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Faculty of Education

Department of Counseling and Human Development

**Constructing the social role of a ‘pupil’:**

**Portrayals of school and starting school in Hebrew-language picture books**

**ההבניה של התפקיד החברתי ‘תלמיד/ה’: ספרי ילדים ישראלים לגיל הרך כמקרה מבחן**

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# Introduction

Schools have long been considered important sites of children’s socialization. They socialize children to certain norms, ideas and ideologies, and do so situated within specific local and national contexts (e.g., Jørgensen & Allan, 2020; Keating & Benton, 2013). These socializations serve to reproduce social power structures and maintain sociocultural order in societies (e.g., Collins, 2009; Link et al., 2017); as a result, schools are sites of social construction. Social interactions of any kind, particularly language interactions, form the basis of shared human knowledge and beliefs in every community. Human knowledge about the ‘nature of the world’, which varies historically and culturally, is therefore a product of everyday social processes that construct one’s knowledge and beliefs (Burr, 2015). Just as young children are socialized to constructions of age, temporality and ‘becoming an adult’ (Uprichard, 2008), I argue that they are socialized to a particular construction when starting school—that of filling the role of a pupil—that is essential for maintaining sociocultural order. This study will explore how society shapes and constructs the role of the pupil via children’s picture books, focusing on Hebrew-language picture books that tell stories of children beginning school.

Picture books, or picture storybooks, combine illustrations and text to tell a story (Owens & Nowell, 2001; Dockett et al., 2010; Phillips & Sturm, 2013). They are a common form of popular culture and a unique genre in children’s literature aimed at children in their early childhood years (Ciecierski et al., 2017). Regularly read to children by educators and parents for different purposes, picture books play a significant role in children’s lives (Dyer et al., 2000; Mayfield, 2002; Ganer & Parker, 2018). They expand and contribute to children’s knowledge about the physical and cultural world (e.g., Phillips & Sturm, 2013; Ciecierski et al., 2017), and can also be used to construct children’s collective cultural knowledge (Dockett et al., 2010) and reproduce existing social structures (Hamilton et al., 2006; Koss, 2015; Lester, 2014).

# Theoretical background

## **The sociocultural construction of starting school in Israel**

### **Schooling in Israel**

Education of and for the masses via a state-organized schooling system became the norm in Western societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and spread throughout the world (Reagan, 2018). Nowadays, as set forth in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, primary education is considered a child’s right (Perry, 2016).

Yet, schools, which are located within local, national and historical frameworks, are not merely educational sites, but also sites of children’s socialization into specific cultural and social ideologies (Jorgensen & Allan, 2020; Reagan, 2018). Being social institutions, schools work to construct an ‘ideal enlightened subject’ via different methods, such as educational practices, disciplinary acts and regulatory techniques. These practices ignore children’s individual or ethnic differences by expecting and enforcing homogenous behaviors and academic achievements among all children of a certain age (Link et al., 2017).

In Israel, schooling is compulsory by law from the age of three. Israel’s educational system is divided into four separate departments according to the children’s ages: pre-primary (early childhood), primary, secondary and academic education (Weissblai & Vininger, 2015). Children between the ages of three and six are under the supervision and curricular oversight of Israel’s early childhood education department, and they attend kindergartens and preschools (Aram & Ziv, 2018), which are physically and institutionally separate from “school” at the higher levels. At age six, Israeli children enter “school,” or elementary school (Weissblai & Vininger, 2015).

### **School transitioning and school readiness**

Transitions are defined as processes of change from a certain stage of life to another. They are seen as part of an individual’s developmental process, and are culturally based: a transition is marked or celebrated according to societal norms that define what changes are noteworthy and what are not (Rogoff, 2003). Children’s transitions from one stage to another require time and deliberate effort from their parents and community, as they mark a change in the child’s social role in the community and in the child’s own development. Transitions are framed by awareness of the process through activities and events that take place before and during the change, and transitions end when the child becomes a full member of the endgoal stage. Children’s first entrance into school changes their social role in families and communities profoundly, as they are given the new role of being a pupil (Harper, 2016).

There is broad agreement among researchers that a child’s entrance into and adjustment to school has a long-term effect, academically and socially, on the child’s developmental trajectory, making it an important milestone in the children’s and their families’ lives (Blankson et al., 2017; Huser et al., 2016; Mirkhil, 2010). Early childhood education differs profoundly from elementary school in its historical origins, pedagogy, methods, demands and physical surroundings (Hogsnes, 2015; Huser et al., 2016). Consequently, children, parents and preschool teachers tend to prepare for transition to school both in thought and in action (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Mirkhil, 2010; Perry, 2016). Petriwskyj et al. (2005) argue in their literature review that the conceptualization of this transition recently shifted from ‘school readiness’—the notion that it is the child’s responsibility to be mature and ready—to the notion of ‘school transition’, a long-term process seen as a responsibility of the child’s environment. This shift seems to be mostly semantic, however, as school readiness continues to be a crucial part of children’s transition to school worldwide (Shemesh & Golden, unpublished manuscript). In Israel, literacy and numeracy are still important and integral parts of the early childhood education curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2011). Preschool teachers work intensively to prepare children, whether academically or socio-emotionally, for school and the demands of the first grade (Shemesh & Golden, unpublished manuscript). Parents are also greatly concerned with their children’s readiness for school, so much so that various private services exist to promote school readiness (Erdreich & Golden, 2017).

Indeed, the new social role that preschool-age children anticipate having as school-age pupils permeates their surroundings as preschool teachers and parents work to prepare the children for the “right kind” of transition/readiness. Their efforts are not isolated, as popular culture also shapes and constructs children’s social roles.

## **Picture books**

Picture books, more specifically picture storybooks, are a form of popular culture oriented toward an audience of young children who cannot yet read. A unique genre in children’s literature, picture books are illustrated children’s books in which the illustrations correspond with and are just as important as the text. Together, pictures and text tell the story (Owens & Nowell, 2001; Dockett et al., 2010; Phillips & Sturm, 2013). On average, the length of a picture book is about 32 pages, and illustrations appear on each page or page spread (Ciecierski et al., 2017). The cohesiveness of a text-illustration story contributes substantially to children’s comprehension of and ability to retell it (Takacs & Bus, 2018). Picture books have existed since the eighteenth century in the West and remain a prominent genre in popular culture (Adams et al., 2011).

### **Uses and roles**

Commonly read to children by educators and parents for a variety of purposes, picture books play a significant role in children’s lives. Some didactic uses are literacy development (van Renen, 2008; Takacs & Bus, 2018) and the development of reflective thinking abilities or cognition (Mustadi et al., 2019). Additionally, these books serve as an important medium for developing emotional discourses with children and helping children cope with life challenges (Dyer et al., 2000; Mayfield, 2002; Ganer & Parker, 2018). Picture books also function to teach children about and expose them to the physical, cultural and social world surrounding them (Phillips & Sturm, 2013; Ciecierski et al., 2017; Knopp-Schwyn & Fracentese, 2019). At the same time, picture books help to construct children’s collective cultural knowledge (Dockett et al., 2010) and reproduce structures of social order (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2006; Koss, 2015; Lester, 2014).

### **Social construction in picture books**

As I will show next, picture books are children-oriented artifacts that carry cultural and social messages and cultural values. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (Kress, 1990), researchers have uncovered institutionalized social power relations—such as race, gender, ableism and more—widely embedded in children’s picture books. They affect literacy abilities, self-esteem, self-significance (Aronson et al., 2018) and access to power, opportunities and equality (Lazar & Rachko, 2012).

### **Constructing Whiteness in US picture books**

Larrick, in her pioneering research, found that out of 5,000 picture books published in the United States three years prior to her study, fewer than 7% of the characters were African American (Larrick, 1965, as cited in Koss, 2015). Recent studies have indicated that little has changed since, as children’s picture books still do not represent the US population accurately. People of color are still profoundly underrepresented in these books (Koss, 2015; Aronson et al., 2018). For example, Koss’s (2015) study of 455 picture books published in 2012 in the United States found that 75% of human main characters were White. African American characters accounted for 15% of the human main characters, while a combined 6% of characters were of other ethnicities, including Asian American, Latinx, Middle Eastern, and Native American.

### **Constructing gender in picture books**

Studies have found gender bias and gender stereotypes in Western children’s books. For example, Hamilton et al. (2006) examined 200 top-selling or award-winning picture books in the United States between the years 1995 and 2001, and found that twice as many main characters were male than female, and that the books’ illustrations portrayed 53% more males than females. Female characters were portrayed as nurturers three times as often as male characters, and male characters were more often displayed outdoors than females. These findings aligned with previous studies (e.g., Weitzman et al., 1972; Tepper & Cassidy, 1999). Adams et al. (2011) examined parental portrayal in the 750 best-selling picture books in the United Kingdom published in 2008 and found that fathers were underrepresented in children’s picture books. Fathers were outnumbered by mothers as parental figures in the books, and fathers were portrayed as less nurturing than mothers, as displaying less emotion and as doing less housework.

Moreover, social constructions in picture books do not end at race and gender. Studies have shown that other power structures of the sociocultural order, such as ableism (e.g., Aho & Alter, 2018; Koss, 2015), sexual orientation (e.g Lester, 2014; Taylor, 2012) and class (e.g Forest et al., 2015; Saltmarsh, 2007), are also constructed via children’s picture books.

## **Picture books about school or starting school**

As the activity of reading picture books became increasingly popular among parents and came to be perceived as a beneficial preacademic tool for preschool children, there came to be an increase in popularity and availability of picture books representing schools, teachers, transition to school and the teaching profession (Belcher et al., 2019). Surprisingly, there is little research on picture books that portray schools and the transition to school.

### **Teachers in picture books about school or starting school**

#### **Teachers’ role in school**

The teacher-child relationship plays a critical role in children’s educational and social success trajectories in school (e.g., Curby et al., 2013; McNally & Slutsky, 2018); yet, there are remarkably few representations of personal connections between children and teachers in picture books about starting school. Dockett et al.’s (2010) study of images of teachers in picture book analyzed 164 English-language picture books about starting school from six different countries (USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, UK and Singapore), and their findings showed that teachers’ main role in school, as portrayed in the books, was managing the classroom and teaching. Only 34% of teacher representations showed teachers conversing with children, and even fewer (25%) showed teachers providing nurture and support or building meaningful relationships with children. Other researchers have found that many books illustrate teachers standing in front of a classroom as the children sit in rows, a known power position (Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Dockett et al., 2010; Phillips & Sturm, 2013).

#### **Teacher’s images**

In fact, in picture books about school, teachers are mostly portrayed in a negative light, sometimes to the extreme. Sandefur and Moore’s (2004) study about teachers’ images in children’s picture storybooks, which analyzed 96 teacher representations in 62 picture storybooks published between 1965 and 2003 in the United States, shows that negative portrayals of teachers outnumber positive ones. For example, teachers were portrayed as ‘drill sergeants’, as being indifferent towards the children or as nameless characters. Only 40 images out of 96 (42%) portrayed positive images of teachers. Belcher et al. (2019) examined portrayals of teachers’ classroom management in 39 English-language picture storybooks published between 1977 and 2004. They found that in many of the books, teachers lacked the ability to manage the classroom successfully and were ridiculed, or were portrayed as being extremely harsh. A less common but equally unrealistic trope was that of teachers as being extremely good. Some teachers were portrayed as angelic or having outsized compassion and love for children; others were overly friendly, and a few were depicted as superheroes who saved the children. As the researchers pointed out, it seemed that there are not many realistic or neutral human-like portrayals of teachers in the books. Given these representations of teachers, it might not come as a surprise that, according to Cutler and Slicker’s (2020) findings, families, especially female members of the family such as mothers and grandmothers, are presented in children’s picture books as the agents primarily responsible for preparing children for the transition to school.

#### **Teachers’ gender and race**

Teachers, as portrayed in picture books about school, are overwhelmingly White women (Mayfield, 2002; Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Dockett et al., 2006; 2010; Phillips & Sturm, 2013; Belcher et al., 2019). The books portray considerably fewer male educator characters. When portrayed, the male characters are either school principals (no female principals were found in the books) or portrayed as better teachers than their female colleagues, adequately managing the classroom with kinder attitudes or providing more intellectual inspiration than their female colleagues (Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Belcher et al., 2019).

### **Children in picture books about school or starting school**

Mayfield’s (2002) study of 131 Canadian picture books depicting an experience of starting school (or kindergarten) finds that children in these books are portrayed in images of success. Only 2% of the books portrayed an unsuccessful adjustment to school. The other 98% portrayed children adjusting well to school, quickly overcoming their concerns or obstacles, and making new friends by the end of the first day of school. Phillips and Sturm (2013) have found similar percentages of successful adjustment (92%) and making new friends quickly (77%) in their study of 25 US picture books about starting school or kindergarten.

Another finding, from studies by Mayfield (2002), Dockett et al. (2006) and Belcher et al. (2019), is that there is little diversity in children’s images in the books, with limited representations of only some minorities. Dockett et al. (2006) found that only 13% of 106 English-language picture books about starting school or kindergarten, from six different countries, portrayed culturally and linguistically diverse characters or characters with special needs. Mayfield (2002) found only two books out of the 131 she examined that portrayed children with special needs.

Picture books about school or starting school, which participate in the social construction of school culture, may indicate society’s messages about who is welcome at school and belongs there and who is unwelcome and does not fit in (Dockett et al., 2006)—for teachers and children alike.

## **Picture books and picture book research in Israel**

Picture books and children’s literature play a significant role in children’s lives in Israel, through the education system and also at home. The Ministry of Education (MOE) highlights the importance of books through initiatives supporting children to be exposed to experiences with books in the course of their development.[[1]](#footnote-1) For example, they recommend that each kindergarten in Israel should have an active library of at least 150 books, and their kindergarten literacy program specifies goals in children’s book comprehension according to children’s ages (Ministry of Education, 2007). Israeli parents also seem to prioritize children’s books, as 34% of all books sales in Israel in 2014 (Ministry of Economy and Industry, 2015) and 36% in 2015 (Ministry of Economy and Industry, 2016) were of children’s literature. Israeli academic research on children literature, and more specifically on picture books, is well established, rich and diverse, and there are a variety of Israeli journals focused on children’s literature, culture and education. Some are published privately,[[2]](#footnote-2) while others are peer reviewed and published by academic institutions, such as by Israel’s colleges of education[[3]](#footnote-3) or Teachers’ Union (Histadrut Hamorim).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Early childhood literature research in Israel deals with diverse subjects, including literacy in kindergarten (e.g., Michalovitch, 2009; Shapira & Aram, 2009; Turjeman, 2014), the Holocaust (e.g., Sachradoti, 2015; 2018), feminism and gender (e.g., Baraam-Eshel, 2014; Rodin, 2015), representations of ‘the other’ in books (e.g., Pelek-Peretch, 2014; Sachradoti, 2015), animal and nature representations in books (e.g., Garon, 2010; Rosenthal, 2018), humor (e.g., Baruch, 1986; Fogel, 2006), parents and books (e.g., Aviram & Aram, 2007; Smadja et al, 2013), poetry for children (e.g., Baruch, 2016; Prior, 2003), illustrations in picture books (e.g., Dori, 2010; Gonen Tor, 2000), and analyses of specific well-known picture books (e.g. Dar, 2017; Ofek, 2019). Despite this established, rich and diverse body of research on Israeli picture books, however, there has been no research to my knowledge on the portrayal of school or starting school in Israeli children’s picture books.

In conclusion, starting school is considered a significant milestone in Israeli society, and preparations for children’s transitions to school are mediated by parents and kindergarten teachers. Children’s picture books, a form of popular culture that carries cultural and social messages, are used by parents and kindergarten and preschool teachers in the process of preparing children for school, and they serve as a means for familiarizing children with schools and teachers. The same books also take part, however, in constructing school culture, teachers’ social roles and students’ social roles. In my research, I would like to find out, by analyzing Israeli children’s picture books about school or starting school, how those books participate in the sociocultural construction of the child’s role of ‘being a pupil’.

# Research question

My main research question is the following: How do Israeli Hebrew-language picture books contribute to the construction of children’s sociocultural role of a ‘pupil’? Texts, as Machin and Mayr (2012) argue, send social messages and have different meanings that can be either explicit or implicit, and can be highlighted as well as ignored in the texts. What emerges are questions about semiotic choices of words and images and the social meanings of what is mentioned and what is not in children’s books about starting school. My specific aims are to understand the following: (a) What do the stories tell us about school, teachers and pupils? (b) What do the illustrations tell us about school, teachers and pupils? (c) Which behaviors are portrayed in the books as appropriate (and inappropriate) for a pupil? Hopefully, answering these questions will allow me to address the main question I proposed.

# Method

The methods that will be used in this research are multimodal discourse analysis (MDA; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), linguistic analysis of the texts using Halliday’s functional grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013), and thematic analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). Overall, I proceed from the premise that language—either verbal or visual—is a social semiotic process (Halliday, 2014).

The visual modality of discourse, especially in picture books, is as important as the textual modality in conveying social messages (Painter et al., 2012). Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) pioneering work in MDA enables the analysis of texts in different modalities—including, for example, texts in visual modalities such as pictures or commercials—in order to understand the social meanings of visual choices and the synergy between the visual and the written in creating meaning. MDA can be seen as a type of critical discourse analysis (CDA; Kress, 1990). CDA aims to systematically expose the ways in which social power relationships, ideologies and sociocultural structures are established and reinforced through language use. Using CDA, one can reveal power asymmetries, normalizations, manipulations and structural inequities in domains such as education, media, and politics (Mogashoa, 2014).

# Corpus

According to the University of Haifa’s Children and Youth Library index,[[5]](#footnote-5) the vast majority of Hebrew-language picture books about starting school were published in the last 30 years—that is, since 1990. The inclusion criterion for this research will be Hebrew-language picture books[[6]](#footnote-6) about school, school transition or starting school published since 1990. Based on the University of Haifa’s Children and Youth Library index, this corpus comprises 50 picture books.

# Data

## **Data analysis**

Data analysis of the contents of the 50 picture books—to encompass both textual narratives and illustrations—will start with basic familiarization with each book in order to gain an overall sense of them. This phase will be followed by multiple deeper reviews of each book, in order to code the books’ data into categories and themes for the purpose of performing a multimodal discourse analysis of the books. Due to the special aspects of the visual modality in picture books—for example, the use of successive illustrations throughout a book—I will apply Painter et al.’s (2012) model of image analysis for children’s picture books and Arsenio Jesús Moya-Guijarro’s multimodal approach to picture books (e.g., 2014, 2019), both of which lean on Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (e.g., 2006) MDA methods. In addition, although picture books are multimodal texts where the visual element is important, the books’ textual discourses also have meanings of their own. Therefore, textual narratives and language will be analyzed using thematic analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) and Halliday’s functional grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013) to identify and reveal social meanings.

# Ethical issues

There are no human or animal participants in this research. I declare that I have no connection to any publication, writing or selling of Israeli children’s books.

# Contribution

Picture books are an important apparatus of children’s socialization and of ideological social construction (Painter et al., 2012), and it is a commonly available cultural artifact in wide use by parents, educators and children (Belcher et al., 2019). Picture books about school or starting school carry social messages about teachers, school culture, children and belonging (Dockett et al., 2006). In Israeli picture book research, there is a lacuna where portrayals of school are concerned. By revealing the social construction mechanisms in Israeli picture books about starting school and the social messages they deliver, I hope to help expand the general field of research on picture books about school, as well as contribute to specific research on Israeli picture books. In addition, by revealing messages conveyed to children via this literature, this work can add to understandings of sociocultural pressures enacted upon Israeli children to become specific types of pupils.

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1. For example, the Sifriyat Pijama project distributes books to children aged 3 to 8 of low socioeconomic status (https://edu.gov.il/owlHeb/GanaiYeladim/Pages/Kindregarden.aspx). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These include the online journals *Hapinkas* (www.Ha-pinkas.co.il) and *Daf-Daf* (www.dafdaf.co.il). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, the *Childhood and Youth’s Literature* journal has been published once or twice a year by the David Yellin College of Education since 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Hed Hagan*, a professional magazine for early childhood educators, was published from 1935 to 2018 (<http://old.itu.org.il/?CategoryID=379>). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://lib.haifa.ac.il/index>, retrieved 15/1/2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Excluding any Hebrew books of the ultra-orthodox public. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)