

“We Try to Fix Things Quietly, and We Do Not Take Revenge”: Christian Arab Teachers’ Experiences Coping with Child Sexual Abuse Among Their Pupils in Israel

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Abstract

Teachers are at the frontlines of the fight to identify and cope with child sexual abuse (CSA) among their pupils. Their methods of coping with CSA cases, both personally and professionally, are strongly influenced by their socio-cultural contexts and religious beliefs. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the experiences of Christian Arab teachers in Israel coping with the CSA of their pupils. Twelve Christian Arab elementary school teachers in Israel were recruited for the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and a qualitative thematic analysis was employed based on a descriptive phenomenological-psychological approach. Two key themes emerged from the analysis: (a) The teachers' intense emotional reactions regarding the CSA of their students and the empowerment some

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found in handling such difficult situations, and (b) The teachers' Christian beliefs and identity strongly affected their understanding of CSA and their approach to intervention. The findings indicated the dialectical position of the teachers' religio-cultural context, particularly the duality of the Christian value of forgiveness, a powerful resource for their coping, yet with adverse implications for children's vulnerability. This unique risk should inform training teachers regarding CSA matters. Teachers must also have systems that support them and allow them to reflectively examine their coping styles.

Keywords

child sexual abuse, child abuse, disclosure, teachers' coping, Arab Christian society, school systems

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is defined as sexual interactions with a child that the child may not understand, cannot fully consent to, and is not developmentally prepared for, in addition to being illegal or considered taboo in the society in which it occurred. Such acts can be perpetrated by adults or occur between children, where one child is in a position of responsibility, trust, or power relative to the other according to their age or development (World Health Organization [WHO], 2017). The religio-cultural contexts of individuals involved in cases of CSA affect their emotional reactions, conceptualizations, and operational actions and are fundamental to how they view CSA (Sigad & Tener, 2022). Previous studies have demonstrated that, aside from the direct implications for CSA survivors (Almuneef, 2019; Hailes et al., 2019), this global phenomenon (WHO, 2017) has ripple effects on their social circles (Tremblay-Perreault & Hébert, 2020) and utilizes significant resources in countries' education, health care, welfare, and judicial systems (Taylor et al., 2008). Teachers are among the professionals most likely to encounter CSA in the course of their work. Despite this, literature on educators coping with CSA in their everyday work remains in its infancy (e.g., Sigad et al., 2022; Tener, Lusky-Weisrose et al. et al., 2022).

Teachers' religio-cultural backgrounds have been found to be key in shaping their worldview (Sigad & Tener, 2022), and their resultant perceptions can significantly inform their approaches to CSA detection, responses, intervention, and coping (White et al., 2005). Nevertheless, research on the topic remains scant as well. While there is a vast body of CSA research in Christian settings, it mainly focuses on cases of CSA by clergy (Easton et al., 2019).

Such research examines institutional responses toward sexual violence against minors, the extent of the phenomenon, its characteristics, and its consequences for survivors (e.g., Death, 2013; Easton et al., 2019). Less is known about other forms of CSA within Christian settings or the perspectives of the professionals working in those settings. Moreover, there is a complete lack of research focusing on the specific and unique social, political, and cultural context of the Christian Arab minority in Israel. Their circumstances are unique as they have to navigate between contrasting expectations: religious (i.e., Christian) and societal (i.e., the overall Arab community), as well as the formal authorities in Israel, which are mostly secular Jewish. As noted, the study of teachers' professional and religio-cultural identities in the context of CSA remains in its early development. To the authors' knowledge, there is no other study of Christian Arab teachers in Israel and their experiences contending with CSA cases among pupils.

Thus, the current study aimed to fill the gap in the existing literature and describe the experiences of teachers from the Christian Arab minority in Israel in coping with CSA cases. This specific case study has the potential to illuminate the ways educators in a religious community navigate the challenges of addressing CSA, offering insights that could have broader implications for global Christian religious contexts.

Teachers' Role in CSA Disclosure

Through close contact with students, teachers can identify emotional, academic, and behavioral problems suggestive of CSA (Townsend & Haviland, 2016; Walsh et al., 2010). They are also common disclosure recipients (Walsh et al., 2010) and often play a critical role in effective CSA prevention (Márquez-Flores et al., 2016). Yet, teacher training is often inadequate (Márquez-Flores et al., 2016) for the complicated matter of CSA (Lamb et al., 2008). Thus, increasing teachers' knowledge of reporting and CSA identification could allow for the implementation of more immediate and effective interventions (Walsh et al., 2010, 2012).

Teachers' Role in CSA Disclosure in the Israeli School System. While the definition and understanding of CSA are far from uniform across cultures (Fontes & Plummer, 2010), Israel officially and procedurally has adopted the WHO's classification of CSA. This definition, described previously, includes sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, abandonment, assault, and human trafficking, perpetrated by a primary caregiver, family member, other minor, or others. In Israel, the role of teachers in CSA incidents is addressed by the Mandatory Reporting Act of 1977, which stipulates that all citizens, particularly

professionals who work with children, must report any reasonable suspicion of an offense that may endanger a child's life and health. Accordingly, all education professionals are legally required to make mandatory reports of suspected abuse (Mussa, 2019).

Alongside this legal requirement, educators have specific guidelines regarding CSA identification and intervention strategies (Director General's Circular, 2008), including the procedures of when there is an obligation to report, the appropriate professionals to report to, and how the report should be made. There are also guidelines for teachers regarding the identification of CSA, how to respond to CSA disclosure, how to ask student victims or witnesses questions, and how to deal with an abusive student. Although these policies and protocols are in place, Israeli teachers have been reported to exhibit only a limited awareness of CSA (Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, 2008). Furthermore, a government report noted that there is no legal requirement for teachers and educators to engage in CSA training and no obligation to include CSA coursework in teacher training curricula (Becker & Mizrahi-Simon, 2017). The Ministry of Education does provide a continuing education program that addresses CSA and is attended by the majority of teachers. However, the program's content is broad, not solely dedicated to CSA, and does not include identification and prevention tools (Becker & Mizrahi-Simon, 2017).

Thus, a gap exists between teachers' legal obligations and practical involvement. High rates of CSA have been found across all socio-cultural groups, with large-scale nationwide surveys in Israel showing rates of 18.7% for sexual harm within a sample of 12,035 children (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2018). Such numbers emphasize the importance of informing all teachers about how to address CSA and the disclosure process. Nevertheless, while teachers are mandatory reporters and are often disclosure recipients (Manay & Collin-Vézina, 2021), they are rarely involved in the CSA reporting process, as this official responsibility is delineated to either the school counselor or principal (Tener, Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2022). Furthermore, once CSA has been disclosed and reported, teachers are required not to discuss the CSA event with the student so as not to influence the official legal processes (Sigad et al., 2022). Due to these dynamics, teachers have described feeling marginalized in interventions by law enforcement (Tener & Sigad, 2019).

Teachers' Coping Following CSA Disclosure

Those who come into contact with traumatic material through their work are susceptible to secondary trauma (Gil & Weinberg, 2015). Teachers are particularly at risk due to their often-close relationships with students

(Caringi et al., 2015; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019) and their frequent lack of training to cope with CSA (Márquez-Flores et al., 2016). Teachers in Israel have struggled with regard to CSA disclosures and coping due to social pressures, anxiety over their role, and loneliness (Sigad et al. 2022). Arab teachers, in particular, have described a conflict between cultural norms against reporting, with potential consequences for all involved, and their personal protectiveness and professional responsibility for their students (Sigad & Tener, 2022).

The Study Context: The Christian Arab Community in Israel. The highly diverse, large Arab minority in Israel comprises multiple socio-cultural groups, including Muslim, Christian, and Druze subgroups (Sulimani-Aidan, 2020). These communities integrate aspects of the secular mainstream Jewish culture in Israel, while adhering to their own individual traditional norms (Abu-Saad, 2003). Christians constitute about 2% of the general population in Israel, and 7.1% of the Arab population (77.1% of the overall Christian population in Israel is Arab) (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Thus, Christian Arabs in Israel represent a minority religion within a minority ethnicity (Raheb, 2002) and tend to feel a strong attachment and responsibility toward other members of their close-knit community (Cooperman et al., 2016). Community life, including education, is grounded in interpretations of Christian values (Buchanan, 2013; Maitanmi, 2019). Faith-based schools are the norm, shaped by the community's faith tradition (McGettrick, 2005), aiming to prepare students for an adult life of Christian fellowship (Wolterstorff, 1980).

When considering CSA interventions, it is crucial to note the community's political, geographical, and organizational characteristics (Attrash-Najjar & Katz, 2022). In contrast with the Muslim Arab community in Israel, the Christian Arab community is characterized by various demographic similarities to the Jewish community, including high rates of education, average number of children per family, and age of marriage (David, 2014). Moreover, the Christian Arab community tends more toward integration with the secular Jewish society than the Muslim Arab community (Sagiv & Schwartz, 1998).

Finally, the Arab society in Israel receives less funding, facilities, and resources, including child protection services, welfare professionals, and educational resources, than the Jewish society (Abu-Saad, 2003). Access to these resources may significantly impact the CSA prevention and intervention available to the community. Thus, Christian Arab teachers in Israel are positioned in the intersection of unique social, cultural, and political contexts, which influence their experience and perceptions in coping with CSA among their students.

The Current Study. The study at hand is part of a larger project of more than 200 interviews with educators from three cultural subgroups in Israel: religious Jews, secular Jews, and Arabs. The participating educators included teachers, principals, and counselors. The project is novel in its breadth and depth in that it explored the coping of educators from multiple educational professions, as well as diverse socio-cultural groups. Each cultural subgroup also included specific cultural communities, including ultra-Orthodox and National religious Jews, and Druze and Christian Arabs. Grounded in a context-informed perspective (Nadan et al., 2015), the overall study seeks to create a grounded theoretical model addressing educational professionals' experiences in coping with CSA in different multicultural settings. A multidisciplinary team from diverse socio-cultural groups comprised of experienced CSA researchers and students in education and social work conducted the interviews. The diverse research team allowed for innovative insider-outsider research and cross-examination during weekly discussions between the research team members on the particularities of each socio-cultural group as well as similarities, which enabled the context-informed analysis of educators coping with CSA. Due to the diversity of the team members, it was possible to learn of more subtle differences between the subgroups, which led to the understanding that each group deserved their unique observations to be addressed separately.

The focus of the study at hand was the specific context of Christian Arab teachers (the remaining subgroups were addressed in other studies, e.g., Sigad et al., 2022; Sigad & Tener, 2022; Tener, Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2022). This study aimed to describe and analyze how Christian Arab teachers in Israel cope with CSA in their work and how their socio-cultural context may shape their coping. The research questions guiding the study were: (a) How do Christian Arab teachers in Christian schools in Israel experience cases of CSA in their daily work? (b) How do Christian Arab teachers in Christian schools in Israel view their responsibilities regarding CSA cases? (c) How do Christian Arab teachers perceive the role of Christianity and the Christian Arab community in Israel in the context of CSA?

Methods

The current study sought to capture how Christian Arab elementary school teachers in Israel conceptualize and cope with CSA. Through in-depth analysis of these firsthand accounts, the study aimed to uncover the defining elements of the teachers' experiences (Sokolowski, 2000; Spinelli, 2005), suggesting areas to be addressed via policy and future research.

Participants

The sample comprised 12 Christian Arab teachers who taught in Christian elementary schools of different denominations (i.e., Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Anglican, and Baptist) in northern Israel. The study participants were all directly involved in cases of CSA during their teaching careers. This sample size was selected based on an approach asserting that qualitative studies may reach saturation with a relatively small number of participants, particularly in studies among a homogeneous population (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Thus, the sample size and criteria allowed for theoretical saturation (Patton, 2015), meaning the sampling ceased when no new information emerged from additional data collection. Although theoretical saturation was achieved, it should be noted that the recruitment of participants was complex, as the research addressed a sensitive and controversial topic within the community, and also because the participants were members of a minority group (Raheb, 2002). Many potential participants expressed concern about the protection of victims, the cultural and social norms, legal considerations, and the personal emotional implications that their participation could have for them (Sawrikar & Katz, 2017). Consequently, outreach to teachers who met the study criteria was often met with rejection and negative reactions. To cope with the challenge of entering this closed community, both field outreach and interviewing were conducted by the second author, a graduate student of education who was an insider both to the teacher and Christian Arab communities (Wolcott, 2016). After locating initial participants, the snowball sampling technique was employed (Warren, 2002) to recruit additional potential participants through the interviewees themselves.

All participants were women due to the small number of male teachers in this Christian Arab society. The participants' ages at the time of the study ranged from 33 to 56 ($M=37$), and all were married with children. Their teaching experience ranged from 4 to 29 years ($M=15.5$). Years of teaching seniority was not a criterion for participation as the threshold condition was the significant experience contending with CSA (Englander, 2012).

Procedure

Twelve open, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic by the second author, an M.Ed. student who received comprehensive training. The interviews lasted 45 to 75 min and sought a communicative and unrestricted conversation between the researcher and participant (Spradley, 1979) about the cultural experience of Christian Arab teachers coping with CSA. The categories in the interview guide included: the perceived role of educators in

CSA cases (e.g., What do you think the educator's role is in relation to the phenomenon of CSA?); responses to CSA disclosure (e.g., In your experience, what are the responses of official figures in cases of CSA that occur/are disclosed within 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?). All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English prior to analysis. Quotes were arbitrarily back-translated to confirm the translation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a qualitative thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with the data organized using Dedoose software. The first stage involved repeated readings of the transcripts to experience deep immersion in the narratives. Next, the researchers sought to identify key recurring phrases that captured the essence of the participants' experiences (Roulston, 2010), a process known as open coding (Patton, 2015). The units of meaning that resulted from open coding were then subject to cross-case analysis (Patton, 2015) and combined to form broad themes. Throughout the analysis, cross-examinations were conducted between the insider and outsider Christian Arab community research members' codebooks to broaden and deepen the findings. Saturation was achieved when further analysis no longer contributed new meanings. The themes describing the key features of participants' experiences were revisited, re-checked against the interviews, elaborated on (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), and, finally, described in the findings.

Rigor and Trustworthiness. Steps were taken to guarantee the study's trustworthiness (Morse, 2015), promote rigor (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and ensure the analysis originated from the data and was not shaped by outside beliefs or information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, investigator triangulation was carried out, with some materials analyzed and coded by three research team members (i.e., one M.Ed. student and two expert researchers). Second, the data and interpretations were discussed in peer debriefing sessions throughout the study (Nowell et al., 2017), accompanied by an audit trail tracking the progression from raw data to analysis (Bowen, 2009).

Third, all researchers participated in team debriefing and reflection meetings to increase awareness of their biases and influence on the analysis. The bimonthly meetings included reflective discussions on how the team members experienced conducting interviews on the sensitive topic of CSA. Also discussed was how the position of the researcher, including personal and professional perceptions, influences the data collection and

interpretation processes. This was considered in light of the researchers being educators or social workers involved in the field of CSA. In addition, ongoing, formal, and informal conversations were held with advisors, team members, and colleagues for this purpose. Fourth, the researchers kept detailed notes and a field diary to promote reflectivity. Finally, to avoid bias related to the researchers' professional familiarity with the field of study, as described previously, an open qualitative interview guide was used initially, following which the researchers highlighted the issues that required further investigation. They then built a semi-structured interview guide, assisted by peer consultations.

The findings' credibility was established by presenting quotes from the participants and detailing the researchers' interpretation and analysis. This allowed for the presentation of how the participants' accounts were conceptualized and the themes identified (Maxwell, 2005). For example, the theme *Shock and Resilience Among Christian Arab Teachers Coping with CSA* was organized as follows: (a) relevant participant details; (b) an excerpt from the participant's interview; and (c) conclusions drawn regarding the nature of the teacher's experiences, placed in context with the data and synthesized themes. The authors also conferred with additional experts on CSA and qualitative research (Henry, 2015) to verify their approach. Finally, the researchers reached out to the participants to request their reflections on the accuracy of the findings and to provide alternative language or interpretations, a technique known as member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Ethics

The study was approved by the ethics committees of the researchers' affiliated institutions. The interviewer explained the study to the participants prior to their involvement, providing a letter about the study's purpose and importance, and the participants then signed the informed consent form. The interviewer also informed participants of the measures taken to respect their perspectives and ensure their confidentiality throughout the study (i.e., using pseudonyms and eliminating recognizable personal details). The participants were also informed that they could choose not to answer questions or stop the interview at any time. This information was provided at different stages of the study, both verbally and in writing (Malone, 2003). Participants were also advised that mental health resources would be available if required during or following the interviews. They were told that if they were to experience emotional distress as a result of the interview, to contact the researchers for a referral for professional help. All participants were also provided with a list

of resources at the end of the interview. All data were stored on a password-secured computer and only accessible to the research team.

Findings

This study aimed to conduct an in-depth investigation of the experiences of Christian Arab teachers in Israel coping with the CSA of their pupils. Two key themes emerged: (a) The first theme described the multifaceted processes of both the experience of shock while facing CSA in their work alongside the means for the construction of the teachers' resilience. The second theme described the unique and particular meaning of the Christian faith and values of the socio-cultural community when faced with CSA.

Theme 1: "It Felt Like Being Struck by A Bolt of Lightning": Shock and Resilience Among Christian Arab Teachers Coping with CSA

Upon learning of the CSA of their students, the majority of the teachers expressed intense and even overwhelming shock. Many were unprepared to encounter such acts within their community, which they considered highly moral. Some also recounted feeling dread and anxiety as they attempted to process this previously unknown information. Conversely, some described a sense of self-empowerment and the belief that their coping experiences strengthened them personally and professionally.

The powerful emotional disturbance that characterized many of the teachers' reactions when they first contended with CSA was illustrated by Lucy, age 40, a mother of two children and Bible study teacher of over 12 years in a Christian-Arab school. Upon learning of an incident of CSA concerning one of her students, Lucy experienced overwhelming restlessness and unease:

I didn't sleep at night. I kept thinking, who was going to protect him, since the parents are also divorced, and they aren't on good terms. [. . .] I started thinking, should I go to his house and suddenly knock on the door? I had ideas about how I wanted to save him, but I didn't know how. . . I used to wake up in the middle of the night and think about whether he was asleep yet or not. I would worry about him a lot and fear for him. [. . .] I started to get scared for my daughters because in our family there are no such things. [. . .] I was also affected and started noticing how they dress, and I keep telling them, [taking off] your clothes is only something you do for yourself.

This pupil's case deeply infiltrated Lucy's personal life, as she felt protective of him to the extent that she had trouble sleeping and fantasized about

rescuing him. Despite her statement that such events are foreign to their world, she, in effect, entered a metamorphosis of her paradigm regarding what childhood can be and became mistrustful of others around her daughters. The new toxic knowledge of the threat of CSA affected her parenting not only conceptually but also behaviorally as she then instructed her daughters on how to behave protectively, such as explaining that their bodies are solely theirs to touch.

Beyond the distress the teachers experienced at the discovery of the CSA, many demonstrated concern and anxiety over how to handle such cases. Lana, age 41, who has taught for 14 years, described her unease:

Fear, horror, because this is something that we aren't familiar with, and if we are going to talk openly about it, it won't end. It's better when you don't know something, that way it can't hurt you. Also, it makes it so much harder on us to have to deal [with] and present these subjects to the pupils, because what if they ask questions that we won't know how to answer? Or we give them the wrong advice?

Lana adopted a conscious approach of gaze aversion to avoid facing CSA cases. The potential price of opening Pandora's box is too great when considering engaging in dialog with children on CSA or sexuality. Beyond the potential of a never-ending uncomfortable topic, Lana also feared mishandling the issue or sharing the wrong advice with her students, whom she cares for without a doubt. Thus, as she found this encounter so unsettling, she would rather consciously avoid knowing about and attending to cases of CSA.

However, alongside the fear and resistance, the teachers also expressed manifestations of coping and resilience. Tarez, age 43 and a primary school teacher of 19 years, described her experience of empowered resilience in the potential to turn her sorrow into resilience:

I felt how strong I was. I felt I was able to discover this phenomenon, which demands the parents pay more attention to their child, even if they rejected all that I said about their son. It also demands them to speak with their older son. I hoped, and I wanted, the matter to have been solved differently. I used to say in my head, "I just hope that the parents deal with this in the right way." Also, I think I have helped in this. I have given them a red light [. . .] As for change, this has made my personality stronger and made me more determined to talk about it again.

In challenging the parents to manage the situation and be more attentive to their child, Tarez learned of her ability to wield influence. She was confident she made a difference in this young boy's life, which made her feel capable if she encountered a CSA case again.

The majority of the participants faced intense emotions when dealing with CSA. Their overwhelming feelings stemmed from not being exposed to CSA in the past, as well as concern over how they or others should handle such cases. Nevertheless, some teachers were able to reshape this challenge into a constructive learning experience that ultimately led them to be better equipped to cope with CSA.

“We Have An Extra Value, Which Is Our Hope in God”: The Role of Christianity While Coping with CSA

The teachers' beliefs regarding the Christian faith and community were found to be a prominent religio-cultural component in their coping with CSA among pupils. Participants strongly emphasized the role of Christian beliefs and practices, such as repentance, forgiveness, and prayer, in their understanding of and response to CSA. A majority of the teachers conveyed compassion and support for the survivors as an expression of their faith. Mary, age 56 and an elementary school teacher with 29 years of experience discussed how the school's protocol for supporting the child's best interest was in line with her Christian values:

In our school, it was very clear that this case needed to be taken care of and that the law must take its course. As a Christian school, we refuse this kind of abuse against our pupils. It doesn't fit the school's vision. All students have the right to learn and develop, by the grace of God. The instructions that came from the municipality didn't contradict with the school's vision; instead, it was accepted because the school's vision is that every student has the right to live a Christian life where he or she is honored and loved without any abuse.

When describing dealing with the case, Mary used the plural of “we,” illustrating that she is not acting alone. In fact, her approach adheres to a strong social agenda led by the school system, one that is rooted in Christian values and is in harmony with institutional law regarding CSA. According to this approach, as a Christian, providing children with support and safety from abuse is a priority.

Interestingly, the majority of the participants discussed the Christian value of forgiveness in coping with CSA. Lana, for example, believed that healing from a sexually abusive experience could occur when the survivor witnesses the perpetrator express regret in their request for forgiveness:

Forgiveness is important for the abused girl or the abused boy, being asked for forgiveness. We as a Christian religion believe in repenting, and when

[perpetrators] repent, we need to accept their apology. . . there is a kind of comfort when someone knows they're wrong and asks for forgiveness and asks to apologize, even if the child doesn't accept the apology, there is a big significance that someone recognizes your pain, recognizes your feelings and the harm that has been caused to you.

Lana's words reflect a restorative justice approach that corresponds with the Christian principle of repenting. This approach seeks to repair the abuse while holding the person who caused it accountable for their actions. She noted the Christian expectation of receiving forgiveness, although she did not state that she encouraged the survivors to forgive. As she sees it, it could be positive for the survivor if the perpetrator seeks forgiveness and might even serve as a consolation, regardless of whether the survivor accepts it.

Susan is a 33-year-old mother of 2 with 4 years of teaching experience and teaches in a Christian elementary school. Relatedly, she believed that God provided survivors with the strength to cope and invoked a comparison to God in attributing the survivor the ability to forgive:

Our faith teaches us to give all our worries to God because He is our father; He loves us, He accepts us as we are, He embraces us, He heals our wounds. [. . .] these are the basics that we've learned since we were children. So, [. . .] our faith gives us a sense of inner peace in many respects [. . .] I think our relationship with God and trust that he will heal and save us gives us a lot of comfort [. . .] I'm not canceling the professional treatments and help; I just think that we have an extra value, which is our hope in God and the ability to forgive. They crucified Jesus, spit on him, and cursed him, and He forgave them. So, who am I not to forgive?

Susan presented two fundamental intertwined Christian values: the belief in God's protection and healing, and the forgiveness of those who cause harm. Here, God is depicted as both a benevolent and faithful figure who provides salvation to the survivors, and as a model for a life characterized by forgiveness.

There was also a notable minority who felt that CSA exceeded acceptability, even for Christian tolerance. Clara, a 57-year-old homeroom teacher with 30 years of experience, related:

Our entire religion and faith is built on forgiveness. It's written in the Bible that if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, you turn to him the other [cheek] . . . But in cases of child sexual abuse, I think there is a red line that can't be crossed, and I think there shouldn't be any forgiveness in this case.

Like the other teachers, Clara highly valued Christian forgiveness. However, she perceived CSA as existing in a separate category, where different rules apply.

The Role of the Christian Community in Coping with CSA

Community affiliation emerged in the narratives of most of the participants. Some participants criticized the attitude of the community in the face of CSA. Lana expressed this in the dissonance between proudly belonging to a group while also recognizing the grave costs of the characteristic of the community's inadequate sex education programs, which she noted could lead to the development of perpetrators:

Apparently, we educate well, but we don't offer proper education on sexuality. We don't talk about it the way it should be talked about, and when hormones explode, apparently, they get lost, and when we don't talk about it, nor explain that this is called abuse and you mustn't do it, so apparently, it's not clear to them, and they do it.

Lana found it hard to accept that a Christian could commit a criminal act like CSA and diffused responsibility from the perpetrator to the community's educational practices. Likewise, Dima, age 35 and a teacher for 10 years, expressed her difficulty in dealing with CSA cases where the perpetrator was a Christian:

First of all, it's hard to accept it, maybe because you don't expect it, and what I'm saying now might sound wrong, but I wouldn't expect this from Christian people who are really good people in general even though there's always the different ones, the irregular ones, that deviate from the norm.

Dima expected Christians to live according to religious values, which certainly included refraining from abuse. She categorized all Christians as "good" and considered anyone who does not act accordingly to be abnormal.

Regarding the general community, Lucy shed light on how Christians respond as a group during troubled times:

Christians tend to worry and protect each other, and they do not take revenge; that is, if parents know their child has been abused, they do not disclose and do not take revenge because our nature is to hide and take care of each other because we do not want to lose touch with the person who hurt our child. So, we try to fix things quietly, and we have no revenge. We do not take revenge.

Lucy presented Christians as a homogeneous and tolerant group who depend on each other for care and help. Her description also gives clear priority to collective values over individual well-being. She emphasized the positive qualities of tolerance and endurance, yet did not address how this tendency could negatively affect or even endanger survivors.

In coping with the emotional difficulty associated with CSA, these teachers relied on their Christian beliefs and community in various ways. Their Christian values provided them with strength and optimism that the survivor would be capable of forgiveness and healing. Furthermore, identification with the community provided a sense of belonging and enabled social support. However, at times, such beliefs may not best serve the pupils under the teachers' committed care.

Discussion

The present study brings to the forefront the experiences of Christian Arab teachers in Israel dealing with CSA. The findings reflect the tremendous complexity involved in coping with CSA, as well as how this complexity is inflected by this particular and unique religio-cultural context (Haboush & Alyan, 2013; Sanjeevi et al., 2018). The teachers' accounts affirm the importance of religious institutions to their processes of meaning-making (Raine & Kent, 2019). Yet, the findings also indicated the dialectical nature of this relationship, as the teachers' faith simultaneously represented a powerful resource for coping and a potential source of children's vulnerability.

To begin, the teachers' reactions of shock and fear echoed previous studies indicating their emotional vulnerability while coping with their students' abuse among both Muslim and Christian Arabs in Israel (Sigad & Tener, 2022). These studies indicated feelings of loneliness in encountering children, parents, and the educational system, as well as fear of social reactions and deep conflict related to the community's demands (Sigad et al., 2022; Tener & Sigad, 2019). Furthermore, teachers' burnout and secondary traumatization appeared to be a consequence of forming relationships with students and listening to their stories (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019).

Uniquely, the teachers in this study perceived coping with CSA as a form of spiritual warfare, a Christian concept describing the inevitability of sinful struggle in the mortal world (Goodykoontz, 1960). The teachers' compassion and support for the survivors also embodied, in their perception, the Christian ideal of spiritual perfection through faith, hope, and love (Yip, 2016). A majority of the teachers also framed their coping as related to their religious values. They defined the experience in terms of their belief in God's grace, as demonstrated by Christians in other studies of overcoming conflict, finding

self-assurance and strength, and maintaining a positive outlook (Yip, 2016). In the present study, this was reflected in the teachers' descriptions of different religious coping mechanisms (e.g., forgiveness, seeking God's support and guidance, and prayer) through which they created meaning from the trauma (Raghavan & Sandanapitchai, 2020).

In particular, forgiving offenses against oneself is a central theme in the Christian tradition (Brewster, 1996), drawn from Jesus' teachings of an ever-forgiving God (Matthew 6: 14–15¹). Generally, religiously committed Christian young adults express great empathy and forgiveness, and are not vengeful when faced with an offense and its aftermath (VanOyen Witvliet et al., 2008). In fact, in the current study, many teachers saw the perpetrator asking for forgiveness as healing for their students, the victims. The teachers who held this belief felt that a perpetrator seeking forgiveness could provide comfort to the survivor in light of the recognition of the injustice. Similarly, another study found that Christians responding to CSA utilized forgiveness to reframe the power dynamic between the victim and perpetrator, allowing the victim to reconstruct their identity (Death, 2013).

The findings did not show that the teachers explicitly led the survivors to accept or seek this forgiveness. However, many did not understand CSA to be an exception to the ideals of repentance, apology, and forgiveness. Furthermore, most saw them as a positive goal for both victims and perpetrators. Indeed, the CSA literature is ambivalent regarding the social expectation of survivors' forgiveness of perpetrators (Tener & Eisikovits, 2017). Forgiveness has been found to empower survivors, and as a positive religious coping strategy, it has been associated with post-traumatic growth among survivors (Schaefer et al., 2018). Yet, this approach is not without risk (Death, 2013). Previous studies have also found that emphasizing forgiveness may have implications for children's vulnerability to CSA in religious institutions (Kaufman et al., 2016) or that survivors may experience forgiveness as a repressive mechanism, preventing them from channeling their energy into healing (Parkinson, 2000).

The general cultural attitude that Christians should forgive (Parkinson, 2000) is accompanied by the associated risk of socializing survivors, such as the participants' students, to believe that forgiveness is the most acceptable response to acts of abuse. Survivors may feel guilty (Crisp, 2007) if their internal state does not correspond with this interpretation (Tener & Eisikovits, 2017). This vulnerability comes in strict contrast to the positive framing of the value of forgiveness within the teachers' own coping. It is therefore notable that, while some of this study's participants, who strongly upheld the same Christian values as the majority, were opposed to any form of forgiveness in the context of CSA, most described forgiveness as a central and

meaningful source of strength, a well-intended emphasis that could potentially silence survivors (Franz, 2002). The prevalence of such sentiments in the community could also lead to premature attempts to seek forgiveness from the survivor or hold survivors partially responsible for their own abuse (Parkinson, 2003).

This is evocative of an additional issue critically noted by some participants in relation to the role of the community in CSA incidents, that is, the lack of open discussion in schools regarding sexuality and CSA as a real-world phenomenon. The teachers' comments conveyed a tendency to omit sexual subjects and emphasize forgiveness, which functions as a central religious principle that structures the community's attitude toward sexual crimes. The teachers' perceptions resemble those of Catholic school students in a previous study regarding their teachers' lack of openness when teaching sexual morality (Barbagallo & Boon, 2012). As has been extensively discussed in the literature, this religious value can sometimes contribute to a culture of ignoring, silencing, and concealing CSA (Cahill & Wilkinson, 2017; Parkinson, 2000). Once again, there is a duality at play. The same elements that strengthen coping for some, such as the teachers, may also negatively affect child protection efforts.

Limitations and Future Directions

In acknowledgment of the current qualitative study's limitations, it is important to note that this study was based on a small convenience sample, therefore, the findings are not generalizable. Moreover, the topic's taboo nature and the community's cultural context hindered participant outreach. Thus, despite the findings being grounded in the analysis of the participants' in-depth perspectives and experiences, caution should be taken in applying the findings to other contexts. Future studies should explore a broad range of socio-cultural groups coping with CSA to further expand the understanding of this phenomenon. Additionally, due to the difficulty of recruiting interviewees, the analysis did not consider participants' denominations. Therefore, future studies should consider the effects of structural differences between such groups (Rashid & Barron, 2019). Similarly, the potentially different experiences of male teachers were absent due to the small number of men working in this profession within Christian Arab society, which demands future exploration.

Furthermore, this study did not differentiate between different types of CSA, such as CSA perpetrated by clergy (e.g., Easton et al., 2019), parents, family members, teachers, neighbors, strangers (e.g., Witt et al., 2022), or among peers (Tener, Sigad, Katz, Shimron et al., 2022; Tener, Sigad, Katz et al., 2022). The different types of abuse often include diverse

patterns and dynamics of disclosure, identification, and implications, which require further studies regarding the differences in teachers' responses. Other Christian education professionals' experiences are also necessary for a holistic understanding of how CSA should be addressed in Christian educational institutions.

Moreover, further research should examine coping strategies among teachers from other religions. Such studies should adopt an intersectional paradigm to address the multiple structural contexts, including the social, political, and national, which exist simultaneously within and beyond religion. Finally, given that Arab society in Israel is a minority community with ambivalent relations with the Israeli government, it is important to further compare this unique socio-cultural context to Christian contexts in other countries.

Implications

The findings showed that religious Christian teachers are likely to turn to their religious worldview above others (Raine & Kent, 2019). Hence, fostering the religious component (e.g., seeking God's support and forgiveness) can empower teachers' sense of competence when addressing CSA. Educators can also harness "shared meanings" (McGuire, 2008, p. 25) within the community for the benefit of survivors in an effort to strengthen trust and support.

However, the findings also showed that, while cultural-religious beliefs facilitated positive coping in some contexts, it may also have ramifications for silencing victimized children. It is important to make educators aware of this danger and to open a discussion of how certain interpretations of religious values, such as forgiveness, can affect the survivors. To this end, teachers must have support systems that will allow them to reflectively examine their coping style and its implications for student vulnerability. At the same time, they must recognize that cultures are not static and are constantly changing in relation to the larger context of societal change. Thus, the Christian Arab society in Israel is an important example of a "transitional society" between traditionalism and modernity (Gross, 2013) as it has experienced constant social changes (Azaiza, 2013), including in the field of coping with CSA.

The current findings also demonstrated the urgent need to provide information, resources, and support regarding CSA not only for teachers but also for other education professionals, such as administrators, in all schools, for all ages, and for all religio-cultural groups. Furthermore, awareness should be raised regarding the types of abusive sexual acts, behaviors, and locations, including outside or within the school and among peers. In particular, the resulting behaviors of a child experiencing CSA or CSA among peers at school can result in a ripple effect and impact the

overall school and classroom climate in a manner that calls for particular, culturally sensitive interventions for all those involved.

Beyond the necessity to provide support and resources to teachers, it is also essential to acknowledge them as key social actors in addressing CSA. As teachers often encounter CSA cases in their daily work, they are in the position to detect abuse, be disclosure recipients, and intervene to stop the CSA, whether it is occurring inside or outside the school environment (Sigad & Tener, 2022). Therefore, they possess vital experiential knowledge critical to the CSA discourse in designing effective curricula, policies, and interventions. Thus, the findings revealed not only the Christian school educators' experiences regarding CSA, but also the limits and blind spots of the school systems and the complex role of religion in such processes.

Finally, this study illuminates the importance of integrating religious community leaders and institutional structures in forming effective child protection protocols and processes. In this way, it is possible to create Christian-based intervention programs in which the elements of the religion reinforce practices of protection, prevention, and treatment of CSA. These programs can also include alternative, benevolent interpretations of those religious principles that have the potential to function as risk factors, such as forgiveness.

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Note

1. For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6: 14–15).

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