Mitigating Distress and Hate: A Rapid School-based Response to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Quebec, Canada

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Abstract

Objectives: Since October 2023, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has particularly affected international communities and diasporas. Within Quebec, Canada, these tensions added to existing social polarization, not sparing the school environment, by creating feelings of fear, anger, powerlessness, deteriorating school climate, and hindering individuals' and groups' ability to empathize with one another. This article reports a rapid intervention aimed at mitigating distress and hate in the educational environment through training and supporting school teams.

Methods: Five training webinars were organized for school professionals within the Quebec Ministry of Education. Pre-webinar surveys were disseminated to participants to identify if and how the conflict had impacted their school environment to inform trainings. A thematic analysis was carried out on pre-webinar survey responses, chat feedback and field notes collected throughout the webinars.

Results: Having an opportunity to share and address concerns, receive reassurance, positive reinforcement, and guidance around strategies, proved to be helpful for school teams. In a context of crisis and politicized emotions, the intervention legitimized a range of emotional responses, addressed school team and community divides, and encouraged double empathy while acknowledging its limits. Finally, these activities also unveiled the potential dangers associated with silencing dissent and highlighted the value of mobilizing agency around school teams' common mandate to educate and protect children from all communities, and in spite of the expression of divergent solidarities.

Implications: In times of crisis, school team and youth engagement in empathy-based activities facilitating non-judgmental expression and awareness of the Other can appease heightened emotions and prepare for dialogue, healing, and coexistence as a way forward.

Keywords: Intervention, empathy, school, social environment, Israel-Palestine conflict.

Introduction

Since Autumn 2023, the escalation of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine has strained international relations and has been associated with heightened psychological distress and socio-political mobilization in numerous countries (Dubois, 2023; Zhang & Jiang, 2023). In many regions, societal division and polarization have directly affected school climates, triggering fear, distrust, and anger within educational environments (Bongiorno, 2023; Haines, 2023). This article describes a rapid intervention deployed to respond to increasing tensions around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Quebec's school environment, aiming to contain heightened emotions, mitigating hate manifestations, fostering double empathy, and restoring a sense of safety and agency among school teams and students. We first provide a brief description of the intervention as then present results of an implementation evaluation that assesses its strengths and limitations. The findings support the development of guiding principles for preventing and mitigating the impact of international conflicts on the well-being of youth in and around schools.

Within a socio-ecological framework, schools, which have always been affected by wider socio-political tensions, may serve as an entry point for interventions with youth and local communities (Allen et al., 2016; De Haan, 2023; Miconi et al., 2023). In the last decade, these tensions have been accelerated by the digital realm through access to disinformation on social media platforms and the phenomena of "echo chambers" (Cinelli et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2018; Miconi et al., 2023). Beyond these global trends, the relative local impact of the Middle Eastern crisis was directly associated with the presence of diasporas and local and national political positioning (Dubois, 2023). According to the Canadian Census (Statistics Canada, 2021), Quebec citizens who identified with the Jewish and Muslim religion was equivalent to 1% and 5.1%, respectively. These communities are concentrated in Montréal, making up respectively 2.1% and 12.7% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2021). Moreover, ethnic or cultural origin for these groups are as follows in Quebec: Jewish (0.7%) and Arab (4.3%; based on countries within the Arab League; BBC News, 2017; League of Arab States; LAS, 2024), of which includes Palestinians (0.1%) (Statistics Canada, 2021). In the Montréal region in Quebec, Canada, the large Jewish and Arab-Muslim communities have been deeply affected by the conflict, while the impact of the conflict on the Arab or Palestinian Christian communities was largely ignored.

Hate crimes and incidents targeting these communities exploded, with two schools being shot at during the night and intercommunity violence happening in educational settings (Bongiorno, 2023). Defined by the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, hate crimes are criminal acts motivated or suspected to be by hatred of characteristics like race, ethnicity, language, skin color, religion, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity (Service de police de la Ville de Montréal [SPVM], 2022). This can include physically attacking someone based on their skin color, threatening someone due to religious beliefs, or vandalizing spaces—such as homes or places of worship—with hate-related graffiti (SPVM, 2020). Hate incidents are hateful verbalizations or gestures which do not reach the threshold needed to be considered criminal (although their repetition may qualify as criminal harassment; SPVM, 2022). Previous to the escalation, 419 hate crimes were reported in Quebec in 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2023). Within two months after the escalation on October 7th, Montréal police reported 125 and 37 hate crimes and incidents towards the Jewish communities and the Arabic-Muslim communities, respectively (City News, 2023). By the end of 2023, there was a 76% increase compared to 2022 with a total of 739 police-reported hate crimes (Statistics Canada, 2023). It is imperative to keep in mind that not all hate crimes may be reported, as reporting can be influenced by institutional and political positioning and by the relative trust or distrust between communities and the police. These numbers only represent incidents that are brought to the attention of local authorities.

Consequently, the rapidly changing social environment called for creative solutions to minimize the repercussions of social crisis on the protective nature of the school environment. Our response was unique in very rapidly providing school staff a space to share their experiences, recreate a holding environment, encourage double empathy, receive support, and gain knowledge to better understand the crisis. Other responses followed but focused mainly on security measures and regulations around protest in the educational and public space (Olivier & Henriquez, 2023). Some community organizations also promoted joint (Jewish and Muslim) voice events to try to propose mediation and peace building avenues (Madoc-Jones, 2023). According to Winnicott's (1960) definition of "holding", the concept initially referred to the ways through which a mother confers a sense of safety to her infant or child. By extension, a "holding environment" is a safe enough environment which facilitates a joint reflection on adversity and the formulation of avenues for solutions (Rousseau et al., 2022). The premise in this context was that participants felt invested and not afraid that they would be blamed if they expressed themselves, even when they disagreed with others.

Moreover, the concept of double empathy initially theorized in autism studies as the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012; Milton, 2017; Milton et al., 2018), can be defined as "to actively engage in a reciprocal process of understanding another's communication styles, social cues and perspectives, while fostering mutual empathy through shared effort". This concept emphasizes that empathy is a co-created understanding dependent on both participants' efforts to bridge perceptual differences. Thus, Double Empathy involves openness to seeing and validating the ways in which another person's perceptions or social signals may diverge from one's own habitual expectations. Rather than assuming a lack of empathy in one person, having Double Empathy means understanding that these differences are interactional and rooted in differing backgrounds, experiences, and social expectations (Milton, 2012; Milton, 2017; Milton et al., 2018). This can manifest as asking clarifying questions, consciously adjusting one's own communicative style to better align with the other person's or being patient with misunderstandings.

A Threefold Intervention Approach

Immediately following initial events on October 7th, 2023, the Research and Action on Social Polarizations (RAPS) team was mobilized by the Quebec Ministry of Education (MEQ) to discuss potential effects of the conflict within the schools. A threefold intervention was implemented through: (1) training, webinars, and supporting school teams, (2) school-based group interventions; and (3) youth and family centered interventions. This paper focuses on the first component which was nested within larger ongoing evaluative research on the prevention of politicized bullying and ideological violence.

The training webinars were organized around the following objectives: (1) documenting the school impact of the Middle East crisis and the school teams' responses to it; (2) addressing potential divides in school teams to recreate a holding environment; and 3) providing school teams with pedagogical and institutional strategies to facilitate safe expression of emotions related to the Middle-East conflict and to mitigate hate discourses and actions which may be associated with it.

Method

Pre-Existent Interdisciplinary Collaborations

This rapid intervention was facilitated by the pre-existing partnerships in place since 2016 from the network of researchers and professionals within the RAPS team, and more closely, the ongoing work between the clinical Polarization team (comprised of two psychiatrists, four psychologists, two social workers, and a psycho-educator) based at the CIUSSS West-Central (Rousseau et al., 2023) and a more recent partnership established in 2021 with key decision-makers in the MEQ (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2024) who were able to implement the intervention and reach all the schools in the province. Five members from the clinical team were involved in the webinar development and rollout. Previous and ongoing collaborations on various forms of social polarizations such as racism and gender or religion-related issues among others, within the scope of a ministerial action plan (Ministère de la famille, 2021) have been put in place, such as the Act Just on Time "Agir Juste à temps" program (AJAT), which offer school professionals drop in consultations with clinicians every Monday during the lunch hour. These collaborations have built the foundation for trust between partners and with school professionals who use training tools and events developed by the RAPS network and, in some cases, request curated interventions for their schools from the Polarization team. Ethics approval was obtained by the CIUSSS West-Central Montréal Research Ethics Board (REB).

Webinars

Four webinars were initially planned, with an additional one added at the request of professionals who were not able to participate, and organized in a three-step process. First, to document what was happening on the field, an online qualitative survey on Microsoft Forms (Office 360; available in French) was sent out to all Quebec school professionals (public and private sector) who registered for the webinar. The webinar invitation was disseminated through MEQ communication channels – the high ministerial authorities contacted all School Service Centers, School Boards, and Private Schools Directors, who were then tasked to relay the information to their respective schools. Participants were asked to identify if and how the conflict had impacted their school environment; responses were anonymous. All registrations were checked twice to ensure they were part of the Quebec education network (via their institutional email addresses) to minimize any risk of trolling. One clinician was assigned to intervene during webinars if someone did join for this purpose. Data collection took place throughout the registration period (up to 1 week prior to webinars). Specifically, professionals were asked three open-ended questions: (1) What do you observe in your school

environment in relation to current events in the Middle-East? (2) How do you feel about it and how are your other team members feeling?; and (3) What are your strategies for dealing with the current situation?

Second, 90-minute webinars were organized on Microsoft Teams for: school principals in the French and the English sector; support staff (psychologists, social workers, psycho-educators); and teachers. All webinars began by sharing an overview of the survey responses (anonymous), followed by a diverse panel of experts (in terms of gender and ethnicity/religious affiliations) empathetically validating and commenting on the responses to the survey, and proposing or validating strategies for school professionals. At the end, a period for dialogue encouraged questions and the expression of comments and dissent. Schools requiring further support for specific collective or individual crises were invited to contact the Polarization clinical team.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The Polarization team is composed of clinicians from Arab-Muslim (2), Jewish descent (1), and other ethnic heritages. It has established strong partnerships with both the Jewish and Muslim leaderships during the COVID-19 pandemic (El-Majzoub et al., 2023). The webinars and their analysis reflected these contrasted positionings, allying always an insider-outsider position to represent the capacity to share and dissent both within and across communities (the analysis did not elicit dissent). A thematic analysis of pre-webinar survey responses, chat feedback, and field notes taken during the webinars was carried out (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Each webinar had one observer take field notes (two pages), and these were complemented by other team member's memories and impressions during debriefing sessions, which took place immediately after the webinars. Codes were formulated through interview questions and emerging themes from responses and field notes. Material was closely read twice by two coders who shared the main themes, which emerged from the material and agreed on a coding tree. Coding was subsequently performed, discussing codes among coders, triangulating data, and adjusting them through team discussions (until consensus was reached) when discrepancies and confusion arose during the coding process (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Johnson et al., 2020; Morse, 2015). Given the research team participated in the entirety of the process, from the realization of the webinars to their evaluation, the team and Ministry partners provided the contextual background to situate the data.

Results

Pre-Webinar Assessment

A total of five surveys were made available, one for each organized webinar. Overall, 895 pre-webinar responses were collected. In the French sector, they yielded 263 pre-webinar responses for school administrators and principals, 233 responses for school psychosocial intervention workers, and 145 responses for teachers. The webinar intended for school personnel in the English sector had 74 responses. Finally, the last webinar organized and intended for all school professionals resulted in 180 responses. Pre-webinar surveys enabled participants a moment for self-examination, to share both what may be going on in their schools and their strategies, which was perceived as empowering. Overarching themes included: impact of the Middle East conflict on the educational community, students, school staff, and school board; emotional responses and professional positioning; intervention strategies around personal positioning, posture, communication, regulation of media, school-based actions, self-care for staff, and support for vulnerable students, as well as main challenges such as lack of freedom of expression and general uncertainty (see Table 1 for examples).

Webinar

Within one week, four webinars were held with attendees ranging from school professionals (teachers, principals, support staff), intervention workers, to managers. The first webinar invitation along with material (key messages to parents and resources) were sent out to all principals across the province on October 14th, 2023. Webinars were held shortly after on October 17th, 18th, and 19th, 2023. Across all sessions, a total of 481 participants participated. As a result of the perceived usefulness of initial webinars and considering their short notice for the first four webinars, a fifth one was organized for all audiences on November 19th, 2023 and yielded an additional 103 participants. During the webinars, the exchanges remained respectful, and there was no need to intervene. For example, participants shared their appreciation for the opportunity to speak about the conflict: "Thank you for this opportunity to talk about this delicate and important issue. […]". In a few cases, participants shared that they had not been feeling safe enough to express themselves around the crisis in their daily interactions, or felt they had to take sides. Many said that expressing

a political opinion, even a nuanced one, was interpreted as taking a side. This polarization was also visible during the webinars.

Table 1. Pre-Webinar Survey Overarching Themes

	Theme	Summary
Impact of Middle East conflict	Educational community	Diversity of positions and of distress among students and staff, and requests from students to take a stance in the Middle East conflict. Stressing the importance that schools remain neutral around the conflict in spite of political positioning.
	Students	Desire to discuss the conflict, asking for information, misinformation circulating, and increased emotional responses.
	School staff and school board	Distress, and uncertainty if not difficulty around if or how to discuss the conflict. Fear of hurting and fear of violence.
	Absence of any issues	Certain schools reported no present problems or apparent concerns but still wanted to have skills.
Emotional Responses	Emotions	A wide array of emotions from uncertainty, worry, incomprehension, stress, hurt, fear, sadness, mistrust, anger, and powerlessness were repeatedly named.
	Professional positioning	Common agreement of "neutrality" in stance as an ideal, some anger at the absence of neutrality of governments. Variety in discomfort and role around mediating discussions around the conflict.
Intervention Strategies	Personal positioning	Grief, preoccupation, anxiety, and exhaustion reported by school staff members.
	Posture	Providing a listening ear, reassurance, empathy, and remaining "neutral" (not taking sides) with students. Avoidance also reported.
	Communication	Advising parents that school support is available, sharing resources, and remaining open to discuss.
	Regulation of media access	Limiting media access to reduce emotional response and providing accurate information around the situation.
	School-based actions	Teaching critical thinking, humanity, and compassion. Providing reassurance through sharing protective factors within their school community.
	Self-care for staff	Taking time to be alone and with loved ones. Practicing self-care
	Support for vulnerable students	Offering students individualized support as needed, trying to maintain a neutral stance. Worries about detection.
Main challenges	Lack of freedom of expression	Difficulty expressing one's point of view in the context of EDI and cancel culture, non-neutrality of official discourse.
	General uncertainty	Many comments and feedback highlight incomprehension, hurt, and hesitation around actionable steps to take.

In addition to the positive outcome of the webinars, as highlighted in participant feedback (interest for more webinars or formative meetings, perceived usefulness of the event), these webinars represented a model of leadership utilizing knowledge dissemination and support throughout the educational network at the provincial governmental level (MEQ).

Participants Evaluation of Webinars

Participants who expressed themselves spontaneously emphasized that the webinar they attended had been helpful and that they felt reassured and more knowledgeable of resources and strategies to address the situations they faced in school settings. One participant noted "I'm learning a lot. Understanding conflict and what's at stake helps support our actions and posture." See table 2 for more examples. The informal feedback collected in the webinar chat (giving thanks, noting the importance of having these conversations and holding space, etc.), verbal comments by participants during the webinar, and their feedback to the ministry was so positive that it led to the expansion of these interventions in higher education (college and university levels) and in health institution settings. Another outcome from these webinars included the training of Regional education support officers in charge of school climate and of violence and bullying prevention, further mobilizing local teams to organize their own events and to integrate social polarization issues into their specific regional realities.

Table 2. Webinar Feedback Examples

Theme	Examples
General appreciation and pertinence of content	"*It does help to have advice as we feel helpless when faced with these questions that are put to us.*"
	"*I'm learning a lot. Understanding conflict and what's at stake helps support our actions and posture.*"
	"*Thanks for the compass in this climate.*"
	"*Thank you for this opportunity to talk about this delicate and important issue. […]*"
	"*Appreciated the care and nuance of your comments.*"
	"*Very instructive and so relevant and pragmatic. There's no doubt that all these points will be useful in our teaching and relational practice.*"
Request for additional support	"*I'd love the opportunity to offer our (additional) directors the chance to participate […]*"
	"*I wish there had been more directors from my (region)! I second the comment to have another moment.*"
	"*[…] The current conflict is likely to have a major impact on our communities. It would be important for all those involved in the various schools to be able to take part in such highly formative meetings on a more regular basis. Will you be repeating the exercise and offering other dates? […]*"
Request for dissemination	"*Will there be access to the recording so that I can share it with colleagues who weren't able to make it […]?*"
	"*Please forward tools that also deal with how to build dialogue, for which [dialogue has] diminished in our [educational program]. This may be employed across subjects and issues, once promoted […]*"

Discussion

The Value of Training and Holding Space in Times of Social Crisis

Overall, the webinars were very well received by the school staff. They seem associated with four main active processes which emerged from the analysis of participant feedback and field notes: (1) reassuring and offering positive reinforcement around strategies; (2) validating and legitimating a range of emotional responses in a context of politicized emotions, while acknowledging the limits of Double Empathy; and (3) mobilizing agency around a common mandate and the expression of divergent solidarities. Creating opportunities to discuss difficult situations to ensure both school staff and students feel physically and psychologically safe is essential for personal well-being, effective teaching, and student engagement and progress (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Kaul et al., 2020). When youth learning is perceived as not only academic, but also encompasses the socioemotional component, school teams will be able to better support school climate and education throughout various forms of crises.

Reassuring and Offering Positive Reinforcement

The webinars provided reassurance by reminding participants that they were not alone and could use their expertise in overcoming other types of crises to appraise and respond to a divisive situation perceived as highly sensitive. The opportunity to share and validate strategies proved very helpful. Strategies presented by school professionals included listening to students without taking sides, offering respectful discussions in class or opportunities for students to express themselves, or ask questions and offering group support. If most already had the tools and knowledge (school code of life, established protocols against bullying and violence they can refer to, as well as psycho-educators) that they needed in terms of intervention, the webinars also gave a forum to discuss the limits and dangers of censorship (prohibiting to talk about something sensitive at school) and of securitization approaches (such as trying to detect who may be violent or suspending students expressing dissent). These both usually fuel grievances, conflict, and violence (Rousseau et al., 2021).

Validating Emotional Responses While Acknowledging the Limits of Double Empathy

The wide range of distressing emotions (such as uncertainty, worry, incomprehension, stress, hurt, fear, sadness, mistrust, anger, and powerlessness) shared by participants confirmed that school staff were personally affected by the conflict and felt greatly supported by the mere fact that this was acknowledged. Although encouraged, Double Empathy was difficult for many to embrace in times of such high tensions and distress, because it was perceived as a form of betrayal. Throughout the webinars, participants emphasized that while they or their students could not always reach a position of Double Empathy, they could work towards acknowledging that the Other's distress and anger had some legitimacy.

Working Towards a Common Mandate in spite of the Expression of Divergent Solidarities

Throughout the process, the importance of maintaining the school environment as a relatively safe space of the school environment, regrouping youth, families, and the school community around the school's learning and socialization mandate, was highlighted. Providing avenues to decrease feelings of helplessness by promoting youth agency were brought as occasions to emphasize the importance of solidarities around civil and human rights and around peacebuilding, even if there were divergences around which group was to be supported and which protest was legitimate. This allowed to frame the conflict and bring nuances, in spite of the pain and anger it provoked, and presented an opportunity to embrace shared humanism, dialogue and non-violence, and to support communities and build resilience among peers (Zhang & Jiang, 2023). When partnering with school staff, mental health professionals can contribute to mitigate the impact of divisive social events on youth. From a public health perspective, this constitutes an intervention which, by promoting empathy, respect, dialogue, and agency beyond dissent, has the potential to decrease division, stigmatization, bullying and marginalization, and preserve the protective role of the school environment.

Limitations

First, this was a crisis intervention that required a rapid response, for which the evaluation took place within a larger study evaluation of services offered by the clinical Polarization team. Thus, there was no unique protocol, in-depth interviews, or follow-up measures for the webinars. Reporting an intervention outside of a research protocol can potentially betray participants' voices, yet not reporting what was perceived as a helpful rapid response to a crisis can also be problematic. This raises dilemmas around rigorously reflecting crisis interventions (which is needed but often too rapid for research). To mitigate this, we ensured a diversity of voices among the evaluation team (education, psychology, psychiatry, psychosocial), and diverse community perspectives (Jewish, Arab-Muslim, others). Secondly, the implementation evaluation was carried out by the team that helped organize the intervention. Although this adds to the overall coherence of the account, this situated gaze may have introduced a bias.

Conclusion

In a context of globalization, international conflict like the Middle East crisis may shatter school climate and increase youth distress and acting out. School staff, who are also affected by these events, may mitigate the associated upsurge in fear, hate, and related emotions. Although the evaluation of the present intervention is based on subjective perception and warrants further research, results suggest that in moments of crises due to international conflicts, rapid interventions may help support school staff contain the emotional upheaval and preserve the protective nature of the school environment for all children in front of growing social polarization. These interventions may help to reduce fear-induced institutional security responses which may have adverse effects by fueling feelings of injustice and further dividing the school community instead of fostering a real sense of security and belonging. In order to promote youth resilience, we collectively need to learn about avenues to promote some forms of healing and coexistence, especially in a world of rapidly increasing globalization.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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