

# The Role of Bibliotherapy in Reduction of Violence in Arab Schools in Israel

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**Abstract** For many societies violence has become a major problem to be immediately dealt with and overcome. Schools, for reasons ranging from their framework, structure, client population and lack of appropriate educational tools suffer from manifestations of this phenomenon no less than other societal institutions and much more than some. This state of affairs leaves teachers, in general, and Arab teachers in Israel in particular, utterly frustrated and in many cases extremely helpless and bewildered. The situation calls for fast intervention in order to find suitable educational solutions for the reality of Arab teachers and Arab schools that function as a minority with its own set of values, standards and distinguishing features within general Israeli society. The objective of this study is to examine the effect of group bibliotherapy on violence among Arab elementary school children in Israeli society. The study hypothesis is that group bibliotherapy diminishes violence among aggressive children. The study sample included 60 pupils from grades one to six in one Arab elementary school in Israel. The results show a decline in the level of violence among aggressive children that went through bibliotherapy, in comparison with aggressive children that did not receive bibliotherapy. Results suggest that school violence can be mitigated significantly by use of appropriate teacher training programs. Lack of such training and the experience it furnishes may encourage a violent and dangerous environment for the pupils. The program furnished teachers with a tool for successful handling of the violence.

**Keywords:** *bibliotherapy, violence, elementary school*

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## 1. Theoretical Background

Violence is considered as one of the phenomena that have heavily preoccupied several societies in the past and present. It has become a major problem that every society must acknowledge, confront and attempt to overcome.

School violence is an issue of the highest priority on the social agendas in Israel and many other countries across the globe. Many have already written about its negative impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of pupils [1], on the pedagogical process in the classroom and the school [2], and on pupils who are not directly involved in the violent events but suffer its negative repercussions [3].

In Israel, as elsewhere, educational systems are trying to grapple with school violence. Nodding suggests the main educational goal should be to prevent pupils' feelings of frustration that cause them to act out violently [4]. Educators and teachers must understand the source of violence and alter the class ambiance that gives rise to the frustrations that engender it.

Researchers point at the school as one of the most crucial forces affecting the intensity and level of violence [5,6]. In light of this claim, the need to initiate educational activities and appropriate programs for training the school staff in handling and preventing violence is obvious. Such interventions exist in educational systems today, relating

to aggressors and victims of school violence as well as to non-involved onlookers, which focus on developing an optimal educational climate calculated to reduce aggression and victimization among pupils. Benbenishty and Astor's study refers to four components of existing intervention programs in schools: evaluation of the dimensions of the violence at the school, planning of work processes, implementation and evaluation of the intervention. They remark up on the limited number of studies that have been conducted in Israel to examine the effectiveness of intervention programs [7].

An individual's behavior is the result of a combination of biological, environmental and cultural factors. The individual behaves in a specific manner due to his being a human being with specific needs surrounded by different environmental and socio-cultural influencing factors that do not always coincide with those needs [8].

Though not new in human history, technological advancement and other forms of progress, besides their many advantages, have created some distinct changes in society, such as the weakening role the family fulfills in the upbringing of its offspring and a decline of the authority of the school. This has led to a rise in violence in society as a whole and particularly among youth [5].

The Arab minority in Israel may be characterized as a developing society undergoing a process of modernization, yet still showing clear signs of conservatism. The basic concepts of conservatism are a high value attached to customs

and traditions; a belief in the irrational nature of mankind; faith in some supernatural force guiding human affairs; acceptance of human inequality and social hierarchy; recognition of the need for a sense of community among individuals [9].

Arab minority desires to go through modernization and up-date itself to suit the general civil society. This puts the individual in a conflicting situation between the values of the conservative past and those of the modern present. This is clearly reflected in schools and leads to an increase in violence [10].

Violence in schools places obstacles before the Arab educational system in Israel, which impede its ability to cope with the challenges of survival in a post-modern, and highly demanding technological society.

This research work will contribute to the enrichment of the theoretical knowledge, and the practical and professional applications accumulated on the subject at hand. School violence is a general concern and the study will contribute to its vanquishing in the Arab education system in particular and the Israeli education system in general.

The school, with its staff and framework, suffers from the violence phenomenon due to a lack of educational tools with which to confront it. This situation gives rise to deep frustration among teachers in general and Arab teachers in Israel in particular, and a sense of inaptitude and helplessness.

The situation obviously calls for fast intervention in order to find suitable educational solutions for the reality of the Arab teachers and Arab schools that operate in a society with a set of values, standards and distinguishing features different than its own.

Violence is defined as a broad expression of different behaviors including "attack" and "hostility". Such behaviors stem from feelings of fear, anger and helplessness, which create a desire on the part of the individual to act out the feelings he suffers under toward others [11,12].

In our context violence is also defined as a behavior that leads to harming others. The outcome might be physical or psychological harm, such as oppression or abuse of authority to coerce others to perform damaging deeds [13,14].

In summary, violence may be defined as the use or the threat to use power in an illegitimate manner in order to inflict harm on other individuals or property.

In psychology, violence has been viewed through multiple theories, each with its own concept of Man and the sources of his tribulations and each with specific approaches to handling him and them. Behaviorists, for whom the immediate vicinity of an individual is the main influence on his behavior, regard violence as a mode of action or manner acquired from the immediate environment.

Some behaviorists attach special significance to the environmental factors that cause the individual to feel helpless, leading him to aggressive reaction [15]. Others lean toward the significance of social learning, where the individual emulates the aggressive behaviors of characters significant for him [16].

In his analytic theory, Freud viewed violence as congenitally motivated; the desire for destruction an inseparable part of life. He also viewed the individual's behavior as a manifestation of two congenital drives - sex and aggression [17].

Freud also pointed to the significant role of early childhood experiences in shaping an individual's behavior. Most psychological conflicts and aggressive behaviors date back to an individual's early life. During this period, the individual's feelings and desires are concealed in the subconscious, but may create more manifest sensations of jealousy and hostility. Later cognition of himself and understanding of the biological and psychological causes of his violent behaviors may help an individual find appropriate therapy [18].

In the theory on the human entity that Rogers has developed, he argues that the formation of his personality depends on the individual's awareness of his immediate and distinct surrounding. Every person is aware of his own reality rather than of an absolute objective one. Rogers introduces some expressions that he has developed in order to understand individual behavior such as "self", "ideal self", "congruity" and "incongruity". He describes how congruity or incongruity may exist between the self and its psychological experience. When congruity exists between what the individual knows about himself and the experience he undergoes he feels calm, psychologically sound and capable of adaptation and integration. But when his thoughts of himself and his experiences are incongruous he feels anxious and stressed, and that is when he may be found to develop unusual behaviors [15].

Congruity between what the individual knows about himself and what he expects in the future reflects congruence between the self and the ideal self. When it exists he feels satisfied and adaptable.

A positive view of his reality makes a person aware of the support, encouragement and acceptance in this reality, which in turn leads him to self-acceptance, increases his positive view of himself and makes him more positive and constructive in dealing with others. But if his experience is that reality rejects and neglects him, he might develop a negative self-view with difficulty to adapt, which leads gradually to violent behaviors toward others.

Adler, founder of the Society for Individual Psychology, points to the impact of a person's first social affiliation group on his present and future behavior. He adds that Man is a being responsible for himself and his essence, and capable of managing his behavior [12]. However, his social environment and social motivations directly affect his behavior. A person, who feels dependent on others or weak for lack of support or encouragement, develops a sense of social and psychological inferiority. This feeling often results in a lifestyle characterized by violence and hostility. This theory adds the effect of the family's socioeconomic status on the personal development of its youth. The excessive negligence and the inferiority feeling that sometimes accrue due to a life of socioeconomic bare survival may lead to difficulties in facing let alone adapting to the environment and to reality.

Adherents of the developmental theory, Erickson consider life as consecutive groups of tasks and activities to be achieved at various life stages, while coming to grips with and overcoming the dilemmas and difficulties they pose. In childhood, for example, an individual develops his sense of confidence and control, where as in adolescence he forms his independent personality including his sexual and psychological identity and personal set of values [19].

Intimate and emotional relationships contribute to a sense of satisfaction, increase self-confidence and help to overcome feelings of weakness, anxiety and despair [20].

To summarize the theories enumerated above, one may say that different theories attempt to explain the specific factors that lead to violent behavior; each according to its own concepts and distinct expressions. Because violence is a complex phenomenon, each of the theories complements the others with valuable explanations, descriptions of its components and proposals for mechanisms to deal with it.

Generally, violence in schools is attributed to three main causes:

1. Violence at school is a mirror image of what goes on in the community. What takes place in the immediate surroundings is reflected, one-way or another, inside the school. According to different studies in schools in Israel [21,22], one may summarize the factors and cases that lead to violence in schools as follows:
  - a. The school is located in a neglected and socially disintegrated area.
  - b. The school is located in an area with widespread crime.
  - c. The school is located in an area that suffers from lack of supervision of activities in different ways.
2. Violence is a result of the experience each student goes through in school. It may be the outcome of the educational policy inside the school. The routine and closed school climate leads to dissatisfaction, frustration and helplessness, which, in turn creates violent behavior among children, who do not adapt to concepts foreign to their desires, tendencies and abilities. In addition, they may well find alienating the teaching methods that do not offer an equal opportunity of achieving to everyone, but rather creates a negative competition, that for many culminates in a sense of failure and helplessness [12,23].
3. Violence is a result of temporary factors, such as sudden events in society or at the school itself, which generate violence among students. For example, a tribal conflict in the village may seep into the school and cause conflict between the children. The social norms of the organizational culture at school have a significant role in violence of this type, its presence and course.

According to the psychological theories, the methods to prevent or grapple with violence are diverse. The behavioral learning method suggests a principle of learning by trial and error through reinforcements and producing protocols for behavior and its improvement. In this method, the individual's behavior is analyzed by identifying its factors and components; afterwards, the causes of the behavior are mapped and gradually treated until a phase of controlling the violence is reached. At the same time, an alternative, positive behavior is offered.

The socio-cognitive method focuses on the social and mental abilities of the individual, which help in decreasing violence, such as relaxation, improving human communication skills and methods of self-control, coaching indecision-making and how to seek alternative solutions for problems.

In the psychoanalytic method, the individual is assisted in discovering himself and acquainting himself with the biological and psychological impetus that led to his violent behavior through direct dialogue, in which the

individual is confronted with the behavior and is aided in explaining it and later in constructing new behavioral models.

Establishing a suitable therapeutic program may positively affect personality improvement and a decline in violent behaviors. Group bibliotherapy may be an effective method in decreasing violence in schools [24,25]. This method is the focus of our study.

Stories have the ability to diagnose inner secrets and feelings and that helps to construct the content of unacknowledged unfinished issues, stored memories and denied feelings in a non-frightening manner. Stories also help in transferring suppressed content matter gradually to the region of the conscious brain, which allays pains and improves problem-solving skills [26]. Stories promote self-esteem among children and help them deal with those of their desires that lean toward violence, jealousy and more. They also help in getting rid of fear and helplessness, developing cognitive abilities and adopting constructive styles of behavior. Through stories, the child finds room to release his instincts and desires; he acquires feelings and impressions that suit his different phases of growth, as stories provide him with characters that suffer from similar problem.

The basic hypothesis that this therapeutic method is founded upon is that human beings suppress difficult psychological emotions in the unconscious brain. The suppression leads to a seemingly unaccountable frustration which is often made manifest in a psychological defensive manner expressed in socially unacceptable behaviors [24,25,27].

As a therapeutic method, bibliotherapy relies upon the sympathy of the reader or listener toward the story characters and events, which causes him to live through them. Then he may be freed of his frustrations and confusions and release the feelings suppressed in his unconscious brain. This, in turn, helps the reader/listener perceive his feelings and deal with them. Stories are considered a source of expression for hidden motives such as competition and control. They also help in developing the child's hobbies and emotions and gear it toward a positive direction.

Coboby considers bibliotherapy a constructive experience for the reader or listeners and a substitute for any deficiency from his early growth stages. Thus it releases the psychological pressure and increases the understanding of others. Bibliotherapy enables the individual to express himself, his feelings and his problems freely, and thus helps him to analyze his attitudes and behaviors and deepen his self-esteem and self-confidence. It also gives him new alternative perceptions of and solutions for his problems. At the same time, it strengthens his values, principles and moral behavior [24].

Reading or listening to stories provides therapeutic experiences and helps confront behaviors frankly and objectively which leads to the adoption of positive reactions [27].

The reader and/or listener pass through the following therapeutic stages:

1. Sympathy: He sympathizes with one or more of the story characters. The sympathy is expressed by rejection or agreement with the story characters and events, which leads to an actual support or rejection of certain behaviors. The reader/listener can express his viewpoint and speak about his

- feelings toward the behaviors of the story characters more openly and freely than about his own.
2. Reflection: The reader/listener aims his accusations at the story characters, including the hero. Indirectly, this leads him to accuse himself. He also speaks about attitudes, concepts and behaviors of the story characters toward other people and surroundings. In this manner he will be talking about himself indirectly, which procreates a reflective thinking.
  3. Outburst of suppressed feelings: When the reader/listener becomes involved in a strong experience of agreeing or disagreeing with certain behaviors of one of the story characters, he pushes his feelings verbally or in other ways into his conscious brain. This, in turn, releases some of his psychological pressure. Sometimes, the reader/listener uses violence toward one of the characters.
  4. Cognition and awareness: In this stage, the reader/listener becomes aware of his feelings, behaviors and thoughts. He also understands his problems and needs to accept with understanding the behaviors of others. He develops the ability to analyze his motives and adopts new principles and values [24,28].

A teacher applying bibliotherapy must observe the following points:

1. Selection of stories suitable to the children's feelings and the difficulties that face them.
2. Helping the children to analyze all story components.
3. Selecting stories that are fit for the children's age. For example, pre-adolescent children like fiction; adolescents lean toward adventures and post-adolescents favor love stories.

The objective of this study is to examine the effect of group bibliotherapy on violence among elementary school children in the Arab society in Israel.

The study hypothesis is that group bibliotherapy leads to the reduction of the level of violence among aggressive children.

## 2. Methodology

The study sample included 60 children from grades one to six in one Arab elementary school in Israel with a pupil body of 557 children. Of the children in the sample, eight were first to third graders and 52 were fourth to sixth graders with a large majority of males (87%).

The class teachers selected the children. Each teacher graded all pupils of his class on the basis of a four-point scale according to the measures of physical and verbal violence. Children who received scores of 3 or 4 were considered for bibliotherapy. We found aggressive children in each class. They were divided randomly into two groups; one represents the cases and the other represents the controls.

The experimental group was broken down into six subgroups by age (N=33). Twelve non-violent children participated in the study within the different subgroups, in order to maintain a heterogeneity in the groups, which is recommended by previous studies [29].

The six therapists are educators from the school. They received comprehensive training during the first semester of the school year 2012/2013. The training focused on the subject of bibliotherapy, its importance, objectives and application to actual cases.

The proposed program includes a selection of literary works and folk stories that were carefully chosen, according to how they reflect problems that provoke, among other things, feelings of fear, helplessness, failure and lack of control. We used one weekly period for each group for the duration of the second semester.

### 2.1. Research Tools

We used two questionnaires - Child Behavior Checklist - CBCL and Teacher Report Form - TRF [30,31]. Each questionnaire consists of 113 questions broken down into eight groups. For the purposes of our study we used only two groups of questions, those that focused on violence and troubling events (18 questions). For example, one of the questions reads: "I tend to enter into physical quarrels". The answer offers three choices: 0 = Never, 1 = Sometimes and 2 = Always. High scores indicate a high level of violence.

The same questions were formulated in the teacher's questionnaire to ask about their opinion of the child, such as: "does the child tend to enter into physical quarrels?" The internal validity of the questionnaires is quite high (Alpha = 0.78).

### 2.2. Study Procedures

The therapists received a three months training during the fall semester of 2013. They learned theoretic material about violence among school children and became familiar with the program and work plan, its objectives, contents and methods of application. At the beginning of the second semester of the same school year, the therapists began applying the program with the different groups. The researcher held one-hour biweekly meetings with the therapists to discuss progress and any matter relevant to the study.

## 3. Preliminary Results

First of all the differences between the experimental and control groups were measured through one-way MANOVA, with both the self-reports and those of the teachers as dependent factors, and the experimental and control groups as independent factors. The results showed no difference between the two groups' multivariate F (2.95=0.07; P>0.05). This indicates that the two groups started with a similar level of violence (Table 1).

**Table 1. Means and standard deviations of violence according to the self-reports and to those of the teachers in the experimental and control groups before and after bibliotherapy**

Groups	Violence					
	According to teachers			According to self-report		
	N	Before Mean (S.D.)	After Mean (S.D.)	N	Before Mean (S.D.)	After Mean (S.D.)
<b>Experimental</b>	33	0.78 (0.58)	0.52 (0.40)	33	0.51 (0.27)	0.41 (0.24)
<b>Control</b>	27	0.82 (0.42)	0.75 (0.45)	27	0.60 (0.31)	0.62 (0.32)

The table shows a decline in the level of violence among the experimental group from 0.78 to 0.52 according to the teachers' reports and from 0.51 to 0.41 according to the self-reports. The control group, on the other hand, exhibited no change.

#### 4. Results Analysis

The study attempted to examine the effect of group bibliotherapy as an organized method for reducing the level of violence among elementary school children in the Arab sector. The results show a decline in the level of violence among aggressive children who underwent bibliotherapy, in comparison with aggressive children who did not receive bibliotherapy.

The results indicate that school violence may be significantly diminished through suitable training programs for teachers. The programs our experiment furnished the teachers with solved the fundamental problems of the school staff that hindered it from suitably handling violence among their pupils. The problems we have tackled were absence of cooperation among the educational staff and absence of suitable training and school frameworks of support for dealing with violence. These lacks cause many teachers to feel helpless in dealing with day-to-day violent events and most of them simply choose to ignore violent pupil behaviors. Lack of training and experience on the part of teachers may give rise to a violent and dangerous environment for the pupils. The program enabled improved handling of pupils' violence by their teachers.

The results are consistent with those from similar studies among groups of older students [32,33].

One month after the conclusion of the study, the researcher returned to the school and met with the principal and teachers in order to discuss the effectiveness of the experiment after the children returned to the normal routine. The principal and teachers noted the benefits of the study to the school in general and confirmed that bibliotherapy has reduced the level of violence among the children and between them and their teachers.

Teachers testified that the success they had experienced during training and practicing what they had learnt renewed their belief in the possibility of a successful fight against violence, especially if the staff stands together. They also opinionated that teachers must assume responsibility for handling the problem of violence by maintaining a network of coordination and sharing among all relevant school personnel, and not out-source it to educational counselors.

The successful coping with school violence by teachers from the same school, trained as bibliotherapists, proves that bibliotherapy's efficacy is not limited to special counselors. This finding becomes even more significant, given the shortage of counselors in the Arab schools.

#### 5. Recommendations

Based on the results of this study and in order to reduce the level of violence in school, the following recommendations are set forth:

- Class teachers are encouraged to use bibliotherapy in their social education classes.
- Continuing education courses in bibliotherapy are strongly recommended for teachers in order to make them the natural alternative to deal with violence.

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