

FAMILY, AUTHORITY, AND AMBIGUITY IN DAILY RITUALS AS FACTORS SHAPING THE CULTURE IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Iris Bitton

Abstract: This article is based on a research study I performed in two state elementary schools in Israel. In the research study I examined the role and meaning of routine and regular rituals in the school agenda. The research findings indicate that the school arrangements, in other words, the repeating activities, are the main factor that shapes the school culture. I present the two rituals that were studied, and I examine the role that they fill in the assimilation of main messages and values of the Israeli national culture. In addition, I clarify the importance of the awareness of the educational staff, and at the head the school principal, of these rituals and their influence on the assimilation of the values of the national culture.

Key words: Rituals, national culture, values, family, authority, ambiguity.

Introduction

The school principal, as the person at the head of the organizational hierarchy, is committed to a systemic viewpoint and to the ability to recruit all the components of the system, and first and foremost the teachers, to create processes that will lead to the creation of the students' success. Therefore, it is customary to think that the school principal is the main factor, the "home owner" in the school, the one responsible for its character and success. However, is this really the case?

In my many years as a school principal, I experienced daily the school rituals, and I understood the tremendous importance of the understanding of the

principals and the teachers of the special place of the rituals in the school routine and the implicit influence on them and on the students.

The research study examined through the two rituals the assimilation of three main values: family, authority, and ambiguity. Family is the creation of cohesion and a collective infrastructure, authority is the challenge to formal authority, and ambiguity is the control of ambiguity through the support of it.

I begin with a review of the literature on the topic of rituals and culture, I continue with a description of the research method and the findings, and I end with a discussion of the meaning of the findings in theoretical and practical terms.

1. Review of the Literature

The school is one the main agents of socialization. Therefore, one of its roles is the transfer of the cultural heritage to the next generation (Haran, 1990). The rituals and practices customary in the school, both aware and explicit and unaware and implicit (Blum, 1980), transmit the values of the culture to the students. The Ministry of Education defined the cultivation of the values and social skills as one of its objectives alongside the promotion of the academic achievements (Department of Elementary Education website), and the social rituals were defined as one of the means for the fulfillment of this goal.

Sociologists and anthropologists (McLaren, 1993; Turner, 1988) see rituals to be an essential part of modern culture and traditional researches of rituals (Giroux & Purpel, 1983). In the educational systems the focus was on the relationship between rituals and the transfer of cultural information and development of social unity. The diverse nature of the school rituals is especially prominent in multicultural democratic societies that undergo a rapid process of

social change. In these societies, the schools are the place where there are struggles to determine definitions of meaning and to recognize knowledge (Etzioni, 2000; Geerts, 1973). However, the schools not only reflect the cultural context in which they are found but also renew and rebuild the symbolic codes that guide and interpret actions.

This is the case in Israeli society. The rituals in the education system express the Israeli culture and at the same time serve as a means to convey it to the next generation, since they are a powerful device in the process of the building of the national collective identity in the student (Zamir, 2005).

2. Rituals

Conda (2000) defines a ritual as an activity with a symbolic nature, which is guided by rules and focuses the attention on the objects of thought and emotion with especial meaning to the participants. The rituals are characterized with actions and gestures with regular structure and order. For the most part they are conducted under special circumstances or in the context of cyclical events (Turner, 2004), and they create a unique experience. There are different types of rituals, including meeting rituals and welcoming rituals.

The researchers hold different opinions about the goals of the rituals. Some maintain that their role is to socialize for the existing order (Gehrke, 1979) and to unite around the feeling of shared identity (Durkheim, 1954). Others emphasize the role of the rituals in the duplication of the power relations and the transformation of the existing order into transparent and obvious (Bourdieu, 1977). However, all the researchers agree about the importance of the rituals as reflecting and shaping culture. The ritual can determine the way in which the social reality is perceived, interpreted, and understood. Despite the existence of

different schools of thought, most of the researchers see the ritual to be a critical link that connects between the ideologies that shape the frameworks of life of the collective and the personal experience derived from them (Conda, 2000). Turner (1974, p. 56) notes that when a ritual “works”, the reality it presents receives emotional meaning among the participants, and this creates and shapes an experience he denotes the “symbiotic merger of the individual and society”.

Rituals are first and foremost collections of symbols, and we would best understand them through a symbolic analysis. The ritual has different meanings in different societies, and thus its roles will be defined differently from society to society. The formal and informal components of the rituals, the fact that they are a mirror of the national culture and its assimilators, exist also in the rituals held in the education system – and this is the focus of the research.

3. Rituals and National Culture

3.1. Culture

Among the researchers, there is agreement that the shared culture is the main factor that influences the way in which society is run and its rituals are designed. The culture is defined as a framework of meanings, beliefs, values, and customs that constitute the basis for the formation and preservation of the cultural institutions, the creation of the products of the culture, and the development of the members of the culture (Cross & Gore, 2003).

While Goodenough (1970) determines that the culture is a learned system of tradition that includes what a person needs to know, to think, and to feel to be a member in it, Geertz (1973) tends to identify the culture with the public means of expression of this system – signs and symbols. Poole (2003) emphasizes the

importance of practices, customs, and rituals of everyday life and stories, popular beliefs, and myths that give meaning to people's lives. However, while culture in its different definitions addresses every social group, the rituals of culture at the center of the research study address the national culture and the way in which it is duplicated through the elementary school.

3.2. National Culture

The variety of definitions can be divided according to two main approaches that represent different perceptions of nationality:

- Territorial-civilian nationality. This perception, also called political nationality, assumes that every citizen who lives legally in the country is a part of the nation. According to this approach, the factor that creates the nationality culture that differentiates between the citizens and other people is the sovereign state, as can be seen in countries like the United States, Canada, and France (Hobsbawm, 2006).
- Shared ethnic basis. According to this perception, it is not possible to join the nationality, rather only to be born into it. According to Gelner (1994), the ethnic approach characterizes the German nationality and the Jewish-Israeli nationality.

Researchers of culture maintain that while national cultures are different from one another in language, customs, and living conditions, they share the basic characteristics that every society, according to its culture, proposes for them different solutions.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) defined three dimensions for the characterization of the national culture: time, the attitude to the environment, and the relations among other people. Schwartz (1999) also found three

dimensions of the characterization of the national culture: the borders and relationships between the individual and the group (autonomy versus assimilation), the degree of guarantee and responsibility that the individual displays in his behavior to preserve the social structure (equality of rights versus hierarchy), and the person's relationships with nature and its resources (harmony versus control).

Hofstede (1997) proposes five dimensions in light of which it is possible to examine the national culture in different societies: the attitude towards authority, the relations between the individual and the collective, the attitude towards ambiguity, the attitude towards femininity and masculinity, and the attitude towards time (in the continuation, another dimension was found that addresses restraint versus satisfaction). The response of different societies to each dimension appears on a continuum. In his method, the integration of the solutions that every culture offers to each one of the problems creates the characterization of the national culture.

Despite their criticism, the critics agree that Hofstede's approach was the most influential, most useful, and easiest understood and implemented from among different approaches to culture, because it was a framework for the understanding of cultural models (Clark, 2003). In this research study, the conceptual framework of Hofstede (1997) of the dimensions of culture will serve also for the examination of the Israeli national culture and its assimilation through the rituals customary in the elementary school.

4. Israeli Culture and Its Characteristics

Israeli culture is heterogeneous and is characterized by cultural complexity. However, its definition, like the definition of every national culture,

relies on the dominant group (Bourdieu, 1977). Kimmerling (2001) defined the dominant group in Israel by the term: “achsolim”, an acronym standing for Ashkenazi, secular, native, socialist, and nationalist. He maintains that although the rule of the “achsolim” is losing its power as a result of political, social, religious, and economic reasons, the culture created by this group is the dominant Israeli culture that shapes Israeli culture and also dictates the desired attitude in the State towards different matters. This opinion is shared by other researchers, such as Almog (2006), Bar On (2005), and Etzioni-HaLevy (1999).

The following paragraphs present a description of the characteristics of Israeli culture according to the dimensions determined by Hofstede (1997). I focus on four of the five dimensions, regarding which there is data in Israel,

The Dimension of the Attitude towards Authority. In this dimension, Israel is found in the 73rd place from 74 countries, at the rank of 13 from a range of 11-104. According to Hofstede (2005), this low value indicates the extreme lack of respect for authority, which according to Meisles (2005) lies in the explanation derived from a unique characteristic of Israeli culture that conveys dual messages towards the expectation of obedience to authority. Kamir (1999) adds in her argument that the “culture of dependence” (“it will be fine”) is a result of cultural processes that originate in the exilic complex and the perception of the figure of the “Sabra”¹ of the start of the country. In this context, Blair (2010) addresses the non-existence of norms and rules in the context and the concept of the ‘sucker’ as an organizing element in Israeli culture.

This dimension is expressed in the school in that the teachers and the students are perceived as equal. The students do not respect the teachers’

¹ Sabra is a term for the Jewish person born in Israeli territory. Like the desert fruit (sabra), this person is prickly and tough on the outside and sweet and soft in the inside.

authority, defy them, criticize them, and do not respect them outside of the school framework. A research study conducted about the attitudes of students towards the authority of the parents and the teachers found evidence and reinforcement of these Israeli characteristics (Meisles, 2005).

The Dimension of Individualism. In this dimension, Israel was found in the 28th place out of 53 countries, at the ranking of 54 in a range of 6-91. In other words, on the continuum between the individual's independence or commitment to the collective, the Israeli culture is more collective. A prominent expression was found in the research work of Katriel (1999) on the phenomenon of the class cohesion, which emphasizes the collective aspect and the way of the school to assemble individuals into one unified unit. This phenomenon indicates the importance of the 'togetherness' in Israeli society and is expressed also in the teacher's reference to the student as a part of the group and not as an independent individual.

However, in the cross-checking between the dimension of the attitude towards authority and the dimension of individualism, Hofstede (2005) found that many countries ranked high in the dimension of obedience to authority were ranked low in the dimension of individualism. In other words, cultures that regard the obedience to authority as an important trait attribute less importance to the autonomy or independence of the individual. In Israel, a unique combination was found of a disrespectful attitude to authority and relatively high importance to the collective. An expression of this unique Israeli combination is supported in a research conducted by Forman (1994), which indicates that in the kindergartens in Israel two conflicting and contradictory cultural messages are conveyed. On the one hand, there is the cultivation of values of submission and obedience to group dictates in collective events, and on the other hand, there is the cultivation of the

assertiveness, initiative, and spontaneity of the individual. This approach can explain events of the blurring of the border between assertiveness and aggression, contempt of the rights of others, and violence among children.

Dimension of Masculinity/Femininity. In this dimension, Israel was ranked in the 40th place out of 74 countries, at the rank of 47 in a range of 5-110. The meaning is that on the continuum between adherence to a gender division of roles and aspiration for achievement and acceptance and tolerance of others Israeli culture is found in the middle. In the crosschecking of this dimension with the dimension of the obedience to authority Israel was ranked in an intermediate ranking (in the 40th place) in masculinity-femininity and at a low place (73) in obedience to authority. Hofstede argued that this finding reflects the lack of requirement for obedience from children in Israel. Children learn through the personal example of the parents and not through obedience to them, and fathers and mothers constitute an example of the relative equality of the sex roles in the family, as found in the research of Meisles (2005).

Dimension of Avoidance of Ambiguity. In this dimension, Israel was ranked in the 28th place of 74 countries in a ranking from a range of 8-112. This ranking was considered high. In other words, on a continuum between tolerance and ambiguity and acceptance of the unknown and the need to control reality and structure it, Israeli culture is closer to the need to control ambiguity. An expression of this dimension, according to Hofstede, is aggressiveness, tension, speaking while raising hands, raising the voice, and banging the table. These behaviors were observed in the kindergarten (Forman, 1994), but also in other areas of life. For instance, in the analysis of the phenomenon of the “depend on”, Kamir (1999) shows how we produce situations of ambiguity so that we can control them – like leaving late, which justifies driving above the permitted speed,

which produces lack of quiet and lack order on the road. Alternatively, the concept of the “sucker” explains the ambiguity created when all people want to reach their objectives but without maintaining the norms and rules, so as not be suckers (Almog, 2006). These characteristics are conveyed in a constellation of rituals through different agents of socialization.

5. Rituals as Reflecting the National Culture in the Education System

The educational system is one of the main and most effective arenas for the shaping of the national culture. Thus, through the educational system, the State establishes the national identity of its citizens and ensures their commitment to it (Lomsky-Feder, 2003). The studies in the school are a “rite de passage”, with many rituals and symbolic customs (McLaren, 1993). These rituals represent social structures that grow from the cultural or political mediation of the agents of socialization (Turner, 1969).

The school rituals have considerable importance in the establishment of the national collective identity, in the examination of “know where you came from and where you are going”. In the school, many rituals are held to indicate a religious or national holiday, the morning parade, the singing of the anthem, the distribution of report cards, the after meal grace prayer, and so on. These rituals illustrate to the young people the important values in the culture. Meisles (2005) maintains that the problems of authority that parents and teachers encounter have an explanation that derives from a unique characteristic of Israeli culture, which is expressed in the dual messages about the expectation for obedience on the part of the authority figures. Meisles (2009) further adds that the homework given in the schools in Israel train the students for disobedience and the violation of regulations and laws without being punished. The violation of the regulations and

laws is perceived in Israeli culture as “wise” and not being a “sucker” (Meisles, 2009). Katriel (1999), in her reference to the phenomenon of the formation of the Israeli school class, maintains there is a cultural explanation, according to which the “formation” notes a cultural outlook about the structure of the society and the nature of social relations and includes the abstract of famous Israeli “togetherness”. Foreman (1994) found in her research that two contradictory cultural messages are presented in parallel: values of submission and obedience to group dictates are cultivated, while assertive behaviors are encouraged.

Like the research studies that propose cultural explanations of different phenomena, this research, too, will examine informal rituals, the morning meeting ritual and the welcoming ritual, through the prism of Israeli culture on the basis of the five dimensions of Hofstede (2005). In the two rituals there are processes of socialization and they are defined as rituals of ‘*communitas*’, which are characterized by the active involvement of the masses, spontaneity, lack of formality, permissiveness, diversity, and removal of class barriers (Turner, 1969, 1974). Thus, for example, the meeting ritual in the airport in Israel is characterized as a reflection of the Israeli sense of family. The airport constitutes an introduction experience (for the tourist) and a reminder (for the Israeli) of the “infectious” Israeli experience. This ritual has become one of the identifying marks of the Ben Gurion Airport and a fascinating anthropological reflection of a number of characteristics of Israeliness: a warm family relationship, lack of order, impatience and limited ability of restraint, willingness to express emotions in public, crowdedness that appears when landing on the tribe’s land, and a tribe is a crowded and warm place (Almog, 1994; Levy, 1994; Serena, 2005).

The research literature lacks reference to these rituals and the aim of the present research study is to address this lack and to respond to two questions:

1. How do the ritual of the entrance to the school and the ritual of the welcome occur?
2. How are the values and symbols of Israeli culture expressed in these rituals?

6. Research Methodology

6.1. Research Approach

The research approach is based on the qualitative-ethnographic approach. The research studies the behavior of people in their natural environment and not under laboratory conditions (Sabar Ben Yehoshua, 2001). The research data originates from observations and describes events and occurrences. The analysis of the data does not include the participants' interpretation of the event, since these are daily and routine rituals, the existence of which the participants are not at all aware (Sabar Ben Yehoshua, 1990). Therefore, for the purpose of the research study, I followed up after the norms and values of the people being observed who behaved naturally and with lack of awareness of the situation (Sabar Ben Yehoshua, 1990). I gave the observed behaviors interpretation based on previous theoretical knowledge (Genzuk, 2003) and their lack of the ability to respond gave me precedence over their opinions.

6.2. Research Sites and Research Population

The research study was conducted in Beersheva, in two state elementary schools where there are Young Divisions². In each one of the schools there are about seven hundred students and a teaching staff of about fifty teachers. The

² The Young Division is an educational setting for kindergarten and first grade children in the elementary school.

assumption is that the first years of the students in the school constitute the start of the socialization for the social life and therefore the components of the ritual in this period will be more prominent.

The two schools serve a region where there lives a population from a middle and middle-upper class, which tends to act according to the rules of the dominant culture in Israeli society (Etzioni-HaLevy, 1999; Kimmerling, 2001). The schools were chosen because of the similarity in their characteristics and because they were normative schools and as such they can also represent the majority of the schools in the city and reflect the main values of the culture.

All the observations were held in two main places in the schools and at special times. The first is the entry into the school in the morning before the start of the school day as a time that represents the rituals of meetings between the different populations, and the second is the school secretary office as representing the place that welcomes guests, the formal public space in which it is possible to encounter the different relationships that are held between the communities inside and outside of the school. For the purpose of the research study, two rituals, which are daily rituals, were defined: the morning meeting ritual and the welcoming ritual. These rituals are held daily and are different in their everyday existence from other rituals that are held at regular times and rituals that revolve around the calendar, such as holidays and special days.

Daily Morning Meeting Ritual. This includes the meeting of the parents and the students with the school staff every day. The relevant space is from the entry gate to the school to the entry into the classes: the entry space in the school yard, the space at the entry of the school, the open spaces outside of the classes, etc. The range of time of the ritual is from the opening of the school gates (7:30)

until the entry bell into the classes (8:00). The ritual includes a wide range of interactions between teachers, parents, and students.

Welcoming to the School Ritual. This addresses the encounter between the school and the community of guests that comes to it. This is the encounter of guest and host, when the host is the official institution. The ritual exists in the space of the entry into the school secretary office and in the space of the entire secretary office, and it can exist throughout all the hours of the day, also on vacation days during which the school secretary office works as usual. The guests from the outside are welcomed, and by the school representative – the secretary of the school.

6.3. Research Instrument – Observation

In this research study, focused observations were held. The focused observation, also called a non-participative observation, has four main objectives. It enables concise and focused information to be obtained about the chosen subject, eases the organization and analysis of the material, enables comparison between different behaviors from a distant perspective (of the researcher), and it is intended to describe only, or primarily, issues that were decided upon ahead of time (Sabar Ben Yehoshua, 1997). I conducted all the observations by myself and during them I was careful to describe all the occurrences that happened with reference to the following factors: spoken speech, body language, time, and physical space. The information was recorded clearly and accurately (Ashkenazi, 1986).

I conducted a non-participative observation, or in other words, the level of my involvement in what occurs was the lowest as an external observer (Sabar Ben Yehoshua, 1990). However, it is important to note three pieces of data in this

context. First, some of the participants knew me as a school principal, and therefore there was a certain degree of participation in the observation. My presence inspired questions also among those who did not know me and those who asked were told that I am a principal who is conducting a research study. Second, the fact that I am a researcher who is a non-participative observer gave me preference over the respondents. The respondents' lack of awareness of the existence of the research denied me the possibility of obtaining from the feedback or the interpretation of what occurs, when I am giving the behaviors observed interpretation based on previous theoretical knowledge (Genzuk, 2003). The origin of the previous knowledge lies in the fact that I am a part of the education system and in my in-depth knowledge of it from my many years of work as a teacher and principal. Third, although my viewpoint as a researcher was distant and uninvolved in the occurrence itself, the perspective still influenced the collection of the data (Sabar Ben Yehoshua, 1990).

6.4. Data Collection

In the two elementary schools, thirty observations were held, fifteen observations in each elementary school: five observations in the morning in the entry into the school and the entry into the Young Division, five observations at the end of the day in the same areas, and five observations in the area of the secretary office of the school. The collection of the data was separate for every ritual.

6.5. Method of Analysis

In the first stage, I held an observation with the goal to examine the stages of the ritual, as they were defined by Katriel (1994). These stages include seven main components: description, topic, goals, participants, circumstances,

atmosphere, and organization of the continuum. These stages define a “ritual” as a symbolic action with the role to express and re-confirm the attitude of the members of one culture to one of the sacred or indisputable values of their culture. The information collected from the observations included diverse verbal and nonverbal interactions of all the participants – students, teachers, and parents. Methodical repetition of these interactions created the framework of the ritual in its seven components. Interactions and other communicative expressions of the welcoming ritual and the morning meeting ritual served the anthropological research according to the perception of Geerts (1990), who maintained that they expressed patterns of human experience and meanings as they are perceived by the representatives of society, at a certain period of time. In the research, I was the representative of society.

The information collected on the basis of prominent interactions helped define an initial framework for the two rituals and enabled the proposal of an initial interpretation of the values of Israeli culture that were reflected in them. In the second stage, I continued to collect data in parallel to their analysis on the basis of professional literature on the topic of Israeli culture and the conceptual framework of Hofstede (1997, 2005) that presents the characteristics of national culture in general and the characteristics of Israeli culture in comparison to other cultures.

For this purpose, I refined from the observations terms and generalizations, statements and behaviors, which were examined in the constant comparison to the cumulative data and the research literature. On the basis of this information, I analyzed themes, categories, and main components that arose in the observations and defined the ritual structure, in its different parts and its daily cycle. In the process of the analysis I identified patterns and pointed out meanings

and interpretations of behaviors and accordingly the “ritual” was written, which is a description of the phenomenon as a part of Israeli culture, in combination with conceptualizations and terms from the world of literature with the goal of achieving a general understanding of the topic. The analysis of the rituals was based on content analysis and its interpretation (Sabar Ben Yehoshua, 1997). The process of content analysis and attribution of meaning was based on the division into components or smaller units of analysis (Shkedi, 2003).

The building blocks in this research study are components of the ritual, but they are not enough in themselves to create the whole structure. The building blocks were collected into a whole to create an interpretable structure that has meaning for the analyzed information (Shkedi, 2003). The analysis and interpretation of the data were performed, as aforementioned, according to the four original dimensions of Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), as follows:

- Masculinity and femininity. I compared between fathers and mothers in the following topics: number who bring the children in the morning to the school, the manner of reference to the teachers, the level of interest, the teachers’ response, and the topics of conversation. In addition, I examined the teachers’ response to boys as opposed to girls.
- Attitude towards authority. I examined the degree of the parents’ support of their children as opposed to their support of teachers, the physical and verbal distance between the teacher and the parent and between the student and the teacher, expressions of intimacy and closeness, whether the students are required to be obedient and how they address disobedience. In addition, I addressed the parents’ perception of the authority of the educational staff in the school in the morning meetings. How do the parents turn to the teachers? What is the parents’ tone of voice? Does the parents’ manner of reference to the teachers indicate the preservation of

the teachers' authority – or the opposite? What arises in these conversations and are they planned? How does the educational staff respond? Does the response contribute to the teachers' authority – or the opposite?

- Collectivism-individualism. I studied the topics typical of conversations between teachers and students and between teachers and parents and I examined whether in the morning meetings and welcoming meetings they talk about general or personal issues, assuming that the topics are an expression of collectivism or individualism.
- Avoidance of ambiguity. I researched the attitude towards time and space, for instance, whether there are conversations without prior coordination between parents and teachers, whether parents ask questions about the school arrangements, whether the conversations are held calmly or in a pressured manner, in a comfortable or aggressive atmosphere, the strength of the voice, the hand movements, the body language of the speakers, etc.

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