

CZU: 37.016:82-93(111)

DOI: 10.36120/2587-3636.v38i4.145-155

## **NURTURING EMPATHY AND VALUES THROUGH STORIES WHILE USING THE DIDACTIC POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

**Abuo Afash HODA**, Teacher, PhD student

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5597-0942>

Kee Bear Sheva College, Israel

**Abstract.** This study explores the significance of children's literature as a tool for fostering learning and social skills, focusing on its role in shaping cognitive, emotional, and social development. Through a qualitative methodology involving semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with 35 teachers, the research identifies key factors influencing the selection of literary texts. These factors include thematic universality, cultural relevance, narrative structure, pedagogical integration, and theoretical frameworks. Findings show that thematic universality and cultural relevance are most emphasized by educators and teachers, while integration with pedagogy and theoretical frameworks are less frequently prioritized. The study emphasizes the transformative potential of literature in building values such as empathy, critical thinking, and intercultural competence, offering practical recommendations for selecting and teaching literary texts to maximize their didactic impact.

**Keywords:** children's literature, thematic universality, cultural relevance, narrative structure, pedagogy integration, moral development.

## **CULTIVAREA EMPATIEI ȘI A VALORILOR PRIN POVEȘTI UTILIZÂND POTENȚIALUL DIDACTIC AL LITERATURII PENTRU COPII**

**Rezumat.** Acest studiu explorează semnificația literaturii pentru copii ca instrument pentru dezvoltarea abilităților de învățare și comunicare socială, concentrându-se pe rolul său în modelarea dezvoltării cognitive, emoționale și sociale. Printr-o metodologie care a inclus interviuri semi-structurate și observații în clasă cu 35 de profesori, cercetarea identifică factorii principali care influențează selecția textelor literare. Acești factori includ universalitatea tematică, relevanța culturală, structura narativă, integrarea pedagogică și abordarea teoretică. Rezultatele arată că universalitatea tematică și relevanța culturală sunt cele mai accentuate de educatori și profesori, în timp ce integrarea cu pedagogia și abordarea teoretică sunt mai puțin prioritizate. Studiul subliniază potențialul transformator al literaturii în construirea valorilor precum empatia, gândirea critică și competența interculturală, oferind recomandări practice pentru selectarea și predarea textelor literare pentru a crește impactul lor didactic.

**Cuvinte cheie:** literatura pentru copii, universalitate tematică, relevanță culturală, structură narativă, integrare pedagogică, dezvoltare morală.

The significance of children's literature lies not only in its ability to entertain but also in its capacity to nurture empathy, critical thinking, and self-awareness. Stories rooted in universal themes of kindness, fairness, and perseverance contribute to moral and ethical development, while tales that explore group dynamics, diversity, and intergroup relationships promote cultural sensitivity and social cohesion. By reflecting societal values and addressing complex issues such as identity, conflict, and tolerance, children's literature shapes the perceptions and attitudes of future generations.

Additionally, the didactic nature of children's literature allows it to be a tool for instilling knowledge and fostering value systems that align with cultural and educational priorities. Theories like Social Identity Theory, Schwartz's Theory of Values, and Kohlberg's Moral Cognitive Development emphasize how literature aids in building *self-concept, moral reasoning, and social understanding*. Whether by teaching the importance of inclusivity, cultivating critical thinking, or encouraging moral decision-making, children's literature is integral to the intellectual and emotional development of young readers.

In essence, children's literature is more than a collection of stories; it is a foundational element in the formation of personal identity, societal belonging, and ethical frameworks. It equips children with the tools to navigate the complexities of life, fostering not only academic and intellectual growth but also emotional resilience and cultural awareness. As such, its role in shaping the minds and values of the next generation cannot be overstated.

theories regarding the impact of literature on children's values, drawn from the provided text, include:

### 1. **Social Identity Theory (SIT)**

This theory explains how group identity impacts self-perception and societal interactions. SIT asserts that individuals derive a significant part of their self-esteem and worldview from their perception of group belonging. In children's literature, SIT emphasizes how narratives shape intergroup relations, stereotypes, and prejudices. For example, the portrayal of "ingroup" and "outgroup" dynamics in Israeli children's literature contributes to shaping children's perceptions of societal conflicts, such as the Israeli-Arab conflict. By fostering ingroup favoritism and stereotyping, literature can perpetuate intergroup tensions or challenge existing biases by offering balanced perspectives. Through the lens of SIT, literature acts as a political socializing agent, influencing attitudes toward minorities, tolerance, and even political affiliations during early adolescence.

### 2. **Schwartz's Theory of Values**

Schwartz's theory categorizes values into ten motivational domains, such as power, achievement, hedonism, self-direction, universalism, and tradition. These values serve as guiding principles for individuals, rooted in universal needs: biological survival, social interaction, and societal well-being. Children's literature incorporating Schwartz's framework can emphasize particular value domains—such as kindness, conformity, or security—depending on cultural or educational goals. For instance, Israeli literature has utilized Schwartz's theory to instill societal values aligned with national identity or broader universal principles. By reflecting and reinforcing these values, literature shapes children's moral and emotional development, encouraging behaviors aligned with individual, group, or societal aspirations.

### 3. Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Cognitive Development

Central to Arabic literature in Israel, this theory outlines six stages of moral development across three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Children's literature serves as a medium to encourage moral reasoning aligned with societal expectations. For example, at the pre-conventional level, stories may emphasize obedience to rules and avoidance of punishment, while at the conventional level, literature promotes social conformity and interpersonal relationships. This approach has been particularly influential in Arabic children's literature, fostering moral and academic growth while reflecting cultural and religious contexts. Kohlberg's framework demonstrates how literature can cultivate moral values and guide children through progressive stages of ethical reasoning.

#### Impact of Theories on Children's Values

- ***Social Identity Theory.*** Shapes group perceptions, intergroup relationships, and societal attitudes. It reinforces belonging and identity but can also perpetuate stereotypes and biases if not critically framed.

- ***Schwartz's Theory.*** Offers a structured approach to instilling diverse values, allowing literature to align with specific cultural or universal goals.

- ***Kohlberg's Theory.*** Encourages moral reasoning and ethical growth, fostering a gradual transition from self-centered to society-centered thinking.

These theories underscore the transformative role of literature in developing children's social, moral, and personal values, contributing significantly to societal and cultural education.

#### Literature, Citizenship, and Education in a Multicultural Society

The Case of Israel reveal the interplay between education, literature, and societal values is a cornerstone in shaping democratic citizenship, particularly in societies marked by cultural, national, and social heterogeneity. Israel provides a compelling case study due to its deeply divided society, where the challenges of fostering national unity, democratic values, and shared civic identity coexist with multicultural dynamics and historical narratives [2].

#### Tensions and Challenges in Developing Civic Identity

Studies have shown that creating an affinity with one's country is more challenging for national and ethnic minorities than for members of dominant groups. This difficulty is amplified in Israel, a society deeply divided along religious, ethnic, political, and socio-economic lines [8, 11]. The presence of diverse immigrant groups has created a "vertical mosaic" in which ethnic and socio-economic divisions merge with tensions between established Israelis and recent arrivals. These divisions, along with the enduring Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the living memory of the Holocaust, shape a political culture that often operates under a sense of existential threat [8].

In such a context, education is expected to bridge these societal gaps. Schools are tasked with providing learning environments that promote democratic values, build shared civic identities, and address the divisions within Israeli society [8, 11]. Yet, the effectiveness of education in achieving these goals is a subject of ongoing debate.

### **The Rise of Multiculturalism and New Educational Goals**

By the mid-1980s, Israel began to embrace multiculturalism more explicitly. As the country grew economically and socially stronger, educational policies started to reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of its population. Literature began to include stories featuring children of Ethiopian and Eastern origins, as well as Arab children, though interactions between Jewish and Arab narratives remained limited [10].

This shift highlighted the dual role of education in Israel: fostering a unified Jewish national identity while acknowledging the multicultural fabric of its society. Literature became a means of introducing children to the cultural diversity within Israel, promoting understanding and coexistence. However, challenges persist in achieving genuine integration, as historical and societal tensions continue to influence the educational narrative.

### **Literature as a Tool for Building Citizenship**

Literature remains a vital tool in Israeli education, not only for language development but also for shaping the social and moral fabric of young citizens. The early inclusion of literature in education helps children develop linguistic skills, cultural awareness, and empathy, all of which are foundational to democratic participation. By engaging with narratives that reflect the complexities of Israeli society, children are encouraged to think critically about issues of identity, conflict, and coexistence.

Educational literature in Israel reflects two competing but interconnected goals: preserving a strong Jewish national identity and fostering the values of tolerance and democracy. The balance between these objectives continues to shape the educational landscape, as educators and policymakers strive to adapt to the evolving needs of a diverse and dynamic society [3,4,8].

The role of literature in Israeli education exemplifies its potential as a tool for fostering learning, citizenship, and social cohesion in a multicultural society. While the emphasis on Zionist values and collective identity remains strong, the inclusion of multicultural narratives signals a growing recognition of diversity within Israeli society. By integrating literature into education, Israel seeks to address the challenges of division and create a generation equipped with the knowledge, values, and empathy necessary for democratic citizenship in a deeply divided yet interconnected world [8].

### **The Didactics of Literary Texts in children's formation**

The didactics of literary texts refers to their educational and instructional potential, particularly in shaping the intellectual, emotional, and social development of children.

Literary texts, through their thematic richness and narrative complexity, serve as powerful tools for nurturing a wide array of skills and values, contributing significantly to the holistic formation of young minds [1].

The concept of literature has evolved significantly over time, shaped by dynamic developments in literary research and the philosophy of art. Children's literature, in particular, has emerged as a distinct and vital genre that not only entertains but also educates, instills values, and contributes to the holistic development of children. As Reingold and Bartz [9] note, children's literature encompasses all works designed for or adapted to young audiences, blending simplicity in language, themes that resonate with children's experiences, and often, an underlying didactic purpose.

### **The Educational Value of Children's Literature**

Children's literature has dual objectives: *aesthetic engagement and the transmission of knowledge and values*. From infancy to early adolescence, literary texts introduce children to diverse cultures, societal norms, and moral frameworks, fostering intellectual, emotional, and social growth. As Hayek [56] asserts, literature must correspond to the child's emotional and spiritual development while catering to their evolving needs, such as emotional security, intellectual enrichment, and a sense of belonging.

The **didactic potential of literature** lies in its ability to serve as both a mirror and a lamp-reflecting societal values while illuminating paths for personal growth and social integration. Early childhood literature, whether read aloud by adults or self-read, provides children with tools to navigate their emotional and social worlds. It fosters a sense of catharsis, offers substitutes for reality, and legitimizes the expression of mental and emotional experiences [8, 10].

### **Approaches to Teaching Literature**

Two dominant approaches frame the teaching of literature:

1. **Intrinsic Literary Approach:** Focuses on the artistic and aesthetic goals of literature, emphasizing its creative and imaginative dimensions [95]. This perspective views literature as an independent art form, not necessarily tied to educational objectives.

2. **Extrinsic Social Approach:** Sees literature as deeply intertwined with societal events and values, influenced by dynamic processes such as cultural shifts and philosophical trends [7]. This approach prioritizes literature's role in conveying moral, cultural, and educational messages.

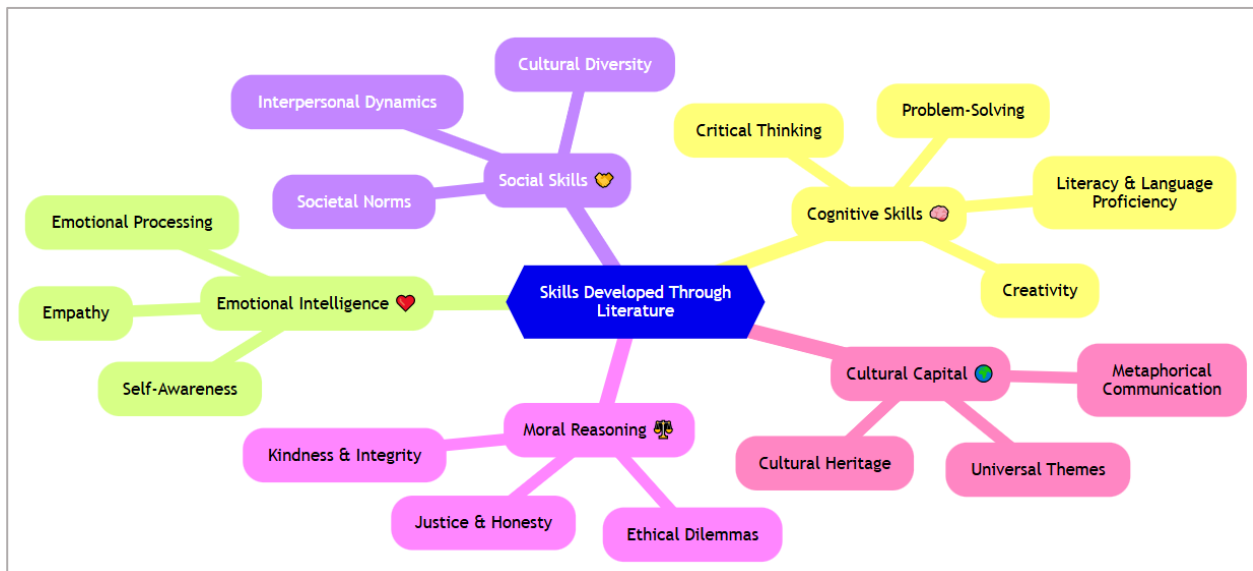
A hybrid approach combines these perspectives, using literary texts to foster both aesthetic appreciation and educational value. As highlighted by Hayek [4], literature's uniqueness lies in its ability to open pathways for education, human interaction, and social design.

### **Skills Developed Through Literature**

Children's literature contributes significantly to the development of various skills:

1. **Cognitive Skills.** Enhances literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. Stories encourage children to interpret, analyze, and synthesize information, shaping their intellectual development [1, 4, 2]. The most important skills that have to be mentioned are those cognitive. Literary texts engage children in critical thinking, problem-solving, and comprehension. By interpreting stories, analyzing characters, and exploring themes, children learn to evaluate situations, make connections, and draw conclusions. Exposure to diverse genres enhances vocabulary, language proficiency, and literacy. Literature sparks creativity by encouraging children to visualize settings, imagine alternative endings, or even create their own stories. This imaginative engagement supports cognitive flexibility and innovative thinking.

2. **Emotional Intelligence.** Through relatable characters and situations, literature fosters empathy, self-awareness, and the ability to process emotions. Stories allow children to step into the shoes of characters, fostering empathy and emotional intelligence. They learn to recognize and process emotions, develop compassion for others, and understand the complexities of human experiences.



**Figure 1. Skills and values developed through literature**

3. **Social Skills.** Encourages understanding of interpersonal dynamics, cultural diversity, and societal norms, building a foundation for social participation and collaboration. Literature introduces children to different cultures, traditions, and historical contexts. It helps them appreciate diversity, build intercultural competence, and challenge stereotypes, preparing them for participation in a globalized world.

4. **Moral Reasoning.** Introduces ethical dilemmas and value-based decision-making, aligning with frameworks like Kohlberg's theory of moral development. By presenting moral dilemmas and ethical challenges, literary texts encourage children to reflect on values such as justice, honesty, and kindness. This aligns with theories like Kohlberg's moral development and Schwartz's value framework, which emphasize the role of narrative in shaping ethical decision-making.

5. ***Cultural Capital***. Provides children with knowledge of their own cultural heritage and exposure to universal human themes, fostering a shared language for cultural and metaphorical communication [1, 12].

### **Literature as a Reflection and Socializer**

Toher [2] and other sociologists of literature propose the "**reflection theory**," which posits that literature acts as both a mirror and a socializer. It reflects societal structures, values, and norms while influencing children's preferences and attitudes. Early exposure to literature, particularly in preschool, shapes children's worldviews and establishes foundational thinking patterns. The dual role of literature as a cultural indicator and value socializer underscores its transformative potential.

### **The Role of Adults in Children's Literature**

Children's literature is created and curated by adults, who decide what is appropriate and desirable for young readers. Writers consciously choose themes that align with societal norms and educational objectives, while educators and parents ensure that children are exposed to texts that correspond to their developmental needs and cultural context. This responsibility highlights the role of literature in bridging the gap between adult intentions and children's intellectual and emotional growth.

### **The Unique Context of Israeli Education**

In Israel, the education system is divided into Jewish and Arab schools, each with distinct cultural and linguistic traditions. Literature in these settings plays a pivotal role in shaping children's intelligence, literacy, social behavior, and values. According to [8], the foundations laid during early childhood have a lasting impact on academic success and social involvement. Reading in preschool fosters cultural capital, contributing to long-term educational achievements.

### **Perspectives on Literature as an Educational Tool**

Literature serves as a multi-vocal and multicultural phenomenon, embodying diverse worldviews and values. It educates children not only in shared societal norms but also in critical thinking, openness, and empathy. The integration of aesthetic and educational experiences allows literature to function as a bridge between personal growth and social responsibility [1, 10].

Children's literature is more than a means of entertainment; it is a powerful tool for developing learning and social skills. By fostering cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence, and moral reasoning, literature equips children to navigate complex social landscapes and contribute meaningfully to society. Its dual role as a cultural reflection and an agent of socialization underscores its importance in shaping future generations. The didactics of literature offer vast potential for educators, emphasizing the transformative power of stories in nurturing empathetic, knowledgeable, and socially conscious individuals.

## Methodology

We were curious to discover what are the main factors that drive teachers in choosing the literary texts. In this context a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interview and classroom observations was used to gather data. Teachers were asked questions in interviews, and their use of literary texts were observed in classroom settings to capture real-world applications. At the interview participated teachers from diverse educational contexts (e.g., urban, rural, multicultural) and teaching various age groups were included to ensure a broad range of insights. Regarding observation, we tried to observe how teachers implement literary texts in their lessons, focusing on the selected factors. Also, we have analyzed the literary texts used by teachers to identify recurring themes, cultural relevance, narrative styles, and theoretical alignment. So, the *primary aim* of this study was to explore how literary texts can be used as a didactic tool to develop learning and social skills in children. The study seeks to understand how themes, cultural relevance, narrative styles, pedagogical integration, and theoretical frameworks influence the educational impact of literature in classrooms.

The questions involved in the interview were related to thematic universality, contextual relevance, narrative structure and styles, used strategies, theoretical framework:

- *What themes do you find most effective in engaging children through literary texts, and why?*
- *How do you select texts that reflect the cultural or social realities of your students?*
- *What types of narrative structures and language complexity work best for your students' engagement and learning?*
- *What teaching strategies do you use to connect literary texts to your lessons?*
- *How do you ensure the stories you use contribute to children's moral or social development?*

It was found that the answer to the one of our objectives **to identify the key factors** contributing to the didactic potential of literary texts, including thematic universality, contextual theme, narration style, and pedagogical strategies.

**Table. 1 Factors influencing the selection of literary texts by teachers**

Nr.	Factors	Selection counts
1.	Thematic universality	27
2.	Cultural and contextual relevance	28
3.	Narrative structure and style	26
4.	Integration with pedagogy	16
5.	Theoretical frameworks	11

According to the interview answers, classroom observation and document analysis the following factors contributing to the discovery of didactics in literary texts:



1. **Thematic universality.** Themes such as friendship, courage, and identity resonate universally, allowing educators to connect with children on multiple levels. Identifying and leveraging these themes enhances the didactic potential of literary texts.

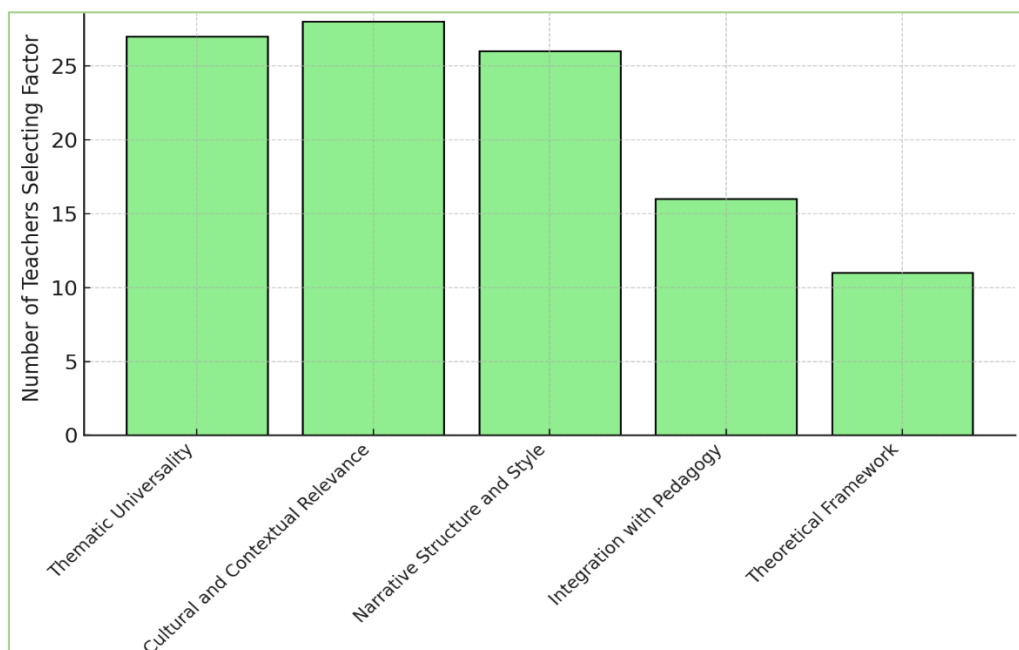
2. **Cultural and contextual relevance.** Selecting texts that reflect the cultural, historical, or social realities of the children ensures relatability and relevance. This fosters a deeper connection to the material and encourages critical engagement.

3. **Narrative structure and style.** The complexity of plots, character development, and use of language significantly contribute to the educational value of literary texts. Simple narratives may focus on foundational skills, while layered stories challenge advanced reasoning and interpretation.

4. **Integration with pedagogy.** The effectiveness of literary texts depends on their integration into teaching strategies. Interactive activities such as role-playing, group discussions, and creative writing amplify their didactic impact.

5. **Theoretical frameworks.** Drawing on established theories such as Social Identity Theory or Kohlberg's stages of moral development helps educators understand how children interpret stories and internalize their messages.

The diagram highlights the prominence of factors like thematic universality, cultural relevance, and narrative structure, while showing less emphasis on pedagogy integration and theoretical frameworks.



**Figure 2. Factors influencing the selection of literary texts by teachers**

Based on the findings, practical recommendations will be developed to guide educators in selecting and teaching literature that fosters learning, critical thinking, and social skills in children. These recommendations will emphasize strategies for integrating culturally relevant themes, leveraging narrative complexity, and aligning teaching practices with developmental and moral frameworks.

In conclusion, children's literature is a powerful medium that goes beyond entertainment to nurture essential skills and values in young readers. This study highlights its transformative role in fostering cognitive development, emotional intelligence, and moral reasoning. Themes such as friendship, courage, and identity resonate universally, creating opportunities for deeper engagement and learning. The cultural and contextual relevance of texts enhances relatability, while complex narratives challenge children to think critically and creatively.

The findings indicate that while thematic universality and cultural relevance dominate teachers' selection of texts, the integration of literary works into pedagogical strategies and alignment with theoretical frameworks remain less used. Overcoming these gaps can increase literature's impact as a didactic tool. By bridging cultural divides and fostering empathy and tolerance, children's literature contributes significantly to shaping socially conscious and intellectually developed learners. As such, it remains an important element in education, offering vast potential for fostering a more inclusive and thoughtful future generation. Teachers are encouraged to use its multidimensional strengths, integrating both aesthetic and instructional approaches, to fully realize its educational promise.

## Bibliography

1. BUREA, S. Developing intercultural competence through literature in a multicultural framework. In: *Acta Et Commentationes Sciences of Education*, 37(3), 2024. ISSN 1857-0623 pp. 153-164. <https://doi.org/10.36120/2587-3636.v37i3.153-164>
2. CLAUDY, T., YONAN, Y. Relationships between the value system, attitudes and personal behavior and the level of religiosity among female teachers in Israel. In: *Studies in Education* (2-3), 2016. pp. 25-58.
3. COHEN, R. Values and Commitment: A Test of Schwartz's Human Values Theory Among Arab Teachers in Israel. In: *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 2010, 40, 8. pp. 1921–1947.
4. HASSUNA -Arafat, S. Mother-child activity in the Arab family while reading a book and its contribution to the child's literacy in preschool school and first grade. In: G. Russo-Zimet, G., M. Ziv M., Hayik R. Addressing Religious Diversity through Children's Literature: An "English as a Foreign Language" Classroom in Israel. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 17(2), 2015. pp. 92-106.
5. MALKAWI, H. The Maqasid value system and its educational manifestation. Amman: Islamic Thought Institute, 2020. pp. 44-167.
6. SCHOENBERG, D. *The literary adaptation from Kenab: a study of the work text by text*. Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015. pp. 122-147.

7. SCHWARTZ, S.H. Studying values: personal adventure future direction. In: *Journal of cross-cultural psychology* 42(2), 2019. pp. 307-319.
8. SHAPIRO, P. The role and place of Hebrew and Israeli children's literature in shaping children's sense of identity in elementary school. In: *Devarim* 3, 2016, pp. 205-207.
9. RHEINGOLD, R., BERETZ, L. Orthodox children's literature as a tool for ethnocentric education - stories about the subject of school as a case study. In: *Children's and Youth Literature*, 129, 2019. pp. 33-46.
10. ROSENTHAL, A. A comparative study of values in children's literature as a tool for early childhood values education, in state-religious, orthodox-independent, and Jewish-advanced education. In: *Children's and Youth Literature*, A (138), 2015. pp. 9-35.
11. WEISS, I. Values in Hebrew and Arabic books in the preschool curricula in Israel. In: *Educational Research and Theory*, Vol. 2(1), 2019. pp. 20- 49.
12. WITTE, E. H., STANCIU, A., BOEHNKE, K. A New Empirical Approach to Intercultural Comparisons of Value Preferences Based on Schwartz's Theory. In: *Frontiers in Psychology*, V (11) 1723. pp. 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01723>
13. ZHANG, Q., Zhao H. An Analytical Overview of Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development in College Moral Education in Mainland China. In: *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 5, 2017. pp. 151-160. [10.4236/jss.2017.58012](https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2017.58012)