ORIGINAL PAPER

"The Good World You Thought Existed does not": Teachers' Classroom and Self-Transformation Following Sexual Abuse of Pupils

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Abstract

Background Child sexual abuse (CSA) has grave implications for survivors, as well as repercussions for the survivors' family members and professionals, such as teachers, who work with child survivors of sexual abuse.

Objective As teachers are often key supportive figures for CSA survivors, the present study aims to contribute to the understanding of teachers' experiences when working with students who have undergone CSA.

Methods Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of 31 elementary school teachers to illustrate how their basic world beliefs and professional functioning were altered by their encounters with CSA victims.

Results The qualitative thematic analysis indicated that teachers facing pupils who experienced CSA underwent a fracture in their basic beliefs about the safety of the children in their classrooms. The traumatic event elicited a reconstruction of their beliefs about CSA and their role as classroom leaders to meet the demands of the changed classroom environment.

Conclusion The findings highlight the importance of accounting for the needs of teachers, as members of the school community, in responding to CSA. In addition, they suggest the importance of receiving transformative learning skills training to prepare teachers to handle the repercussions of CSA in their classrooms.

Keywords Child sexual abuse (CSA) · Child sexual abuse disclosure · Classroom climate · Coping · Teachers' well-being

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Introduction

Among global efforts to prevent violence against children, there are attempts to contend with the complex phenomenon of child sexual abuse (CSA; Alaggia et al., 2019; WHO, 2020). CSA is a cross-cultural health, social and educational phenomenon occurring on an enormous scale, with roughly 20% of girls and 5–10% of boys afflicted worldwide (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Cases of CSA can take diverse forms and can occur both within educational institutions (e.g., perpetrated by peers or educators; Abboud et al., 2020) and outside of them (e.g., intrafamilial or stranger CSA; Musiwa, 2019); Gallagher et al., 2008). In Israel, recently reported CSA prevalence rates have been as high as 18.7% (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2018; RAMA, 2018). Given this potential vulnerability, an infrastructure of services aimed at children at risk has been established (Tasher et al., 2016). Nevertheless, CSA remains a national health concern in Israel.

Being at the forefront of disclosure and handling CSA cases, professionals who work within educational institutions may be subject to emotional and professional conflict (Finkelhor, 1999; Sigad & Tener, 2022; Tener & Sigad, 2019), however, their experiences have been largely overlooked. The current study aims to fill this gap by spotlighting the inner experiences of Israeli secular teachers following encounters with pupils who have experienced CSA. Furthermore, this study seeks to expand what we know about the emotional consequences of this experience, as well as its implications for teachers' professional development and learning. The manner in which teachers experience and cope with cases of CSA has multiple implications. It influences not only their personal well-being and professional identity but also CSA prevention and intervention among their pupils and their ability to support vulnerable children.

Teachers' Role Following CSA Disclosure

Due to the daily contact between teachers and students, teachers play a significant role in students' lives. As a result, teachers frequently confront CSA cases in their everyday work and witness children displaying psychosocial difficulties associated with CSA (Scholes et al., 2012; Walsh et al., 2008). As trusted figures, they may also be disclosure recipients (Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Schönbucher et al., 2012). Hence, teachers constitute key figures in CSA events and their aftermath and have been found to be front and center in both CSA prevention and intervention (Márquez-Flores et al., 2016; Tener & Sigad, 2019; Walsh & Brandon, 2012).

Studies on teachers' role in CSA have primarily focused on perceptions of mandatory reporting (e.g., Walsh et al., 2008) and barriers to reporting (e.g., Bunting et al., 2010). Experience with reporting CSA or having sufficient knowledge regarding CSA identification and policies can increase the likelihood of reporting suspicions (Kenny, 2004). However, the majority of teachers refrain from reporting due to fear of professional or legal consequences if the suspicions are proven to be false, a lack of belief in the justice system, and, most commonly, insufficient training in detection and reporting procedures (Kenny, 2001; Márquez-Flores et al., 2016).

Indeed, deficiencies in teachers' knowledge and training have been found globally, including in Spain (Márquez-Flores et al., 2016), Australia (Goldman, 2007; Mathews, 2011), and

the U.S. (Kenny, 2001), among other nations. From identifying and responding to CSA (Márquez-Flores et al., 2016; Mathews, 2011) to the implementation of proper reporting and intervention procedures (Sinanan, 2011), teachers appear to lack the necessary expertise (Kim et al., 2012). In addition, intervention following child abuse is largely considered the responsibility of other professionals (Davidov et al., 2017; Tener et al., 2022), which may further contribute to underestimating the need for training among teachers regarding this phenomenon.

Teachers' Role Following CSA Disclosure in Israel

In Israel, the role of the teacher in CSA incidents is addressed by the Mandatory Reporting Act of 1977, which stipulates that professionals, including educators, are required to report any reasonable suspicion that an offense has occurred. Alongside this legal requirement, educators have specific guidelines regarding CSA identification and intervention strategies (Director General's Circular, 2008). However, school principals, rather than teachers, are traditionally designated by the welfare system to contend with abuse (Director General's Circular, 2008; Lindenbach et al., 2021).

Despite the existence of policies and protocols, formal reports have indicated that Israeli teachers demonstrate little awareness of CSA (ARCCI, 2008). A recent government report by Becker & Mizrahi-Simon (2017) showed that teachers and educators have no legal requirement to undergo CSA intervention training, nor is academia obliged to include related courses as part of the mandatory curricula. Although the majority of teachers do participate in a continuing education program offered by the Ministry of Education that includes content related to the sexual abuse of students, the program is not dedicated to the topic and does not include CSA identification and prevention tools (Becker & Mizrahi-Simon, 2017).

Teachers' Coping Following CSA Disclosure in Israel

Previous studies have pointed to the severe emotional burden inflicted on teachers who face CSA as they try to navigate between the various social actors involved while experiencing extreme levels of fear and loneliness (Sigad & Tener, 2022; Tener & Sigad, 2019). Israeli educators tend to vary in their coping strategies following exposure to pupils who have experienced CSA, in both their perceived responsibility and ability to enlist support (Tener & Sigad, 2019; Tener et al., 2022). Educators in multicultural contexts in Israel have also experienced conflicts between professional and cultural demands when managing the CSA cases of their pupils (Sigad & Tener, 2022; Tener et al., 2022). However, the existing literature on teachers' personal coping in cases of CSA of their pupils has yet to address the implications on their classroom climate as well as their professional identity as educators.

Theoretical Framework: Professionals' Self-Transformation Following Encounters with Pupils who Experienced CSA

In general, professionals exposed to traumatic content are at risk of developing secondary trauma (Gil & Weinberg, 2015). Secondary traumatization refers to the indirect trauma experienced by learning about a traumatic event experienced by others, as well as the weight of caring or trying to care for the traumatized individual (Tehrani, 2007). This form of traumatization can manifest in symptoms such as anger, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and withdrawal from others (Horvath & Massey, 2018; Motta, 2012). Beyond that, it may also have existential consequences for the self. Accordingly, a study among Israeli professionals, including educators and teachers, showed that exposure to CSA acted as a catalyst for the reorganization and reconstruction of the self (Sigad et al., 2016).

The transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2000) offers a model for such a process of change in paradigmatic assumptions. This approach was chosen as a theoretical framework for this study due to its relevance regarding adult learning, particularly for teachers' professional development and learning (Liu, 2015). It stresses that learners can adjust their thinking based on new information. This occurs by questioning the validity of a long-taken-for-granted perspective predicated on a presupposition about oneself and the world (Mezirow, 1991). According to this theory, individuals in crisis may discover that their previous structures of meaning do not accurately reflect their current experiences (Laros, 2017). Therefore, by critically assessing their former assumptions about the world, they integrate the new experiences by using prior learning or exploring new perspectives (Mezirow, 1991, 2000).

Viewed in these terms, encounters with children who have been abused can be seen as presenting new, disruptive knowledge, thereby constituting a so-called disorienting dilemma that can act as a powerful facilitator of change (Sigad et al., 2016). Professionals who reflect on their reactions to such incidents may derive a vastly new perspective, referred to in the literature as "connected knowing" (Gilgun, 2008). In other words, this transformative process enables professionals to rethink their previous understandings and construct new meanings that, consequently, shape their behavior (Taylor, 2007).

The Current Study

There remains limited knowledge about the experiences of teachers facing pupils who experienced CSA and the implications for how they may intervene. Thus, the significance of the present study is its contribution to the understanding of a unique socio-culture context based on the assumption that the critical role teachers play in addressing CSA can have significant implications for their own mental health and responses to CSA survivors. Furthermore, despite a large body of literature on educators' transformative learning, little is known about how secondary trauma (Luthar & Mendes, 2020) shapes teachers' professional development. In an Israeli context, previous studies (Sigad & Tener, 2022; Tener & Sigad, 2019) have focused on emotional coping and professional and personal dilemmas of teachers in CSA cases. This study seeks to shed light on the profound impact of this phenomenon on their existential situation and analyze the implications for their professional development and basic beliefs. Given the phenomenon's complexity, a qualitative approach was chosen,

allowing for a multifaceted exploration of the meanings ascribed to the experience by those coping with it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following research question guided the study: How do teachers personally and professionally perceive and experience their encounters with CSA cases of their pupils?

Methods

Study Context

This study is part of a larger study that aims to create a grounded theoretical model to conceptualize the experiences of different educational professionals coping with CSA in diverse multicultural settings, focusing on three cultural subgroups: religious Jews, secular Jews, and Arabs. The data of the larger study included over 200 in-depth interviews with educators. The interviews were collected by a multidisciplinary team that included experienced researchers in the field of CSA alongside students from the field of education and social work from two academic institutions. The current study focused on secular Jewish teachers, with each of the other subgroups being analyzed separately and simultaneously(e.g. Sigad & Tener, 2022; Tener et al., 2022). The data collection among the secular Jewish teachers of the sub-study at hand was conducted by four M.Ed. students and one M.A. student in social work as part of their requirement for a seminar or research thesis on the topic.

Sample

In the current study, 31 teachers between the ages of 26 and 68 participated, including 29 women and two men. Most were married ($n=25$) and had children. All participants taught children between the ages of 6–13 in secular Jewish elementary schools in Israel, with 12 who taught children with special needs. All teachers had experienced direct and intense involvement with one or more CSA cases of their pupils. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 36 years ($M=14$) and 26 taught in schools in northern Israel, two in the Jerusalem area and three in the center of the country.

Data Collection

Participants were selected via criterion sampling, a form of purposive sampling based on pre-identified factors that aims to select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015; Tenny et al., 2020), in this case, teachers coping with the CSA of their pupils. The researchers initially contacted teachers in their immediate area based on the following basic criteria: teachers in secular Jewish elementary schools who stated they had been exposed to a case or cases of CSA of their pupils in the course of their everyday work. Years of seniority in teaching did not constitute criteria for participation as the threshold condition was the participants' familiarity and significant experience contending with CSA (Englander, 2012). After locating an initial number of participants, the researchers contin-

ued recruitment via a "snowball" technique (Patton, 2015) and were referred to additional potential interviewees by the interviewees themselves.

The researchers contacted potential participants via an initial phone call to explain the study's purpose, check the participants' suitability and ask for their initial consent to participate. In total, 31 teachers met the study criteria and were invited to be interviewed for the current study. The sample size was selected as the optimum number for reaching saturation, which allows the thorough examination of the study's characteristics and recognition of the related conceptual categories. As data saturation was achieved after the initial wave of data collection, no further interviews were conducted (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Throughout the data collection period, the researchers received continuous, dedicated training and supervision from expert researchers in the field, namely, the first and last authors of this article who led the multidisciplinary research group. The researchers conducted four open interviews. These were proceeded by 27 semi-structured interviews based on a culturally-informed interview guide (Spradley, 1979). The participant interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and took place between 2019 and 2021. The open interview guide mainly included descriptive questions (e.g., What is it like to be a teacher dealing with a case of CSA at work?; What types of CSA do you encounter in the course of your work?). The semi-structured interview guide was based on the content that arose from the open interviews. It included references to additional aspects, such as the perceived role of teachers in CSA cases (e.g., What do you think the role of an educator is 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 within the education system?), and the effects of disclosure on the teachers' personal lives (e.g., How does being an educator dealing with cases of CSA affect your personal life?). All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted. The first stage of analysis consisted of reading and re-reading the interviews to achieve deep immersion and full fluency in the described experiences. At this point, each transcript was entered into Dedoose software. In the second stage, the researchers singled out ideas and statements that repeatedly appeared across the participants' accounts and were central to how they defined their experiences (Roulston, 2010). This identification process and all subsequent analyses were inductive and did not rely on established coding frames or the researchers' preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the third stage, the units of meaning derived from the analysis and organized into codes and code groups were consolidated into the themes and subthemes that comprised the study findings. Themes that did not provide significant insight into the participants' experiences were removed. The researchers then reviewed the transcripts again to expand on the established themes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In the last stage, the researchers framed the participants' perceptions and the meanings they attributed to the experience of encountering CSA of their pupils in an overall conceptual model (Charmaz, 2014). After concluding the analysis, the researchers excerpted illustrative quotes from the interviews, which were translated into English. To check the translation, randomly selected quotes were back-translated into Hebrew to confirm their accuracy.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Several considerations were made and techniques were used to promote rigor and trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). First, investigator triangulation was carried out during the analysis, with some materials analyzed and coded by three research team members, one M.Ed. student and two expert researchers. Second, the source materials and interpretations were discussed in documented peer debriefing sessions throughout the study. Third, all the researchers participated in team debriefing and reflection meetings to increase awareness of their biases and influence on the analysis. The bimonthly research team meetings also included reflective discussions on how the research team members experienced conducting interviews on the sensitive topic of CSA. In these reflexive meetings, the research group discussed how the position of the researcher, including personal and professional perceptions, influences the data collection and interpretation processes. These processes were 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 conducted with advisors, team members and colleagues in the field 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 initially used, 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 direct quotes from the participants and then openly detailing the researchers' interpretation and analysis. This allowed for the presentation of how the participants' accounts were conceptualized and how the themes were identified (Maxwell, 2005). For example, the theme: *Perceptions of Increased Sexualization of the Classroom Climate Following CSA Events* is organized as follows: (a) relevant details of the participant; (b) excerpt from the participant's interview; (c) conclusions drawn regarding the nature of the teacher's experiences, placed in context with the surrounding 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 participants during data collection for their own reflections on the accuracy of the findings and to provide alternative language or interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the authors' affiliated institutions and was conducted in accordance with the committees' guidelines. First, participants signed an informed consent form, and confidentiality was ensured through all stages of the study. Second, to protect participants' privacy, all identifying information was stored in a locked file, interviews were transcribed without identifying data and pseudonyms were given to each participant. Furthermore, informed consent was not seen as an event but as a process. Therefore, in addition to signing a consent form, the options of not answering questions or stopping the interview at any time were discussed, and the participants were reminded of them both verbally and in writing at different stages (Malone, 2003). The participants were also informed in advance that, should they experience emotional distress

during or after the interview, they could contact the researchers, who would refer them to professional help. The participants were also provided with a list of referral resources at the end of each interview.

Findings

Among the teachers in the present study, the act of contending with the CSA of their pupils engendered the realization that certain constructs they had held to be true were flawed. Once their core beliefs came to be viewed as illusions, their understanding of the world came to be seen as not only unreliable but incorrect. At the same time, they were also required to navigate a new reality. Thus, three themes emerged from the analysis: **(1) loss of faith in children's safety following CSA disclosure; (2) perceptions of increased sexualization of the classroom climate following CSA events; and (3) Teachers Reconstructing their Professional Role**.

The themes presented herein represent the most common patterns that arose from the analysis of the narratives, noted by at least 75% of the participants. As such, the included quotes are representative of the respective thematic categories. Additional quotes for the same categories were excluded due to space limitations.

"It burst the bubble of a rosy world": Loss of Faith in Children's Safety Following CSA Disclosure

This theme presents various changes in how participants experienced a loss of their basic beliefs regarding children's safety in the world as a result of their encounters with CSA of their young pupils. The teachers underwent a transition from the perception of the world as a safe and protected place for children to a worldview where they are now aware of the risk that CSA can happen to anyone, anywhere. The teachers used metaphors such as "broken illusion," "bursting the bubble," "punch to the stomach," and "serious slap" to describe this experience.

Recognizing that children's safety is fragile and vulnerable undermined the teachers' previously held beliefs. For a majority of the teachers, their construction of this new understanding represented an emotional hardship. For example, Roni, a Grade 3 homeroom teacher, experienced two instances of peer-to-peer CSA among her pupils. She explained the jolting emotional experience of contending with one of the cases, which led her to realize that CSA can occur even in contexts she previously thought were safe:

> When it happened, I took it very badly, emotionally. […] to realize that something like this even happens, it was the first time I was exposed to children so incredibly young even ending up in this type of situation. With experience and years, slowly the ability to handle such things grows, but because it was the first case and also my first home-room class, everything was very sensitive, and it of course hit close to home […] It seems to me that it burst the bubble of an innocent, rosy world. […] So *here* too there are such things? A small town in an isolated area, I came here especially to raise *my* children in a good place, different and far from all chaos and so-called bad and harsh

things. It pretty much shattered that for me, such a bubble of innocence, to know that *it* is *everywhere*, at *any time* and at *all* ages.

Encountering such an incident in the classroom takes CSA from the realm of the theoretical, something that affects others, to a concrete reality that exists within the teacher's own social and professional spheres. Accordingly, many of the teachers referred to the influence CSA events and disclosures had on their experience as parents, as they internalized the potential risk to their own children. Linoy, a Grade 4 teacher, similarly described the upheaval she experienced in the face of a male pupil's CSA disclosure:

> I had a case of a student who came home, apparently someone had followed him... and when he arrived home, that person knocked on the door, and the boy opened it and was assaulted by him […] It's very scary, because you realize... that the good world you thought existed does not exist. […] And in the end, you realize it can happen anywhere, it doesn't matter. It grabs, scares and shakes you, and stops all the other things […] It definitely affects you and it stays with you after that, when you raise your kids, it stays with you, you're thinking, "I didn't think a boy could be [sexually] assaulted, how can it be?" […] You realize you can't protect [them] all the time. It can happen anywhere, it can happen in school, it can happen in an afterschool program, a youth movement. What can we learn from this? To repress it and move on.

Linoy illustrated specific elements that comprised the shift in her perception of child safety. She refers to the qualities she previously thought would protect children, such as gender and location, which then appeared unable to do so. Similarly, Lea, a Grade 6 homeroom teacher, described her change in perception after being exposed to several cases of CSA of her pupils:

> Although I was very young, it still upsets me that I used to speak this way. Whenever there was talk about sexual abuse, someone would ask, "Have you ever experienced sexual abuse?" And I'd reply, "You think someone can hurt me?!" I was so convinced that it's about someone's character, that it depends on the person.

Lea described her once held understanding that some people are at a higher risk of being sexually harmed, while others are immune due to their individual characteristics. After encountering the CSA of her pupils, she—and a majority of the participants—developed different views regarding the likelihood of experiencing CSA. They became aware that young children can be hurt, regardless of demographics or perceived invincibility and inner strength.

The loss of belief in having a safe distance from CSA also shattered another central conception that teachers have control. Elhanan, a Grade 5 homeroom teacher who faced several instances of CSA of his pupils, encountered a scenario in which a female pupil in his class reported that an older teenager had sexually assaulted her:

> When your own pupil is hurt by another pupil… you can try and seek out the guilty party and protect them [the victim], and I'm putting quotation marks around "protect,"

it's […] *an illusion of protection*, if I […] put a fence up around him and lock him up in the classroom, probably bad things probably won't happen to him.

In the past, Elhanan believed that the classroom was a space he could control. This sense of security seemed to dissipate once the abuse occurred, at which point the imaginary protective walls fell.

Thus, the majority of participants experienced CSA as if infringing on their personal spaces and previous beliefs. A sense of loss accompanies this experience as they come to understand that preadolescent children can be sexually exploited regardless of where they live, their gender, socio-economic status, or the presence of a guardian adult. Likewise, a majority of the teachers addressed the shattering of their preconceived notion of the classroom as a safe space where children are protected. Having seen themselves as active agents with a responsibility to intervene and protect their pupils, they underwent a sense of lost power over their environments. This new understanding of childhood and their classrooms was fraught with discomfort and grief, as the participants were confronted with their inability to act as protectors, either personally or professionally.

"It was a sort of pandemic": Perceptions of increased sexualization of the classroom climate following CSA events

This theme further describes teachers' realization regarding the climate of their classrooms, which they perceived as altered by the presence of students directly or indirectly involved in cases of CSA. Furthermore, they also addressed how their coping included regulating these changes.

The Sexualization of Pupil Interactions

The teachers' sense of CSA as invading the protected space of the classroom was not only emotional for them, they also viewed it as introducing an element of sexualization and, thus, a range of practical challenges they must address. Notably, the majority of participants perceived broad changes in peer interactions following cases of CSA of their students. Bar, a Grade 6 homeroom teacher, who was aware of two separate instances of CSA of her pupils, described how the discourse between her students changed after one of these incidents, which occurred outside the school:

It was a sort of pandemic […] The case of the girl who was abused, it very much awakened something in the boys. […] One of the kids in the class started corresponding with the girl on the phone […] So he told her, "I've decided I want to sleep with someone, and I want it to be with you, you'll be my first, teach me…" It amused her very much… [She said,] "Yeah, Dor, who would sleep with him? I wouldn't sleep with him." And you say, wow! This is a conversation I had at the age of 19–20, they're in 5th-6th grade. […] I think it's because these two children dictated some new norm. They brought their pathology to the classroom.

Bar recognized age-inappropriate behaviors between the young pupils as manifestations of the abuse. Similar to other teachers, she felt that the abusive content encroached on the

boundaries of her classroom. Yet, her perception of this invasion also alluded to hyper-sexualization. This was also referred to by Alona, who described one of her two experiences of coping with CSA of her pupils, in which a first-grade female student engaged in sexual behaviors after being abused:

> I received a phone call from one of the mothers… She called and apologized profusely and told me that Karen [the CSA survivor] […] told her daughter that boys really like it when you take them to the bathroom and take off their pants and lick their "balls" [scrotum]. […] But we've seen the consequences of her presence. We saw them daily. […] My entire class started getting involved in matters of affection, and falling in love, and kissing, and sending love letters, in first grade! And it's really all because of one girl who was constantly presenting and focusing on it. And she was… she used to rub against the boys, and she would constantly invite children over and tell them stories, tell them what sex is, and that a "pee-pee" [penis] is called a cock, and tell them all sorts of things that a first grader doesn't [usually] know.

Alona viewed the experience of CSA of one of her pupils as resulting in the exposure of age-inappropriate sexuality not only to the victim, but also to the victim's classmates. Despite her compassion for the abused child, Alona interpreted this as a shift in the space that was once free of sexual talk. This is a sentiment shared by the majority of teachers that, without this event, the children in their classes would have remained untouched by sexuality. The presence of one CSA victim is, therefore, experienced by the teachers as creating a change in the classroom climate, as the students' premature exposure to sexuality revealed hard-to-comprehend dangers and new, unfathomable ways of experiencing childhood.

The Construction of Teacher-Student Discourse Following CSA

In addition to noting the effect on peer relationships, the majority of teachers described the presence of CSA survivors in the classroom as altering the content of their classroom discourse. Some teachers, particularly of younger students, described conflict and discomfort when the event required them to navigate sexually oriented discussions and topics that may be developmentally inappropriate. Alona noted the challenges of the children's incomprehension when describing her attempts to engage her Grade 1 class in educational discourse on the subject of sexuality following one of her pupils' CSA disclosure:

> It's like we talk to them [the pupils] on the one hand and on the other, everything is lost. It's like trying to fill a bottle of water and there's a hole in the bottle and everything leaks and it's like nothing absorbs. It just doesn't register. It was like talking to a wall… There are extremes of [sexualization] in the classroom. There are children who are very naïve and if you say "penis and vagina" around them, they'll be uncertain… and there are those who passed that stage long ago and are at an advanced porno stage.

Sexual content was present in Alona's classroom as a result of her pupils' direct and indirect exposure to CSA. She attempted to engage the students on the topic and help them understand it in an appropriate way. However, this theoretical ideal was complicated by the reality that many of the children could not developmentally process this content. The heterogeneity

of knowledge among the children, ranging from innocence to sexual awareness, became an impossible gap to bridge and made the educational discourse a highly challenging goal.

In contrast, there were teachers who noted that instances of CSA disclosure yielded new educational opportunities. For example, Dalia, a Grade 6 homeroom teacher who experienced several instances of CSA of her pupils, described introducing the role of the bystander:

> […] That was really my lesson with them, the issue of bystanders. I witnessed someone else being hurt, coming forward and reporting […] They kept saying, "But I didn't say anything, I was just watching," [so] I also talked about all those who stood aside and did nothing. […] Indeed […] talking about things that really occupy them on a daily basis […] if there's a case of exposure to the content, then I bring it up in class, and really, they know they have a chance to talk about everything, and no one will judge [them]… and I will not silence them and try to change the subject, like some teachers who fear to talk about all sorts of topics. I do give it a place.

The discussion of sexuality following CSA allowed Dalia to create meaningful discourse with her students on formerly unspoken topics. She felt that the ability to include open discussions in the classroom also provided the students with a safe space for disclosure. Similarly, Sivan felt that the CSA case provided an opening to create a safe space to discuss how to understand and interpret dangerous sexual situations and to keep the conversation going:

> Look, both with my students and my own kids, I am in a constant dialogue about things that are happening, about current affairs, age-dependent issues. Even in classes where there are no victims of sexual assault, the issue comes up. In general, [we talk] about sexuality, about rape […] We talk about sexuality in a very open way in class because it's really important to me that they know legally what each thing means, what consent is and also in general that they understand what these terms are. That if I came to hug a girl in the class and she told me no, is that okay? Is it not okay? All kinds of social situations, which they are often unaware of in everyday life. And a moment is needed to put it on the table and say that it exists and that they should pay attention to it.

Thus, while the teachers saw the sexualization of peer interactions as uniformly negative, there was a range of reactions to the introduction of sexuality in the classroom discourse. Teachers found it disturbing when a survivor's classmates were exposed to what they deemed age-inappropriate material. However, opinions varied on whether the teacher was able to guide the discussion, depending on how successfully they could communicate with their students. Some viewed it as an invasion, whereby the presence of CSA cases caused sexual issues to be raised in their classrooms, while others considered it a significant, although sensitive, educational opportunity.

"I have a great responsibility": Teachers Reconstructing their Professional Role

In addition to coping with their own loss of faith in basic childhood safety and managing the introduction of sexual topics in the classroom, the participants described the difficulty of prioritizing competing student needs following CSA disclosure. In their role, they had to

balance the emotional and educational needs of the students involved in the CSA, including, at times, cases involving multiple students with contradictory needs, as well as fulfill their responsibility to the rest of the class.

Noa, a Grade 2 homeroom teacher exposed to two instances of CSA of her pupils, described how, during a routine classroom discussion, one of her students suggested to Noa that they had been subjected to abuse. She recounted her thought process at the time, as she attempted to navigate the educational discourse in the classroom while also seeking a response to the student's critical situation:

> All the other children were present as well, so I was scared to involve the whole class as she was sharing it and upset the class […] It should be done in a one-on-one context, listening to the story again and getting more details ….

Noa was simultaneously concerned for the student and committed to the responsibility of handling the discussion in a manner that would not be harmful to the child or the rest of the class. As the disclosure of CSA could have grave implications for the protected nature of the classroom, it was her educational responsibility to limit the immediate discourse and try to address it in a more private setting.

Additionally, most of the teachers described increasing their responsiveness and attention towards pupils who were CSA survivors to ensure that the classroom served as a safe space during their recovery. They held regular personal conversations with the survivors and developed deep bonds with them. Lea, for instance, maintained a personal and meaningful relationship with a female pupil who was abused by her father, closely monitoring the girl's emotional state:

> I'm much, much more attentive to every little thing that happens with her. At the beginning it was difficult for me to identify it, but now I can see her… even yesterday for example, she was sitting, and I saw the look on her face. She isn't speaking, and I'm asking her, "Is everything alright?" She replies, "No, I don't feel so good, I'm going to vomit." And she didn't think to tell me. If I hadn't seen it, there was a good chance the girl would have vomited in the middle of the classroom.

Upon identifying the student's distress, Lea adjusted to accommodate her. This was a proactive step that required her to create a compassionate and non-judgmental dialogue with the girl and an understanding of the symptomatization of the abuse.

The teachers' responsibility towards their students was further challenged when peer-to-peer abuse occurred between students under their care. Yaeli, a Grade 6 homeroom teacher who experienced two instances of CSA of her pupils, contended with one such case:

> In a teacher's life there are dilemmas, in people's lives but especially for a teacher in this situation […] this is an unusual thing. You know you have millions of dilemmas that you deal with throughout the day, but this is extraordinary. And in that sense, it's also like… both pupils are yours. Now you must choose. You need… not to choose, but you also need…yes, I felt I have a place in the processes of what's going on with them.

As noted by the majority of participants, Yaeli described the conflicting loyalties that arose in light of her commitment to taking care of both the victim and the perpetrator. She felt compelled to choose between the children, yet they were both her pupils. Ultimately, she decided to be present for both children under her supervision, accepting the duality of this task.

Teachers contending with CSA in their classroom engaged in a delicate balancing act, weighing the multiple needs of the children, the classroom climate, and their educational values. Often, they weighed their desire to support and assist one pupil against the needs and concerns of the broader peer group. A spirit of apprehension, therefore, permeated the fabric of the class dynamic, formed around the indirect presence of abuse.

In the three themes described here, we found that the teachers struggled in the context of CSA and its effects on the classroom climate to adjust to the loss of two key belief systems: (1) their view of what childhood is, and (2) the ways in which they perceived their role in their classrooms. Where they once thought of childhood as a time of safety, they then had to accept that all children are vulnerable. Furthermore, they needed to cope with a version of childhood that included increased and inappropriate levels of sexuality. Under these circumstances, their dynamics with their students changed, and they adapted and sought new ways to communicate. Despite the lost illusions of both childhood and their own classrooms, they took responsibility and forged a new balance of priorities to address the educational and emotional needs of the students involved in CSA incidents and the class as a whole.

Discussion

In this study, the teachers' confrontations with CSA of their pupils presented an extreme challenge to their defenses, beliefs, and worldviews (Tehrani, 2007), impinging on their internal perceptions of well-being. This process began with the loss of a previously held perception of children's innocence and safety, and of the teachers' ability to serve as their protectors. The loss of these beliefs, in turn, undermined the teachers' basic assumptions and life paradigms regarding CSA and the children involved.

As seen in the current study, the teachers were faced with a world that did not align with their values and sense of logic, where the malevolence of CSA can occur to anyone and in any sphere (Dalbert & Stoeber, 2005). Thus, a new understanding infiltrated the teachers' private and protected world, operating as "toxic knowledge" (Sigad et al., 2016), instigating a metamorphic reconstruction of the self and a new paradigm of being in the world. Previously, they thought of CSA as a foreign, alien phenomenon—something that existed among others and not in their own world. Once this belief was lost, so was the protection of an individual's sense of meaning and self.

Beyond the identity and professional transformations of the teachers, this study shed light on the effect of abuse on the classroom space. Trauma, such as CSA, is known to result in a "ripple effect," whereby the initial trauma leads to repercussions that reach those surrounding the firsthand survivor and beyond (Lipsky & Burk, 2009). In the present study, this can be seen through the consequences of CSA on the classroom climate, specifically, the increased sexual content in the classroom given the "infiltration" of the abuse, as identified by the teachers. "Hyper-sexualization" or "traumatic sexualization" is a well-known consequence of sexual trauma and relates to the impact of the developmentally inappropriate

and harmful interpersonal relationship resulting from CSA that forms a child's sexuality (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). However, less is known about its secondary form and how this mechanism affects other circles in the survivor's environment.

A glimpse of this mechanism could be seen as the teachers contended with the complex dynamics of trying to juggle between and bridge the different and often conflicting needs of individual CSA victims and their entire class. Ultimately, when faced with the infiltration of CSA content, the teachers strived to regain control of the classroom climate by regulating their own intense emotions and conducting proactive interventions. Thus, the teachers in this study demonstrated a transformative type of response. Despite the adversity and emotional hardship, they underwent a multifaceted process of accepting and merging the knowledge of CSA of their pupils into their professional worlds and identities (Sigad et al., 2016).

In terms of the transformative learning theory, these "individuals may be empowered to learn to free themselves from unexamined ways of thinking that impede effective judgment and action" (Mezirow, 1998, p. 72). Accordingly, the teachers in this study did not harbor protective illusions. Instead, their self-reconstruction and metamorphosis led them to a clear-eyed recognition of the dangers to be faced in their changed world. Furthermore, they demonstrated an active interest in addressing this new reality and its challenges. Some participants reported their attempts to encourage open discourse on sexuality and abuse in an age-appropriate manner (Ratzburg, 2010). Similarly, many noted their proactive attempts to balance the varied and contradictory emotional needs of the students involved in CSA, as well as their responsibility to the rest of the classroom. Others described their constant attempts to gain access to the students' inner emotional worlds within the complex circumstances surrounding CSA events, including students' suspicion, anger and lack of sharing. Thus, the teachers attempted to construct new meanings for themselves and their students, if only within the microcosm of their classrooms. In other words, they approached their role with the understanding that they must overcome their internal barriers to effectively support student safety and empowerment and create a classroom climate that promotes student well-being (Marquart & Báez, 2021).

Limitations

Firstly, as is inherent to qualitative research, the study did not involve a representative sample. Therefore, the findings are limited in how they can be generalized. Moreover, as part of a broader study including diverse cultural and educational groups, as previously described, the current study was based on the experiences of a group of secular Jewish elementary school teachers within a specific socio-cultural context (the Israeli school system). This group represents approximately 45% of the Israeli population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018) and is characterized by an individualistic, Western lifestyle (Al-Krenawi, 2002). Future studies should focus on diverse cultural contexts among other groups in Israel that hold collectivist and traditional values. Likewise, our heterogeneous sample included both general elementary school and special education teachers. Future studies should include diverse school settings. Our sample also included mostly female participants. The experiences of male teachers could be fundamentally different and demand future exploration.

Secondly, although teachers are an essential part of how the CSA of students is addressed in the school system, the experiences of other educational professionals are necessary to

gain a holistic understanding of how CSA should be handled. Lastly, in this study, the teachers described their experiences coping with CSA broadly and did not differentiate between experiences of being exposed to CSA between students or by school staff and CSA outside the school. It can be assumed that different forms of CSA would produce different responses, interpretations and implications for the classroom climate. Therefore, future studies should compare the impact on teachers of CSA occurring within and outside of school.

Implications for Theory, Research and Practice

The current study contributes an in-depth analysis of teachers' loss of control experienced while contending with the CSA of pupils. These findings highlight the importance of training educators on how to respond to sexual abuse (Ey & McInnes, 2018) and how to facilitate sexual education content in their classrooms (Burns & Hendriks, 2018). Moreover, the study's findings contribute to understanding the necessary components for successful and efficient educator training. Beyond education of procedural reactions (Ey & McInnes, 2008) and social support for teachers coping with fear and loneliness when encountering CSA of their pupils (Sigad & Tener, 2022; Tener & Sigad, 2019), teacher training must also provide skills for transformative learning. Transformative learning requires individuals to apply thoughtful analysis to their own internalized assumptions to deconstruct and, possibly, overturn them (Mezirow, 2000). As teachers' professional functioning is influenced by their personal beliefs (Newberry 2014), training must focus on changes in beliefs and behavior to facilitate professional growth (Illeris, 2014; Kelchtermans, 2009) and allow for creative and effective interventions in the classroom.

Moreover, the majority of interventions and current research on CSA and educators is child-centered, in that it focuses on educators as the responsible adult agents involved in identifying and fostering the healing of children and youth from traumatic stress (e.g., Márquez-Flores et al., 2016). As key social actors in the phenomena of CSA and members of the school community, teachers deserve a place in the center stage when considering CSA interventions. The professional demands upon teachers' reactions, alongside the extreme personal implications of the ripple effect of trauma, must be accounted for (Luthar & Mendes, 2020).

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