



# A virtual safe zone: Teachers supporting teenage student resilience through social media in times of war<sup>☆</sup>

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- In times of war, teachers/students communicate through ubiquitous social network technologies.
- Students mentioned different ways in which teachers provided emotional support through SNT.
- The mere existence of SNT-based communication with teachers contributed to perceived resilience.
- Teachers understand the unique potential of SNT to reach out during crises.
- Teacher motives: provide emotional support, monitor distress, maintain discourse norms.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 26 July 2017

Received in revised form

11 March 2018

Accepted 20 March 2018

### Keywords:

Social network technology (SNT)

Teachers

Teenagers

Emotional support

Resilience

## ABSTRACT

We examine how teacher-student communication through social network technologies may support student resilience during an ongoing war (i.e., the 2014 Israel-Gaza war). Based on student responses from open-ended surveys ( $N = 68$ ), five content categories of emotional support were identified: caring, reassuring, emotion sharing, belonging, and distracting. The mere existence of continuous online contact with teachers also contributed to resilience perceptions. Interviews with 11 secondary school teachers revealed three main purposes for this communication: (a) delivering emotional support to students, (b) monitoring their distress; and (c) maintaining civilized norms of discourse. Practical implications and theoretical contributions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

"When the storm of fear broke, the teacher was quick to respond to each one of us ... I felt that she cared about me on a personal level - not just as a teacher" (15 yr old male student, Sderot, Israel, 2014)

School-based trauma intervention programs often include teacher training to support student resilience, that is: their ability

to maintain stable levels of psychological and behavioral functioning in the face of disruptive or life-threatening situations (Baum, 2005; Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2007). According to contemporary social-ecological approaches, a person's resilience is not simply determined by a set of given, static individual characteristics. Rather, it depends on the capacity of multiple dynamic systems, including micro systems (e.g., the individual's psychological capacities) as well as broader social environments (e.g., family, peer group, and school; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013), to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the systems' function, viability, or development (Masten, 2014). Research on resilience has identified a number of protective factors that moderate the negative impact of traumatic events (Baum, 2005; Masten, 2014). For example, based on a comprehensive review of studies that explored the effects of war on children around the world, Werner (2012) identified the following protective factors: strong bonds between the primary caregiver and the child, a shared

<sup>☆</sup> The study was conducted with the financial support of the Institute for the Study of New Media, Politics and Society at Ariel University and the German Israeli Foundation (nr. 116-105.4/2010).

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sense of values, and the social support of teachers and peers. In the current study, we focus on the latter: the role of teachers and of teacher social support in times of warfare.

Teacher-delivered, classroom-based intervention programs have been shown to effectively reduce negative reactions and strengthen student resilience in the face of traumatic events and have been identified as a viable and cost-effective alternative to individual or group therapy (e.g., Berger, Pat-Horenczyk, & Gelkopf, 2007; Werner, 2012; Wolmer, Hamiel, Barchas, Slone, & Laor, 2011). As teachers have everyday, ongoing contact and relations with the children and teenagers in their care, they are in a unique position to support student resilience building efforts. They may suggest coping strategies (e.g., distraction from traumatic events and related thoughts), assist with emotional processing, and help students maintain their familiar roles and routines (Prinstein, LaGrecia, Vernberg, & Silverman, 1996). Moreover, research shows that, beyond specific therapeutic techniques, greater strength of and accessibility to human relationships in times of security threats improves individual ability to cope with trauma and recover from it (Coates, 2003; Cohen, 2008). Finally, by strengthening connections with their students, teachers may also increase students' sense of 'school connectedness', an emotional bonding with teachers and peers (Goodenow, 1993). School connectedness, in turn, may lead to better adjustment and improved resilience (Moscardino, Scrimin, Capello, & Altoè, 2014; Werner, 2012).

However, during ongoing wars and in areas of intensive warfare, access to school premises is limited, as teachers and students are obliged to remain close to bomb shelters for security and safety reasons. Maintaining face-to-face teacher-student contact is often not an option in those circumstances. The question then arises: How can teachers support student resilience in active war zones and during an active, continuous war when schools are closed? In the current work, we report on spontaneous teacher initiatives to initiate and maintain teacher-student contact through ubiquitous social media communication technologies, as an alternative pathway.

### 1.1. Students, teachers and social media technologies

The enormous popularity of social network technologies (SNTs) such as Facebook and WhatsApp among youth and adolescents (Brenner, 2012) has brought many secondary school teachers to use them as easily accessible, available and usable channels of communication with their students (Andersson, Hatakka, Grönlund, & Wiklund, 2014; Asterhan & Rosenberg, 2015; Asterhan & Bouton, 2017; Rosenberg & Asterhan, 2017). Even though communication through these channels is not without limitations (e.g., HersHKovitz & Forkosh-Baruch, 2013), SNT-based communication is leveraged by teachers, not only for organizational and didactical purposes, but also for psychosocial purposes (Asterhan & Rosenberg, 2015). Adolescent students use SNTs for emotion and distress sharing (Ophir, 2017; Ophir, Asterhan, & Schwarz, 2017) and teachers have been documented to use SNTs, such as Facebook, to unobtrusively monitor their students' wellbeing, intervene to prevent negative social interactions such as cyber-bullying, and use SNT communication to reach out to specific students in need (Asterhan & Rosenberg, 2015).

Reaching out to students in need occurs not only during the school year, but also when teachers recognize that their students might experience prolonged psychological stress. During the 2014 Israel-Gaza war, which took place during the school summer recess, it was estimated that more than half of Israeli adolescents who lived in war-afflicted areas communicated with their teachers via WhatsApp and Facebook (Ophir, Rosenberg, Asterhan, & Schwarz, 2016). Research in the general population showed that SNTs were

the dominant communication channels during the Israel-Gaza war, and this communication was perceived by users as having a calming influence (Malka, Ariel, Avidar, & Hen-Levi, 2015).

These findings complement documented advantages of SNTs as efficient communication channels for exchanging live information during times of disaster and crisis (Palen, Vieweg, Liu, & Hughes, 2009). The ubiquitous availability of SNTs contributes to efficient coordination of response and even recovery efforts in times of large-scale disasters (Liu, Palen, Sutton, Hughes, & Vieweg, 2008).

### 1.2. The present study

Despite these documented advantages of SNT communication during times of crisis, and the fact that teachers were found to be using this channel to communicate with their students in times of war, little is known about how this SNT-mediated contact may have strengthened students' emotional state and resilience. In light of the fact that exposure to war-related stress endangers children's healthy psychological development (Davis & Siegel, 2000), an open channel of SNT-based communication between teachers and students may be a significant contributor to adolescents' mental health. In a previous survey study, we have documented the existence of teacher-student SNT-based contact during the Israel-Gaza war and reported that students both appreciate this form of communication as well as believe it helps them cope with the war-related agony and stress (Ophir et al., 2016). The goal of the current study is to further investigate the content of this communication and how both students and teachers perceive its benefits and limitations. Thus, we inquire about the 'active ingredients' of teachers' SNT-based interventions, in order to better understand how they may eventually contribute to students' subjective feelings of resilience.

For this purpose, we examined both teachers' and students' points of view on SNT communication during an active, ongoing war (i.e., the 2014, Israel-Gaza war). We focused on Israeli teachers and secondary school students who live within 45 kilometers from the Israel-Gaza border (e.g., the cities of Sderot, Be'er-Sheva, or Ofakim). Among Israeli civilians, this area was exposed to war-related events most. For two consecutive months, cities in this area were hit by approximately 4500 rockets in total and civilians had very limited time to find shelter (i.e., 15–90 seconds, depending on the exact distance from the Gaza border).

From the students' point of view, we inquired how SNT communication with their teachers helped them during the war, using 'real' examples and stories. From the teachers' point of view, we inquired whether and how teachers leveraged SNT communication to try and create feelings of resilience among their students? What were their attitudes towards SNT usage with their students and what might be the benefits as well as the shortcomings of SNT communication in times of war?

## 2. Method

The data for this study were collected during an active, ongoing war. In order not to miss the time limited window for data collection, on the one hand, but to ensure rich data of sufficient quality, while taking into consideration both security issues and ethical limitations, two different data collection strategies were combined: Online open-ended survey questions and semi-structured, one-on-one interviews.

### 2.1. Participants and data collection procedure

The data for the current study was collected during the 7th and 8th weeks into the 2014 Israel-Gaza war (August 2014). All

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