Formation of the Religious Identity of Kindergartens
in the Government Religious School Sector
in the Israeli Educational System:
Between Hegemony and Independence.

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Abstract

Research Rationale: Religious Zionism is caught within an "ideological syndrome" making it difficult for it to navigate between two contrasting worlds: on the one hand the 'sacred' world - a world of permanence, of divine commandments and objectivity with binding ideological contents embracing the entire spectrum of the life of the individual; and on the other hand, the 'secular world' that believes in a relative outlook in a dynamic, subjective, unstable and constantly changing world, based on universalistic and liberal values. The absence of a theological-social and political solution capable of regulating the contrasts between the two worlds, causes tensions between the different ideologies to continue to produce new community factions within the Religious Zionist, on the continuum between conservatism and religious liberalism, a growing phenomenon resulting from post-modern influences.

Research Aim: The research aimed to examine the formation of religious identity in government religious school kindergartens within a reality of multiple community identities produced by the ideological duality that characterizes Religious Zionism: the tension between the 'sacred' and the 'secular' and the infiltration of exterior, non-religious communities into Religious Zionism. In accordance with the aims of the research, two main questions were formulated, one referring to the management of the conflicts within the ecological environment in the kindergarten (kindergarten teachers, the kindergarten community) as a result of this state of affairs; and the other, managing these conflicts in the ecological environment outside the kindergarten (instructors, regional and national kindergarten supervisors, the head of the

government religious school administration and chairman of the advisory committee as well as educational policy).

Methodology: The research was conducted according to the ethnographic paradigm, as a collective, multiple case study of five kindergartens. The kindergartens were selected in a non-probabilistic, purposeful sample, providing rich information for investigating the research questions. Three government religious kindergartens were selected, each representing one of the three central streams of Religious Zionism on the continuum between conservatism and religious liberalism: a Haredi oriented (Ultra-Orthodox) Zionist Kindergarten, a classical Religious-Zionist kindergarten and a kindergarten in a religious kibbutz. In order to enrich our understanding of identity formation in government religious kindergartens, we researched two additional government religious kindergartens not connected to Religious Zionism, representing non-religious communities and belonging to an 'edge culture', one under the auspices of a traditional-secular community and another designed for immigrants from Ethiopia.

In order to analyze the data we built a theoretical- sociological model integrating two theoretical traditions: the Ecological Systems Theory that served as a conceptual framework for understanding of the effect of the social environments surrounding the kindergarten (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1979, 1986; Cicchetti and Valentino, 2006) and Social Representations Theory (SRT), which provided a conceptual framework for the identification and diagnosis of the verbal and practical ways of expressing religious ideology (Doise, Clemence and Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Moscovici, 1976, 1988).

Data were collected over the course of two school years - 2011 and 2012 - and included observations focusing on all the fields of activity of the kindergarten teachers in all the five kindergartens selected. A telephone interview with the teacher was conducted prior to every observation and another interview was conducted after the observation for the purpose of asking specific questions about the observation. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants such as the kindergarten rabbi, a representative of the community of parents and other sources in the ecological circles outside the kindergarten area connected with the instruction and supervision system. We also examined cultural documents written by the teachers and documents written by the government religious school supervising bodies outside the

kindergarten area. Data analysis was carried out through a multi-dimensional approach integrating the textual-content analysis applied in this research according to the principles of categorical analysis, "grounded theory" and the textual-formal analysis applied according to the principles of critical discourse analysis.

Findings: The teachers coped with a conflict-ridden reality by providing a local response – establishing a religious-pedagogical model based on the community anchors of the kindergarten community. Accordingly, various religious-pedagogical models for the purpose of constructing a religious identity were created, even though all the kindergartens were subject to the same supervisory system. The five models created by the teachers according to the religious anchors of the community, led to the construction of a theoretical model that enabled us to characterize the variety of the government religious kindergartens – a religious-pedagogical model for the construction of a religious identity within government religious kindergartens. According to this model we found three dominant hegemonic codes that formed the core of identity in these kindergartens: education for acculturation; practices based on collective memory along the axis of the Jewish year; and Jewish socialization by using a reconstructed past. In addition to the hegemonic codes, recessive independent codes were found only in some of the kindergartens because they were chosen in order to provide a direct response to the kindergarten community according to its religious affiliation. As a result, the Religious Zionist kindergartens recreated a theological model in which the representations of identity were based on religious symbols and on God as the source of creation and the social order, a typology with the characteristics of "neo-traditionalism", which rejects the modern world in favor of the world of Torah and halacha in every aspect of life.

In the kindergartens in non-Religious Zionist communities, on the other hand, the identity representations created a sociological model, which, though based on religious symbols, appropriates Jewish discourse and practice as a source of national and social values. This typology has the characteristics of compartmentalization, which does not see any contradiction between secular culture and religion; rather, a division of authority and area of responsibility.

The kindergarten belonging to the religious kibbutz is located on the border between a theological and a sociological identity. It has forged a binary structure integrating patterns from the theological typology together with patterns from the sociological typology.

In each of the two models – the theological and the sociological – we found independent codes characterizing two contrasting poles: from monolithic pedagogy to pedagogy of variance, from an appropriating religious discourse to a national discourse, from encoding the cyclic past to encoding the linear present, from defensive interpretation to a distancing or even critical interpretation. The last independent representation – from religion/gender to feminism/gender was observed only in the Religious Zionist kindergartens. The concentration of independent codes belonging to the sociological model that developed in the ecological and cultural periphery, which, by nature, is exposed to external influences, points to creation of an alternative Jewish religiosity and renunciation of the patterns of formation of a religious identity.

Nevertheless, even though conflicts were expected to crop up in the government religious kindergartens, no such conflicts were found. The reason for this state of affairs can be traced to the influence of two factors, inherent in the unique organizational structure of the kindergarten: on the one hand, the teachers enjoy administrative and pedagogical autonomy, and on the other hand, they carry out their duties in a state of professional isolation without any support from the institutional system. This combination of autonomy and isolation led the teachers to adopt the kindergarten community as a community of belonging, and on the other hand, to restrict the extent of their conformity to the educational system that employs them, an act defined in the research as "professional autonomy conscripted for the community". This professional and personal state of affairs led the kindergarten teachers to adopt a differential pedagogical response manifest in the creation of a variety of pedagogical-religious patterns, preventing the emergence of conflicts and enabling the preservation of the variety of streams under the auspices of a single educational system, common to all the streams and differing from accepted reality the schools.

Since no conflicts were found in the micro-system within the kindergarten, we decided to examine the existence of conflicts and patterns of coping in the external eco-systems of the kindergarten - the meso-system - the system of instruction and supervision, and the exo-system - the ideology of government religious education. The range of religious observance of the agents connected to the kindergarten, created conflicts between the different reference groups with

regard to three representations of conflicts that were found to fit the central representations that form the core of Religious Zionism: kindergarten teacher recruitment for the government religious kindergartens appears to be an educational ideal. Actually the conflicts were few but the patterns of coping with them showed considerable differentiation, representing different educational perspectives: the doctrine of the government religious system is ideological and does not contain operative goals for managing conflicts. Therefore each one of the supervisory levels has created different mechanisms in order to preserve the boundaries of the government religious kindergartens by controlling personnel and the community of parents, thus minimizing the conflicts and contributing to the stability of the system. The national supervisory body initiates indirect mechanisms for the purpose of creating religious socialization based on the common past, while the regional supervisory body initiates religious socialization based on the differential present.

The policy of the national supervisory authority shows the first signs of an ideological-educational turning point in the National Religious education system, which is attempting to broaden the philosophical-educational boundaries beyond the extreme outlook of Rabbi Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook. On the other hand, the district authority continues to adhere to the version of the past that sees the sacred world as leading and including all areas of life.

Another focus of conflict found in the research was located in the encounter between the two identities, the religious and the secular, that led to the construction of a religious-ecological model for the purpose of creating an identity for the government religious kindergarten that would help to examine the discursive position of each one of the identities. The analysis of the findings according to this model showed that each ecological cycle of the kindergarten environment maintained a different pattern of creating identity, by excluding or by idealizing either the religious or the secular identities: a pattern of religious hegemony, a pattern of honor, and an illusive pattern of multiple identities. The variety of these contrasting patterns is an indication of the pluralism of the system that enables dynamics in which every actor in the system is able to establish an independent pattern for the purpose of creating identity.

The large extent of differentiation in the coping patterns of the ecological cycles outside the kindergarten with multiple identities, along with the differential pedagogical response by the teachers to the kindergarten community, indicates a lack of educational coherence and

disintegration of the hegemony of the central supervisory body and its dispersion into local particles of hegemony, in line with the critical post-structural approach. The advantage of the dynamic system lies in the fact that its principles are formed and developed according to the requirements of the changes in peoples` lives. However great this advantage may be from a community point of view, it reveals a systemic inadequacy and indicates the weakness of the educational system that is unable to impose institutional hegemony and prevent the dissolution of the religious boundaries of government religious kindergartens in the ecological and cultural periphery, to the point of creating patterns of identity opposed to the core of the religious identity of such kindergartens.

Research Contribution: This study presents two new models, constructed on the basis of the analysis of the data. These have to potential to serve the government religious education system in its effort to establish a religious identity in its kindergartens, as a result of the encounter between various internal Religious Zionist and non-Religious Zionist communities, penetrating it through the edge culture: one is the over-arching religious-pedagogic model for the purpose of establishing a religious identity in the government religious kindergarten – aiding researchers to map these kindergartens according to the components of the religious identity created by each kindergarten, and to examine the socio-educational processes occurring inside and outside the kindergarten. The other is a religious-ecological model for the purpose of establishing the identity of the government religious kindergarten in the encounter between religious and secular identities – thus making it possible to examine what is happening in the edge culture between the two identities – the religious and the secular - by way of three patterns of identity formation excluding or idealizing one of the two identities. The use of this model for the purpose of classifying government religious kindergartens can serve to reveal the power relations between the two identities and the social stratification of each of them, with the aim of reducing conflicts between them and even removing such conflicts from the educational system. This model can help the government religious system to conduct a thorough self-examination and re-examination of the structure of the hierarchy and supervision of the kindergartens, and to find ways to ensure the continuation of the Religious Zionist community, whose continuation is dependent on the ability of its educational system to act as a cultural agent to preserve its traditions, values, patterns of life and social processes.