

Sailing through Stormy Seas: An Israeli Kindergarten Teacher Confronts Holocaust Remembrance Day

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Abstract

The young child's exposure to disaster and trauma through the media or in the social milieu poses a challenge for the early childhood educator who is faced with responding and educating in a developmentally appropriate manner. In the case of public commemoration of a national disaster, the classroom implications are seemingly unavoidable. This investigation is a case study of an Israeli kindergarten teacher's dealing with Holocaust Remembrance Day. In this situation, society at large has assigned the role of cultural mediator to the preschool teacher who must explain to the children the significance of the day and prepare them for the day's central event—standing silently during a 2-minute siren. In order to tap the teacher's pedagogic reasoning, a narrative methodology was employed, including the video filming of the group discussion on Holocaust Remembrance Day and the recording of a narrative interview 2 weeks later. The data revealed a carefully strategized plan to provide information to the children without frightening them and to prepare them for their participation in the national mourning event. Of central concern to the teacher was the children's understanding of why this commemorative day was established, which led her to provide information about the enormity of the disaster. On the other hand, she managed to avoid question asking by the fast pacing of her lesson. Her reflective assessment of her successful resolution of the pedagogic dilemmas includes positive feedback from parents and her observation of the calmness of the children during the day.

Introduction

The destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 triggered discourse among early childhood educators about the wisdom of including young children in discussions about a national disaster (McKersie et al., 2003; Gross & Clemens, 2002; West & Albrecht, 2007). Exposing children to violence has been found to be damaging to the emotional well-being of the young child (McIntyre, 2004). On the other hand, helping the child to process information available in the media and in the general cultural milieu may be a primary task of the preschool teacher, who is recognized as an important socializing agent (Epstein, 2007). Natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, mass murders, and even isolated events of violence enter the home through the media, and young children are not immune to horrific visual and verbal stimuli. In places around the world where terrorism and large-scale violence frequently directly impact children and families, such issues are of particular interest to the early childhood community. In Israel, in particular, the commemoration of the Holocaust has penetrated the national ethos in such proportions that the teacher of young children has little choice but to include Holocaust Remembrance Day in the program. Although the historical boundaries of the Holocaust curriculum are not specified, the period is generally defined as beginning with the Nazi party's rise to power in 1932 and ending with the Nuremberg trials in 1945. However, Israeli educators typically add on the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 as a final outcome of the Holocaust.¹ While this content is not a compulsory component of the state-mandated preschool curriculum, the preschool supervisors, parents, and society in general expect the teachers to mark the day as a national event (Rina Cohen, National Supervisor for Preschool Curriculum in the religious sector of the Ministry of Education, personal communication, March 19, 2009). Holocaust education is presented as an important part of the program by the preschool supervisors, who offer both teaching materials and inservice programs on the topic to the teachers in the region. An example of this official stance is the article on the Ministry of Education's preschool Web site that proposes an active role for the teacher in exposing children to the topic of the Holocaust written by Ora Goldhirsh (2008), the state Early Childhood Department's psychologist.

This study examines the narrative of one Israeli kindergarten teacher thinking about, preparing for, and carrying out the Holocaust Remembrance Day program. The research includes a close look at the lesson she gave, her reflective narrative account of the lesson, and her thoughts about dilemmas that

Holocaust Remembrance Day generates for the early childhood educator. The study also examines the process by which the teacher reached her own pedagogic solutions on the wider issue of public memory.

The shaping of public memory through visual monuments (Haskins, 2009), public discourse (Rosen & Amir, 2006), and negotiating contemporary relevance (Alba, 2005) has drawn recent attention among researchers. This study sheds light on the reflective process in which a teacher engages in the face of seemingly irresolvable pedagogic conflicts and dilemmas related to public memory of the Holocaust. Understandings gained from this case study may be helpful in creating strategies to support early childhood educators who must deal with their pupils' exposure to disasters and large-scale tragedies, both natural and manmade.

Context of the Study

Preschool in Israel

This study is situated within the context of the Israeli public preschool educational system, which is an official branch of the Ministry of Education. The state provides preschool education for children starting at age 3 and ending upon entry to first grade at age 6 or 7. This education is subsidized for ages 3-4 and free for ages 5-6, the year before entry to first grade. By law, children are required to attend preschool at age 5-6, but not before. The system is set up on a sectarian basis according to family religious identity. There are separate schools for Muslims, Christians, and Jews; and the Jewish schools are divided between secular and religious streams. Parents choose in which sector to register their child. In addition, there are separate teacher training programs for the Jewish religious and secular school systems, and Arab education students may attend either a state-run Arab college or a secular Jewish institution. The Ministry of Education's Preschool Department produces mandatory and optional curricula for the state-run preschools. Furthermore, the department ensures the quality of the preschool education through a hierarchy of supervisors, who are also designated according to the sectarian divisions mentioned above. Each regional supervisor is responsible for the preschool classrooms within a particular religious sector. The supervisor represents the Ministry of Education in personnel decisions, and she supports the professional development of the teachers in her region throughout their careers. She takes responsibility for implementing the national curriculum through inservice training, and she deals with local municipal authorities concerning the construction and maintenance of classroom buildings. Government preschools are maintained in separate structures, usually two per building, and situated within the neighborhoods. They are typically independent of the elementary schools both physically and administratively, although over the past 20 years, a limited number of preschool classrooms have been integrated with local schools.

Holocaust Remembrance Day and Its Dilemmas

Israeli teachers are aware that on Holocaust Remembrance Day a 2-minute siren will sound, and the whole country will stand in silence. Traffic stops on the roads and highways, people step out of cars and buses to stand silently beside the roads, workers in offices stand beside their desks, and pupils in schools and students in the universities stop their lessons and stand. In short, the entire country is paralyzed for the duration of the siren. The preschool teacher cannot ignore this all-encompassing phenomenon, and he or she must find a way to respond in a socially acceptable and pedagogically sound manner in the classroom.

In Israel, preparing for Holocaust Remembrance Day presents complex dilemmas that challenge the teacher's pedagogic reasoning. These difficulties grow out of an inherent conflict from both explicit and implicit demands placed on the teacher by a variety of stakeholders, which include Israeli society at large, the kindergarten inspector, the parents, and the children themselves (Mayrav, 2005). The teacher must negotiate contradictory claims that arise from these sources within the framework of the child's cognitive and emotional needs as they are understood by the early childhood educator. Given this almost impossible task, the teacher relies on pedagogic content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) to weave a path through this morass of conflicting principles.

Israeli society in general and its educational system in particular regard Holocaust Remembrance Day as a mandatory topic that must be addressed directly with all children, including those ages 4–7. The commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day has been included in the preschool program for many years and is viewed as one more opportunity to inculcate the central Zionist values of the nascent state. This national event was included as an integral part of the Israeli school curriculum in the 1950s and, along with the Memorial Day for Fallen IDF Soldiers, “leads to the crystallization of the pupils’ historical consciousness” (Ben-Amos & Bet-El, 1999). Traditionally, the elementary school ceremony on this day includes readings, didactic theatrical events, religious elements including prayers and lighting a memorial candle, and standing in silence during the siren blast. With the expansion of Jewish immigration in the 1950s (Rosenthal, 1992), the preschool teacher became a central socializing agent. Wrapped within the cultural context of commemorating the Holocaust in the schools, the kindergarten teacher is faced with the explicit mandate of addressing the Holocaust with her students one day each year.

In 1985, the education committee of the Knesset discussed the teaching of the Holocaust in preschools. In her address to the committee, Dr. Nehama Nir Yaniv, national supervisor of all Israeli preschool programs and lecturer at Bar Ilan University, stated that although young children cannot understand the Holocaust, the teachers cannot ignore it. She suggested the use of stories with a happy ending and the presentation of heroes such as Janusz Korczak (Nir Yaniv, 1990, p. 108). State preschool supervisors provide inservice training for the teachers in conjunction with Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority. Articles in professional journals and on the Ministry of Education Web site provide guidance on the topic. Additional suggested activities are found in professional publications such as Ritchler (2006), Dagan (1986, 2007), and Nir Yaniv (1994).

In her article on the topic, Ora Goldhirsh (2008) suggests that instead of teachers talking about atrocities, they focus on concrete events that are not frightening, such as the Nazi requirement that Jews wear a yellow star. Goldhirsh also recommends stressing the establishment of the state of Israel and the heroism of those who saved lives, as positive features of the history of the Holocaust.

In addition to the supervisors’ expectation that teachers arrange an appropriate activity on this difficult topic, there is evidence that parents prefer that teachers address the issue of Holocaust Remembrance rather than taking on the task themselves (Gaziel, 1993). They rely on the teacher as a socializing agent to frame the topic in an age-appropriate manner. The children themselves constitute another source of pressure on the teachers. Many arrive in class on Holocaust Remembrance Day having been stimulated by media coverage of Holocaust themes, including music, the reading of names of victims, and stories of Holocaust events. Lack of television monitoring among young Israeli children has been well documented (Levinson & Tidhar, 1989), and even peripheral viewing heightens children’s awareness of the day’s serious nature. They seem to know that adults and older siblings are engaged with a very sad and very terrible topic. This widespread awareness makes the teacher’s task even more complex, as she finds her students responding to scraps of information collected from the media and from one another.

Juxtaposed against this societal norm of bringing the Holocaust into the preschool is the commonplace of early childhood education—nurturing the child’s emotional well-being; creating a warm, safe environment; and bolstering the child’s confidence and basic trust in those surrounding him.² The ethos of creating an optimal emotional climate was stated as a goal by the national coordinator for early childhood education in Israel.³ Preschool teachers have been trained to support the emotional needs of the child—not to frighten the children. Further, the teacher knows that young children yearn for a safe and predictable world (Sorin, 2005; Rimm-Kaufman, Voorhees, Snell, & La Paro, 2003; Nir Yaniv, 1990). Kindergarten teachers sometimes speak of their classrooms metaphorically as “an island of serenity in a sea of turmoil” (Brody & Baum, 2007, p. 23). This protective stance sharply conflicts with the demands of Holocaust Remembrance Day, which the teacher is not free to ignore. In her study of the handling by an Israeli kindergarten teacher of a suicide bombing, Golden (2005) proposes a “discourse of vulnerability” in the preschool setting, a process by which the teacher both protects the children from environmental dangers while at the same time helping them process extremely stressful news events. Holocaust Remembrance Day provides similar challenges and enlists such a discourse.

Planning for Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israeli preschool classrooms reflects teachers' personal theories on how to resolve the conflict between national demands of socialization on one hand and emotional security requirements on the other. For many, the planning and execution of activities for this day occur in a vacuum of collegial support. Israeli preschool teachers function autonomously in their classrooms, which are geographically separated. The isolation of the preschool teacher (Appl, 1995; Johnson, 2007) contributes to the phenomenon of each teacher generating unique solutions to the central dilemma we have described. This lack of collegial support, coupled with society's demand that teachers create their own strategies, places some Israeli kindergarten teachers in a position that they find untenable both on the personal and professional levels.

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how one Israeli teacher views and addresses the inherent pedagogic problems that Holocaust commemoration poses for her as an educator and for her young students as learners.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was chosen for this research because of its sensitivity to the identity formation of the person being studied. The narrative interview itself is thought to not only reflect identity but to aid in its formation (Sarbin, 1986). The telling of the narrative is a selective process, in which material is included and left out, emphasized or minimized, according to the self-perceptions of the person interviewed (Rosenthal, 1993).

In this study, the teacher is asked to speak about her Holocaust Day activity and her views of dilemmas inherent in addressing this topic with young children. The narrative method taps her thoughts in an unrestricted manner, providing a window of analysis unavailable in more conventional methods of data collection, including a closed interview. By studying the whole person in context, the narrative method reveals the pedagogic thinking process as it occurs in the interview (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2002; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Furthermore, narrative methods tap cultural patterns and structures (Houston, 2000) that are relevant to the functioning of the teacher.

Participants

This study took place in the spring of 2008. The teacher, Lea, was selected because of her stature in the local early childhood community, where she is a respected pedagogue and leader among the preschool teachers.

Lea lived and taught in a settlement numbering 8,000 residents, whose population consists of observant and politically active Jews as well as a smaller segment of secular Jews who have chosen the location because of low housing prices. Her family is of Moroccan origin, and in her case, there is no personal or familial connection with the Holocaust.

At the time of this study, Lea had been teaching kindergarten for 22 years, after completing a bachelor's degree at a religious teachers training college. She served as the preschool coordinator for seven years, an assistant to the area's early childhood supervisor. This role included setting up meetings, acting as a mediator between the teachers and the local authority that provides funds for materials and enrichment activities. In addition, Lea mentored early childhood interns in their first year of teaching and supervised undergraduates as student teachers in her own classroom. At the time of this study, she received a regional prize for learning achievement in her kindergarten.

Lea's class included 30 children ages 4-6. These children came from families of second- and third-generation Israeli-born parents as well as new immigrants from Ethiopia and India. The veteran

Israeli families were highly aware of the Holocaust, while the new immigrant groups had little understanding of the tragic events.

The author of this article is an American Israeli, whose Orthodox life style is similar to that of the community in which this study took place. He is an early childhood educator, trained in both sociology and Jewish education, who prepares preschool teachers in a religious college where he serves as the academic dean. His theoretical leanings are toward constructivism, and he supports Vygotsky's emphasis on the importance of society and culture in mediating learning.

Data Collection

Data for the study were collected in three stages. The first stage included the author's direct observation of the teaching event, which was a morning group meeting focused on Holocaust Remembrance Day, recorded on video and later transcribed. The session was conducted in Hebrew and lasted 30 minutes.

The second stage consisted of the narrative interview. Two weeks after Holocaust Remembrance Day, in a relaxed and frank atmosphere in her empty classroom after the children had gone home, the teacher was asked to read the transcript of the class activity that had been filmed, and she was then asked to speak spontaneously and openly about the activity that had been observed. The researcher framed the discussion by asking Lea to describe why she chose those particular methods of talking to the class about the Holocaust. After this initial introduction to the interview, the researcher did not intervene or interrupt Lea's narrative, which lasted about 10 minutes.

The final stage of data collection immediately followed the narrative interview. It consisted of Lea's responses to specific questions about the Holocaust Remembrance Day lesson that were not addressed in the narrative interview, requests for clarification of terms used in the narrative, and requests for an elaboration of her understanding of issues raised. A description of the opening of this interview and the questions asked after the narrative are found in the [Appendix](#). This process of answering specific questions lasted about 20 minutes. Quotations from the transcript of the lesson and the interview were translated from Hebrew into English by the author and then back-translated by an Israeli who speaks fluent English for verification.

Data Analysis

Several tools were used to analyze data from these three bodies of research. In order to determine what emphasis the teacher placed on various topics of the lesson, each line of the video transcript was categorized into one of four topics: (1) introduction about the sadness of the day, (2) historical background to the Holocaust, (3) Hitler and the Nazi doctrine, and (4) the need to remember.

Based on analysis of the amount of verbiage for each topic, a measure was created showing the actual attention paid to each. The narrative interview was examined for themes related to the goals that the teacher expressed for the lesson and the strategies that she used to achieve them. These stated strategies and themes were then identified in the lesson transcript, allowing for a comparison of teacher reflection with teacher behavior using grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2002).

Another tool of analysis was the examination in all the stages of the teacher interview of high-frequency words that were considered to support the teacher's stated goal. In Hebrew, verbs and many nouns are based on three-letter roots. This linguistic feature allows for the identification of word families that are connected semantically. A pairing of two of these word families, sentence by sentence, revealed the teacher's basic stance for dealing with the primary dilemma she faced. An additional linguistic analysis of the narrative involved examining the context for using the pronoun *l* versus the pronoun *we*. This categorical-form analysis is used in examining highly emotional oral narratives transcripts (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 157). This comparison reflects the teacher's struggle with isolation and her quest for community. These tools, used in conjunction one with another, produced a holistic picture of the dilemmas that the teacher perceived, on one hand, and her treatment of these dilemmas, on the other.

Findings

The Holocaust Remembrance Day Lesson

Every year as Holocaust Remembrance Day approaches, Lea rethinks her plans for the lesson that she will present by considering new options for structuring the day. At the time of this research, she prepared the children on the previous day with a poem about happy and sad candles, which dealt with the significance of lighting a memorial candle on Holocaust Remembrance Day (Dagan, 2008).

The major element of Lea's Holocaust Remembrance program was her group lesson on the day itself. This lesson occurred in the morning at the regular circle time, after one hour of free play. Opening with an historic overview about the Jews and their relationship with the land of Israel, Lea covered the sweep of Jewish history beginning with the Exodus from Egypt and continuing with the entrance of the Hebrews into the land of Israel and their later exile from the land. She then skipped 2000 years to the modern period by explaining that Hitler was an evil leader in Germany. When he saw that the Jews did not have a country of their own, he decided to kill them all. Hitler wanted to rule over the entire world, and when he conquered each country, he killed the Jews living there.

After this historical framing of the Holocaust, Lea spoke about the sad tenor of the day and the customs of lighting a memorial candle and standing in silence during the siren "to think about those murdered." She mentioned the number six million as "those killed in the Holocaust" and explained that the victims included "old people, babies, and children like you." She ended the lesson with instructions on how to stand and what to think during the siren, and she lit a memorial candle. While the historical overview part of the lesson was conducted in a storytelling mode, the second half of the activity was delivered in a didactic explanatory style. Except for the candle, no props were used.

The lesson lasted approximately 30 minutes. After the lesson, the children returned to their normal play activities. When the siren was heard half an hour later, the children stood silently with their heads lowered, and when it ceased, they resumed playing. During the morning snack, Lea read aloud a chapter of Psalms expressing sorrow. This was done with no explanation of the meaning of the verses. The day ended with a group meeting in which she asked the children to speak about feelings and experiences from the day.

An analysis of the weight given to the different elements of the group lesson indicates Lea's emphasis on each topic she covered. The opening historical background survey from the Biblical Exodus up to the rise of Hitler accounted for 28% of the verbiage of the lesson, while the topic of Hitler's persecution accounted for only 7%. The major body of her lesson (57%) focused on the subject of public memory and included an explanation of the enormity of the disaster and the number of victims. The other 18% of the verbiage addressed technical topics related to the special routines for Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The Reflective Interview

In her reflective interview 2 weeks later, Lea both opened and closed her narrative by stating that "Holocaust Remembrance Day is a very charged topic." She explained her basic dilemma as follows: "My approach is to inform them—what is this day and why did the State of Israel establish this day... but not in a frightening manner." Here she expressed the need to give the children some basic information about why the Holocaust is commemorated. On the other hand, she was aware that the answer to this question can be upsetting to them.

A close look at Lea's comments about informing the children reveals several key ideas. The first is the concept of "straightening the line," which means correcting informational errors that the children bring from home and the media. A second key idea is the desire for all of the children to have the same accurate information. Therefore, she chose to deal with stories and "facts" that children initiated in group meetings and with friends in addition to the material that she presented in her lesson.

Furthermore, she sought to attenuate the impact of upsetting information, such as descriptions of atrocities, by formulating simple and objective statements intended to satisfy the children's curiosity without giving too much information. For example, she made only one brief referral to the incarceration of Jews in ghettos and concentration camps. "The Jews were in camps and in the ghetto. You know what a ghetto is? A closed place where Jews are closed in and don't know what will happen to them." In this statement, she brought up two potentially frightening aspects of the Holocaust, ghetto and camp, then asked the children about the less frightening of the two. She ended by answering her own question so quickly that the children had no chance to address it.

Several major themes emerge in Lea's narrative. She used the verb "to inform" and the nouns "information" and "making aware" 18 times, the highest frequency cluster of related words in the entire narrative. This suggests that her major goal was giving the children information about the Holocaust itself in order that they would understand why Holocaust Remembrance Day was established. In her narrative interview, each use of an "informing" word was followed with a caveat that her information does not frighten the children. Several closely related words—"fear, frightening, distress, paralysis, and shock"—occur 19 times, which parallels the use of the "informing" words. A third theme is the day itself. She prefers the euphemism, "this day" to the fully articulated term "Holocaust Remembrance Day." The phrase "this day" occurs 11 times in Lea's narrative. This linguistic analysis reveals a teacher who is committed to informing her students about Holocaust Remembrance Day while actually withholding information that might frighten them. This strategy was articulated by Lea, as stated above, and can be considered the end point of her narrative, her central message (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Another important linguistic feature of Lea's narrative was her use of the first person plural when she referred to her pedagogic strategies for Holocaust Remembrance Day. For example, she states, "*We* gave the day a unique character, a character which even though *we* who were not in the Holocaust [sic], *we* also must remember our brothers who were killed." This use of the plural pronoun contrasts with descriptions of specific actions, which are cast in the first person singular. For example, "*I* informed them again on a basic level that won't cause fear." This choice of the pronoun "we" is striking because Lea works in isolation from other teachers. Although her pedagogic decisions were uniquely hers, she spoke in the narrative about the profound influence of a teacher from an inservice art workshop. In that class, the topic of the Holocaust came up, and the instructor recommended preparing the children one day in advance by reading a poem. Lea claimed that "every suggestion that the art teacher made, *we* (the teachers in the course) adopted." By framing her pedagogic decisions in the plural, she adopts a psychological strategy for breaking her isolation. By referring to "we," she places herself in the community of learners (ten Dam & Blom, 2006) at the art workshop. She gives group legitimacy to her own pedagogic decisions, thereby avoiding full responsibility herself. This process is particularly poignant when one takes into consideration that the major body of her lesson, the historical overview and the discussion of why the day was established, was of her own making. The only aspect of her program influenced by the art teacher was the poetic reading on the previous day.

At other points in her narrative, Lea's use of the pronoun "we" seemed to refer to the voice of the community into which she was socializing the children. In her lesson, she emphasized the importance of Israel as the only safe place for the Jews, reflecting the central beliefs of many Israelis in general and of members of her community in particular.

In her narrative, Lea assessed her pedagogy for Holocaust Remembrance Day and concluded that she succeeded in achieving her goals, resolving the dilemma that she posited from the outset. She mentioned three measures of success: children's orderly behavior during the siren, normal functioning of the class throughout the day, and parental endorsement of her approach. The fact that the children stood with their heads lowered without panicking during the siren, she said, indicated to her that she succeeded in inculcating proper behavior for this event. Furthermore she observed that they "continued to play and continued to enjoy one another." Lea commented that this sign of normality was accompanied by an unusual level of seriousness among the children. She noted that during the day, children informally brought up Holocaust-related topics. Lea interpreted this open discourse as the children's tacit understanding that the day was set aside by the state precisely because of its serious nature and because of the magnitude of the tragedy. She assessed her teaching as follows:

And in truth...I paid attention to the fact that the children succeeded in dealing with the entire story which they heard which enabled normal functioning during the day, but at the same time, they remembered that the day is Holocaust Remembrance Day.... And at the end of the day when we finished the day, I asked the children if they want to tell me something, something which they experienced today. In truth, all, most of the children focused on the character of the day. On the one hand, we conducted a normal schedule, seemingly regular, but with a character and tenor of the Holocaust. According to their responses, I paid attention to the fact that they aren't living in fear from the morning lesson. I gave information that they can deal with. Information—to know truly what happened on this day.

Positive parent reaction bolstered Lea's assessment that she had succeeded in giving information without frightening the children. Her report on parent response follows:

Three mothers phoned me. "Lea, we thank you that our children arrived home with information which they can contain and doesn't frighten him [sic]".... How did one of the mothers say it? "Believe me, Lea, I always feared that they will give information which I won't succeed in dealing with, and praise God, they calmed me." One of the mothers said, "My daughter calmed me."

In this quote, we see one side of the educator's dilemma from the reported perspective of the parents, who seemed to voice clearly the fear that Lea had wanted to avoid among the children. In her narrative, Lea cited parental approval and support as a reflection of her success in executing her responsibilities toward the children, the parents, and society. Lea's self-evaluation in her narrative confirmed for her the effectiveness of her choice of teaching strategies for Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The Directed Interview

In the directed interview following the narrative, Lea explained that she was "of the opinion that one must give the truth to children and only the truth. If they ask me about the children, what happened to them in the Holocaust, I will have to lie to myself (to my educational principles)." She expressed awareness of the salience of her teaching: "Every word which comes out of the kindergarten teacher's mouth enters the child and is etched on his heart and memory." This heavy responsibility leads her to gloss over the details of mass murder by not permitting questions. Lea stated: "...I don't want to allow them to ask questions, to allow them to ask me what they did to the children there, or what happened to them there, or how they were killed there. This is absolutely a point which is not easy."

Lea's decision to elaborate on the ages of the victims grew out of her desire for the students to understand the magnitude of the disaster as a reason for the state setting aside this special memorial day. Because the number six million is incomprehensible to her young students, Lea said that she decided to specify the ages of the victims: "old people and even babies and children like you." She believed, she said, that this breakdown by age would translate in the child's mind to a significant portion of the population, or a very great number of people. Lest the notion of children being murdered lead to demands for more information, such as how many children, what ages, and how they were murdered, she decided to quickly move to the next topic, thereby eliminating the possibility of questions from the children. She dismissed the likelihood that this information might induce fear, insisting that the children "are not frightened very much" by what she chose to tell them.

Lea also noted that the public siren, associated in Israel with war drills when citizens are requested to practice entering bomb shelters, was the same siren that was sounded both on Holocaust Remembrance Day and on Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers. (These two days of remembrance occur within one week of each other.) In her view, the siren itself was frightening for young children. She claimed that knowing why there is a siren, what to do when it is sounded, and what thoughts to focus on, reduced fear and resulted in the fact that the children did not "panic, scream, or cry."

Discussion

To summarize, Lea's narrative revealed a desire to teach the children why Holocaust Remembrance Day was established by the state. She chooses this strategy in order to socialize the children of veterans and new immigrants alike to this national heritage. Her goal influences the program for the two days. Additional goals include socializing the children about acceptable behavior on this special day, including knowing what to do when the siren sounds.

Lea framed the entire enterprise within the early childhood professional discourse, which places a premium on emotional nurturance and disapproves of frightening the children. By filtering out potentially frightening information and by using an historical context alien to the children, she established a distance between the Holocaust and her students. She thereby created an emotional detachment that enabled the children to feel part of the national enterprise while not truly comprehending the depth and implications of the tragic events being commemorated.

The central theme that emerges from Lea's lesson, the narrative explanation, and answers to the follow-up questions is one of maintaining control in a potentially emotionally hazardous environment. The dilemmas she faced when dealing with Holocaust Remembrance Day could well lead to undesirable outcomes for her as a teacher. Her main concern was the well-being of the children as well as their socialization and, secondarily, the satisfaction of the parents. As she described the various problems and her solutions, one is reminded of a ship's captain sailing a frigate through stormy seas and emerging from the storm into sunny weather on gentle waters. This captain is in control of the ship, knowing precisely what to do in each situation—in preparation for the storm, sailing through it, and assessing and reporting professional prowess afterward.

Lea's need for control in this situation led her to take special caution in listening and responding to her students' comments. One of her primary concerns was dealing with information about the Holocaust that came into her kindergarten and over which she had no influence. She noted that children watch TV and listen to the radio. Recognizing that these external sources of information can be potentially damaging on an emotional level, she viewed it her responsibility to render such sources harmless through her careful interpretations. Having an adequate plan of action was Lea's first concern. She commented that the idea of preparing the children one day in advance made it "easy for me on a personal level."

In her approach to the Holocaust Remembrance Day observance, Lea performed a delicate balancing act. On the day itself, she maintained firm control of the learning environment. Beginning the day with the normal play routine, she followed with a carefully crafted group meeting that emphasized ancient Jewish history and contemporary mourning customs, steering away from any significant discussion of atrocities. She addressed topics on a national scale that are likely to be incomprehensible to the 5-year-old, rather than presenting personal stories of Holocaust experiences that they might understand. By choosing long-range history with a national focus and public memory as her topics, she chose a seemingly safe route in her lesson, attempting to remove the Holocaust from the emotional grasp of the children. She heightened control over classroom events by instructing the children how to stand and what to think during the siren.

As the day progressed, Lea established way stations, or islands of calm in a stormy sea, to monitor the affective tone of the class. For example, at snack time she read a Psalm, and at the end of the day, she asked the children to report how they were feeling. Although she suppressed questions at group time, she encouraged them privately throughout the day. This approach enabled individual children to get accurate information based on their queries, without exposing others to unnecessarily frightening material.

Woven into her narrative, Lea touched on several dilemmas: teaching about the purpose of the day without giving too much frightening information, answering the children's questions without lying, dealing with what the children knew and what they had heard from the media without giving out information to those who had not heard, instructing the children what to do during the siren without frightening them, and reading a chapter of Psalms whose meaning she knew would be inaccessible to young children. She approaches these inherent contradictions with confidence in her role as a primary socializing agent whose expertise in dealing with this difficult topic is helpful to both the children and their parents.

Lea seemed to be aware that parental anxiety and ignorance of how to present the Holocaust to their children were being resolved by placing responsibility on the teacher. This solution was double edged. As Lea reported, one mother implied that if the teacher's explanation were to backfire by causing fear, then the burden of explanation would fall on her.

Mandated by the families and by society at large to guide these young children through a day of ceremonies that early childhood experts consider developmentally inappropriate (Nir Yaniv, 1990), Lea identified with this role and developed a well-formulated method of carrying it out. Her confidence was bolstered by pedagogic assistance from an outside authority, which filled an existing gap in suitable teaching materials. Through self-reflection, she maintained a confident professional self-image, measuring her success in tangible ways. Having sailed her fragile ship with its precious cargo through the perilous sea, she emerged on the other side and landed safely on the calm shore.

Implications

Implications may be drawn from this case for policy planners and supervisors in early childhood settings requiring teachers to help young children deal with large-scale traumatic experience in an emotionally productive manner. Lea's experience indicates that breaking down the isolation of the teacher who is faced with such pedagogic dilemmas could be seen as a primary goal. Lea reported that she felt strengthened by instructions from an inservice teacher who told her exactly what to do. However, planners and administrators must remain aware that such directive supervision may in the long run detract from the teacher's ability to meet new situations creatively. The provision of teaching materials, texts, and stories by experts may encourage confidence because a higher authority in the education system has endorsed them.

The tool most lacking for Lea, authentic collegial support, was provided by the narrative researcher, who listened in a nonjudgmental fashion to her story. As she organized her thoughts reflectively to tell her narrative, she seemed to seek approval of her solutions to the pedagogic dilemmas she had faced. This empowering situation could be replicated through collegial meetings in which teachers tell each other about their strategies, thereby articulating them clearly and investing them with extra significance through peer endorsement. Such telling and retelling may enable the early childhood educator to cope with those dilemmas that on the surface seem impossible to navigate pedagogically. This endorsement of frameworks for collegial support that can break professional isolation is critical for early childhood educators facing dilemmas related to children's coping with large-scale disasters. As noted in this article, intuitive solutions may address an immediate concern; however, they may not yield the desired result in the long run. Reflecting on their pedagogic responses to such crises and stressful situations, teachers will be better able to assess their own practice and further their professional development.

Notes

1. The Holocaust time line on the Web site of Yad Vashem The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority concurs with this delineation, 1933–1945. See http://www1.yadvashem.org/about_holocaust/chronology/1933-1938.html.

2. See, for example, item 12 of the principles of child development and learning that inform developmentally appropriate practice: "Children develop and learn best in the context of a community where they are safe and valued, their physical needs are met, and they feel psychologically secure" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 15).

3. Sima Hadad MaYafit, National Supervisor of Preschool Education, in her letter opening the 2008 school year, stated as a goal for the year: "Nurturing an optimal social and emotional climate." This statement was posted on the Ministry's official preschool Web site (<http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Units/PreSchool/Mediniyut/MediniyutTashsat/>; retrieved March 12, 2009).

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Appendix

Protocol of the Beginning of the Narrative Interview and the Follow-up Questions

Researcher: I would like for you to tell me your story, how you got to this. I suggest that you go over this transcript quickly in order to refresh your memory of the structure of that class discussion.

Lea (reads transcript): This is very encouraging. (reads more) This is not so good.

Researcher: I will listen to what you have to tell me.

Lea: (begins her narrative)

At the end of her narrative, the researcher asked a few questions:

1. Why did you choose to tell the historical sequence of the Hebrew's slavery in Egypt and to talk about the relationship with the gentiles?
2. Why did you use the term "old people" and "children" (when referring to victims of the Holocaust)?
3. (Referring to Lea's reference to the slaughter of children and old people in the Holocaust): In this part of the lesson, you wanted the children to understand certain things. How do you understand this difficulty?
4. Are the children not upset to hear about children and babies (killed in the Holocaust)?
5. (Lea then spoke about her strategy of quickly passing over certain topics in order that children would not ask her too many questions.) Why don't you want them to ask questions?

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