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## **Teachers' Perspectives on Hitting Back in School: Between Inexcusable Violence and Self-Defense**

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*Israeli schools expressly forbid a student to hit back after being attacked. In semistructured interviews, 71 Israeli educators were asked for their views on the hitting-back tactic. The interviews compared their attitude toward hitting back as teachers with their take on the matter as parents. The results, analyzed using grounded theory, show that most educators would not object if their children hit back in self-defense when attacked but would discipline students who hit back unless they can prove their claim of self-defense. Interviewees are much less inclined to discipline retaliators who do manage to prove self-defense but feel that investigations to verify self-defense under school conditions are impractical. To deter bullies, they say, teachers must declare their readiness to discipline everyone involved; otherwise, bullies will falsely claim self-defense. The discussion explores the implications of role theory on teachers' attitudes.*

**KEYWORDS** *hitting back, self-defense, discipline, teacher*

Fighting among students is very common in schools. Customary school codes of conduct in Israel, where this study was performed, and in many other countries proscribe violence and prescribe discipline for students who use it, making no distinction between aggressors and responders to prior attacks. Therefore, students who take the law into their hands and hit back (i.e., respond violently to prior physical provocation) are deemed worthy of discipline.

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Teachers' attitudes toward hitting back are important in regulating school violence. However, few studies have investigated them and those that exist neither examine the rationale behind these positions nor ask what prompts teachers to discipline those who hit back (Waasdorp, Pas, O'Brennan, & Bradshaw, 2011). The current study investigated the factors that shape teachers' attitudes toward hitting back and motivate them to encourage or penalize this behavior, if at all. To accomplish this, the study also examines differences between the respondents' attitude as teachers and their feelings as parents.

## HITTING BACK

### Attitudes Toward Hitting Back

Hitting back transcends retribution because it includes elements of self-defense, which is considered to be legitimate (Nourse, 2001). Indeed, children usually take a positive view toward hitting back but frown on instigated violence (Astor, 1997; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Yell, 2003). Bradshaw, O'Brennan, and Sawyer (2008) found that most students whom they examined favored hitting back. Even schoolchildren not involved in actual violence also typically favor retaliation as a good way to deter aggression and bullying (Frisén, Jonsson, & Persson, 2007). Bullying severely compromises the victims' social status (Nabuzoka, 2003); hitting back is found to sustain social status among young people (Barter, Renold, & Berridge, 2004; Phillips, 2003). The belief that hitting back deters a bully from striking again may induce students and their parents (Davis, 2006; Frisén et al., 2007) to favor this tactic.

Unlike parents and children, who may favor hitting back, most teachers oppose it (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). A specific teacher's attitude might be influenced by their stance on hitting back as a parent. Previous studies, however, do not ask how teachers incorporate their attitudes towards hitting back as parents into their thinking.

### Role Conflict: Teacher Versus Parent

According to role theory, people derive their expectations from the different roles that they play (Biddle, 1986). These roles, however, occasionally conflict. In the context of this study, some parents appear to favor hitting back when the attacked children are their own (Berkowitz, 1993; Davis, 2006). Thus, parents who are also teachers could find themselves in a conflict between their parental and their professional commitments. Katz (1984) offered an explanation for this conflict between the roles of parent and teacher. A parent is subjective, their expectations derived from concern for

the welfare of their own child. These expectations may clash with the expectations of a teacher who is responsible for the welfare of an entire class as opposed to that of a specific student.

## PUNISHING VIOLENCE

Teachers disclose their views on disciplinary infractions most conspicuously by being willing to discipline students who cause them. The trenchant public opposition to manifestations of violence in the United States and other countries has given rise to a zero-tolerance policy toward violence, meaning across-the-board discipline of anyone who uses physical violence in school. Studies in the United States, however, show that disciplines actually administered in schools are inconsistent. For example, members of some population groups are disciplined more severely than members of others: children with special needs more than others, boys more than girls, and African Americans more than European Americans (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Skiba, 2012). Disciplining is also prone to personal bias (e.g., unpopular students are disciplined more severely than popular ones; Nesdale & Pickering, 2006). Sometimes, too, teachers excuse students who are involved in violence from all discipline (Allen, 2010; Marshall, Varjas, Meyers, Graybill, & Skoczylas, 2009; Yoon, 2004).

Punishment in school is sometimes unfair and underweights moral considerations such as the extent of the student's guilt (Goodman, 2007; Skiba, 2012). Thus, hitting back, even when motivated by self-defense, might be disciplined or not depending on a specific teacher's attitude.

To the best of the author's knowledge, research thus far has not investigated the rationales behind educators' attitudes toward hitting back but also has not asked how teachers discipline retaliators. In the present study, teachers are asked to explain their attitudes toward hitting back by a student in their class generally and when it is their own child who hits back. It also asks them to explain contradictions, if any, between their attitude toward hitting back when the retaliator is their own child and what they think about it when the retaliator is someone else's child.

## METHOD

### Participants

Purposive sampling was used, as suggested by Patton (1990). To this end, I used research assistants as informants (i.e., mediators who can locate appropriate interviewees due to their proximity to the research venue). All of the research assistants had more than 5 years of teaching experience. Before beginning the research, I interviewed the research assistants and found them

to be experienced in coping with violence in school. The research assistants were able to track down additional participants who were also familiar with violence in school and had more than 1 year of school teaching experience. I personally advised the assistants in performing qualitative research; they received thorough training in conducting semistructured interviews.

To increase diversity and, in turn, credibility (Patton, 1990), the research assistants selected respondents who were men and women and who came from different neighborhoods and schools. Since the assistants were well integrated into the schools, they used personal acquaintance to identify teachers who were experienced in coping with violence. The teachers participating in the study were also parents. The study was performed in central Israel (greater Tel Aviv). All respondents worked in Hebrew-speaking state (public) schools that served a Jewish population.

Ten respondents were men and 36 were women. They worked in kindergartens (12), elementary schools (31), junior-high schools (17), high schools (9), and special-education settings (4). The youngest respondent was 28 years old and the oldest was 60 years old; the average age was 43.4 years ( $SD = 8.9$ ). Longevity of service ranged from 3 to 36 years; the average was 16.7 years ( $SD = 9.1$ ). The respondents each had between 1 and 5 children, 2.5 on average ( $SD = 1.0$ ).

The interview results revealed no differences in the respondents' attitudes toward hitting back on the basis of age, gender, longevity of service, or type of school. Therefore, this article makes no reference to these variables. Preschool and primary school teachers tended to apply more lenient penalties for all infractions of discipline, as warranted by the students' young age. The author was not, however, able to discern qualitative differences between them and postprimary teachers; consequently, the discussion that follows makes no reference to such distinctions.

### Procedures and Tools

After the respondents filled in a consent form, the interviewers asked them about their demographic details. They were instructed to assemble the interview around the following topics: parents' and teachers' perceptions of violence in school, their attitude toward hitting back and their perception of the meaning and importance of hitting back, and their thoughts about disciplining those who hit back. At an advanced stage of the research, when it became clear that the respondents were taking a tough line on hitting back because they felt it difficult, under ordinary school conditions, to determine "who started it," a second round of interviews took place. Here the interviewers were also asked to determine whether the respondents felt differently about disciplining a retaliator if they could determine who instigated the violence and who engaged in self-defense.

## DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and explored using grounded theory, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). In the first stage, the interviews were analyzed using the open-coding method: subject headings were created and assigned to phrases that exposed the subjects' perceptions of hitting back as parents and as teachers, their attitudes toward students who hit back, their expectations of the outcomes of the quarrel, their feelings about various treatment methods, and their attitudes toward discipline.

In the second stage, axial coding allowed identification by key categories and comparison of separate perspectives to establish similarities and dissimilarities among the respondents. Each respondent's perspectives on the implications of hitting back and administering discipline for hitting back were compared. Differences were found between the respondents' views as teachers and their views as parents. Processes that produced costs in the teachers' opinion and produced benefits in parents' opinion came into clear view. Four categories emerged: (a) perceptions of cost–benefit and moral values in hitting back, (b) attitudes toward hitting back as parents, (c) attitudes toward hitting back as teachers, and (d) attitudes toward discipline.

In the third stage (selective coding), the different perceptions of the “values of hitting back” emerged as the leading category. This category is linked to the other categories and explains the difference in attitude between the respondents as teachers and the same respondents as parents. This category elicited a theory: the respondents' stance towards hitting back is dictated by considerations relating to their roles as teachers and parents, as suggested by Katz (1984). One of the costs of fulfilling the role of teacher is the obligation to determine who started the fight; teachers try to reduce this cost by taking a categorical stance against hitting back (see the Results and Discussion sections).

## RIGOR

The content of the analysis was compared with the results of a quantitative study and the main results seemed to be similar (Vanunu & Fleischmann, 2013). Since research validity might be improved by having more than one researcher analyze the data (Patton, 2001), the author asked each research assistant to analyze the interviews in which he or she had been involved. As the principal researcher, I also analyzed each interview and compared my analysis with that of the research assistants. I found a good fit in most cases; occasional disagreements about specific analyses were settled by mutual discussion. I then used the assistants' insights to evaluate the meaning of each interview and the meaning of each analysis in its three stages.

All the research assistants were familiar with goings-on in school due to their role as teachers. As one who trains teachers in undergraduate and graduate courses on coping with violence in school, I am also familiar with the topic.

## Ethical Issues

I undertook the study only after obtaining authorization from my college's research committee to perform the study and approach classes to administer questionnaires and conduct interviews. All interviewees were aware of the purpose of the interview and gave their permission to publish the interview contents. It was nevertheless decided not to reveal the participants' names and/or identifying particulars.

## RESULTS

### Attitudes Toward Hitting Back

The respondents saw pros and cons in hitting back. Most frowned on the practice, especially when considerations related to the teachers' perspective were discussed.

#### THE MORAL DILEMMA OF VIOLENCE VERSUS SELF-DEFENSE

The respondents revealed the existence of a moral dilemma in their attitudes. When asked what they thought about the use of violence in school, all respondents vehemently objected to its use because they perceived it as harmful to the class and even the community. One respondent explained, "Violence, in my opinion, is one of the worst diseases of Israeli society today." Therefore, almost all respondents also opposed hitting back, perceiving it as a violent affront to the public and the transgression of a rule that is meant to protect the general welfare. The quotations that follow illustrate this:

You shouldn't respond to violence with violence, even in [self-]defense. For me, a kid who hits back is guilty. Failing to prevent violence and behaving violently are the same thing. He should have called for help, and the moment he didn't call for help and took the law into his hands, for me they're both morally equivalent.

Violence is a red line that mustn't be crossed and if it happens, it has to be dealt with at once. . . . To my mind, someone who hits back is even a bigger failure: he had a situation to deal with and chose to deal with it violently.

Most respondents, however, agreed that hitting back in self-defense is less contemptible than proactive violence. One respondent explained, "Morally, I think hitting back is less serious than aggressing in certain cases.

That is, when a child is attacked and hits back, it's a form of self-defense that's sometimes justified if not unavoidable." Another teacher said, "I would put hitting back in the gray area—unlike aggressing, which is definitely in the black area. That's the difference."

The perspective of hitting back as justified self-defense was given special emphasis when the question of hitting back by the teacher's own child was discussed. Some one third of the respondents even claimed that they would urge their children to hit back when necessary for self-defense. Most respondents said that they would understand, although would not recommend, hitting back when it serves their children as a self-defense tactic. The following two examples illustrate this duality in the respondents' attitude. One teacher explained that hitting back should not be done in school because, "We speak in no uncertain terms: don't hit [anyone] and don't use violence." When the same teacher was asked about her attitude in regard to her own children, however, she replied:

It's hard to answer this question because now, when I think about my own children, I don't want anything bad to happen to them, and for sure they shouldn't be victimized by bullies. The message I give at home is don't hit back, violence is a bad thing, one should stay far from it and also from violent children. Indirectly, however, and sometimes directly too, I explain to my children that if someone hits them and they feel they're being attacked, they should defend themselves.

Another teacher expressed disgust about violence and opposed hitting back in her class for this reason:

Violence shouldn't be accepted in any way whatsoever. Children should be trained to negotiate by means of language and not to use their hands even when they're attacked. . . . There should be zero tolerance toward all uses of violence, period.

The same teacher, however, explained:

Today I tell my two daughters that if anyone hits them, they should hit back. The era of "It's not nice for me that you cause me pain" is over; they have to defend themselves. It doesn't excuse violence and it doesn't make things better. I don't want to use the [rabbinical] expression "If someone comes to kill you, kill him first." But it's clear to me that if a boy or girl hits my daughter or picks on her in kindergarten or school, she'll hit back then and there. That way she'll defend herself and in most cases won't experience violence again.



## UPHOLDING THE SCHOOL'S CODE OF CONDUCT

The respondents opposed hitting back on the grounds that everyone has to obey the school rules. According to most respondents, the schools that employ them forbid hitting back as a matter of official policy. Here are several examples:

The sanctions and punishment [in our school] are the same for all students, aggressor and retaliator alike. They're clear to everyone up front and it's our duty to uphold them.

Both [aggressor and retaliator] are punished because both used their fists. There's no wiggle room; it's the clearest rule there can be.

[Hitting back] is like applying jungle law in the schoolyard; it's something that has no place in a setting that has rules [against it].

The school code has to be upheld. Upholding the code lets us send a clear message. Once the message is really clear and the punishment is foreknown, there'll be very few cases of violence.

The rules of our school say "no violence." There's a code of conduct that the student council refreshes and advertises now and then, but it's something that's very clear among us, something that our students know, that there's no violence in school and if there is, you'll [be sent] home. It's Section 1 in our code.

Obviously, since teachers are also subject to the school rules, they must oppose hitting back. Therefore, respondents cited the importance of upholding the school code as a reason for objecting to hitting back. They did so, however, mainly when asked to explain their attitude as teachers but not when discussing their own children. Here is an example: "As a teacher, I'm subject to the school code of conduct. I can't display tolerance toward hitting back." As a parent, however, he was less interested in obeying the rules. When asked why he urged his children to they hit back even if the school forbade it, he explained, "It's better for boys not to always do what they're told [obey the rules]. Their character has to be formed."

## A COST-BENEFIT DILEMMA EMERGED

The respondents were wont to explain their attitude toward hitting back in cost-benefit terms (i.e., the retaliator harms the community and the teacher but gains as an individual). In terms of the well-being of the teacher and school community, most respondents claimed that hitting back intensifies the cycle of violence and therefore poisons the school atmosphere, making

it necessary to expend more energy to restore peace, hence harming the teachers' work. They used the following expressions to explain the damage caused by hitting back:

- Instead of an incident being over and done with, it escalates into a major brawl.
- Violence begets violence begets violence.
- Any violent response merely results in more violence.
- Hitting back widens the cycle of violence.
- When there's hitting back, the system has to intervene more firmly.
- For the teacher, hitting back creates many problems—tension, frustration, and waste of time, to name only a few.

Only three respondents believed that hitting back might benefit the community by deterring bullies and, in turn, lowering the level of violence. As for the retaliator's well-being, most respondents suggested that hitting back improves the retaliator's social status and helps them emotionally. Some respondents also suggested that a student who does not hit back forfeits deterrence, becomes a victim, and may consequently suffer social and emotional harm.

Several respondents explained the divergent processes that await those who hit back and those who do not:

Victim [a child who doesn't hit back] becomes a teacher's pet.

These children [victims who don't hit back] become punching bags, sad to say, and then parents tell them to hit back—as an educational thing.

Hitting back improves the student's status in class. It shows the other children that he's strong enough to stand up for himself and that starting up with him is not worth the trouble. But if a child does not hit back—for example, if he runs to the teacher for help—he loses status. Children laugh at him and call him names like baby, crybaby, tattletale, and so on, making further molestation more likely.

The child [who does not hit back] may become a victim. Children are really bad; they might gang up on a certain kid and molest him both at school and elsewhere. I get worried about things like that, so you have to tell children to be tough [to hit back].

Sometimes I say that if you feel someone's picking on you too much in school and you feel, let's say, that the adults aren't doing enough and so on, then yes, you can sometimes hit back and teach that kid what's called a lesson, so he'll know not to pick on you anymore.

## Punishing Hitting Back

The respondents believed it essential to discipline violent students to keep violence from escalating and teach them the consequences of their behavior. Many allowed no exception for mild violence:

I think [mild violence] should be punished as well; it has to be stopped because little things that sometimes start as a game, a make-believe beating, get bigger and bigger and escalate into more and more severe beatings. It has to be stopped.

Since the respondents included hitting back in the category of violence, almost all claimed that they would discipline students for this behavior as well. Here are two illustrations:

If it develops again into a violent brawl in the same case, both of them will have to sit [be disciplined], no matter who started it.

If both [aggressor and retaliator] exchange blows, hit each other, I don't call it semiviolence; everyone gets disciplined.

Very few respondents objected to disciplining a retaliating student on grounds of an objection to the use of discipline, per se. Following, however, are two examples:

I opposed hitting back but thought disputes should be settled peaceably, by mediation and exchange of words. In their opinion, any form of discipline would worsen the atmosphere at school and therefore harm the collective.

I never punished [anyone]—that's the truth. I believe the key to this matter is finding out the reasons and getting to the root of things, and I think the most helpful thing is to establish a personal relationship with the child, a emotional relationship, a genuinely loving relationship, to show the child that you really care about him as a person. In my opinion, these are the only things that can help.

### HITTING BACK—BY MY STUDENT, PUNISH! BY MY CHILD, COMMEND

As stated, almost all respondents said that they would punish hitting back but most respondents also agreed, at least tacitly, that their children should hit back (see above). Some were asked to explain the contradiction between their roles as parent and as teacher. Examples of their responses follow:

- As a father, I'm concerned only for my son's safety. As a teacher, I have to look out for everyone.
- Professionally [as a teacher], I see the problems that violence may cause. Personally [as a parent], I understand that if my children don't hit back, they'll become other children's victims.
- When it's my kid, I'm not responsible for the other party. As a teacher, I'm responsible for both parties.
- As a mother, it's important for me to protect my daughter and spare her from frustration. The teacher has to see the broad angle of what should and shouldn't be done at school and what things would be harmful to all students.
- A parent is responsible for his child, while the teacher has a commitment to all the students in her class.
- If I were his mother, okay [I would favor retaliation]—as a teacher, no—I'd try to treat the boy who administers the beating and not the one on the receiving end.
- As a mother, it's important for me to protect my daughter and keep her from suffering. A teacher has to see the broad angle of what can and can't be done in school, and hitting back is on the "can't" side.
- As a teacher, I certainly shouldn't agree to hitting back. As a parent, I have only one concern: that my child shouldn't suffer.

In this manner, the respondents acknowledged the mismatch between their attitude toward hitting back as teachers and the attitude they espouse as parents.

#### KNOWING THAT THE STUDENT'S CLAIM OF SELF-DEFENSE IS TRUE

The respondents' remarks indicate that they take self-defense claims into consideration, especially in regard to their own children. Therefore, in some interviews (mainly in Round 2, see Method section), an attempt was made to determine why the respondents seem to disregard these considerations when it comes to disciplining their students. Many respondents' remarks make it appear that their willingness to discipline a student who claims to have merely "fought back" traces not to principled opposition to self-defense but to distrust in the student's claims and fear that the aggressor will exploit the loophole to make the same claim. In their opinion, however, investigating cases of violence to determine "who started it" would consume so much energy as to make their work unendurable. The following examples shed light on their rationale:

As I said, it's not simple [to determine whether a student who professes retaliation is telling the truth]. I can't spend the whole day dealing with who started it and who hit back. There's no end to it. If it goes that way, I think it'd eat up my whole day. When would I teach? And also, my message, which we as educators have to make very clear, is: no violence allowed!

As to whether it's possible to punish only the bully [the one who started it], in our school there's no such thing as a bully. What's a bully, after all? If we see one child provoking another and the other doesn't hit back physically or verbally, then obviously only the former will be suspended. But it's usually very hard to know [who's the instigator] so you have to punish both. Otherwise, each of them will say that the other started it.

You often don't know who's guilty, and even if you do know, the other side had something to do with it, too. You can't appoint a grand jury to figure out who started it and who's guilty. In our opinion, it's better to punish both of them. That sends a message to all students: We don't put up with violence, and anyone who's involved in it, no matter how, will be punished!

In the middle of class, I don't know why two kids began to fight, why one got up and hit the other. Both of them were removed from class; they waited in the hallway. I gave them a one-day suspension; the next day I talked with their parents and there was no more violence.

Thus, it seems, the retaliator is disciplined because, in the respondents' opinion, disciplining both protagonists excuses them from having to perform a time-consuming investigation to determine who started it.

The interviews, however, also show that the initial expressed attitude is "exceptioned" when teachers really know that one side acted in self-defense. In such a case, the latter is disciplined much less severely. The following interview segments demonstrate this:

Interviewer: Why would you punish someone who retaliates even if he or she says it's in self-defense?

Teacher: We don't have a judicial system to determine who started it. Both students get suspended. It doesn't matter who started it and who got drawn in.

Interviewer: But what would you do if it's clear that one of the parties merely hit back?

Teacher: Let me continue. Obviously, both children are treated the same only at the beginning of the inquiry. Afterwards, if we manage to figure out who's offender and who's the defender, of course they won't be treated the same. The offender should be punished more severely. The defender is in a totally different situation

Interviewer: What would you do if a student claims that she tried to defend herself and that's why she hit back?

Teacher: I don't have the strength to figure out every last thing; the child who retaliates should be punished severely.

Interviewer: But what if you find out definitely that the student hit back because she was defending herself?

- Teacher: In a case where a child is attacked and defends himself, he won't be punished. The matter will be dealt with by reporting only to the parents and having a talk together with the aggressive child.
- Interviewer: How do you solve problems of violence among children when you don't know who started it?
- Teacher: First I try to find out [who's responsible for the quarrel] by asking those involved. If I find contradictions, then I bring in students who witnessed what happened, ones whom I trust to tell it like it is. Some children know how to manipulate and whitewash. We'll never get to the whole truth at all times, but we'll do our best to be objective.
- Interviewer: And insofar as you don't know [who started it and who retaliated], will both students receive the same punishment?
- Teacher: If I can't arrive at the whole truth, well, yes, then I'll punish the retaliator. If I manage to figure it out, then I won't.

## DISCUSSION

Ostensibly, the respondents opposed any manifestation of violence in school. The findings, however, show that this opposition is not absolute. If convinced that the student indeed hit back, most respondents are willing to soften the discipline or forego it altogether. Thus, the written rule in Israel, which leaves no slack for violence in the education system (Wininger, 2011), evidently clashes with common sense when the question of disciplining self-defenders arises, making the rule too strict to be implemented.

### Respondents' Attitudes as Teachers

Most respondents believed that hitting back would amplify violence and poison the school atmosphere. Researchers who look into the matter concur: retaliation may exacerbate violence and lead to escalation (Davis, 2006). It creates recurrent, long-lasting confrontations between children, and, accordingly, intensifies the violence and prolongs the clashes (Davis, 2006). Revenge may cause violence to escalate into brawls during recess (Warren & Anderson-Butcher, 2005). Violence has a "contagion" effect (Bandura, 1983; Warren & Anderson-Butcher, 2005). If so, hitting back may heighten students' exposure to violence and spread the predisposition to violence.

Most respondents also favored disciplining retaliators as well as aggressors. Research shows that judicial systems, too, often apply cost-benefit considerations in their decisions (Shavell, 2004), weighing how penalizing

both sides in a dispute may enhance the general welfare. Thus, judicial systems sometimes punish less-guilty as well as more-guilty parties, especially when the former may be held responsible for the dispute due to failure to take necessary precautions. When educators are “elevated to the bench,” they also hold retaliators at least partly liable for disputes even if they act in self-defense.

### The Parent Versus Teacher Role Conflict

The findings show that despite their opposition to the use of violence, most respondent acknowledged the right to self-defense in cases of violence in school. Their attitudes in this regard, however, yield to their practical needs as teachers. As teachers, the respondents stressed their opposition to violence. Discussing their own children, however, many emphasized the importance of self-defense, if only due to their practical awareness that a child who fails to retaliate will be exposed to recurring molestation and, in turn, loss of social status.

Role theory suggests that the role of individuals as parents may negate their role as teachers (Katz, 1984). This may explain why several respondents intended, as parents, to advise their own children to hit back but when asked to reply as teachers preferred to discipline retaliators.

Campbell (1975) proposes that individuals' attitudes are the products of a compromise between two clashing types of pressures: pressure originating in the individual's biological nature, leading to a selfish approach, and social pressure of the opposing kind, inducing a prosocial and, at times, an altruistic approach. Imparting prosocial attitudes to the society's constituent individuals enhances the functioning of the society and, in turn, of the individual who belongs to it. Therefore, society imparts to its members, by means of various agents, prosocial attitudes that sometimes clash with their selfish interests (Campbell, 1975; Simon, 1990). In our case, the respondents in their role as parents focused on their children's selfish personal interests. For this reason, they encouraged their children to defend themselves and hit back. As teachers, however, they are social agents whose role it is to impart the values of their society to tomorrow's adult members of the society (Noddings, 1995). Consequently, teachers are exposed to the society's attitudes and accept them. Thus, the respondents adopted the view that rules out violence among students even in self-defense and imparted these attitudes to their students.

### The Importance of Knowing “Who Started It”

At first glance, the respondents' attitude as teachers toward violence in self-defense was exceedingly negative. A deeper investigation of their remarks, however, shows that even as teachers the respondents acknowledged the

right of a student who is not their child to defend themselves but under restrictive terms. Under ordinary conditions of a quarrel between two pupils in school, they said, it is hard to obtain the information needed to determine the truth of one protagonist's claim of self-defense; absent such proof, the teachers said, they must discipline such a pupil. The teacher's decision on whether or not to discipline a student who uses violence in self-defense depends, strange as it sounds, on the tactic that the aggressor student adopts. The aggressor student can do one of two things: admit that she started it or falsely accuse the other of having done so. By confessing, the aggressor will incur discipline; accordingly, she has no interest in confessing. Lying, in turn—persuading the teacher that she is not at fault—might mitigate the penalty. The findings show that the respondents in their role as teachers assume that the aggressor student who stands before them will make the optimum decision for himself or herself and, accordingly, plead self-defense and even accuse the retaliator of responsibility for the quarrel. Therefore, even though our respondents affirmed the right to self-defense, it was inevitable that they should hold the retaliator liable along with the instigator and discipline both, because this alternative prevents the instigator from falsely claiming that she or he was “just hitting back.”

### The Importance of Investing Resources in Determining “Who Started It”

Theoretically, the respondents could conduct an intensive investigation whenever a student pleads self-defense. This would allow them to be much more lenient in disciplining the retaliator. The teachers, however, stated that such investigations would consume precious time and energy, possibly impairing their functioning in other matters. Accordingly, they believe that the policy they have embraced (i.e., disciplining both sides, aggressor and retaliator alike) is highly resource-efficient and, therefore, preferable to a policy of intensive investigation that would single out only the aggressor for discipline. Such a policy, however, may be amoral because it may disregard the right to self-defense.

If so, some respondents admitted that despite their principled opposition to violence, the retaliator should be disciplined less stringently, if at all, when no expensive inquiry is needed, (i.e., when they know for sure who started it and who hit back). Hence, the express policy of disciplining both sides equally, typically espoused by most respondents when discussing an anonymous student, is evidently meant to restrain the aggressor more than to deter the retaliator.

A quantitative study by this author shows that teachers indeed discipline self-defenders when the latter cannot prove their case and discipline those who retaliate much less if at all, particularly when the retaliator acts solely



in self-defense and can prove it (Vanunu & Fleischmann, 2013). Hence the outcome is a compromise between the wish to discipline the aggressor and consideration of the right to self-defense: rhetoric about disciplining everyone but limiting the penalty to the aggressor and to the self-defender who fails to prove his or her claim, allowing one who can prove his or her case to be disciplined mildly if at all, notwithstanding the black-and-white rule.

### Limitations and Conclusions

This study based itself on a small sample tailored to specific circumstances. Thus, its findings should be tested under other circumstances as well (e.g., in other countries that prescribe discipline under a zero-tolerance policy).

Israel's zero-tolerance policy on school violence requires disciplining an aggressor and a self-defender alike. Consequently, neither protagonist has an interest in informing the teacher about the altercation, leaving the teacher with little ability to influence the level of violence in school. Furthermore, the findings show that the respondents determined their stance on hitting back in view of their roles. Violent retaliation by a student could touch off a dispute between teachers and parents in school due to their different roles. If parents become more involved in restraining violence on school grounds, they might be able to align their positions with those of the teachers, thus alleviating the dispute between them. Such cooperation might also give teachers with better information about violence in their schools.

Better-informed teachers, in turn, may be able to lighten the penalties that they administer to retaliators. Teachers might amass more information about quarrels by recruiting students and their parents to solve problems and co-opting them in the investigation of quarrels among students. This kind of recruitment, as proposed in the past (Johnson & Johnson, 1996), would lessen the need for discipline by the teacher and, in turn, ease the friction that occurs among teachers, children, and parents when teachers discipline children who defend themselves, allowing greater cooperation among them. Improved cooperation among teachers, students, and parents may make teachers better informed about goings-on in school, allowing teachers to be less "unfair" in disciplining students who hit back, and so on.

The conclusions adduced from this study may have implications for similar situations in the education system or in judicial and economic domains in which supervisory players regulate conflicts between players who have clashing interests by punishing them. Thus, arbitrators' stances toward retaliators, for example, may originate in the difficulty of determining "who started it." This, however, is a topic for further research.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

There are no competing interests in relation to the current article.

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