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

**Abstract**

This article addresses the relationship between being a mother and being an educator. It focuses on female educators’ system of relationships in the professional sphere, which are nurtured by their maternal role, alongside their system of relationships in the private sphere, which are nurtured by their professional commitment. The study results reveal the interviewees’ desire to participate in a broad public arena, where they can use their professional skills and experience to make a contribution within their work world and also outside of it. The study also reveals their need to establish their professional status, which sometimes conflicts with their maternal role. Understanding of this issue is deepened and clarified by examining female educators’ professional perspectives, as they are manifested in the connections linking their maternal identity and role with their professional identity and role.

The article illustrates the tendency of female elementary school and kindergarten teachers to identify with their own children’s teachers. It shows the conflicts inherent in their choices regarding their maternal and professional roles. It explores educators’ perceptions, their maternal behaviors towards their students, and the blurring of the professional boundary between the educator and her students’ parents who need assistance. The research questions are: How do female early education teachers experience the interface between their professional and maternal roles and identities? How do these roles and identities impact each other, and why?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I present scientific literature on: the ways that women learn maternal skills; the emergence of the profession of the kindergarten teacher; the interface between maternal and professional identities among early education teachers; empathy as part of educators’ self-identity; and the interaction between the private sphere and public sphere for those working in the education system.

*Development of Maternal Behaviors among Women*

Rudik (1989) outlines the concept of “maternal thinking,” which she defines as the practice of childcare. Rudik explains that biology is not a condition for maternal thinking. Nor is maternal thinking created simply by virtue of girls having been educated by women, and thus given a special love of their body, emotions, and ambitions. According to Rich (1995), the cultural division of labor that assigns women the role of being the primary caregivers for children (in addition to giving birth and breastfeeding), means that most of the population learns what love, disappointment, strength, and tenderness are from the female figures in their lives. Apter (1985) argues that performance of the maternal role by females contributes to other women also taking on themselves the primary responsibility for child-rearing. However, Apter notes that women naturally attribute greater importance to human connections. Even as infants, girls exhibit more enthusiasm about human faces than baby boys do. Rich (1995) seems to be addressing this issue when she explains the meaning of motherhood and notes that a maternal potential does exist in women, but that the patriarchal culture degrades this potential, and directs it in ways that serve the patriarchy.

O’Reilly (2020) discusses the evolving role of mothers during the Covid-19 crisis, and the disconnect between what is happening in homes around the world and the reports about it. She states that even during this pandemic crisis, motherhood remains largely invisible. During the period of social distancing and closures in response to Covid-19, many mothers have continued doing their paid work from home, while the burden of housework and their children’s education also remains their responsibility.

These ideas recall psychoanalytic theories that focus on the relationship between the mother and her children as a key factor in children’s developmental processes (Garcia et al. 1998; Peroni 2009). This belief led the pedagogue and social critic Johann Pestalozzi to launch a pioneering project with mothers as educators. He bought a small estate, brought abandoned children to it, and invested in their education. One of his students and disciples, Friedrich Probel, became the “father” of the modern kindergarten. Following Pestalozzi, Probel emphasized the crucial role of women in the first years of a child’s development, and gave priority to the status of mothers as educators (Fin, Seton, and Russo-Chimet 2012).

*Development of the Teaching Profession*

The development of the concept of the kindergarten in the mid-19th century in Germany paralleled an emerging societal perception of women and their place in society. This perception led to a feminist ideological stream 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 are able to contribute to human society and to fulfill themselves by using their distinctive skills as women.

The teachings of Pestalozzi and Probel contributed to the development of 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, and therefore, children need to be raised by educated women. Women who began working as kindergarteners founded in the spirit of Probel were part of a broad educational revolution, which touched on the education of children in general and the education of females in particular. The curriculum for the training of kindergarten teachers was comprehensive and included pedagogical training according to Probel’s teachings plus the study of science and philosophy. This gave women the opportunity to acquire higher education. This cultural revolution drew largely on young women who recognized the possibility of acquiring a profession and supporting themselves in a field where their status would be equal to that of men (Fin, Seton, and Russo-Chimet, 2012; Seton 2002). Thus, women were successfully integrated into the public sphere, by utilizing both their maternal traits and the education they acquired.

The current study explores the question of the appropriate combination of maternal traits and education to be used by teachers of young children. Klein and Yablon (2008) demonstrate a link between positive maternal behaviors and children’s ability to regulate their emotions when they are in a state of distress. Egozi and Feuerstein (1987) assert that educators have the power to correct deficiencies in the home, through proper mediation in kindergartens and schools. Female educators often feel obligated to use their maternal skills, alongside providing professional mediation with the children in the education system, based on the belief that they can positively influence children’s development.

*Professional Identity among Early Childhood Educators*

According to a postmodern viewpoint, professional identity includes multiple dynamic identities that respond to diverse and changing contexts, and negotiate social interactions (Warren 2012). Such contemporary conceptions of identity are based on four basic assumptions. The first assumption is that identity depends upon and is formed within a multiplicity of social, political, and historical contexts. The second is that identity is formed within an emotionally diverse system of relationships. The third assumption is that identity is unstable and may change. The fourth is that identity involves the construction and reconstruction of meaning through narratives.

Processes of identification operate in the space between intrapersonal and interpersonal discourse. Teachers must strive to build awareness of their professional identity (Rodgers and Scott 2008), since it influences their behavior, ways of working, ways of thinking, and beliefs (Altman and Katz 2001). According to Limor (2000), the identity of kindergarten teachers in the 21st century is moving in the direction of an educational leader who must also master management and pedagogic skills. On the one hand, they must help kindergarten children progress according to their developmental stages, and understand and implement the various curricula. On the other hand, they must lead their team, and maintain relationships with parents and others in the immediate and extended community. Mevorach (2017) explains that the need for kindergarten teachers to function as educational leaders is the result of the system for which they are responsible and the many other entities with which they maintain a professional relationship. In the words of Frisch (2012:27) “As a [female] kindergarten principal and educational leader, you must present yourself and transmit an impression to those in your environment that will enable you to succeed and achieve your professional goals.”

*Empathy as Part of Educators’ Self-identity*

Gee (2001) identifies four domains of identity: nature, institutional, discourse (dialogue with others) and affinity (among various aspects). Each of these domains provides an interpretive system of individuals’ identity and connects people with identities sharing common practices. Therefore, people together working in the same organization are able to be empathic and identify with their partners in the system. Individuals’ personal history and background shapes the relationship between their emotions and thoughts in various areas (Kaniel 2013). Empathy includes an inner, resonant experience that is partly intuitive and partly cognitive, conscious, and interpretive. That is, sometimes people feel empathy without intending to, and other times they open their feelings to others intentionally (Rosenheim 2003). Kaniel (2013) explains that empathy means feeling and understanding another person’s reality as if it were one’s own, but without losing oneself.

Many [female] researchers have noted that women tend to have a higher capacity for empathy than men do, because the process of developing their sexual identity is built on relationships rather than separation. Friedman (2004) goes beyond Chodorow’s statements and explains that a daughter’s close personal relationship with her mother is the platform on which she builds her identity. According to Nardi and Nardi (2006), women learn to think of the needs of others before their own needs. According to Friedman (2004), women grow up emphasizing their relationships with others over self-reliance. They tend to fulfill this internal imperative to satisfy the needs of those around them to the point that they are often unable to separate what is good for them from what is good for others.

*Interaction between the Private and Public Spheres and in the Education System*

It is understood that the organization of public life and discursive relations correspond 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), an interactive and mutually respectful relationship must be created between parents and the teacher. A system based on sharing and communication makes children feel more secure, and helps parents to trust the educational endeavor at the school, to learn from and teach the educators, to give and receive support.

A strong link has been found between parental involvement and their children’s achievements. 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 kindergartens, and even provide emotional and moral support that can reduce their professional burnout (Friedman, 2010). As in any relationship, a proper balance must be achieved in the teacher-parent relationship for things to be done in an appropriate way.

In the present study, a new phenomenon was identified, in which the parent-teacher interaction overstepped boundaries, and penetrated into the children’s homes and the lives of parents, particularly of mothers who need assistance.

The research questions are: How do female early education teachers experience the interface between their professional and maternal roles and identities? How do these roles and identities impact each other, and why?

METHODOLOGY

*Study Population*

The study population included 22 teachers in kindergarten or grades 1-2 who are also mothers. The interviewees are all married in heterosexual relationships. All of them are in the fourth to sixth decades of their lives. All the interviewees have between 2 and 4 children, between the ages of 3 and 20. All the interviewees live in the population and geographical center of Israel.

The interviewees in this study all 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 additionally hold a master’s degree.

The workplace seniority of the interviewees ranges from 7 to 22 years.

At the time of the interviews, 17 of the interviewees worked as kindergarten teachers. Of these, 6 taught at kindergartens (nursery schools) for children aged 3-4 years; 5 taught kindergarten children aged 5-6; 4 taught in special education kindergartens, and 2 were teaching assistants in kindergartens. Five of the interviewees worked in elementary schools, teaching grades 1-2.

*Research Tool: Semi-structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection tool for this study due to their suitability to serve as a basis for interpreting the field as defined in the research questions. Researchers in the field of feminist studies view semi-structured interviews as an appropriate tool for collecting data, as they 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 1992).

Examples of questions:

* Tell me about a routine afternoon at your home.
* Do you sometimes feel tension between the various theories and the reality in the field? How do you negotiate with 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 border between professionalism and motherhood is crossed?
* How do your knowledge and experience in education affect your path as a mother?
* How do the knowledge and experience you have gained by being a mother affect your professional path?
* What process of identification has taken place since you became a mother who is also an educator?

*Locating Interviewees for the Study*

The interviewees were recruited using the snowball method. I contacted friends and acquaintances and asked them to provide me with contact information for elementary school teachers and kindergarten teachers in their area. I personally contacted those women, explained to them the subject of the research, and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed.

*Ethics*

Each interviewee received a written statement of confidentiality explaining that the identity of participants will be known only to the researcher, pseudonyms will replace real names, and interviewees’ place of residence or place of work will not be specified alongside the quoted material. They were told that every interviewee would be given the opportunity to read the interview after its transcription and during all stages of the study, to clarify what she said or to request to have something removed.

*Data Analysis*

In the current study, I combine a content-and-thematic approach to data analysis with analytical readings according to the Listening Guide of feminist researcher Carol Gilligan (Gilligan 1992). Gilligan’s Listening Guide proposes four readings of each of the texts created following an interview. Each reading invites the reader to look deeper into the text in different ways, thus necessitating subsequent readings. The first reading focuses on the interviewee and the social circles from which she makes her voice heard. The second reading focuses on the relationships that emerge in the contents of the interview. In the third reading, the researcher examines her own sensory memories and perceptions of the interview, using the notes she wrote during the interview and in a field diary immediately afterwards. In the fourth reading, the analysis 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 are analyzed and organized according to themes that recur in each interview and across all interviews. From these, it is possible to deduce the meanings the interviewees attributed to various subjects. Through these meanings, it is possible to examine the ways in which these interviewees construct their worlds.

The primary advantage of the thematic analysis method lies in its uncovering of general meanings that extend beyond any single interview. The thematic categories for the issue under consideration are not predetermined, but rather arise during the analysis process (Strauss and 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).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I introduce the categories that were uncovered by applying this method of analysis to the interview contents. These categories express the social challenges faced by women who are early childhood educators and mothers.

* The female educator as a mother in the public sphere of her life
* Conflicts in the choices between maternal and professional commitments
* Between mother and teacher: female educators’ identification with their own 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 Sphere of her Life*

Studies have found that infants elicit maternal behavior in women who have not yet given birth, in animals that have not given birth, and in men (Chodorow 1999). The following stories present maternal behaviors exhibited by female educators when they are in the public sphere of their lives, interacting with children they did not give birth to.

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

“I bring motherhood to class because I work with preschoolers. It cannot be just professionalism. ... you must be sensitive, hug them, hold them ... Many times, children get confused and call me mother ... and I smile and say to them, ‘Yes, here I am your mother. Here, I am a second mother.’”

Like Amit, Kochi said they does not correct children who call her “mother”. She adds a layer to Amit’s method of combining her professionalism with maternal qualities, in that she perceives herself as first and foremost 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.’ ... It’s a trivial question, like, which do you prefer being called, Jewish or Israeli? So what are you, a teacher, an educator or a mother? I’m first a mother, then an educator and teacher.”

The stories of Amit and Kochi portray an image of female educators who give their students warmth and love. They both seemed to assume that the children receive warmth and love at home, and that they, as early childhood educators, complete this social picture, so that the children grow up surrounded by maternal warmth and love, and sometimes do not notice which female figure is giving it to them.

The stories of Irit and Relli express a reality in which warmth and love are not taken for granted in the relationship between a mother and her children. They do not ignore the range that exists among mothers. Nor do they ignore the fact that not only mothers bear the burden of educating children. Early education teachers encounter children who suffer from emotional deprivation. Irit and Relli explain how they make sure to incorporate maternal traits into their work as teachers, especially when they have identified children suffering from emotional deprivation. According to Becker (2004), educators notice children whose attachment to their mother is insecure, and therefore need more attention as a corrective experience. In these cases, the educators display emotional and physical affection and pay closer attention to these children.

Irit’s words illustrate the confusing emotions expressed by Amit and Kochi when the children in the class call them “mother”, and show how this becomes more acute when dealing with children who suffer from a deficiency of maternal behaviors at home.

“There are children in kindergarten 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. She said she makes an effort to give more love and warmth to them than to the other children. In her words, when she sees children suffering from emotional deprivation, she also can identify varying degrees of emotion within herself.

“There are children who really, really get into my heart ... children 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 are described by Relli as a “mobilization” of stronger emotions. Edyth 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 to deal with the situation.

“I had a two-year-old child 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 are like his mother!’. I would put his head against 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 the place of a mother. ... It depends on what and with who.”

Amit and Kochi raised the dichotomy of maternal and professional qualities. Irit and Relli addressed the use of maternal tools and skills in the education system. Irit said she combines these traits as needed and by choice, out of a profound understanding of who she is dealing with and what the situation is.

This section has shown how women working in early childhood education integrate maternal traits into their professional role. This combination of traits reflects the maternal thinking that develops among females by virtue of being educated by women (Rudik, 1989). It also relates to the concept of spiritual motherhood, which emphasizes that children need educated women to raise them (Fin, Seton, and Russo-Chimet 2012; Seton 2002).

In the current research, the concepts of maternal thinking and spiritual motherhood take on another aspect, which deals with intention. Female educators choose when and how to apply the thought patterns and skills they have acquired in their process of identification as women and mothers, and when and how to use their education and professional tools. Maternal behaviors become a professional tool of choice, used to respond to children who are in need of them.

*Conflict in the Choice between Maternal and Professional Commitment*

In this section, I show how the commitment to the students in the kindergarten or elementary school continues, even when a female educator is dealing with the needs of her own children.

The conflict in the choice between commitment to the role of a mother in the private sphere and commitment to the role of educator in the public sphere raises intense emotions. This is not an absolute choice between roles, but may be temporary, such as deciding whether to extend maternity leave or use sick days. However, the conflict is seen as particularly difficult, because they female educators who are mothers feel they are leaving their own children to invest their time and skills in other women’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 of the roles, but rather deciding which role to play each morning.

“I remember a stage during which 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 can 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 teacher? Because if it’s only a livelihood, then I will stay, I will 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. This is a huge conflict.”

Deganit’s difficulty deepened as her story progressed. At first, she was torn between motherhood and professionalism. She knew she had a strong desire for motherhood, but was also committed to her profession. After she made a decision, she was overwhelmed with remorse. The decision was not easy for her, and the conflict continued to plague her. According to Friedman (2004), because women grow up preferring relationships with others over relying on themselves, they tend to fulfill the inner imperative to satisfy the needs of those around them to the point that they are often unable to separate what is good for them from what is good for others.

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 of female educators feel towards kindergarten 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. I attribute this to the “myth of convenient hours”[[1]](#footnote-1) which is part of the emotional burden of this profession.

As Mali began her story, she raised her voice in frustration: “You can’t be absent.” For her, this is a significant limitation in combining the role of mother with the role of 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 mom! .... Many times, Omar and Mirit would say, ‘The kindergarten is more important to you than us.’ ... there are afternoon activities ... there is also preparation beforehand...”

Mali’s remarks touched upon another aspect of the “myth of convenient hours”, a concept that covers all the invisible hours worked by female educators within the framework of their professional commitment. By mentioning the afternoon activities and the preparation for classes, she included them in the hours she was not with her own children out of a sense of commitment and responsibility to the children in the education system.

Shilat’s story added a new layer to previous stories. She opened with a description of how she used to “distribute” her children when they were sick so she could go to kindergarten. She went on to mention the pangs of conscience that made her wonder why she did that. She led me, as the interviewer, to expect her to note an insight, but this did not come.

“When my children were little ... whenever they were sick, I would pass them on to my grandmother, a babysitter, a neighbor, the main thing was that I would go to kindergarten. A mother will not miss a single day of work if her child is ill. ... today, when I look at it, I say: Why? Why did I do that? But I keep doing it. ... Do you understand? It is such an irritation. It is not only my own children. I also bring myself down, for the sake of children in the kindergarten.”

Although Shilat summed up with the words “I also bring myself down for the sake of children in the kindergarten,” I saw in her story an individualistic spark of someone who strives for professional success and recognition. She seems to be consistently following her professional path and not allowing anything to divert her.

In this section, I presented a central conflict that obliges female educators to choose, ostensibly, between their own children and their “borrowed” children in the educational system. All the women in the current study said they choose their “borrowed” children 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 out 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 the students in the kindergarten or elementary school caused them to return from maternity leave on time and give up sick days. The study “Professional Challenges to Women as Educators and Mothers” found that women working in early childhood education perceive their role as extremely important due to the segment of the population with which they are involved; as one interviewee noted: “Children are our most valuable asset” (Galili 2020).

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

This section discusses how educators’ commitment to the education system extends to their own children’s teachers, and how this stems from their sense of identification.

The women who participated in this study spoke about their tendency to identify with their own children’s kindergarten and elementary school teachers. This runs parallel to their need to carry out their maternal role, and to identify with their own children, who may experience difficulties with the education system. I open this discussion with the system of relationships that female educators develop with their children’s teachers. They strive to manage to combine identification with the teachers and with their own children’s needs, in order to create a situation in which everyone is satisfied.

Following this, I discuss the conflicts faced by women who are educators and mothers, who often instinctively identify with teachers and the education system, and only later learn to logically manage the relationships with their children’s teachers in a way that places their own children at the center. I end with a discussion of how maternal insights can enable the children to internalize the feelings of the teacher and to identify with these feelings in a positive way.

Ilanit’s story illustrates her need to maintain respect for the teachers and to expose her children to their side in the situation.

“I often find myself off to the side, in the barricades. Now, I am in the place of the teacher. I bring her side to them [the children]. ... Uriel once told me another mother would ‘flip their desk over’ ... I maintain 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. At the same time, she concluded with a statement that made it clear that, despite her identification with the teacher, she supports her children.

Like Ilanit, Idit also said she makes sure to respect her children’s teachers. She raised two additional issues. One is educating her children to treat the teacher as a ‘subject’. The second is that in cases of conflict with her children’s teacher, she tries to keep the conflict modest 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 referred to the fact that other mothers would have behaved differently, and clearly showed their identification with the teacher. This identification stems from their personal experience in the professional sphere and in similar situations with parents and children. Gee (2001) explains that people who work together in the same organization are able to be empathetic and even identify with their partners in the system. As mothers, the interviewees said they 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 first, she automatically sided with the teacher. After clarifying the situation with her son, her perception of the situation broadened, and she tried to find 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 toilet and she told him: ‘You cannot not go to the toilet.’ ... 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 out’. ... My first instinct was to defend the teacher, actually.... later when I talked to my son, he presented it from a child’s side. ... I stopped myself and connected to where he was, and started to treat it from a different angle.”

Dana’s path, like that of the women quoted above, corresponds with the claim of Ribbens and Ribbens (1994) that while the mother appoints herself as an advocate on behalf of her children and presents their arguments, she also serves as a representative of society, and her goal is to help her children meet societal expectations.

This study shows that this advocacy role is particularly challenging because mothers have an internal understanding of the side that is opposing their children in a given situation. This enables them to mediate between their children and their teachers in a way that presents the teachers’ side to the children, and makes them notice the teachers’ feelings and perspectives.

In these seemingly simple cases, identification with the teacher did not interfere with these educators’ relationship with their own children. These women said they felt that their approach was correct, in that they tried to teach their children to respect their teachers and to understand the other side as well.

In more difficult cases, dealing with complex situations and negative emotions, 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. It began with her identifying with those in the education system who were addressing her son’s behavior. It ended with her coming 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 is a kid who has ADD [attention deficit disorder]. He’s sitting in class like an astronaut, hovering, sometimes bothering. They don’t understand him. They are always getting mad at him ... instead of understanding him, I stumbled. I stumbled over the conditions 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 became like some kind of tiger protecting her cub ... In seventh grade, we started a process, 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, and I know how difficult it is for us to cope, so I understood her instead of my son.”

Shalit’s case can be explained by the term “ambivalence in motherhood”. Every mother has a mixture of positive and negative emotions, such as love, frustration, compassion, and hatred. Only after a mother comes to terms with the turbulent and mixed feelings within her, will she be able to manage her experience of ambivalence effectively, for herself and her children (Parker, 1997; Peleg-Hecker, 2005). Once Shilat was able to come to terms with her mixed feelings towards her son, she was able to break away from her aspiration for him to align with the demands of the education system, and to realize that he needed her help in order to overcome his difficulties.

Female educators vacillate between the roles they represent in the various spheres of their lives. The maternal role and the professional role do not necessarily depend on the realm in which the events take place. Rather, they depend on the situation. Thus, when dealing with her own children, a female educator may show empathy for their teachers, while in her dealings with her students and their parents, she may exhibit maternal behavior.

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

The women I interviewed expressed confidence in their use of maternal skills combined with professional capabilities. This sometimes led them to intervene in the private, family lives of their students, whose parents came to a meeting at the school. Sometimes the parents initiated an intervention. Other times, the teacher initiated it, and the parents accepted her professional opinion and cooperated.

The female educators interviewed in this study sometimes crossed the formal boundaries of their defined role in relation to their students, for whom they become more than teachers, and in relation to their parents. These teachers said they often serve as counselors for the parents. They enter into the family unit, get an intimate glimpse into it. They may assist in changing a counseling routine, or propose alternative intervention and counseling. In this way, the teacher crosses another border, and operates within the private sphere of the children’s lives.

From Sol’s story, a narrative emerged about the respect that the parents of the children in her kindergarten have for her professional experience. Sol spoke about how parents turn to her for advice that will help them cope with their children at home. Over time, she came to recognize the importance of the counseling aspect of her role as well.

“In recent years, I have found myself in the role of counselor for the parents, because I feel this is sorely lacking for them. ... Just now, when we had personal conversations to get to know each other, 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’.”

Her words indicate that the relationship built between her and the parents motivates the parents to trust her professional opinion.

Relli spoke about how she reaches parents’ hearts through personal stories about her own motherhood. She said the parents trust her, due to her professionalism and her maternal knowledge and experiences that 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 counseling 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 passive advice from the field of knowledge in which they are experts. They explain to parents how they should conduct themselves with their children in their private life. In contrast, Irit depicted a more intrusive crossing from the public sphere to the private sphere, and more active assistance. At the end of the interview, after it seemed we had spoken about everything, I asked Irit if she had anything to add to this study. Irit paused for a moment and replied:

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

Irit explained that, due to her personality, she is unable to stop herself from helping mothers in distress. In such cases, she says, another border is crossed. Irit may have also crossed a legal boundary as well, in this case she described.

“I once helped my mother run away from 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 rescuing ... they were being beaten ... This father came and threatened me. You do not understand what was happening here.”

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 the family of the kindergarten student, and her own story, which developed alongside that of the other family. She presented the family’s story in a confused and emotional way. This made it clear that she did indeed go through a difficult period, which was engraved in her memory as something that justified her preliminary remarks that sometimes teachers “must have a psychologist nearby, to make this separation.” Irit summed up this difficult story as a victory. More calmly, she explained that her improper intervention was in fact positive. To prove her point, she moved on to another story about the empowerment of a mother and child amid 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 a ... from the black market, gray market, how do you say it? One day he just got up and left. No dad. The end. Now, deal with a child who has no father. ... you must also push yourself to 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 kindergarten teachers.”

Irit came across these situations by virtue of her role as a kindergarten teacher, but her reaction stemmed from a personal need. According to her professional role, she should refer mothers to welfare agencies and continue to offer support to their children at school. However, she chose to provide them with assistance “from a place of rescuing” 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 her role as a kindergarten teacher. Irit clearly and blatantly crossed professional boundaries. In her view, since she has the ability to help women who have fallen victim to social oppression, she must give support and backing to those who need it.

In this article, I have presented the words of female educators who, in the public sphere of their lives, display maternal thinking towards the children in the elementary school or kindergarten, towards her students’ parents who need guidance and counseling, and towards the students’ mothers, through a sense of female solidarity.

In two books on Adrienne Rich’s legacy, O’Reilly (2004a, 2004b) noted the important distinction between the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering. The institution of motherhood is an oppressive patriarchal concept, dictated by men. The experience of motherhood, in contrast, is subjective, defined from a female point of view, and has the potential to empower women.

As the findings of this study show, female professionals maintain a de facto maternal identity, not only in the realm of their motherhood, but also in the classrooms and kindergartens where they work, and to which they feel committed. Observation of the relationship between being a mother and being an educator revealed that, on a social level, the interviewees’ desire to be part of a broad public arena, where they can contribute their skills and professional experience outside their work world as well. This issue was clarified by examining the professional perspective of female educators, as it is reflected in the connection between maternal identity and role and the professional identity and role.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND INSIGHTS

In this article, I examine the social aspects of early childhood educators’ lives in the private and public spheres, and in the connections between their roles in these spheres. Combining the role of motherhood with the role of educator is a challenge for women who believe in educating children in both spheres of their lives.

In the category of the educator as a mother in the public sphere, the interviewed women discussed several types of attachment with their “borrowed” children in the schools. This stems from their belief that they can complement the relationship that their students have with their mothers. They way in which female educators manage their relationships with their students in the education system correspond with the findings of Ainsworth et al. (1978), who described three prototypes of attachment styles. The first is secure attachment, in which children feel their mother is available and the relationship with her is secure. The second is ambivalent attachment, in which the children desire their mother’s attention, but feel they cannot trust it completely. The third is insecure attachment, in which children refrain from choosing between their mother’s attention, and choose the attention of another female figure. Kindergarten and elementary school teachers can support children who have secure attachment to their mother, and try to fill the gap for the 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, which are not related to the children’s relationship with their mother. In these cases, they combine maternal and professional skills to reach the hearts of the children who need them. Regarding the thematic category pertaining to the choice between maternal commitment and professional commitment, a conflict arises from the perception that as a mother, she must think first of the needs of others and only then of herself (Friedman 2004; Nardi and 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 fulfill their professional commitments. For example, in terms of maternity leave and sick days, they chose their professional responsibility rather than staying at home with their children. Their words indicate that listening to their inner voice and adhering to professional responsibility causes them to feel a sense of remorse. They simultaneously realize their individuality, and fail to feel at peace with themselves. In order to come to terms with this they must, as Friedman (2004) explains, break free from a perception that equates the interests of the mother and the interests of the child.

Pertaining to the thematic category that describes the identification of female educators with their own children’s teachers, the interviewees said they feel torn between the various identities and roles in their lives. The women I interviewed spoke about their tendency to identify with the teachers and kindergarteners of their private children, in parallel with their need to play their maternal role and identify with their own children who are facing difficulties with the education system. The path followed by female early childhood educators corresponds with Kaniel’s (2013) explanation of empathy as the ability to feel and understand other people’s personal world without losing their sense of self. The interviewees empathized with their children’s teachers without losing their self-esteem 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 with their children, they said they first tend to understand the side of the teachers, and only later connect to the perspective of their children as well. The obvious reason for this that emerged in this study is the empathy they feel towards the teachers, which emerges from their professional identity. This recalls Gee’s (2001) explanation that people who work together in an organization are able to be empathic and identify with their partners in the system. It seems that, without detracting from this ability to identify, 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 cooperate with 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 the need for perfection allows them to harness all resources to put their children at the center.

In the category regarding the blurring of the boundary between professionalism and motherhood when faced with parents in need of counseling, an issue that is not mentioned in the professional literature on the parent-teacher relationship and the education system was revealed by this study. When researchers discuss teacher-parent relationships, the discourse is generally focused on the way parents are integrated into the education system. In the current study, I present a parent-teacher relationship in which female educators become involved in the family lives of their kindergarten and elementary school students, whose parents visit the school. Friedman (2010) argues there is a strong link between parental involvement and their children’s achievement, and that parental involvement gives practical help to teachers and provides them with emotional and mental support that can reduce professional burnout. Following this, the female educators interviewed in this study said they believe that their involvement in the family can offer practical help to parents and even provide them with emotional and mental support. In extreme cases, the teachers assisted mothers by giving practical and emotional support to help them continue to function in their maternal roles, even during particularly difficult times. O’Reilly (2004a, 2004b) emphasizes Rich’s most important distinction between motherhood and mothering, according to which the institution of motherhood is patriarchal, oppressive, and controlled by men, while the experience of motherhood is subjective, defined from a female point of view and has the potential to empower women.

The findings presented in this article examines the relationships between the two different and supposedly separate spheres of identity, the professional sphere and the private sphere of home and family, among mothers working in early childhood education. It was found that these spheres influence each other and are influenced by each other. 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. 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 spheres of their lives reveal aspects that differ from those that are familiar in public discourse. They provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse of roles that are perceived by the public as almost natural for optimal integration.

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1. In response to claims about the convenient working hours for educators I propose the “myth of convenient hours” (Galili 2020), which first addresses physically bringing tasks from work to the home, and continues with the psychological impact on the lives of women working in early childhood education and the price their children pay. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)