

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Teaching of Talmud
in Ultra-Orthodox Talmud Torah Schools:
Students' Achievement and Efficacy of Teachers**

Ariel Sherlo

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Abstract

The main goal of the present study was to compare the achievements of students in ultra-orthodox Talmud Torah schools who studied Gemara (Talmud) using Rabbi Yeshayahu Weber's method and the achievements of students who studied Gemara via the traditional method. Another goal was to compare the sense of efficacy of teachers who teach using Rabbi Weber's method and that of teachers who teach via the traditional method.

Teaching Gemara is difficult and complicated, due to the structure of the text and the Aramaic language in which it is written, and indeed numerous studies have dealt with this complexity (for example, Ben-Menachem, Hecht, & Wosner, 2003; Raviv & Kaniel, 2013; Schlesinger et al., 2003; Steinsaltz, 1988; Wint, 2000). Rabbi Weber's method is used primarily in corrective teaching for students in ultra-orthodox Talmud Torah schools who have learning difficulties.

This is a method for teaching Gemara, with the aim of promoting the independent learning and learning skills of the students in Talmud Torah schools. The method was especially developed for students who have difficulties in their Gemara studies. However, Rabbi Weber claims that it is suitable for all learners. Rabbi Weber uses unique concepts for defining the learning stages, and in this study an attempt was made, for the first time, to "translate" his concepts into concepts which are acknowledged in pedagogic research.

Numerous studies have investigated different aspects of the social-cultural characteristics of ultra-orthodox society, including use of the Internet, the matchmaking institution, the field of entertainment and the relations between this society and secular society (Baum, Yedidya, Schwartz, & Aran, 2014; Ben-Schachar, 2015; Gilboa, 2015; Hechter, 2014; Layosh, 2015; Ogun, 2016; Shukrun-Nagar, 2014; Taragin-Zeller, 2014). However, very few studies have addressed pedagogic issues in the context of teaching methods used in ultra-orthodox educational institutions (Finkelman, 2002; Kanarik, 2000; Shlif, 1995; Spiegel, 2011).

The innovation of the present study is embedded in the fact that it deals, for the first time, in a method for teaching Gemara in ultra-orthodox Talmud Torah schools, and opens a window to scientific investigation of the learning and teaching processes which take place in these schools.

The present research included students and teachers who teach and learn using Rabbi Weber's method. These students and teachers were compared to students and teachers who learn and teach using the traditional method. The research sample included 150 students (76 students who learned using Rabbi Weber's method and 74 students who learned via the traditional method) and 96 teachers (49 who teach using Rabbi Weber's teaching method and 47 who teach via the traditional method).

The students were tested in two stages. In the first stage, their general ability was tested using three research instruments: Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices (Raven, 1958), tests from the Abstract Verbal Thinking Battery (Glanz, 1969, 1989), and a Gemara vocabulary test which was constructed for the purpose of this study with the aim of evaluating students' mastery of Aramaic. In the second stage of the study, the students participated in a Gemara lesson in which they learned an unfamiliar passage, after which they were administered a reading comprehension test that was constructed for this study with the specific goal of assessing the degree of their understanding of the Gemara passage which they studied. This test was constructed according to the model of Pearson and Johnson (1978), who developed a taxonomy that includes three categories of reading comprehension questions: textually explicit knowledge, textually implicit knowledge, and scripturally implicit knowledge. Four measures were constructed for the test, based on this model: informative knowledge measure that tests textually explicit knowledge, inference and application measures which test textually implicit knowledge, and general knowledge and vocabulary measures which test scripturally implicit knowledge. The questions were analyzed using a cross-analysis and with between-judge agreement regarding the questionnaire.

The first research hypothesis pertaining to the students was that the level of achievement of students who learned using Rabbi Weber's method would be higher in the reading comprehension of the Gemara test than the level of achievement of students in the comparison group. This hypothesis was confirmed, and differences were found between the groups, in favor of the research group.

The second hypothesis was that the achievement of the research group would be higher on each of the measures of reading comprehension than the achievement of the comparison group. This hypothesis was partially supported. It was found that students who learned using Rabbi Weber's method attained a higher level of achievement on two of the reading comprehension measures, i.e. on informative knowledge and inference and application, compared to students in the comparison group. No significant

differences between the two groups were found on the general knowledge and vocabulary measures.

The third research hypothesis was that the gap in the reading comprehension test scores between strong and weak students would be smaller in the research group than in the comparison group. This hypothesis was not confirmed.

The teachers were tested using a Self-Efficacy in Teaching Questionnaire (Rich, Lev, & Fisher, 1996) which was administered to both groups of teachers. The research hypothesis regarding the teachers was that differences would be found in the perception of self-efficacy between teachers who teach using Rabbi Weber's method and teachers who do not teach via this method. This hypothesis was partially supported.

Contributions of the Study

The findings of the study indicate that in general, Rabbi Weber's teaching method leads to an enhanced level of achievement of students and a higher sense of self-efficacy among teachers. Therefore it is advisable to develop teaching plans for Gemara lessons based on this method within ultra-orthodox educational frameworks as well as in other educational frameworks. The research method is suited to explaining Rabbi Weber's method using acknowledged scientific tools, and enables examination of the outcomes of using the method in different types of learning frameworks where it is used.

Another contribution of the research is that it opens a window to a systematic scientific discussion on teaching and evaluation processes in ultra-orthodox Talmud Torah schools using reliable and valid instruments. To date, very little attention has been given to this issue due to the general isolation of ultraorthodox society, and in particular due to the feelings of suspicion that exist in the ultra-orthodox education institutions towards research.