacher of 40 and mother of two boys, explains the consequences of refusing the norm of silence and discretion:

In the Arab community you barely hear about cases such as these, unless the student falls into the hands of a brave teacher or principal or counselor who are willing to fight to save the student. A big portion of these cases are buried between school walls under all kinds of deals and arrangements with the parents. The student can keep suffering, the most important part is that there won’t be any stigmas or breach of honor surrounding the family. Some teachers refuse, some agree and save the student, and some get in trouble with the parents and the community, and who will save *them* then?

Going against the stream to save a student requires great bravery. Such teachers are left vulnerable; they become victims in turn, with no one to save them.

A minority of participants do see a visionary way to change the maze of fear, honor, mistrust, and silence. They envision educational communities as places to help one another and their students. Hiba, a young mother of two girls, explains this positive possibility of systematic intervention and change:

From my experience, I see that the system reports to external outlets and that’s it, it removes itself from the story. I think and see a lot of importance in the system working with the students within the school, meaning to create workshops about all different kinds of assault, and focusing on sexual assault, in all its forms, and by that the system surrounds the problem from every side, also treats it according to the law once informed of it, and also raising awareness among the other students and empowers them and displays to them the ways of coping in similar cases. In this way the system gives hope to students who are going through assault and keeping quiet.

The school is a culture in and of itself. As such, it can create new norms and ways of seeing and doing things. In Hiba's vision, the school is a place of learning, not only for academic subjects but also for life lessons regarding abuse and assault.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to describe teachers' experiences in cases of CSA within their daily work and personal lives in light of the cultural context of the Arab community in Israel. The study aims to bridge the gap of knowledge concerning the relationships between cultural variables and teachers' experiences when faced with CSA. We find that when the teachers in our study experienced CSA disclosure, they did not deal with the child's sexual abuse solely, but rather with an extensive and tight family system surrounding him or her. The child in their care was part of a much larger system with strict rules and norms concerning sexuality and sexual abuse. While teachers care greatly for their pupils' well-being, the weight of strong codes of honor, as well as the fear of violence and other repercussions, overtake both experience and action. Although it is not uncommon for educators to express anxiety over the consequences of reporting abuse among their students (Mussa, 2019), this overwhelming, paralyzing experience is highly unusual.

In contending with cultural obstacles to intervention, the participants describe a sense of being not merely stymied but trapped in a maze whose exits are blocked. They identify as protectors, responsible for their pupils, and fully aware of the damaging consequences of abuse for their development; they are highly critical of the cultural failure to address this problem. However, though their professional values compel them to protect the children in their care, the teachers in the study are simultaneously members of the community and constricted by its cultural codes, in fear of bearing a heavy and even impossible price should they attempt to make a change. The teachers face roadblocks on two fronts: the prioritization of child welfare relative to family honor and the limited power they themselves wield as individuals with responsibilities to their own families. As the teachers cannot reconcile their self-conception and commitment to their professional code with their inability to act, they find themselves in a state of perpetual cognitive dissonance.

Attempting to navigate their conflicting personal, cultural, and professional roles, and all-encompassing experience of fear, the teachers engage in analysis of their community's coping with CSA. This engagement aims to create and ultimately utilize empathetic and professionally oriented strategies to allow them to manage their fears, protect the honor of all social actors, and

still contend with CSA among their pupils. Looking to the future is, in effect, part of the process of becoming. They do not accept the validity of the status quo and continue to seek a way out of the maze.

Their options are unfortunately limited when it comes to enacting change; it is a rare individual who is willing or able to resist all the cultural pressures they face. Not only do these teachers face internal pressures from their community, but they also function in a cultural and political context in which they are a numerical minority and subject to the historical suspicion between the Arab minority and Israeli authorities (Jamal, 2013). They may even have had experiences of oppression and silencing themselves. All of these elements influence the culture within the schools as well as the teachers' willingness and ability to access resources that may be available outside their communities. However, as one participant notes, there is an opportunity for the school setting itself to foster a culture that accounts for the gap between the professional value of child welfare with the cultural values of collective family duty and honor. Schools have the potential to be sites of cultural transformation, for example, by promoting prevention programs as a way to encourage acknowledgment in the phenomenon, open discussion with the students, and the creation of relationships, opportunities, and environments where children feel safe to disclose (Blakey et al., 2019; Fryda & Hulme, 2015; Walsh et al., 2013). If teachers were supported by such a secondary culture that understood and accounted for the cultural context, this would provide them with some room to move within the maze, a means for supporting their students despite the resistance and danger they may face.

Limitations

Generalization is an inherent limitation of the study by virtue of its qualitative nature. While our research provides a valuable in-depth perspective on the experiences of the participants, the findings cannot be universally applied. In order to continue to broaden our understanding of this phenomenon, future studies should consider the distinction between different sub-communities and the varying level of threat and/or support teachers may face, as well as the differences that may manifest due to the ages and genders of the teachers and their students. As Israeli society contains different Arab subgroups such as Muslim Arabs and Christian Arabs, the participants' experience of coping is likely to change along with their affiliation. It will also be particularly important to analyze the experiences of males in the Arab educational community, a population not included in this study, in light of their potential to play a role in changing norms and practices in the Arab community.

The advantages and pitfalls of the school setting have also not been fully explored in this study. In recent years, for example, Israel has implemented policies and training programs for teachers in order to promote reporting. It is not clear which of the participants in the current study have been trained and how, in their perception, such training affected their coping. Future study should address this issue. What's more, while the study at hand analyzes the experience of teachers coping with the challenges of CSA among their pupils, other accounts of "educator sexual misconduct and abuse" have been accounted for in the literature (e.g., Knoll, 2010). Future research in the Israeli cultural context should note that in a nationally representative sample of students in Israel, around 8% reported being sexually maltreated by school staff (Benbenishty et al., 2002; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006).

This study focused on the experiences of teachers. Yet, it will also be important to explore the experiences of all the social actors involved, both among the students and their families and within different professional niches in the educational system (e.g., counselors and principals). Another limitation may be connected to the study's sole focus on Arab society; though this community presents a unique cultural and social experience, it may be similar in many ways to other segregated societies in Israel (such as the Ultra-Orthodox community). A future study should compare teachers in different societies subject to various cultural norms. The way in which Arab and other minority cultures are influenced by the dominant Israeli-Jewish, primarily secular, culture is also an important area for future discussion. Expanding on the study in this manner, we can continue to expand our understanding of CSA in light of all the diverse populations affected by this global phenomenon.

Practical Implications

School officials, most notably teachers, are trusted figures in the lives of their charges and are therefore commonly involved not only in disclosure and intervention in instances of CSA, but also in managing the emotional and developmental aftermath (Phasha, 2008). Insider knowledge of their experiences will enable their empowerment and ability to create change. What's more, the lack of attention we see directed towards *preventing* CSA represents a dereliction of duty that has resulted in severe harm to children's lifelong physical and mental health. Rather than taking a reactive approach, we need to place the prevention of CSA at the top of the agenda across varied cultural contexts, educating parents, professionals, and communities.

For the Arab teachers in our study, the very choice to be interviewed for the study indicates the importance they give to the subject and their desire not only to help, but to foster social and cultural change. However, the complex

cultural context often inhibits their ability to carry out this mission. They do not see an escape from the cultural maze that traps them—with the singular exception of the potential of the school setting itself. This is a direction well worth exploring in terms of social and educational policy. As we have previously noted, it would alleviate some of the problems that the teachers in this community must confront, empowering them in their school cultural context. Such experiences may be relevant to many other teachers from segregated societies around the world. Furthermore, involving students as partners in the fight against CSA would take it out of the realm of the adults in the world of education and would give students direct access to coping tools. Hiba's vision, for example, includes communication, openness, and peer mentorship in pursuit of empowerment and coping. It offers a model and means for protecting and assisting children who have experienced CSA. As culture is dynamic and changing, a vision of the future with a new expressive school culture may suggest a way out of the overbearing maze and sense of entrapment that teachers currently experience.

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