



Teaching in conflict settings: Dimensions of subjective wellbeing in Arab teachers living in Israel and Palestine



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Subjective wellbeing
Political violence
Human insecurity
Cultural differences
Mixed-method

ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to identify domains of wellbeing that are salient to Palestinian teachers in West Bank, Gaza Strip and Israel. We set out to identify the social and environmental factors that influence the ecological wellbeing of teachers working in environments characterized by high levels of conflict and social exclusion. Sixteen focus group discussions were conducted with 104 teachers and interviews were administered to 36 key informants. Thematic content analysis was applied to the data using a combination of bottom-up and top-down methodologies. Seventeen distinct themes concerning teachers' wellbeing emerged. Implication for practitioners and directions for future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Palestinian teachers in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) – West Bank and Gaza Strip – are exposed to continuous risk, due to ongoing military occupation and political violence (Makkawi, 2015); Palestinian teachers resident in Israel, part of the small percentage of Palestinians who escaped dispossession and displacement in the war of 1948 (the Palestinian *nakbah*), operate in a context of social, economic, and educational disadvantage (Ghanem, 2001; Rajuan and Bekerman, 2011; Veronese et al., 2011). The conflict settings in which these teachers operate have implications for their subjective wellbeing, that is to say, for how they cognitively and affectively evaluate their lives, across different existential domains and dimensions (psychological, economic, environmental, spiritual, etc.), and from the individual level to a broader community level (Crocker et al., 2015; Diener et al., 1997).

Nonetheless, because the geographical and socio-political jeopardization of Palestinian territory has led traditional resources (e.g., land, water) to lose much of their occupational and stratificational power (Mazawi, 1994), education – as an unalienable right – has become a crucial social resource. The educational sector has therefore seen rapid expansion since the twentieth century, when teachers became the largest occupational group among Palestinians (Brand, 1988). Teaching is a key source of subjective wellbeing for Palestinians, both in terms of social recognition and in terms of the strategic role that teachers can play as situated actors in the civil struggle against colonizing forms of power. Indeed, the process of recovering from political

violence is not only individual, but also a collective process centered on the reestablishment of community functioning and social and political action (Ager et al., 2005; Sousa & Marshall, 2017; Summerfield, 1999). In the disrupted conditions prevailing in conflict scenarios, the subjective wellbeing of teachers is affected by a range of individual and contextual factors (Veronese, 2013). We therefore advocate a “holistic” approach that explores teachers' wellbeing across multiple domains and dimensions (Veronese et al., 2016; Williamson and Robinson, 2006).

Teachers in conflict areas are not only at risk of poverty, but also have to deal with the consequences of the conflict in their own lives. In addition, schools can lack resources, disrupting the educational life of both teachers and students (Winthrop and Kirk, 2005). Teachers in such contexts may lack confidence and self-esteem concerning their professional abilities, due to the uncertain and unstructured environment, the many constraints conditioning school life in general, and in most cases, inadequate training and support (Kirk and Winthrop, 2007, 2008; Vega and Bajaj, 2016).

Exposure to extreme violence among teachers has been reported in studies from around the globe, including Turkey (Ozdemir, 2012), Slovakia (Dzuka and Dalbert, 2007), and the United States (Kondrasuk et al., 2005; Robers et al., 2012). Chronic exposure to different forms of violence has been documented in El Salvador, where teachers are at risk of both direct and indirect traumatization in a context characterized by gang fighting and widespread delinquency (Currier et al., 2013).

In addition, research has shown that teachers living and operating in low-income countries are more likely to be severely demotivated,

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and to display inadequate teaching performance (Bennell and Akyeampong 2007; Moon 2006, 2007). Teachers in low-income countries are poorly equipped for dealing with the numerous hardships affecting their work and personal lives, with adverse implications for their wellbeing and effectiveness in the classroom. Finally, in a study carried out with teachers in Sub-Saharan countries, higher levels of self-perceived risk in relation to the work environment were associated with both poor motivation and burnout, while high levels of self-perceived risk in relation to health and well-being were associated with burnout only (Wolf et al., 2015).

Given this background, we set out to identify the ecological levels (individual, environmental, and relational) at which teacher agency can promote subjective wellbeing. We propose that ecological approaches to wellbeing can provide tools for enhancing the quality of life of teachers, as well as of other groups of educational and aid workers operating in war and conflict-affected zones.

1.1. Dimensions of wellbeing and quality of life (QoL) in Palestine

Quality of life in Palestine has deteriorated dramatically since the Israeli army invasions of September 2000 and the beginning of the *Second Intifada* (Palestinian uprising), which resulted in increased restriction of movement, targeted killings and imprisonments, territorial separation and fragmentation. Recent research conducted in the oPt has attempted to assess the impact on quality of life and health of intensified conflict, border closures, sieges, and spiraling unemployment, and to document the views, needs and concerns of the population (Giacaman et al., 2007).

Quality of life is defined by the WHO as “individuals’ perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (WHO, 1993; p. 13). The Palestinian context is characterized by protracted warlike conditions and chronic exposure to political violence with periods of acute intensification (Harsha et al., 2016). Thus, living conditions in the oPt are undermined by poverty, high unemployment rates and declining wages, with negative implications for multiple levels of wellbeing. More specifically, according to Giacaman et al. (2009), 52% of Palestinian families (40% in the West Bank and 74% in the Gaza Strip) live below the poverty line (US\$3.15 per person per day).

Giacaman and colleagues have identified specific domains of QoL that are salient to this context of warlike conditions, economic crisis, insecurity and ongoing uncertainty (Giacaman et al., 2007; Mataria et al., 2009).

The psychological, social and environmental domains of wellbeing all appear to be crucial to Palestinians living in the oPt. Finally, the political context of military occupation also emerges as a key factor in mental health and quality of life. Closures, sieges, checkpoints, road-blocks, the separation wall, instability, and insecurity have all been identified by Palestinians as negatively affecting their individual quality of life (Giacaman et al., 2007; Veronese, 2013).

1.2. The Arab educational system in Israel and Palestine

The Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) launched a five-year development plan and a national curriculum in 2000 (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2000), with the aim of improving the overall quality of education, providing vocational education, promoting gender equality especially for girls, and empowering human resources. However, the Second Intifada (uprising) compromised the educational growth planned by the MoEHE (Akesson, 2015). According to the MoEHE and UNESCO (2005), damage to education infrastructure alone cost over \$5 million during the five-year conflict.

The Israeli-Arab education system was set up after the establishment of the State of Israel and although it has significantly evolved since then, it still suffers from uneven and limited allocations of funding. In

addition, 80 percent of learning contents are determined by the State. The result is a minority group education system at the margins of Israeli education, distant from the centralized decision-making core and disadvantaged in terms of resource distribution and educational outputs (Arar, 2012). Research has shown that there is a degree of inequality between the Jewish and Arab education systems in Israel (Arar and Abu-Asbah, 2013; Jabareen and Agbariah, 2010). Recently there has been some improvement in the outputs of the Arab education system, but a gap remains with respect to the Jewish system (Arar and Abu-Asbah, 2013).

2. The study

2.1. Aims

In light of the perspectives on wellbeing and QoL reviewed above, the key aim of the present study was to identify specific domains of wellbeing that are salient to Palestinian teachers in three different contexts: West Bank, Gaza and Israel (Veronese, 2013; Veronese et al., 2017a,b). A second aim was to identify the social and environmental factors influencing the ecological wellbeing of teachers in environments characterized by high levels of human insecurity (West Bank and Gaza), or social exclusion and marginalization (Arab teachers in Israel) (Rosshandler et al., 2016). A third aim was to explore individual factors that promote or undermine self-perceived well-being in teachers operating in areas with ongoing political conflict such as the oPt and Israel (Batniji et al., 2009; Veronese et al., 2015; Ziadni et al., 2011).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The research sample consisted of 104 teachers divided into 16 focus groups, as well as 36 key informants including psychologists, counselors, school principals, lawyers, politicians, journalists and religious teachers (see Table 1).

Five of the focus groups (FG) were from the Gaza Strip, and comprised 12 men and 22 women. Five other groups were from Israel, and comprised 15 men and 15 women. The remaining six focus groups were from the West Bank, comprising 23 men and 17 women. Participants’ ages ranged from 26 to 51 years, with the average age being 39.5 years ($SD = 7.3$). Two participants held a high school diploma, 83 a bachelor’s degree, and eight a master’s degree. Of the sixteen focus groups, four were recruited at UNRWA schools, two at private schools, and 10 at public schools.

The focus group discussions took place in the school buildings

Table 1
Distribution of participants’ age, gender, education, and school type by geographical area.

	Gaza Strip	West Bank	Israeli-Arab	Total
Age	38.2 ($SD = 9.3$)	41.2 ($SD = 8.5$)	39.1 ($SD = 8.7$)	39.5 ($SD = 7.3$)
Gender				
Men	12	23	15	50
Women	22	17	15	54
Education				
Diploma	4	8	0	12
B.A	28	29	27	83
M.A	2	3	3	8
PH.D	0	0	0	0
Tot	34	40	30	104
School type				
UNRWA	3	1	0	4
public	2	4	4	10
private	0	1	1	2

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