Sharing School Staffs Ambivalent Perceptions and Feelings towards Children from Divorced Families

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Abstract

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In the last years, the divorce rates have risen in the world, as well as in Israel. Changes in family structure significantly affect children life cycles and they have to deal with their parents' divorce in different ways. Since children spend many hours in school and school is part of the child's life cycle, school becomes the child's second home. The subject of divorce raises many concerns among school staffs; therefore, it is important to discuss how school staff relates to divorce in general and to children of divorced families in particular. A doctoral thesis sought to examine how to improve perceptions of school staffs regarding dealing with children of divorced families. The following article presents a part of the qualitative findings of a doctoral thesis that discusses improving perceptions of school staff with regard to dealing with children of divorced families from a pedagogical perspective. It addresses school staffs' feelings and perceptions towards children of divorced families.

Keywords: Divorce; Children from divorced families; Ambivalence; Divorce perceptions.

1. Introduction

Divorce is a growing worldwide phenomenon. The concept of family has changed (Figueiredo & Dias, 2012) and these changes reflect children's life cycles. Part of a child's life cycle is school, schools are forced to deal with divorce, and how it affects children. Little has been written about the action patterns of school staff in relation to this subject. This article discusses the perceptions of school staff

regarding divorce and children of divorced families. It presents part of the qualitative findings of a doctoral dissertation that was written on the subject of improving perceptions of school staff with regard to dealing with children of divorced families from a pedagogical perceptive. It is important to explore school staffs' perceptions of the phenomenon in general and their role regarding children of divorced families in particular. It is also important to investigate how they deal with the situation. Hence, the subject of divorce raises many questions and concerns among school staff.

School staffs' motivation is mainly invested in promoting students pedagogically. Research concerning its role perception relates to students' advancement and the creation of optimal conditions for students' academic achievement. This research investigated the challenges that may arise for school staff when they have to deal with children of divorced families. These perceptions not only strongly influence their behavior and functioning with children of divorced families; but also contribute, or not, to children's wellness throughout the crisis (Veinberg, 2015).

1.1 Divorced Families

The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (2012), reported that about 40,000 marriages take place annually, while 11,000 couples divorce. The report referred to the entire population of Israel and statistics show that, in the Jewish sector alone, one-third of marriages ends in divorce. Over a period of thirty years, divorce rates have increased threefold. Eldar-Avidan and Barnea (2002) and Nardi (2003), stated that the increase in divorce rate is influenced by social changes. These days society accepts divorce as an alternative to the original family structure; divorce is more common. Nevertheless, Eldar-Avidan and Barnea, (2002) claimed that divorce affects the nuclear as well as extended family. Divorce has a huge and often devastating impact on all members of a family, parents as well as children. Therefore, any discussion about getting divorced is harder when children are involved. Because of divorce and changes in family structures, new realities are conceived for all family members. Divorce is a long process and the final divorce decree is but a milestone in this process. It is equally important to realize that in a family life cycle, divorce is an unplanned event, which brings about different and contrasting feelings. Families have to deal not only with confusion and loss but also with conflicting desires, stress and the stigma of divorce (Veinberg, 2015).

1.2 Children of Divorce

Following the discussion of divorce in general, this part discusses the critical effect divorce has on children. As mentioned previously, the concept of family has changed over the years (Figueiredo & Dias, 2012). These changes have repercussions on family structures as well as their operation (Bayle, 2005). For a long time, children were peripheral in a family. However, today, children are central to family life (Leal, 2005).

As a result of divorce, changes occur within the nucleus of a family, which affect parents in general and children in particular (Ayalon & Flasher 2004). Furthermore, changes in family structure contribute to changes in the behaviors and internal mental processes of all members of that system (Eldar-Avidan & Barnea, 2002; Minuchin, 2003). There are long-term consequences for children's development in several aspects (Smilansky, 1991). These are reflected on an emotional, cognitive and

behavioral level. Children experience great stress due to a situation forced on them. Changes in their lifestyle create stresses and an imbalance that require reevaluation of the effect that divorce has on children. In addition, children are affected by stress and their parents' emotional reactions; at some point, they feel that their parents are unavailable emotionally to protect and provide for them (Eldar - Avidan & Barnea, 2002). According to Smilansky (1991), children from divorced families generally suffer from lower academic achievements as a result of stress that directly affects their performance and behavior, both within and outside the home. From the research that has been carried out over the past 20 years (Amato, 2006), it seems that divorce has a negative impact on children. Five factors can predict whether the impact on children will be negative or positive. (1) Absence of one parent; divorce damages the time that a parent spends with his/her, children. (2) Parental ability of the custodial parent. (3) Level of conflict that exists between parents. (4) Decline in a household's economic circumstance. (5) Physical changes that children may experience, such as moving home, school, etc. Therefore, the school has a significant part in children's wellness and functioning during and after the divorce process.

1.3 Teachers' Perceptions of Children of Divorced Families

In light of the above, school is the place that should provide a stable and consistent environment and function as the children's second home. Just as children usually perceive the parents' home as a stable and supportive framework for them, they ought to perceive the school framework in the same way. Therefore, schools should provide children, a safety net, a stable and supportive environment that includes both emotional and educational support during parents' divorce (Ayalon, 1991; Eldar-Avidan & Barnea, 2002; Erhard & Shemer-Elkayam, 2004; Kupershmidt, 2006).

As presented above, divorce and separation are correlated positively with lower achievements and children's performance at school (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). Elementary school children, who experience parental divorce immediately begin performing academically worse than their peers from whole families (Potter, 2010). In conclusion, the role of schoolteachers in supporting children of divorced families is crucial. The following paragraph will present part of the qualitative findings that discuss school staffs' perceptions of and feeling towards children of divorced families.

1.4 Methodology

A mixed methods research paradigm was chosen in order to generate a robust body of findings that would allow generalizability (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007). However, this article presents the findings that emerged from qualitative research part, which used document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 10 school principals, 10 educational counselors and 10 teachers in different elementary schools in northern Israel. Content analysis was employed as a data analysis method.

1.5 Findings

Part of the qualitative finding that emerged from the content analysis shows that school staff's' perceptions of divorce and children of divorced families are prejudiced.

In addition, the subject raises different emotions among school staff members. Some of them identify with the children/parents; some feel that it is very difficult to get divorced or deal with affected children. Some are sad for the children; others are frustrated by the fact that they have to deal with these children. They also pity the children and a few of them think that they can contribute to the children's wellness. Finally, the expressed ambivalence and duality with regard to dealing with children of divorced families. Thus, it can be said that school staffs' perceptions of children from divorced families are emotional and emotionally ambivalent

1.6 School Staffs' Perceptions

The following table presents the perceptions of school staffs with regard to dealing with children of divorced families.

Table 1. School staffs' perceptions towards children of Divorced Families is emotional and   emotionally ambivalent

Categories	Sub-categories	Evidence
Prejudice	Awareness	☒ Failure - the feeling of me being guilty, kind of guilt. ☒ I do not know much about the subject\ ☒ Oh my goodness. It is a difficult process ☒ I had to divorce my husband. I would not do it; it is very difficult. ☒ Less functional families. Their schedule is not organized like other children
	Labeling	☒ When talking about children of divorced parents there is always some kind of stigma. ☒ Degrading ☒ a child often uses a kind of manipulation
Emotions	Identification	☒ Some empathy between women ☒ Identification with the mother The father lives with someone and the door was open ☒ Why I'm different,
	Difficulties	☒ The process of divorce is sometimes very painful ☒ Family falls apart ☒ The dirty laundry and all that rot ☒ Financial difficulties Need a lot of courage, strength, ☒ Fear, pain, and disappointment,
	Sadness	☒ A ticking bomb ☒ Devastation ☒ It always hurts. It hurts for anyone who goes through this, adults and children.
	Frustration	☒ Not enough that I have to deal when I go with my father, not enough that I have deal when I go to my mother, now I have to deal with what they tell me here. ☒ Some unstable ground,
	Pity	☒ Divorce's no reason to feel sorry for a child ☒ Thank God, not from my personal life and not from my close surroundings ☒ I really feel sorry for them.
	Wellness	☒ They are not aware of the sensitivity of the child, this child needs more They have priority over others ☒ The school is the child's second home ☒ More sensitive, Building trust
Ambivalence	Duality	☒ It is very difficult to deal with divorced parents/ ☒ Actually two houses

2. Conclusions

From the table it emerges that there are diverse opinions, ambiguity regarding school staffs' perceptions of divorce in general, and children of divorced families in particular.

The finding shows that there are a variety of opinions and ambiguity towards divorce in general and children of divorced families, in particular, This finding can be explained by the fact that on the one hand, people have different opinions. School staff members start with different worldviews regarding divorce and children from divorced families. Their opinions derive from their feelings and interpretations of those emotions, and from their experience and worldviews. Their emotions vary from identification with a child, difficulties, and sadness they feel for themselves and these children, to frustration and pity they experience when dealing with the situation and trying to help a child find some relief. Some of them identify with these children or one parent. Others mentioned their difficulties in dealing with the situation and the fact that they did not always understand or know what to do with these children. They also mentioned children's difficulties and projected these difficulties onto themselves. They are confused by their feelings and by children's frustration regarding divorce. Some felt it was an unknown area both for them and children and they did not know exactly what to say, or what to do when they were confronted with divorce. Others felt pity for these children. On the other hand, some school staff members felt that if they had established a sense of trust and wellness with children, they would be able to help them deal with the divorce.

This article discusses divorce, in general, children of divorced families and the perceptions of school staff. As it showed, school staff shares ambivalent perceptions of and feelings towards children from divorced families. Therefore, it is important that schools staff be aware of their feelings and opinions regarding divorce in order to deal with the issue appropriately.

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