

IMPACT OF ISRAELI-HAMAS WAR ON EDUCATION/LEARNING AND LEARNERS' MENTAL HEALTH IN ISRAEL, GAZA STRIP AND THE USA: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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Abstract

Educators hope that Israel and the Gaza Strip's experience during the corona-virus pandemic will make the management of education and learning during the current Israeli-Hamas war a little easier as education systems grapple with trauma amongst teachers and learners, on both sides of the divide. It is not clear how long this situation will last, but it definitely means putting on hold the traditional scheduled educational programmes and progress, in most instances, in favour of online and hybrid make-shift educational programmes with the hope that normalcy returns soon. In times of crisis, ideally, the population of learners affected by the crisis need clear directives and frameworks coupled with caring and sensitive teachers and frequent in-person and hybrid meetings amongst teachers and learners to provide re-assurance and hope. Notably, the main dynamic during war is the learners' constant fear of attacks to them or their families as uncertainty looms large. This fear leads to anxiety, thereby adversely impacting the learners' mental well-being. This paper, thus, discusses educational situation with regard to Israel, Gaza and to a limited extent, the USA, in light of the latest Israeli-Hamas conflict that began on October the 7th, 2023, following a Hamas attack on Israeli civilians leading to retaliatory attacks from Israel. Accordingly, the main impacts of the war are disruption of education systems and structures, shift to remote learning, psychological trauma and insecurity and fear amongst learners.

Keywords: *Israeli, Hamas, Education, learning, Mental Health*

1. INTRODUCTION

Educators in both Israel and Gaza have been faced with a teaching challenge soon after Oct. 7, when the Hamas militant group crossed over to Southern Israel from the Gaza Strip, kidnapping, assaulting and killing civilians. Accordingly, one thousand, four hundred Israelis were killed in the unexpected attack, which also saw two hundred Israelis, including children and the elderly, kidnapped and held hostage by Hamas, most of whose whereabouts remain unknown. As a result, Israel embarked on retaliatory attacks that have (at the time of writing this paper) left eight thousand three hundred dead. Notably, whenever war breaks out, education systems suffer and oftentimes, schools shut. This has been the situation in Israel and Gaza as well, since a fresh war broke out on October, 7th 2023. Accordingly, both Israel and Palestinian education systems are adversely affected and learners on both sides of the divide have been left scarred emotionally and psychologically out of the war images and deaths experienced by some of them as a result of the war. In some instances and in this case in Gaza, schools are totally shut and are **increasingly becoming hiding places for militants, making them targets of attack and destruction**. The impact of Israeli-Hamas war on the mental health of school-going kids in Israel and the Gaza strip, may be vast and far-reaching.

2. METHODOLOGY

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Thematic interpretation of various studies and articles on impacts of Israeli-Hamas war was conducted. This paper, thus presents the cross cutting impacts of Israeli-Hamas war on education and mental health with a view to finding workable intervention and solutions aimed at reducing the adverse effects of the Israeli-Hamas conflict on education and learners' mental health. It is paramount to establish ways of safe-guarding learners' interests and ensuring continuity in learning. More effort should also be directed at ensuring that learners are protected from war-mongering in an attempt to prevent mental health episodes amongst them.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A study by Fiske (2023) indicates that the overall exposure to high levels of violence affects both Israeli and Palestinian kids in a number of harmful ways, the most significance of which is psychological trauma. The subsequent sections of this review delve into the impacts, adaptation and mitigation strategies adopted by education systems that are most affected by the Israeli-Hamas war, namely Israeli, Palestinian and American education systems.

3.1 Impact of Israel-Hamas war on Israeli education system

As the latest war broke out, a series of directives were sent to schools in Israel with instructions to begin distance learning. As a result, by the end of the first week, some schools in Israel had already begun holding classes and meetings online. However, later, the ministry issued a directive allowing the academic institutions to have some in-person classes or activities depending on the security situation in the location, subject to approval by the ministry of education, school local councils and Home Front Command (Fiske, 2023).

Notably, as the war began, the country (education-wise) was divided into three sections designated red, yellow and green. Accordingly, the areas designated red is the areas adjacent to Israel's north border with Gaza. These included: the Golan region, the central coast (including Tel Aviv, Ashkelon and Ashdod). In these areas in-person learning activities were prohibited. The region designated yellow, covers most central and northern regions of the country including Haifa, Jerusalem and West Bank settlements.

In these regions in-person learning was allowed only if specific security conditions were met/observed. Consequently, the areas designated green (those in the far southeast and south including Arava, Eilat, and southern Dead Sea), in-person learning could be held without restrictions. In another move and rather resoundingly, the Ministry of education of Israel also announced a month-long delay in the administration of matriculation exams, which Israel's 11th and 12th graders take in synch with their graduation process. Accordingly, educators prioritised creating new, daily activity programmes that might give students some sense of security in the face of the war between Israel and Hamas. Apparently the teachers were determined to deviate from the usual content and address the current needs of the learners in their classes whether remotely or in-person.

Notably, another educational, dilemma in Israel was how to absorb evacuated and displaced learners from regions adjacent to Gaza, and bring back into the learning fold even as the whole country waits and hopes that the war and current animosity between Israel and Gaza fizzles out and normalcy returns. Accordingly, these evacuated families, whose exact number was uncertain, were scattered around the country, some staying in hotels, some with relatives, and some with others who had opened their homes for them. Many of them experienced deeply traumatic events during the unexpected Hamas assault/ massacre in Israel, requiring urgent care and counselling from teachers and healthcare staff.

Consequently, the Israeli Ministry of Education released a series of directives and guidelines aimed at helping staff and teachers cope with the influx of learners from Northern Israel (some of whose parents are taking part in the war) along with a 24/7 mental health care hotline (*6552). Accordingly the response to these services has been great. Notably, some of the evacuees completely lacked or had less or functionless computers at their disposal, implying that distance learning programmes could not be implemented for them. Moreover, Israeli's Arabic and ultra-Orthodox populations, who usually have separate, state-sponsored schools, face the same barriers in returning to distance learning. As a matter of fact, both populations have challenges accessing computers for all

their children at home. This scenario is worse for the ultra-Orthodox, whose majorities do not use modern technology including computers in their daily lives.

3.1.1 *Emerging Issues in Israel's Education*

With many of the learners' parents called upon for the massive deployment of Israeli defence forces currently underway, educators, counsellors and staff are a critical component in helping Israel's children and students navigate the crisis. Moreover, transitioning from in-person to remote learning is bound to cause issues for some learners, especially those who were just starting, as happened after the corona pandemic when schools registered low reading grades amongst learners that were entering elementary level. Consequently even high school students had social issues as a result of online learning occasioned by the pandemic. Hence, the current shift to online learning as a result of the Israeli-Hamas war may have similar repercussions unless urgent intervening measures are put in place. Furthermore, not all learners may thrive without a personal bond with the educator, **further necessitating the need for urgent intervening measures. Accordingly**, giving school principals authority and autonomy during crises to make relevant decisions that are contextual and responsive to the local needs may go a long way in mitigating and lessening the impact of the conflict or war on school systems.

3.2 *Impact of Israeli-Hama war on education in Gaza*

As with Israel, schools are no longer safe spaces in Gaza. Accordingly, in Gaza, the ministry of education has developed emergency training programmes (evacuation drills) for teachers and students close to the border in case of war. An earlier study by Miao, et al (2013) established that a rise in the number of school-closure days leads to increased child labour while also encouraging truancy and reducing school attendance in the West Bank. Another study by Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2022) details teargas and other weapon-firing that injured students and teaching staff in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, during an Israeli-Hamas conflict. Accordingly, explosives had affected at least several schools and kindergartens in Palestine between January 2019 and September 2021 during an escalation of hostilities. There is bound to be a repeat of this scenario, in the current conflict, if proper protective and humanitarian measures are not put in place.

On November 6, as a result of Israeli retaliatory attacks (in an attempt to hit back at the Hamas militants who had killed 1400 people including foreigners in Israel) the Ministry of Education in Gaza suspended the 2023-2024 school year for about 625,000 learners in the Gaza strip. Previous reports indicate that access to quality education in Gaza is a persistence challenge owing to conflicts with Israeli as well as attacks from Palestinian armed groups damaging school buildings, resulting in children being taught in unsafe surroundings. Accordingly, overcrowding is a serious repercussion too. Hence, in order to accommodate the massive number of students in Gaza, many school operate on a double shift (Save the Children UK, 2011)

The latest Israeli-Hamas conflict has seen an estimated 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) hosted in 102 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees in the near east (UNRWA) schools and 54,453 IDPS at 51 public schools in Gaza. Consequently the website, Reliefweb (2023) reports that more than 625,000 students and 22,564 teachers in the Gaza Strip have been affected with no access to education. Many of the UNRWA educational establishments have now been converted into shelters for those fleeing war. Notably UNRWA's nearly 13,000 staff are in the front line helping schoolchildren, education professionals and all those impacted by the conflict. (UNESCO, 2023) According to UNICEF (2023), since the beginning of the conflict, about 40% of the total numbers of schools in the Gaza Strip have been damaged. As a result, UNESCO (2023) condemns the military use of schools by armed forces and armed groups that ultimately render schools legitimate targets of attack, by retaliatory forces, hence endangering learners' safety as well as their education. A report by Save the Children (2022) indicates that four out of five children in Gaza live with depression while slightly above half, struggle with suicidal thoughts. Apparently, learners in schools

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near the border in both Gaza and Israel experience constant fear of incursions from either side, necessitating the development of emergency training programmes (evacuation drills) for teachers and students in schools near the Israeli-Gaza border in preparation for attacks (should there be any) from either side.

3.3 Impact of Israeli-Hamas War on Learning in the US

The US is home to students and staff with cultural ties to both Israel and Palestine. Hence, unsurprisingly, reports indicate that the onset of the Israeli-Hamas war has seen a spike in anti-semitic incidents. Additionally, there has been a rise in Islamophobic occurrences on campuses and schools around the USA. New Jersey department of education particularly decried the rise in conflicts at school as a result of Israeli-Hamas war. Accordingly, students were facing intimidation and harassment at school based on their religious or cultural affiliation. The incidents, reportedly, involved derogatory and racist remarks and innuendos, coupled with online bullying and other threatening behaviours. As a result, American academic institutions are grappling with how best to respond to Israeli-Hamas war for fear of angering learners, instructors, alumni and donors (OPT Education Cluster, 2023). Notably, educators are encouraged to remind students and their families of their role in reducing anxiety and fear during crisis times like these

Hence educators are expected to be keenly aware of the emotional and psychological impact the Israeli-Hamas war has on learners. Accordingly, teachers should pay close attention to Jewish or Muslim learners, or those that are Israeli or Palestinian and learners who may be concerned about how the Israeli-Hamas conflict could impact them in the United States. Furthermore, particular attention should be paid to teachers and students who may know people, who are missing, have been killed or taken hostage in the Israeli-Hamas war. Apparently, the Israeli-Hamas war is one of the most difficult topics to handle in a K-12 classroom in the US as it is complex, emotionally charged and evolving by the day. The situation gets worse in classrooms and schools with a mix of Muslim and Jewish students. Teachers, however, are curious to avoid topics or anything that is triggering or capable of causing unnecessary fear or anger. Many educators, thus, try to avoid bringing their own biases into classroom conversations and only start conversations that are developmentally appropriate.

Other reports indicate that across the country, public universities and colleges are facing backlash in their attempt to respond to the Israeli-Hamas war. Apart from learners, school officials and administrators have been criticized over their responses to the Israel-Hamas war. Regardless of the tensions, in some schools in the US, students are being encouraged to share their perspectives on the Israeli-Hamas war. In one school (Benjamin Franklin High school), the majority of students who spoke said they were disappointed in the actions of the leaders on either side of the conflict. According to the students, leaders from both sides were engaged in retaliation rather than solution- seeking.

4. CONCLUSION

The ongoing Israeli- Hamas conflict is the most significant factor influencing education in both Israel and Gaza currently, and its full impact on education will not be fully known until the war ends. Arguably, the war will negatively impact Gaza's education systems more than it would Israel's owing to the fact that prior to the war, Gaza's education system already faced significant constraints. It is hoped that a truce will be reached sooner than later as most certainly, returning to a learning routine in times of crisis and during emergencies is key to building and enhancing national resilience.

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