

Conformism Vs. Independent Opinions: The Challenges Facing Education Administration Students When Dealing with Political Conflicts Practiced in Simulation-Based Learning

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Abstract

Israel is defined as a Jewish and a democratic state. Yet, in recent years, the government of Israel has attempted to change the balance of power between the judiciary and the legislative and executive authorities. Many perceived this change as a fatal blow to democracy, while others supported the change. These political conflicts cannot be ignored inside schools. The purpose of this study was to examine how education administration M.A. students deal with political conflicts within schools and the communication strategies they use. To that end, the method of simulation-based learning was used. The main research questions focused on the study participants' willingness to express their opinions about controversial political conflicts. The results revealed an unexpected scenario. Even though school principals might be expected to be in control because of their powerful position in the organization's hierarchy and their authority to mete out punishments and rewards, the simulations showed a different outcome in the broader political context, indicating that a general sense of chaos reigned in schools as well. Following these results, we developed a didactic educational model whose purpose is to educate toward social involvement and the ability to express a reasoned opinions.

Keywords: *Jewish and democratic state; political conflict; conformism; expressing independent opinions; education administration students; simulation-based learning (SBL).*

Introduction

The Complexity of The Democracy Debate in Israel

The contemporary challenges facing the State of Israel raise the question, in the public discourse, of how it is possible to preserve and integrate the various ideologies comprising the political entity of the State: as a democracy, on the one hand, and as a state for the Jewish People, on the other. Israel is a multicultural and very heterogeneous country. In recent years, it has been characterized by deep divisions fueled by the diverse composition of its population. Former President of Israel Reuven Rivlin claimed that, in recent decades, demographic and cultural processes have been reshaping Israeli society: from a society consisting of a clear majority and minority to a society consisting of four main sectors or “tribes” that are becoming increasingly equal in size: secular, nationalist-religious, ultra-Orthodox (Haredi), and Arab. In January 2023, Israel's right-wing Minister of Justice introduced a legislative package aimed at overhauling the judicial system. Many Israelis perceived this legislative package as a threat to Israeli democracy and initiated huge weekly protests against the government's reform plans. The scale of the protests escalated, with hundreds of thousands of people packing the streets of towns and cities across the country. Clashes with the police and counter demonstrations by government supporters raised the issue of conformism versus independent thinking [Kedar, 2004].

When Israel was established in 1948, the Israeli Declaration of Independence articulated the leadership's vision for the fledgling country. In particular, the Declaration made repeated reference to United Nations Resolution 181, which adopted the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan. Yet Israel's transformation from a parliamentary democracy to a constitutional democracy, known as the “constitutional revolution,” occurred

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only during the 1990s. This constitutional revolution was led by Supreme Court President Aharon Barak, who advocated a liberal interpretation of the principles of the Declaration of Independence [Shinar, 2022].

The four classic justifications for the importance of freedom of expression at the personal and social levels [Kremnitzer, 1988] are as follows: as a means of self-realization, of discovering the truth, of preserving the democratic process, and of balancing stability and change.

The connection between ideas of democracy and freedom of expression is complex. According to the simplified definition of democracy (i.e., that the people, through democratic elections, are the sovereign power), liberty can be taken away from the minority. Nevertheless, the inherent link between the ideas of freedom of expression and democracy refers to the democratic idea of equal participation of the people in the governmental process; it is not just the power of the majority but the ability of everyone to participate in this process [Barak, 2000; Rachaf & Kremnitzer, 2008].

In Israel, freedom of expression is recognized as an important and fundamental right. It serves as a broad platform for individual expression and autonomy within society, forming an integral part of the foundations of democracy. However, this is not an absolute right and often conflicts with other rights and obligations [Medina & Bloch, 2023].

Freedom Of Political Expression in Education Institutions in Israel

Freedom of political expression in the Israeli education system is a complex issue that intersects with various factors, including national identity, security concerns, and educational objectives. While Israel maintains democratic values and guarantees freedom of expression as a fundamental right, the application of this value in education institutions is subject to certain boundaries and contemplations. The Israeli education system aims to cultivate informed and engaged citizens who actively participate in the democratic surroundings. Drawing on this aim, there is educational acknowledgement of the importance of allowing students to express their political views, engage in political discourse, and develop critical thinking skills. Unavoidably, certain political issues may be considered more controversial or sensitive than others. Educators may exercise caution when addressing such topics, considering the age and maturity of students, community feelings, and the potential impact on the learning environment. Nevertheless, efforts should be made to create opportunities for open dialogue, humble debate, and the examination of varied perspectives.

The issue of freedom of political expression among teaching staff was first discussed in the early 1950s in a petition filed by Dr. Israel Eldad against Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion's decision to block his employment as a teacher. The order not to employ him was based on the accusation that Eldad had preached about the use of weapons against the Israel Defense Forces and the Israeli government. In his petition, Eldad, who had previously served as one of the leaders of the Lehi (a movement that fought against the British Mandate of Palestine), claimed that the real motive for the defense minister's refusal to approve his employment was political and was based on the fear that his ideas would influence the younger generation to adopt political positions that were contrary to those of the government [Kedar, 2004]. The court accepted the petition and ordered him to return to teaching based on procedural and administrative reasoning. However, at the beginning of the ruling, Justice Shneur Zalman Cheshin (HCJ 144/50, p. 404) expressed the following wish:

The day is not far off, and the Knesset will pass a law that will prohibit teachers and educators and anyone who deals with educational needs in practice, from engaging, either overtly or covertly, whether inside or outside the school, in matters of politics, or in any activity from which the smell of politics arises. The education of our children is sacred, and on this altar no strange fire should be sacrificed.

In the spirit of this, in 1953, approximately two years after the Eldad case ended, the Knesset enacted Article 19, which stated that "A teacher, as well as any other employee of an educational institution, shall not conduct propaganda in favor of a political party or other organization among students of an educational institution."

Until 2014, the Ministry of Education Director General's circular explicitly stipulated prohibitions for teaching staff in the political field. In September 2014, the conclusions of a special committee established by Education Minister Shai Piron on the differences between political and party education were published [Unger & Vergen, 2010]. According to the committee's conclusions, teachers may express an opinion and hold a certain view, but "shall be aware of their status, set a personal example with their respectful conduct, will not impose their views on the students, and will allow their students to think critically (towards them as well)." [Michaeli, 2014]

The question of whether there is room to express political opinions in the classroom or whether schools should be a safe place, away from political battles, is not unique to Israel [Camp, 2020; McAvoy, 2017]. In her book, Paula McAvoy offers guidelines for that pertinent question drawing on a study she conducted that included 21 teachers and 1,000 students in 35 schools. She concluded that schools are and should be political places but must not endorse specific partisan ideologies. In light of these issues, the aim of the present study was to examine how education administration students handle political conflicts.

Research Questions: How willing are education administration students to express their opinions concerning the political conflict at hand? Do they "align" with the directives of the Director General of the Ministry of Education and Supervision, or do they feel confident enough to express their own opinions? How is the conflict perceived?

Rationale: In recent years, Israel has seen many controversies regarding, inter alia, the democratic nature of the state, separation of religion from the state, sharing the burden of military service, and equal participation in the economy. Extensive demonstrations and feelings of anger expressed these great ideological differences; hence the urgency to address the expression of political opinions in the classroom.

Materials and Methods

Simulation-based learning (SBL) examines participants' behaviors, knowledge, and skill levels by placing them in scenarios in which they must actively address specific issues (Asal & Kratoville, 2013; Baranowski & Weir, 2010). SBL is an active learning experience in which the learner acts out a professional scene, the focus of which is a problem or conflict, followed by a reflective debriefing session. In this session, the participants, guided by the simulation instructor, engage in a peer discussion of ways to improve their future performance in similar real-life situations [Levin, et al, 2023].

The second phase of this study included a content analysis of the education administration students' responses. We applied a qualitative content analysis approach, a methodology in which a series of procedures are used to create meaningful generalizations and distinctions within the text. Content analysis combined with the qualitative approach used in this study was based on an understanding of the content and its accompanying interpretation. This method helped derive the principles and values found in the corpus. The analysis also included quotes from textbooks to maintain maximum precision in presenting the content [Sabar Ben-Yehoshua 2001; Author, 2006].

In this study, simulation provides the students with experiential learning opportunities that help them understand complex political processes, systems, and decision-making dynamics. The main contributions of simulation to political education, in general, and of this study, in particular, lie in practicing critical thinking and analysis. The simulations require participants to analyze information critically, assess competing interests, and make strategic decisions. Through these activities, learners develop critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of political issues and strategies. The simulations in themselves present learners with ethical dilemmas and moral choices, challenging them to consider the ethical implications of their actions and decisions. By grappling with these dilemmas in a simulated environment, learners develop ethical reasoning skills and an appreciation for the ethical dimensions of leadership as expected from education administration students.

Phase 1: Presentation of simulation events:

During SBL, two scenarios were presented to the students. These two scenarios dealt with current political conflicts relevant to life in the State of Israel, designed to elicit participants' responses either of conformism or of independent thinking. In both scenarios, the actor impersonated a conservative opinion that was in line with the right-wing government.

- A school principal is ordered to fire a teacher who expressed his political stance and supported protests against the government's judicial reform.
- A principal at a state school receives a request from an official Orthodox rabbi to split the mixed choir into two separate choirs for boys and girls, based on Jewish Rabbinical Law.

Phase 2: Questionnaires

Questionnaires containing open-ended questions were then handed out to the students who observed the SBL, and the viewers' responses were content analyzed [Krippendorff, 2018; Shkedi, 2006].

Ethics: As part of the transparency code, viewers were presented with the purpose of this study. Furthermore, as part of maintaining strict confidentiality, we emphasized that their personal details would remain confidential. In the Findings section, their names have been replaced with pseudonyms [Shkedi, 2006]. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Achva Academic College.

Research Population: Participants were 21 first-year representatives of the master's degree in Education Systems Administration, who were teachers in the Israeli educational system. Their ages ranged from 25 to 46 years, and most of them were female and of middle socioeconomic status. Two students participated in the simulation and the remaining 19 observed the simulation and its recording.

Results

Content Analysis of The Education Administration Students' Responses to Scenario 1

What is your personal impression of the encounter between the principal and the teacher? (You can give more than one answer.)

Figure 1 shows that most participants (13) thought that there was no negotiable solution to the argument between the principal and the teacher. However, 11 participants thought that the conflict may be resolved either by communication, saying that "a gentler discussion is needed" and "school should stay neutral when discussing politics," or by systemic change since the Ministry of Education Director General's circulars should address those kinds of incidents. Only two participants regarded the conflict as a political argument, mirroring the Israeli political situation that had penetrated the school boundaries.



Figure 1. Personal Impressions from The Conflict Encounter Between the Principal and The Teacher

What is your personal impression of the nature of the communication between the principal and the teacher? (You can give more than one answer.)

Figure 2 shows that most observers (14) regarded the discourse as aggressive, citing responses such as "loud," "stressful," and "threatening." However, nine viewers regarded the discourse as respectful, with responses such as "cautious" and "trying to convince each other." The remaining seven defined the communication as impartial discourse, citing responses such as "reasonable claims" and "well-anchored."

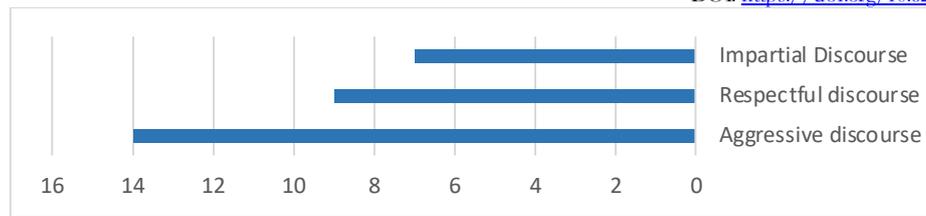


Figure 2. Reflections From the Communication Between the Principal and The Teacher

How successful were the confronters in persuading each other?

Most observers (17) thought that the principal and the teacher had failed to convince each other, as shown in Figure 3. Even those five who identified signs of persuasion admitted that they were only attempts. One observer reported that the confronters radicalized their positions.

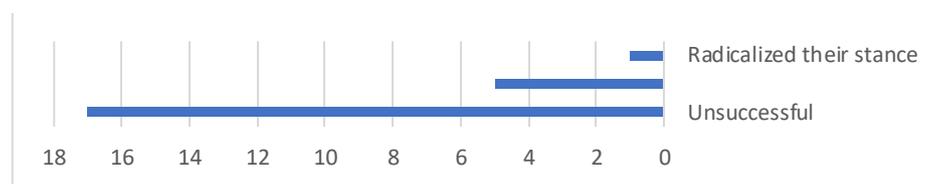


Figure 3. Confronters' Ability to Persuade Each Other.

What advice would you give the principal participating in the simulation?

Figure 4 shows that three pieces of advice were given to the principal participating in the conflict encounter: be less aggressive (7), be more assertive (5), and reach a compromise (6).

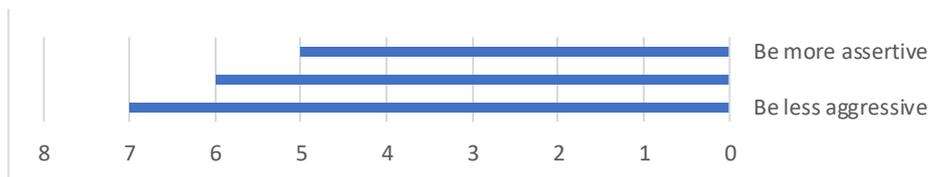


Figure 4. Potential Advice for The Principal Participating in The Conflict Encounter.

Which conflict style did you observe?

Figure 5 shows that most observers (16) regarded the conflict style as negative, which may lead to a dead end.

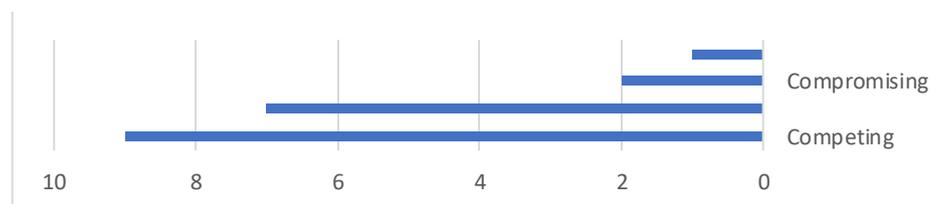


Figure 5. The Conflict Style in The Encounter Between the Principal and The Teacher

Content Analysis of The Education Administration Students' Responses to Scenario 2.

What is your impression of the meeting between the principal and the rabbi? (You can give more than one answer.)

Similarly to the first simulation, 13 participants thought that there was no negotiable solution between the principal and the rabbi (Figure 6). However, only six participants thought that the conflict might be resolved through communication. Two participants regarded the conflict as a political argument, mirroring the Israeli political situation that had penetrated the school boundaries.

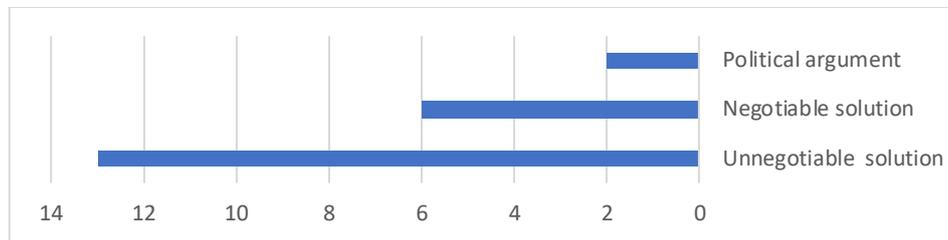


Figure 6. Personal Impressions from The Conflict Between the Principal and The Rabbi

What is your personal impression from the communication between the principal and the rabbi? (You can give more than one answer.)

While the principal's conduct was described with positive adjectives and adverbs, such as "polite," "speaking calmly," and "kind," the rabbi received five negative references such as "rude," "impertinent," and "loud" (Figure 7).

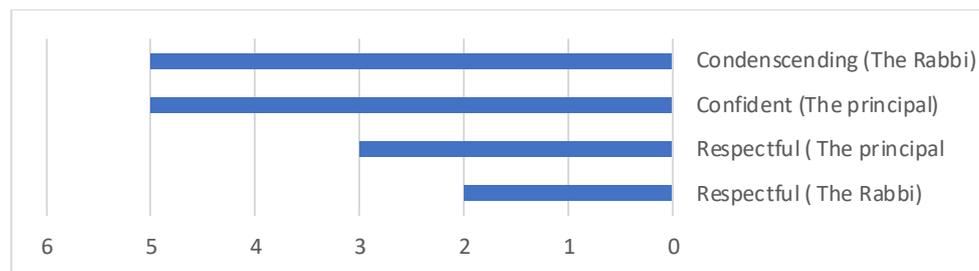


Figure 7. Reflections From the Communication Between the Principal and The Rabbi

How successful were the confronters in convincing each other?

Figure 8 shows that most participants (19) concluded that the rivals had failed to convince each other. Only one participant stated that they had tried.

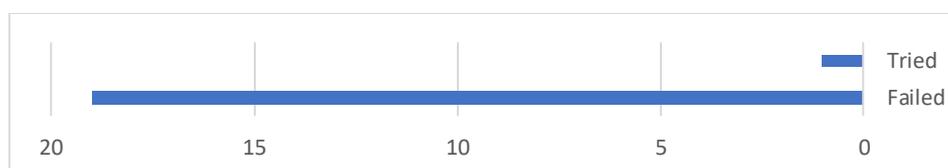


Figure 8. The Confronters' Ability to Persuade Each Other

What advice would you give the principal participating in the simulation?

Figure 9 reveals that two pieces of advice were given to the principal participating in the conflict: improve your conversation skills (12), for example, "be open minded" and "be politically correct," and continue being assertive (6), for example, "stick to your principals," "fight for your truth," and "keep clarifying your point."

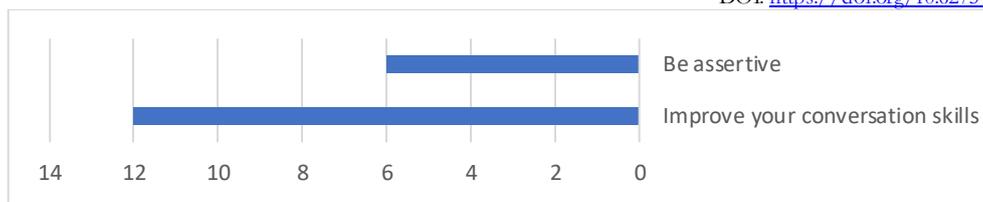


Figure 9. Two Pieces of Advice Given to The Principal Participating in The Conflict

Which conflict style did you observe?

Figure 10 reveals that most observers (12) regarded the conflict as a negative one that may lead to a dead end.

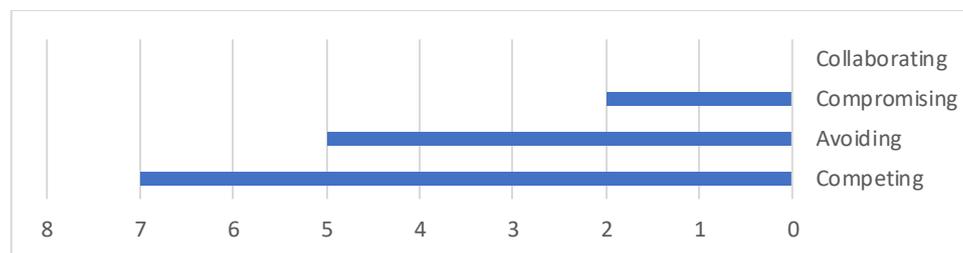


Figure 10. The Conflict Style According to The Observers

Discussion

The question of whether to expose teachers and students to controversial political opinions that are relevant to the students' lives, or alternatively, leave the school "sterile" without expressing political opinions, is still considered a relevant question [Camo, 2020]. Even though the school is not a hygienic space, one may prefer to ignore controversial dilemmas for various reasons, such as maintaining education routines and avoiding unnecessary upheavals. Since children and adolescents are aware of what is happening around them and are frequently exposed to various political messages on social networks, in print, and in electronic media [Cummings et al, 2016], the appearance of such conflict in educational organizations is inevitable.

Addressing value conflicts in education usually requires open dialogue, respect for diverse perspectives, and a commitment to finding common ground when possible. It also involves recognizing the inherent subjectivity of values and the need for ongoing reflection and negotiation within educational communities. Navigating value conflicts in education is essential for fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and effective learning environment [Goldberg, Ron, 2014]. Nevertheless, the political conflicts that were presented to the education administration students had the potential to threaten democracy, in general, and one of its basic values, namely, freedom of speech, in particular.

This study was based on two simulations describing conflict situations involving two incompatible political agendas, with the principal as one of the participants. In both cases, asymmetric communication was observed. Communication between people of different status reflects, in many cases, the asymmetry of power; consequently, there is a tendency for the low-status holder to be defensive. A high-status holder can mitigate and blunt the harmful effects of defensive situations by creating a supportive climate or, alternatively, exacerbate a defensive climate [Rahim, 1983]. Both simulations reflected the defensive situation. While one might have expected the principal to demonstrate her dominance due to the sources of power afforded to her by virtue of her role (a high position in the organization's hierarchy and authority to bestow punishments and rewards), the situation is less clearly defined in the wider political arena. In the first simulation, the principal threatens the "disobedient" teacher by telling her that she will distance herself from her students if she does not change her behavior. However, the teacher does not display conformity and is besieged and unwilling to capitulate despite the real threat. According to viewers' reports, neither of

the two women's body language implied subordination, but demonstrated a confrontational stance with no hint of difference in authority. This was the case also in the second simulation between the principal and the rabbi. The principal's verbal and nonverbal language was authoritative and self-confident. In contrast, the rabbi was aggressive and threatening. The principal expressed her position in an assertive and confident manner and showed no signs of conformity. In both cases, the viewers were divided, according to their analyses; for example, most participants (13) thought that there was no negotiable solution between the principal and the teacher. On the other hand, 11 participants thought that the conflict may be resolved either through communication or systemic change. These findings mirror the tensions within the divided Israeli society; Israeli politics is characterized by fragmentation, with an array of political parties representing diverse interests, ideologies, and agendas. This fragmentation often leads to coalition governments composed of disparate parties with conflicting agendas, which challenges the implementation of comprehensible policies and the effective addressing of societal divisions.

Rahim [Thomas et al, 2008] proposed four characteristics of conflicts derived through combining 1) the degree to which individuals relate to their own interests and 2) their attitude toward the interests of others. This process can be presented by integrating two dimensions: one examines the intensity of people's need to satisfy their own requirements and the other characterizes the tendency to satisfy the needs of others. When these meeting points intersected, five conflict styles could be characterized. Similarly, they also suggested that competing (low cooperativeness, high assertiveness) is an attempt to satisfy one's own concerns at the other's expense. The opposite is being accommodating (high cooperativeness and low assertiveness), which sacrifices one's own concerns in favor of that of others. Avoiding (low cooperativeness and assertiveness) neglects people's concerns by sidestepping or postponing conflict issues. Collaboration (high cooperativeness and high assertiveness) is an attempt to find an integrative or win-win solution that fully satisfies both parties' concerns. Finally, compromising (intermediate in both cooperativeness and assertiveness) is an attempt to find a middle-ground settlement that only partially satisfies each person's concerns.

After observing both scenarios, most students tended to classify the conflicts they observed as competitive. A competitive conflict is defined as placing the personal goals and exclusive needs of each confronter at its center. In this style, each side stands up for its own interests until the stronger of the parties is crowned the "winner" of the conflict. Lawrence's theory [2010] of competitive conflicts claims that a competitive conflict can easily deteriorate to violence, particularly in national scenarios. Competitive conflict and violence refer to situations in which competition between entities escalates to the point of physical or psychological confrontation, often resulting in harm, injury, or damage. This phenomenon can occur in various contexts, including politics. Political competition can turn contentious, leading to conflicts between political parties, blocs, or interest groups. This may involve negative campaigning, smear tactics, protests, or even violent clashes between supporters of rival political movements, particularly in contexts of political instability or polarization. Even though most of the observers advised the simulation participants to conduct a less aggressive dispute and to negotiate, it seems that the societal atmosphere drove the participants to exercise their competitive stand.

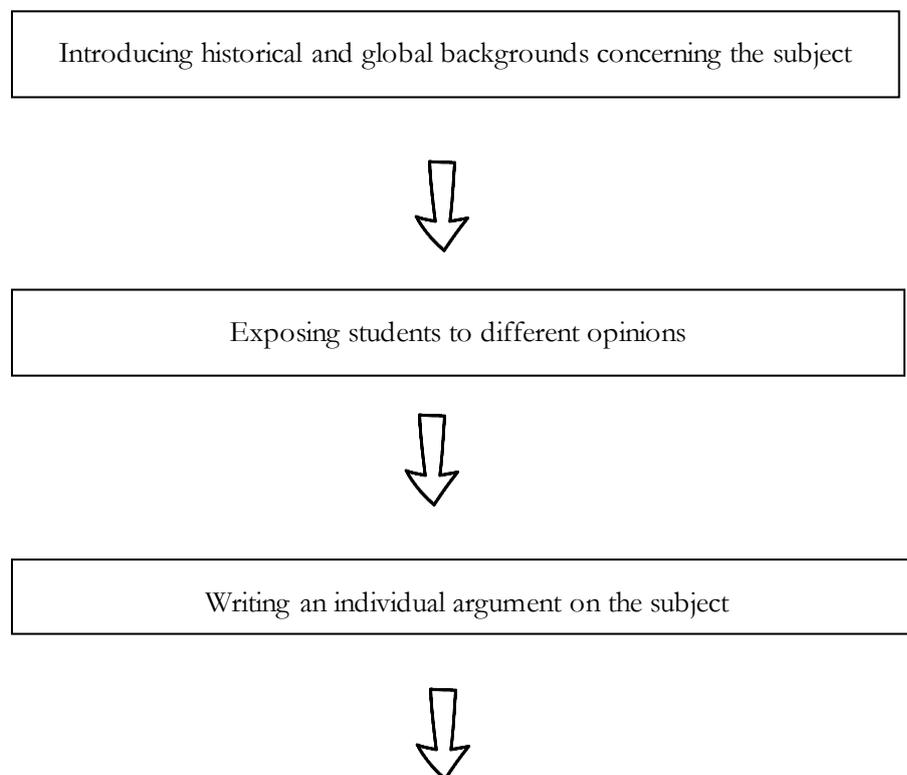
Violence erupts from social fragmentation and competition. Fragmentation and competition upset the existing balance of power within a society and cause upheavals. The observers' choice to portray the conflict as competitive appeared to be the result of the current situation in Israel, in which conservatives, on the one hand, and liberals, on the other, hamper themselves in their position and strive for the victory of their own politics as if in a zero-sum game. Hence, the Israeli common discourse about a civil war may seem to have a solid ground.

This trend corresponds well with the question of whether the attempt at mutual persuasion between the two parties succeeded. Most of the viewers claimed that not only were there no mutual attempts at persuasion between the interlocutors, but also observed a clear radicalization tendency. The results of persuasion do not depend only on the nature and strength of the persuasive party's arguments and reasoning or on the nature of the relationship between them. According to the observers, the results of the failure to convince the other party were directly related to the starting points of the discussion: If argumentation stimulates supportive thinking in the individual, parties will tend to be convinced. However,

if argumentation provokes antagonistic thinking that arouses feelings of humiliation, contempt, anger, and so on, parties will remain unconvinced. The lack of success in this process of persuasion, as well as the unwillingness to listen to the other party's arguments, can be attributed to the situation in Israel following the publication of Justice Minister Yariv Levin's plan, which has the potential to bring about a revolution in the justice system. Approximately half of the public firmly believes that Israeli democracy is in danger, while the other half seeks to reduce the power of the judicial system and its ability to restrain the government.

Our lifestyle in adaptive societies teaches us that, as social beings, we need to acquire social skills to fulfil our needs for connection with and approval by others [Flynn, 2018]. These social needs have frequently been satisfied through persuasion. Therefore, persuasion is a cardinal social instrument designed to prevent conflict. The fact that most of the participants in SBL failed to exercise persuasive communication skills led to a collision of power. Moreover, they distanced themselves from tolerant and democratic approaches. Simultaneously, the primary bright spot in the simulations was that the education administration students distanced themselves from conformism and chose to express a clear and unapologetic opinion. Nevertheless, the simulations encouraged active participation and engagement in political agenda, fostering a sense of civic responsibility and empowering learners to become informed and engaged citizens. By simulating roles such as decision makers or diplomats, participants gained insight into the importance of political involvement and its impact on their immediate society, both as educators and as principals.

After processing the results and subsequently realizing that political conflicts would eventually breach school boundaries, we concluded that political conflict may be used as a didactic tool toward educating students to be fully informed and involved citizens in a vital democracy. Accordingly, we have developed a didactic model as a template for dealing with political or social conflicts (Fig 10).



Learning to conduct an argument as well as to listen actively to variegated opinions and argumentations.



Holding a debate fair, where the students can express their opinions.

Figure 11. A Didactic Model for Formulating and Expressing an Opinion in The Classroom

This model has several goals:

- Increasing involvement in social and political issues.
- Coaching students to form independent opinions.
- Instructing students how to present a topic clearly as well as how to explain claims rationally and articulately.
- Imparting skills to develop creative, independent, and critical thinking.
- Encouraging a vigorous and respectful discussion that will lead to the assimilation of a democratic and appropriate debating culture.
- Developing citizens with the ability to form their own opinions and thus be full partners in a democratic state.

Limitations Of the Study: The research participants were students in the first year of their master's degree in education systems administration.

Funding: This research was funded by the Simulation Center at Achva Academic College.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Ethics Committee of Achva Academic College.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Additional details regarding the method and the reported results will be provided on request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Figure captions.

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Figure 2. Reflections on the communication between the principal and the teacher

Figure 3. Confronters' ability to persuade each other

Figure 4. Potential advice for the principal participating in the conflict encounter

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