



Research paper

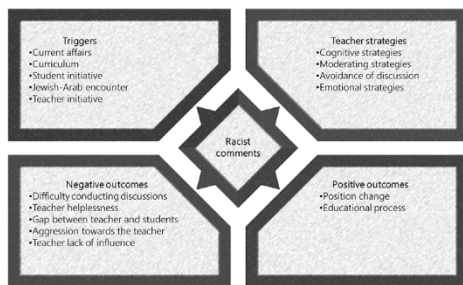
Alone in the forefront: Teachers' precarious position when facing students' racist comments in class

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GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the way teachers in secondary schools in Israel reported their responses in class to racist comments concerning Jewish-Arab relations. Teachers indicated that the majority of comments were within a discourse that students initiated. In reaction, most teachers reported cognitive strategies, followed by moderating strategies and emotional strategies. Teacher reports indicate that they operate without clear guidelines, and without feeling that their responses will be backed up. Teachers worry that the extreme discourse will make them lose control of the classroom, while rarely being aware of the importance and possible benefits of conducting controversial political issues discussions.

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1. Introduction

In October 2017, the Israeli press reported that the Ministry of Education had canceled a strict prohibition on accepting racist responses to questions in the civics matriculation exam (Kashti, 2017). The reporter also cited teachers' reservations regarding the changed guideline, and their incredulity in view of the Ministry's

alleged commitment to fight racism, especially in light of previous State Comptroller's reports (Shapira, 2016). Beyond this specific event, there has been an escalation in the discourse in Israel (Jönsson, 2020), and, on a larger scale, waves of world separatism in many democracies around the globe legitimize discourses that were once seen as racist and inappropriate (Hirschl, 2018; Stanley, 2018). Within this context, teachers are finding it even more difficult to handle controversial political issues¹ in classrooms. In this study, we explore how Jewish teachers in Israel report their

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handling of the particularly sensitive topic of racist remarks against Arabs in the context of the political situation and teachers' role perception.

1.1. Escalation and polarization

The political climate in several democracies around the world is becoming more aggressive in its discourse regarding separatism, nationalism and anti-human rights (Hirschl, 2018). A manifestation of this trend can be found in the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People (Knesset, 2018), a legislation that privileged Jews within Israel, and further increased the alienation between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority in Israel. Similarly, surveys demonstrate growing animosity between Jewish and Arab youth (aChord, 2021). The education system in Israel was also affected by these trends, for example, with the ethnonational discourse affecting the civics curriculum and the goals of Israeli education (Agbaria, 2016). Within this reality, Israeli teachers are required to handle controversial issues that arise in the classroom in general, and issues of Jewish-Arab relations in particular.

1.2. Racism

In its common definition, racism is a negative reference to human beings according to their race or ethnicity, and is illegal in many countries. Israeli law defines racism as persecution, humiliation, slander, hostility ... violence, or causing unrest towards groups or sections of society based on color or affiliation with race or ethnic origin (Penal Law 5737–1977 §144 A). The science that attempts to show biological differences between races has been refuted in various disciplines many years ago (Montagu, 1942; Provine, 1973), yet racism continues to exist as a sociological phenomenon with many negative consequences (Constantine, 2006). Racist comments are one behavioral aspect of racist attitudes which can range from blatant calls to genocide to subtle micro-aggressive comments (Ridley, 1995; Sue et al., 2019).

1.2.1. Education, racism and power relations

Education may be a road to fighting racism, but it can also be a mechanism in the service of the nation state, institutions and power hierarchies (Ficarra, 2017; Freire, 1996). Education can be used to restrict knowledge production and consumption, and to present one-sided sacred stories of how our nation came into existence inhibiting any unpleasant fact that questions our basic perception of ourselves as the “good guys” (Laats, 2015). Nation states, through their education systems, brutally suppress alternative narratives from a basic anxiety to lose power and prestige (Patel, 2016). Through curriculum choices and learning standards, education can be used in the service of repressing the subaltern (Smith, 2012).

1.2.2. Anti-Arab racism in Israeli society

Since the establishment of the Israeli state as a Jewish state, there have been unequal power relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority (Jamal, 2007). There has been a steady increase in anti-Arab racist sentiments among Jews in Israel in the past few decades (aChord, 2021). The end of Rabin's regime (1992–1995) with his murder at the hand of a right-extremist assassin was a significant turning point in Jewish-Arab relations. Since then, Jewish Israelis' political orientation has shifted to the right, the two-state solution has decreased steadily in popularity (O'Malley, 2017), and legitimacy of anti-Arab statements has increased - accentuated by the abovementioned Nation-State Law (Knesset, 2018). Nationality and religion have progressively become more linked to produce a supremacist agenda (Yadgar, 2003; Gindi & Erlich Ron, 2020). Israeli parties justify political claims such as

sovereignty over the Arab population quoting the Old Testament (Cowie & Deckard, 2017), and religious hegemony adds to the diminution of Israel's Arab citizens.

Correspondingly, teachers feel less and less supported in raising political issues (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2018), and when trying to fight racism. In 2020, an Israeli civics teacher was dismissed after he expressed anti-establishment left-wing attitudes, despite his students' appreciation (Yanko, 2020). In January 2021, a principal in an Israeli school wanted to invite left- and right-wing civil organizations to a discussion panel. The Minister of Education opposed the invitation of the left-wing organization, while at the same time remaining silent about a right-wing operative talking to students in a Jerusalem school saying that the Palestinian equivalent of Israeli entrepreneurship was killing Jews (Baruchin, 2021). The implicit message to Israeli teachers is that liberal discourse is discouraged, and anti-Arab comments are not frowned upon.

How Do Teachers React When Racist Statements Come Up?

While the way to handle racist comments *per se* is rarely discussed in the literature, one can draw many conclusions from the pedagogy of CPI. It is noteworthy that in Israeli Ministry of Education Director General Regulations, CPI, as well as discussing racism, is encouraged, but there are no formal guidelines as to how to navigate such discussions. Three leading texts on the topic from which we can learn about the way teachers can handle racist comments are: Noddings and Brooks (2017), Hess and McAvoy (2014), and the EU guidelines regarding handling CPI (Kerr & Huddlestone, 2015). Noddings and Brooks (2017), for example, emphasized the curriculum as a vehicle for raising and discussing controversial issues, and the use of analogies to historical periods (e.g., slavery, holocaust), which is highly applicable to the issue of racism. The EU guidelines, on the other hand, encourage teachers to view classroom discussions as an expression of the democratic essence, and conduct discussions sensitively by applying basic rules for democratic discourse (Kerr & Huddlestone, 2015). They also emphasize the importance of acquiring varied techniques and tools for conducting discussions, and view spontaneous statements and questions as opportunities for meaningful dialogues. Hess and McAvoy (2014) stressed the importance of including evidence (e.g., facts), context (community, school and class culture), and aims (values) in teachers' pedagogy.

The EU Guide to controversial discussions states that one of the challenges in controversial issues is the fear of “over-heating” the debate (Kerr & Huddlestone, 2015). The authors note with concern that student conflict may escalate at any time, undermine teacher authority, and negatively affect teacher-student relationships. This may lead teachers to worry that their professional and personal status may be impinged, that complaints will be filed against them by students or parents and community representatives, and that this will, in extreme cases, lead to public condemnation or dismissal. The authors' mentioning of such catastrophic consequences is highly indicative of teachers' deep concerns, and coincides with the findings of previous research in which teachers avoid CPI (Hawley et al., 2016).

Previous research has also found that the less teachers feel that they are supported, the less they will engage in CPI discussions (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2018). Teachers' role perception is an important factor in their engagement with CPI: the more teachers view civic education as part of their role, the more they will engage in such discussions. On the other hand, given that teachers in Israel value setting boundaries and giving emotional support as part of their role – more than civic education – they may prioritize addressing such needs first (Erlich-Ron & Gindi, 2021; Gindi & Erlich Ron, 2020; Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2018; Gindi, Sagee, & Gilat, 2021).

Teachers' avoidance of CPI has multiple explanations. Parents

generally oppose a diverse political discourse and prefer a uniform political trend (Hess, 2009). The students themselves prefer to maintain their attitudes and avoid exposure to political discourses (King, 2009). Teachers are aware of these attitudes (Tannebaum, 2020) and the governmental agenda of avoiding such discourse. Thus, for example, in a study examining the level of support teachers expect when a complaint regarding a class discussion is filed against them, the highest perceived level of support was from the principal, and the lowest levels of expected support were from the Ministry of Education, followed by parents (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2018).

Racist comments are especially sensitive in the context of CPI discussions as the teachers may wish, on the one hand, to delegitimize them, but on the other hand, protect the principle of freedom of speech. Further complicating matters is the notion that students who raise racist issues in class and are shunned, may continue to voice these opinions in other forums that will accept them. Forums such as these are widely available in 21st century social media. It has therefore been argued that teachers have a duty to address these issues so as to inhibit this compartmentalization of opinions (Wansink et al., 2019).

1.2.3. The Israeli education system

The Israeli education system is predominantly public with four different streams: Jewish secular, Jewish religious, Independent (Ultra-Orthodox) and Arab. This separation coincides with the segregation and power relations in Israeli society (Khattab, 2003). This structure makes encounters between Jewish and Arab students rare and perpetuates or even exacerbates intergroup anxiety (Hager & Jabareen, 2016). The segregation in the Israeli education, and particularly between Arabs and Jews, is a primary contributor to alienation, suspicion, and prejudice that may lead to anti-Arab attitudes (Abu-Saad, 2004).

1.2.4. Handling racism in the Israeli education system

Based on the principles of the Israeli Declaration of Independence and the researched benefits of controversial debates, the Israeli Ministry of Education adopted a policy that encourages discussions: "It is important for the teacher to raise questions on the public agenda for discussion, and encourage class discussions on controversial topics. This kind of discussion promotes tolerance, dialogue, and in-depth thinking, which are the goals of state education." (Ministry of Education, 2016, regulation abstract). Nonetheless, attitudes toward political education are complicated. A study of political education attitudes among a representative sample of 501 graduates, 170 students, and 100 high school teachers found a general opposition to holding political discussions in class, especially on equal opportunities for Arabs, Israeli Defense Force morality in the occupied territories, and expansion of settlements (Gindi, Sagee, & Gilat, 2021, Erlich-Ron & Gindi, 2021). In addition, the degree of confidence in teachers' ability to engage in CPI discussions was low, with only 25% of students and 18% of adults trusting teachers on this topic, while only 36% of teachers themselves expressed such confidence.

The Israeli Ministry of Education has published several Director General Regulations specifically regarding racism. In one such regulation, it is emphasized that during the week of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination "schools are invited to spend 2 h dealing with the issue of fighting racism and

discrimination of all kinds", and it is further noted that "Because of its great importance, it is recommended to engage in it throughout the school year" (Ministry of Education, 2018 Section 9.1.1). In 2016, the State Comptroller of Israel² reported that over the years, the Ministry of Education had not taken the necessary steps to create an organizational, pedagogical, operational and budgetary infrastructure to promote education for shared life and prevention of racism (Shapira, 2016). Wolff (2020) also noted that the Israeli education system ignores one of the most significant achievements of modern times and an important educational tool for racism: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

2. Method

Data used for the study were taken from a larger study that reached out to approximately 60,000 Jewish and Arab high school teachers across Israel, of all disciplines and all educational streams (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2018). 1625 teachers answered an online questionnaire, which was predominantly quantitative. The questionnaire 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". 387 valid responses were received from Jewish teachers to this question. This excluded all answers that were a single word (e.g., yes/no) and all comments by Arab teachers that are not the focus of this paper but have been published elsewhere (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2019). From the pool of responses, we focus in this paper on Jewish teachers' handling of racist statements towards Arabs made by students in the classroom. The statements were general and did not distinguish between the Palestinian citizens of Israel, Palestinians from the Occupied Territories, or citizens of other Arab countries. The issue of racism came up in 158 teacher responses to the open-ended questions, with 116 of them reporting the use of the racial phrase "death to Arabs" in various forms.

The responses were uploaded to a qualitative analysis software (Atlas.ti, version 7.5.6.) and analyzed thematically in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2016) guidelines. Since the responses were relatively brief, the unit of analysis was the full response by the teacher. The analysis was performed according to Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step model, which includes 1) familiarity with the data, 2) creation of primary codes, 3) creation of key themes, 4) recursive review of the themes, 5) providing definitions and names for themes, and finally (6) writing the report. About 20% of the data was analyzed 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 (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

The authors are Jewish scholars in the fields of psychology and sociology of education, as well as having vast experience as a high school teacher and as teacher trainers. When analyzing the data, the authors made every effort to remain loyal to the spirit of the text, and be as reflective as possible regarding their own biases. In the data analysis, it was also noted that the data were teachers' self-reported events, and not a fully reliable source for what actually occurs in a given interaction. The authors bore in mind that the students' perspective was missing, and that the data were reported only from the teachers' perspective.

2.1. Participants

The respondents' mean age was 45.2 (SD = 11.3), and they had a mean of 16.2 teaching years (SD = 10.1), which means that they were a fairly mature and experienced sample. Table 1 presents the other sample characteristics, which demonstrate that approximately two thirds (63.8%) of the sample were women, and most

² The State Comptroller is the central institution in Israel for state auditing. The State Comptroller conducts an external audit of the actions of the various State Administration and public bodies, in order to ensure supervision of public funds and accountability.

Table 1
Sample characteristics (N = 158).

Gender	
Men	57 (36.2)
Women	101 (63.8)
Education	
High school	3 (2.0)
Bachelor's	61 (38.6)
Master's	90 (56.9)
PhD	4 (2.6)
Educational stream	
State -secular	105 (66.9)
State- religious	25 (15.8)
Rural	20 (12.9)
Independent (ultra-orthodox)	7 (4.4)
District	
Central	36 (23.0)
Tel Aviv	31 (19.9)
Jerusalem	30 (18.9)
Northern	22 (14.2)
Southern	18 (11.6)
Haifa	20 (12.4)
Discipline	
Social sciences	40 (25.1)
Languages	24 (15.5)
Technological	5 (3.4)
Humanities	45 (28.2)
Arts	3 (2.1)
Sciences	19 (12.1)
Physical Education	8 (4.9)
Other	14 (8.8)
Homeroom teacher	
Yes	89 (56.4)
No	69 (43.6)

(56.9%) had a Master's degree or a PhD (2.6%). The distribution in the different districts and educational streams is on par with the general distribution in Jewish Israeli society.

3. Results

Fig. 1 presents the main themes that were conceptualized in the

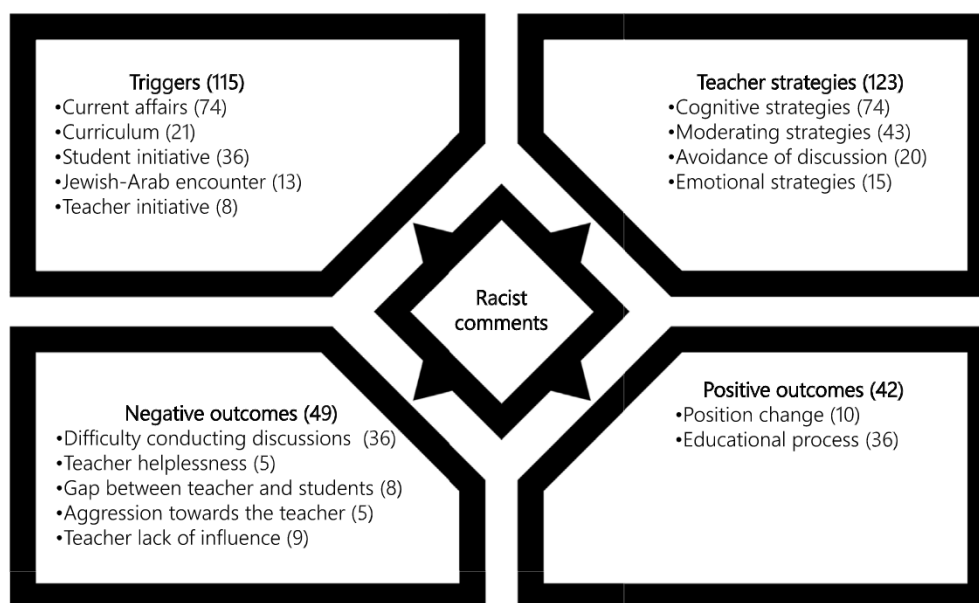


Fig. 1. Themes emerging from the thematic analysis.

qualitative analysis alongside the frequency with which each theme was observed.

3.1. Factors leading to racist comments

In examining the motivating factors that led to the racist statement, five key themes were conceptualized: 1) current affairs, 2) student initiative, 3) curriculum, 4) Jewish-Arab encounter, and 5) teacher initiative. Current affairs related to racist comments that were triggered by news or social media items that students were preoccupied with. The next subtheme referred to cases in which teachers perceived the students as initiating unprovoked racist comments. The curriculum subtheme related to incidents in which the racist comments were in response to teaching materials. The fourth subtheme characterized racist comments that were in response to or in preparation for Jewish-Arab encounters. Finally, the fifth subtheme referred to racist statements in response to teachers' initiating controversial political discussions. All themes were coded based on teachers' recollections of events, and not by direct observation of classroom activities.

In addition, there were teachers who described the racist statements in general, and therefore no motive for discussion could be found. For example, a teacher who replied succinctly: "Death to Arabs, a class discussion was held using examples that calmed things down". Another teacher had difficulty remembering a specific event: "I have no event (to report), but I have students with a negative built-in reflex for the word 'Arab', which requires preparation, an immediate and consistent set of responses to allow for a discussion atmosphere in class". It therefore seems that teachers mostly respond to unexpected racist statements. Most racial statements occur spontaneously in the classroom, usually due to external factors and not the content of the lesson or teacher initiative.

3.1.1. Current affairs

The analysis of teachers' reports demonstrates that quantitatively, the main trigger for racist statements was topical events, such as terrorist attacks, war times and Israeli Defense Force

conduct in the Occupied Territories. The questionnaire was administered in September 2016, and two (then) current events that directly arose were the murder of the Dawabsha family³ (7 references) and the trial of soldier Elor Azaria⁴ (18 references). These triggers are indicative of the education system's permeability, and the futility in trying to prevent discussions on controversial issues. Some of the racist statements were general and sweeping, while others referred to specific people. On the one hand, alienation allows students to utter unashamed general racist statements. On the other hand, the willingness to hurt or justify harm to innocents is equally disturbing. These challenging student statements may represent their confusion in this emotionally loaded and highly complex conflict.

Some teachers recalled that anger and extreme racist statements were generally more common following terror attacks, for example: "Especially after terrorist attacks etc., there are racist statements"; "A day of a terror attack is followed by racist statements in the classroom." Talking about the perpetrators is often a leap to harsh and blunt statements about Arabs as a whole: "The Elor Azaria affair brought to the surface very difficult attitudes toward Arabs in the classroom, including very harsh racist expressions. There was great difficulty in understanding the soldier's moral failure."

Another example of the way current affairs infiltrate into the classroom can be found in reference to a specific attack that took place in the Sarona center in Tel Aviv⁵: "After the Sarona attack, there was rioting. 'Arabs should be killed' was on many students' lips." Terrorist acts often led students to racist comments that teachers repeatedly tried to counter by explaining the differences between the acts of few and the general qualities of an ethnic group or race, as in the following example:

When the Knife Intifada⁶ began ... I explained that notorious slogans like 'death to Arabs' also include those students who sit with us, and that makes no sense. In addition, I had to explain that the perpetrators, terrorists, are a minority within Arab society.

We argue that students are preoccupied with the events that take place outside of school. When schools try to be neutral and maintain their routine, students express their need by addressing current affairs in different ways. This ties into the next theme - student initiative.

3.1.2. Student initiative

Student initiative was the second most prevalent factor mentioned to trigger racial statements. Students raised the topic in various ways, such as flagrant expressions, interjections, shouts during breaks, or writing on the blackboard. For example, a teacher referred to how a student defined a person according to their origin, and used the opportunity to teach about racist speech:

When one of the students announced at the beginning of the lesson that: "The Arab did not clean up properly today", I

conducted a discussion that lasted the whole duration of the class about different ways of expression: "the cleaning person", "the worker", but by no means being racist!

In the next quotation, beyond the racist comments, violence was also directed at a student who held a different opinion: "Right-wing high school students expressed racist and violent attitudes toward Arabs and attacked a student who expressed a less extreme position. I stopped the escalation and opened a rational discussion of the positions presented." Some teachers also mentioned positive student initiatives that led to different opinions being expressed, including extreme opinions:

The student council organized a joint activity with an Arab school that included holding hands (a human chain) of Jewish and Arab students. The subject sparked a sharp discussion in my class - both about the event and the holding of hands. There were a variety of opinions, some extreme.

In conclusion, seeing that students initiate many of the CPI discussions and racist comments, a structured policy for the way such comments are treated is required, and teachers should be ready and well-equipped to address spontaneous remarks and interjections.

3.1.3. Curriculum

Certain aspects of the curriculum incite political reactions, for example, the curriculum in history, civics and social sciences related to Jewish-Arab relations: "In the discussion of social rights, the question arose as to who are entitled - whether foreigners or Arabs too ... A student claimed that the Arabs are not civilians, and that they were all murderers". The curriculum also raised racial discussions and statements in subjects such as literature and science, providing evidence of the students' need to discuss these topics in different contexts. In the following example, when teaching a Zionist poem about the meaning of land and life, racist comments were heard. The teacher reported to have preferred to silence the students rather than start a discussion:

One of the students said something about all the Arabs having to die, and I cut him off. Another student said the poem reminds him of the incident where the three boys were kidnapped and then one of the Jews burned "a gay Arab",⁷ I stopped him too and returned to the topic of values, but it was hard to hear that they were so loaded.

The example this next teacher gave of a science class where a student presented her racist attitudes to her Arab friends in the mixed class is particularly brazen: "During a biology class (on the subject of evolution) ... a student chose to say that 'all Arabs are monkeys' ... she insisted on generalizing although there are members of the class who are Muslim or Christian ... A heated discussion ensued."

3.1.4. Jewish-Arab encounter

There were a number of examples where encounters between Jews and Arabs sparked a class discussion and racist statements. For example, one teacher described a meeting between Jewish and Arab students: "Students yelled racist comments at students from

³ This refers to the Duma village arson attack by Jews in July 2015, which resulted in the loss of life of three Palestinian family members; 18-month-old Ali Dawabshah and his parents.

⁴ Elor Azaria is an Israeli Jewish soldier who was tried and convicted in a military court for shooting Abdel Fattah al-Sharif, a Palestinian assailant who had stabbed an Israeli soldier, after the latter was disabled and laid motionless on the ground. The trial sparked a fierce widespread public debate in Israel.

⁵ The Sarona market center June 2016 Tel Aviv shooting was a terrorist attack, in which two Palestinian gunmen opened fire on patrons of a café, killing four people and injuring seven others.

⁶ The 2015–16 wave of violence in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

⁷ On 12 June 2014, three Israeli Jewish teenagers, Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar, and Naftali Frankel were kidnapped and murdered. Following this event, Jewish terrorists kidnapped and murdered Mohammed Abu Khdeir early on the morning of 2 July 2014.

an Arab school. We then had a conversation about the meaning and relevance of these statements.” In another case, the presence of an Arab bus driver on a school trip provoked racism among the students: “The driver was an Arab and received a suspicious, not to say offensive, attitude. A discussion developed in which I helped the students to see him as a person.” There was also a case when a discussion began following an encounter outside the school: “Students ... were in the park and there were also Arabs ... some of the students ... made racist statements, that they are all terrorists and could not be trusted.”

The theme may be unique to Israel given its geographical and educational segregated nature (Khattab, 2003). Considering that most students rarely meet Arabs, especially on equal terms, these encounters often elicit fear and prejudice.

3.1.5. Teacher initiative

Teachers rarely reported to have initiated the discussions that led to racist statements. This following quote from an English teacher was the exception rather than the rule:

I teach the poem “As I Grew Older”⁸ in English Literature ... I referred the discussion to the racist and discriminatory attitude towards some Israeli Arabs and Ethiopians ... After some clichéd racist statements such as “you have to kill them”, I said that every student was allowed to express his opinion on the condition that he justifies it and uses facts not slogans.

In the following example, too, the teacher’s initiative was above and beyond the formal requirements of her role, in which case racist statements did not emerge, but a discourse on racism developed:

I was one of the leaders of a trip in Israel that offered an alternative to Poland,⁹ and dealt with questions of Jewish identity through encounters with local people near our town. The most significant day was when the students met Arab youths and discussed identity issues with them.

To summarize the factors that led to racist statements, it is evident that most of the factors are external to the school and arise from current events, random encounters between Jews and Arabs or student initiative. A lower proportion of the discussions arise due to the content of the lesson. Finally, only a minor part of the racist statements is raised following teacher initiatives that include debating controversial issues.

3.2. Teacher strategies

The racist comments placed teachers in a charged situation. In analyzing their reported responses, one has to bear in mind not only the class situation and pedagogy, but also teachers’ position within the system and within society. Thus, when we relate to teacher strategies, we look at the way that these teachers remember they handled class situations, and the way that they choose to present them. We do not necessarily treat these reports as actual teacher actions, but remembered incidents that may be skewed by their memory, their role perception, social desirability, and even their sense of self.

In the qualitative analysis of strategies used by teachers for handling racist comments in class, 15 different strategies were

identified, which were grouped into four themes: 1) cognitive strategies – where teachers’ response to the situation is recollected as appealing to the students’ rationale, adding knowledge and information, making distinctions and connecting the issues to abstract principles and the curriculum; 2), emotional strategies – which included mainly allowing students to ventilate and teachers’ acceptance of students’ emotions; 3) moderating strategies – which were aimed at calming students and helping them see issues in a more balanced manner; and 4) avoidance of discussion – where teachers used different ways to circumvent discussions.

3.2.1. Cognitive strategies

In this theme, teachers recollected dealing with racist comments on a cognitive level. Most commonly, teachers reported to have moved the discussion to the level of values. In the following example, the constitutional foundations of the State of Israel are used in response to a racist statement: “One of the students burst into racist statements such as “Death to Arabs”. Together we discussed the Declaration of Independence. What is an Israeli citizen? And why we, as an Israeli society, are committed to the rule-of-law.” Teachers used different strategies together, as in the following quotation, where the teacher elicited values such as freedom of speech:

I tacked an article on the message board in class ... Reading the title of the article ... has already caused a verbal backlash ... Reading the article led to a minority-majority clash. I allowed everyone to scream [ventilate], then calmed them down and analyzed all the steps from ... the newspaper’s name, the newspaper’s role, freedom of expression, the culture of discourse.

Another cognitive strategy was coded specifying vs. generalizing, and comprised attempts by teachers to dismantle generalizations and present students with a complex picture, such as the teacher in the following quote: “A student said he wanted to enlist in the Border Police to kill an Arab ... It was important for me to point out the racism in his statement ... (to point out) its generalization.” Another strategy used by teachers was to provide concrete examples to deal with racist statements. Through this strategy, teachers seek to give faces and names to racist generalizations, and allow students to deal with them. Some teachers used well-known public figures, while others, like the teacher in the following quote, used familiar figures from school life:

I found the inscription: “Death to the Arabs” on the board ... I asked if it included Nadia, an Arab student in their cohort. Many were shocked by the idea. I mentioned some of the school’s maintenance workers by name and asked if they should be killed. Many of the students said no ... they said they believed these people did not want to harm them. I asked: If so - does the class agree with this overall slogan? And many students said no.

Some teachers used analogies to other historical periods, and especially to the Holocaust, as in the following example:

Students in the 10th grade began to mock “Allahu Akbar” calls and to sing racist songs ... I said that I myself am a second-generation Holocaust survivor, and there is something about racism that personally hurts me, any kind of racism ... The students were a little shocked ... they explained that they had never linked their feelings against Arabs to racism against Jews during the Holocaust.

⁸ As I Grew Older – a poem by Langston Hughes (1932).

⁹ Jewish Israeli students in the 11th grade travel to Poland to learn about the Holocaust.

3.2.2. Moderating strategies

Teachers see de-escalation as part of their role, with 43 mentions of moderating strategies. The most common strategy reported to have been used by teachers was to raise diverse and balanced opinions. For example, in the following case where students became upset during class: “The students ... Dealt with throwing stones at them on the tram. There was a lot of fear and anger. I tried to give more room for balanced opinions and to protest against extreme opinions”.

Another moderating strategy reported by teachers was the introduction of democratic debate rules that allow different opinions while the teacher acts as gatekeeper. Unlike using discipline to evade a meaningful debate, a strategy that will be introduced later, the goal of presenting the rules for discussion is to create a democratic discourse, as in the following example:

In a geography class on the borders of Israel, we talked about the Green Line¹⁰ ... Many opinions were raised ... including those of students living beyond the Green Line, and there was a rant on both sides of the barricade. I moderated the argument so that it would be civilized and that everyone would hear the other.

3.2.3. Emotional strategies

Teachers define the emotional aspect as a significant part of their role perception (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2018). Nevertheless, quantitatively, in response to racial statements, this strategy seems to be less frequently reported (15 mentions). Teachers may be less empathetic to angry and revengeful statements, and in instances where this strategy was used, teachers usually addressed feelings of fear and sadness that underlie racist statements. The math teacher in the following example recollected allowing for ventilation after a terrorist attack:

When there was a bombing in the city where the school was located, there was a sense of fear among the students in managing their daily routine (bus travel, walking outside in the evening). I held a discussion to allow ventilation, to hear attitudes and to calm down.

Finally, there were teachers who recollected responding to racist statements by understanding the underlying fears and reducing students' concerns, as, for instance, in the following description of the integration of an Arab teacher trainee wearing a *hijab* into the classroom:

One [student] even said he was afraid she [the Arab teacher trainee] might be a terrorist and could hurt him. I let the student speak, but I responded clearly that a lot of Arab trainees are studying in our area, and Muslim Arabs live in the vicinity of the school, so he has nothing to fear.

3.2.4. Avoidance of discussion

Some teachers (15 mentions) recollected avoiding the discussion altogether, several of them turning to disciplinary actions to avoid conducting discussions. There seem to be different motivations for implementing this strategy: some related that there are limits to democracy and such statements should not be allowed for moral reasons. Others, such as the following teacher, recalled fear of losing control of the class: “In a 12th grade conversation, hard

¹⁰ The line separating Israel and its occupied territories that comprise the Palestinian authority.

statements from both right and left sides came up and I had to interrupt the discussion because the feelings were too hot”. Yet others use discipline as an excuse for cutting off such unpleasant discussions, as in the following example that shows how some teachers stiffen their attitudes, resort to outdated practices, and do not take the opportunity for in-depth processes:

In a debate, one of my students expressed extreme opinions against Arabs including racist chants. I sent him to rinse his mouth with water, and then made it clear to the whole class that I would not agree to hear such opinions in my class.

Subject teachers who are not homeroom teachers, do not generally see discussions on controversial issues as part of their role (Tannebaum, 2020), and use different excuses to avoid dealing with racist comments, such as: “There was an event and only the homeroom teachers dealt with it in their classrooms”, or “Unfortunately, I do not always have the necessary mental strength to do this, and in such cases I avoid raising the issue. If the topic is raised by the students, I do not run away and I cope, but against my will.”

Some teachers refrain from dealing with racist statements by referring to some senior staff member, like a coordinator or a counselor:

When the family from Duma¹¹ was burned, I was horrified ... I talked to the students about it, and they started making statements like “he deserves it”, “Death to the Arabs.” I was shocked ... I was not prepared for the discussion, so I cut the discussion short, contacted the social coordinator and the counselor.

Finally, there were teachers who did not respond in real time to the comments and found themselves in the role of “spectators” in the classroom without leading the discussion, as the following teacher sincerely demonstrates:

It was an event where I was not coping ... One of the students saw on his cellphone that there had been a stabbing incident in Jerusalem, and a group of students began chanting “Death to Arabs” and “Holocaust to Arabs.” I couldn't control the event ... I wasn't happy with my response.

To sum up the strategies theme, teachers recalled reacting to racist statements in different ways: A few avoided conducting discussions, and there were those who saw racist comments as an educational opportunity. Most reported to have used cognitive strategies, while others emphasized de-escalation or emotional venting. Teachers do not report the use of any manual or guidelines when they come across racist statements and seem to use intuitive strategies, depending on their personal style and worldview.

3.3. Discussion outcomes

Following racist statements, teachers described what they perceived to be positive (42 mentions) or negative (49 mentions) outcomes. The two main positive outcomes were either students becoming more tolerant, or being able to conduct a democratic discourse in class when different opinions were heard. The main negative outcome that teachers perceived was their difficulty to conduct discussions, and their feelings of helplessness and lack of influence.

¹¹ This refers to the Duma village arson attack by Jews in July 2015, which resulted in the loss of life of three Palestinian family members; 18-month-old Ali Dawabshah and his parents.

3.3.1. Positive outcomes

Teachers remembered varied educational processes following racist statements. Some focused on a specific student, for example: “a student began to chant ‘death to the Arabs’. He was removed from the discussion, and at the end of the process he was involved in, he gave a class on the meaning of his chant.” In other cases, class processes allowed a more respectful and mutual discourse, as in the following example:

While discussing the topic of the 9/11 terrorist attacks ... students said they wanted no contact with Arabs because they are terrorists ... but also other comments that not all Arabs are terrorists, and that most of them want to live just as peacefully as we do ... of course we couldn't reach an agreement, but there was a discourse in which the students listened to each other, responding well to comments they objected to.

Similarly, we quoted a teacher above, who, following racist statements that included support for Meir Kahane¹²'s views, began a year-long process with her class, at the end of which she reported the student learned to “respect others' opinions.”

3.3.2. Negative outcomes

In many cases, the teachers expressed a sense of helplessness and difficulty in controlling discussions. For example, the teacher felt that a discussion was impossible to conduct: “In a conversation about a terrorist attack ... students chanted “Death to Arabs”, they were upset to hot-headed. No other opinions could be expressed.” Another teacher described a similar difficulty in managing the heated atmosphere created in class:

Following the wave of knife attacks ... there were very racist statements toward the Arab population in class ... “They have to be killed”, “If I see Arabs, I'll stab them,” ... as a teacher, it was very difficult to calm the nervous classroom.

Some teachers talked about their helplessness. The next teacher, who heard racist statements during recess, was unsure how to approach the situation: “Unfortunately, I did not intervene in the discussion ... I was in the first month of teaching and had no idea whether and how to intervene.” The following special education teacher reported feeling helpless, and turning to an emotional venting strategy: “The subject of Jews-Arabs is loaded, always accompanied by racial chants ... As a teacher, (I) do not have much in the way of balancing or discussing ... (I am) quite helpless, and only allow emotional ventilation for the students' anxieties.”

It seems that some of the difficulty teachers are having stems from the students' growing extremism. The disparity between teachers' more moderate attitudes and students' extreme attitudes makes it difficult to conduct discussions, and often leads to student hostility toward their teachers, for example, using derisive nicknames:

Students said all Muslims should be killed. I mentioned that there are about a billion and a half Muslims in the world, including babies and young children. Since then, and for a long time, children have been shouting “billion and a half” at me in the school's corridors.

In the case quoted below, the teacher did not agree to express racist views, and was categorized as “leftist” in a derisive manner:

Two students came into the classroom chanting “Death to Arabs” and asked if I hated Arabs. I said I didn't hate people for their origin, and they started yelling at me that I was a leftist teacher who shouldn't teach at school. From that day, they organized a group of students who chanted against Arabs and against leftists in the hall as I passed. Another student came into the classroom where I was teaching and asked: “You're the leftist teacher?”, raised a middle finger and exclaimed, “I hate Arabs and leftists.”

Some of the negative outcomes teachers referred to were that, from their point of view, the discussions did not cause any change in the students, as the following teacher wrote in his reply: “ ... Unfortunately, I do not think that there is a change in attitudes, facts cannot make a change among the youth”. It is important to note that a teacher may not know if there has been a change in racist attitudes, but the statement reflects despair.

To summarize the teachers' perception of the outcomes, positive outcomes included students becoming more tolerant, enhancing a democratic atmosphere in class, and specific students undergoing educational processes. The negative outcomes included teachers' sense of helplessness in both controlling discussions and not achieving their desired attitude change. Nevertheless, as we will argue in the discussion, teachers' reactions remain important for students and for the development of their civic consciousness and democratic skills.

4. Study limitations

The study relies on teacher self-reports of racist incidents in their classrooms. These are not actual teacher actions, but remembered incidents that may be skewed for different reasons. Nonetheless, the picture that emerged from teachers' recollections is so bleak, with teachers reporting their helplessness, negative outcomes and avoidance of discussions so often, that it reduces the concern of social desirability biasing their reports.

5. Discussion

The study presents an alarming picture of explicit racism among Israeli youth, which is in line with the radicalization and polarization processes that are manifested in leading democratic countries, including Israel (Hirschl, 2018; Stanley, 2018). The amount and nature of the quotes paint a picture of aggressive and blatant classroom discourses that causes many teachers to feel embarrassed, and fear losing control of the classroom. Teachers report that these remarks usually respond to events outside the school, when one of the most prominent triggers is students' spontaneous statements on current events such as terrorist attacks. There is a gap between the students' concerns about events in the public sphere and the humdrum routine of schools. Given students' pre-occupation with the political world outside the school, policy makers and teachers should consider being duty-bound to conduct CPI discussions, alongside their obligation to the curriculum and to spreading content.

The focus of the study is the way teachers recollected dealing with racist remarks. We find it important to display a vivid, rich description of teachers' experience in this regard. We analyze these phenomena on two levels: the political roots and the educational experience. On the political level, the Ministry of Education is an extension of the nation-state that suppresses critical narratives, and teachers are “public servants”, weary of standing up to racist statements inspired by populist leaders. This political trend stands in opposition to the wide consensus regarding the benefits of

¹² A right-wing ultra-nationalist politician who served one term in Israel's Knesset, but whose party was banned from participating in the 1994 elections.

discussing CPI in class. The political and pedagogical can be seen as two forces operating in opposite directions, with the first inhibiting discussions and the latter promoting them. Thus, we analyze teachers' recollections of the way they handled these charged situations through the prism of their role perception and the educational strategy that they reported.

From a political perspective, it may well be that teachers see the Ministry of Education as part of the problem rather than part of the solution (Patel, 2016). Reinforcing this argument is the complete absence of school management and the Ministry of Education in the teachers' descriptions. None of the 158 teachers who answered our question mentioned a supervisor's or principal's involvement, referred to Director General Regulations, or contacted a consulting functionary for assistance. This finding should also be understood within the context of teachers' lack of trust in the Ministry (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2018), and the messages teachers have been receiving from the Israeli Ministers of Education against liberal discourse and turning a blind eye toward anti-Arab statements (Baruchin, 2021). Teachers are unwillingly recruited to a wider political goal whereby the nation-state restricts criticism and suppresses the subaltern (Laats, 2015; Ficarra, 2017).

One can say that teachers' reported use of cognitive strategies when dealing with racist remarks is congruent with Hess and McAvoy (2014); that the laying out of democratic rules of discourse is according to the recommendations made by the EU guidelines on teaching controversial issues (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015); and that the way teachers tie discussions to the curriculum and make historical analogies fits Noddings and Brooks' (2017) recommendations. But while this is all true, the teachers do not seem to draw their knowledge from these sources nor any other organized system of knowledge or guidance. The teachers' reports rely on their previous skill set and experience.

The findings point to the need for teacher education to guide teachers systematically in conducting CPI discussions, expand their skills and help them feel confident in responding to spontaneous comments by students. The onus on teacher education is to teach the skills and provide role models (e.g., teacher educators) who would exemplify them. Future research would do well to study the effectiveness of new CPI teaching methods including simulation exercises and observations of experienced teachers.

Teachers' loneliness in the face of students' racist statements was palpable throughout their quotes. They handled racist statements mostly based on their intuitions and default skills. A small proportion of teachers avoided discussions, and only a smaller number used emotional strategies such as emotional ventilation – a surprising finding given that teachers in Israel see much of their role in emotional support (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2018). It may be that teachers do not see racist remarks as a legitimate expression of emotion, and therefore do not see their role in containing these feelings. We would argue that addressing the emotional aspects that underlie racist statements are an important part of teachers' role, and that it connects to the importance of social-emotional learning in schools (Gindi, Sagee, & Gilat, 2021, Erlich-Ron & Gindi, 2021).

Teachers reported a similar rate of positive and negative outcomes following racist statements by students. It is important to note that it is the teachers' subjective perception of positive or negative results. Teachers often stated that the result was positive or negative based on attitude change or withdrawal from extreme positions, in contrast to most professional literature that considers discussion and multiple voices as a democratic achievement, regardless of the outcome of the discussion (Hess, 2009). Several teachers reported that their coping with racist statements led to aggression against them—another finding indicating the importance of addressing the issue in a structured rather than reactive way.

In conclusion, attempts to keep schools neutral from political influences are a disguise for preventing alternative narratives from entering the discourse, mainly out of the majority's anxiety to lose power and prestige, in line with Freire's (1996) suggestion that critical and question-pausing education is subversive to the oppressor. Moreover, these attempts fail, and teachers find themselves confronting adolescents' powerful feelings without either epistemological or pedagogical tools. Teachers often avoid the discussions altogether, missing the opportunity for Freire's (1996) recommended emancipatory dialogue.

The Jewish-Arab conflict is ongoing, and students require teachers to systematically mediate it for them. All the while, schools bury their heads in the sand, students raise the issue, and teachers lack the tools to respond, and often feel helpless. Teacher responses indicate a significant gap in their knowledge and skills on CPI in general and dealing with racist statements in particular. Disregard and lack of training leave teachers alone and without the proper tools for coping and influencing the polarization and radicalization trend. It is of great importance to train teachers to deal with controversial issues in general and racism in particular, as well as a proactive approach to the education system in which political content will be proactively raised rather than in response to student provocations.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103685>.

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