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REFLECTIVE TEACHING AS A PATH TO RELIGIOUS MEANING-MAKING AND GROWTH

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how respondents evaluate the influence of their teachers upon the formation of their religious discourse in terms of content, process, and structure. This study addresses the educational-value aspect of religious schooling, as distinct from the instructional aspect, as an integral part of the school curriculum. The findings show that the role of teachers in the construction of their students’ religious world is limited. The style of most of the teachers in Religious Education is instrumental; only a small minority utilizes reflective strategies. However, these teachers had a meaningful impact on their students’ religious socialization processes.

Most research on school curricula in general and Religious Education concentrates specifically on content and learning skills, while the educational or values component of the curriculum is often neglected. This stems from the fact that content and learning skills can be measured in real time, whereas transmission of values can only be estimated in retrospect, at a time when the students are no longer in school. The focus of the present study was to examine the teachers’ role and the impact of their teaching style in the Religious Education system on the educational–religious aspect, as distinct from the instructional aspect, of the socialization process of their students. This research addresses the influence of different teaching styles and types of discourse on the content, process and structure of the religious socialization of students. The main question raised is what kind of discourse has an impact in the long run on the construction of the religious world of the students: the instrumental style or the reflective style? These issues will be examined here through a case study of Religious Education frameworks, but the findings can be applied to other educational settings.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Different Epistemological Orientations and Teaching Styles

Varying descriptions of the teacher’s role derive from different epistemological paradigms and approaches to the transmission of knowledge. Pedagogical literature distinguishes between instrumental teachers, who consider their principal function to be the transmission of knowledge (Keiny 1993, 1998), and reflective teachers, who examine knowledge critically and inquisitively, thereby conceptualizing practical knowledge and transforming it into theories of action (Zeichner 1994; Schon 1987, 1988). This study will examine which of the two conceptual systems is more relevant and appropriate to Religious Education, seeking to identify the implications of the respective paradigms on the teacher’s role in the religious school system.

Reflection deals primarily with meaning-making based on experience (Dewey 1933). Rodgers (2002) claims that “the creation of meaning out of experience is at the very heart of what it means to be human” (848). Meaning-making is also one of the essences of religiosity (Oser 1991) and Religious Education (Tirri et al. 2006). Thus, it seems that the meeting between reflection and religiosity is a natural one, since both are the products of an experience that makes human beings unique in the universe. In this article, through the examination of Religious Education as both the context and the content of a case study, I will examine the inner mechanism and the methodology of reflection in a broader sense.

Instrumental and Reflective Religious Education

Religious Education prepares individuals to be aware of God at all times, to believe in God’s existence, sense God’s sublime presence and act in accordance with Divine commandments and imperatives. According to the instrumental approach, the school curriculum is a finished product that includes a structured collection of educational activities. It is the teacher’s task to develop a variety of teaching methods and skills with the objective of elevating the quantity and quality of the religious product (i.e., the extent of religious observance among students) and their “religious consumption” (after Willis 2003, who coined the term “cultural consumption”). Teachers who employ the instrumental approach function according to the basic assumption that the corpus of religious knowledge they are charged with imparting to
their students is objective, structured, and organized. Consequently, the learning process involves the passive reception of messages, and the teacher’s role is the systematic transmission of the requisite knowledge.

The reflective approach, in contrast, maintains that the Religious Education curriculum is neither fixed nor predictable but is part of a dynamic process of interaction between the learner and knowledge. It perceives the goal of teaching as the structuring of religious socialization to yield proactive learners whose religious commitment is part of their personal structuring and the result of the internalization of religious knowledge. Such knowledge emerges and evolves as a result of interaction with the environment and constitutes an integral part of cognition (see Rogoff 2003). Accordingly, the learning process entails the active structuring of religious knowledge and its implications on religious praxis. The teacher’s role is to foster students’ development as independent learners who structure and “own” their religious knowledge, in keeping with their individual intellectual tendencies, diverse motivations and styles of learning, and other personal traits (see Gutierrez and Rogoff 2003). Reflective teachers learn to respond to students’ differential learning needs, account for the variance in their individual points of entry into the learning process, and design teaching methods to supply anchors and mediation that ensure their progress (McEntee et al. 2003).

The forms of reflection within the context of Religious Education translate into differential emphases on the teaching of religious skills (technical); the decision to adopt a religious lifestyle under the inspiration of assorted religious ideologies and schools of thought, such as ultra-Orthodox, modern Orthodox, Reform, Conservative and the like (practical); and criticism of religious theory and practice from an ethical–social standpoint (critical). The first two types of reflection relate to the instrumental teaching method and the third to reflective–constructivist teaching. Under certain circumstances, practical reflection may also involve a critical approach.

**Religious Education: Which Teaching Style Is Better?**

The question of whether the instrumental or the reflective style of teaching is more appropriate for Religious Education is a complex one and depends on the developmental stage of the student’s religious identity and thinking. According to Fowler (1981), the higher the stage of religious development, the greater the autonomy exercised in
religious reasoning. Thus, instrumental teaching seems more suited to the needs of the early stages of religious development whereas reflective teaching would be more appropriate to the developmental needs of the later stages.

In this study, I seek to determine the practical implications of these concepts and theories in characterizing the teacher’s mission in constructing students’ religious worlds. The issue is analyzed from the retrospective point of view of students, whose objective, relatively unbiased and at times rather critical perspective, enables an examination of the efficiency of educational practice. The retrospective dimension allows us to estimate the success or failure of socialization processes.

**METHOD**

**Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews (each lasting between one and a half and five hours) were conducted with 40 young women, graduates of the State Religious educational system\(^2\) in Israel who attended conventional religious high schools or intensive (Ulpanot), and were, at the time of the interview, serving in the Israel Defense Forces or in the National Service. The interviews focused on the following questions:

1. In retrospect, to what extent were teachers influential in shaping your religious worldview?
2. What educational strategies did the teachers use and what impact did they have on the formation of your religious worldview?

**Analytical Methods**

The interviews were taped and transcribed according to Spradley (1979) and the material was analyzed according to the constant comparative method (Strauss 1987). In the initial stage of analysis,

\(^2\)State religious education is a modern orthodox religious system, in which the student studies Judaic studies half a day and general studies half a day (Gross 2003). The Ulpana is considered a more religious intensive system where many more hours are dedicated to Judaic studies. Many Ulpanot are dormitory schools where the values component is more salient.
recurring topics were identified. Axial coding allowed for formulating categories, defining criteria and continuing theoretical sampling. The stage of selective coding involved refining and finalizing the criteria. The next stage included formulating the hierarchy (structure—teaching style and types of reflection; content—types of discourse; and process—behavior patterns) and identifying core categories: types of teaching styles (instrumental, reflective) and types of rationalism (functional, objective). The final stage involved creating a category-based theoretical structure linked with the literature, and developing an empirically corroborated theory.

RESULTS

Analysis of the findings will focus on the general attitude of the respondents to their teachers’ role as religious socialization agents, the context in which, according to the respondents, the socialization process actually took place, and the discourse from the point of view of content, process, and structure.

The Context of Socialization

The respondents described the context in which their religious world was created. Vast differences were revealed between the teachers’ rhetorical world (in the school environment) and the “real world” (where the student actually functions, especially among graduates of conventional religious high schools). Many interviewees described normative life within two worlds (all names are fictitious):

There was the school world and there was our world and there was no problem living in both of them at the same time. [Michal]

Interchanges with some of the teachers were conducted in two “languages,” as Tamar described it:

If there was anything that really got to me, it was the informal stuff, like when we’d sit in the teacher’s living room or outside, in front of the school building. Talk was simply on a different level. . . . In school, I had no problem asking anything, but I knew in advance what the answer would be—they’d quote some religious law or other and I’d get the answer I expected. But in the teacher’s living room, it was different. In the classroom, . . . you could see that there was something above her—the setting—and that she represented something.
In other words, in the school, as a religious institution, there were prepared responses to questions. Elsewhere, however, teachers expressed themselves differently. The students related to this as “the language of school and the language of truth.” The gap between the two worlds was conceived as wider among conventional high school graduates than among the girls who attended an Ulpana. This discrepancy was emphasized and apparent in the words of Gila:

I had a teacher who was really devout. I didn’t get anything from her, but it was nice to see her believe so strongly. We gave her a shock. She taught a class of new immigrants for the first time and most of the girls came from atheistic backgrounds (in the former Soviet Union). She got all excited about how we’re nothing and about God and us... We didn’t understand what she was talking about. She saw that something wasn’t right about our reaction. Once, she asked who believed in God and maybe two hands were raised. She was shocked. I think that only then did she understand the spiritual distance between us.

Gila compares her own world and that of her peers with her teacher’s. The latter is a religious world in which the teacher “gets excited” contrasting the nothingness of man with the ultimate power of God. When the teacher ventures briefly out of her world and into that of the girls, she understands that the basic question of faith in God does not exist for them at all so the religious discourse is practically barren.

**The Teachers’ Role as Socialization Agents**

The interviewees implied that their teachers’ role in shaping their religious horizons was limited. Only four respondents (10%) stated explicitly that some of their teachers had a significant impact on the construction of their religious world, while others (40%) stated that there were teachers who had a destructive impact on their religious world for various reasons.

**Content of Religious Discourse**

Religious content includes distinct bodies of knowledge that are to be transmitted to students. From the students’ perspective, most of the teachers are viewed as transmitters of knowledge that consists of religious norms and behaviors, and only a small minority examine this knowledge critically.

The religious education that the teacher gave was actually a collection of religious laws and behaviors, what you should do or shouldn’t do. But what
was missing for me was critical study. Later, at the Midrasha [post-secondary Jewish Studies Academy for women], they told us that all knowledge has to stand up to examination. And that’s something I didn’t see in high school. [Hadas]

**Behavioral Aspects**

The interviewees did not address the cognitive aspect of religious rhetoric; rather, for the most part, they related to the effect of their teachers’ behavior on their own religious world. In this context, the comments revealed a disparity between the teachers’ avowed values and their actual religious behavior. For example, some graduates of the conventional religious high school indicated that there were teachers who dressed in a manner unsuited to a religious educational institution, yet “had the nerve,” as they put it, to condemn students for their “immodest” attire:

We would speak openly about this to the principal—that we saw this teacher walking around in such and such a manner [i.e., dressed immodestly]. So how can you ask us to come dressed in a certain way? [Rachel]

Another interviewee, Shira, commented:

So she [the teacher] tells you not to walk around in trousers [prohibited to women according to Jewish law] and you tell her: “Fine, no problem.” But to your girlfriend, you say: “If she wears trousers, why shouldn’t I?”

Subsequently, Shira indicated that the immodestly dressed teacher was the one who had drawn up the school’s dress code. The respondents concluded that religiosity accords power, which in turn engenders hypocrisy. Power enables individuals to act dishonestly because there are no superiors to monitor their behavior. In contrast, *Ulpana* graduates praised the religious honesty and authenticity of their teachers, as reflected specifically in their religious behavior that served as a positive role model for the students. The following dialogue with Iris exemplifies this:

Iris: We took quite a personal example from our teachers and they talked to us, even one-on-one. A teacher makes a comment here, a comment there and it sinks in.

Q: What do you mean “makes a comment”?
Iris: I mean a private conversation. A lot of times when I think about how hard it is to keep the commandments, I think back to the classroom. It bothered me a lot at the time, the whole thing about in marriage being
off-limits to your husband for two weeks [every month]. And I remember a conversation with my teacher, who said: “Look, I’m not going to kid you. It’s hard. But afterwards, it’s worth it.” Hearing something like that from a woman when I know that it’s her lifestyle, affects me more than any lecture.

Iris recalled this incident mostly because of her teacher’s honesty and candor. The teacher was aware of the difficulty involved in religious observance but did not avoid the subject. In fact, many interviewees characterized the *Ulpana* education as setting a personal example that the girls internalized in the process of their religious development. Similarly, most *Ulpana* graduates mentioned the authenticity of the teachers as manifest in the congruence between their religious rhetoric and their practice.

**The Process of Religious Socialization**

Two main processes were found to describe the framework in which religious socialization took place: acceptance and rejection. The process most prominent in religious discourse was that of rejection. Many of the conventional high school students recall a disparaging attitude and a constant atmosphere of yelling, squabbling, discord, and religious coercion. For example:

Q: Give me an example of a hurtful remark that “cut to the bone.”
Esty: “Who taught you how to dress? Your mother? Your father? . . . What does this have to do with my mother and father? . . . I have no problem if you have something to say about how I’m dressed. I have no problem with that because they have to enforce the school dress code. But say it nicely, normally, like a grownup. . . . Not: “You idiot!”
Q: Is that how they spoke to you at school? “You idiot”?  
Esty: Yes.

The rejection Esty described stemmed from a commitment to the hegemonic narrative of the school, while at the basis of acceptance lay respect and openness to different shades of religious views. The unpleasant atmosphere at that high school led to alienation and to religious withering. In contrast, *Ulpana* students describe the process in which religious socialization took place as one of receptiveness and acceptance, and most retain fond memories of their teachers’ cordial and respectful demeanor and the positive educational atmosphere:

It was pleasant. . . . They were really open-minded and that was great! They’re not just there for “Teacher, I couldn’t figure out the homework
Even interviewees who were critical of the form and substance of religious socialization at the Ulpana spoke wistfully of the warm, encouraging way the teachers treated them. They considered this positive treatment to be of definitive pedagogical—religious value in the short- and in the long-run, facilitating religious growth in a world that is a priori supportive and accepting.

**The Structure of Religious Discourse**

The structure of the messages conveyed in the socialization process is presented as objective and final, in the name of “Jewish law” or “the Holy Torah.” Many interviewees claimed that the messages transmitted by the school and its teachers were infallible, with the obvious expectation that the girls would conform to them and respect the demands placed on them.

Many interviewees claimed that the school allowed them to ask questions but only offered set responses:

> I think that, all in all, it [the school] knew how to trigger the questions because we learned the material about basic beliefs. And I was supposed to take these questions and go ask my mother or father. What do I think the school should do to shape religious identity? Listen to the questions that come up in class, in every subject. Hold classes on religious belief. Listen to the questions and give answers without just quoting. [Bracha]

As her comments indicate, Bracha believes answers should be provided without resorting to citations and slogans, that is, genuine responses that go beyond the school’s predictable sichot (conversations). Two contradictory trends may be discerned among the students, one of which is reflected in reservations concerning the prevailing ideologically closed socialization process:

> There was no openness of thought when it came to opinions about belief, but I later discovered that there are so many voices—Sefer ha-Iqarim [the fifteenth-century book of Principles by Rabbi Yosef Albo] vs. the Rambam [Maimonides]. At the Ulpana, we didn’t think such a thing could be. What? Someone disagrees with the Rambam? Can it be? I believed very specific things when I left the Ulpana. Later on, I opened my mind. [Shoshi]
However, in contrast to students who complained about the lack of receptivity to authentic questions, others argued that it was precisely this dogmatism that gave them a sense of security:

> My homeroom teacher was the person I felt closest to and I think that she had the greatest influence on me—perhaps not directly, but in many respects . . . because she’s such a warm person and she has a firm opinion about everything. It gave me a sense of security to know that there are no areas of doubt in Judaism . . . . There is an answer for every subject and almost every question. This gives you a feeling of security that you’ll be told the right thing. [Eva]

Eva perceived this religious dogmatism as something solid and reliable, enabling her to structure an identity in a world that was clear and complete. This wholeness gave her a strong sense of security. Conversely, interviewees who attended schools that were considered religiously open and pluralistic argued that this openness made it difficult to find their way:

> When it comes to religious identity, the school mostly equipped me with certain questions and the ability to ask others, to go out and seek my truth, to find out what I want to be and where I stand concerning Judaism. But I left the school with the feeling that I’d missed something, that I hadn’t been given enough tools or even real answers. Essentially, what they did was to encourage us to ask questions. And this is all right, but it was not enough for me. They should have given more importance to answers. [Malka]

Paradoxically, it seems that among those students who accused the school of dogmatism, there was a desire for more openness; whereas those who felt that their schools were open and liberal, asked for more direction, and a clearer path.

**Types of Rhetoric: Rigid versus Tentative and Critical**

A majority of the interviewees described the teachers as employing highly structured rhetoric, perceived by the students as empty, unconvincing slogans:

> It was the kind of religious education with a lot of standard catch phrases and sayings—the type that we could recite even in our sleep. [Sharon]
> The teacher stood and preached and we, like sheep, listened to what she said. I don’t think she expected us to react at all but only to listen. [Debora]
This contrasts with the teaching style reflected in the comments of three interviewees who mentioned a form of rhetoric of a dialogical nature that elicits an entire range of dilemmas, quandaries and personal conflicts:

There were teachers... for whom everything was open. Life was one big question, yet that did not contradict their high level of religious belief. There was one teacher... who presented a lot of challenges to her religious beliefs and ours. On one hand, it looked as though she herself hadn’t decided what she wanted, although she was steering us pretty clearly in a religious direction. There was something positive and constructive about this openness, but when it came to behavior, she was very clear and unambiguous. [Tal]

Or, as Orna commented:

When the Ulpana teacher... who was strictly religious said that she too had inner conflicts, we were in shock, as though it were contrary to the way we thought things should be. Things were not final for her. This opened up our thinking... she still had questions about belief such as why righteous people suffer and things like that. Some girls were distressed with her frankness about belief. Personally, I felt that she was... giving me much religious strength. There was something very real about it—things aren’t all black and white.

**Teachers’ Personal Experiences**

The interviewees felt that teachers who included them in their inner struggles and shared their personal religious life stories—their religious experiences and how they unfolded—contributed more to their religious growth than those who relayed a “closed,” fully formed message. Furthermore, students perceived normal religious development as a process of personal growth:

Q: What was special about these teachers?
Judy: They were open. They would listen, always with a smile on their face. They also told us their personal stories, from which we learned that they were not always the way they were, not always so righteous. I know that my teacher gained spiritual strength and that she studied and I realized that I could do the same thing.

In other words, the teachers’ religious development and reflections about their own world constitute an important element in their students’ religious socialization. This type of reflection is functional in
nature, as it is the teacher’s task to set an example and guide religious orientation.

One interviewee commented that her teacher’s religious struggles, her having dared to speak critically about Judaism, persuaded her to continue her Jewish studies at a Midrasha:

The teacher said that every Saturday morning, she struggles with herself about praying. She described how it was especially hard for her to get out from under her warm blanket in the winter. She began to convince herself that women are not really obligated to pray so she could stay in bed a little longer. There were times that she got up and went to synagogue and times that she just went back to sleep. In her opinion, exempting women from observance of time-dependent precepts reflects the inferior status of women in Judaism. For this reason, she actually wanted to get out of bed.

This was the first time that a teacher shared her actual religious conflicts with us. It sounded persuasive. She gave us the feeling that she was still struggling. Then we started a long dialogue between us. Afterwards, after the Sabbath, we would compare notes about whether we’d managed to get to synagogue or not. Later on, girls felt secure enough to tell her about a lot of their own religious struggles. Teachers usually give us closed messages, but in her case, the whole religious business was something open. [Yael]

By sharing their authentic religious struggles, teachers apparently serve as agents of religious socialization with long-term implications in shaping their students’ religious life.

DISCUSSION

The interviewees’ comments show that teachers’ de facto influence on the emerging religious world of their students is generally rather limited. Similarly, it would appear that most religious structuring does not encompass reflective processes, although reflective teachers are apparently preferable to instrumental ones insofar as construction of one’s religious identity is concerned. Interviewees preferred critical reflection (van Manen 1977) to technical or practical teaching.

The interviewees indicated four major aspects of teaching that exerted a defining effect on their religious development in terms of the process and structure of the religious discourse:

1. Positive interaction with teachers, including an empathetic attitude, respect for students, and the transmission of various religious messages.
2. A favorable personal example set by teachers.
3. Description and analysis of the teachers’ own religious experiences, essentially constituting a form of reflection on behavior.
4. Critical-religious reflective education, cited as significant in shaping the students’ future religious world.

In general, teachers who maintain a tentative and open-ended worldview are perceived as more conducive to the shaping of a stable and coherent religious world for students than are those who declare themselves to be “perfect” and adhere to a more rigid outlook on life. As in Court’s (2004) study, the interviewees stressed the central role of the teacher as a model of respect and openness and this served as a catalyst for transformation and growth. They emphasized the impact of extracurricular school activities, especially the *sichot* (conversations), as agents of socialization enhancing identification with school values (see also Marsh and Kleitman 2002).

The respondents recoiled from discourse of an empirical nature that utilized objective evidence and preferred discourse of a constructivistic nature. In some sense, by displaying respect, caring, and concern for their students, *Ulpana* teachers were conceived both as more human and as embodying “shades of the ultimate Being,” thereby playing an important role in molding their students’ religious judgment. In contrast, the religious development of conventional religious high school students is considered less effective, apparently because of the negative interaction between teachers and students on religious issues. Their religious identity is developed through coercion and punishment.

In general, pedagogic religious discourse in the school context incorporates very little reflection on reflection (van Manen 1991), an approach considered unsuited to the spirit of most religious schools, which value their role as agents of religious preservation (apparently because of its critical slant). The teachers delivered what they wanted to teach and not what the students wanted to learn (see also Rodgers 2002). As such, it is not surprising that only a few students, who attended schools considered highly liberal, described the pedagogic structuring of their religious identity as a critical process of reflection on reflection, adding that they perceived it as a threat to religious coherence. For these students, the many graduates of schools employing the critical-reflection approach who later abandoned religious observance constituted “proof” that under certain circumstances, this approach could be destructive religiously.
Virtually all the interviewees described a pedagogic process whose goal was to bolster the existing hegemonic sociocultural order—a process that included clear “objective” messages on various levels of abstraction transmitted through diverse pedagogic methodologies. In fact, all the interviewees’ narratives fall under the conceptual rubric of reflection on all its levels, as described in the literature (Moore 2007), with the exception of the teaching style described by Yael, whose teacher shared her own religious conflicts with her students. The reflective process demonstrated in her teacher’s pedagogic methods was reflection in action. In effect, Yael’s teacher allowed her students a glimpse of the “other” subjective world existing within her that is struggling with the subjectivity dictated by the hegemonic institutional world, describing her dialogue with her own “otherness” and its inherent conflict. As she offered no solutions, some students, unused to such socialization methods, felt threatened, yet for Yael her honesty and humanity served as a source of religious inspiration. Apparently, this very experience may well be the most effective instrument of religious socialization.

There is something extremely human about this reflective approach. The reflective process incorporates an honesty and religious authenticity that transforms the encounter with the sublime into a very personal experience. The teacher did not express all her thoughts on the subject in question—not because she was not interested in doing so, or because she wished to be politically correct, but because she was truly unsure of the desirable position and of whether it is at all possible to navigate between the two aspects of the conflict. The move beyond political correctness is called by Vacarr (2001) “the cultivation of mindful presence.” These moments where the teacher “sacrifices his own humanity” (292) are “teachable moments” that had a long-lasting educational impact on students. Yael’s teacher enables her students to share her intimate moments of searching for meaning, confronting morality and knowing her inner self. She “pushes the envelop” and uncovers the natural veil of her inner soul while enabling her students to study about religious deliberation and meaning-making processes in an unmediated fashion, not from the book but rather in life (Tirri et al., 2006). Her own reflection is the text that Yael studies (see also Court 2008).

This reflective approach is fundamentally different from the socialization process to which students in religious schools are accustomed. Accordingly, it is perceived by some of them as representing an anti-religious perspective. Yael, in contrast, considers her teacher’s
approach to be the pinnacle of her religious experience. The teacher’s inner dialogue, presented for class discussion, constitutes a subjective internal analysis that is free of institutional norms and defies the trends of standard, “normalizing” Religious Education. To Yael, these features constitute the optimum means of religious socialization, giving her the impetus to pursue further Jewish studies on a higher and more intensive level.

Two kinds of reflections can be elicited from the data presented here: institutional, representing the hegemonic institutional voice, and objective, representing the voice of the “other.” As demonstrated both directly and indirectly in students’ comments, teachers in the religious educational system systematically and intensively employ their “normative institutional selves,” that generally connects with the student’s “institutional self.” The students, for their part, expect teachers to reveal their methods of coping with their own “other selves,” as the students’ religious turmoil and disquiet occurs precisely at the point of their “otherness.” As such, exposure to the teacher’s “otherness,” that allows for honest exploration and reflection regarding her internal coping mechanisms, constitutes the epitome of the pedagogic–religious process for students. Consequently, the point of connection with the student’s “other” self constitutes a juncture of supreme pedagogic importance.

CONCLUSIONS

The research findings attest to the need to authorize students’ perspectives (Cook-Sather 2002) on Religious Education. The respondents’ descriptions of their teachers shows two kinds of religious discourse within the socialization process: instrumental (the majority) and reflective (very few). The content of instrumental discourse is usually of behaviors, dress codes, and rules, whereas reflective discourse concentrates on the analysis of experiences. Instrumental discourse usually involves processes of rejection sometimes rooted in negative knowledge, whereas reflective discourse usually involves a process of respect and acceptance. The structure of instrumental discourse is rigid, objective, and of an empirical nature, whereas the structure of reflective discourse is tentative, subjective, and constructivistic. These two kinds of discourse are presented here dichotomously. However, in reality, they function as part of a continuum, which may have a combination of components.
In retrospect, the use of a monologue approach in Religious Education, creating a pedagogic–religious style of rhetoric, including conventional religious slogans, clichés, and “closed” religious messages, was perceived as limited and ineffective despite its short-term success, as demonstrated in outward conformity—referred to by Marcia (1966) as “foreclosure.” In some cases, this compliance erupted into religious rebellion during the students’ military or national service (Gross 2003). In contrast, Religious Education that employs reflection, including dialogue between teacher and student and within teachers’ inner selves, using open-ended and even half-formed messages, is perceived as more meaningful in structuring the religious world of adolescents and shaping their religious integrity and coherence, particularly in the long range. The retrospective process enables the examination of the efficiency of the educational process. Accordingly, in the long run, what impressed the respondents was a general and vague attitude toward contents and concentration mainly on the processes and the structure of socialization discourse and argumentation (Zeidler and Sadler 2008). Processes of a positive nature in Religious Education had a constructivistic influence attesting to attachment, caring, and mutual respect. Processes of a rejective nature in Religious Education have a castrating influence. What constructs the religious horizons of the students in the long run is more the form than the content; into these shapes and structures, students insert different contents through the course of their lives. In the religious arena, students mainly remember the unconventional constructs: those that are not functional and have a nonlinear structure. The tentative construct of the discourse is considered to be more reliable and human. The moments of tentative reflection in Religious Education processes are considered “teachable moments” and are remembered as the climax of the educational aspects of the curriculum, as distinct from the instructional aspects.

The findings of this study are limited in that they are based on a population of only female adolescents. The questions raised here should be tested on a male population as well, using similar methods, enabling comparison of the two populations and formulation of broader generalizations with respect to the desired form of Religious Education.

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