Identity Components of Religious Preschool Teachers as Reflected in Selection of Children's Literature

**Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to examine teaching of children’s literature among religious Jewish preschool teachers in Israel. The study used a multidisciplinary qualitative methodological approach, which combined practices from the fields of early childhood educational and children’s literature. The research tools were semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire consisting of five open questions. The findings revealed that selection of children’s literature in religious preschools involves dialogue and sometimes even conflict among the components of a religious teacher’s identity. Her choice of books shapes and reflects her self-image, especially when this choice subverts or violates the official policy.

The purposes of this study are to examine the system of considerations underlying teachers’ choice of children’s literature in Jewish religious preschools in Israel, and how teachers’ literary choices reflect the various components of their identity.

The professional identity of teaching staff and their views on education and pedagogy may be examined through the implicit and explicit words, expressions, and explanations they use (Schatz-Oppenheimer & Dvir, 2010). Their outlook represents their professional identity, which is shaped by dialogues and by conflicts. The ethical and educational decisions of educational professionals accurately reflect their identity. Examination of the identity of religious preschool teachers must take into account that their identity is comprised of both professional and religious components.

The teachers who participated in this study are religious Jewish women who work in the religious state education (RSE) system in Israel. The Religious Education Division is a branch of the Israeli Ministry of Education. This division benefits from the allocation of resources and funding and enjoys full autonomy. The supervisory system for preschools and schools associated with the RSE system differs from that of the general state schools. The content of many subjects has been adapted to the population of the RSE system. In the religious education system there are two curricular categories:

The first category is the common curriculum. This category includes all the subjects in which there is no distinct curriculum for RSE. The curricula for these subjects are the same throughout the entire state educational system in Israel. The primary subjects included in this category are mathematics, science, and Hebrew language.

The second category is a distinct curriculum for RSE schools. This category covers subjects for which there is a significant gap in approach between the general and religious education systems. The main subjects included in this category are Bible studies and other religious studies.

In preschools, children’s literature is taught as part of the language curriculum. Therefore, this area of study should be in the first category, the common curriculum. In practice, however, in addition to children’s literature read by the general population, the Religious Education Division in the Ministry of Education distributes specific books dealing with religious subjects and religious role models to be read in RSE preschools. Aside from these distributed books, the preschool teachers are fully autonomous in terms of the children’s literature they read to the children. Therefore, choices in children's literature reflect the teachers’ worldview, professional attitudes, and religious identity.

Reading books is a daily activity in preschools. Many researchers, such as Elkad-Lehman (2009) and Vinden (1999), have shown that reading books in preschools enables teachers to develop a discourse dealing with aspects of cognitive and emotional development. The importance of literature in early childhood education is expressed through the creation of content that supports development of social skills and encounters with alternative perspectives in social situations (Rosenthal, 2006).

In addition to these considerations, when RSE teachers choose a book to read to preschool children, they must ensure congruence between their professional and religious values. In this realm, connections between components of professional and religious identity of RSE preschools teachers are expressed. The ways in which preschool teachers choose to mediate stories for the preschoolers stem from the dynamics between these components.

The current study makes contributions to the field on several levels. On the theoretical level, while the subject of teaching literature in preschools in various sectors has been thoroughly studied, there have been virtually no comprehensive studies conducted in religious preschools in Israel. On the practical level, the study sheds light on the connections between teachers’ choice of children’s literature in religious preschools and the various components of their identity. On the methodological level, the research is interdisciplinary and combines practices from the fields of literature and early childhood education, which can serve as a model for future studies. In addition, this study expands upon the findings of Schatz-Oppenheimer and Dvir (2010) regarding conflicts in teachers’ professional identity structures, relating them to the specific case of religious teachers.

The methodology for the current study is a collective case study; a collection of specific case studies used to obtain general insights (Stake, 2006). The data collection method is qualitative, interpretive, and humanistic, based on semi-structured interviews (Shkedi, 2012) and a questionnaire consisting of five open questions. Data analysis is conducted through content analysis of the responses (Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2016).

The study population consisted of 45 female preschool teachers in RSE schools. All of them work in municipal preschools for children aged 3-6. Some of the preschools are located in cities in the population center of Israel and some in peripheral communities. All the preschools considered in the study are under the supervision of the Religious Education Division of the Ministry of Education.

Study participants were recruited through existing personal acquaintances with the researchers and through pedagogical instructors in preschool tracks in religious colleges. All subjects voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. With respect to ethical considerations, the study included informed consent, confidence building, confidentiality, privacy, reciprocity, and cooperation (Dushnik & Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2016). The selection of teachers for interviews was not guided by criteria of representativeness, as this is not required in qualitative research. The selected study participants are typical examples of teachers working in the RSE system in Israel. The teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire on the considerations underlying their choices regarding whether or not to read a given children’s book in preschool. A brief explanation was given about the researchers, the research, and its purpose. In the second stage, the teachers were interviewed. They were asked to explain how they choose a book to read in their preschool. Occasionally, the teachers were asked to expand upon certain topics. At the end of the interviews, each respondent was told that she could receive a copy or transcript of the interview, and that she had the opportunity to omit, clarify, or add to her statements.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed while maintaining the principles of reliability and validity. Analysis of the texts obtained from the interviews and questionnaires included the following stages: (1) reading the raw text of the interviews and questionnaires by each of the researchers separately; (2) a second reading of the texts by the researchers together; (3) identification of key phrases that indicate components of professional identity; (4) identification of key phrases that indicate components of religious identity; and (5) identification of key phrases that indicate connections between these two components of identity. The processes of analysis and interpretation of statements were conducted both separately and together in order to maintain principles of validity and reliability.

The findings reveal a wide range of connections between the various identity components of the teachers in RSE preschools. In particular, the findings show connections between components of professional and religious identity, as reflected in the process of selecting children’s literature to read in the preschool. Some statements clearly and unequivocally expressed one component of identity, whether professional or religious. Other statements indicated a dialogue between these two components of identity. At the end of this process, the preschool teacher arrives at a clear and unequivocal decision that contributes to her identity. We also heard expression of conflicts in which the teacher hesitated, deliberated, and considered subsequent steps. Many of the participating teachers indicated that they see children’s literature as a tool for fulfilling their educational mission. Therefore, there are times when they do not follow requirements from their supervisors to read children’s literature they see as contrary to their worldview. Whether through dialogue or conflict discourse, the teacher’s identity is clearly built, shaped, and reflected by her choices in children’s literature, including when this choice is subversive and contrary to their supervisor’s instructions.

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