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Identity and Motivation

*Exploring the Experiences of Educators of Other
Faiths in Early Childhood Jewish Education*

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Identity and Motivation: Exploring the Experiences of Educators of Other Faiths in Early Childhood Jewish Education

Orna Siegel

“Consciously, we teach what we know; unconsciously, we teach who we are” (Hamachek, 1998, p. 209). This insight is especially resonant in early childhood Jewish education (ECJE), where educators are not only responsible for children’s social-emotional and cognitive development, but also for nurturing nascent Jewish identity, practice, and belonging. Over the past several decades, the composition of the ECJE workforce has undergone a profound transformation. As recently as 2003, only 10% of ECJE teachers were non-Jewish (Fox et al., 2003), a dramatically smaller proportion than today’s nearly 50% (Rosov Consulting, 2025). Educational leaders warned that teachers lacking deep and personal Judaic knowledge could struggle to address children’s theological questions or create Hebrew-rich environments (Achituv, 2013; Fox et al., 2003; Handelman & Auerbach, 2000; Rosov Consulting, 2025). This marked shift over two decades reflects broader trends including early childhood staffing shortages, stagnant compensation, a proliferation of public pre-K alternatives, and a declining pipeline of Jewish educators (*Compensation and Credentialing in American Jewish Early Childhood Centers*, 2023; Goodman & Schaap, 2008; Moskowitz & Segal Handelman, 2003).

This meaningful change in the composition of the educator workforce raises critical questions about educators of other faiths (EOFs), defined here as individuals from all non-Jewish faith backgrounds, including those who are areligious. It also raises questions about what motivates them to support young children's Jewish identity development (Fox & Novak, 1997; Rosov Consulting, 2025). Without a clear understanding of their professional identities and motivation, ECJE leaders face challenges in creating effective recruitment, training, evaluation, and retention strategies tailored to this growing segment of their staff (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijgaard et al., 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This gap hinders the implementation of evidence-based approaches that promote workforce stability, deliver high-quality Jewish education, and cultivate cohesive communities centered on shared mission and values (Levisohn, 2013; McLean et al., 2021). Such communities not only provide strong educational and developmental experiences for children but also serve as vital spaces for Jewish learning and communal engagement, sustaining Jewish identity across generations (*Compensation and*

Credentialing in American Jewish Early Childhood Centers, 2023; Goodman & Schaap, 2008; Rosov Consulting, 2025).

Extensive research has established that educators continuously draw upon their personal identities, beliefs, emotions, historical backgrounds, and social contexts in shaping their pedagogical choices and interactions with students (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). In religious educational settings such as ECJE, motivation for teaching is often shaped by educators' commitment to faith values, cultural identity, and the spiritual development of students (Ladson-Billings, 2013; White, 2014). Religious educators consistently articulate a distinctive sense of purpose grounded in the transmission of tradition and the fostering of community belonging (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day & Gu, 2014). These forces sustain intrinsic motivation and resilience even amidst professional challenges (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017; White, 2014). However, much of this scholarship implicitly assumes educators who are cultural and religious insiders to the communities they serve, leaving less understood how these dynamics unfold for EOFs whose personal faith traditions differ from the Jewish environments in which they work.

Understanding how identity and motivation intersect for EOFs in ECJE is therefore essential for developing effective teacher recruitment, training, and retention strategies that not only support educators' professional growth but also ensure the vitality and authenticity of Jewish educational experiences for children. To address this critical need, the present study explores how EOFs construct and navigate their professional identities and motivation within ECJE settings, religious environments distinct from their own personal beliefs. It examines how EOFs reconcile these differences while meaningfully engaging with Judaic content and community expectations. Employing a qualitative case study design, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, this research focuses on educators who self-identify as confident and competent in teaching Judaic content. By integrating insights from Teacher Professional Identity (TPI) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the study offers a nuanced perspective on the intertwined nature of identity and motivation that shape EOFs' educational practice, resilience, and contributions to ECJE. Research shows the profound influence of educator identity and motivation on children's academic and cultural experiences, and highlights the importance of supportive professional environments for fostering educator commitment and

efficacy (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Generating evidence about EOFs' experiences is therefore essential for sustaining and advancing the mission of ECJE communities.

Literature Review

Teacher Professional Identity

Teacher Professional Identity (TPI) has become a central construct in educational research, providing critical insight into how educators perceive themselves, interpret their roles, and make pedagogical choices throughout their careers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). Despite its importance, the literature does not converge on a single, definitive understanding of TPI. Researchers describe it as “identity,” “teacher identity,” “professional identity,” or “self,” with definitions focusing on the integration or reconciliation of personal and professional selves (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004), constructions of self-understanding as an educator (White, 2014), perceptions shaped through relationships (Danielewicz, 2001), and occupational group membership (Androusou & Tsafos, 2018; Beijaard et al., 2004).

Current conceptions agree that TPI is not a static attribute but rather an evolving self-concept formed through the ongoing interplay between internal and external factors. Central to understanding TPI are five elements: agency, belief, context, emotion, and narrative. Agency describes the teacher's capacity to act intentionally and make professional decisions aligned with internal convictions and influenced by their environment (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Kouhpaenejad & Gholaminejad, 2014). Belief encompasses both deeply held personal values and professional philosophies, which inform instructional practice and classroom choices (Cross & Hong, 2009; Pajares, 1992). Emotion shapes and is shaped by experiences in teaching, reinforcing or undermining one's sense of professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Frijda & Mesquita, 2000). Context refers to the social, cultural, and institutional milieu, including organizational culture, leadership, and peer relationships, where TPI develops socio-constructively through teacher participation in school communities (Androusou & Tsafos, 2018; Murphy & Hall, 2008; Vygotskij, 1978). Finally, narrative/biography refers to the life stories and formative experiences, both personal and professional, that teachers use to make sense of their practice and justify their choices (Beijaard et al., 2004; Knowles, 1988). These elements do not act independently; rather, they are fluid and interconnected, resulting in

dynamic, often shifting sub-identities that may be harmonious or in tension depending on context.

Although TPI scholarship illuminates how teachers negotiate personal and professional boundaries in complex institutional contexts (Beijaard et al., 2004), it has not examined educators who train children in religious practice outside their own faith tradition. Specifically, it has not explored how educators facilitate students' lived identity formation within a religious or cultural tradition distinct from the educator's personal background. While Friedman's work (2023, 2024) focuses on Jewishly identifying Orthodox Bible teachers whose religious commitments do not fully align with the pluralistic ideologies of their schools, the present study examines educators of other faiths who are cultural and religious outsiders to Judaism while still being responsible for children's lived Jewish identity formation. This gap leaves unanswered how EOFs construct professional identities while teaching children to embody Judaic rituals, values, and practices, particularly when institutional expectations emphasize cultural insider status.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000, 2017, 2020), is a leading theory of human motivation that emphasizes the quality, not just the quantity, of motivation in work and learning settings (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020). At its core, SDT identifies three universal and basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as critical to fostering optimal motivation, engagement, and well-being.

Autonomy refers to the experience of volition and psychological freedom in one's actions. Autonomy is fulfilled when educators have meaningful choice and the sense that their teaching practices arise from their own values rather than mere compliance with external mandates. Research shows that autonomy-supportive environments enhance motivation, job satisfaction, and instructional effectiveness (Fradkin-Hayslip, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

Competence describes the need to feel effective and capable of mastering challenges. Teachers' sense of competence grows when they can develop expertise in content knowledge and pedagogical skills, receive constructive feedback, and observe the positive outcomes of their work. Such experiences reinforce professional self-efficacy and encourage deep engagement in teaching (Deci et al., 1991; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Murphy & Hall, 2008).

Relatedness expresses the human need to feel connected to and valued by others. For teachers, relatedness is cultivated through meaningful, trusting relationships with colleagues, students, families, and administrators. A sense of belonging within a school community is a powerful motivator and a key buffer against burnout (Klassen et al., 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

SDT asserts that when these needs are met, educators are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation (engaging in teaching for its own sake) or identified motivation (teaching because they value its goals). This results in higher engagement, resilience, and professional satisfaction (Deci et al., 1991; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). Conversely, when autonomy, competence, or relatedness are frustrated, motivation diminishes, potentially leading to disengagement or professional burnout (Fernet et al., 2012).

While SDT robustly predicts teacher engagement and resilience across diverse settings (Ryan & Deci, 2017), it has not been applied to faith-outsiders teaching unfamiliar religious content. This leaves unclear how cultural and religious dissonance affects all three psychological needs: autonomy (aligning personal values with institutional religious expectations), competence (developing authentic expertise in unfamiliar religious content and pedagogy), and relatedness (belonging in faith communities that may privilege Jewish communal insiders), particularly when educators must facilitate children's identity formation in a faith tradition outside their own.

An Integrated TPI-SDT Framework

TPI illuminates the evolving self-concept shaped by agency, belief, context, emotion, and narrative; SDT illuminates the motivational forces of autonomy, competence, and relatedness that sustain teaching practice. Together these frameworks offer complementary insight into the identity-motivation dynamics uniquely relevant to EOFs in ECJE, where educators navigate personal backgrounds, institutional religious expectations, and culturally specific classroom demands (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Sun et al., 2025; Weiß et al., 2023).

Gaps in the Literature

While TPI (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004) and SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) constitute robust research domains with extensive application to teachers, they have not been applied to faith-outsider educators teaching religious curriculum in early childhood. Beijaard et al. (2004) and Cross and Hong (2009) acknowledge practicing teacher contexts but note limited attention to cultural minority positioning where educators construct identities across competing religious/cultural boundaries. While Friedman's work (2023, 2024) focuses on

Jewishly identifying Orthodox Bible teachers whose religious commitments do not fully align with their schools' pluralistic ideologies, the present study examines EOFs who are cultural and religious outsiders to Judaism yet remain responsible for facilitating children's lived Jewish identity formation.

This creates a critical limitation for ECJE, where EOFs (~50% of the workforce; Rosov Consulting, 2025) uniquely teach children to become Jewish by mastering rituals, values, and identity practices outside their own faith tradition. Unlike typical religious studies classes where educators teach about religion as subject matter, ECJE demands that EOFs navigate institutional expectations of Jewish communal insider status while fostering this identity development. This study fills three specific gaps: (1) TPI and SDT application to faith-outsiders teaching religious identity formation; (2) identity-motivation dynamics when EOFs develop children's Jewish practice and identity; (3) practical recruitment and professional development strategies for ECJE's diverse workforce. By examining experienced EOFs in constructivist settings, this research tests these frameworks' applicability to culturally complex faith contexts.

This study investigates the professional identity and motivation of EOFs in ECJE by exploring several critical questions. Specifically, I examine:

1. How do educators of other faiths express their professional identity, and how does that intersect with their other identities more broadly?
2. How do educators of other faiths experience motivation, as defined by competence, autonomy, and relatedness in their Judaic classroom?
3. How do those two elements, identity and motivation, affect their choices in their Judaic classroom?

To address these questions, I identified, interviewed, and observed six EOFs in ECJE settings who self-identified as confident and competent teachers in both general and Jewish subject areas. Through an in-depth analysis of these data, consistent identity markers and meaningful forms of internal motivation emerged, shedding light on the reasons these educators choose to work in ECJE and facilitate young children's Jewish practice and identity formation.

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative case study, conducted January-March 2025, examined EOFs professional identity and motivation when teaching Judaic content in ECJE settings, addressing the three research questions outlined above. Aligned with ElevatEd's workforce evaluation (Rosov Consulting, 2025), this study employed interviews, observations, and documents from six purposefully selected educators across four U.S. cities to examine context-dependent identity and motivational dynamics in their work settings.

Methodological Framing

This research is framed as an interpretive, phenomenologically informed case study, emphasizing lived experience, thick description, iterative meaning-making, and researcher reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I am a Jewish educational leader with over 20 years of experience across Hillel, day schools, and ElevatEd. I recognize that this insider role in ECJE and my commitments to Jewish education shape how I approach this study, and I used ongoing reflexive practices to examine and manage the ways my assumptions could influence data collection and interpretation (Charmaz, 2014). Per IRB standards, participants provided written informed consent prior to participation, emphasizing voluntariness, confidentiality (pseudonyms, secure storage), withdrawal rights, and researcher-participant power dynamics (Stapleton & Mayock, 2023).

Participants and Sampling

Six full-time educators from distinct ECJE centers across four U.S. cities participated. Programs represented diverse institutional types (independent centers, synagogues, JCCs, and Jewish day schools). Participants were recruited through ElevatEd's Rosov Consulting survey, distributed to over 150 schools across twelve cities nationwide. Sampling criteria targeted educators who (a) self-identified as non-Jewish, (b) served as lead/co-teachers responsible for Judaic content, and (c) reported high competency (4–5/5 scale) in both general early childhood and Jewish education domains. Six eligible educators responded affirmatively to the invitation to join the study.

Although the broader ElevatEd survey spanned diverse program sizes, affiliations, and pedagogies, all six participants worked in progressive, constructivist programs describing their approach as “child-centered,” “child-directed,” “play-based,” and/or “Reggio-inspired,” pedagogical characteristics that emerged organically rather than as sampling criteria and reflect substantial constructivist adoption within the ElevatEd network. This sample thus illuminates

EOF experiences within a specific subset of ECJE programs. All participants were female (predominantly White, one multiracial), ages 27–38 ($M = 35$), with 3–20 years of early childhood experience (much in ECJE). Table 1 summarizes demographics, institutional types, and pedagogies.

Table 1:***Participant Demographics and Professional Backgrounds***

Name	City/Region	Age	Highest Ed.	Years in ECE (ECJE)	Jewish/ Org Type	Jewish Pedagogical Focus	Pedagogy	Student Population
Amanda	Mid-sized Eastern city	35–40	Master	6–10	JCC	Jewish values, holidays, customs	Reggio-inspired Play-based	~50% Jewish
Ella	Large Midwestern metro	35–40	Bachelor	11–20	Community	Jewish culture and tradition	Reggio-inspired Child-centered Play-based	Majority interfaith; some Jewish/non-Jewish
Jill	Mid-sized Eastern city	30–34	Master	11–20	Pluralistic day school	Rooted in Jewish teachings	Reggio-inspired	100% Jewish
Kate	Large Midwestern metro	35–40	Master	3–5	Reform	Jewish calendar as yearly guide	Play-based Reggio-inspired	100% Jewish
Mary	Large Northeastern metro	35–40	Bachelor	11–20 (3-5 in ECJE)	JCC	Jewish culture, traditions, values	Reggio-inspired	~50% Jewish
Sierra	Large Southern metro	25–29	Associate	6–10 (3-5 in ECJE)	Conservative	Shabbat, holidays, Torah, mitzvot, tzedakah	Play-based Child-directed	Majority non-Jewish; some interfaith; few Jewish families.

Data Collection

Each participant engaged in two in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by protocols designed to elicit reflections on professional identity, pedagogical decision-making, and motivation in the context of teaching Judaic content. The first interview explored background,

role perceptions, experiences navigating cultural and religious boundaries, professional development, and teaching philosophy (Appendix A). Interviews averaged one hour in length and were transcribed from video recordings with participant consent.

Following initial interviews, I conducted one classroom visit lasting approximately one hour per participant. These visits included observation of at least one planned Judaic lesson as well as informal Jewish moments embedded in daily routines and interactions, reflecting the reality that early childhood lessons are brief and interwoven with play and care. A follow-up interview (30-45 minutes), also video recorded and transcribed, focused on reflecting on the observed lesson, covering lesson planning, preparation, resources used, instructional choices, and perceptions of congruence or tension with personal beliefs (Appendix B).

Additionally, relevant curricular materials, along with information about the schools' educational philosophy, Jewish mission and values, and general details about the school population, were reviewed to contextualize participant experiences and triangulate data sources.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach, using TPI and SDT as guiding frameworks while allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts. I wrote analytic memos throughout all phases to map research decisions, extract meaning from data patterns, maintain analytic momentum through reflexivity, and document researcher perspectives (Charmaz, 2014).

All transcripts were read repeatedly for familiarization, followed by line-by-line open coding using participants' phrasing (initial codes $N = 472$), such as “love of Judaism,” “love research,” and “child-directed.” For each educator, I kept all materials (interviews, observations, documents, school context) together in a single project file to preserve case integrity.

Codes were sorted against TPI elements (agency, belief, context, emotion, narrative) and SDT needs (competence, autonomy, relatedness). Similar codes clustered into candidate themes (e.g., “joyful Judaism” from 22 excerpts across five participants). I examined code patterns across institutional types (JCC vs. day school) and pedagogies (Reggio-inspired vs. play-based), returning repeatedly to teacher materials and school documents for triangulation.

Table 2:

Sample Interview Coding

Data Excerpt - Participant Quote	Open Code	Axial Code	Theoretical Link
I'm ecstatic that she is now the director because her vision is amazing and completely aligns with mine...It's child-directed	Child-directed	Alignment	Belief
I love research, so anytime a holiday would come up... I'm going to research this.	Love research	Curiosity	Agency
I love seeing how the kids make profound connections. It's rewarding when they can carry those stories home and share them with their parents, who appreciate what their kids are learning.	Rewarding	Underlying values and purpose	Competence
We make challah on Fridays. That's huge... the kids are very joyful about it, like they're very excited about it. And I think that's probably what Jewish parents and would want out of this is just to have a love of Judaism.	Love of Judaism	Joyful Judaism	Emotion

Preliminary themes were reviewed by my fellowship director and three peer fellows ($N=4$ total), achieving 90% inter-rater agreement. Member checking occurred via email. Final themes represented stable patterns across multiple excerpts per participant.

Ethical Considerations

Given EOFs' potential vulnerability as religious and cultural outsiders teaching in faith-based settings, ethical rigor was prioritized throughout. Recognizing power dynamics inherent in my role as executive director of a national program connected to participants' schools and communities, and my identity as a Jewish educational leader and ECJE workforce advocate, all interactions were approached with deliberate respect and empathic attunement. Following the Structured Ethical Reflection (SER) framework (Stapleton & Mayock, 2023), ongoing self-reflection around values of respect, empathic attunement, critical inquiry, and cognitive flexibility guided data collection, analysis, and reporting, ensuring cultural sensitivity, attention to institutional dynamics, and faithful representation of participants' voices.

Findings

This section presents three salient and interconnected themes that emerged from the analysis of educator narratives and observations: Pedagogical Alignment; Openness and Curiosity; and Flexibility and Adaptability. These themes illuminate how EOFs construct and express their professional identities while sustaining motivation through key elements of competence, autonomy, and relatedness within their Judaic classrooms. The first theme, Pedagogical Alignment, highlights educators' intentional choice of learning environments that reflect their core beliefs about education, child development, and values. The second finding, Openness and Curiosity, characterizes the stance educators adopt toward teaching and learning, and finally, Flexibility and Adaptability capture the practical skills that enable EOFs to navigate pluralism and complexity in culturally diverse, Jewish classrooms. While each theme is explored separately, they are deeply connected, providing a comprehensive understanding of how EOFs negotiate identity and motivation within ECJE settings.

Participant Portraits

To ground the thematic findings, brief portraits of each educator follow, illustrating how EOFs understand and position their religious identities and professional identities in textured ways that intersect with Pedagogical Alignment; Openness and Curiosity; and Flexibility and Adaptability. These six educators worked across diverse institutional types (including independent centers, JCCs, synagogues, and day schools) all within centers that employed constructivist pedagogies ("child-centered," "child-directed," "play-based," "Reggio-inspired"). This pedagogical approach reflects a broader shift in ECJE toward constructivist models grounded in the work of Dewey and Piaget (Dewey, 1997; Muller et al., 2023; Nucci, 2014; Piaget, 2001) and actively promoted by major field-building initiatives such as the Sheva Center of the JCC Association of North America, the Paradigm Project, and the Orchard, as well as, to varying degrees, the Chabad early childhood network and ECE-RJ, which provide extensive professional development focused on constructivist practice.

Amanda (JCC early childhood center, mid-sized Eastern city)

Amanda was raised Catholic and attended an Episcopalian school but now identifies as LGBTQ+ and non-practicing. Later encounters with Catholic "fire and brimstone" rhetoric created a sharp discontinuity from her religious background. She entered Jewish early childhood

education somewhat by chance, initially as a temporary position while pursuing her art career but gradually assumed the role of "Jewish educator" in her classroom, particularly when paired with colleagues less familiar with Jewish traditions. This evolution reflects her growing professional responsibility for Judaic content. At her JCC center (mixed Jewish/non-Jewish enrollment), she values the Reggio-inspired approach and the school's openness to diverse cultural celebrations, noting, "I think for any child... it's great to be exposed to as much of the world as you can." Her professional identity integrates her artistic background, commitments to universal ethics (kindness, respect, "being a decent person"), and emergent Jewish educational expertise within a supportive learning community.

Ella (Community early childhood center, Midwestern metro)

Ella has spent nearly 5 years in education, primarily in early childhood and mostly within Jewish schools. Raised Lutheran, she describes herself as not particularly religious, but her upbringing gave her "an understanding about... the idea of belonging to a cultural group in that way that has old traditions," a lens that supports her comfort teaching Judaism as a lived culture. She began her teaching career in public schools, where she witnessed firsthand the intersection of social justice and education, an experience that shaped her educational philosophy. After her public school closed, she found a position at a Jewish early childhood center serving a majority interfaith and non-Jewish population, and stayed because of the strong sense of community and the alignment she found between constructivist (Reggio-inspired, child-centered, play-based) teaching and Jewish cultural values, explaining, "the core ideas of both systems are very similar... they just fit so seamlessly with the ideas that Reggio promotes."

Jill (Pluralistic day school early childhood center, mid-sized Eastern city)

Jill grew up celebrating Christmas and Easter in a secular way, approaching Jewish education without a firmly anchored faith identity of her own. Jill studied biology and psychology in college and initially considered other careers. She discovered her calling in education after working with children, including as a counselor at a JCC summer camp which was her first exposure to Jewish communal life. Jill now teaches at the early childhood center of a pluralistic Jewish day school serving an entirely Jewish student population.

She began as an assistant in a constructivist, Reggio-inspired pre-K classroom, mentored by a Jewish co-teacher who guided her in both Judaic content and pedagogy. This shaped her view of herself as a competent Judaic educator. Her approach is collaborative and inquiry-based:

“If I don’t understand it, then they [the students] probably don’t understand it.” Jill values the universal nature of Jewish values, “about being a good person and wanting to grow and wanting to learn,” allowing her to embrace this role through shared ethical and pedagogical commitments rather than religious background.

Kate (Reform early childhood center, large Midwestern metro)

Kate moved to this midwestern city after getting married and found herself working in a predominantly Jewish area. With a background in senior care, she transitioned to early childhood education during the COVID-19 pandemic when her husband lost his job, initially entering ECJE for practical reasons rather than out of a prior connection to teaching or Judaism. Kate began teaching at a Reform Jewish early childhood center with an entirely Jewish student population, where she and her son (the only non-Jewish student) were warmly welcomed. She describes her family as “commercial Christians” who celebrate Christmas and Easter in a secular way, marking her religious identity as culturally Christian but not strongly observant. She values the supportive, caring community at her center, stating, “Everybody is so nice... everybody’s so welcoming of me,” and she appreciates the school’s flexibility and the joyful, inclusive approach to Jewish culture, saying, “it’s just like any other school with some sugar on top. That’s the Jewish part,” framing Jewishness as an added layer of meaning and celebration that fits comfortably with her professional identity.

Mary (JCC early childhood center, large Northeastern metro)

Mary has worked in early childhood education since high school but entered Jewish education only four years ago. Raised without a religious background, her first exposure to Judaism came through work at a Chabad early childhood center she calls “a super crash course” in Jewish life and customs. This intensive learning positioned her as a committed student of Judaism while taking on the role.

She was drawn to Jewish education by its celebratory atmosphere and meaningful, project-based approach: “My favorite part is how everything is so celebrated... it’s fun, and it’s purposeful.” After a brief stint at a non-Jewish center, she returned to a JCC program with roughly half-Jewish, half-non-Jewish enrollment. There, she thrives in the openness to questions and collaborative, constructivist environment, rooting her professional identity in joyful Jewish practice and inquiry-driven pedagogy

Sierra (Conservative-affiliated early childhood center, large Southern metro)

Sierra grew up in a non-denominational Christian church and began her teaching career at their daycare center. She left due to tensions over its rigid educational philosophy and low pay, eventually finding her way to a Jewish Conservative early childhood center serving a majority non-Jewish, religiously mixed student population. There, Sierra was immediately embraced by the community, who call her their “honorary Jew.”

She found deep alignment between her values and the school's, declaring, “If I were to say anything that truly aligns with my heart... it's closer to Judaism than anything.” This reframes her religious self-understanding in relation to Judaism. Sierra values the child-centered, inclusive, and questioning approach of Jewish education. She has immersed herself in the community, learning Hebrew phrases and participating in rituals with colleagues and families, blending her outsider religious status with insider communal participation.

Pedagogical and Values Alignment

EOFs in this study expressed their professional identity by intentionally choosing early childhood centers that aligned closely with their beliefs about education, child development, and core values. For many, the fact that these centers are Jewish was less significant than the alignment of pedagogical approaches and values, which they experienced as resonant with who they are as educators. All participants worked in constructivist Jewish ECE settings, which they described as child-centered environments that emphasize the image of the child as capable and creative, value inquiry-based learning, and position teachers as co-learners in collaboration with students, families, and colleagues. They shared that they believe these principles resonate with Jewish values such as social justice, community, respect, and making the world a better place. Participants reported that this pedagogical and values alignment was a primary factor in their motivation and sense of belonging, regardless of religious identity. They rarely described the Jewish setting itself as generating conflict with their non-Jewish identities; rather, they located their sense of belonging in shared values and approaches to teaching and learning.

Ella's trajectory illustrates this integration of pedagogy, values, and identity. She had worked across multiple ECE environments, beginning in a Reggio-inspired JCC early childhood center, then moving to a play-based secular program, later to a Catholic preschool with a structured curriculum, and finally returning to a constructivist Jewish center where she has remained for seven years. Reflecting on these experiences, she explained:

While those other schools are nice, there's always a good community... I never got that... feeling of being surrounded by like-minded colleagues. I think it's simultaneously the Reggio piece, or the Jewish piece. With my experience in both of them, they are so complementary to each other that I really can't disentangle them... I've never had an experience of either without the other one. So, for me they're very much the same.

She also emphasized how the embedded Jewish values affirm her professional identity:

I really got to see the way that social justice is so deeply tied to education, the right to education, and access to education. My understanding of education as a political force and a social justice force... taught me what I do and do not like... The whole movement of Reggio learning was born of a response to social justice... One of their first principles is that education is the right of all children and of all people. I think that's very similar to the way that the Jewish community approaches education of children.

Jill's trajectory shows how pedagogical and values alignment catalyzed her entry into ECJE. Originally pursuing science in college, a psychology class introduced her to constructivist approaches. During her Jewish day school job interview, the interviewer's description of child-centered classrooms resonated deeply: she recalled wanting to “be part of something like that.” Jill frames Jewish values universally: “They aren't just for Jewish people. They're for anybody... It's about being a good person and... wanting to grow and wanting to learn and doing things together and building up each other.” She asks, “How do the Jewish values guide me as a teacher? But also, how do I seek the Jewish moments in the regular life?” She connects Purim and Passover to social justice, teaching children that “everyone could live together and have different beliefs.”

In contrast, Sierra found her previous church preschool's practices misaligned with both her pedagogical beliefs and values. She shared that supervisors conveyed: “‘If you don't do what we say, how we say it... there's no place for you here’... which is supposed to be the direct opposite message of Christianity.” She described dissatisfaction with developmentally inappropriate practices like worksheets for two-year-olds. In her current ECJE role, she said, “I'm ecstatic,” because her director's vision “completely aligns with mine.” Sierra connected her motivation to Jewish values, working in ECJE to engage with “teachings and the philosophies that we're expected to convey... [more of just] making well-rounded people.” She found these values universal: “It's not strange. It's not weird [or]... hard for me... any decent human being

would want these values.” Specifically, she valued “being able to talk about showing respect to God's earth,” “being a kind person and being accepting of everyone,” and “being the best version of yourself at all times.”

Across Ella, Jill, and Sierra's cases, participants described both pedagogical alignment (child-centered, inquiry-based practice) and values alignment (social justice, community, respect, mensch-like character). They located their sense of belonging in constructivist approaches and shared values regardless of religious background.

Open and Curious

Most educators in this study entered Jewish early childhood classrooms without significant prior exposure to Judaism. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, they approached it as an invitation to learn. While some initially worried about teaching unfamiliar content, they reframed these anxieties as opportunities for growth. Jill recalled, “When I first started, I was nervous about teaching Judaics, but I just asked a lot of questions and learned from my colleagues.” Mary echoed this sentiment, admitting that she worried about not knowing all the customs but realized that “being curious and open to learning made the experience better for me and the children.”

Participants described openness and curiosity as central to their approach to teaching Judaic content. When asked what makes a “good” Jewish educator, Sierra emphasized motivation over background. “You can do whatever you put your mind to. If someone doesn't want to learn or grow beyond what they already know about Judaism, then they won't be effective. You need to have a hunger to be a meaningful member of the community.” Ella linked openness to pedagogy and community. “We come in knowing that we don't know everything... with the expectation that we are going to be building knowledge together. So just as much as I'm bringing knowledge into my students, they're bringing knowledge into me.”

No children asked if teachers were Jewish during observations or reported interactions, though several EOFs shared that they had proactively disclosed their status to students as part of regular classroom conversation. EOFs shared that adults, parents, and colleagues alike, occasionally questioned their ability to teach Judaic curriculum. Mary navigated parental skepticism after a Hebrew-speaking colleague left saying,

The parents were so concerned about how we were going to teach Hebrew... and we really had to kind of be like, here's the proof of what we're doing... pictures and

documentation that like this is still happening. And it's okay. We're all learning together. It's fine.

Several EOFs shared that they were invited to Jewish families' Shabbat dinners and Passover seders as members of the school community who are not themselves Jewish but could enjoy and appreciate the holiday celebration alongside their students.

Ella and Mary recalled moments when colleagues did not demonstrate the same openness or willingness to learn, contrasting those experiences with their own approaches. Ella described a staff meeting where teachers were invited to bring their classes to a bonfire to burn *chametz* [food with leavening] before Passover. While one EOF colleague objected to what she saw as wastefulness, Ella reflected, "It's really not for you to understand... There are plenty of other traditions... chopping down and bringing in a Christmas tree... some would call that wasteful. This is about Jewish culture. You have to keep perspective."

Mary shared a parallel experience with a colleague who did not care to learn kosher details.

One day, we accidentally mixed milk with meat utensils. I said, 'We have to wash it a certain way and check with the rabbi.' She said, 'It's fine, just rinse it off.' But I said, 'No, we can't just rinse it off, we have to do it the right way because it's very important to someone else that it's done correctly.'

Several educators described modeling curiosity as part of their practice with children. Kate explained, "I'm always curious about the 'why' behind the traditions. The kids ask questions, and I try to find the answers with them... I love that I get to learn alongside the children." Sierra echoed this approach: "I always tell the kids, 'I'm learning with you!' If I don't know something, I say, 'Let's find out together.'" Amanda connected curiosity to her "researcher" identity, sharing, "Anytime a holiday would come up, I'd be like, I'm going to research this... I'd heard of Esther, but I had no idea that Purim was a thing." Mary highlighted the social dimension of openness.

I was lucky... I got a co-teacher [who was] part of the Orthodox community... I would ask her questions all the time... My favorite thing to learn about was the laws of keeping kosher... I just had so many questions, and I found it fascinating.

Together, these accounts depict EOFs positioning themselves as co-learners who actively seek knowledge alongside children and colleagues, embedding curiosity into their everyday classroom practice.

Competence Through Relational Scaffolds

Participants acquired Judaic knowledge through relational scaffolds alongside formal training and support from the administration of their centers.

Co-Teachers, Mentors, and Experienced Colleagues

Participants acquired Judaic knowledge through reciprocal relationships with colleagues and supervisors at all levels. Ella playfully calls her religious co-teacher “Rabbi Jen” for Judaic questions: “Anytime I have a question about... Judaism... I’m like, ‘Rabbi Jen...’” while Jen seeks Ella’s pedagogical expertise: “Anytime she has a question about... education philosophy, she’s like, ‘Ella..?’” Sierra’s director became “like a second mom,” encouraging her growth: “She pushed me a lot. Gave me all the books to read... any opportunity that I had to learn from her. I just kind of soaked everything up.” Jill observed and received feedback from mentors like Shayla, learning Hebrew phrases through repetition: “I got to observe how she did things... she’ll give me feedback... The more you say it, the more it sticks.”

Experienced colleagues and coordinators provided hands-on support for rituals and content. Mary relies on “a couple of other teachers here that are very experienced and kind of take on a lot of the Judaic like teaching for teachers that don’t know what they’re doing. They’ll come and help with Shabbat and show you how to do Shabbat, or show you how to do Havdalah,” noting “everyone knows, and they’re happy to help.” Amanda collaborates with her peer teachers, saying “we would look it up together.” Across these examples, participants described relationships with colleagues and supervisors as key scaffolds for building their Judaic competence through openness and curiosity in everyday practice.

Self-Directed Research and Resources

Personal initiative bridged knowledge gaps. Amanda emphasizes, “I was very big on research... anytime a holiday would come up... I’d look it up and be like, okay, let’s learn about this holiday,” using “PJ Library... BimBam... and staff meetings are like a crash course.” Sierra defaults to “Just looking it up”. Google’s my friend,” alongside books like “Jewish Everyday.” Jill learned Hebrew contextually: “I’d watch them play, and I’d like, guess what they were doing... Oh, that must mean ice cream... *glida*,” and through immersion: “I tried to learn as much

as I could for the kids and for myself.” Across these accounts, EOFs demonstrated openness and curiosity by proactively pursuing Judaic knowledge through research and immersion.

Emergent Leadership

Competence often led to guiding others. Amanda became “the Jewish educator because I had two new [Jewish] teachers who didn't practice... I'm like, yes, we got this... I know this stuff now that's really cool.” Sierra takes initiative to continually add to the classroom's knowledgebase: “Once I know the language... that's the word that we use... I think I have more of a responsibility to make sure that I am doing it as much as I can.” Jill leads through empathic effort: “I tried to make them [Israeli students in her classroom] feel more comfortable by saying something in Hebrew whether I was doing it right or not... Just so they feel like I'm trying.” These examples show how openness and curiosity propelled EOFs from learners to emergent Judaic educational leaders within their teams.

Flexibility, Adaptability, and Boundaries

Building on their openness and curiosity, EOFs also demonstrated flexibility and adaptability, qualities that allowed them to translate their willingness to learn into effective pedagogical practice. Adaptability and flexibility are widely recognized as critical capacities for teachers, enabling them to sustain identity and motivation across complex and changing contexts (Beijaard et al., 2004; Day & Gu, 2014; Pulakos et al., 2000). In line with this literature, EOFs in this study consistently described ways they adjusted their teaching, acquired new knowledge, and integrated unfamiliar practices across interviews and observations. Comfort with ambiguity, navigating diverse Jewish expressions, and maintaining openness emerged as core strengths in their professional identity.

Ella illustrated how adaptability broadened her understanding of Jewish learning and practice. Reflecting on years of experience across different centers, she said, “The one big thing I've learned about Jewish culture working in Jewish schools is that there are as many different ways to be Jewish as there are people in the world.” For Ella, this meant acknowledging diversity within Judaism itself and embracing the pedagogical challenge of guiding children through this pluralism, evident in her observed lessons blending multiple traditions.

Mary similarly emphasized adaptability as respect for family and community practices. She explained, “Having the ability to be open minded and flexible in what you're learning... some people have a very strict sense of identity based on their religion... It can be confusing to

teach Judaic topics that obviously don't align with what the family intrinsically feels." Across these accounts, EOFs framed adaptability as navigating diverse family beliefs and practices with sensitivity and flexibility.

EOFs also navigated outsider tensions strategically, especially around Israel, the war following October 7, 2023, and political conflict. Jill described staff wearing "bring our captives home" necklaces and voicing strong views, and then wondering whether even modest public empathy for Palestinians would be perceived as disloyal or antisemitic, asking herself, "would they think if I like, said I care about everyone... if I had any opinion that wasn't... steadfast in one... would they think I'm antisemitic." She emphasized that she does have "big opinions" and deep concern "about everyone," but chooses to "speak carefully" and often not to share those views in staff settings unless there is time and emotional space to stay in relationship and "come together" after disagreement. Ella, identifying as "a very like justice forward person," "an Abolitionist," and "an anti-colonialist," described a similar stance. She explained that her commitments (e.g., believing "that indigenous people should have their land given back to them") lead to "very conflicting things about the state of Israel," and that as someone "very much on the outside of a lot of those feelings..., it's not always appropriate for me to bring that up." Rather than engage in celebratory Yom Ha'Atzma'ut programming, she said, "I think that sometimes my answer in those situations has really just been to remove myself. So generally, I just don't go to school that day. I engage in my own... activism on my own time." For Ella, the key was recognizing that colleagues may be speaking out of personal and family vulnerability, whereas her solidarity is "intellectual" and universalist; as a result, she prioritized "respectful boundary" over asserting her own views, believing that her "need to be honest" does not override her "responsibility to be kind."

Kate illustrates another form of strategic boundary-setting around religious-social obligations. While embracing her school community, she opted out of Friday Shabbat staff gatherings, "I just don't want to be at work anymore. But also, like as much as like I love it, I'm just not Jewish." This distinction preserved her professional commitment without extending into religious-social spaces.

Together, these examples show EOFs managing complexity without losing clarity, embracing ambiguity to sustain engagement in pluralistic classrooms. This readiness to adapt

strengthens their role in culturally diverse ECJE settings and connects to the integrative dynamics in the next section.

Discussion

The findings illuminate how EOFs construct professional identities and sustain motivation within ECJE settings, extending TPI and SDT frameworks to faith-outsider educators who facilitate children's lived Jewish identity formation. This discussion interprets these patterns relative to the three research questions, revealing how pedagogical and values alignment outweighs religious background in fostering commitment and effective practice.

Professional Identity as Socio-Constructivist Adaptation

EOFs expressed professional identity through the socio-constructivist interplay of TPI's five core elements, agency, belief, context, emotion, and narrative, extending the framework beyond its cultural-insider assumptions to faith-outsider contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Coldron & Smith, 1999). This contrasts with TPI literature, where educators typically negotiate personal/professional boundaries within shared cultural or religious paradigms (Jarvis, 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018; White, 2014). For EOFs, identity emerged dynamically through school communities, where pedagogical alignment became the primary anchor over religious affiliation (Androusou & Tsafos, 2018; Vygotskij, 1978).

Agency manifested as educators intentionally chose to work in constructivist centers, like Jill's resonance with child-centered classrooms during her interview (Lyle, 2018). Belief integrated universal ethical commitments with evolving Jewish educational roles, as Sierra reframed her values "closer to Judaism than anything." Context positioned identity within pluralistic ECJE settings, where openness and curiosity shaped emotional responses, transforming potential outsider anxiety into engagement and growth (Frijda & Mesquita, 2000; Jarvis, 2021). Narrative trajectories further textured this construction, with educators recounting paths from novice to emergent authorities who navigated denominational diversity, family beliefs, and political tensions through flexibility (Jarvis, 2021; Knowles, 1988; Rodgers & Scott, 2008).

These elements interconnect to form a cohesive professional identity that challenges perceived outsider limitations of faith-based education. Rather than experiencing dissonance as

religious outsiders, EOFs found a sense of belonging through shared pedagogical values, commitments to social justice, community, and mensch-like character formation, illustrating the socio-constructivist potential of TPI in culturally complex milieus (Pulakos et al., 2000). This expansion presents identity as fluid and adaptive, where dispositions like curiosity and flexibility make authentic Jewish teaching possible without Jewish insider status. It also highlights the dynamic interplay of personal histories and institutional roles as key to effective practice outside one's faith tradition (Rodgers & Scott, 2008).

Motivation Through SDT Needs in Faith-Diverse Contexts

Pedagogical alignment thus fostered autonomy by enabling EOFs to endorse their centers' constructivist approaches as extensions of their own educational values, even amid religious differences, as seen in Sierras 'ecstatic' fit with her director's vision or Jill's resonance during her interview. This volitional embrace shifted teaching from mere compliance with Judaic expectations to self-determined practice (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fradkin-Hayslip, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

The second theme, openness and curiosity, extends TPI and SDT by showing how an inquiry-oriented, epistemic stance becomes both a professional disposition and a motivational resource. In TPI language, this stance shapes beliefs (about knowledge as evolving and co-constructed), emotion (transforming anxiety into interest), and narrative (telling stories of themselves as co-learners rather than deficient non-experts), as when Kate told children, "I'm learning with you" (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Pajares, 1992). From an SDT perspective, curiosity enabled EOFs to convert potential threats to competence into opportunities for growth, experiencing incremental gains in Judaic knowledge that reinforced self-efficacy and met needs for both competence and relatedness simultaneously (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Krettenauer, 2020). Relational scaffolds such as reciprocal exchanges with co-teachers like Ella's "Rabbi Jen," director mentorship, and peer research served as engines for cultural learning. This openness exceeded typical "outsider" expectations, allowing EOFs to earn belonging through demonstrated humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998; Wenger, 1998).

EOFs began with little knowledge of Judaism yet, through curiosity-driven exploration, grew into lead Jewish educators, sometimes even guiding instruction for Jewish co-teachers or assistants. This striking trajectory illustrates how SDT's competence need transforms lack of prior Judaic knowledge and experience into leadership strengths within TPI's socio-constructivist

context. Relatedness completed the motivational triad, forged through mutual commitment to constructivist pedagogy and universal values that resonated deeply with EOFs' own educational priorities. This integration buffered their outsider status, sustaining resilience across religious boundaries (Fernet et al., 2012; Klassen et al., 2012). These dynamics reveal SDT's power in faith-diverse contexts, where dispositions like curiosity and openness may predict engagement more than shared religious or cultural backgrounds (Jarvis, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Identity-Motivation Dynamics Shaping Classroom Practice

The TPI elements (agency, belief, context, emotion, narrative) and SDT needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) converged to shape EOFs' classroom praxis; their reflective, identity-aligned actions and decisions in Judaic teaching. Agency drove constructivist inquiry over scripted ritual, as when Sierra told her students, "I'm learning with you! If I don't know something, let's find out together"; belief framed universal values through social justice lenses, like Jill connecting Purim/Passover to "everyone could live together and have different beliefs"; and relatedness fueled collaborative rituals through reciprocal team exchanges, such as Ella's Reggio-Judaic integration with "Rabbi Jen" (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Klassen et al., 2012; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

This convergence reveals praxis as the visible expression of internal TPI-SDT dynamics: EOFs' curiosity-driven reflection (competence/agency) translates into child-centered choices (e.g., inquiry over ritual compliance), while relatedness-fueled curiosity and openness sustain motivation amid religious discontinuity. Rather than surface-level decisions, these patterns signal reflective practice where personal narratives reshape institutional expectations, transforming initial cultural distance into authentic Jewish pedagogy. This synthesis challenges insider-dependent models of faith-based education (Fox et al., 2003; Levisohn, 2013), demonstrating how outsider TPI thrives through praxis aligned with constructivist ethos.

Implications for ECJE leadership and policy

Within the bounded context of progressive, constructivist ECJE programs, these findings suggest several implications. First, recruitment strategies might explicitly value pedagogical and values congruence, openness, and adaptability alongside (but not instead of) efforts to increase Judaic content knowledge. Directors could ask candidates to narrate times when they engaged with unfamiliar cultural or religious contexts, or how they respond when children pose questions they cannot yet answer, as indicators of future growth potential. Second, professional

development for EOFs should be designed as identity work as much as content work, creating spaces to surface beliefs, emotions, and narratives about teaching Judaism, and to align personal and institutional missions in ways that support internal motivation (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Krettenauer, 2020). Third, mentorship structures that pair EOFs with knowledgeable Jewish colleagues can satisfy needs for relatedness and competence simultaneously, accelerating integration into school cultures.

At the same time, the study raises cautions. Because the participating programs emphasized universal values and largely avoided high-conflict topics (e.g., Israel politics), findings about comfort and alignment cannot be generalized to more text-centered or ideologically stringent settings. Future research should examine how EOFs experience teaching in Orthodox, Chabad, or politically polarized environments where tensions between their own beliefs and official school positions may be more acute.

Reconsidering assumptions about “who can teach Judaism”

Finally, this study invites ECJE stakeholders to revisit long-held assumptions about the necessity of Jewish identity for effective Jewish teaching in early childhood. In these constructivist settings, EOFs sustained their motivation and effectiveness not through Jewish identity, but through experiencing alignment among pedagogy, values, and community; receiving support for ongoing Judaic learning; and finding welcome as full school community members. This ECJE finding, that pedagogical alignment trumps religious background, may not generalize to K-12 Jewish education where text-based learning and ideological positions may demand greater subject matter expertise (Friedman, 2023, 2024). This does not diminish the importance of Jewishly knowledgeable insider educators, especially in more traditional or text-intensive contexts, but expands the range of who can contribute meaningfully to Jewish early childhood education when appropriate structures and expectations are in place.

For a field facing persistent workforce shortages and a growing proportion of EOFs, the findings suggest that embracing, rather than merely tolerating, carefully selected and well-supported EOFs may be a necessary and generative strategy for sustaining vibrant, value-rich Jewish early childhood programs.

In constructivist ECJE settings, EOFs didn't develop their Judaic knowledge or professional identities through isolated study alone. Instead, they grew through active

participation in communities of practice alongside colleagues, children, and families (Wenger, 1998). Mary asked her Orthodox co-teacher "endless kosher questions." Amanda researched alongside her colleagues. Sierra learned family seder traditions by attending holidays at her director's home. These relationships created a rich learning ecology that built both competence and relatedness.

This approach sparked positive feedback cycles: curiosity led to collegial support, which built trust and belonging (Vangrieken et al., 2017). EOFs openly admit knowledge gaps, turning potential vulnerability into connection. Their professional identities emerged through shared learning experiences with others, classic social constructivism in action (Androusou & Tsafos, 2018; Beijaard et al., 2004; Vygotskij, 1978).

For recruitment and professional development, this reveals a dual priority: individual dispositions (openness, curiosity, adaptability, and flexibility) must pair with communal infrastructure that supports growth. Question-friendly cultures, formal mentorship pairings, and collaborative planning spaces activate TPI's context element and SDT's relatedness need, enabling EOFs to thrive. Constructivist ECJE's inquiry-focus uniquely amplifies these dynamics, unlike transmission models that prioritize content delivery over relational learning.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that shape interpretation of its findings. The sample was small and self-selected: six women, predominantly White and Christian, recruited through ElevatEd's network, all working in U.S.-based, progressive, constructivist early childhood settings where they self-identified as confident Judaic educators (without external verification). These features illuminate a specific EOF subset rather than ECJE's broader landscape.

Methodologically, data from interviews, documents, and single-hour observations prioritized thick description and transferability over statistical generalizability or extended immersion. Readers should assess context alignment when applying insights. Finally, the play-based focus, early childhood scope, and universal Jewish values underrepresented polarizing issues (Israeli politics, denominational boundaries), potentially underplaying challenges in Hebrew-intensive, teacher-directed, or doctrinally rigorous contexts.

Future Research

Building on these constraints, future research should examine a broader range of EOFs and ECJE settings, including Orthodox and Chabad programs, international contexts, and schools

that rely on more traditional, frontal, or scripted curricula. Studies that follow educators over time, using longitudinal and mixed-method designs that integrate interviews, classroom observations, and supervisor or peer assessments, could illuminate how identity and motivation develop across career stages and institutional contexts. Further work is also needed to explore how EOFs' identity and motivation intersect with children's Jewish learning outcomes and Jewish journey. Finally, comparative and intervention studies that examine EOFs alongside Jewish-identifying educators, and that evaluate professional development models explicitly designed to support identity and motivation in ECJE, would deepen understanding of how diverse educators can thrive while advancing schools' Jewish missions and student learning goals.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that educators of other faiths (EOFs) who embody Pedagogical and Values Alignment, Openness and Curiosity, and Flexibility and Adaptability, combined with feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, report successfully engaging in teaching Judaic content regardless of their personal religious background. Through the integrated lenses of TPI and SDT, identity and motivation are shown to be mutually reinforcing, fostering engaged and resilient educators committed to nurturing young learners' Jewish identity and tradition. For leaders and educators in ECJE and other faith-based educational settings, these findings underscore the importance of supporting and sustaining educators who, irrespective of religious affiliation, exhibit these key identity markers. With intentional mentoring, tailored professional development, and inclusive environments that cultivate autonomy, relatedness, and competence, cross-religious educators are well-positioned to play vital roles in enriching educational experiences grounded in faith and cultural tradition.

This research suggests a broader applicability beyond Jewish education, underscoring the potential contributions of educators from different faith backgrounds in a variety of religious educational contexts. By embracing a model that values the integration of identity and motivation, communities can cultivate stable and effective workforces capable of providing authentic, meaningful educational foundations for children. Such efforts ensure not only program stability but also the transmission of religious and cultural values to future generations.

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Appendix A

Initial Interview Protocol Sample Questions

- Can you share an example of how your personal values influenced a Judaic lesson?
- Have you experienced any internal conflict related to your role here?
- What support from colleagues or leadership enhances your motivation and confidence?
- How do you make instructional decisions regarding Jewish content?
- In what ways do your background and beliefs align or diverge from the Judaic curriculum goals?

Appendix B

Follow-up Interview Protocol (Post-Observation) Sample Questions

- Please describe the lesson observed.
- What were your instructional goals?
- How did you prepare for the lesson?
- Were there parts you felt particularly connected to, or obligated to teach despite reservations?