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Forgiveness Education in Conflicted Societies: The Lived Experiences of Arab and Jewish Fifth-Grade Children in Israel

Laiki Saban ¹, Tali Gal ^{2,*} , Jiahe Wang Xu ³ , Jacqueline Y. Song ⁴ , Hannah Rapp ⁵ , Moon Evans ⁶ , Danielle Lee ⁷ and Robert Enright ⁶ 

¹ School of Criminology, University of Haifa, Haifa 3498838, Israel; laiki.saban@gmail.com

² Faculty of Laws, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 9190501, Israel

³ Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin Whitewater, Whitewater, WI 53190, USA; wangxuj@uww.edu

⁴ International of Forgiveness Institute, Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, 28223 Madrid, Spain; jacqsong@gmail.com

⁵ Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention, State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14068, USA; hrapp@buffalo.edu

⁶ School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI 53706, USA; yjevans@wisc.edu (M.E.); robertenright1@gmail.com (R.E.)

⁷ Independent Researcher, Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

* Correspondence: tali.gal@mail.huji.ac.il

Abstract: This research examines the subjective experiences of 10–11-year-old students participating in a social-emotional Education Program on Forgiveness and Agape Love (EPFAL) in Israel. The EPFAL is designed to help students acquire a social-emotional tool to help them deal with the wrongs, vulnerabilities, and injustices they will likely experience later in life. The EPFAL took place as part of a larger international research project evaluating the program's effectiveness in enhancing students' well-being and improving the class environment in Northern Ireland, Taiwan, and Israel. The present article presents findings from qualitative, semi-structured interviews of forty students and thirteen teachers who participated in the study in Israel and field notes of class observations conducted during data collection for the larger study. A thematic analysis of the findings suggests that students found the EPFAL interesting, enjoyable, and valuable. The participants experienced cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes, including changes in the perception of forgiveness. They experienced a sense of empowerment and openness, reduced anger and empathy, and learned to talk about their feelings. This study demonstrates how emotional, behavioral, and cognitive transformations promoted by the EPFAL affect children's relationships with friends and family and improve the classroom atmosphere.

Keywords: educational program; social-emotional learning (SEL); forgiveness; agape love; moral virtue; qualitative study



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1. Introduction

The Educational Program on Forgiveness and Agape Love (EPFAL) is an educational intervention based on Robert Enright's four-phase forgiveness model, which has been proven effective in promoting hope and reducing anger and violent reactions to wrongs [1]. Aiming to move beyond forgiveness to other moral virtues, the EPFAL is designed to promote the development of Agape love, defined as the tendency for unconditional giving to others, even when the offender does not deserve their compassion and mercy [2]. EPFAL follows the principles of social-emotional learning (SEL), which has been marked in recent years as one of the essential goals of education [3]. According to the United Nations 2030 Agenda, among its 17 goals of Sustainable Development, Goal 4 is Quality Education. The importance of SEL is expressed through the UN's program for schools as territories for peace [4]. SEL programs such as EPFAL allow students to learn about

ethics and develop moral character [5], opportunities that are particularly important in nationalistic and polarized societies such as Israel [6]. This article describes the subjective perspectives of Arab and Jewish fifth-grade students who participated in the EPFAL program in their classrooms in the north of Israel during the school year 2022 [7]. Previous empirical studies have evaluated intervention programs for forgiveness using quantitative measures and often neglected subjective aspects [8]. The subjective experience of individual students, parents, and teachers is critical for understanding why such programs work, how they work, and what elements are challenging, threatening, or empowering for the children. This is particularly true in Israel, where collective social conflicts penetrate personal lives and affect the daily behaviors of individuals.

2. Theoretical Background

The last three decades have seen the growing use of forgiveness as a psychological process designed to promote individual well-being and address various hardships [9]. Research on forgiveness-focused educational interventions has also expanded significantly. For example, in middle and elementary school studies in Milwaukee, participants' data analysis showed improved school functioning, self-esteem, attitudes toward teachers and parents, and educational achievements [10,11]. Further research has been conducted in several Belfast, Northern Ireland schools among Protestant and Catholic children aged 6–7 and 8–9, indicating reductions in anger following a forgiveness-focused educational program [12]. In South Korea, high-risk girls who participated in a twelve-week educational program for forgiveness showed a marked improvement in mental health, a marked decrease in anger and aggression, and an increase in empathy relative to a control group [13]. Similar findings were found in a study in Iran with 12 eighth-grade schools in the Islamic cultural context. Schoolchildren who participated in the program demonstrated significant reductions in anger and increased forgiveness [14]. A pilot study with fifth-grade students attending a low-income school in a midwestern U.S. city adds further evidence that forgiveness education can instill in children the willingness to forgive in situations of hurt and conflict, thus demonstrating forgiveness as a form of peace education [15]. There is, by now, a significant body of empirical research examining the usefulness of forgiveness interventions worldwide [8].

According to the psychological literature, the ability to forgive constitutes a high emotional-social developmental stage. Forgiveness is perceived as a coping strategy to deal with the stress of unjust situations [16]. However, according to Kim and Enright, forgiveness cannot be understood only as a coping self-strategy; forgiveness is a moral virtue with multiple qualities and a significant collective impact [17]. Despite some differences, researchers agree on the core components of forgiveness: it is associated with interpersonal relationships where an injury has occurred. It involves a conscious decision by the injured person to relinquish feelings of revenge, anger, and grudges towards the offending person while recognizing the injustice done. Forgiveness is not about forgetting the injury, relieving the wrongdoer from responsibility, or reconciling with them. It does not serve to justify, excuse, or minimize the wrong. It is a generous gift given voluntarily to the undeserving wrongdoer by the person wronged [18]. To address the need for justice through forgiveness, the Enright forgiveness process first focuses on the cognitive phase, separating the violent act from the person who did it. The violent act warrants condemnation and labeling as unjust. It even justifies a social response sanctioned in appropriate cases. Despite their actions, however, the wrongdoer is seen as humane and potentially deserving of forgiveness for their inherent internal value. Forgiveness is an inner personal process that requires mental strength, time, and effort and is considered courageous and generous. The forgiving person must not be rushed, pressured, or judged for feeling angry. The gradual and voluntary forgiveness process must fit the forgiver's internal pace [17].

Agape, the second major concept learned in the EPFAL, is a Greek word whose literal meaning is 'love'. It first appeared in Aristotle's writings and was later used by various theologians and philosophers. In Aristotle's literature, it appears in the context of

interpersonal relationships and refers to giving unconditional love to others, even when the 'other' does not deserve their compassion. Agape love is therefore considered a supreme moral virtue in moral education [19]. Enright suggests that forgiveness is a practical implementation and a specific case of agape love targeted at the person who has harmed the forgiver, and that it should be taught as a way of life and a worldview [7]. Typically, the forgiving person is unaware that by forgiving the undeserving wrongdoer, they are acting out of unlimited and unconditional love, which is the meaning of agape.

EPFAL is an SEL program offering a different educational model than the prevailing learning model in schools. The structure of the conventional learning model is hierarchical, and the discourse is often punitive. Knowledge is at the center, and education directs results measured in numerical grades.

In exploring how children experienced the EPFAL, we are guided by several educational theories: (1) the psycho-pedagogical approach, (2) the spiral curriculum approach, (3) cognitive learning through philosophy, and (4) bibliotherapy and art therapy. The psycho-pedagogical approach recognizes that learning and development combine emotional and cognitive dimensions, and emotional discourse is not detached from the material being studied. Learning processes are integrated in this approach, and emotional discourse promotes the learning mission [20]. The psycho-pedagogical approach perceives the teacher as a group facilitator leading the group dynamics, so their emotional and social abilities are essential to the effectiveness of the learning process. When discussions in the classroom involve emotional dynamics, they fit the model proposed by Collins of "interactional rituals". Participants develop a mutual focus of attention and become entrained in each other's bodily micro-rhythms and emotions. In this interpersonal interaction, the participants experience a shared reality and collective consciousness of empathy and empowerment [19]. Studies suggest that emotional and social learning is linked with the quality of teacher-student relationships. Teachers who regulate their emotions are more likely to impact their students positively and significantly. They are better equipped to treat their students with sensitivity and warmth, even as students behave in challenging ways [4]. Educational programs such as EPFAL provide ample opportunities for students and teachers to express emotions, speak openly about their personal experiences, and build relationships.

According to the Spiral Curriculum, cognitive learning occurs when learners meet the core content repeatedly and in a spiral way so that they gain a better and deeper understanding of it as they shift back and forth from instructions and explorations. Practically, each session starts where the previous session ended, and then progresses to the next level of understanding and implementation of the subject. Learning is understood as active and exploratory. The materials should stimulate interest and motivation, and educational sessions should yield understanding rather than execution alone [21]. In the EPFAL, the concepts of forgiveness and agape love are introduced early on and then discussed, explored, and implemented by the students repeatedly, gradually progressing into more complex and challenging contexts.

The cognitive learning process in SEL programs such as the EPFAL takes place through philosophical discourse, which examines questions of meanings and concepts in students' lives and their relevance at school, home, and in daily life. Through philosophical discussion, students explore meaning. The practice of philosophy significantly impacts teachers, students, and the general dynamic of the classroom atmosphere as it promotes personal development [22].

Finally, the EPFAL includes class activities inspired by art therapy and bibliotherapy, such as stories, videos, and creative work with the students. These activities encourage them to express themselves emotionally. Bibliotherapy represents a dynamic interplay between the reader's individuality and the story or audiovisual material, functioning as a medium for adaptation and growth. Its general goals are gaining insight into mental life, self-awareness, flexibility of behavior patterns, and helping to resolve conflicts and personal problems. The importance of bibliotherapy in an educational-therapeutic context is noteworthy [23].

In recent decades, there has been an increase in the practice of SEL programs. Technological advancements and the understanding that there is a link between cognitive and emotional development have led to significant shifts in educational goals. Today, scholars and practitioners agree that schools should expand students' skills in different areas of life, including emotional and social skills, positive self-perceptions, motivation, values, and attitudes. This approach aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 of Quality Education, which includes a specific target to, by 2030, 'ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for . . . human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence. . . ' [4]. SEL can be imparted and nurtured strategically by various means, and long-term positive effects can even be expected. The expansion of the use of SEL in education is evident in the scientific literature and trends led by international organizations and in the implementation of SEL in many educational systems worldwide. Cefai and colleagues, examining the effectiveness of SEL, concluded that there was compelling evidence of the ability of SEL programs to bring about positive changes in many aspects, such as decreasing negative behaviors, improving academic achievements, and reducing depression, anxiety, substance use, and anti-social behavior [24] (p. 50). The EPFAL program offers particular benefits for children in primary schools, considering the injustices and hurts pupils endure on a daily basis—from minor insults in school corridors, through social isolation and unfair treatment to emotional and physical bullying. Obtaining the ability to transform anger and grudges into understanding and forgiveness without jeopardizing their physical and emotional safety can strengthen children's resilience and improve their well-being.

The understanding that the classroom has great potential for emotional learning and social processes and that the teacher plays a central role in pupils' development of emotional and social skills is also evident in the curricula of teacher training institutions. Training programs for educators now regularly include elements of SEL, and studies have shown that such training modules influence the quality of learning and the development of a professional teacher [25]. The growing use of AI technologies also opens up opportunities for SEL programs, such as virtual reality applications for emotional skill development, chatbots and virtual assistants for personalized emotional support, gamification techniques to foster empathy and social interaction, and sentiment analysis tools for real-time feedback on student emotions [26]. The capacity to understand another person's thoughts and feelings underlies SEL outcomes, and thus, the empathic ability develops, which is a significant life skill for adult life [27]. Enright's clinical research on forgiveness and the accumulated knowledge about its emotional benefits provided a robust basis for introducing forgiveness programs in schools as part of the broader SEL framework [28,29]. However, the understanding of how school students experience forgiveness educational programs and in what ways they think such programs influence them is still very limited. Such knowledge is key in order to expand the use of EPFAL programs and to implement them in schools across diverse cultures and communities.

Accordingly, the present study sought to address the following research questions: How did fifth-grade students in Israel experience the forgiveness and agape love education program? How did they perceive their participation in it? How, in their and their teachers' views, did it influence them?

3. Methodology

This study was conducted as part of a larger research project exploring the positive effects of the EPFAL on individual children, their interpersonal relationships, and the class atmosphere in three conflicted societies: Northern Ireland, Israel, and Taiwan. In selected schools in these three countries, the EPFAL introduced a culturally adjusted curriculum comprising 14 lessons delivered as structured interactive workshops within a consistent framework. Each ninety-minute session revolved around themes linked to the program's core concepts: forgiveness and agape love. Stories, videos, and creative activities were

not just 'instructional content' but tools to generate empathy, foster emotional discourse, and facilitate social and personal sharing. Students were encouraged to share real-life scenarios from home and school and use them as 'learning content'. They were also guided to interpret and analyze their experiences by applying the program's concepts.

3.1. Paradigm

Considering the study's goal to explore how students experience the EPFAL program, the phenomenological paradigm and qualitative methodology were utilized. This approach enabled us to delve into students' subjective perspectives of the program, learn about their social experiences and interactions during its implementation, and identify the emotional and behavioral changes they encountered, thus promoting a rich understanding of the EPFAL as a SEL phenomenon [30].

3.2. Sample

The larger study in Israel encompassed twenty schools in Haifa and the Northern region, focusing on fifth-grade students aged 10–11 from both Arab and Jewish sectors. Overall, two hundred and fifty-three students and 22 teachers participated in answering the online questionnaires for the larger study. For the qualitative study presented in the current paper, we used a convenience, stratified sample consisting of three layers. The first layer consisted of 19 students who demonstrated the most significant change from the pre- to post-intervention questionnaires in the larger study. The second layer consisted of 21 students who were recommended for an interview by their teachers based on their verbal abilities. In selecting students for the interviews, we sought maximum diversity, encompassing students from Arabic- and Hebrew-speaking schools. Among the Arabic-speaking students, Christians, Druze, and Muslims were recruited to participate, while Hebrew speakers included students from secular and religious Jewish schools. The third layer consisted of 12 teachers displaying the most significant changes between the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, and an additional teacher who expressed profound interest and motivation to continue with the program after its completion. Overall, the sample included 40 students and 13 teachers. We recognize that by selecting research participants who were the most influenced by the program, most enthusiastic about it, or most articulate, we cannot capture the subjective experiences of those who were less engaged and possibly less satisfied with it. This is because, in this qualitative study, our goal was not to examine whether the program was effective but how, why, and at what phases it was most and least effective.

3.3. Data Collection

The main source of data for this study was semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author, who acted as the local research coordinator in the larger international research project in 2022. The interviews with 40 students and 13 teachers took place at the end of the EPFAL or within a month following its completion. The interview guide for the students included open questions such as: "Tell me how the EPFAL classes were for you?", "What was the most interesting part for you in the program? What made it interesting for you?", "What were the parts that were not interesting for you and why?", and "Tell me about something that you believed in or thought of before the program and has changed since then". The interview guide for the teachers' interviews sought to obtain the teachers' perspectives on how the class experienced the program and how the program affected them personally, and invited them to provide examples of social dynamics, obstacles, and transformations they observed in the class during the program. The first author also conducted 32 observations; of them, six were during classroom sessions, and 26 were during the students' answering of online questionnaires. Data collection for the larger international research project included online questionnaires on four occasions over the academic year. The interactions between the first author and the students as they answered the questionnaires provided insight into their worldviews and a unique

glimpse into their experiences. Observations of teaching methods were an opportunity to experience the interactions between students and their teachers and the overall classroom atmosphere created during the intervention. Additional observations took place during school intermissions, in which the first author was present before or after data collection for the international research project. They provided opportunities for informal conversations with students and attentive listening. These observations were documented in a diary by the first author and used for triangulation purposes.

3.4. Data Analysis

The content analysis process was based on the grounded theory approach. It commenced with “open coding”, where each interview, reflection, and observation transcript was analyzed separately, followed by “axial coding” across transcripts to identify commonalities and differences. Subsequently, “selective coding” was applied to define a conceptual framework and establish connections between research findings and the theoretical literature [31]. Both authors discussed each emerging theme and their interconnections until a mutual agreement was reached on their meaning in an interactive and gradual process.

3.5. Ethics

Ethical clearance was granted by three ethics committees: the Israeli Ministry of Education, the Law Faculty at the University of Haifa, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Parents and students provided their consent, indicating their willingness to participate in the international research project, answer the questionnaire, and participate in personal interviews for the present study [32]. Participants were explicitly informed that interviews would be recorded solely for this research and that all data would be securely destroyed following analysis. Due to the students' age, ethical aspects received particular attention, and a great effort was made to minimize any discomfort associated with the semi-structured interviews. We maintained confidentiality and anonymity to ensure that none of the interviewees' identities were exposed; we use pseudonyms in the quotes below. At the end of each interview, the interviewer asked the interviewee how they felt. Given the sensitive nature of topics covered in the educational program, referral information for mental assistance was included in letters to parents and children. To our knowledge, no such need arose during the research.

4. Results

4.1. The EPFAL and Students' Attitudes

The findings reveal that students exhibited a profound interest in the program's lessons, recognizing their value to their lives. They expressed their interest in the program and its contents, such as **Saul** saying: “It was delightful, a life-changing lesson,” or **Liat** saying: “There were stories, and we sat focused on and listened to with jaw-dropping faces”. The students highlighted the uniqueness of the teaching method that caused the interest, as **Jonathan** mentioned: “The program differed in how we went through the lesson; it was unique and not just written on the board. We also discussed things and saw a lovely movie that conveyed the message well”. The teachers' perspective was no less enthusiastic; **Revital**: “The children eagerly anticipated these lessons”. **Mona**: “Thanks to the educational activities, drawings, and writing letters, they cooperated and shared feelings. Children who had difficulty in the other lessons that I teach cooperated...expressed feelings through the drawings...a girl who never talked, drew, and wrote about being a bullying victim”. The observations diary shows that the researcher's experience of the observations during the lessons was meaningful and exciting: “She started sharing her personal story right after the teacher finished reading the story. There was complete silence in the classroom. One girl placed her head on the table, and her nearby classmate placed a gentle hand on her head and caressed her”.

4.2. The Impact of the EPFAL—Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Changes

According to the children's perspectives, they experienced transformation in three dimensions with mutual impact on one another: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Change in one realm affected the others. Accordingly, the following classification is mainly for analytical reasons.

4.2.1. Cognitive Changes

- **Understanding the other's viewpoint:** One critical cognitive change that the children described was the understanding that the ability to forgive or ask for forgiveness is related to understanding the other person's viewpoint. Through discussions and shared experiences, students gained insight into broadening their viewpoints. **Liat** describes the dynamics of understanding the other's viewpoint: *"It is a change because then you look at it from her point of view, which could be from my point of view, she hurt me, but it could be from her point of view that I hurt her... I will never be able to hold her exact viewpoint, but I can try to imagine it... When you consider the other's perspective, you might realize they did not intend to hurt you... Seeing things from their viewpoint can ease the pain and facilitate forgiveness"*. She understands that the conversation expands her perception of reality, acknowledging its limitations and facilitating forgiveness. **Dikla** describes an introspection process she experienced from asking herself questions about the other's perspective in the conflict: *"I also need to see the other's side, not look only at mine. . . Maybe I should say for a moment: Why did I do it? I hurt her hard, so she paid me back, or... well, I deserved it. . ."*.

Some students changed their perspective about asking for forgiveness from pseudo-forgiveness to forgiveness with intention. This process might be unique to participants in the present study, who speak Semitic languages (Arabic and Hebrew). In both languages, the phrases "I am sorry" and "forgiveness" are expressed in the same word—SLIHA in Hebrew and SULHA in Arabic. Accordingly, students in the present study often "jumped" between talking and thinking about the process of apologizing and the process of forgiving. **Dafna**: *"I thought it was possible to say sorry (SLIHA) and walk away. Now I realize that you have to ask for forgiveness in your heart and soul.... Apologize with your thoughts, not just say sorry and walk away..."*. She makes a distinction between expressing real remorse and paying lip service. It is an interesting finding because the EPFAL did not focus on apologizing, expressing regret, or asking for forgiveness but on the victim's perspective, who may be receiving the apology. Although the program does not deal with reconciliation but rather with the internal process of the victim, the interviews reveal that the children internalized the concept of forgiveness and applied it even in situations in which they were the ones expected to apologize.

- **Uncovering injustice:** According to Enright's model of forgiveness, uncovering injustice and hurt is the first and most crucial phase in internal forgiveness [33]. The changes in students' perceptions regarding the importance of recognizing injustice and their understanding that being and feeling hurt is not a weakness emerged explicitly during the interviews and were apparent during observations. **Abir** demonstrated how she learned to recognize being hurt and to ask for explanations and acknowledgment: *"Before the program, I thought that if someone quarreled with me, there was no forgiveness; to forgive is to be weak... for example, a classmate followed me wherever I went and bullied me. I did not tell the teacher. After we started [with the program], when he started bullying me again, I said to him that it was bothering me. I asked him why he was doing it, and he said he was kidding with me. I told him I did not like those laughs, and that was it, and I forgave and ignored him"*.

Throughout the international research project, the participants completed an online questionnaire in four separate rounds to measure changes in their worldviews and personal well-being. In the first round, when the students filled out the questionnaire before the

intervention, they were asked to recount a personal story of injustice and to reflect upon it. The students were invited to answer anything they chose or to skip the question. Subsequently, their response to that question was presented to them as part of the questionnaire at the three subsequent rounds (mid-program, post-intervention, and follow-up). In the first round, answering the questionnaire was challenging for many students. They asked for help, especially for this question, excusing skipping the question about the injustice narrative with sentences such as: “I do not want to tell” or “It is a secret, secret, secret”, or sentences indicating denial: “I was never hurt”, “Nobody hurt me”, “Nothing happened”, or “I do not remember any story about injustice”. At the end of the EPFAL, some students reflected upon their decision not to share their stories during the last data collection round. The quotes below, taken from the observational diary, signify a shift in the perception of the importance of uncovering injustice. From their advanced stage in the program, the students realized they had missed a desirable opportunity for self-expression. **David** recounts the disappointment he experienced in the second questionnaire, being unable to add his story about hurt: “When we answered the first test [the questionnaire], it was before we learned that it is important [to tell]. Even though you said there was no right answer, I was ashamed to write, I thought I was not okay. Tell them [the American researchers] that I want to write”. **Saul** expresses his protest that the story of the hurt cannot be added: “Ugh... It is truly irritating...it does not spoil it, right?”. **Rachel** also reacts with displeasure: “It is not fair; it was at the beginning...”.

- **Changing Response Patterns to Violence:** The students learned that forgiving the wrongdoer should be an act of relinquishing feelings of anger and revenge. While learning about ‘agape love’, the issue of violent retaliatory reactions or, in the children’s terms, ‘hitting them back’ came up. Lively discussions revolved around the possibility of treating wrongdoers respectfully despite feelings of injustice, in which the children explored everyday situations. A central argument in support of retaliation was that some parents accept and support the idea that ‘when you are hit, you must hit back’. **Nora**, one of the teachers, outlines the efforts to change deeply rooted punitive patterns among parents and school personnel: “A student said: ‘If someone hits me, I will hit back. That is what I learned at home’. The school imposes penalties, whereas the EPFAL promotes a distinct narrative. I perceived a dissonance between administrative directives and the program’s themes. To forgive is not a sign of weakness. It is a strength”. The nonviolent response to injustice that the EPFAL promotes often contradicts the messages the students receive from their parents, educational staff, and broader societal norms, creating a significant challenge.

4.2.2. Emotional Changes

- **Emotional Openness:** Emotional openness emerged as a central theme, influenced by cognitive and behavioral elements. Through cognitive shifts in understanding forgiveness and sharing different perspectives, students learned not to fear their emotions and found that sharing with others improved their emotional state. **Sivan** describes the openness that she experienced, which allowed her to share personal stories: “I felt more open sharing things with others that I once might have thought I should keep secret or things that I thought I did not really want to tell”. **Liron** expresses the joy of opening up during lessons, leading to a more positive emotional state: “I loved the lessons where we opened up to each other. It was great to open up and feel better afterward”.
- **Empathy:** Empathy is a process that combines emotional and cognitive components. Empathy can be described as an advanced phase in the evolving emotional dynamics in a classroom group. It is sometimes described as “learning to walk in another’s shoes” [32]. In this interpersonal interaction, the participants experience a shared reality and collective consciousness; empathy occurs as a personal emotional experience towards the other. Sensitivity, concern, and caring toward others develop in this process. Empathic behavior usually appears as a response to distress in the other. The emotional process is spiral but can be described linearly as follows: awareness

of the emotions leads to sharing personal stories, which enhances a sense of belonging and triggers a positive cycle of empathy among listeners. **Danny** highlights a transformative moment where empathy altered his perspective on a friend: *“He shared his difficult time with us, and whereas he was aggressive and tense at the start of the year, forgiveness changed him completely. Now, we laugh together during breaks. I believe it is because of forgiveness that he learned to open up and become less aggressive and nervous. After hearing his story, my perception of him changed completely”*. **Liri** recounts an empathetic feeling following Menachem’s story. She describes the cognitive and behavioral change through the empathy experience: *“Thanks to the story [which was read in class], he was not embarrassed to admit he had imaginary friends... I consider him courageous for sharing something I would not. This change has made me focus less on outward appearances and more on inner value. It has influenced my decision to befriend someone and has broadened my circle”*. **Menachem**, who spoke openly in class about having imaginary friends, had perceived his behavior as odd: *“Let us put it this way, most people I will tell them that I have an imaginary friend, will tell me: Come on, you are weird. It will sound weird”*. After reading the story in class, Liri understands the role of imaginary friends in resolving the conflicts in Menachem’s life. She shows empathy instead of mocking him; her opinion changes, and she thinks he is brave. The empathetic reactions from his classmates helped **Menachem** be more accepting of himself: *“I too have mentors for life [like the character in the story], and it taught me... I also have imaginary friends”*. Cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects are combined throughout this process, with empathy as the predominant emotional component.

- **Empowerment:** Empowerment is a personal emotional experience leading to feelings of self-competence, confidence, and strength. According to Collins [19] (pp. 47–65), this is one of the experiences that participants are likely to experience following a successful group gathering that includes interpersonal interactions with a shared focus on emotion. For children with low self-esteem and low confidence, experiencing empowerment is necessary for the internal processes required to forgive the offender. **Liat** talks about the empowerment she experienced following the emotional conversation and understanding the other’s point of view: *“Gives you more strength to forgive”*. **Dafna** uses the expression *“I became a little stronger”* to describe the feeling of empowerment as a result of a cognitive process: *“I think that sometimes I became stronger because I understood all kinds of things... so... let us say there is someone I cannot connect with, I look less at how he looks. I look more at his inner value. Then, the part about whether to be his friend also gave me many more friends. Let us say now I have more friends”*. The empowerment affected her ability to create new relationships and be aware of the ‘right reasons’ for choosing them. Her experiences demonstrate how the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes are integrated and reinforce each other. **Mona**, the teacher, links the increased self-confidence to the ability to express emotions and the anger that subsided: *“I can point to at least three children from the class whose self-confidence has increased. They are less angry and have learned to express emotions instead of hitting”*.
- **Feeling More Comfortable in Class:** When the children describe ‘feeling more comfortable’, they base their description on a previous uncomfortable experience. Feeling uncomfortable in the classroom means, in **Yeftah’s** words, *“I am not raising my hand even though I know the answer”*. Feeling uncomfortable in class means not being a part of social interactions, not sharing, or asking for help. Such childhood experiences can cause social anxiety in adulthood and prevent realizing personal potential [34]. **Tamar** describes the improvement in the atmosphere in the classroom: *“After the program, the atmosphere in the classroom has changed, and I feel more comfortable”*. **Danny** describes an atmosphere that has changed in the classroom from *“there are quite a few enemies in our classroom.”* to expressions of empathy towards a child in distress: *“Yesterday one kid felt lonely and another kid, who fought with him a week ago, came and comforted him, and they became friends and did not fight, and he did not say to him: ‘Get out of here, I do not want to talk to you’*. Moreover, *I think it positively affected all the children in the class. I think this is a*

result of the program". Contrary to the description of an "enemy" who looks for weak points, he describes: "...come and comfort him and make friends and do not fight". Children who feel that they have enemies in the classroom feel emotionally insecure and possibly physically unsafe. Such experiences of stress and anxiety are in stark opposition to the 'comfortable feeling' that the children experienced after the program.

- **Reduced Anger:** Many students reported reduced anger levels, positively influencing their interactions and relationships at home and in the classroom. They became aware that their conflicts are accompanied by anger, which darkens the atmosphere and distances them from friends. Their descriptions regarding anger included behavioral, cognitive, and emotional processes, all mutually intertwined. For example, they considered emotional discourse, the sharing of feelings, and understanding the other's point of view to be factors that reduce their anger. They realized that anger is an emotion with a price tag attached to it and that it can be relinquished. The children learned to ask themselves whether the anger is justified, necessary for them, or possibly redundant, even if it is justified. **Abir** shared how her anger had diminished since participating in the EPFAL: *"My mom and my friends told me that I changed. I used to be angry about everything for no reason, and now I am not"*. **Tamar's** experience also highlighted the link between cognitive understanding, empathy, and behavioral change in managing anger. She narrated a scenario where her changed perspective reduced her anger towards her sister: *"Before I studied the program, I thought she was mad at me all the time, and then I was angry with her back. I understand now that she is angry at something else. I learned a lot from the lessons, and I had fun"*.

4.2.3. Behavioral Changes

- **Improved Relationships:** The behavioral changes were visibly reflected in the students' relationships. *"Something calmed down,"* as **Ravital**, one of the teachers, described. *"Relationships shifted to more relaxed lines. . . Communication between them became direct without coming to me with complaints about the other"*. The teacher **Samira** observed these changes and reflected on her relationships with the students: *"I saw how it [the program] improved the classroom atmosphere and the student's perspective... I saw how the kids' perception of others changed over time... The more relaxed the atmosphere, the tighter the connections between the students and me, and the students themselves became more positive"*. Changing the point of view toward the other and emotional discourse about individuals' inner value also influenced the creation of relationships. **Salit** highlighted the shift in how she evaluated relationships, emphasizing the importance of looking beyond superficial attributes: *"I liked the idea of unconditional love. You can love someone not just for what they have or how they look. Sometimes, you judge someone based solely on their appearance or possessions and immediately reject them. It changed my perspective on evaluating people based on external factors and pushed me to see what is inside"*.
- **Ability to Express Emotions:** Students repeatedly highlighted the importance of expressing feelings in relationships related to forgiveness, and they understood that it is an acquired ability. Emotional expression meant the child could communicate and mediate his or her feelings with the environment. Through practical discussions and exercises, students learned about the importance of expressing and sharing emotions and practiced such expressions continuously until they internalized this lesson. **Abir** talks about the ability to express feelings as an acquired skill: *"Before, I could not express my feelings. I did not know how to say it [being angry or hurt], even though it bothered me. I learned how to voice myself after completing both parts of the program. I used to be shy and unsure how to express myself, but now I know how"*.
- **Reduced Violence:** From the teachers' subjective viewpoint, the expectation of reducing violence was one of the motivations for joining the EPFAL. **Mona**, one of the teachers, said: *"It is tough for the children; there is much bullying in the school space, and there are vulnerabilities"*. **Samia**, the consultant, describes the necessity of the program in Arab society, where violence levels have risen extensively in recent years: *"Especially*

in the world we live in now, unfortunately, not a day goes by that we do not hear about a case of murder and killing and injury". She expressed her satisfaction with the EPFAL's impact: "I felt in terms of physical and verbal violence that it has decreased a lot". Changing behavioral patterns is always challenging, and preserving such changes is crucial. While the EPFAL's impact on behavioral changes was evident, educators expressed concerns about the sustainability of these changes once the program concluded. **Irit**, an educator, emphasized the importance of ongoing discussions and reinforcement to ensure that the concepts and terminology of forgiveness that the children acquired during the program become ingrained: "For the children, this awareness needs to continue seeping in. It needs to be repeated... grounded until it becomes second nature, not just on a conceptual level". **Revital**, another educator, echoed this sentiment, noting that it is essential for the concepts "to transition from speech to action". From the students' perspective, the changed atmosphere in the classroom and the replacement of confrontation with emotional discourse were described as reduced violence. **Elias**: "In class, they fight less, they learned about forgiveness and began to understand that it is necessary to talk to each other". **Almog** described his cognitive and behavioral transformation in how he responded to violence: "I used to beat, hit back, and curse him. However, now I realize I do not have to pay him back. ... Because if you hit back, it makes you the weakest. The one who beats is weak".

Table 1 summarizes the cognitive, emotional and behavioral changes that the students participating in the EPFAL experienced, as emerging from the data collected in this study.

Table 1. Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Changes among Students Participating in the EPFAL: A Qualitative Analysis of Semi-structured Interviews.

Cognitive Changes	Emotional Changes	Behavioral Changes
Changes in understanding forgiveness: "Forgiveness is not a weakness".	Empathy: "I feel completely different about him".	Sharing Emotions: "I could not express my feelings before".
Changes in understanding requests for forgiveness: "Apologize with intention"	Sense of empowerment: "I became more assertive".	Being more attentive to each other: "It is nice to know you are being listened to".
Understanding the importance of the other's viewpoint: "After hearing his story, my perception of him changed completely. Initially, I judged him harshly..."	Sense of openness and comfort: "The atmosphere has changed... I feel more comfortable".	Reduction in violence: "In class, there is less beating".
Awareness of Injury: "...he started bullying me again, I told him that it was bothering me. I asked him why he was doing it..."	Anger reduction: "I stopped getting angry about everything".	Meaningful apologies: "Say sorry and understand what you are sorry for".
Changed criteria in selecting friends: "I am now looking at the intrinsic value".	Forgiveness as an internal personal process: "I became more forgiving".	Improved relationships: "It consolidated our class".
Changes in the perceptions about response patterns to violence: "I realized I don't have to pay him back".		Changed response pattern to violence: "I used to beat him, hit him back".

The cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes experienced by the students and observed by them and the teachers are visualized in Figure 1.

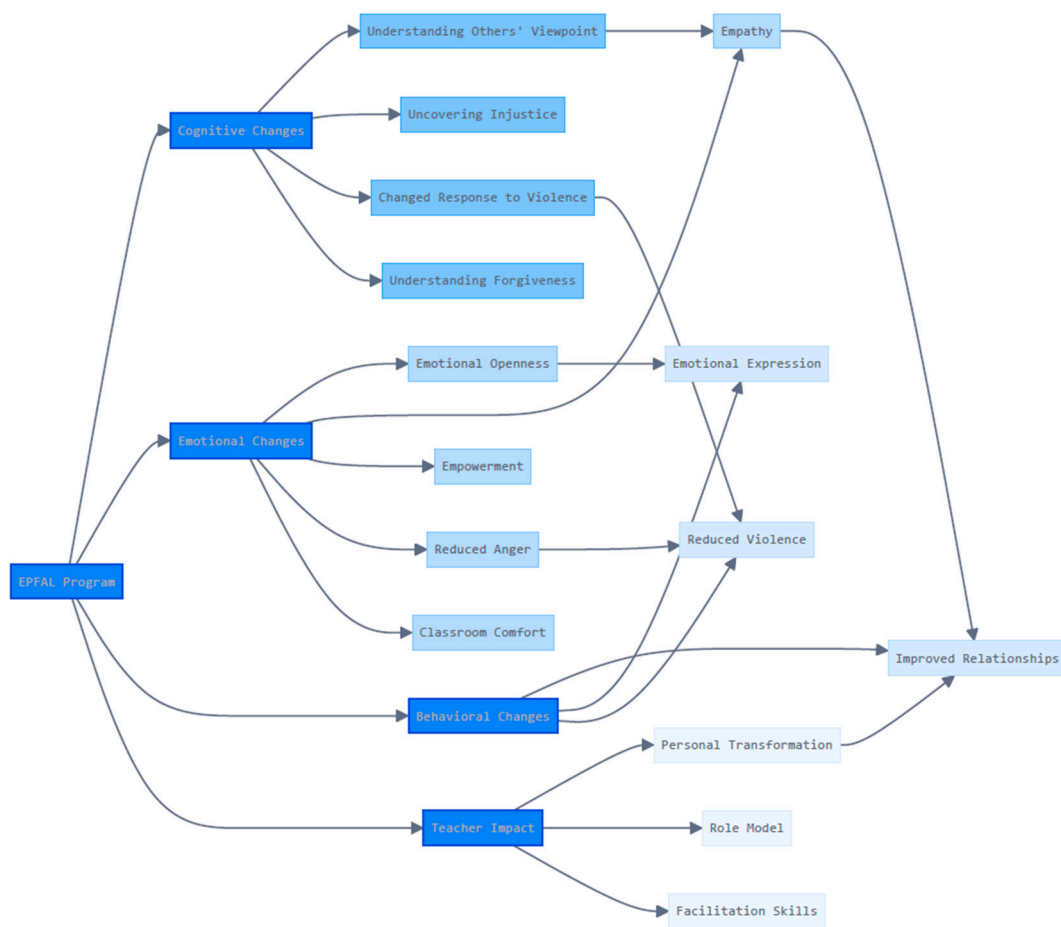


Figure 1. Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Changes Experienced by the Students Participating in the EPFAL and Observed by Them and the Teachers.

4.3. The Impact of the EPFAL on Teachers

The thirteen teachers interviewed for this study enthusiastically described their experiences of the program. The findings indicate that they found the program exciting, appreciated its positive influence on cognitive and behavioral patterns, and found the content and methodology highly relevant. At the end of the EPFAL, they and their principals discussed teaching the program in all classes in the coming years. The teachers played a key role in the learning process. They demonstrated creativity and made the concepts accessible and relevant, arousing interest and discussion. During the process, they experimented with facilitating emotional discourse in class, which allowed introspection and created an atmosphere of mutual attentiveness among students. The program was emotionally demanding for the teachers and required special efforts and much preparation. While initially reluctant, the teachers gradually found themselves teaching the EPFAL with great faith and intention—a progression influenced by the students' concurrent growing enthusiasm. According to the educators, they noticed a connection between the impact of the EPFAL on them and the quality of the lessons. A teacher's transformation while teaching about forgiveness has a powerful effect. **Nairuz's** story illustrates the ripple effect of a teacher's transformation on the classroom's atmosphere: "Our teacher changed too. Before, she used to scold a lot. Now she is more helpful and understanding". An experienced teacher, **Samira**, speaks about her transformative journey while preparing for the program. She observes how her experiences resonated with those of her students: "Throughout the program, as I moved from one lesson to another, I felt my understanding deepening. I realized that my personal growth directly impacted the students, creating a profound influence. Each lesson presented something new that touched me". **Armin**, a young educator, shared her journey

of redefining her role as a teacher and realizing the importance of accessible materials for students: *“I struggled to bridge theory to real life. I searched for practical methods. Then, I understood that emotional connection matters most. This insight transformed my teaching and how I looked at assessments. Tests shifted from evaluations to practical learning experiences. Before, I focused on testing my teaching. Now, the student’s growth is paramount. I used to try to intimidate, thinking it spurred better learning. I have entirely changed. It is surprising even to me”*. **Mona** shares her transformation, realizing the significance of the program’s themes and their application in her life: *“I felt its impact and transformed myself... As a naturally forgiving individual, I wrote in the first questionnaire about a personal incident I could not forgive. The second questionnaire revealed the shift in my perspective. It was initially challenging, but the program has truly transformed me. I asked myself, why remain stagnant?”* The principal, **Dalia**, emphasizes the significance of the teacher as a role model and highlights that lessons in empathy were not theoretical but acquired through lived experiences guided by the teacher: *“Empathy cannot be learned from textbooks alone; it is exposed through personal experiences, through the teacher’s embodiment and modeling... That is the crux of its efficacy”*. The teacher’s role has changed from teaching knowledge to guiding a group—a group facilitator.

5. Discussion

This qualitative study sought to explore how the students experienced the EPFAL, perceived their participation, and were impacted by it. Analyzing students’ experiences within the socio-emotional program centered on forgiveness and agape love indicates that the program was engaging, enjoyable, and highly beneficial. The participants perceived the program’s impact through noticeable positive changes in their daily lives. These findings align with previous studies demonstrating the effectiveness of forgiveness-focused educational interventions in reducing anger and increasing forgiveness among schoolchildren [8]. However, this study’s qualitative findings provide a deeper understanding of *how* children acquire forgiveness skills and *why* the EPFAL program is effective in reducing anger and improving the class atmosphere. Based on the participants’ descriptions, we can obtain a broad picture of the components of the educational-emotional process and the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes as they arose from their subjective perspectives. Specifically, our qualitative approach enables linking current knowledge about forgiveness education with various educational theories and approaches. The present study demonstrates how these theories are at play during the learning process in the EPFAL.

The psycho-pedagogical approach emphasizes the importance of the teacher–student relationship and the centrality of emotions in the learning process [22]. In the present study, as the teachers opened up and were willing to connect with their students on an emotional basis, the learning process accelerated. As the teachers’ role in the program transformed from teaching knowledge to being group facilitators, the class became a group of interactive peer learners led by a teacher. The mutual and shared process facilitated emotional changes in ways that an individual counseling session might not have produced.

The findings also demonstrate the power of spiral learning according to the spiral curriculum approach. The educational process in the EPFAL begins with meeting the core concepts of forgiveness and agape love, shifts to introspective reflections and class activities, and returns to conceptual discussions—and so on in a spiral way. The constant back and forth movement from the abstract to the concrete and between various teaching methodologies throughout the intervention was critical for deepening and maintaining the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes among students [35]. The changes in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions are interrelated and influence each other in continuous cycles of mutual progression and development.

The power of philosophical discussion in the learning process was also demonstrated in the study findings. The program begins with a philosophically applied discussion on forgiveness through content materials and creative activities. This environment provides a platform for identification and a channel for emotional expression, creating shared realities and a collective consciousness. The practice of philosophy significantly im-

pacts teachers, students, and the general dynamics of the classroom atmosphere as it promotes personal development [22]. The cognitive discussions, integrated with stories and videos from the children's worlds, enabled the students to make cognitive connections between abstract concepts such as shared humanity and generosity and their concrete life challenges and conflicts.

Similarly, bibliotherapy and the art therapy literature recognize the importance of creative activities [23]. Through storytelling and creative work, the students in the EPFAL could learn and practice reflection on events from their daily lives in a non-threatening way. Such a process allows them to control the exposure of the connection between the story or the creative work and their personal experiences, facilitating a safe atmosphere of openness in the classroom. This internal process that the children go through affects the depth of the impact of the EPFAL.

Study Limitations

As a qualitative study focused on children's subjective perspectives, this research cannot prove the EPFAL's effectiveness in promoting forgiveness and reducing anger and violence among Israeli schoolchildren. First, we cannot verify whether students fully internalized the material or maintained behavioral changes over time, nor can we assess the program's impact on objective measures such as school violence rates and academic achievements. This study primarily illuminates how and why the EPFAL was transformative for students who perceived it positively. Relatedly, our sample inherently favored children and teachers who responded well to the program. Future research should examine the experiences of students who showed minimal or no attitudinal changes.

Additionally, this study's timing during early adolescence (ages 10–11) introduces variables related to emotional development, verbal expression, and reflective capabilities. In generalizing this study's findings, developmental changes should be acknowledged. Furthermore, the program's perceived success may have been influenced by participants' awareness of their involvement in international research. Students' enthusiasm might have been enhanced by their sense of contributing to global knowledge. These factors should be considered when evaluating the magnitude of observed changes and student engagement.

While our findings suggest promising trends, further studies are needed for validation.

6. Conclusions

The present study contributes to the growing multidisciplinary knowledge of SEL programs in education, specifically focusing on forgiveness-focused education. This approach provides students with social tools for managing conflict and injustice while reducing angry and violent reactions. Incidents of violence and threats often stem from either simple conflicts or the accumulation of chronic anger, resentment, and perceived insults that eventually lead to violent outbursts. By developing curricula that provide emotional tools to children during their formative years, we can help them modify behavioral and thought patterns. Learning to release anger and experience the empowerment of forgiving may guide them toward healthier paths in adulthood and reduce the likelihood of violent or criminal reactions in the future. Achieving these goals aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goal of quality education, which specifically includes references to promoting education for peace and non-violence and appreciation of cultural diversity.

Like any transformative skill, forgiveness and agape love require ongoing practice. Teachers observed the program's impact beginning to diminish shortly after its conclusion, indicating that brief, isolated interventions are insufficient. A more effective approach would involve implementing the EPFAL comprehensively across schools nationwide. Such a broad educational policy could help bridge the gap between the EPFAL's nonviolent conflict resolution strategies and the retributive responses often modeled by parents, educators, and society at large.

We conclude by referring to Enright and Kim's words: "It is our desire. . . that forgiveness education will be taken up by courageous educators, adapted to their own cultural

context (with the essence of forgiveness in mind), and used as a vehicle that contributes to peace in the human heart and the family as well as between local and international communities [36] (p. 8)".

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