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THE INSTITUTE FOR EXPERIENTIAL JEWISH EDUCATION

Identity Education in Israel: Voices from the Field

RESEARCH REPORT

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[1] Introduction

This study attempts to map the personal accounts of 40 educators who have been involved in identity education in Israel for a significant period of time, in effort to paint a current picture of the questions and issues that they face, and draws key findings from the processes that inform them and the educational frameworks they work in.

The common denominator among the educators we interviewed is that the type of work they do can be described as '"identity education"' — **an education whose goal is to shape, develop and enhance the identity and values of individuals and communities.** Accordingly, whenever this report refers to education and educational frameworks, it refers to an education whose objective is developing, influencing, and strengthening individual and communal identity and values. While the majority of the educators we interviewed work in experiential (informal) and communal educational frameworks, some work in schools.

However, it is important to emphasize that not all of the interviewees define themselves in these terms, and the question of professional identity is one of the issues that this study examines.

The issues surfaced by the research center around on five key areas:

- **Professional Identity:** What defines the profession of "identity education"? What complexities and uncertainties exist regarding the perception of this profession which that are particularly at play in Israel?

- **Training:** What training exists in within the space of "identity education", and how can it be characterized? What training have educators undergone over the course of their careers; which components of the training were relevant, and which were not? What training components are missing in this type of field and should be provided?

- **Motivations:** Why do educators enter and operate in the field? How do they make their choices to take on educational roles?

- **Goals and definitions of success:** What are the desired outcomes of the educational processes that these educators participate in or lead? What does success look like and what are its characteristics? What do they expect to achieve through their work in the short and long term?

- **Challenges:** What obstacles and challenges do these educators face? What are the current challenges in the educational field in Israel, from their perspective?

[2] Executive Summary

The Goal of the Report

The goal of this report is to gain an understanding of how educators in Israel perceive the opportunities and challenges of "'identity education'" — an education whose goal is to shape, develop and enhance the identity and values of individuals and communities. Specifically, the report focuses on how 40 diverse and experienced educators working in the field relate to the following five categories: professional identity, training, motivations, goals and challenges.

Research Population

The findings of this report are based on in-depth interviews with Israeli educators active in the space of identity education. The research population was selected with the goal of achieving diversity in gender, age, and geography, as well as in target population and institution (employer). That being said, most of the educators who participated in the survey and the interviews are in the 30-45- year-old age bracket and hold at least one academic degree or are in the process of acquiring one. Some of them, though not all, hold degrees in education. Most participants did not undergo any structured training as a condition for entering the profession. A small number have participated in structured training or professional development programs during the course of their work.

Key Findings

The five key findings that emerge from this research present a complex picture of identity education in Israel.

1. Educators are motivated by personal values and ideological beliefs that guide their choices and manner in which they educate. Their goals are related to social, political, cultural, and identity-based outlooks.

2. Definitions of success are products of ideological stances. For most, it is in having graduates possess some of the following characteristics: a clear personal identity; complex cognitive development; and engagement in community and /or political activism; and values-driven actions.

3. Educators generally gravitate towards the profession because of meaningful personal experiences or ideological aspirations, not because they have a clear understanding of what it is means to be an experiential educator.

4. There is a lack of training opportunities that provide educators with an educational language to develop identity-related content in the context of Israeli and Jewish identity. As a result, there is a lack of shared methodologies, skills, and habits of mind among educators.

5. Educators lack a professional network to share best practices or deal with challenges related to the field. Such a network is essential to their professional growth and advancement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While educators are ideologically motivated and driven by a clear picture of success, the challenges they share expose the need for initiatives that will deepen their professional identity and provide them with the relevant knowledge, tools and skills to support their work. Offering such initiatives can address some of these challenges, particularly by:

- Cultivating educators' capacity to execute a long-term vision;
- Ensuring educators' effective implementation of educational initiatives;
- Enhancing educators' confidence in their identity development and Jewish identity work;
- Cultivating of a network of peers that will share tools, best practices, and ideas to enrich the field; and
- Fostering higher degrees of professional retention and mobility among said educators.

[3] Background

[A] Methodology

The core of the research was in-depth qualitative interviews with 26 experienced educators at different stages of their professional careers. The interviews had a semi-structured format. The main focus was on the interviewees' descriptions of their work, their educational perceptions, and their experiences in the field. The ability to construction of a narrative faithful to the experiences of people on the educational front line in Israel forms the foundation for our findings. In addition, in order to add a slightly broader the examination of the field of identity education in Israel, the research also included a quantitative component, composed of a survey of 40 educators (including the 26 interviewees) of varying ages from different sectors and geographical areas. The survey questions focused on questions concerning the educational profession, target populations, and professional training.

Further, we examined, compared and contrasted 21 professional training programs in Israel that focus on identity education to varying extents. While this information does is not explicitly referred to in this report, it did provide us with more context on training in the profession.

[B] A Note on Terminology

The distinction between formal and informal education in Israel influences how organizations and educators view their work. This distinction assumes that, on the one hand, there is the "formal" school system and all it includes, characterized by its mandatory nature. On the other hand, there is the "informal" system — a broad educational field that embraces numerous arenas and pedagogies with diverse value-based perceptions, all of which are voluntary. The "informal" educational field tends to not be categorized by theories, pedagogies and value-propositions that make it unique (what we would term "experiential education," whose primary focus is identity work) but is rather defined in relation to what it is not i.e.: not scholastic or compulsory.

Most of the informants for this research are not school teachers, and those who are involved in schools also work in educational settings outside the school. For the majority of them, the theories of experiential or identity education are unfamiliar, and they too categorize their profession in the negative terms of what it is not. As we will see below, this has a significant impact on their professional identity.

[C] Research Participants — Demographics

This study surveyed 22 women and 18 men ("the participants"). Of these, we interviewed 14 women and 12 men ("the interviewees"). We placed a strong emphasis on participants' diversity, as reflected in the various demographic categories as follows:

- **Age and Seniority:** All survey participants have at least eight years' experience in the educational field. The largest group of participants are mid-career professionals, reflecting our understanding that professional in this stage of their careers are particularly preoccupied with professional identity and career advancement. However, it was also important to us to examine a wider range of perspectives, and accordingly, other age groups and types of levels of experience are also represented.

Age of Respondents

3% 5%
5%
5%
8%
45%
30%

● 25-30 ● 30-35 ● 35-40 ● 40-45 ● 45-50 ● 55-60 ● 60-65
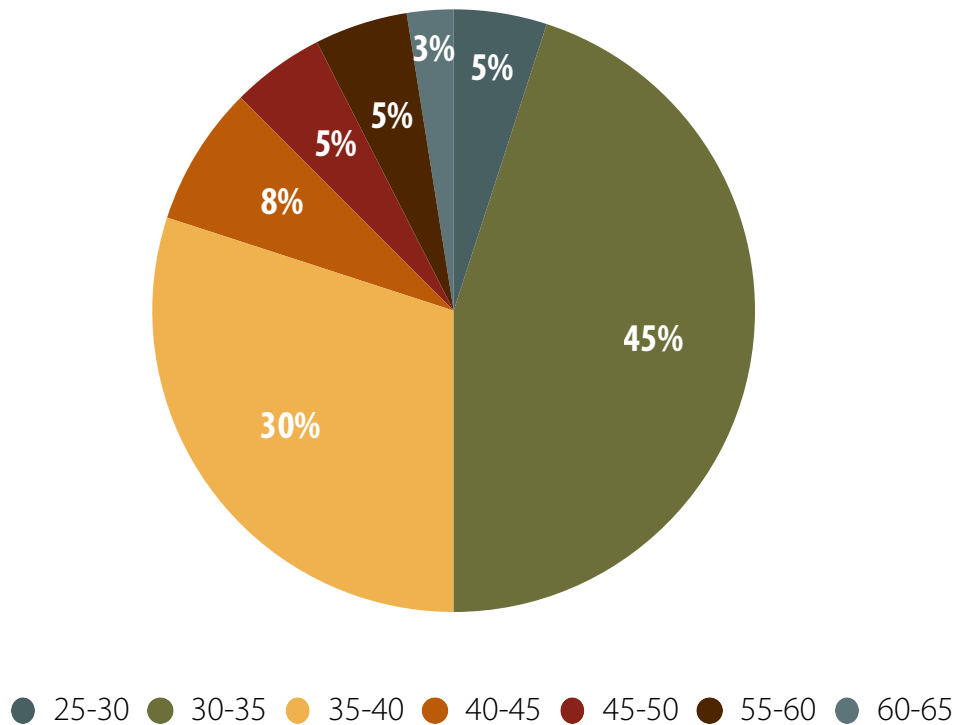
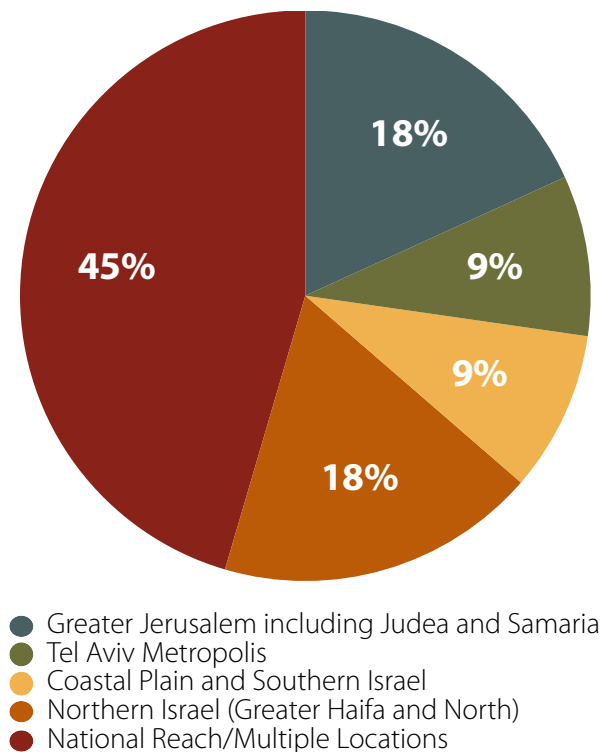- **Geography:** In geographical terms, we distinguish between two key data: place of residence and area of work (i.e., location of target population). The structure of education in Israel, as well as the small size of the country, permits a relatively high degree of flexibility regarding the geographical location of one's workplace. Thus, a significant number of participants are responsible for and involved in educational frameworks whose target populations span the entire country. For the purposes of the survey, and recognizing that there are various factors that influence education, we note the two above-mentioned data items. We also address the issue of the center and the periphery in the socioeconomic sense. Area of work relates to the geographical dispersal of the population with which the participants work directly rather than the location of the organization's headquarters or offices or the dispersal of populations indirectly connected with the work. In this context, the survey notes the main populations where the participant's work is based, according to their own description.

Area of Residence: Respondents

- Greater Jerusalem including Judea and Samaria
- Tel Aviv Metropolis
- Coastal Plain and Southern Israel
- Northern Israel (Greater Haifa and North)
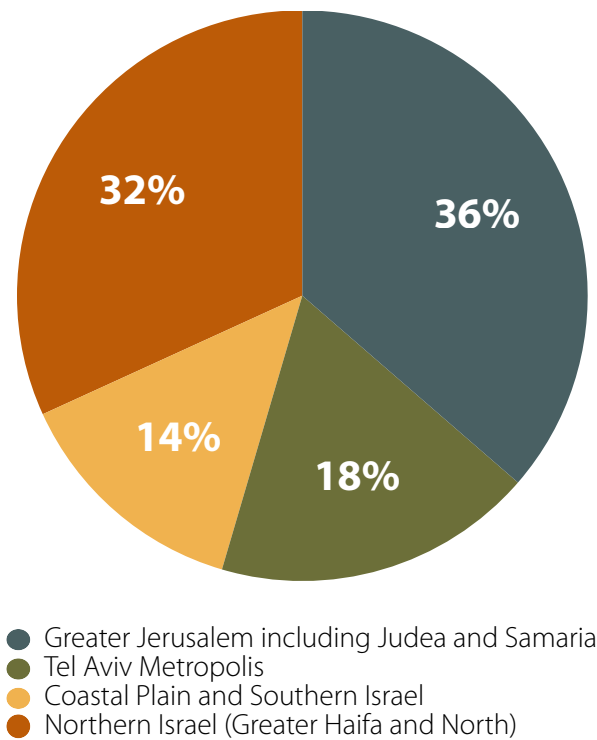
Area of Work: Respondents

- Greater Jerusalem including Judea and Samaria
- Tel Aviv Metropolis
- Coastal Plain and Southern Israel
- Northern Israel (Greater Haifa and North)
- National Reach/Multiple Locations
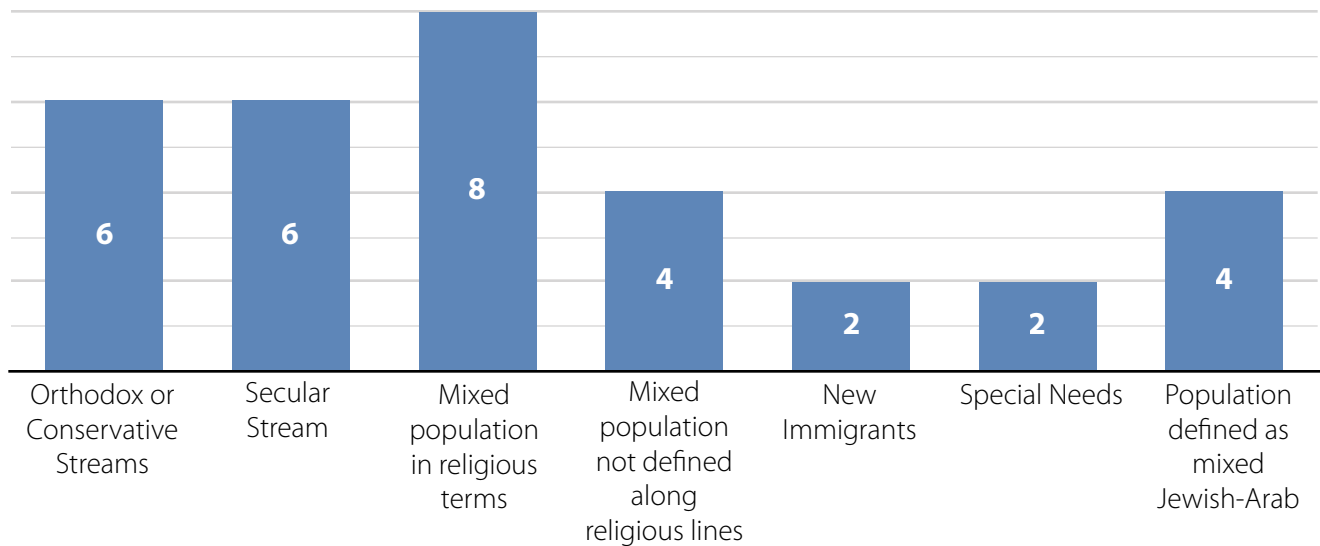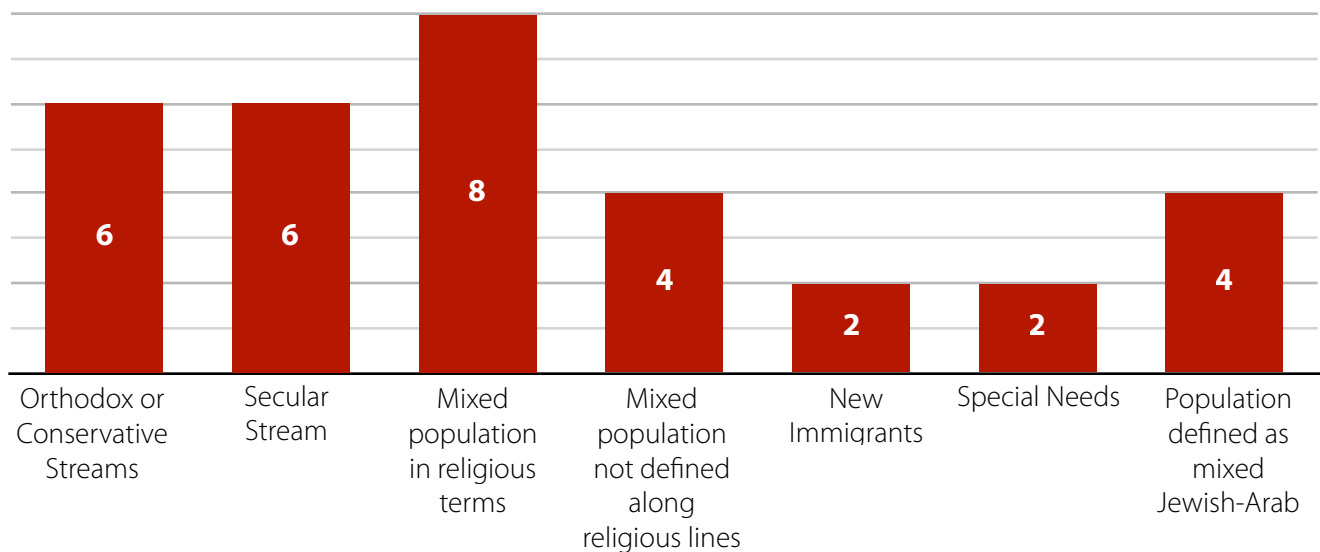
- **Type of work:** The educational field in Israel is broad, with ambiguous and flexible boundaries. In many cases, educational frameworks other than schools occupy a borderline position or combine educational activities with culture, therapy, social entrepreneurship and politics. Accordingly, the educational space also includes a diverse range of sub-spheres that are not solely or necessarily related to what is traditionally referred to as "education." Our division of type of work is presented both according to the population type and according to the sub-sphere of the educational field, as reported by participants.

Target Population: Key Demographics

Orthodox or Conservative Streams	Secular Stream	Mixed population in religious terms	Mixed population not defined along religious lines	New Immigrants	Special Needs	Population defined as mixed Jewish-Arab
6	6	8	4	2	2	4

Educational Sub-Spheres in Which the Educators Work

Orthodox or Conservative Streams	Secular Stream	Mixed population in religious terms	Mixed population not defined along religious lines	New Immigrants	Special Needs	Population defined as mixed Jewish-Arab
6	6	8	4	2	2	4

- **Training:** All participants hold an academic degree or are at an advanced stage of academic studies. A relatively small proportion of them have completed training related directly to their field of work.

With the exception of school teachers, the participants' training did not constitute a threshold requirement for their work and did not necessarily relate directly to the position they fill. Most of the participants did not participate in the training by virtue of their work and currently are not undergoing any professional development within the organizations in which they work.

Training

	Value
Holders of an academic degree or in the course of studies toward an academic degree	40
BA or MA in an educational field	15
Holders of a teaching certificate	13
Graduates of academic programs focusing on Jewish education	4
Graduates of the educational leadership program at the Mandel Institute	5
Graduates of the Institute for Experiential Jewish Education	4
Graduates of group facilitation training	7
Graduates of various Jewish and educational leadership programs (Maoz, ROI, Kollot, Gevanim, etc.)	6

[4] Research Findings

In their interviews, participants shared a personal and professional narrative related to their professional identity, educational goals and worldviews based on their daily experiences working in the field. The following analysis highlights key points and insights raised during the interviews. The decision to omit or emphasize certain points is based on their frequency and prominence across the interviews.

[A] What is This Profession?

Most of the respondents found it difficult to clearly and concisely answer the question, "What is your profession?" Approximately half of the interviewees did not offer an unequivocal answer to the question or prevaricated by giving different answers. Below are five of the most common answers:

An informal educator: *"I am involved in informal education, that is to say — voluntary education outside the boundaries of the school."*
An educator: *"I can't find a precise and less general definition. When I was a principal, that was a position, but the profession is education, definitely education."*
A teacher: *"I'm a teacher. That's what I studied and that's what I do. I educate through the profession of teaching."*
An activist: *"I'm not an educator by profession, I'm a social entrepreneur and an activist, and as of today I see education as a good arena for creating change."*
A Jewish educator/professional Jew: *"I choose to engage in Jewish education, and I've been doing so on a professional basis for almost 20 years."*

The question of professional definition presented a complex obstacle for many educators, who, unlike many other professionals, often did not come to the field after completing their studies or professional training. On the contrary, many of the interviewees shared that it was the absence of a narrow definition that eventually allowed them to enter the field of education.

[B] Training and Professional Development

Professional and academic training is based largely on the distinction between formal and informal education. Training for formal education is almost entirely concentrated in academic programs as well as a number of programs for principals and other positions in the school environment.

In the informal sphere, there is a growing wave of dedicated training tracks at colleges. These focus mainly on educational theory and its connection to fieldwork (e.g., work with at-risk youth, social-community education, and similar programs). These tracks are still in their infancy and are not perceived as a threshold requirement for working in the field.

In addition to academic programs, there are also programs that focus on the cultivation of an educational identity and educational leadership. Prominent examples of these include the Mandel Institute and the Maoz programs, which focus on the educators' professional identity and the programs they lead and create.

Another body that offers training programs is the Society and Youth Authority of the Ministry of Education, which in recent years has attempted to create a standardized level of professionalism among educators in the public sector through training programs and by requiring certification equivalent to a teaching certificate.

While many have not undergone relevant academic training, most of our respondents have undergone trainings within the organizations and programs with which they are affiliated, often related to their specific area of work.

Reflections of interviewees on training and professional development can be divided into two categories: the role of training and the gaps that emerge from insufficient training.

<u>The role of training</u>

The following quotes demonstrate the varied perspectives on the role of — and value in — training within the profession:

"The prevalent perception among us is that it's impossible to teach facilitators how to facilitate. The approach relies on the assumption that they have acquired enough meaningful experiences as participants themselves, and that we merely teach them about our organizational identity."

"All the training we provide for staff members is ideological and values-based. It's obvious that there's no point discussing practical tools when time is so limited. It's much more important for us to develop the educator's ideological and social approach as a political person."

"The most important tool we teach and train with is the study of practice. A complex and uncompromising observation of daily actions, together with a group of peers bringing diverse perspectives, and learning through educational experiences, with the help of various theories."

<u>Gaps that emerge from insufficient training</u>

The following quotes point to gaps and challenges that arise from the lack of cohesive training for identity education.

"The training at [organization name] doesn't seriously address the teacher's own Jewish and Israeli identity, despite the fact that the program relates to subjects that structure identity."

"The profound lack of training and of a professional language is all too clear from the many times over recent days when I guided the staff or took an educational decision solely on the basis of intuition."

"Everyone on our team comes with different experience and a different approach, and there's no common base."

"Today everyone here already recognizes that experiential education is something significant and important, but there still isn't any serious discourse or training in the field."

"How can it be that when I want to work with an adult population, the only methods available to me are from the youth movements?"

The main insights concerning training center on the desire and need to professionalize and deepen educational work, evident in the comments of most of the participants and interviewees. To address these needs, training programs for identity education would need to accomplish some of the following goals:

- Development of a common educational language that extends beyond the confines of a specific program or organization.
- Development of and training in educational approaches particular to identify education, extending beyond formal/informal divides.
- Development of a set of relevant tools and skills for educators to enable the creation of profound, complex, and meaningful educational process.

[C] Motivations to Enter the Field

Our interviews uncovered two clear and reoccurring patterns in the reasons or motivations that led educators to enter the field:

1. Motivations reflect attitudes toward culture, values, identity and politics. The decision to enter the field of education is often accompanied by different perceptions and aspirations regarding personal and educational ideologies.

2. Educators entered the field as a gradual process that reflected their background and a host of meaningful educational and social experiences they had participated in, such as youth movements, counseling or volunteering.

The following quotes reflect these patterns:

"Education is what I'm good at and what's good for me. I want to stand in front of young people and with young people. I've tried other things and I also studied industrial design, but I came back to education, because it's only here that I can feel myself blooming and expressing my strengths and my love for others."

I'm working to change and improve society, and I see education as a good and serious tool for this purpose — it's not the only tool, but it's a good one."

"It's important for me to be in an arena where people are grappling with shaping Jewish identity and culture. It's a mission to engage in discourse about prayer and the essence of Judaism with girls who are asking themselves profound questions about their connection to all this."

"I'm a teacher and I see myself as an agent for culture and nationhood. This is my motive to act and this is my function, through discourse about identity and belonging."

It is interesting to note that participants placed far greater emphasis on ideological or values-based motivations writ large. Their personal, financial or spiritual wellbeing was hardly mentioned. Across all the interviews, we witnessed an admirable richness and depth to the motivations toward educational work, based on a broad values-based and ideological commitment.

[D] Goals and Visions of Success

In the interviews, four primary themes emerged in relation to goals and definitions of success. Each theme presented here is followed by several quotes from the interviews.

1. Participation in individual and communal activism and social change

Activism as a key goal and/or definition for success encompasses the ability to participate in society and have influence over it. This involves strengthening weaker members of society (people with special needs, low socioeconomic status), creating a strong sense of community through action and cultural activities, or educating toward the pursuit of fruitful dialogue between noble ideas and daily experiences.

"The educator's role is to create political awareness and to promote conscious and complex political discourse stemming from his world of values."

"Although this may sound pretentious, our goal is to reform the society that brought these children to a point where they have no support or tools and no place where they feel safe."

"The foundation and support for all our movement work comes from the community. Our educational work is a central part of the community, and in essence, education is a tool for strengthening the community and the young people as those who lead the community."

"What matters to me is that the educator be capable of reading Plato and then of thinking again about what they're doing — and vice-versa. If they tell me that they're building a program on the basis of Plato's thought, I want them to be able to show me exactly where this is present and what the practical meaning is of each philosophical idea they present."

2. Development of a salient identity

Many of the goals and definitions of success described the capacity for independence, resilience and self-actualization, often through the exploration of meaningful ideas and experiences.

"Someone who's completed the process is capable of understanding their identity on the personal and educational level and knows how to define it."

"The idea is to separate from home and from my dependence on it in terms of identity and functioning, so that I can cope with the difficulties of life."

"For us, success can be seen when serious questions and ideas become part of identity. In other words, when Nietzsche or a text become a best friend, and the encounter with them is intimate and meaningful."

"Personally, and despite the real challenge, I see educating a class mainly as a tool to develop the human spirit and make the most of its inherent potential."

3. Development of complex and critical thinking

Many interviewees mentioned critical thinking as a key goal. This includes the ability to examine reality independently and from different perspectives; to understand ideological, social and cultural processes within the existing social environment in Israel; and to develop political, social and ideological worldviews.

"What interests me in my work in education is to develop complex and critical thought processes and an ability to rise above the obvious."

"For me, education to good citizenship is political education. It's important that every person have an understanding of the perceptions that shape society, that they care, and that they have something to say about what's going on in this place."

4. Connection to — and a sense of ownership within — Israeli society and Jewish tradition

In relation to Jewish and Israeli life, educators define success in terms of the ability of their students to clarify their values and ideologies, and then emerge as cultural and societal agents in discourse about these values and ideologies.

"As a teacher, my goal is to connect the processes of individual identity with the formative stories of Jewish culture and to create something that is relevant to contemporary life."

"In our educational process, I focus on an examination of identity — who am I and who are we, and how we can answer these questions over time without giving up on complexity and without submitting to populism."

While there is little uniformity among the different educational organizations in terms of the perception of success, the interviews suggest that the variance is mainly due to a difference of values rather than one of pedagogy.

The emphasis on self-actualization, critical thinking, and social or political involvement corresponds with the connection between the field of community and identity education in Israel and the field of social activism, which many participants believe plays a significant role in the Israeli educational world.

However, it is precisely the impressive picture painted by the educators' perception of educational success that is responsible for their extensive and complex discussion of challenges, as presented in the next section.

[E] Challenges

The challenges educators face are many, and although they are changing, they do not seem to be becoming fewer. We have grouped these challenges into three categories that distinguish between language, tools and target population.

1. An unclear and loose educational and professional language

Educators do not possess a cohesive language with which to describe their particular type of work and the processes that accompany it. They find it hard to describe what their profession is, and this lack of clarity impacts their attitudes and aspirations.

"Although it's fundamental to all our work, and although I can say that being in nature is something basic and important, even today I can't put in words why this is so, and that makes things hard for me."

"I feel that it's very difficult to clearly put into words what we do here, and the excuse is always that it's complex. But complexity isn't an excuse for a lack of clarity."

"Through the confusion of work in school, some serious confusion emerges regarding the question of the balance between emotional and dynamic support and educational processes for the transfer of knowledge. To what extent is the educator's function to provide psychological or therapeutic help, and what is the difference between the two fields?"

2. Lack of tools to get the job done

Interviewees reflected on their lack of tools and methods to help them create meaningful educational experiences. Further, they lack professional standards to which they can hold themselves accountable. These challenges translated into a sense of discontinuity in their work, low standards and thresholds, and a sense of professional loneliness.

"We don't have any supervision or any standardization of the educational process. It all comes from the grassroots. What matters to the person leading the process in each council is what happens. In some councils the educational processes are on an appalling level."

"The longest a coordinator lasts with us is two years or, in extreme cases, three. There's no perception of continuity or progress, and for many people this is just a stage along the way, while they're students or before they begin their studies."

"One of our most serious problems is the low standard of counseling and the old-fashioned perception of the role of the charismatic counselor who always talks with pathos and whom everyone listens to."

"Everything I bring to work, I bring by myself. I don't have anyone to discuss the essence of it all with or to think about things from a fresh angle — despite the fact that I am a member of several forums with people at my level."

3. Challenges in educating for identity development

Some of the most notable challenges shared in the interviews reflect the complexity of educating for identity development and the many questions that arise from this particular line of work, questions whose answers can help educators sharpen their practice. Among others, these questions relate to the difficulty of functioning in a space with multiple views, conflicts and cultures; the resistance to content that comes under the definition of Judaism; the difficulty in making Jewish education relevant; and the desire to balance autonomous education within social boundaries.

"As you work with educators and teachers, you realize just how hard it is to break down the old-fashioned perceptions of education... It's really a case of tilting at windmills."

"We usually spend the first six months here simply overcoming the objections to any Jewish content. Only after a long struggle do the learners begin to see some interesting cracks below the surface."

"An attempt is made to connect the content of the lessons and the students' real needs, but there's nothing you can do about it — the Bible doesn't meet any concrete need of a secular kid on the moshav."

"This is a question I grapple with all the time. How can we balance the desire to create a completely autonomous space for learners with the need to keep them grounded in reality, within the boundaries of society and the values that are important to us?"

The educators we interviewed encounter serious difficulties stemming from the lack of clear and relevant educational approaches for confronting the social, emotional and cultural problems facing the populations they work with. When comparing the challenges articulated above with the sections that precede it, we can conclude that while educators possess clear motivations and goals, they do not have the tools or pathways they need to actualize their aspirations in the field.

[5] Conclusion

Each of the areas examined in this report presents an interesting yet complex picture of the experiences of educators. Below are some of the key points identified in the report:

1. There seems to be a lack of clarity about the educational value proposition of Jewish and Israeli identity education, reflected in the difficulty educators had in defining their profession and practice. Existing formulations of identity education are not accessible to most of the interviewees, and those that are accessible are often imprecise and outmoded relative to the current complex reality in which the educators work.

2. Almost all the interviewees have strong motivations and clear goals. These relate, by and large, to values exploration, social activism and identity development. These motivations fuel the educators' explanations of their strong desires to professionalize their practice.

3. The investigation around professional training points to a dearth of opportunities for most educators who have been active in the field. Professionalization does not seem to be a priority for educational organizations. Many of the educators lack knowledge and tools that can help them improve their work, and they possess neither sources nor resources for accessing such knowledge. It is important to note that educators who have undergone serious training in identity education reported that the training was valuable and contributed significantly to their work.

4. Interviewees surfaced challenges around identity education in a diverse and divided society, and a lack of a professional and personal support network or other forms of peer discourse. Specifically, many mentioned the challenge of delving into Jewish content in a way that does not automatically spark opposition or political expropriation.

5. A common thread that emerges directly and indirectly from the findings is the gap between the aspirations of the interviewees and the lack of tools and knowledge for how to get there.

There is clearly a need to invest in initiatives that will elevate the standards of identity education and improve the status of educators active in the field. Such initiatives should seek to accomplish the following:

• Cultivate the capacity to execute a long-term vision

• Ensure effective implementation of educational initiatives

• Enhance confidence in educating for identity development and Jewish identity

• Cultivate a network of peers for sharing tools, best practices and ideas to enrich the field

• Foster higher degrees of professional retention and mobility

It is also important to continue to study the field of identity education in Israel. Additional data and analysis will provide a more precise understanding of the needs and steps required to improve educational processes in Israel and to help the educators in their work.

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