**Social Challenges Facing Women as Educators and Mothers**

**Abstract**

This article addresses the interplay between motherhood and working as a professional educator. It focuses on female educators’ relationships in the professional sphere and private sphere, and how these two spheres inform and impact one another. The research questions guiding the study were: How do female educators experience the intersections between their roles as educators and mothers? How do each of these roles and identities impact one another? To what extent are women trapped in their maternal roles by the dictates of society? In what ways do female educators transmit these societal dictates to the children they teach?

The study employed qualitative methodology; semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 female early-childhood educators. The findings reveal the interviewees’ desire to take part in the broader public sphere and apply their professional skills beyond the confines of the workplace, for example by counselling parents on issues that have only an indirect connection with the educational framework. They need to establish their professional status, which at times conflicts with their role as mothers; at the same time, they utilize their mothering skills with young pupils and needy mothers in ways that may go beyond the boundaries of their professional role.

Keywords: motherhood; female early childhood educators; conflict in motherhood

**Introduction**

The present article reveals the desire of female early childhood educators to be part of the public sphere and contribute their professional skills and talents. Through semi-structured interviews, such educators conveyed their desire to advance in their careers, a goal that at times conflicts with their role as mothers. Insights into this issue are clarified through examining the intersection between their identities as professional educators and as mothers.

The following section presents a review of the scientific literature on maternal roles, the development of the teaching profession, and the integration of the private (home) sphere and public (outside the home) sphere of women's lives.

***Development of Women’s Maternal Behaviors***

Ruddick (1989) defines “maternal thinking” as the practice of childcare and explains that maternal thinking is socially constructed, not biological. As girls are exposed to child-rearing practices and receive love and care from women, their own maternal thinking crystalizes. According to Rich (1995), because of women’s ability to give birth and breastfeed, society has expanded women’s role to include caring for children and taking primary responsibility for them, well past the stage of infancy. The cultural division of labor designating women as primary caregivers for children means that most people learn about love, disappointment, strength, and tenderness from the female figures in their lives. Likewise, Apter (1985) argues that performance of the maternal role by females contributes to preserving and perpetuating the social constructs of motherhood. However, Apter also notes that females seem to naturally attribute greater importance to human connections; infant girls exhibit more enthusiasm about human faces than do baby boys. While Rich (1995) acknowledges the maternal potential in women, she argues that the patriarchal culture directs this potential in ways that serve it. Hays (2003) notes that this is why welfare programs often attempt to “fix” poor women by trying to strengthen their commitment to work and family values. This attitude demonizes welfare recipients and calls into question the values and behaviors of anyone unable to emulate a fictional model of perfect self-reliance, without any dependence on social support.

***Maternal Ambivalence***

 Maternal ambivalence is created through the complicated relationship between one’s personal/internal world and the external, social, and cultural one (Parker, 1997). Peroni (2009) claims that the fantasy of the “ideal mother” causes ambivalence in motherhood. This universal construct, held by both men and women, is full of contradictions: mothers are perceived as guiding and shaping life, as anchors symbolizing hope, while simultaneously held responsible for their children’s actions, especially their negative ones.

In reality, mothers have both positive and negative emotions towards their children, including love, frustration, compassion, and hatred (Maoz, 2015; Palgi-Hacker, 2005; Parker, 1997). Palgi-Hacker (2005) states that mothers must first come to terms with these mixed feelings, then learn to manage and make peace with their ambivalence. Finally, they must garner strength to cope with their ambivalence and with the cultural wariness towards maternal ambivalence. Parker (1997) explains that only when a mother undergoes a healthy process in relating to herself and her children will she have the emotional space in which to experience love, care, and compassion towards her children as well as anger, disappointment, and frustration. Thus, in managing their ambivalence properly, mothers can have healthy, less guilt-ridden relationships with their children. The experience of maternal ambivalence plays a significant role in how mothers understand the reality of motherhood, themselves, and their children. The process of coming to terms with it fosters healthy differentiation between mothers and children (Shiovitz-Gorman, 2009).

***Development of the Early Childhood Education Profession***

Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) is considered to be the “father” of the modern kindergarten. He emphasized the crucial role women play in the first years of a child’s development, and gave priority to the status of mothers as women and as female educators (Snapir et al., 2012). As the concept of kindergartens continued to develop in the mid-19th century, it paralleled an emerging societal perception of women and their place in society; a feminist ideological stream emerged known as “spiritual motherhood,” which offered a new self-definition of women that justified their involvement in the public sphere, based on perceived differences between the sexes. This movement claimed that women can contribute to society and fulfill themselves by using their distinctive skills as women.

Fröbel’s teachings contributed to the concept of spiritual motherhood and the belief that, in addition to physically caring for children, it is important to emphasize their social and moral education; following this logic, the belief emerged that children should be raised by educated women. In this spirit, women who worked as teachers in kindergartens were part of a broader educational revolution, which included the education of females. The comprehensive curriculum for training kindergarten teachers included pedagogical training according to Fröbel’s teachings, as well as science and philosophy studies. This cultural revolution drew largely on young women who recognized that acquiring higher education and a profession might enable them to support themselves in a field where their status would be equal to that of men (Seton, 2002; Snapir et al., 2012). Thus, women were successfully integrated into the public sphere by utilizing both their maternal traits and the education they acquired.

***Professional Identity Among Teachers and Early Childhood Educators***

According to a postmodern viewpoint, professional identity includes multiple dynamic identities which respond to diverse and changing contexts, and negotiate social interactions (Warren, 2012). This is based on four assumptions: First, identity depends upon and is formed within a multiplicity of social, political, and historical contexts. Second, identity is formed within an emotionally diverse system of relationships. Third, identity is unstable and may change. Finally, identity involves the construction and reconstruction of meaning through narratives.

Processes of identification operate in the space between intrapersonal and interpersonal discourse. Teachers must build awareness of their professional identity (Rodgers & Scott, 2008), since it influences the ways in which they think and work.

Ball (2003) presents the dilemmas that teachers face following liberal educational reforms that demand a passion for excellence. One teacher from Ball’s article is quoted as saying that due to these reforms she cannot “find herself” and that her relations with the children are changed *by* reform, rather than *with* them. The surveyed teachers said that their individual relationships with the children become secondary, making the reforms feel inauthentic.

According to Limor (2000), the identity of preschool teachers in the 21st century is moving in the direction of educational leadership that includes mastering management and pedagogic skills. Teachers help preschool children progress according to their developmental stage and must understand and implement various curricula. They also must lead their team and maintain relationships with parents and others in the immediate and extended community. Thus, preschool teachers are responsible for a wide-reaching system and for maintaining a professional relationship with many entities (Mevorach, 2017). Frisch (2012, 27) adds that a kindergarten teacher must be an “educational leader,” and present herself as having a clear direction and clear objectives. Kindergarten teachers are committed to professionalism, which entails acquiring in-depth knowledge in the field of early childhood education, familiarity with a diverse range of pedagogic methods, and creativity. Additionally, they must care about the children and be able to work cooperatively with them. They must be proficient in team management and have strong communication skills in order to build cooperative relationships with parents, the local authority, and the community to which the kindergarten belongs (Hadad, in introduction to Mevorach, 2017).

***Intersections between Educators’ Private (Home) Sphere and Public (Outside the Home) Sphere with the Education System***

The organization of public life and discursive relations corresponds to the organization of private life. Therefore, the school should be studied as a system of relationships with family, neighborhood, popular culture, and other entities outside the school (Grumet, 1997). According to Frisch (2012), there must be an interactive and mutually respectful relationship between parents and teachers. A system based on sharing and communication makes children feel secure and helps parents trust the school’s educational endeavor, learn from and teach the educators, and give and receive support.

A strong link has been found between parental involvement and their children’s achievements (Friedman, 2010). This is especially true when children feel that there is a correspondence between the values of their home and the values of the educational institution. In addition, parental involvement can help educators in their practice in schools and preschools, and provide emotional and moral support which reduces professional burnout (Friedman 2010). As in any relationship, a proper balance must be achieved in the teacher-parent relationship.

Hays (2003) recounts difficult stories of mothers who are supported by welfare and what they must do just to survive and raise their children, clearly showing that these mothers cannot afford to be involved with the educational system in the ways they are expected to be. Educators need to be understanding of this. Similarly, some of the interviewees from the current study exemplify sensitivity towards these mothers who are struggling to manage on a daily basis. To further understand how female educators manage their personal roles, which for many includes mothering, and their professional role, the following research questions were examined: How do female early childhood educators experience the interface between their professional and maternal roles and identities? How do these roles and identities impact each other, and why? To what extent are women trapped in their maternal roles by the dictates of society? In what ways do female educators transmit these societal dictates to the children they teach?

To date, there have been a number of studies on motherhood, both in terms of the role of motherhood and from a feminist perspective. There have also been studies on female educators both in terms of the job requirements and from a feminist perspective. However, there have been few studies on early childhood educators, and these tend to focus on their role in the education system. Therefore, the current research makes a significant contribution to knowledge regarding the challenges inherent in the integration of the roles of motherhood and early childhood education. As described below, each role entails mutually enriching skills, yet may also raise conflicts. The study findings indicate the importance that should be attributed to this profession and to the women who work in this field with responsibility and commitment, along with an acknowledgement of the personal price that is often paid by these women and by their children for this commitment.

**Materials and Methods**

***Study Population***

The study population included 22 female teachers in preschools or grades 1-2 who are also mothers. The interviewees were aged 30-52, were all married in heterosexual relationships, and had between 2 and 4 children, ranging in age from 3 to 20. All of the interviewees live in the central region of Israel. All of them hold a teaching certificate and a bachelor’s degree in education from one of the recognized colleges of education in Israel. Half of the interviewees also hold a master’s degree. The interviewees had worked in the education system for 7 to 22 years.

At the time of the interviews, 17 of the interviewees worked as preschool teachers. Of these, 6 taught at preschools for children aged 3-4 years; 5 taught kindergarten children aged 5-6; 4 taught in special education preschools, and 2 were substitute teachers in preschools (with an ongoing arrangement in certain preschools where they teach one day a week). Five of the interviewees worked in elementary schools, teaching grades 1-2.

The interviewees were recruited using the snowball method. Friends and acquaintances of the researcher were asked to provide contact information for elementary school teachers and preschool teachers in their area. Those women were then contacted, the subject of the research was explained, and they were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed.

***Research Tool: Semi-structured Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate data collection tool for addressing the research questions. Researchers in feminist studies propose that semi-structured interviews allow for observation of women’s ideas, thoughts, perceptions, memories, and experiences, as stated in the words of the interviewees, rather than in the words of the researcher (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992).

***Ethics***

Each interviewee received a written statement of confidentiality explaining that (a) the identity of participants would be known only to the researcher, (b) pseudonyms would replace real names, (c) interviewees’ place of residence or work would not be specified alongside the quoted material, and (d) every interviewee would be given the opportunity to read the transcribed interview, to clarify or request that something be removed.

Ethical considerations were taken into account in the recruitment of participants and in conducting the interviews. The snowball method helped preserve the interviewees’ anonymity, since each only knew those who she recommended. The interviews were conducted at a place selected by the interviewee (her home, my office, the kindergarten after school, a café, etc.).

The semi-structured format of the interviews enabled me to guide the direction of the interview, while I also was attentive and receptive to the elaborations and digressions that the interviewees’ personal stories and examples gave in response to the same set of questions. In the analysis, I made every effort to stay true to the words of the interviewees and to the varied answers I received.

***Data Analysis***

A content-and-thematic approach to data analysis was combined with analytical readings according to the Listening Guide of feminist researcher Carol Gilligan (1992). Gilligan’s Listening Guide proposes four readings of each of the texts created following an interview. The first reading focuses on the interviewee and the social circles from which her voice emerges. The second reading focuses on the relationships that emerge in the interview. In the third reading, the researcher examines her own sensory memories and perceptions of the interview, using notes written at the time of the interview and in a field diary immediately afterwards. The fourth reading focuses on the language used by the interviewee, with an emphasis on metaphors, specific words, and repeated phrases.

The insights elicited by these attentive readings of the interviews were analyzed and organized according to themes that recur within and across interviews, shedding light on the meanings that interviewees attributed to various subjects and how they construct their worlds. The primary advantage of the thematic analysis method lies in its uncovering of shared meanings which extend beyond any single interview. The thematic categories for the issue under consideration are not predetermined, but rather arise during the analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In a process of deliberate selection, the number of categories is reduced, and a “category tree” is developed, which is a schematic representation of the categories and the connections between them (Shkedi, 2003).

Each interview began with a general question about the interviewee’s typical daily schedule, in order to get to know her. This was followed by questions exploring issues such as their relationships with the children in their classes, and the conflicts they experience in integrating their two roles (mothers and early childhood educators). Some questions challenged the “good mother” theory and how this interacts with their professional responsibility to the children in the education system. Other questions explored interviewees’ ambivalence regarding their responsibility towards their colleagues/peers (other teachers) and their responsibility to their own children at home. Another set of questions was designed to ascertain whether the interviewees’ perceptions were changed by their experiences in various contexts and situations that integrate their roles as mothers and educators. Additionally, questions were asked to explore issues regarding their relationship with the parents that had not yet been covered in this research.

**Results**

The following categories, uncovered by applying this analytic method to the interview contents, reflect the social challenges faced by women who are early childhood educators and mothers:

* The female educator as a mother in the public/professional sphere of her life
* Conflicts between maternal and professional commitments
* Between mother and teacher: female educators’ identification with their children’s teachers
* Blurring the boundaries of professionalism: Educator-mothers faced with parents who need assistance

***The Female Educator as a Mother in the Public (Professional) Sphere of her Life***

The interviewed teachers said that they integrate maternal skills into their work and their relationships with their students. The following stories present maternal behaviors exhibited by female educators when they are in the public sphere of their lives, interacting with children who are not their own. The public sphere includes their professional lives at the school/kindergarten as well as their lives outside the private (home) sphere.

Amit’s story illustrates how she uses maternal behaviors intentionally, because she believes that her young students need this type of communication. Amit said this approach does not detract from her professionalism, and that these behaviors are an inseparable part of her role as a teacher:

I bring motherhood into the classroom because I work with preschoolers. It can’t only be professionalism. ... you need to be sensitive, hug them, hold them ... Many times, children get confused and call me “mommy” ... and I smile and say to them, “Yes, here I am your mommy. Here, I am a second mommy.”

Kochi also said she does not correct children who call her ‘mother’. Similarly, but going somewhat further than Amit in her approach of combining professionalism with maternal qualities, Kochi said that she perceives herself first and foremost as a mother, regardless of the sphere in which she is operating. For her, motherhood is a way of life:

I am always giving hugs. One girl said to me, “You’re like a mother.” ... I told her, “Yes, I’m a mother here at school.” ... So, what are you, a teacher, an educator or a mother? I’m first a mother, then an educator and teacher.

These stories portray an image of female educators who offer their students warmth and love. Both interviewees seemed to assume that the children receive warmth and love at home, and that early childhood educators complete this social picture, so that children grow up surrounded by maternal warmth and love, to the point where they sometimes do not notice which female figure is giving it to them.

The stories told by Irit and Relli, below, depict a reality in which warmth and love in the mother-child relationship are not taken for granted. Indeed, early education teachers encounter children suffering from emotional deprivation, and Irit and Relli explained how they intentionally incorporate maternal traits into their work as preschool teachers. When dealing with children identified as suffering from emotional deprivation, these two educators said they display more emotional and physical affection and pay closer attention to the children. Irit echoed Amit and Kochi’s stories about students who call teachers “mother” and how this can be more acute among children who suffer from a deficiency of maternal behaviors at home:

There are children in the preschool for whom I become like a mother. There are kids in kindergarten who call me “mother”. They know why they call me “mother”. I replace what their mother does not give them: warmth, love, reassurance ... I call them “my children”.

Relli also spoke about children who lack warmth and love and said she makes an effort to give this to them. When she sees children suffering from emotional deprivation, she said she can identify varying degrees of emotion within herself:

There are children who really, really get into my heart ... children who I know have problems at home, and they lack a little warmth and love. It blurs the boundary between kindergarten teacher/mother. It is very important for me to do things with them. I feel a stronger emotion for them, more than for the other children.

The sense of responsibility that Irit feels towards the children who lack warmth and love seems to occur for Relli through using stronger emotions. It is worth noting that the belief that children need love and warmth from a mother figure is an assumption of Western culture and can lead to judgement of mothers who do not or cannot give warmth or attention to their children.

Idit, another teacher, spoke about a symbiotic relationship in which a child’s helplessness causes her to make an effort to protect the child and to help that child cope with their situation:

I had a child [in my preschool] for two years with PDD [pervasive developmental disorder]. A very, very complex child ... the relationship between us was symbiotic ... I acted towards him like a mother ... he was so helpless ... everyone who saw the relationship, said: “You’re like his mother!” He would put his head on me so he could feel my heartbeat, and that way he would relax. ... I understand things about professionalism, but a lot of times I act from a mothering place. ... It depends on what and with whom.

The statements by Amit and Kochi bring up the binary nature of maternal and professional qualities. Irit and Relli addressed the use of maternal tools and skills within the education system. Irit said that she combines these traits as needed and by choice, out of a profound understanding of each individual child and the circumstances.

The female educators presented in this study choose when and how to apply the thought patterns and skills they have acquired through their identity as women and mothers, and when and how to use their professional education and tools. As these quotes attest, maternal behaviors can become a professional tool of choice, used to respond to children who are in need of them.

***Conflicts Between Maternal and Professional Commitments***

The interviewees’ commitments toward their young students carry over into their private lives, as they deal with the needs of their own children. Indeed, when there is a conflict between one’s commitments as a mother in the private sphere (home) and as an educator in the public/professional sphere, intense emotions can arise. Making a decision in the face of such a conflict is generally a temporary rather than absolute choice between roles; for example, an educator may need to decide whether to extend her maternity leave or use sick days to stay home with a sick child. However, the conflict can be particularly difficult for these educators because, as mothers, they may feel guilty leaving their own children in order to invest their time and skills in other people’s children.

Deganit described, with great emotion, the first time she had to choose between her role as a mother and her role as an educator. The choice did not mean giving up either role, but rather deciding which role she would give her time to each morning.

I remember a stage where I became addicted to motherhood. This was the first stage after my daughter was born ... there was tension between my professionalism and the fact that I want to be a mother .... I am committed to the system, to the Ministry of Education, to my students. ... For the first few days, I got out of the car in tears. How could I leave my own child and go to take care of other children? Am I going out to make a living or to be a preschool teacher? Because if it’s only a livelihood, then I’ll stay [home], I’ll give it up.... This is a place of ambivalence, because, on the one hand you want to give to others, and on the other hand you neglect what is yours. It’s a huge conflict.

Deganit’s difficulty deepened as her story progressed. At first, she was torn between motherhood and professionalism. She had a strong desire for motherhood, but was also committed to her profession. After she made the difficult decision to return to work and not extend her maternity leave, she was overwhelmed with remorse and the conflict continued to plague her.

Mali and Shilat spoke about conflicts and choices between these roles as a recurring motif in their lives. They said things taken for granted by most working mothers are not obvious for mothers working in the field of education. The responsibility that female educators feel towards preschool or elementary school children causes them to avoid missing work. Virtually every time that their presence is required in both spheres of their lives, the public sphere takes precedence. They find it difficult to make peace with this.

As Mali began her story, she raised her voice in frustration: “You can’t miss days of work!” For her, this is a significant limitation when it comes to combining the roles of mother and kindergarten teacher. Her tone of voice made it clear that she was not happy with her choice, but her sense of responsibility was stronger.

My girlfriends don’t mind missing [work]. My sister works at the Open University, and every time her daughter is sick, well, then the papers can wait a day or two .... when they [my children] are sick, they are always with someone else, instead of being at home with mommy! .... Many times, [my children] Omar and Mirit say, “The preschool is more important to you than us.” ... There are afternoon activities [for the preschool] ... there is also preparation beforehand.

Mali’s remarks touch upon the “myth of convenient hours.” By mentioning the afternoon activities at the preschool and her preparation for classes, she included them in the hours she was not with her own children, because she felt a sense of commitment and responsibility toward her students in the education system.

Shilat’s story adds another layer to previous stories, describing how she used to “distribute” her children when they were sick so she could go to her work at a preschool. She described pangs of guilt that made her wonder why she did it.

When my children were little ... whenever they were sick, I would pass them on to their grandmother, a babysitter, a neighbor; the important thing was for me to go to the preschool… Today, when I look at it, I say: Why? Why did I do that? But I keep doing it. ... You see? It’s such a crazy thing. It’s not only my own children. I also ignore my own needs, for the sake of children in the preschool.

Shilat also described choosing to keep commitments to the preschool over personal recreation activities. While this can be understood as ignoring her own needs for the sake of others, it can also be seen as a drive and a spark of someone striving for professional success and recognition. She seemed to be consistently committed to her professional path, not allowing anything to divert her.

This central conflict ostensibly forces female educators to choose between their own children and their “borrowed” children in the education system. All the interviewed women said they choose their students, and go to work even when their own children need them by their side. On subsequent readings, I concluded that the choice is not between their own children and the children under their responsibility, but between staying in the private sphere and caring for their own children informally (as any grandmother or babysitter can do) or going into the public sphere to contribute their skills, and strengthen their professionalism and ultimately themselves. The desire to be an influential and consistent figure in the lives of their students caused them to forego extended maternity leave and sick days.

***Between Mother and Teacher: Female Educators’ Identification with Their Children’s Teachers***

The interviewees spoke about how their commitment to the education system extends to their own children’s teachers. They tend to identify with their children’s teachers, despite their need, as mothers, to identify with their own children, when they encounter difficulties in the school system. Ilanit’s story illustrates her need to maintain respect for the teachers and help the children understand the teacher’s perspective:

I often find myself on [the teacher’s] side... I bring her side to them [the children]. ... Uriel [my son] once told me another mother would “flip over the desk” ... I respect the teacher’s dignity. It’s not that I don’t stand up for my children. I am there when they need me.

Ilanit’s remarks indicate that her children are dissatisfied with the empathy she shows towards their teachers, but she clarified that she nevertheless supports her children.

Idit also said she makes sure to respect her children’s teachers. Moreover, she educates her children to treat their teachers as fully subjective human beings. In cases of conflict with her children’s teacher, she tries to keep the conflict l and hide her negative feelings from her children.

This year, I really did not like the teacher’s attitude, but my son never heard me speak badly about her. ... I came with him to school and told him: “You will be part of the conversation, but you will speak respectfully.” I think 90% of mothers would have behaved differently ... but I know what it’s like to be on the other side, and I believe that adults should be respected. No matter what the teacher said, it can be resolved in a respectful way.

Like Ilanit, Idit noted that other mothers behave differently, and she clearly conveyed her sense of identification with the teacher. This identification stems from her own experience in the professional sphere and having been in similar situations with parents and children. The interviewees empathize with their children and want to protect them, but without sacrificing respect for their teachers. Thus, they find themselves in an additional role as mediators between teachers and their children.

Dana spoke about how she became a mediator between her son and his teacher, only after coming to fully understand the situation at hand; at first, she automatically sided with the teacher, but after clarifying things with her son, she gained a broader perspective and sought out the best way to deal with the issue.

I had a situation with my son’s nature teacher. ... He told her he needed to use the bathroom and she told him: “You cannot go to the bathroom.” ... Towards the end of the class, he felt like his bladder was about to burst. He said to her, “I want to know the reason you won’t let me go.” ... My first instinct was to defend the teacher, actually. ... Later when I talked to my son, he presented it from the child’s perspective. ... I stopped myself and connected to where he was, and started to approach it from a different angle.

For these interviewees, the advocacy role is particularly challenging, because they have a sense of internal resonance and understanding with the teacher that their child is clashing with. However, their unique position can enable them to mediate between the teacher and their own child, to help the two sides understand one another’s perspective.

In these cases, identification with the teacher did not seem to interfere with the interviewees’ relationship with their own children. They said they felt that their approach was correct, in that they tried to teach their children to respect their teachers and to understand their side.

In more complex and emotionally-fraught cases, empathy with teachers can lead to frustration and heavy guilt among female educators. Shilat spoke about a difficult process she went through with her son; at first, she identified with those in the education system who were addressing her son’s behavior, but she eventually came to a completely different conclusion. In the midst of that process, Shilat realized that the one who needed her emotional support was her son. He needed to know that she accepted him, with all his challenges, so she could help him:

Yonah has been a bundle of hardships from the day he was born. ... he’s a kid with ADHD. He’s sitting in class like an astronaut, hovering, sometimes disrupting. They don’t understand him. They’re always getting mad at him ... instead of understanding him, I stumbled. I stumbled as if I were [a teacher] at the school. ... I was angry at him. I confronted him, instead of seeing how I could help him. Suddenly, I realized what was going on here. ... I switched and became like a tiger protecting her cub ... In seventh grade, we started a process, and he entered a special education class. The teacher was amazing. I talked to the teacher before, I’m in communication with her ... all the time. I realized that we kindergarten teachers sometimes have difficult children [in our class], and I know how difficult it is for us to cope, so I had more understanding for her than for my son.

Once Shilat came to terms with her own mixed feelings towards her son, she could let go of her aspiration for him to meet the demands of the education system and realize that he needed her help.

Female educators vacillate between the roles they fulfil in the various spheres of their lives. The maternal role and the professional role are not only enacted in their respective spheres, i.e., the private familial sphere and the professional education sphere. Rather, they are situation-dependent. Thus, when dealing with her own children, a female educator may display a sense of identification with the child’s teacher, and in dealing with her own students and their parents, she may exhibit maternal behavior.

***Blurring the Boundaries of Professionalism: Educator-Mothers Faced with Parents in Need***

The interviewees expressed confidence in their use of maternal skills combined with professional capabilities. This sometimes led them to intervene in the private lives of their students. Sometimes the parents initiated an intervention involving the teacher and at other times, the teacher initiated it, with the parents accepting her professional opinion and cooperating.

The interviewees sometimes crossed the formal boundaries of their defined professional role in relation to their students and in relation to their parents. These teachers said they often serve as counsellors for the parents. They enter into the family unit, get an intimate glimpse into it. They may propose an intervention or help them get counselling, thus operating within the private sphere of the children’s lives.

Sol spoke about how the relationship between her and her students’ parents motivates the parents to respect and trust her professional experience and opinion. She said some parents turn to her for advice that will help them cope with their children at home. She came to recognize the importance of the counselling aspect of her role:

In recent years, I have found myself in the role of counsellor for the parents, because I feel this is sorely lacking for them. ... Just now, when we had one-on-one meetings to get to know one another, there was distress among the parents. Parents asked for help, parents asked for guidance, ... when I give a little advice or tips, they use it. Just today, one mother came and said to the teaching assistant: “Tell Sol that what she told me was very helpful.”

Relli spoke about how she reaches parents through stories about her own motherhood. She said the parents trust her, due to her professionalism and her maternal knowledge and experiences, which are similar to theirs.

With the parents in the kindergarten, the fact that I am a mother helps a lot. ... I give my personal examples as a mother, when counselling other parents ... “this also happened to my son.” I know when to give tips and how to help, and they rely on it. ... There are parents who are thirsty for these things.

As part of their relationship with the parents, Sol and Relli said they give advice drawn from their professional knowledge and expertise. They explain to parents how they should conduct themselves with their children in their private life. In contrast, Irit depicted instances where the help she provided was more active and interventionist, crossing from the public sphere to the private sphere. At the end of the interview, I asked Irit if she had anything to add. Irit paused, then replied:

I don’t know if this will help your research, but I think that a good preschool or elementary school teacher must have a psychologist nearby, to make this separation.

Irit explained that she feels unable to stop herself from helping mothers in distress, crossing another boundary. She said the she makes every effort to help mothers in need, even if this extends past the boundaries of her work as a kindergarten teacher.

I once helped a mother run away from her home. ... and when she ran away from home with her son ... you don’t know what happened to me then ... you don’t understand what happened to my children at that time. I separated a family. I found this an unbearably difficult thing to do. But it was a kind of victory, too. I saved someone. This came from a place of wanting to rescue ... they were being beaten ... This father came and threatened me.

Irit recognized the mother’s distress. She felt she had to take action before it was too late. In doing so, she exposed herself and her family to the threat of violence. Two parallel stories emerged from Irit’s narrative: the story of her kindergarten student’s family and her own family’s story. She presented it in a mixed-up and emotional way, which seemed to reflect the deep impression that this difficult period had on her; it justifies her remark that teachers must have the support of a psychologist, “to make this separation.” Irit summarized this difficult story as a victory. More calmly, she explained that her unusual intervention was in fact positive. To prove her point, she moved on to another story about empowering a mother and child during a crisis. This story was described in a more orderly manner, and her voice was more stable:

I was with one mother, and the father just up and left one day, because he had [some dealings in] the black market, [or] the grey market. One day he just got up and left. No dad. The end. Now, deal with a child who has no father. ... you need to push yourself to that place so you can also help the mother grow. You help her, so she has the strength to cope. These are the times when you say: Listen, we need to do this thing as women. But it’s not our job as preschool teachers.

Irit came across these situations in her role as a preschool teacher, but her reaction stemmed from a personal need. Within the confines of her professional role, she should be referring mothers to welfare agencies and continue to offer support to their children at the preschool. However, she chose to provide them with assistance out of a desire to “rescue” or to “help the mother grow.” She said she believes this is the role of women, and therefore she could not separate herself from the situation or relate to it only through the lens of her role as a preschool teacher. Irit clearly crossed professional boundaries. In her view, since she has the ability to help women who have fallen victim to social oppression, she has an obligation to do so. From this we see that early childhood educators sometimes cross professional boundaries to order to offer help to families associated with the school.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This article has presented the words of female educators who, in the public sphere of their lives, display maternal thinking and behaviors towards elementary school or kindergarten students, towards their students’ parents who need guidance and counselling, and towards the students’ mothers, through a sense of female solidarity. As the findings of this study show, female professionals maintain a de facto maternal identity, not only in the realm of motherhood, but also in the classrooms and kindergartens where they work and to which they feel committed. Analysis of the findings on the relationship between being a mother and being an educator revealed that, on a social level, the interviewees seek to be part of a broad public arena, where they can contribute their skills and professional experience.

This article examines the social aspects of female early childhood educators’ lives in the private and public spheres, and the connections between their roles in these spheres. Combining the role of motherhood with the role of educator is a challenge for women, who are responsible for educating children in both spheres of their lives.

When discussing the concept of the educator as a mother in the public sphere, the interviewed women spoke of several types of attachment and connection with their students; some of these feelings stem from a belief that the educator can complement the relationship that students have with their own mothers. The ways that female educators manage their relationships with students in the education system correspond with the findings of Ainsworth et al. (1978), who described three styles of attachment (secure, ambivalent, and avoidant). Kindergarten and elementary school teachers can support children who have a secure attachment to their mother, and try to fill the gap for children who have an ambivalent or insecure attachment with their mothers. In addition, the interviewed women expressed a connection to children who need them due to personal characteristics, unrelated to the children’s relationship with their mother. They combine maternal and professional skills to help these children.

Regarding the thematic category about choosing between maternal commitment and professional commitment, a conflict arises from the perception that as a mother, one must put the needs of others before oneself (Friedman, 2007; Nardi & Nardi, 2006). The early education teachers interviewed in this study said they listen to their inner voices and, in addition to caring for their own children’s needs, choose to fulfil their professional commitments. For example, in terms of the choice to extend maternity leave and take sick days, they chose their professional responsibilities rather than staying at home with their children. Some indicated that this choice caused them to feel a sense of remorse. They realized their own individual prerogative and ability to choose, but did not feel at peace with themselves. In order to come to terms with this they must, as Friedman (2007) explains, break free from a perception that equates the interests of the mother with the interests of the child.

Regarding the thematic category of female educators identifying with their own children’s teachers, the interviewees said they feel torn between the various identities and roles in their lives. They spoke about their tendency to identify with their children’s teachers alongside their need to fulfil their maternal role and identify with their own children when they face difficulties in the school system. The interviewees empathized with their children’s teachers without losing their sense of self as mothers, and in the situations that routinely arise, they said they try to represent both sides in a balanced and effective way. In more challenging cases involving their children, they first tended to understand the side of the teachers, and only later connect to the perspective of their children. Their empathy for the teachers emerges from their professional identity. This recalls Gee’s (2001) explanation that co-workers are able to be empathic and identify with their partners in the system. It seems that, without detracting from this ability to identify with others, there is a latent reason expressed by Galili (2020), that educators believe their children’s behavior represents them, and by demonstrating their skills as good mothers, they also show they are capable of being good teachers. This perception causes them to work with their children’s teachers to motivate their children to accept the norms of the educational system. Eventually, they recognize and come to terms with the fact that their children have other needs. Only then do they manage to give up the ideal of being a perfect mother and realize that their children’s behavior does not represent them as educators. Releasing themselves from the shackles of a need for perfection allows them to engage all of the partners involved to put their children at the center.

In the thematic category of blurring the boundaries between professionalism and motherhood, an issue arose in this study that is not mentioned in the professional literature on parent-teacher relationships and the education system. The discourse generally focuses on how parents are integrated into the education system. The current study presents a parent-teacher relationship in which female educators became involved in the family lives of their preschool and elementary school students. They believe that their involvement in their students’ family life could provide practical, emotional and moral support to parents. Some teachers helped their students’ mothers to function in their maternal roles, including in extremely difficult times. The teachers felt they could empower other mothers, as described by O’Reilly (2004a, 2004b).

The present study examines the relationships between the supposedly separate private and professional spheres of identity among mothers working in early childhood education. It was found that these spheres reciprocally influence one another. Sometimes this enriches the world of the educator, and allows her to enrich the world of those around her: her own children, her students in the education system, and their parents. At other times, the needs of the two spheres conflict, leading to remorse or feelings of missing out.

The topics discussed in this article on the lives of female educators in both private and public spheres reveal different issues than those familiar in public discourse. They provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse of a dual role that the public tends to perceive as natural and easy to integrate, revealing that this is not always the case.

**Limitations of the Study**

The primary limitations of this study pertain to the traits of the sample of interviewees. The study population was intentionally restricted in order to concentrate on the voices of women with the dual roles as mothers and early childhood educators. In this way, the encounters, intersections, and conflicts of the studied phenomenon could be understood and appropriately described. Further, this narrowly defined sample eliminates variables that could obscure the interviewees’ perceptions of their identities, roles, and life spheres. Therefore, I chose to limit the sample to women working in early childhood education who are Israeli, Jewish, in heterosexual marriages, and in a middle-class socio-economic bracket.

However, this sample does not enable generalization to other populations of women who are mothers working in early childhood education. The meanings attributed to this intersection of roles and the conflicts that arise from it may vary widely between cultures, ethnicities, and different types of families.

**Directions for Future Studies**

This preliminary study on the integration of the roles of mother and early childhood educator examines the issues from the subjective perspective of the interviewed subjects. A follow-up study could investigate the integration of these two roles among other populations in Israel, such as ultra-Orthodox Jewish women, Arab women, single women, or those raising children with a female partner.

Further, a study of early childhood educators who are *not* mothers could deepen and broaden the understanding of the results of this study. How do they integrate “maternal skills” into the classroom without having experienced being a mother in their personal, private lives? Do they define the necessary job skills differently? Do the pupils’ parents perceive these teachers as performing this professional role differently from those who *are* mothers?

**Contribution and Implications of the Current Study**

This study is pioneering in that it conveys the words of early childhood educators regarding the complexities in their lives that stem from the integration of motherhood and a profession that is so closely related to motherhood. While they can flexibly integrate their maternal and professional skills, the commitment these women feel towards their students may cause difficulties in their private home lives. This is based on the commonly held belief that this profession and motherhood are naturally integrated.

In terms of its practical implications, this research may bring about a change in the public’s perception of this profession by showing how complex, challenging, and inconvenient it can be to integrate it with motherhood. Additionally, it indicates that there is a need for more advisors and counselors to guide early childhood educators and help them cope with the challenges that emerge in their lives from fulfilling the dual roles of their profession and motherhood.

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**Appendix: Interview questions**

* Tell me about a regular afternoon in your home.
* Do you sometimes feel tension between the various theories you learned in your training and the reality in the field? How do you negotiate these theories?
* Do you ever have negative or ambivalent feelings about your own children?
* Mistakes and remorse: How do you feel when you thought you acted correctly, then it turns out you should have acted differently?
* Do you ever feel that the boundary between professionalism and motherhood is crossed?
* How do your knowledge and experience in education affect your approach as a mother?
* How do the knowledge and experience you have gained by being a mother affect your professional path?
* What has the process been like for you since you became a mother who is also an educator?