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# Beyond allowing ventilation: How to connect the social- emotional and the cognitive in teachers' handling of controversial political issues (CPI)?

## ABSTRACT

*Twenty-first century teachers are expected to have a holistic approach to teaching including addressing students' self-determination, interpersonal awareness, cultural sensitivity, empathy and self-regulation. Discussions of controversial political issues (CPI) provide opportunities to examine the interplay between emotional and cognitive components, the former having rarely been studied. As part of a larger study, teachers were asked to provide a description of a CPI discussion in class. The 387 valid responses were analysed qualitatively,*

## KEYWORDS

controversial political  
issues (CPI)  
social-emotional  
learning (SEL)  
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*and the model that emerged connected triggers, motivations, responses and outcomes. The students and teachers were found to have different motivations and needs: while students were concerned with emotional needs, teachers had educational goals in mind. Teachers wanted to quell the emotional unease, to prevent racist remarks, to keep control of the classroom, and to tie the discussions to the curriculum. Teachers mainly used cognitive responses and somewhat allowed students to ventilate, or used moderating responses, all of which produced partial results. Some teachers avoided the discussion altogether, which was the least useful. The smallest proportion used a mixture of responses, which met both educational and emotional needs. Implications to teacher training, including the importance of training in social-emotional aspects of teaching, are discussed.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identifies SEL as the process through which students ‘acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions’ (CASEL 2018a). In Israel, the Center for Knowledge and Research in Education (2020) adapts the definition to refer to the process by which students learn and apply a set of social, emotional and behavioural skills required for success in school, work, relationships and civic engagement. However, most of the SEL literature focuses on students’ rather than teachers’ skills. The literature on teaching SEL depicts teacher training as lacking (Schonert-Reichl et al. 2015) and teachers, on their part, report limited training and little confidence in their SEL teaching skills (Zinsser et al. 2016). Suitable SEL instruction to students has been argued to be highly difficult without working on teachers’ social and emotional competence. In this article, we focus on one important practice, for which the emotional aspect of teachers’ competence is rarely addressed: discussions of controversial political issues (CPI).

## **CPI**

While the benefits of discussing CPI are well documented, teachers are ambivalent about approaching such topics. Teachers find it difficult to anticipate the outcomes of these discussions, and are wary of losing control of the classroom (Barton and McCully 2007; Hess 2009). Previous research has shown that the more teachers perceive themselves as skilful in conducting discussions of CPI, the more they feel supported, and the more they know the policy, the more they report conducting discussions of CPI (Gindi and Erlich Ron 2018). It has also been found that civics and social sciences teachers conduct more discussions of CPI, as do teachers who have undergone training in the topic of discussion (Erlich Ron and Gindi 2018). There is also a widespread view among teachers, which is controversial among theoreticians, that CPI discussions are the duty of civics and social science teachers alone (Kus and Öztürk 2019).

### ***Social-emotional aspects of CPI***

The political world is highly emotional, the rationale approach is often irrelevant and a CPI is unlikely to be settled simply by appeal to evidence (Garrett et al. 2020). Discussions or debates around CPI may threaten the involved students' identification where facts have little value without addressing the social-emotional aspects (Håkansson and Östman 2018). Nonetheless, the emotional aspect of CPI discussions has often been neglected in the research and theoretical literature (Sheppard and Levy 2019). It presents a challenge both for students who attempt to benefit from these discussions and for teachers who conduct them. In that sense, the emotional aspect of CPI and its associated challenges are an important subject to focus on in teacher training (Hochschild 2016).

The educational challenges are to keep the debate within democratic norms and procedures, and teach the learners to respect, listen and engage in debate with people whose values are different from one's own, even when one's identification is at stake. The relationship between SEL and CPI is spiral: SEL skills such as self-determination, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, communication skills and cultural sensitivity (CASEL 2018a, 2018b) are vital for students to be able to conduct useful discussions, which can, in turn, promote pro-social skills (Berkowitz et al. 2012).

SEL programmes in high schools often target reducing risk behaviours. Nonetheless, these intervention programmes have demonstrated efficacy in advancing positive development in many interrelated areas of competence. For example, a review of 25 such programmes showed them to promote students' interpersonal skills, problem-solving, self-control, as well as social and educational attainment outcomes (Catalano et al. 2002). Positive Youth Develop interventions, for example, set a goal for youth to thrive described as:

an integrated moral and civic identity and a commitment to society beyond the limits of one's own existence that enable youth to be agents both in their own healthy development and in the positive enhancement of other people and of society.

(Lerner et al. 2003: 172)

In this study, we focus on how, from the teachers' perceptions, teachers and students initiate and respond differently to CPI in schools. The analysis emphasizes the relationship between the social-emotional and the cognitive components of the motivations, initiatives and reactions.

### **METHOD**

Data were collected from a larger study that sent out questionnaires to approximately 60,000 high-school teachers across Israel (Gindi and Erlich Ron 2018). A total of 1,625 teachers answered the predominantly quantitative online questionnaire, which also included the following optional open-ended question: 'Recall a significant event in which you handled the issue of Jewish-Arab relations in the classroom and describe it'. This study used as data 372 valid responses, which were received from teachers to this question. The research was conducted after obtaining the approval of an institutional ethical review board.

**Participants**

The respondents’ mean age was 45.1 (SD=11.3) with a mean of 16.0 years of teaching (SD=10.9), which means that they are a fairly mature and experienced sample. Approximately two-thirds of the sample were women and most (61.0 per cent) had a master’s degree or higher. The distribution in the different districts and educational streams is on par with the general distribution in Jewish–Israeli society.

**Data analysis**

The responses were uploaded to qualitative analysis software (Atlas.ti, version 7.5.6.), and analysed thematically in accordance with Braun, Clarke, Hayfield and Terry’s (2019) guidelines. First, the authors studied the data and read the material several times. Subsequently, the authors produced initial themes, and identified, reviewed and outlined a theme matrix that included themes and subthemes. To improve coherence and integrity, the authors used a fixed comparative method. About 20 per cent of the data were analysed by the first author, followed by the second, and the results of the two analyses were compared to reach the final theme matrix. This triangulation method was designed to enhance the validity of the findings (Levitt et al. 2018). The rest of the data were then analysed according to the theme matrix.

**FINDINGS**

**The social-emotional-cognitive pendulum in class CPI opportunities**

Figure 1 presents the model that emerged from the qualitative analysis. Each theme will be explained in turn.

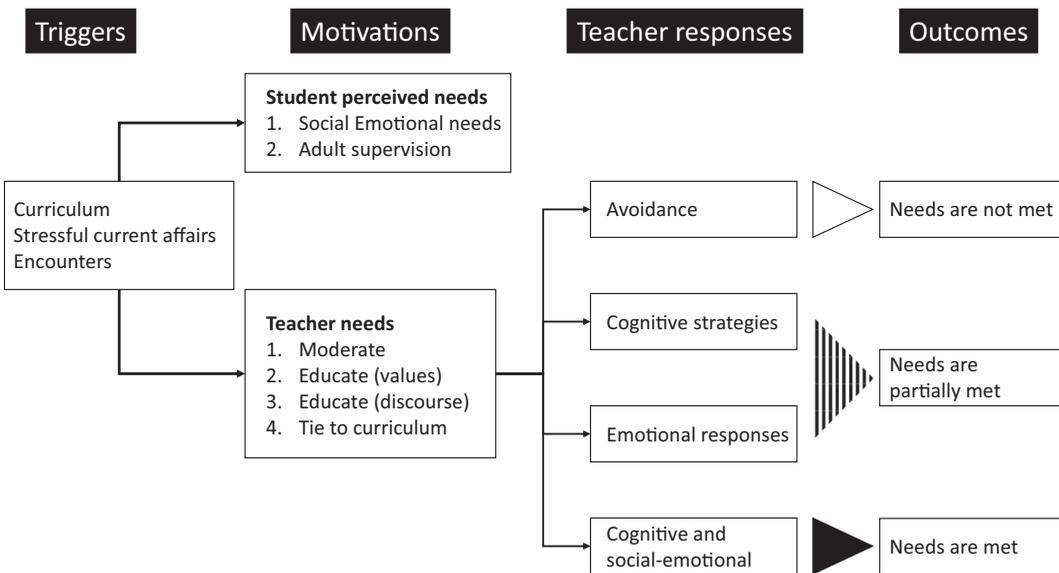


Figure 1: Model of CPI discussions in class processes.

## Triggers

### *Stressful current affairs*

The events that infiltrate the classroom are usually high-profile, emotionally intense events that are published in the news, especially when the students feel threatened. The questionnaire was administered in September 2016, and two current events that were prominent at the time were the murder of the Dawabsha<sup>1</sup> family and the trial of soldier Elor Azaria.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, one teacher noted students justifying the Dawabsha murder and only ‘After a lengthy and heated discussion, their argument [of] “they deserve it” began to dissipate’. Many discussions followed terrorist attacks: ‘Following the wave of attacks last year, in which a relative of one of the students was also injured, a class discussion was held on the Arabs in Israel...’.

1. This refers to the Duma village arson attack in July 2015, which resulted in the loss of life of three family members: 18-month-old Ali Dawabsha and his parents.
2. Elor Azaria was tried and convicted in a military court for shooting Abdel Fattah al-Sharif, a Palestinian assailant who had stabbed an Israeli soldier, after Sharif was disabled and motionless on the ground. The trial sparked a fierce widespread public debate in Israel.

### *Curriculum*

The curriculum often summons opportunities to discuss CPI. The findings indicated that teachers feel more comfortable discussing CPI when it arises from the curriculum. In a social studies class, a teacher used a fact mentioned in the textbook to stimulate a discussion: ‘I brought a fact to class, according to which 75% of Jews did not want an Arab neighbour. A class discussion ensued on students’ attitudes’. Teachers of different disciplines such as geography, English, biology and history referred to CPI discussions arising from the curriculum.

### *Jewish–Arab encounters*

Two kinds of encounters emerged in the data: encounters where students go on excursions to meet Arab students or visit Arab towns and encounters within the school. The former is usually well-planned and goes well, while the latter is often more difficult for students and teachers to handle. In one case, students reported they were anxious about an Arab teacher trainee coming to their class: ‘He [the student] was afraid that she [the teacher trainee] might be a terrorist and could hurt him’.

## Motivations

### *Teacher perceptions of students’ needs: Social-emotional needs and adult supervision*

The social-emotional needs of students were highly prominent in the data. Current affairs often raise teachers’ awareness to students’ intense emotions: ‘Discussion on feeling insecure following attacks by Arabs against Jews [...] students’ physical concern of traveling home, etc.’; ‘The topic of medical aid to terrorists came up. Opinions were divided and there was quite a storm in the classroom. It was a problematic and very difficult discussion’. This demonstrates the social-emotional needs of students facing the harsh reality in Israel.

Students express, in many ways, their need to have responsible teacher supervision. For example, when a student felt that the other students ganged up on him because of his different opinion: ‘The seventh grader was very upset and even cried because [...] another classmate treated him scornfully only because he expressed his opinion [...] the need arose to mediate between them’. The quotation demonstrates teachers’ role in mediating interpersonal communication including social-emotional expressions.

The findings indicate an overwhelming emotional need, even if it is disguised by racist remarks and provocations. The students ask for a present responsible adult, who will calm them down, provide them with feelings of safety, mediate the intrapersonal and interpersonal communication, and regulate their emotions.

## **TEACHERS' NEEDS**

### *Moderating the discussions*

The first need that came up on the teachers' side was to control the classroom, and to regulate the intensity of emotions to allow for constructive discussions. For example, 'there was rage on both sides. [...] I moderated the argument so that it would be civilized and that everyone would hear the other'; 'it was difficult to hold a civilized discussion and so I settled on calming down the spirits'; 'I tried to allow for more room for balanced opinions'. In the following example, we can see how teaching the rules of discourse helped the teacher moderate the discussion in order to be able to apply cognitive responses: 'I said that every student was allowed to express his opinion on the condition that he justifies it and uses facts not slogans. This [...] calmed the mood'. Teachers express their need or basic conditions in order to hold a discussion. Holding discussions in stressful, intense environments can impede teachers' ability to address students' needs and exacerbate burnout (Benbenishty and Friedman 2020; CASEL 2018a, 2018b).

### *Values*

One of the basic tenets of teaching and education is to teach values, and to help students understand their everyday dilemmas in terms of the values that underlie them. Teachers assist students in their socialization by explaining the social set of values, and assist them in developing their ability to weigh the relative importance of each value. Teachers in the study were guided by different sets of values like 1) democratic principles and human rights: 'The discourse was around [...] human dignity, equal human beings, no difference between blood and blood'; 2) early Zionist leaders: 'I explained to students that Jabotinsky's was a way of respecting and upholding human rights'; or 3) religious doctrine: 'I explained to them that this was not a way for the people of Israel and the teachings of Israel'.

### *Discourse*

Teachers' descriptions indicated their need to educate students about appropriate, democratic ways of holding discussions. Their responses demonstrated different levels of teaching, when some teachers were punitive: 'I had a discussion when the racist comments came up, I undertook disciplinary measures'. Others accompanied disciplinary actions by explanation of the appropriate behaviours: 'I silenced racial statements and allowed them to express their views, reflecting the importance of listening to the different opinions in the classroom, as part of acceptance and mutual respect'. While others emphasized the consequences of inappropriate discourse to democracy: 'I explained the consequences of mouth shutting and allowed the student to express her opinion'.

### *Link to curriculum*

Teachers often feel committed to the curriculum and in Israel, to the matriculation exams in particular. The curriculum can serve as an important lever and an indirect opportunity to practice SEL skills (Benbenishty and Friedman 2020; CASEL 2018a, 2018b). Indeed, one of the needs that came up in the findings was to tie the CPI discussions to the curriculum. For example: '[...] I realized that the lack of knowledge about the religion of the Arabs is great. This discussion influenced the construction of the following lesson plans and I decided to focus on Islam'. Another teacher noted similar lack of knowledge among students: 'In a lesson on religions [...] there is a lack of understanding of. [...] Islam and they [the students] see only the subject of *jihad* and martyrs as if this is all the Muslim religion amounts to'.

In summary, teachers have several needs in holding discussions. Most notably, their needs are regulating students' emotions and nurturing communication skills. In addition, teachers want to educate their students about values, debating skills and democratic discourse, and use the CPI discussions to return to the curriculum.

## **Teachers' responses**

### *Avoiding discussions*

Many teachers avoid discussions of CPI as is evident in several previous studies (e.g. Barton and McCully 2007; Hess 2009). Even though the open-ended question that was used in this study was about CPI, many teachers declared they avoided such discussions, usually using prosaic answers such as: 'There are a lot of materials to cover and little time to engage in such discussions'; 'There are countless opportunities, unfortunately, they are not seized'. Naturally, avoidance of the topic does not address the students' nor the teachers' needs. Reprimanding students, as was done in several examples, inhibits future class discussions as well. Some teachers explicitly said that they were afraid for their employment in case of CPI discussions, and therefore avoided them: 'The ministry [of education] must better explain and in writing the limits of individual freedom [...] [to] better learn the regulations. I am not willing to fall into a trap'.

### *Teachers' cognitive responses*

Cognitive responses included specific methods that teachers employed to handle CPI using reasoning, analogies, knowledge, thinking responses, logic and higher-order thinking. The use of cognitive responses was overwhelming in the data, with as many as 32 different cognitive strategies identified in the qualitative analysis. The findings clearly indicate that cognitive responses are teachers' default when approaching CPI. For example, when 'a quarrel started about Arabs working in Israel'. The teacher 'introduced them [the students] to the principle of equality and equal opportunities at work'. Similarly, when a student asked what the teacher would think if he had shot a terrorist, like Elor Azaria, the teacher quickly diverted the question to teaching students about legislation.

### *Emotional responses*

Emotional responses included specific methods that teachers employed to handle CPI using ventilation, containment, validation and identifying emotional states and emotional climate. The issue of emotional ventilation came up a lot in teachers' answers, but the manner in which the teachers discussed it was very different than the way they described their use of cognitive responses in terms of their activity. When discussing their cognitive responses, teachers acted and initiated, whereas in emotional responses, the teachers 'allowed' students to ventilate, they 'spent time' on ventilation, and not always out of their own initiative. In the following quotations we highlighted the segments that demonstrate teachers' passivity: 'during the tension and stabs [the Knife Intifada] *we were asked to talk* about the situation and *allow ventilation*, and it was not easy'; 'When there was a terror attack in the city where the school is located, there was a sense of fear among the students. [...] I held a discussion to *allow for ventilation, hearing opinions and relaxing*'.

Examples of teacher initiative in using emotional responses were rare. Most teachers used passive reactive ventilation responses; only rarely did teachers show a more comprehensive attuned emotional response.

### **Most favourable outcome: Needs are met**

There were few examples where teachers demonstrated their ability to address both the emotional and the educational needs. In one example, the teacher stopped the planned progress of her lesson, and was active in navigating the emotional discussion as well as cognitive responses:

I teach in mixed high school, and one of the Jewish students said after an attack that all Arabs are terrorists and want to kill the Jews (in the presence of Arab students, of course). We stopped the Hebrew lesson short; we talked about fear of the other, fear of terrorism, the fear of being lynched on the bus because you are an Arabic speaker, about Jewish pain and Arab pain.

The teacher quoted next started the discussion with a helpful statement, especially for adolescents. She initiated the discussion, came well prepared with a movie for students to watch, and responded emotionally as well as cognitively:

First, let me start by saying that in this kind of lesson, I start by saying that there are no right or wrong answers. There is a variety of opinions and it is our duty to listen to everyone [...] we talked about soldiers' treatment of the Arabic population at checkpoints. There were a variety of opinions and racist exclamations [...] opinions on humanity and human rights were voiced. We talked about fear-driven hatred, the problems the populations are facing [...]. Finally, the movie *Beaufort* was screened [...]. I allowed everyone to express their views.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this study, we examined the way teachers initiate and respond to discussions of the controversial topic of Jewish–Arab relations in schools in Israel. The findings indicated that most discussions were blatantly initiated by students, and through the teachers' eyes we learned they were motivated by

their need for a responsible adult regulating their emotions and providing them with safety. In reality, though, teachers' default reaction concentrated on pedagogy, and involved cognitive responses and tying their responses to the curriculum. Thus, teachers primarily addressed knowledge and curriculum and neglected SEL contrary to contemporary theories and recommended practices (CASEL 2018a, 2018b).

Throughout the findings, teachers exhibited early stages of SEL skills. When teachers initiated the discussions, addressing the cognitive/educational aspect sometimes indirectly nurtured students' SEL needs. Teachers were found to be skilful in cognitive responses, and especially when they were prepared for the discussion, they felt successful. When approaching SEL directly, however, teachers were passive and their reactions were limited in their scope for the most part. The responses usually amounted to allowing students to ventilate or argue with one another without much teacher mediation or intervention. These findings are congruent with the lack of training in teacher's SEL skills (e.g. Zinsser et al. 2016) and shows that teachers' default reaction when controversial issues arise and evoke emotions, is providing students with data and knowledge.

Alongside promoting SEL in the intrapersonal and interpersonal areas, due to the great differences between cultural, social and religious groups, emphasis must be placed on SEL that also concerns the civil sphere (Center for Knowledge and Research in Education 2020). This learning will promote functioning as responsible and contributing citizens in a multicultural and diverse democratic society based on the values of equality, human dignity and social justice. These include SEL skills related to civic engagement, social sensitivity, caring for the needs of society, belonging, involvement and contribution to the community, ability to deal with situations of ambiguity, values and the ability to make moral decisions (Benbenishty and Friedman 2020; Catalano et al. 2002; Lerner et al. 2003). In the contemporary polarized climate, opportunities for social-emotional discourse in the classroom alongside their inclusion in the curriculum are important to the practice of the required SEL skills (Garret et al. 2020).

This article calls for the integration of these two separate bodies of theory and research: CPI and SEL, and herein lies its major contribution. The psychological contribution to so many fields of knowledge such as economics (Kahneman 2003) and education (Thorndike 1910) has surprisingly passed over the handling of political issues in schools. The political reality is increasingly polarized (Garret et al. 2020) and uses emotional manipulations of all sorts, and the educational literature and research has not caught up yet.

We argue for teacher training that involves emphasis on CPI discussions in general, and teachers' handling of the SEL aspects of CPI discussions in particular. The first stage is for teachers to see past brazen statements into the deep emotional needs that underlie them, and the SEL opportunities that these statements present. Secondly, the appropriate context should be created to help teachers feel that they can discuss harsh topics without suffering the consequences themselves – that there will be genuine back-up by their peers, principal, parents and the broader establishment (CASEL 2018a, 2018b). Thirdly, teachers should come equipped with knowledge regarding the benefits of CPI discussions (e.g. Hess and MacAvoy 2014), with skills to address adolescents' emotional needs and with CPI discussion skills. Finally, teachers' coping with students' social-emotional skills should rely on state-of-the-art literature regarding students' social-emotional learning (e.g.

CASEL 2018a, 2018b), the psychology of adolescence, and the psychology of handling stress.

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