

**Construction of Identities in the
Birthday Party Ceremony:
Perceptions and Practices of
Kindergarten Teachers
in the Israeli Kindergarten**

Hadara Meir

School of Education

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Abstract

Recent decades in Israel have been marked by a weakening of the national and cultural hegemonic mainstream and a decrease in collectivist values, along the rise of individualism with its emphasis on civil rights. Social reality emphasizing a national identity united by one narrative has gradually changed, growingly legitimizing alternative identities underpinned by different ideologies. At the same time, educational policy has changed as well, shifting from state centralized education services to a policy of decentralization of authorities. However, the system of education has devised formal control mechanisms for municipalities and institutions, establishing educational quality standards for the kindergarten as well, lessening its informal features.

Given this background, the current study examines the perceptions and educational practices of kindergarten teachers relating to the birthday party held for each child in the kindergarten. The research questions are as following:

What are the practices of kindergarten teachers throughout birthday party ceremonies, to what extent does the kindergarten routine reflect them, and how do they differ from those of the canonical ceremony?

What are the teachers' perceptions of their practices of birthday ceremonies? What are the components of the individual and collective identity of the 'worthy citizen' their education aims at? Does it reflect attempts to redesign the former identity, or invest it with new identities, and in what ways?

If, indeed, there are changes in the practices and in the significance that the teachers attribute to them, what might we conclude concerning the figure of the teacher as an agent of socialization? To what extent is she an active leader and agent of social change whose objective is the shaping of alternative collective and individual identity?

The research method is qualitative, following the ethnographic tradition. Its objective is to expose the overt and covert layers of human behavior patterns and elucidate them, focusing on what people say, what they do, and the objects they use.

The research participants comprise three groups of kindergarten principals heading kindergartens for children aged 3-6 of the Jewish sector: eight heading a state kindergarten, four from the center of the country and four from peripheral areas; six heading a state-religious kindergarten, three from the center and three from the peripheries; and two principals of private kindergartens, both from the center.

The first stage was a pilot that included observations in five birthday ceremonies held in five different kindergartens. In the second stage, we made observations and in-depth semi structured interviews. Altogether, we conducted observations throughout 48 birthday ceremonies, 16 regular day observations, and interviews with 16 teachers.

We recorded the observations and interviews, and then processed them following the Strauss and Corbin (1990) method that includes transcription of the observations and interviews, and content analysis delineating major and secondary categories to reveal their interconnections.

The findings show that most kindergarten teachers' practices of birthday ceremonies relate to the system of socially accepted norms and to the hegemonic perceptions reflected in the kindergarten routine. For example, they perceive the kindergarten as a tiny community based on an every-day social solidarity. Thus, throughout the ceremony, they foster the ability to participate actively and be kind and giving towards the other on his or her birthday. Changes in shaping the dimensions of space and time in the current ceremony, as compared to the canonical one, might indicate a growing tendency to take into consideration the needs of children and parents.

Concerning the second research question, the findings demonstrate four main meta-perceptions the kindergarten teachers have of the 'worthy citizen' their education aims to convey by means of the birthday ceremonies. The first perception is that of socialization towards appropriate conduct in social frameworks beyond the family unit. This perception is common to all the teachers in this study, orienting them toward the fostering of four central capacities. These include the ability to accept authority and integrate in social frameworks beyond the family unit, the ability to internalize new expectations in accordance with their new age level category, the ability to participate actively and give to the other on his or her birthday and the ability to realize that autonomy is limited and equality is important.

The second perception is that of individuation. Like the previous perception, it is common to all the teachers, orienting them towards fostering in the children their own self-value as autonomous individuals. The teachers are orientated towards personal-emotional empowerment and the nurturing of their personal-emotional relationship with each child as an individual, rather than treating them as members of a group. However, individuation is undermined, as teachers attend to the needs of all the children attempting to free themselves from the restrictions posed by the ceremonial constructs that require discipline, are repetitive and elevate another child in the group. Therefore, some of the teachers restrict the structuring of the ceremonial activity by decreasing the number of ceremonies in the kindergarten, joining two birthday children in each ceremony.

The third and the fourth perceptions are new, and have not appeared yet in the literature: that of self-fulfillment, and a communal perception. Each of these perceptions was observed among some of the teachers. Self-fulfillment is a perception that enhances opportunities for the child to experience, choose and mostly reveal and express an authentic and unique aspect of his or her personality. However, the birthday child self-fulfillment takes its shape and definition in relation to the group, since the teachers are aware of the need of other children to be more active than previously, thus undermining the birthday child self-fulfillment.

The communal perception enhances the nurturing of ties between the home and the kindergarten, reducing the friction between parents and teachers as main partners to the child's education. Parent participation in birthday party ceremonies strengthens the ties of the parents and the kindergarten and empowers the celebrating child. Yet, most teachers report asymmetrical relations, in which the parents tend to check the teachers' limits and treat them disrespectfully and highly critically. Some of the teachers claim that parent participation in ceremonies exposes their perceptions to criticism. Hence, they prefer to conduct the celebration without participating parents. Therefore, concerning the second research question, we extracted the components of the individual and group identity of the 'worthy citizen' the teachers aim at by their education, and found new messages orienting towards new identities of the 'worthy citizen'.

As to the third research question, regarding the figure of the kindergarten teacher as an agent of socialization, we found her to be a leader of change as an active educator who promotes new narratives along the unifying one. The findings indicate that the birthday ceremony is a site of knowledge for the teacher, since it allows the teachers and the community flexibility and change in the apparently endless process of negotiations over the ideologies and truths towards which education should aspire. In spite of the kindergarten ceremonial birthday tendency to repeat and establish messages enhancing the unifying narrative, the teachers constantly examine, experiment, deconstruct and reconstruct the components of the ceremony, stretching its limits. For example, they deconstruct and reconstruct the dimensions of time and space in the ceremony, and consider the need of children to act less in the collective framework and more in a freer framework. The teachers demonstrate the ability of active agents who oppose the constructs imposed on them.

The research contribution lies in its exposure of the teachers' ideological worldview, the messages and values their education promotes, and the practices they utilize in order to install these messages. Many studies on kindergarten education have focused on psychological or pedagogical aspects. However, they have often overlooked the sociological aspects of the kindergarten as a microcosm of Israeli society. Focusing on a restricted social phenomenon of a kindergarten ceremony enables us to shed light on current Israeli social norms and current views as to the 'worthy citizen' education aims to produce. Previous studies of birthday ceremonies from a sociological-anthropological point of view emphasized the idea of socialization towards 'appropriate' norms of social behavior and the state bureaucratic ethos. In contrast to those studies that were theory based, the current study centers on kindergarten teachers and their perceptions, attentively analyzing findings accumulated in the field. This research procedure of constructing grounded theory allows the broadening of perceptions of socialization and individuation and the revealing of new perceptions and their components.

The current study offers a new model, constructed following the finding analysis. This model might help the state, state-religious and private education system for children

of 3-6 years old, and enable researchers to map these kindergartens following the components of the 'worthy citizen' as formed by each teacher. Firstly, it might enable the examination of the teacher's ideological set of values, and the presence or absence of each of the perceptions. It might be possible to check which of the characteristics and practices she applies in her educational work, that is, which of the objectives extracted by the model the teacher promotes and in what way. For example, concerning the perception of self-fulfillment, we might examine whether she promotes self-fulfillment, and how she does it. Does she foster self-fulfillment by allowing the birthday child or family to influence the elements and characteristics of the ceremony or by allowing the children to move in space? Secondly, the model might be of assistance in a review of teacher support and counseling circles, the system of induction and training and the structure of kindergarten teacher instruction and supervision. The model might offer options for the preservation of a set of hegemonic agreements regarding the ideologies at the base of kindergarten education along the broad ideological base that allows every teacher a wide range of action following her own educational credo.