

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF TEACHER AGENCY IN EMERGENCY SHELTER SCHOOLS

Michal Levy¹, Hagit Inbar-Furst¹, & Ruth Gottfried²

¹*Department of Special Education, David-Yellin Academic College (Israel)*

²*Department of Dance Movement Therapy, David-Yellin Academic College (Israel)*

Abstract

This study explores the experiences of Special Education Teachers (SETs) as agents of change in Emergency Shelter On-Site Schools (ESOSs) through narrative inquiry. Twelve SETs from seven Israeli ESOSs shared 22 stories about their most meaningful experiences in this context. The analysis revealed three main findings: (a) positive changes in students and SETs were identified, emphasizing both academic progress and emotional wellbeing in students as well as positive changes in SETs perceptions and points of view regarding students; (b) two pathways to student success were observed—a slow, gradual process and pivotal turning points, and (c) three distinct profiles of teacher agency were revealed—Mastery-focused, Empowerment-focused, and Attachment-focused. These findings align with a trauma-informed educational approach and enhance the understanding of teacher agency in challenging contexts. Implications for pre- and in-service teacher training programs include cultivating effective teacher agency across all three profiles, recognizing different trajectories of student success, and developing a growth mindset in teachers.

Keywords: *Emergency shelters, narrative inquiry, special education teachers, teacher agency, trauma-informed education.*

1. Introduction

Teacher agency, defined as the “capacity to make choices, take principled action, and enact change” (Anderson, 2010, p. 541), is essential for impacting student learning (Molla & Nolan, 2020). In the context of trauma-informed education, teachers play a vital role in supporting children who have experienced one or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE; Felitti et al., 2019). Trauma-informed teaching practices can significantly benefit students impacted by trauma, fostering strong teacher-student relationships and enhancing self-regulation skills (Brunzell et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the role of teachers as agents of change in Emergency Shelter On-site Schools (ESOSs) remains understudied.

ESOSs provide temporary educational support for children at-risk in crisis situations (Gottfried & Ben-Arieh, 2019). These unique environments present distinct challenges, including students' uncertain length of stay, varied academic levels, and complex emotional-behavioral needs (Hindt et al., 2019). Given these challenges, investigating teacher agency within ESOSs is crucial for understanding how Special Education Teachers (SETs) can effectively support positive changes in students in these specialized settings.

This study aims to explore SETs agency in ESOSs through the lens of narrative inquiry. By examining SETs' meaningful experiences, the study seeks to understand how they conceptualize and enact their roles as agents of change, foster positive changes in students, and manifest different profiles of teacher agency in trauma-informed educational settings.

2. Method

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach to analyze SETs experiences in ESOSs in Israel. The method was chosen as it provides deep insights into experiences through storytelling and meaning construction (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The analysis framework employed Lieblich et al.'s (1998) three-tiered method and included a holistic-content analysis, a categorical-form, and a categorical content analysis.

The research was conducted in Israeli ESOSs that provide short-term educational and therapeutic support for children in crisis, aged 5-15 years with an average stay of 5.9 months. Data collection was carried out through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 SETs. The study received ethical approval from both the Israel Ministry of Education and the researchers' Institutional Review Board.

3. Results

3.1. Positive changes in students and SETs

The Holistic Content Analysis revealed three interconnected dimensions of positive change in SETs meaningful stories. First, students demonstrated improved academic achievements, as evidenced by the quote “Suddenly, he started reading, and I said to him: ‘Wow, you’re reading fluently!’ He continued reading with precision and I think we paved the way to his success,” highlighting the development of new skills and abilities through persistent effort. Second, students showed enhanced emotional wellbeing, illustrated by their ability to overcome trauma and develop self-advocacy skills, as demonstrated by the quote: “She now receives occupational therapy, speech therapy, and remedial teaching – interventions that have contributed to her growth and emotional wellbeing.”

Finally, SETs experienced transformative changes in their own perceptions and perspectives regarding students, as reflected by the quote “Over time, I understood that the student’s actions are not a personal attack on me but a manifestation of their own hardships,” indicating how teachers overcame initial biases to gain deeper understanding of their students’ needs and finding profound meaning in witnessing their students’ growth.

3.2. Pathways to student success

The Categorical-Form Analysis revealed two distinct pathways through which SETs facilitate student success in challenging educational environments. The first pathway characterizes success as an outcome of sustained effort and consistent support over time, exemplified by the quote “I want to emphasize that this transformation didn’t occur within a month or two, but after a full year of persistence and effort,” where teachers create nurturing environments through patient guidance and celebration of incremental progress.

The second pathway identifies success through transformative moments or pivotal breakthroughs in students’ development, as illustrated by the quote “She whispered a single word to the care workers, which surprised and startled them. It was a significant breakthrough,” highlighting how even a small interaction can mark a turning point for students who had previously refrained from communicating with staff.

3.3. Profiles of teacher agency

The Categorical Content Analysis revealed three distinct profiles of teacher agency in SETs meaningful stories. *The Mastery-focused profile* emphasizes differentiated instruction and adaptive teaching strategies, as illustrated by the quote “I adjusted my teaching to his unique needs, and gradually, the breakthroughs came,” demonstrating teachers’ commitment to personalizing learning experiences. *The Attachment-focused profile* prioritizes building secure emotional connections with students, exemplified by the quote: “I reassured her of my affection and care. It... encapsulated the depth of the emotional journey I had shared with this remarkable and resilient child,” highlighting the importance of trust-building and emotional support. *The Empowerment-focused profile* concentrates on developing students’ self-efficacy and confidence, as evidenced by the quote “I simply felt like I had gifted her with life... She has received this gift, this gift of seeing that she is capable, that she can do it, that she has conquered something”, showing how teachers actively cultivated students’ belief in their own abilities.

4. Discussion

This study revealed three key contributions to understanding SETs as agents of change in ESOSs. First, SETs primarily viewed their role through fostering student success in both academic achievements and emotional wellbeing, aligned with a trauma-informed educational approach (Brunzell et al., 2021) and showed a notable shift from initial biases to deeper understanding of student needs. Second, the study identified two distinct temporal pathways to building student success (slow/gradual process and pivotal turning points).

Third, three distinct profiles of teacher agency were identified: Mastery-focused (emphasizing differentiated instruction), Attachment-focused (prioritizing strong relationships), and Empowerment-focused (fostering student self-efficacy). These align with Tao et al.’s (2022) types of teacher support and implemented various guidelines for strengthening student self-efficacy (Bandura,

1997). While the study emphasized attachment and empowerment strategies in trauma-informed education (Brunzell et al., 2021), it found limited mention of self-regulatory skill development. Future research could explore SETs' role as attachment figures (García-Rodríguez et al., 2023), how teachers can facilitate vicarious experiences to build self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and how they develop self-regulatory skills in trauma-informed settings (Brunzell et al., 2021).

5. Practical implications

This study recommends that teacher training programs, both pre-service and in-service, focus on three key areas: (a) cultivating a growth mindset to view challenges as learning opportunities and commit to continuous student improvement (Themane & Thobejane, 2019), (b) recognizing and capitalizing on both gradual progress and pivotal turning points in student success through realistic goal-setting, progress monitoring, field-based experiences, and strategies for leveraging breakthroughs (Brunzell, 2021), and (c) developing effective teacher agency across Mastery, Empowerment, and Attachment-focused profiles by (c1) equipping educators with differentiated instruction and adaptive teaching (Tao et al., 2022), (c2) fostering student self-efficacy and autonomy (Bandura, 1997; Tao et al., 2022), and (c3) prioritizing strong teacher-student relationships through trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning (Brunzell et al., 2021; Gyeltshen & Gyeltshen, 2022).

References

- Anderson, L. (2010). Embedded, emboldened, and (net)working for change: Support-seeking and teach agency in urban, high-needs schools. *Harvard Education Review*, 80(4), 541-572. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.80.4.f2v8251444581105>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. Freeman.
- Brunzell, T., Waters, L., & Stokes, H. (2021). Trauma-informed teacher wellbeing: Teacher reflections within trauma-informed positive education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(5), 91-107. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2021v46n5.6>
- Connelly, M. F., & Clandinin, J. D. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. Green, G. Camilli, & P. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (3rd ed., pp. 447-487). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (2019). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 56(6), 774-786. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2019.04.001>
- García-Rodríguez, L., Redín, C. I., & Abaitua, C. R. (2023). Teacher-student attachment relationship, variables associated, and measurement: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review*, 38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100488>
- Gyeltshen, S., & Gyeltshen, N. (2022). The impact of supportive teacher-student relationships on academic performance. *Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports*, 16(12), 15-34. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajarr/2022/v16i12446>
- Gottfried, R., & Ben-Arieh, A. (2019). The Israeli child protection system. In R. D. Krugman, J. Fluke, & L. Merkel-Holguin (Eds.), *National Systems of Child Protection. Child Maltreatment* (Vol. 8, pp. 139-171). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93348-1_8
- Hindt, L. A., Bai, G. J., Huguenel, B. M., Fuller, A. K., & Leon, S. C. (2019). Impact of emergency shelter utilization and kinship involvement on children's behavioral outcomes. *Child Maltreatment*, 24(1), 76-85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559518797198>
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Applied Social Research Methods (vol. 47). Sage Publications, Inc. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412985253>
- Molla, T., & Nolan, A. (2020). Teacher agency and professional practice. *Teachers and Teaching*, 26(1), 67-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2020.1740196>
- Tao, Y., Meng, Y., Gao, Z., & Yang, X. (2022). Perceived teacher support, student engagement, and academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology*, 42, 401-420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2022.2033168>
- Themane, M., & Thobejane, H. R. (2019). Teachers as change agents in making teaching inclusive in some selected rural schools of Limpopo Province, South Africa: Implications for teacher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23(4), 369-383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1434690>