**Teaching Literature in Religious Schools in Israel:**

**Values, Culture, and Aesthetics**

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**Abstract**

This article describes a qualitative study of the teaching of literature in state-religious and ultra-orthodox elementary schools in Israel. This subject has received scant attention in previous research. The current study examines the literary works that teachers presented to their classes, the contexts in which the lessons were taught, and the teachers’ responses to what was learned in these lessons, from a religious perspective. Results from the two school sectors are compared. It was found, that practice of justifying the study of literary works as part of RE comes at the expense of motivating students to think clearly about the ideas they raise, mediating between the student and the literary text, and increasing students’ cultural capital.

Keywords:

State-religious education, literature in religious schools, approaches to teaching literature, Israel

**Introduction**

**State-Sponsored Religious Education**

Previous research on multiculturalism in various countries notes that the approach to state-sponsored religious education (RE) is one of the criteria for social openness, which is manifested in the ongoing dialogue between various streams in a society (Robben & Mercer, 2007). National educational systems around the world use various models for RE in state schools to familiarize students with core religious concepts.

The UK, for example, has a well-established and well-documented history of RE. In the UK, the goal of the government is for public schools to teach Christianity, the dominant religion in the country (Stern, 2018). In that respect, it is similar to the Malaysia and RE in Israel. In Pakistan, RE is an ongoing part of learning in state schools (Hamid & Nadeem, 2020). Another example that is similar in some respects to the situation in Israel, is the Netherlands, where two-thirds of the schools are affiliated with Christianity, and one-third are state schools with no religious affiliation. The Christian schools are funded by the state and are committed to teaching the state curriculum, except that they have a special curriculum for RE (Veugelers & Leeman, 2020).

Countries that include RE as part of state education cope in various ways with issues arising from integration. One issue pertains to developing a curriculum that accommodates the various religious perceptions that exist among the public (Willaime, 2007, Pp 58-59). There is a need to balance the needs of a secular that does not want RE in state schools, religious population interested in a curriculum based primarily on theological studies, with the needs of a population interested in combining RE with core studies, to allow graduates of the education system to be integrated into the employment market (Hasson, 2018).

Another issue to consider is the extent of the government’s involvement in the contents and management of RE in state educational institutes, in the context of centralization of the curriculum and accommodating RE to government policy. It has been found that when theological contents are combined with the core curriculum, there is little intervention on the part of the state, and autonomy is given to the state-religious institutions for the management of the schools and RE (Hasson, 2018). When a unified solution for the entire population is presented, the state’s involvement and intervention in the process is greater (Reingold, Baratz & Abuhatzira, 2013).

The Israeli educational system is composed of several of subsystems (Stern, 2018): secular state, Arab Christian/Muslim/Druze exetra. The current article focuses on two of these subsystems: state-religious schools, and the ultra-orthodox educational system. In both of these systems, teachers are expected to provide religious content and references, even in lessons that do not deal directly with religious subjects, as part of the goal of shaping and forming students’ identity (Dagan, 2006).

In Israel, there is a wide variety of school types, each of which has distinctive ways of representing religion. State-religious schools have a diverse and relatively pluralistic population. In these schools, boys and girls study together. These schools are budgeted by the state, and the curriculum is determined by the state. The ultra-orthodox schools are segregated by gender. They are partially budgeted by the state and their curricula are approved by the state. The umbrella terms “state-religious schools” and “ultra-orthodox schools” cover various educational frameworks, which express the wide range of ideological perceptions, from conversative to modern, that exist among religious Jewish society in Israel. However, elaborating on these differences is beyond the scope of the current article.

Much of the curricula in the state-religious schools and general (secular) state schools in Israel are shared, except for subjects about which there is a large gap in worldviews between the populations of the two school types. For those subjects, there are special RE curricula in state-religious schools, in addition to the core curricula. Therefore, textbooks and other reading materials have been produced specifically for teaching literature in the state-religious school system. These include literary texts that differ from those taught in the general state education system. The ultra-orthodox sector does not have a centralized curriculum for teaching literature. Schools categorized as “recognized [by the Ministry of Education] but unofficial” enjoy the autonomy of creating a curriculum for literature studies in accordance with their worldviews. In July 2019, a list of literary works recommended for teaching in the ultra-orthodox school system was posted on the website of the Israel Ministry of Education. The lessons that are described in the current article were given prior to the posting of that list.

**Teaching Literature in State-Religious Schools**

Many educators, in Israel and elsewhere, choose the books and other literary works they teach to their classes based on their literary-aesthetic value and their moral and educational contributions (Poyas, 2009). A study that examined Israeli teachers’ approaches to children’s literature (Elkad-Lehman & Gilat, 2009) found that many educators perceive children’s literature as tools for teaching about holidays and seasons of the year, assisting in instilling values, and introducing Hebrew culture to students. Teachers chose to teach books that reflect and reinforce their moral choices and that serve as an assistive tool for the learners’ moral education (Rosenthal, 2015). Other studies support the claim that, educators’ professional decisions reflect their identity, perspectives, values, beliefs, and opinions are reflected in their professional decisions, in addition to their professional knowledge (Achituv, 2012, 2013; Gudmundsdottir, 1990; Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1997).

Close examination of the place of literature in the curricula sheds light on how policymakers’ view its underlying possibilities for promoting certain social-cultural perceptions. In the United States and Europe, literature studies are part of language and cultural studies, in its broad sense. This includes imparting language and literacy skills, developing an understanding of the aesthetic dimension, and encouraging discussions about morals, based on the literary works (Hasson, 2018).

In Israel and other countries, teachers may justify their choice of literary works based on religious ideas, especially if the chosen works are not part of a canonical corpus (Van Koeven & Leeman, 2011). In such cases, the meaning drawn from a given literary work is not necessarily based on its aesthetic value (Gabrielsen, Blikstad-Balas, & Tengberg, 2019). Dorsey (1997) claims that literature can be used to consciously call into question readers’ previously shaped perceptions and beliefs. However, teachers may bring to their class a literary work that reflects a complex reality and arouses discourse on religious and theological subjects, yet not allow the discussion to develop in directions that deviate from the acceptable discourse and religious character of their school. Thus, they do not allow the class to have an open and tolerant discussion that accepts pluralism of views (Berger, 2014), or religious individualism (Jackson, 2014, Woodhead & Catto, 2012) or allows for expression of secular views (Lipiäinen, Ubani & Viinikka, 2020; Taylor, 2007).

In elementary schools in Israel, teaching literature is a part of the curriculum for linguistic education. Consequently, the different textbooks and reading materials include a combination of linguistic and literary activities to be done following the reading of literary works.

According to the curriculum for linguistic education in Israel titled “Hebrew language and culture for general state and state-religious elementary schools”:

“Reading fine literature at school is primarily meant to provide aesthetic experiences, through which students will understand themselves and others, develop their imagination and intellect, and foster a love for reading, literary awareness, and the ability to appreciate a work of literature,” (Israel Ministry of Education, 2003, P. 56).

The same document describes literature as “a tool for instilling the treasures of culture and thought”, and warns against “(turning) the reading of a literary work into a means of teaching language and letting it only serve as a tool serving other subjects or fields of knowledge” (Israel Ministry of Education, 2003, P. 56).

The recommendation to refer to a literary text as an artistic genre with aesthetic qualities began in response to an ongoing situation in Israeli elementary schools and in teacher-training institutes regarding teaching literature for elementary schools. Literature introduces a learner to a world of texts with its own conventions (Poyas, 2000). These conventions include ways of reading, tools for interpretation and criticism, ways of putting together, selecting and organizing the linguistic materials, styles of creation, and research methods. According to Rosenblatt (1985), reading literature is an aesthetic transaction between a reader and a text, which involves an evocation of the reader while focusing on aesthetic actions and personal-internal processes. In contrast, non-literary texts encourage an efferent transaction between a reader and a text, whose meaning is focused on conducting and transmitting information.

In the majority of teacher-training institutes, there is no separate specialization for teaching literature to elementary school students. Hence, most teachers who teach literature in elementary schools in Israel are not specifically qualified for teaching literature. The relatively small number of hours dedicated to teaching literature in elementary school compels teachers to spend more time on other subjects. This comes at the expense of professionalization in the field of literature (Orr, 2012). Research has found that in order to teach an effective lesson, a teacher must have mastery both in the content knowledge of the lesson and in teaching methods (Shulman, 1986; Loewenberg, Ball,Phelps, & Thames, 2008). Some teaching methods involve engaging students by assigning tasks. This raises the question of what is a high-quality task (Preatoriuos, Kelieme, Herbert, & Pinger, 2018). Winkler (2020) views a high-quality task as one which involves cognitive activation. She defines a this type of task as having a number of clear qualities: provoking challenging questions, stimulating students to look for reasons and explanations, encouraging further research on the subject, pointing out contradictory opinions and facts, and encouraging solutions which are not “black or white” (Winkler, 2020, P. 10).

Teaching literature in elementary school involves multiple components. Due to the scarcity of research about literature studies in state-religious and ultra-orthodox schools in Israel, we shall present the results of a study which examined those components, as expressed in the research questions:

1. What characterizes the literary works chosen by the teachers among the different populations?
2. What context is used by the teachers to teach the literary works?
3. What kind of discourse evolved in the classroom, following the teaching of the literary works?
4. What are the connections between the teaching of literature as a class activity and the teachers’ reports about their approaches to teaching literature?

**Research Process and Research Tools**

This research is based on a qualitative approach. The chosen research method is a collective case study: a study of a collection of specific cases through which general insights can be gained (Yin, 2003). The greater the extent to which data obtained from different subjects is recurrent, the higher the reliability of that data (Stake, 2006).

Data were collected using two research tools. The first was a short questionnaire completed by 40 individuals: 28 teachers who teach in the state-religious school system and 12 teachers who teach in the ultra-orthodox education system. The second tool was the recording of 21 lessons: 12 lessons taught by teachers in the state-religious school system and 9 lessons by teachers in the ultra-orthodox education system.

The questionnaires consisted of two parts. The first part asked about various demographic traits of the teachers. The second part consisted of two open questions. The validation of the questionnaire and its adaptation to the two sectors were done by two well-known female professors who teach at two teacher-training colleges in the field of teaching literature. The questionnaire items are presented in detail in the data analysis section.

The second research tool was the collection of audio recordings and written transcription of lessons, along with teachers’ written lesson plans and students’ outputs. In light of the varying quality of the recordings, for the purposes of this study, 6 lessons (out of 12) were selected from the state-religious schools, and 6 lessons (out of 9) were selected from the ultra-orthodox sector.

The study was conducted in order to learn about what is taking place in literature classes among these two sectors. The context for recruiting the population for this study was online and in-person continuing professional education programs on the topic of teaching literature in elementary schools, designed for teachers and educators in the state-religious and ultra-orthodox sectors. Some attendees in these programs became study participants, and others assisted in locating study participants. At the end of the continuing education programs for both state-religious and ultra-orthodox sectors, attendees were asked if they would be willing to record themselves teaching a literature lesson to their class, and to submit their recording along with the lesson plan and the students’ outputs from the lesson. Every participating teacher was also asked to fill out a questionnaire on their perspective on teaching literature.

The processing of the data gathered from the lessons was done through categorical analysis (Tzabar Ben Yehoshua, 2016). In the first stage, the lesson transcripts were read while listening to the recordings. In the second stage, research themes were identified. For the sake of content analysis, several practices from the field of discourse analysis were combined, using the concepts of “cognitive activation” and “conversation analytic perspective.” The cognitive activation analysis was done in several steps: highlighting statements about the text that provoke a thought or response, and highlighting types of cognitive activities or other activities related to a distinct representation. Additionally, an analysis of the structure and organization of the lessons was done in two stages. The first was identifying and highlighting the various parts of a lesson. The second was identifying a central issue around which the lesson is organized (for example, writing a phrase on the white board and returning to it repeatedly throughout the lesson) (Hzimmerman, 2016).

Analysis processes were done in a “go-and-return” activity (a critical rereading of the data analysis) to maintain the principles of validation and dependability (Yossifun, 2016). The data collected from the open questions in the questionnaire were encoded into themes and examined in terms of their internal affinity, and their external affinity with the findings from the content analysis of the recorded lessons.

All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study. Their anonymity and privacy were preserved by using pseudonyms (Dushnik & Tzabar Ben Yehoshua, 2016). The office of the Chief Scientist authorized the audio recordings of the lessons.

**Results**

**Sample of responses to questionnaires distributed in state-religious and ultra-orthodox sectors**

The first part of the questionnaire asked about demographic details of the teachers and the second part consisted of two open questions about the teaching of literature in their schools.

The data analysis uncovered three central themes in the teachers’ descriptions of their approaches to teaching literature and the atmosphere in their schools: (1) atmosphere (2) making literature present in the classroom (3) pedagogical content knowledge.

1. The first theme pertains to the atmosphere in the classroom during literature lessons. The teachers noted their perceptions of the feelings that arise among their students, as well as their own contributions, as leaders of the lessons, to their students’ feelings.
2. The second theme, making literature present in the classroom, reflects the place of literature as perceived by the teachers. This is sometimes contrary to the way their students perceive it.
3. The third theme, pedagogical content knowledge, relates to methods of teaching literature.

First question: Please describe freely and in your own words your approach to teaching literature and the atmosphere in your school:

Below is a sample of responses to this questionnaire item given by the teachers in state-religious schools, organized by theme:

1. **Atmosphere**

“My students really love the lesson, it’s actually their favorite.”

“There is a good atmosphere.”

“We do our best to create a pleasant atmosphere.”

1. **Making literature present in the classroom**

“I would be glad if this topic was more present in the curricula in general.”

“In my opinion, in the new teaching booklet there is less room left for literature.”

“Literature lessons in our school are regarded as unimportant.”

1. **Pedagogical content knowledge**

“They love to learn, to listen, to become smarter. There are interesting discussions.”

“We do our best to make the learning enjoyable in the first place and to make the students experience the text.”

A sample of the questionnaire results of the ultra-orthodox teachers:

1. **Atmosphere**

“The students look forward to having these lessons and are sorry that they have them only once a week.”

“Students really love them. There’s a great atmosphere. They wait for these lessons.”

1. **Making literature present**

“In our school, they put a lot of effort into this subject by working on literary pieces. We have a rich library which is used by everyone. We also have literature days and encourage free writing.”

“In my school, literature is a broad subject with a strong presence.”

1. **Pedagogical content knowledge**

“These are the lessons which they always ask to learn. Even if we didn’t really learn a literary concept.”

“The teachers give their students cognitive, sensory, motor, personal, and interpersonal freedom of action. This is a subject that encourages fruitful and enjoyable discussions for developing certain topics.”

Second question: What would you suggest for changing or improving in the teaching of literature?

A sample of the questionnaire results of the teachers in state-religious schools:

1. **Atmosphere**

“Teaching the lesson to half a class at a time, once a week, to create a better and more intimate atmosphere.”

1. **Making literature be present**

“In fact, when there’s a lot of pressure to meet schedules and to teach all the material, and they need to ‘cut down’ lessons, it’s usually the literature lessons.”

“To give it a more important and respected place than it has today.”

1. **Pedagogical content knowledge**

“Take out the reading comprehension questions and define it as a lesson for fun reading.”

“To publish comprehensive handbooks for teachers on how to teach every literary work.”

“Continuing education programs for teaching literature.”

“Read out loud more to the students. Give out copies of the books so that all the children will be able to read and follow along.”

“Create high-quality materials for teachers.”

“The goals of teaching literature are difficult to implement. Every teacher wracks his brain on how to achieve them, and doesn’t always succeed.”

A sample of the questionnaire results of the ultra-orthodox teachers:

1. **Atmosphere**

“In our school, we do our best to create a good and pleasant atmosphere in the literature lessons.”

1. **Making literature present**

“Add an extra hour for literature in the schedule.”

“Have a formulated curriculum that will determine the place of literature in the schedule.”

1. **Pedagogical content knowledge**

“Varied high-quality teaching materials with an appropriate level of spirituality that will be available for the teaching teams but will also be attractive enough for the students.”

“Hold continuing education programs for teachers. Alternatively, send out literary works with varied teaching methods as a model for every grade level.”

“It’s required to offer many continuing education programs in the subject! There’s not enough real knowledge of what literature lessons are.”

**Findings from the recordings of 12 literature lessons in 6 elementary schools in the state-religious sector and 6 elementary schools in the ultra-orthodox district:**

**Literary works chosen by teachers in state-religious schools**

In some cases, as part of the pre-reading activity, teachers connected the literary works to issues pertaining to the students’ world. Therefore, they began the activity by explaining their reasons for choosing the particular literary work. This section addresses the considerations the teachers choose to present to the students. They might also have other or additional considerations which they did not reveal to the students. Some teachers chose not to tell their students why they were teaching a particular literary work at that time, but the context might have been obvious, such as an upcoming holiday or event.

Sarit is a teacher and language coordinator at a state-religious school. The recorded class was given to students in the 2nd grade. Sarit explained to her students her reason for choosing to read out loud to them a story by Uri Orbach, a children’s author who had passed away the previous year. She connected her choice of this story to an event planned for the next day: a writing contest based on Orbach’s books. She made it clear that Orbach’s widow was to be one of the judges of the contest. In this way, the teacher created pertinence to the events of the day.

Ilanit, a 2nd-grade teacher for a girls’ class, also pointed out her reasons for choosing a literary work. She taught a poem about a boy who trying to express his feelings of frustration and anger without confronting the adults who forbid him to behave aggressively. At the beginning of her lesson, Ilanit explained her decision to change the lesson schedule, namely to teach a literature lesson instead of a Torah lesson:

“You know that this week (…) there were a few incidents of anger in this class. So today I decided, rather than starting with a Torah lesson, to start with this topic of anger. (…) We’re actually not canceling Torah. This is our Torah. (…) I brought you a special work of literature about the topic of anger.”

In her statement, the teacher connected the literary work to an event which took place in class, in order to create pertinence to the students’ world. Her meaningful statement that they were not canceling cancelation the Torah lessons by saying, “This is our Torah”, empowers her decision to deal with this literary work. The teacher decided that learning this poem was more important than the Torah lesson at that time. The teacher pointed out that the poem was being taught following events that took place in class. In this way, she emphasized that the poem was being taught in this particular context. She didn’t mention the poem’s aesthetic aspects, which could have been a reason for choosing this poem.

Sometimes, the teachers didn’t explain their choice of a literary work for a certain timing, but one could understand the context due to the circumstances. Ronit teaches a 6th-grade girls’ class. She chose to teach a poem about the Aliyah (immigration) from Ethiopia, which draws attention to the longing for Jerusalem. Ronit didn’t point out any certain context for teaching the poem, but the lesson was recorded a week and a half before “Jerusalem Day”, so one can infer that the poem about the immigration journey of Ethiopian Jews on their way to Jerusalem was taught in that context. Based on the transcript of the lesson, it was unclear whether the context was obvious to the students.

In contrast, in the following example, the teacher apparently taught a poem in a certain context, but did not reveal what it was. Rina teaches a 6th-grade boys’ class at a state-religious school. The lesson took place two days before the end of the school year. At the end of the lesson, Rina asked the students why they thought she was teaching this poem during the last two days of school. The students gave varied answers:

“Because it talks about the Kinneret and we go to the Kinneret on the summer holiday.”

“Because she’s saying goodbye to the Kinneret and we’re also saying goodbye…”

The teacher repeated the students’ answers, but there was no discussion about their answers, and no discourse evolved on the subject. In the last minutes of the lesson, the teacher replayed the poem, without explaining the reasons for her choice.

Similarly, in the following examples, the teachers did not expose their students to the context for teaching the literary works.

Orit is a linguistic-education instructor in elementary schools. Like many Hebrew teachers at state-religious schools, she also teaches literature lessons. In a lesson to a 3rd-grade class, Orit chose to teach a story that is not included in the curriculum and does not appear in the readers. She passed around photocopies of the story to her students, without explaining her choice or the context for teaching that story.

Nirit teaches a class of 1st-grade girls at a state-religious school. Before Purim, when children dress up in costumes, she decided to teach Dan Pagis’s book, “The Egg that Disguised Itself.” Although the story deals with questions of identity and formation of the self, the teachers’ questions dealt only with the egg dressing up in a costume.

Neither of these teachers explained their considerations for choosing these literary works. However, while in Orit’s lesson there seemed to be no external reason for teaching the story, the context for Nirit’s choice was obvious.

These examples illustrate how teachers in the state-religious sector designed pre-reading activities that connected the literary works to the students’ world and made them relevant to their everyday lives. However, the activities didn’t take off from that technical connection. No activities were held to advance the students’ literary understanding or to generate the meaning of a possible connection between the students and the text, beyond a literacy processing of the text.

**Choice of literary works by teachers in the ultra-orthodox sector**

Leah teaches a 5th-grade class at a special type of school in the ultra-orthodox sector. The school’s administration and staff are ultra-orthodox, but the students come from secular or traditional (not ultra-orthodox) homes. The goal of the school is to bring the students closer to the ultra-orthodox sector. The story which Leah chose to teach doesn’t appear in the reader. It was taken from a children’s book entitled “We love you so much, child” written by the ultra-orthodox children’s author Yehudit Yellin, also known by her pen name, Sari Wallach. It’s a realistic story, which aims at providing emotional support for children struggling with various difficulties. None of the characters have names (they are referred to as Dad, a lady, etc.). Even the hero of the story is called by a symbolic and generic name, “Ma ‘Chpat” (Hebrew for “What does it matter?”), in order to arouse identification and empathy among the young audience. Ma ‘chpat is a vibrant boy, full of life, who can’t behave according to the expectations of children his age in the ultra-orthodox sector, namely, to stay in the synagogue and pray. He is bothered by being labeled as a problematic child, even though he doesn’t express that outwardly. The book presents the character of his father as full of empathy. The message is that children can change the way people label them by praying and by addressing adults. Leah doesn’t explain her choice of the story before reading it.

Hani, who teaches a 3rd-grade class at a state-ultra-orthodox school, doesn’t explain her choice either. Hani chose to teach an adaptation of Aesop’s fable “The ant and the grasshopper”, which was in the reader used at the school. It’s an allegorical and rhymed passage, but in order to adapt it to the Jewish world of values the ending was changed. The ant doesn’t leave the lazy grasshopper to freeze in the cold, but proves him wrong, teaches him moral values, and also has mercy on him and takes him into her home.

A similar example can be found in Mirit’s lesson, for a 6th-grade girls’ class at an ultra-orthodox school elementary school affiliated with the movement of Chabad Hassidim. The school board and staff are ultra-orthodox and affiliated with Chabad. The teaching contents are unique to them, acknowledged and approved by the Ministry of Education. Although the school has a reader of literary works, Mirit chose to teach a poem by Zelda (a religious but not ultra-orthodox poet), titled “Each of us has a name.”

In the lesson plan that accompanied the recording of the lesson, she wrote: “The poem will be taught in Bat Mitzvah lessons, as part of the subject: ‘Identity – the unique essence of an individual’s personality’. The poem appears in the appendix of recommended literary works for the Ministry of Education’s linguistic- education curriculum for 5th-6th grades. Mirit didn’t explain to her students why she chose to teach that poem The choice to teach this poem in a Chabad institute is not trivial, since there is extra emphasis on teaching only literary works by authors affiliated with the Chabad Hassidim, and Zelda was not affiliated with this movement as an adult. However, as part of the pre-reading activity, the teacher told her students that before the author got married, her name was Zelda Shneorson, and she came from an ultra-orthodox family of distinguished lineage, which explains the fact that her poems are taught in the ultra-orthodox school system. The explanation provided by the teacher constituted a religious justification for teaching the poem.

Three other teachers, Shuli, Bat Sheva, and Limor chose to teach stories from the reader without explaining their choices or connecting them to certain events. Both Shuli and Bat Sheva teach 6th-grade girls’ classes in the same network of schools (located in two different cities). Limor teaches a 3rd-grade class in a different network of schools. She chose to teach the book “Foxy is Making Friends” by Adam Ralf. This is a surprising and exceptional choice, because it’s not written by an ultra-orthodox author.

These examples show that there was no significant difference between the sectors in the general division of the literary works the teachers chose. However, there was a significant difference in that the teachers in state-religious schools seem to need to choose literary works that connect to the students’ everyday lives. All but one of the teachers in state-religious schools chose literary works based on a certain context, and they tended to explain to their students why they were learning that literary work in that context. In contrast, the teachers in the ultra-orthodox schools did not explain their choices.

**Discussion**

The discussion will be divided into three parts:

1. A discussion of the pre-reading activities in the lesson plans of the teachers at state-religious schools
2. A discussion of the pre-reading activities in the lesson plans of the teachers at the ultra-orthodox schools
3. A discussion of how literature is perceived in the different school systems based on the recorded lessons and the questionnaire results.

**Pre-reading activities in the teachers’ lessons in state-religious schools**

As an introduction to teaching Uri Orbach’s book and her students’ first encounter with the story, Sarit designed a pre-reading activity, in which she asked eight questions about their prior knowledge, such as: “Do you know various kinds of professionals?” “Who would like to say what kinds of professionals they know?” The students were not asked to explain or prove their answers. This type of question can be characterized as cognitive questions, but their purpose was not to activate the students beyond sharing their prior knowledge, and therefore they are not questions of cognitive activation. This is a “ping pong” discourse, in which Sarit asked a question, repeated the students’ answers, sometimes added a word of praise, *“good, good . .* .” and moved on to the next student. Apparently, she encouraged students to connect to prior knowledge: “Also… in ‘My Uncle Simcha’ you talked about all kinds of professions. Remember?” But she didn’t give her students time to respond, and a "naturally occurring discourse" (Kopfberg, 2016) did not evolve. Even questions of making predictions based on the title of a book and the picture on its cover did not raise the level of the students’ answers beyond the banal.

After reading the title “The Dream Fixer” out loud, Sarit asked, “For those who don’t know the story, what is our book about?” Sarit provided general information about the author: “Uri Orbach, may he rest in peace, wrote the story. He was a Knesset member and lived in our town.” However, it was unclear how this information advanced the students’ understanding of the story. The title of the story has symbolic meaning, and this is a critical point for the understanding of the story, but she did not relate to this at all. Sarit’s questions related to the title and the cover illustration: “Do you see (on the cover) the man who fixes dreams?” Sarit did not relate to the fact that the illustration is a portrait of the author Uri Orbach, which gives a different tone to the story.

Making a connection to prior knowledge, while looking at the cover and the title, is a strategy of addressing the paratextual (Elkad-Lehman, 2016). This corresponds with what Langer (1990) calls standing outside and to “coming into” the world of the text. That is, the readers use their prior knowledge and other means at their disposal (linguistic knowledge, curiosity, predictions, and artistic devices) to elicit ideas that will help them interact with the text. In this case, since pre-reading activities were technical and solely in the field of vocabulary enrichment, with neither cognitive activation nor generic references (such as, this is an allegorical and fantastical story), it is difficult to see how they can assist in the students’ literary understanding of the story they are learning.

Ilanit’s lesson included two pre-reading activities. In the first activity, the students were asked to write an answer to a question that appears in the title of the poem, “What do we do when we get angry?” The teacher wrote their answers on the white board and a “ping pong” discourse evolved. The students answered and the teacher repeated their answers, praised as necessary, and gave the next student permission to talk. Afterwards, the teacher and students read the title out loud together, then did a second writing activity based on the title.

This lesson shows how the tasks empower literary works as tools to develop social/emotional discourse. The teacher used these tools to activate social processes in the classroom. However, to paraphrase Langer’s claim, there is no rule for “getting into” a text (Langer, 1990). As a result, the literary work remains solely a catalyst for discourse about social processes, without there being any literary-artistic discussion about the work of literature itself.

Of the participating teachers at state-religious schools, only two shared information about the writer with their students. In one case, the information was incorrect. The teacher told her students that the writer was a member of the Ethiopian community, a poet, and a screenwriter. However, a quick search online shows that he is not a member of the Ethiopian community. The teacher ignored religious difficulties raised by the text. Further, she only asked the students to relate to the difficulties faced by the Ethiopian immigrants prior to their arrival in Israel. One student asked: “I really don’t understand why. Why not believe that they are Jews?” The teacher replied: “That’s an excellent question,” but did not challenge the student to search for an answer that would activate her cognitively. This illustrates the role of the literary works from the teachers’ perspectives, namely that they are a source of knowledge, provided by the teacher. The emotional awakening felt by the students after hearing the poem, and the religious, moral and personal questions which it raised, were not a part of the lesson planned by the teacher, and therefore, they remained unanswered, and moreover were not wanted.

**Pre-reading activities in the ultra-orthodox school lessons**

A task that enables cognitive activation is meant to awaken the readers and activate them to do further research (Winkler, 2020). In her lesson, Leah used the title to ask questions of cognitive activation with the aim of provoking thought and curiosity about the story: “I’d love to hear more ideas…” “What’s this title, Ma ‘Chpat?” The second question is cognitive as well, and its aim is to awaken the students and create interest and expectations towards the reading of the story. Leah, the teacher, posed a question to herself: “So, I don’t understand, teacher, you’re bringing us a story for a literature lesson, and there’s a mistake in the title? Does it make any sense?”

After the students find the mistake in the title (the phrase Ma Ichpat [What does it matter?] is written with a missing letter aleph– Ma ‘chpat), the teacher provokes a broader discussion with these questions:

“There’s no Aleph. Excellent. So why? Was the book wrong on purpose? It’s a book that costs a lot of money in the store. I can’t just write whatever I want. I proofread it first, I bring it to a book proofreader, it goes through a process of printing, adding vowel signs, page numbers. Why is it like this? Why is it Ma ‘Chpat? Why is the title written like that? Do you think there’s a spelling mistake?”

Her questions met Langer’s (1990) characteristics of being “inside” the world of the text and navigating within the space that it offers. Readers drew from their personal experience and from the information they received about the text to expand their changing system of perspectives regarding the text. The students responded to the teacher’s “provocation” with a good deal of interest and proposed a variety of possible answers to the unusual phenomenon.

Another example was Mirit, who taught Zelda’s song, “Each of us has a name.” The teacher asked her students, “Do you like your name?” However, the students were not asked to explain why they like or dislike their names. The second task generating cognitive activation that Mirit asked her students to do was to read and interpret a Midrash written on the white board, which relates to the meaning of a person’s name,.

“A person has three names:

one that he is called by his father and mother;

one that people know him by,

and one that he acquires for himself.

Not of all what he acquires for himself.”

(Midrash Tanchuma, Kohellet Rabba, 1).

The Midrash is the intertextual and ideological infrastructure for the poem. Discussing it, as part of the pre-reading activity, advanced understanding of the poem.

**Perceptions of literature in the two schools streams based on the recorded lessons and the questionnaire results.**

The perception of teaching literature as works of art is based on viewing literature not as a tool for teaching, but rather to allow it to exist on its own right, and to experience the literary texts as works of art. However, this is not the case according to the results of this study. No teacher was found to teach out of a regard for literature. All of them view the teaching of literature as instrumental. Literature is seen as a tool for promoting literacy or instilling values (Rosenthal, 2015).

Comparison of the teachers from the two sectors yielded two axes in relation to the teaching of literature. One axis is the perception of “literature as part of language skills” (Poyas, 2006: 14). This is manifested in the ultra-orthodox sector by avoiding explanations of the choice of a literary work. The other axis relates to the teaching of literature as a journey of self-revelation in a dynamic society. This axis is manifested at state-religious schools in the teachers’ practice of connecting the literary work to the students’ world, even though the connection is very basic and refers only to time and place.

Additionally, the teachers in the state-religious sector explained to the class their choices of the literary works, while teachers in the ultra-orthodox sector did not do so. It might be that the state-religious school teachers’ practice of explaining the context in which they teach the literary works, as opposed to the ultra-orthodox teachers who don’t seem to feel the need to do so, illustrates their different educational approaches. In the state-religious school system, RE is more open, and there are close relationships between the students and their teachers, for example in many schools the students address their teachers by their first names. In contrast, the ultra-orthodox sector maintains a hierarchy and distance between the teachers and their students in order to preserve a relationship of respect. The students address their teachers in the third person, “the teacher”, and the teachers similarly address the principal in the third person. In such a reality, teachers might not feel the need to explain their choices to their classes. Another possible factor relates to the training of teachers in the ultra-orthodox colleges. Almost no room is provided in the curriculum for literature and its teaching, and the teachers-in-training do not specialize in literature. The result of this is a lack of teachers who feel a personal affinity for literature and who have knowledge of literature.

When teachers in the state-religious school system choose a literary work to teach in their classes, they can rely on an existing pool of literary works chosen by literature specialists. They are familiar with the curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education and inspectors in the state-religious educational system. However, teachers in the ultra-orthodox schools have no approved literature curriculum. They must choose literary works from the textbooks of the school network in which they teach, or from independent sources that are compatible with the spirit of the school.

The understanding that literature can create situations that consciously destabilize the perceptions and beliefs according to which readers have been shaped and the social context in which they live is well-documented in research (Dorsey, 1977). This emphasizes the importance attributed to teaching literature in the researched schools in the ultra-orthodox sector, as a way to instill values and create discourse. This corresponds with prior research conclusions on the subject (Poyas, 2009, Rosenthal, 2015).

Additionally, the results shed light on the teacher’s position within the hierarchy of ultra-orthodox schools: their autonomy is partial, and they are required to receive approval from their superiors regarding the learning contents in the selected literature. Evidence for this perception can be found in the answers to the open question, “Describe freely and in your own words your approach to teaching literature and the atmosphere in your school.” The teachers in the state-religious sector responded with phrases such as “unimportant”, “I would be glad if this field were more present in the curricula”, “In my opinion, in the new teaching booklet there is less room left for literature”. In the ultra-orthodox sector, the teachers reported a perception of teaching literature as central and respected: “In our school they put a lot of effort into this subject”; “a rich library and literature days”; “In my school the subject of literature has broad dimensions and the teachers provide a freedom of action…”; “fruitful and attractive discussions.” The importance attributed to teaching literature in ultra-orthodox schools apparently results from the large involvement of the authority figures in the choice of literary works. Since the contents are approved and there is no danger of “problematic and subversive” texts which might not represent the hegemonic perceptions of the school, there is no problem with giving them significant space in the school domain.

The responses to the second question, “What would you suggest to change or improve in the teaching of literature?” shows differences between the two sectors, which further support the conclusions drawn regarding the importance attributed to teaching literature teaching in two school systems. Regarding the theme of making literature present, the teachers in the state-religious sector paint a sad picture of the place of teaching literature teaching within the hierarchy of the school system, and wish to give literature more presence and respect : “And in fact, when there’s a lot of pressure to meet schedules and to teach all the material and they need to ‘cut down’ lessons, it’s usually the literature lessons”; “Give it a more important and respectful place than it has today.” The teachers in the ultra-orthodox district asked to “add an extra hour for literature in the schedule” and “To have a formulated curriculum that will determine the place of literature in the schedule.” This emphasizes the gap between the perspectives regarding teaching literature in the two sectors, as stated at the beginning of this discussion.

Another theme which emerged from the open questions in the questionnaires pertains to the atmosphere in the literature lessons. The teachers in the ultra-orthodox schools described the atmosphere in their literature lessons by describing their opinions of how the students experience their lessons. For example: “The students look forward to having these lessons and are sorry that they have them only once a week”, “Students really love them. There’s a great atmosphere, they wait for these lessons”. The responses of the teachers in the state-religious schools also related to the way they think their students feel during their lessons: “My students really love the lesson, it’s actually their favorite”. They also mentioned their place in creating a pleasant atmosphere in their lessons: “A good atmosphere”, “We do our best to create a pleasant atmosphere.” In both sectors, the teachers’ responses reflected their impressions of their students’ perspectives and might therefore reflect, implicitly, their own feelings and opinions regarding the teaching of literature in the institutes where they teach (Achituv, 2012, Achituv, 2013, Gudmundsdottir, 1990 Grossman, 1990, Shulman, 1987). However, it is notable that the teachers in the state-religious schools remarked upon their contribution to the positive atmosphere in their classes based on their claims, whereas the teachers in the ultra-orthodox district did not. This is an additional reinforcement for the teachers’ place in the two school sectors.

Despite the differences between the place attributed to teaching literature, teachers in both sectors said they feel that they lack literary content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge for teaching literature (Shulman, 1986, Loewenberg Ball,Phelps & Thames, 2008). The teachers were aware of their instrumental teaching style: “There are the lessons which they always ask to learn. Even if we didn’t really learn a literary concept”. They asked for tools for teaching the aesthetics of literature (Rosenblatt, 1995). Teachers in the state-religious school sector have access to teaching guides and examples provided by the Ministry of Education for some of the literary works in the curriculum. Nevertheless, teachers didn’t feel that they had sufficient literary knowledge (pedagogical knowledge) for independently constructing literature lessons in a way which reflects the aesthetic aspects of literature without efferent aspects (Rosenblatt, 1995). The policymakers in the fields of teacher training and the professional development of teachers in the state-religious and ultra-orthodox sectors should take this into consideration.

All the teachers from the state religious school sector, except for one, chose age-appropriate literary works from the curriculum. However, at the time that the data were collect, no literature curriculum had yet been formulated for the ultra-orthodox school sector. Therefore four, of the teachers relied on stories from the readers, and the other two chose stories from other sources.

In terms of teaching literature so it is pertinent, in the ultra-orthodox sector, the pre-reading activity was not perceived as a “gateway” to the literary work, and no attempts were made to connect a literary work to the students’ everyday lives. In contrast, all the teachers from the state-religious school system made connections between the everyday occurrences in their students’ lives and the literary works, whether directly or indirectly.

In most of the pre-reading activities in both sectors, many of the tasks were found to be cognitive in the simple sense, and did not offer the students any cognitive activation. There was one prominent exception, in the lesson about Zelda’s poem. The teacher used knowledge about Judaism for cognitive activation of the students. Most of the questions were in the “ping pong” format. Even in the discussion activity, the teachers did not allow for a dialogue between the students in a way that would assist them in constructing complex arguments. The discussion did not evolve into discourse in which the students expressed different opinions, discussed them among themselves, and interpreted the literary work in various ways. The students did not try to develop their own reasoned opinions about a literary work. There was no place for opinions that contradict the accepted interpretation, or for questions which the teacher didn’t plan to deal address. In the examined lessons from the state-religious sector, virtually no religious references to literary works were made. In the one exception, when a student raised a question on that topic, the teacher ignored the question. Thus, the perception of a teacher as actively leading a discourse that deviates from the curriculum on topics of religion in the classroom (Roof, 1996) was not manifested in the lessons examined in this study. The teachers avoided creating discourse that might be taken as subversive and threatening for the hegemonic religious perceptions with which their school identifies.

In the ongoing dialogue about teaching literature in the schools examined in this study, the teachers’ need to use literature as an aid that supports the teaching of other subjects overwhelms the need to treat the literary text as a work of art. In RE in the ultra-orthodox and state-religious schools examined, it can be seen that the teachers’ desire to remain within the boundaries of the accepted religious discourse in their schools led them to flatten the literary discourse and prevent an open discussion that could lead their students to complex religious questions that the teachers do not want to address.

**The Research Limitations**

The researcher is affiliated with the state-religious school sector. This has prominent advantages as well as disadvantages (Achituv, 2012, Clandinin, 2007; Lieblich, 1993). The advantages are that the researcher’s prior acquaintance with the teachers’ worlds and ways of working created a comfortable atmosphere of trust and confidence and enabled her to ask for clarifications when necessary. However, the central disadvantage is that “outsider” researchers are capable of seeing things which “insider” researchers are not consciously aware of, since they are part of their thinking and routine standpoint. Thus, the advantage of working with one sector becomes a disadvantage when working with another sector. In order to ensure that the disadvantages of the researcher’s affiliation didn’t come at the expense of the validity of the research, three experienced researchers were asked to read the research and to provide their comments.

There was a significant gap between the number of teachers at state-religious schools who agreed to answer the anonymous questionnaire (28) and the number of ultra-orthodox teachers who answered the questionnaire (12). This necessitates an explanation. For technical reasons, the questionnaire was primarily distributed online. In the ultra-orthodox sector, internet use is not considered acceptable. Most of the teachers do not have an internet connection at home, but only in their workplace, making it difficult to achieve wide-scale distribution of the questionnaire in this way. Therefore, the questionnaire was printed and given to the linguistic-education instructors, who agreed to assist in its distribution. Since there is built-in suspicion, in the ultra-orthodox sector, towards anyone who is not affiliated with that sector, the teachers felt a need to ask for permission from the school principals to fill out the questionnaire. When those principals heard that the questionnaire part of research being conducted by a woman who is not part of ultra-orthodox society, they refused.

Recording the lessons also involved difficulties. The teachers at the state-religious schools had smartphones, which greatly facilitated this task. Use of such devices is forbidden in the ultra-orthodox sector, particularly in educational institutes. Therefore, the ultra-orthodox teachers were provided with other recording devices, but this encumbered the recording process and may have prevented other teachers from recording their own lessons.

**Conclusions**

The present study makes a contribution by illuminating the current situation in classes in the state-religious and ultra-orthodox school sectors in Israel, and reflecting on the place of educators teaching literature in these two sectors. The descriptions of the lessons show a disturbing picture of the reference to literary texts only as tools for RE, and not as literary works with artistic qualities. The participating teachers lacked knowledge of the various theories and strategies underlying the teaching of literature. Further, their need to prevent cognitive deviation from the boundaries of RE allowed by their institutions is noticeable in the lessons analyzed. The practice of justifying the study of literary works as part of RE comes at the expense of motivating students to think clearly about the ideas they raise, mediating between the student and the literary text, and increasing students’ cultural capital.