"A Kind of Magic": Pre-military Preparatory Schools (*Mechinot)* in Israel as Models for Informal Education

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Abstract

The pre-army preparatory programs established in Israel constitute a unique and popular model of education. Using the qualitative method and semi-structured interviews, I found four key themes that can explain this model: identity, autonomy, affiliation, and an informal approach. A variety of psychological theories are raised throughout the paper that address each one. It seems that a combination of these themes may be a key factor contributing to the popularity of these programs, and to other popular Jewish education programs beyond the borders of Israel that are similar. This innovative educational model is capable of influencing not only Jewish education but general education as well.

Keywords Pre-military schools · Informal education · Jewish education · Religious education · Educational philosophy · Israel studies

> *"A certain kind of magic occurs: what they were not ready to hear about in school, here their eyes say: just give me more!" (Goel, 62 years, head of a Mechina).*
> *"What is common amongst all of the Mechinot is some sort of understanding that in regular schools, in formal education, the youth do not receive what they need in order to shape their worldview." (Gavriel, 37 years, head of a Mechina.*

Introduction

Pre-army preparatory programs (henceforth *Mechinot;* singular *Mechina*) in Israel are educational institutes for young men and women prior to their army service. In Israel, army service is mandatory for the entire population (excluding minorities such as Arabs and ultra-Orthodox), and as a result, these institutes are open to all

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who will serve in the army. The *Mechinot* have been successful to a large degree, as reflected by the consistent growth of their student population. They have also received widespread recognition, culminating in the awarding of the Israel Prize to the *Mechinot* enterprise in 2016.

I propose viewing the *Mechinot* as an innovative model of Jewish education, which may also be applied to general education. Successful, innovative ideas are valuable in such frameworks. As Moore and Woocher put it "Jewish learning and experiences are seen as vehicles for achieving broader human goals as well" (2019, 245). The *Mechinot* are an example of a Jewish educational model that can have value in all cultures.

The research studies of the activities of the *Mechinot* conducted thus far deal with the processes of constructing identity (Rosman-Stollman 2005; Halevy 2012; Shamama 2013), concepts of learning and motivation (Drori 2019), and their social role (Ben Ari-Amzaleg 2015). Aside from these, there have been several surveys and operational reports (Rosen et al. 1996; Hacohen-Wolf, Amzaleg-Bahr and Yafah-Argaz 2006; Manny-Ikan and Rosen 2018). This study seeks to examine the *Mechinot* from an educational perspective, and to articulate the main themes by which they function. I will use a phenomenological approach to understand the significance of the enterprise for its partners and participants. This involves focusing on their essential experiences, as described by Moustakas (1994). I will not address the wide-ranging ideological facets of the *Mechinot*, but rather the respective educational philosophies emerging from their activities. These activities resemble one another in most of the *Mechinot*, so my assumption is that they share common elements that can serve as the basis for a comprehensive theory.

The present research utilizes qualitative methodology to analyze the interviews (all of the names of the interviewees are pseudonyms). The need for such a methodology is illustrated by a number of them, as it appears that the *Mechinot* do not share common educational goals. The staff members interviewed highlight values that guide them "to create a new generation of leadership" (Alon, male, 52 years), "to build a deep internal world for them" (Yoel, male, 44 years), and "to facilitate interactions between people" (Noga, female, 29 years). They describe their areas of operation [learning, volunteering, fitness and preparation for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), trips, and communal life], but what is missing is a clear articulation of the educational philosophy that drives them. Their responses are mostly descriptive, and do not explain the methodology behind their activities. Admittedly, most lack a wide and comprehensive educational perspective, and they can benefit from the results of this study as well.

The study asserts that, despite variations among different *Mechinot*, they all share common characteristics that create a deliberate focus on identity, autonomy, and affiliation all coexisting within an informal approach. To elucidate these themes logically and coherently, I used several psychological theories, mainly Erikson's theory of the stages of development, with a focus on Stage 5: Identity versus Confusion, which is the developmental stage of adolescents. I also employed Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (SDT), which focuses on intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and affiliation as basic psychological needs (Deci and Ryan 1980, 1985, 1991; Ryan and Deci 2000a, b). And finally, I have used Kahane's Code (1997), which provided

important insights about informal education. Each of these theories is discussed thoroughly later in the paper, and is complemented by a synthesis of pertinent psychological and educational theories. By integrating all of these themes, the *Mechinot* present a unique educational model, which seems to be the key factor behind their success, i.e., their popularity and recognition.

While the paper deals with a culturally embedded educational approach situated in the unique needs of the Israeli educational system, it presents a compelling educational model that can transcend beyond the particular context of the *Mechinot*.

The *Mechinot*

Pre-military *Mechinot* are unique institutions that developed in Israel in the last generation, providing a distinctive residential platform for army-age Israelis during a gap year after high-school and before their military service. The first *Mechina* was established in 1987, with 67 Orthodox students. Since then, more than 60 *Mechinot* have been established with an enrollment of more than 4500 students (https://mechinot.org.il/en-us/the-jcm/about-us/about-the-joint-council-241). There are mixed religious-secular, Reform, Conservative, secular, and modern Orthodox *Mechinot* (which, unlike the other *Mechinot*, are single-sex *Mechinot*) as well as *Mechinot* for Jews and non-Jews, native-born citizens, or immigrants.

They are situated throughout the country in many types of communities: cities (27%), kibbutzim (16%), Moshavim (50%), Youth Villages (7%). Of these, 1/3 are in the north, 1/4 in the south, 1/5 in the West Bank, 13% in the center, and 10% in Jerusalem. It is interesting to note that there are no *Mechinot* in Tel Aviv, which is considered the central city in Israel.

Some are affiliated with the political right, others are affiliated with the left, and some are apolitical (Ben Ari-Amzaleg 2015). Participation is voluntary, and the length of each program varies from one setting to the next, ranging from 10 to 22 months. The success of the *Mechinot* is reflected by the continual increase in both the number of *Mechinot* and participants; nevertheless, the number of applicants is greater than the available places (Horowitz 2018; Mezuman 2018). The Israeli Ministry of Education regulates their enrollment and restricts thousands of youngsters from joining these programs because they are needed for service in the IDF.

The first several *Mechinot* were modeled on the *Yeshiva* (traditional school for talmudic study) in an effort to solidify religious identity, increase motivation for army service, and foster social responsibility (Rosen et al. 1996; Rosman-Stolman 2005). Against the backdrop of the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995, which caused a crisis of values and rifts in Israeli society, *Mechinot* were established for non-religious youth (Reichner 2016, 218–219), in an effort to deal with this situation. These new institutions saw themselves as "academies for social leadership," and their goal was "to create a ruling Jewish Zionist elite." They defined themselves as pre-military service preparatory schools solely for the purpose of government funding (Reichner 2016, 219).

In 2008, over 20 years after the establishment of the first *Mechina*, the *Mechinot* law was passed in the Israeli parliament: *Mechinot* received a dedicated budget, their

goals were defined, as were the rules and regulations they were required to follow (Reichner 2016, 241–242; Wininger 2017). The law defines the goal of the *Mechinot* as "preparing students for full military service and education for social and civic involvement." However, from conversations with various — of *Mechinot*, it is clear that preparation for the army is not foremost in their minds. Often, they set different, broader goals (Rosman-Stolman 2005, 144; Ben Ari-Amzaleg 2015, 21–22, 29; Horowitz 2018).

Indeed, it has been found that neither the quality nor the duration of a *Mechina* graduates' army service significantly differ from that of the general population. It was also found that, with the increase in the number of *Mechinot* and their students, there has been a decrease in the quantitative contribution of their graduates to the IDF (Evenshpenger 2011, 2014). Some of the — of the *Mechinot* claim that these findings are incorrect, and that the contribution of the *Mechinot* graduates to the army is impressive and significant (Interview with Danny Zamir, Chairman of the *Mechinot* Council in Israel, October 2021). However, it is not clear to what extent these data indicate success or failure because the purpose of the *Mechinot* is not universally agreed upon. It should be remembered that each *Mechina* functions independently, and serves a different target audience (Ari-Amzaleg 2015, 21–22; Horowitz 2018). In my interviews, I found that some of the heads of *Mechinot* are unclear on this point. They could not precisely define how they viewed success and by which parameters it should be measured. I contend that the success of the *Mechinot* can be measured by their demand. As long as youngsters apply for and voluntarily enroll in these programs—without receiving any material benefit for their participation—it means that they view the *Mechinot* as positive and worthwhile for them. My suggestion reflects Dewey's words: "…the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end" (Dewey 1946, 59). So, as long as the youngsters find the *Mechinot* attractive and keep coming, I think there is no need to look for another measure.

To understand what motivates the youngsters and what they find there, I suggest focusing upon the practices and behaviors shared by the vast majority of *Mechinot*, and not their ideologies. Their ideologies are diverse, as mentioned previously— some of them religious, some secular, and some mixed; some lean to the right, some to the left, and some have no political identity; and some aim to strengthen Zionism and Jewish identity, while there are even *Mechinot* for Druze or other minorities. In their practices and behaviors, we find similarities—most of the *Mechinot* combine, to one degree or another: learning, social activities and social responsibility, educational trips, and army preparation (Ben Ari-Amzaleg 2015, 59). All of them provide a safe space where young adults explore their personalities and, while living as a group, establish their relationship with their environment and with one another. All *Mechinot* engaging learning great texts (Jewish and universal) with physical and emotional challenges. This set of behaviors and activities constitute a common educational philosophy. Therefore, I argue that, to fully comprehend the educational philosophy of the *Mechinot*, we must adopt a panoramic perspective, emphasizing their shared elements rather than fixating on their individual uniqueness.

We must point out that, for most students, the *Mechina* experience is positive. However, some graduates report that they had negative experiences in the *Mechinot*, even going so far as describing them as traumatic (Ben Ari-Amzaleg 2015, 21–22;

Horowitz 2018). Nevertheless, a clear majority of students profess deep satisfaction, not just during their period of attendance but also in retrospect (Rosen et al. 1996; Dushink and Kleinberg 2012; Ben Ari-Amzaleg 2015, 24, 35, 38; Manny-Iken and Rosen 2018). What makes these educational institutions so attractive? What benefits do participants receive? Why do they spend their time in the *Mechinot*? The study regimen there is very intense (at least 50 h per week, according to the Ministry of Defense Guidelines 2012), the tuition is quite expensive (compared with high school tuition), and the graduates do not receive a diploma or professional certificate. How then do these institutions inspire so much energy and activity, as opposed to high schools where students display mainly disinterest and mediocrity (Ben Ari-Amzaleg 2015, 44–45; Drori 2019, 18–19)?

It could be argued that the students admitted are fully motivated at the outset; however, their motivation for learning increases significantly with participation in the activities of the *Mechina* (Drori 2019, 20). Therefore, the basic cause of their satisfaction takes place within the *Mechina* setting.

The aim of this study is to uncover the educational philosophy of *Mechinot*, which is essential for grasping the essence of their pedagogical approach and decoding the source of their popularity.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, appropriate for a context in which we seek to sketch a complex reality and examine it holistically, without attempting to predict a specific phenomenon. The qualitative approach was designed to develop a rich body of knowledge in places in which the relationships between phenomena are not causal, but rather involve feedback loops (Merriam 2016).

This study examines educational philosophy. An educational philosophy is primarily concealed in internal consciousness and experience; therefore, a qualitative approach is suitable to examine it (Hitchcock and Hughes 1989; Dayan 2003). Using the phenomenological method, we assess the perspective of those who work in *Mechinot*, and the manner in which they explain what goes on in their *Mechina*. This approach lets us construct the theory inductively, gradually collect the data from the field, and finally create a complete picture to yield a general, grounded theory. Such research focuses on the way in which events are perceived and interpreted by the various subjects (Holstein and Gubrium1994; Schwandt 1994).

The rationale in such research is to understand the logic and the mindset of the phenomenon. For that reason, we use a strategy of choosing the informants who best represent the population from which they were selected and who are able to teach us about the phenomenon being studied (Mason 1996). Phenomenological methodology collects information and insight, without trying to present accurate estimates or graphs. Subjects were chosen based on their insight, sensitivity, and willingness to share information, as opposed to a statistical representative model (Krathwohl 1993; Stake 1995). To achieve maximum reliability, individuals with differing perspectives were deliberately chosen.

The 29 interviewees came from secular, religious, and mixed *Mechinot*: 11 were heads or former heads of *Mechinot*; 5 were *madrichim* (counselors) or teachers in *Mechinot*; 10 were graduates; 2 were parents of graduates; and 1 was a promoter of a *Mechina*. In total, 18 were men, and 9 were women, and 1 set of parents was interviewed together. In all, 11 identify as secular, 13 as religious, and 5 as traditional. In addition, 28 were Jewish, and 1 was Druze. The interviewees live in cities, communities, *kibbutzim*, and settlements, and altogether they represent 25 different *Mechinot*.

The majority of interviews lasted between 30 and 40 min, with a few extending slightly beyond this timeframe. All interviews were conducted in Hebrew, and the quoted passages were translated by Shimon Altshul. Most of the interviews were conducted via Zoom, while a few were conducted over the telephone or in face-to-face meetings.

The interviews followed the semi-structured interview model, according to which the interview begins in an unstructured way, which is followed by a shift in focus (e.g., "Tell me a little about yourself, about the *Mechina* you attended," or "Tell me what happens in the *Mechinot* in terms of the educational process"), or accomplished by asking leading questions (e.g., "Why did you go to the *Mechina*?", "What do you think is the purpose of the *Mechinot?*", "What experiences in the *Mechina* have been meaningful to you?"). In this way, the interviewee is given the chance to express themselves freely, while the interviewer is given the opportunity to focus the discussion.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data were analyzed in an attempt to identify relevant segments and code them into significant units from the perspective of the main question of the study (Miles and Huberman 1994, 56), and to define categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). At the end of the process, a number of unique categories were identified that characterize the activities in the *Mechinot*. For ease of readability, I divided them into four themes—identity, autonomy, affiliation, and an informal approach to education:

Identity	Autonomy	Affiliation	Informal approach
Developing identity	Independence	Group cohesion/family atmosphere	Informal structure
Meaning	Free choice	Intimacy	Intensity
Moratorium	Self-management	Partnership	Disruption
Learning	Internal motivation	Acquaintanceship	Extreme experiences
	Responsibility and commitment	Personal relationship	
	Activity and initiative	Volunteering	
	Competence and self-efficacy		

Identity

According to leading theories in developmental psychology, identity serves a dual function: it distinguishes an individual from other people through the individual's

unique characteristics, while also shaping their sense of belonging and affiliation (Burke 2020). Thus, although identity and affiliation are related concepts, for the sake of clarity, I will treat them as distinct themes. Identity, as used here, relates to the individual dimension. It encompasses various crucial categories such as Developing identity, as described by Marcia (1980). This process refers to individuals engaging in self-inquiry to construct their self-concept. Another crucial category is Meaning, which refers to an individual's self-understanding and the meanings they assign to their own identity (Burke 2020). Moratorium, a category taken from Erikson's psychological development theory (1950, 1956, 1968), describes a period of free experimentation that allows individuals to explore and develop their own identity. Finally, Learning plays a crucial role in the *Mechinot*, as it refers to the inquiry of self-identity, encompassing various cognitive, mental, and social aspects.

Autonomy

Autonomy, by definition, encompasses categories such as Independence, Free Choice, and Self-management. In the context of the *Mechinot*, autonomy is also closely linked to Internal Motivation or Self-motivation, as well as to other categories such as Responsibility, Commitment, Activity, and Initiative because, unlike a laissez-faire approach, the *Mechinot* encourage students to take charge, be energetic, and unleash their creativity. As a result, students experience a sense of competence and self-efficacy, which is the belief in their ability to overcome challenges and perform well (Bandura 1977). The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a comprehensive framework for comprehending the interconnectedness of these categories, as will be discussed below.

Affiliation

Affiliation is a crucial component of identity, as mentioned earlier. In the context of the *Mechinot*, Affiliation is interpreted as Group Cohesion or Family-like Atmosphere, due to the lifestyle of the participants and the intense experiences shared by them. This intensity leads to strong bonds and relationships, which include in this context the following categories: Intimacy, Partnership, Acquaintanceship, and Personal relationship, as noted by interviewees. Volunteering is another category mentioned by them and is emphasized in most *Mechinot* as a vital aspect of their activity. It reflects a sense of responsibility and concern for society at large, and is a way for participants to look beyond themselves. Therefore, it is included here as part of the Affiliation theme.

Informality

The final theme is Informality, i.e., an informal educational approach. Unlike the other themes, it does not pertain to the educational content of the *Mechinot* but rather to their operational framework. However, informality indirectly contributes to the development of identity and sets the *Mechinot* apart from traditional

educational institutions. This theme emerges from four key categories: Informal Structure, Intensity, Disruption, and Extreme Experiences, each of which is explained below.

The transition from codes to categories, and then to themes is made using the model of Saldaña (2021), which ultimately leads to the construction of a broad theory. Actually, at the end of the process, a broad model is conceptualized, and a comprehensive relationship to *Mechinot* activities is presented. This is a holistic model, and most of these categories are interactive and sometimes overlapping. This, for example, can be found in the words of Miriam (female, 52 years), the head of a *Mechina* for religious young women, a description of the purpose of the *Mechina*:

> ...To give [them] in this year the tools and free space.... To give [them] a place where one can, in quiet, grow with respect to one's character...to make learning possible for them on a high level with teachers who will open their minds to the spiritual world, and to the Israeli world—this was one aspect, another aspect is taking responsibility—space for experience, where they could stand on their individual strengths. The third aspect happens within communal life… within their responsibility for their lives, within the tasks they receive or those which they create for themselves [...] It's the meetings within Israeli society, which are truly a place for the growth of the mind, and the space for tolerance. Now, these three aspects nourish one another greatly.

There are a number of codes and various categories that are emphasized in bold, to be analyzed later. Here I intend to emphasize the rich and holistic picture that arises from the excerpt, and the synergetic relationship between various categories. A similar richness can also be seen from the statements of Edna (female, 28 years), a graduate of a secular *Mechina*:

> What was mainly significant for me in the *Mechina* was the issue of **group life** and how to manage with a system which can suddenly be **intensive,** which gives you a stage to provide your input, your ideas, in contrast to what it was like in school. In school I felt that it wasn't the place to go and express myself, and suddenly in the *Mechina* they gave [us] a stage. This was a period of **self-searching (reflection)**... a process of trying to figure out what interests me, what am I drawn to, what is difficult for me. Many things were hard for me, with this **intensity**… on the other hand, with a combination of youth together, who live in an extremely **intense** manner, then there is also the possibility of **being exposed to diverse people... to decide who I want to be similar to more and to who less**... how I see my future.

The categories of cooperation and developing identity, moratorium and free choice, independence, and partnership—all appear in her words in a symbiotic manner.

Moreover, what emerges from her statement is the category of intensity. It seems as if the many categories that exist simultaneously create a burden, which is extant throughout the paper. This is apparently an integral part of the *Mechinot* educational philosophy, to be discussed below. Presently, each category will be examined independently.

Identity (Categories: Identity, Meaning, Moratorium, Learning)

Identity refers to an individual's self-perception, including their sense of continuity over time and the degree of congruence between various aspects of their personality (Erikson 1968; 1980; Burke 2020). Identity is multifaceted, being composed of individual as well as social dimensions (Erikson 1968; 1970; Adams and Marshall 1996; Burke 2020). Identity is the most prominent theme that emerges from interviews with the heads of *Mechinot*. While the definition of this concept may not always be explicitly stated, it appears that they use it simultaneously in both the individual and social dimensions: "… The objectives do not focus on a particular kind of training… Instead, what matters most is shaping identity" (Rotem, male, 37 years). "In general, the *Mechinot* aim to create a Zionist and Jewish identity" (Gavriel, male, 37 years). These quotes implied that identity is identified by them as an overriding goal.

The extent to which grappling with identity is an exclusive characteristic of the *Mechinot* warrants further study. College students in their late teens or Yeshiva boys of the same age undeniably also grapple with identity. Nonetheless, there is a discernible emphasis within *Mechinot* at the institutional level that is placed on this aspect primarily. It appears that *Mechinot* have prioritized the exploration and cultivation of identity as a central goal.

Mechina graduates describe a process of identity seeking, which is referred to herein as Developing Identity. Their quotes also reveal these two dimensions of identity: "At that stage, I needed a place that was a little more for myself—to understand who I am, what I want, where my strengths lie, to learn to be part of a large group…" (Eden, female, 28 years). It is evident that this identity-seeking process is linked to the group experience as well as to the individual self-perception. As noted, identity and affiliation are connected.

Yoel (male, 44 years), who oversees a cluster of *Mechinot*, adds the element of meaning: "A student enters in order to undergo a process within himself… He wants to explore his Jewish Zionist identity as well. He wants to understand… the **meaning** of Judaism in his life." Actually, meanings define identity and are components of self-perception (Burke 2020). This category also emerges from the graduates' remarks, as Shir's comment illustrates: "The *Mechina* instilled in me a desire for my life to be meaningful, to want to advance and learn and develop all the time." In religious *Mechinot*, the categories of identity and meaning usually have a religious character, although not necessarily so. Omer (male, 45 years), a religious *Mechina* graduate, recalls his *Mechina* years as follows: "Religiosity was perhaps the outwardly stated goal; I do not remember that this is what we were told. We were told: be good people… invest in building your soul."

Identity as a process of construction entails a broad framework of diverse categories, as Nevo (male, 32 years) describes: "The *Mechina* aims to have the student undergo a process in which, first and foremost, he comes to know himself… This manifests in his having **openness**, having a real **partner in dialogue**, having **responsibility**, being trusted. It is only the umbrella of openness, of responsibility… that will bring about the internal process that the person carries out…" The link between identity seeking and an open framework can be explained using Erikson's theory on the stages of Psychological Development (1950, 1956, 1968). Erikson argued that, for the sake of identity formation and the development of fidelity, young people must be granted a "moratorium" period that allows for experimentation. The interviews indicate that *Mechinot* does this through openness, dialogue, establishing a family atmosphere, and group cohesion. In addition, they demand responsibility and pose challenges. Rabbi Eliezer (53 years, head of a *Mechina*) describes the need for such a period: "For a young man who grew up in a home where he was quite pampered to make the transition from high school to the army is a plunge that scares them. They feel they need to grow up a little." *Mechina* graduates offer similar descriptions: "I felt that I was not yet ready for the rules of the army… not yet prepared for this stage of life" (Shira, female, 22 years). "I felt not quite ready for the army… I felt so unformed, so ignorant, and I'd almost never been asked for my opinion on anything in my life, so it felt too soon for me" (Edna, female, 28 years). It turned out that many felt they had not completed this stage during high school, an environment that was not sufficiently open and enabling, in which they were not expected to take responsibility or be presented with meaningful challenges.

A key characteristic of the moratorium period is freedom. Miriam (female, 52 years), the head of a *Mechina*, notes that this is what the *Mechina* tries to foster: "To foster some sort of space… to provide a place in which one can quietly grow in terms of personality." *Mechina* graduates indeed describe the sense of freedom that allowed them to consolidate their identity: "It gave me what I needed at the time; it gave me freedom… I studied what interested me" (Omer, male, 45 years). "As the year progressed, as I had more and more opportunities to put myself forward… I felt that I had the place and the backing to create… which might be what finally led me to study industrial design…" (Eden, female, 28 years).

The *Mechina* learning experience occurs in the context of a moratorium and is perceived as part of the theme of identity. It differs from academic studies in terms of nature and objectives. Eli (male, 43 years), who teaches at *Mechinot* as well as high schools, explains: "In high school, there is the material I'm supposed to teach. I look at the matriculation exam questions they will be asked. The lesson is built on this first of all… A *Mechina* lesson begins, for me, by asking about the main idea that I want them to derive from it, which they will ponder afterward… Something that will open their eyes." He divides the *Mechina* learning experience into three areas: "Regular learning: the *hevreh* [friends, 'the gang'] in a class with a teacher, with the text, studying, discussing, and thinking. Another area is that student-led sessions—which the *hevreh* prepare; they prepare texts. And there's a third area … during field trips, during agricultural and social volunteering… without teachers or texts." As such, the *Mechina* learning experience is multilayered and many of its elements are direct and personal. Miriam, a mother of a *Mechina* graduate, puts her

finger on the unique nature of the *Mechina* learning experience: "When you go to a *Mechina*, you do not go in order to study—you actually go to a place that will build your personality, to an open place, to a place that accepts you as you are. It is something completely different."

Some *Mechina* staff members are critical of this approach to learning, which they describe as "exciting, stimulating, but not in-depth learning" (Alon, male, 52 years), or "mediocre learning" (Yishai, male, 41 years). According to Goel (male, 62 years), who founded and heads a *Mechina*: "At certain *Mechinot*, the learning experience is in-depth and meaningful, but at most it is not." Some graduates admit that intellectual pursuit was not their main goal at the *Mechina*: "In many lessons, I mostly sat and drew pictures and didn't listen so much, especially when I knew there wouldn't be a final exam… That doesn't mean that I didn't learn. Many *hevreh* from my year will say that they learned very meaningful things. For me, this was not the case…" She continues, however: "I learned a lot about myself. Coping with difficulties… from that I learned a lot. So, I would not choose to pass up this learning—about myself actually" (Edna, female, 28 years). Indeed, the *Mechinot* seems to create a different learning experience, as one graduate describes:

> … Suddenly at the *Mechina*, I found myself going to classes and listening and being fascinated. So, it was really fun!... It opens up the mind, it broadens horizons, and it is fun to see the lecturers who come with a great passion for this… It's different from the teachers in high school. At school, the teacher prepares [us] for matriculation exams… it's very technical… And the *hevreh* are not there because they want to listen but because they have to… At the *Mechina*, we are there because we choose to be… And the lecturers come because they want to lecture on what they've chosen, so everything simply becomes more interesting… There would always be discussions—something that doesn't happen so much in high school… And if the lesson goes off course, nothing happens, because there is no test on it later… There were fascinating lessons there! (Eden, female, 28 years).

This type of learning occurs within the frame of identity, unlike the learning found in formal institutions that primarily focuses on acquiring knowledge or developing skills.

Autonomy (categories: Independence, Free Choice, Self-Management, Internal Motivation, Responsibility and Commitment, Activity and Initiative, Competence, and Self-efficacy).

Autonomy as used here is synonymous with independence, free choice, and self-management, which are all categories that emerge from the interviewees. According to leading theories in Developmental Psychology, autonomy is the capacity to make an informed, uncoerced decision. It is a pivotal stage according to Erikson's theory (1958; 1963) that typically refers to its second stage; however, it is also relevant to the fifth stage, wherein individuals develop a sense of self and personal identity. As previously stated, according to Erikson's theory, young people require a "moratorium" period to explore their identity, and this provides them a sense of self-control (or as I will refer to it herein "self-management"). The concept of autonomy

also applies to institutions. In that context it refers to the responsibility for procuring adequate resources and ensuring the quality of their programs, courses, and services (Skocpol 1985). As can be gleaned from the interviewees' words, it is evident that the individual and the institutional meaning merge together.

In contrast to regular schools, *Mechinot* are subject only to fiscal regulation, but not to educational regulation, and thus operate **independently**. *Mechina* directors who formerly served as high school principals describe their impressions. According to Rabbi Eliezer (53 years): "The educational system is imposed on me as a principal… The teacher is told what material to teach… The student must learn the material […]. The starting point at the *Mechina* is **free choice**, [whereas] the starting point of the education system is a compulsion. This is a fundamental difference." Goel (male, 62 years) adds a value judgment: "The main problem with school is primarily the fact that the educational staff cannot actualize their pedagogical ambitions… The principals are so deeply buried in the bureaucratic tasks that they do not have a free second to think, to form some sort of vision. […] There [at the *Mechinot*] you can do that… This is precisely the story of **self-management**." According to them, self-management generates internal motivation. Indeed, teachers at the *Mechinot* describe the situation as follows: "A *Mechina* lecturer does not teach according to some curriculum… He brings what he teaches best and most enthusiastically… because there is no curriculum to which he must adapt himself. This creates something entirely different from what exists in the schools" (Shlomo, male, 37 years). Noga (female, 29 years), a teacher who teaches at both a *Mechina* and a high school, relays her impressions: "I'm not satisfied with meeting youths and teaching them math or grammar. It's a thousand times more satisfying to learn history with them, and to learn history with them as it's learned at the *Mechina*—to understand what their history is, what they think about history… For me, it's worth it even if it means less time to sleep." The link between self-management and motivation is further discussed below.

Self-management also characterizes how students operate. In most *Mechinot*, students are responsible for cleanliness and maintenance, meal preparation, and various projects. They also have a hand in determining some of the subjects taught and inviting lecturers. The following remarks illustrate the roles students play: "Everyone volunteers for a committee. Teachers' committee, fitness committee, training sessions committee. They basically prepare everything; the staff just provides a framework" (Eli, male, 43 years, *Mechina* teacher). "The *Mechina* has all sorts of committees: a culture committee, a volunteering committee… Each committee is responsible for projects. For example, […] responsible for bringing lecturers, conducting all sorts of activities in preparation for the army, ensuring combat fitness, training for marathons…" (Eden, female, 28 years, *Mechina* graduate).

Yoel (male, 44 years), who oversees a network of *Mechinot,* explains that the goal of self-management is to instill responsibility and independence in the students: "…To educate them to independence… They are not consumers; instead, they do things themselves… It's easier for me if the director organizes a trip but that is not the issue. I send them on a preparatory trip. They create their own menu in line with the budget… The students participate and take responsibility…" Ehud (male, 44 years), a *Mechina* director, explains: "Giving the students

authority while demanding responsibility on their part is one of the most important educational tools of the *Mechina*… It contributes greatly to creating an engaged, responsible adult figure."

Responsibility fosters commitment, which emerges even before the student enters the *Mechina*, when a reciprocal selection process takes place: on the part of the student as well as the program, as Rotem (male, 37 years), a *Mechina* director, describes: "[The *Mechina*] is a selective program, and in contrast to standard schools, the people who join the program want to be there, and are selected from among other applicants. This is something that strongly influences the educational process." According to him, the reciprocal selection fosters commitment: "The very fact that he was accepted out of thousands already makes him feel committed to demonstrating success."

Responsibility and commitment that result from free choice foster **internal motivation**. Nevo (male, 32 years), a *Mechina* graduate, states this clearly: "I was enrolled in high school but not actually present… lots of nonsense, lots of skipping school, beach, trips… At the *Mechina* there's a lot of responsibility, I felt important and then I became a student who wants, who asks questions, who strives for the truth, who volunteers…" Eli (male, 43 years), a longtime *Mechina* teacher, summarizes: "This is one of the things that the world of *Mechinot* discovered—there is motivation." The category of internal motivation is very important, as many researchers and educators have written about the fact that lack of motivation is one of the top problems of education (Ames 1990; Lamm 2000, 28). Harpaz (2019, 29) argues that currently "the main problem with school is motivation to learn." As it happens, self-management inspires motivation among directors, teachers, and students alike.

I conclude this category with remarks by Yoram (male, 46 years), a *Mechina* graduate: "[In the *Mechina*, learning] is something that comes from within you and [in high school, learning] is something external. [In high school, learning] is something that you're tested on, almost against your will, and [in the *Mechina*, learning] is something that you want to delve deeper into, it interests you…" This is evidence of intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1980; 1985, 1991; 2000a, b). Intrinsic motivation is extremely important in that it is not only a positive emotional experience but it also promotes deep and creative learning, creates identity, promotes a sense of belonging, and gives a sense of meaning (Assor 2001, 175). If so, it links the various themes and explains the interaction between them.

In addition to all of these categories, which characterize education in the *Mechinot*, there is also the category of activity and initiative, leading to a sense of competence and self-efficacy. As Adi (female, 57 years), a *Mechina* founder, describes: "They (= the students) determine who they learn from, how much money they need… The most influential factor is that they are given just a few basic rules and then told: you choose, you manage everything." Eden (female, 28 years), a *Mechina* graduate, describes this from her perspective: "I mainly related to the act of doing— to the fact that everyone can present an idea and turn it into a project… I felt that we have the freedom to dream—things that were not possible before…".

Ilai (male, 35 years), a *Mechina* educator, explains that the expectation that students take action and initiative takes them "out of their comfort zone." Indeed, two

graduates of two different *Mechinot* describe how such a departure from their comfort zone cultivated their sense of competence and self-efficacy:

> At the *Mechina* I learned to be independent and not be afraid of being alone. […] Neither high school nor the army led me to understand that I am competent to do something. At the *Mechina*, one of the first things we did was train for a half-marathon… And from my perspective, the fact that I did it was like wow! Crazy!... Afterward, there were many such points, when each time you think that you cannot do something, and you discover in yourself that you can. (Eden, female, 28 years)

> At the end of the year, we took a two-week hiking trip. We were responsible for planning it and everything. This was the longest trip I had taken so far… and I really remember the feeling, the legs are already hurting and you don't want to go on, but you go on because there is no choice. And I really remember that while I was walking, I thought: Wow, this is the first time in my life that I'm in some sort of pain and I'm continuing. In the end, it was an experience that I really enjoyed… and it was a really empowering experience… Wow, I did it! (Pe'er, female, 22 years)

It appears that autonomy, competence, and motivation are interlinked, as Self-Determination Theory (STD) posits (Deci and Ryan 1980; 1985; 1991). The theory holds that a human being is an active, growth-oriented organism with a natural, inherent drive to develop, that emerges when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2000a, b). So much for the categories of autonomy and competence. The category of relatedness is addressed in the next theme.

Affiliation (categories: Group Cohesion/Family Atmosphere, Intimacy, Partnership, Acquaintanceship, Personal Relationship, and Volunteering)

A central theme that emerges from the interviews is that of Group Cohesion or a Family Atmosphere. Here I refer to it as Affiliation, which is explained previously as the collective part of identity. Erikson (1968; 1970) posits that the ego develops through both biological and sociological processes, that adolescent ego requires a certain level of diffusion, and that some boundaries of one's self-identity need to be expanded to include a wider identity.

This very concept is a salient characteristic in the *Mechinot*, as reflected in comments by Rotem [37], head of a *Mechina*, when comparing *Mechinot* with schools: "A school cannot really replace a *Mechina*… It's an unfair comparison. The intimacy of a small group within the *Mechina,* which lives together 24/7…" The element of group cohesion and the sense of intimacy it embodies are also present in religious *Mechinot*, as described by Ilai (male, 35 years), a religious *Mechina* staff member: "This is a relatively small *Mechina* and we want to maintain the home-like feeling. All the students visit the *Mechina's* rabbis at home." Likewise, Miriam (female, 52 years), who leads a religious *Mechina*, describes: "We strongly emphasize the group process…" Her remarks shed light on the physical-structural layout of the group: "A kitchen, adjacent dining room, four residential caravans, another caravan for administration, and in the back the *Beit Midrash* [study hall]. That's

it." Naturally, such proximity cultivates close ties and group intimacy. According to Miriam, even when the *Mechina*'s applicant pool increased, they made an effort to preserve the group structure and, accordingly, opened another group: "They have their own dormitory and their own classroom and their own *Beit Midrash*, their own kitchen…" Goel (male, 62 years), who headed a small mixed (religious and secular) *Mechina*, describes a similar development: "I wanted a small *Mechina* because in terms of education it's more suitable. So, I said: If we have 60 students, then we'll form two groups…"

The group's intimacy encourages the abovementioned characteristics of responsibility, commitment, and self-management: "A group that lives together 24/7, in a very, very intimate way… is responsible for itself; this has a strong influence on the educational process. If at night the *Mechina's* students did not make sure that they have vegetables, then in the morning there's no salad for breakfast… Their self-management is a core element of the educational approach" (Rotem, male, 37 years). The following remarks by Nevo (male, 32 years), a *Mechina* graduate, indicate that the sense of belonging to a group also promotes learning: "The cohesion, it really gave me a source of something to hold on to, and from that, I drew strength in all areas of the *Mechina*, lessons, summaries, perseverance…".

Life as part of an intimate group offers the students opportunities for partnership. Joel (male, 44 years), who oversees a cluster of *Mechinot*, describes the student's place in the *Mechina* as follows: "The role of students in day-to-day management […] is a major one. That is, you're not a client, you're a partner." Shlomo (male, 37 years), who teaches at *Mechinot*, adds the category of volunteering: "One of the things that *Mechinot* really try to do is to turn the students from clients into partners… You do not come in order to promote yourself… This really changes the position of the *hevreh*…, their attitude toward reality, and that creates a spirit of volunteering…" According to him, "the graduates emerge as very responsible… And they will be the ones who volunteer in the army…"

Group cohesion, intimacy, and volunteering promote acquaintanceship with additional populations: "It was my first-time meeting people from all sorts of places… and it was very interesting… The characters were different…" (Omer, male, 45 years). "I liked that there was a really wide range of people. […] I hadn't met religious people… hadn't met Ethiopians, hadn't met Russians… And suddenly I felt that there was room for lots of people, that it's possible to be different" (Eden, female, 28 years). Even at religious *Mechinot*, where the students are by definition homogenous, there is openness and an inclination toward greater familiarity. Rabbi Eliezer (53 years), who runs a *Mechina* for religious boys, claims that the *Mechina* "is open to vast worlds of knowledge: literature, general philosophy, activities." Likewise, the mother of a graduate who attended a secular *Mechina* describes: "They have a stated goal of creating a certain mix… of providing the experience of being with those who have less in certain areas, or who have a certain disability" (Ziona, 58 years).

Group cohesion, intimacy, and responsibility create strong ties among the students. Eden (female, 28 years) offers a retrospective view: "I look at our *Mechina* group, it was so strong then… it's crazy! The group's cohesion… if I need help—they will all come to my aid…" This feeling also stems from having close, personal

relationships with the staff members. Alon (male, 52 years), a founder of *Mechinot*, describes the planning for the establishment of mixed and secular *Mechinot*. According to him, it was a learning process: "We traveled for a few months to Oxford, to Cambridge, to see how these places established the leadership that created British democracy. There we discovered the ratio of counselors and the students… that the group comprises one counselor for six or seven students." This is indeed the staff-to-student ratio maintained at most of the *Mechinot*, each of which has an average of 35–45 students and usually numbers five staff members: the head of the *Mechina*, a director, and three young counselors aged 22–27 years. — of *Mechinot* explains: "The counselors are present on a daily basis, they mentor the committees, they are close to them in age. They are mediators of sorts; they are closer to their world" (Yoel, male, 44 years). The students' relations with the staff members are very intense: "It's from 7 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. approximately. The counselors participate in all activities, including lessons" (Miriam, female, 52 years). Sarit (female, 21 years), a *Mechina* graduate, describes it from her perspective: "… Those who are there are crazy about it … They're there almost 24/7. They have to be people with fire in their eyes because it comes very much at the expense of their private lives…".

I will term such tremendous dedication later on as intensity, but at this point I submit these expressions create unique learning experiences, as Eli (male, 43 years), a longtime teacher at *Mechinot*, describes: "I meet the *hevreh* at all hours of the day… at 8 a.m., 11 a.m., 6 p.m. At 8 p.m. or midnight—those are the best hours. They are alert at those times… We don't sit in a classroom, we sit on the lawn, on couches… Those are the best lessons… I don't bring lessons from a text, but instead [bring] life lessons." He adds: "I have personal conversations with them and I stay there […] talking until the middle of the night and also staying there to sleep." Thus, it is understandable that a personal connection and sense of intimacy develop between staff members and *Mechina* students. They are enabled by means of the informal approach that will be examined in the next theme. The willingness of the counselors and staff to go above and beyond belongs in the category of volunteering. The general approach at *Mechinot* is one of volunteering, which permeates its activities throughout the year, as Rotem (male, 37 years), head of a *Mechina*, describes: "The contribution to the community, volunteering, this is something that is very present and has a strong influence in terms of educating for activism and so on. It is very rare today to find a general (secular or mixed) *Mechina* that doesn't have this (volunteering) element as 20% of its schedule." This category is more dominant in general *Mechinot*, although it is also present in a large number of religious *Mechinot*. Ilai (35 years), a rabbi and counselor at a religious *Mechina*, describes the educational perspective at his *Mechina*: "To combine Torah study with giving." According to him, "there is a huge number of volunteer activities going on here…".

Informal Approach (categories: Informal Structure, Intensity, Disruption, Extreme Experience).

Until now I have identified many categories that characterize the activities of *Mechinot*. How are they able to coexist? Rotem (male, 37 years), head of a *Mechina*, explains: "The **informal** space in which the *Mechinot* operate allows them to do things very, very differently… and this greatly affects the educational process." Musa (male, 51 years), head of a Druze *Mechina*, emphasizes the

uniqueness of this aspect: "Schools are task-oriented, oriented to matriculation exams and achievements and grades … But the complementary aspect […] and **informal** chapter is lacking. So, this is the role of *Mechinot*."

Later I will discuss how "informal approach" is defined. For now, my only intention is to explain that the informal approach of *Mechinot* is reflected in the range of categories mentioned previously: autonomy and self-management, moratorium and volunteering, intimacy and personal relationships, etc. The informal approach is evident in the sense of free choice, in learning without a fixed syllabus or exams, and the like. It manifests in group gatherings that sometimes resemble sitting together in a youth club (couches, footrests, and armchairs), in the many field trips (hikes, volunteer activities, and outdoor training sessions), and in other ways (see Drori 2019, 5, 74). This approach should not be confused with nonchalance or complacency. On the contrary, the daily schedule at the *Mechinot* is very full, "from about seven in the morning until 22:30 at night" (Miriam, female, 52 years); at some *Mechinot* the day is even longer.

The combination of an **intensity** and an **informal approach** can explain something of the "magic" that takes place in the *Mechina*. The term "magic" was expressed by one of the interviewers and also by some researchers who have studied Jewish summer camps in North America. These camps, which will be discussed below, also had a combination of an intense experience and an informal approach:

> Residential camp is a youth society based on community and friendship. It is an intensive "24/7" environment that encourages participants to try out new behaviors and learn new skills. It is, above all, a place to have fun. Camps seem to work "magic"— captivating children's imaginations, building strong camp memories, and easily winning lifelong devotees. These same conditions make camp an ideal venue for informal Jewish education that gives children the experience of life in a Jewish community and teaches them about Judaism (Sales and Saxe 2002, 3).

I will identify this "magic" later. Here it should be noted that this intensity is not always a fun or easy experience. Previously we mentioned the fact that participants needed to step out of their comfort zones. Here it should be added that for some individuals this experience can be particularly challenging: "The intensity there was very hard for me… Being together all day every day, with no privacy and not having one second to get away, and some days are very long—so it was very tiring… Being very, very overburdened with many new things that I was suddenly exposed to" (Edna, female, 28 years). The burden appears to be intentional. Goel (male, 62 years), former head of a *Mechina*, argues that the shape of the *Mechinot* is designed to generate disruption:

> For students, this is a very, very disruptive period in their lives... it is meant to also be unstable. [...] In education, in order for a person to move from a place they are in, to be open to new things, to see himself in a different way- he must also experience disruption.

The Intensity category appears to emerge as a result of the combination of the other categories: Identity, Autonomy, Responsibility, Acquaintanceship, Initiative, Disruption, and others. At its peak, its leads to another category that I will call Extreme Experiences. Interviewees whom I asked to note an event in the *Mechina* that left them with a unique impression answered:

> We had a *survival week*, which I think for everyone was perhaps the hardest week of their lives. Certainly, it was for me! A week that was very very hard physically, and very hard mentally. We received half a kilo of rice, three dates for a week, and a few lentils- a small quantity of food, on an extreme scale, and we had to carry everything on our backs, and for a week we went and navigated in the desert… We got to some very extreme points, it was cold, you also walked a lot, you were hungry, tired, sleeping without a sleeping bag... (Eden, female, 28 years).

These extreme experiences seem very constructive, as one young graduate attests:

> We had a field training session […] it was really hard […] but absolutely constructive. [...] We were split into groups, and we navigated alone […] we all had a really small amount of food [...] It was really an experience that was very powerful, and very difficult […] and these are the things that in the end are very constructive. (Sarit, female, 21 years)

Extreme experiences create short-term instability and build the personality of the student. The student reaches his or her limit, not only physically, but socially and culturally as well:

> We met people that I would not normally meet in the normal group I associate with, so it really expanded horizons. We were in many situations that simply wouldn't happen anywhere else. (Sarit).

Discussion

Intertwined themes

Through the interviews, many categories emerged, most of which are similar to the findings of other researchers in the fields of Jewish learning (see Dorph and Schunn 2018).[1] I suggested dividing them into four themes: Identity, Autonomy, Affiliation, and Informal Approach. These themes consolidate the primary categories and demonstrate the educational philosophy behind *Mechinot*.

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[1] Dorph and Schunn mention categories such as Fascination, Values, Competency Belief, Interpretive Thinking, Sense of Belonging, Spiritual Stance, Choice, Engagement, Perceived Success, and Learning (21–22). Similar categories, though not identical, emerge from the research of Ben Ari-Amzaleg (2015, 48–57).

I intend to posit that none of these themes stand alone, as they are all interdependent and intertwined with one another: identity is shaped by and through affiliation, autonomy is made possible and molded by means of an informal approach. It is very difficult to draw clear separating lines between them. The interviews reveal that education in *Mechinot* is perceived as an intrinsic part of life, and as such, cannot be cataloged into distinct themes. We have to be aware that we are dealing with intellectual abstractions. Separating the experience into themes is akin to breaking down a cake into its ingredients: while you can consume them all, the overall cohesive experience is vastly different than the sum of its individual parts.

This significant point is paramount, as the distinctiveness of education in *Mechinot* lies in their capacity to reconcile opposing features: the individual and the group, freedom and responsibility, and intimacy and acquaintanceship. Thus, in my view, it is more important to see the big picture that includes all the categories rather than breaking it down into discrete themes. It is the big picture that uncovers the educational philosophy of the *Mechinot*.

This big picture is valuable for both Jewish and general educators who want to foster and cultivate the young generation's identity, autonomy, and affiliation. Some educators who deal with this issue often feel embarrassed when they try to explain their strategy (see Kelman 2019; Krasner 2019; Zelkowicz 2019). For example, they use mixed metaphors and fail to make a clear, rational, and coherent statement about identity and how they attempt to strengthen it (Gottlieb 2019). The intertwined themes offered here can clarify this matter and explain how it works. It supports the claim that identity is not conveyed by educators through formal instruction but through community life and experiential education (see Slawson 1967, 14; Kolodner 2018; Krasner 2019, 56–57; Zelkowicz 2019, 153; Kelner 2019). As Levinson (2019, 226) claims "identity is not the kind of thing that one just *has*, but rather, it is the kind of thing that one *performs*, in various ways and at various times." Identity is not a given, but an activity (see Zelkowicz 2019, 153–154, 163–165; Levinson 2019).[2]

This is how the *Mechinot* work. They do not try to educate by teaching about identity but operate as a small community that acts and lives together, giving their students the opportunity to enjoy their own autonomy. Thus, their students receive practical experience, social skills, and self-efficacy. This fits Erikson's claim that identity has a psychological component that involves relationships with larger groups and internalization of the group culture, values, and philosophical outlook (Krasner 2019, 37).

Moreover, not only in the area of identity but also in every aspect of learning, the learner should be an active partner in the kinds of knowledge that have meaning for them (Kelman 2018). Learning is about engagement with knowledge as part of a web of other social, cultural, and interpersonal dimensions (ibid., 61). This sheds light on the distinctive educational methodology and the underlying motivational factors observed in the *Mechinot*. They combine knowledge with action, autonomy

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[2] In due course, Levinson moderates his formulation and writes: "To be overly schematic about it, sometimes practices create identities, and sometimes identities create practices."

with affiliation, and so on. Eventually it fits into the theory of whole child education (WCE), which focuses on multi-dimensional learning (e.g., emotional, social, and cognitive), which encourages core intra- and interpersonal skills [Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) 2012].

Informal Approach and Jewish Summer Camps

As I mentioned, it appears that the *Mechinot* have the ability to integrate so many varied themes and categories as a result of their informal approach. This educational approach received scholarly attention at the end of the previous century. Levin (1995) examined the educational structure for the very young, and noted that learning during this period of development is a very personal, informal process, and achieved by means of trial and error and social processes and through characters that the child imitates. In his opinion, the archetype for the model of informal education is the family.

Rapoport and Kahane dealt with adolescence. Rapoport (1993) found that informal frameworks play an important role in the development of moral awareness and a feeling of responsibility. According to her, these frameworks are characterized to a great extent by autonomy, voluntary participation, symmetrical reciprocity, activity spaces that allow for the expression of diverse talents and interests, encouragement to try different experiences, and giving legitimacy to making mistakes and temporary deviation from norms. These frameworks constitute a social arena in which youth explore their beliefs, interests, and talents, and develop a social orientation, trust, and initiative. Kahane (1997) formulated the code of informal education, and identified eight components, which include: voluntarism, multiplexity, dualism, and moratorium. Additionally, he noted components such as social participation, activity, cooperation, and responsibility. All of these enable the individual to acquire identity, skills, and life talents that cannot be acquired in a formal framework. They contribute to independence, self-conception, and leadership skills.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the informal approach and the educational philosophy behind *Mechinot*, and to try to understand the root cause of their success, it is essential to compare them with other Jewish education programs that also use an informal approach, such as the "Israel Experience" educational tours (Cohen 1999), Mifgashim Programs for Jewish Youth (Bar Shalom 1998), Birthright Israel free tour program (Saxe et al. 2000; 2001; 2002; 2004), and Youth Tours to Israel (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2002; Cohen 2008), among others. Within the specific context of *Mechinot*, it seems that the most striking parallels are to be found with Jewish summer camps. In both, *Mechinot* and summer camps, we find a youth society based on community and friendship that shares an intensive "24/7" environment. In both, the youngsters take upon themselves great responsibility and try to be independent, by setting up relatively isolated communities that remove them from their home environments and encourage them to create an alternative one. Finally, in both the participants are closely guided by young counselors who serve as role models (Fox 1997; Sales and Saxe 2002 2004). A comparative analysis of the *Mechinot*

programs with the well-studied Jewish summer camp programs can help clarify the educational philosophy and the success of the former.

Most researchers of North American Jewish summer camps mention some of the categories presented previously (Community, Social Intimacy, and Identity; Zeldin 2006; Krasner 2019, 55); giving meaning (Reimer 2007 2012); personal connection between campers and counselors (Gamoran 2007); and autonomy (Zeldin 2006, 94). In both settings, this results in a positive atmosphere and support from parents, participants, and the community.

Identifying all the parallels between *Mechinot* and summer camps would require a separate study since we are dealing with different ages and duration of the programs, among other factors. North American Jewish summer camps are aimed at younger audiences that require more control and supervision, whereas *Mechinot* provide more space and independence for older participants. The former takes place for several weeks, while the latter lasts a year or more. Although both provide a Jewish education, there are significant cultural differences between North American youth and young adults in Israel. Thus, the comparison between those two programs is limited. Nevertheless, the high levels of motivation and satisfaction observed in both programs do not seem to be coincidental. Rather, it can be attributed to the shared educational philosophy underpinning them, which consists of the four themes mentioned previously. The fact that these principles are effective across different environments indicates that they are not dependent on incidental conditions, specific characteristics, or a particular age group. The effectiveness of this philosophy is not tied to the content being taught or to a specific activity; rather, it hinges on the key features and categories mentioned previously.

Deliberate education

Mechinot, similar to summer camps, operate by an informal method. Informal education does not refer to accidental learning, but is rather a systematic educational process that involves a deliberate effort and involves a designed curriculum (Chazan 2003; Zeldin 2006; Gamoran 2007). Reimer (2007, 12) mentions Cremin (1977, viii), who famously defines "education" as "the deliberate, systematic and sustained effort to transmit, evoke or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills or sensibilities as well as any outcomes of that effort." According to this definition, not every influence is Education but it includes only those who act deliberately and systematically at exerting that influence. *Mechinot* and summer camps seem to fall within this category, as stated by Reimer: "Education is not limited to schooling, but involves all those social institutions that have a stake in shaping a next generation. Educators are not just those trained to teach or program, but all those in a position to directly or indirectly influence that shaping." Considering this aspect, informal education appears to be more effective than formal education in shaping the next generation, as it holds greater influence over their development. By their informal approach these two programs manage to combine a wide range of categories in a synergistic way: group cohesion, intimacy, personal connection, role models, autonomy, moratorium, activism, partnership and responsibility etc. It seems that the ability to combine

multiple categories came from their informal approach, and this is what make them so appealing.

Motivation and satisfaction

The attractiveness of these programs is described in both as a kind of magic (Sales and Saxe 2002, 3; Zeldin 2006; Reimer 2012, 122). This term is not entirely clear, but it seems that magic refers first of all to the high level of motivation and personal satisfaction of the participants. Based on my analysis, it appears that the perceived magic of these programs can be attributed to deliberate and systematic efforts in combining multiple categories through an informal approach. As Harpaz noted (2019, 24), students associate the formal framework with a negative environment, which is alienating and meaningless, whereas they associate informal frameworks, such as youth movements, sport teams, and extra-curricular activities, with significant settings, even though they can be demanding or even overwhelming. I find that participants relate to the *Mechinot* exactly in this way—as demanding yet significant settings. Consequently, the structure of informal education can explain the magic of their popularity and the satisfaction they bring about. Here lies the answer to the previous questions: What benefits do participants get? Why do they spend their time in the *Mechinot*? It seems that they find in them their own identity and affiliation, along with meaning and challenges. Their motivation corresponds to the self-determination theory mentioned previously. Whether consciously or not, they realize that *Mechinot*—similar to summer camps—are a place where they can grow. Their intrinsic motivation emerges in the right environment.

Conclusion

Pre-military *Mechinot* in Israel represent an innovative educational enterprise, similar to other models in which practice has long preceded theory. While the practice of *Mechinot* is quite well known, their theoretical conceptualization is lacking. It should be emphasized that, even when they act independently, in the end their activities are similar and can be conceptualized through the same themes, noted previously as Identity, Autonomy, Affiliation, and Informal Approach.

We compared the popularity of *Mechinot* with the significant popularity achieved by Jewish summer camps in North America, which act very similarly (Wertheimer 1999, 89; Zeldin 2006, 110). It turns out that there are many parallels between these two educational programs, not necessarily in terms of their ideology but rather in terms of their methodology. It is likely not a coincidence that both have attained significant popularity. While it may be difficult to prove with certainty, Harpaz's study suggests that the informal aspect of these two programs plays a central role in their popularity, in the steady increase in student enrollment, and in the high level of participant motivation and satisfaction. This assumption aligns with Deci and Ryan's theory of intrinsic motivation (SDT), which develops under conditions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, referred to here as affiliation.

It seems that the *Mechinot*, much as summer camps do, echo a similar ethos to that of prominent youth movements in the Israeli landscape. Established entities such as the Israeli Scouts (Zofim), Young Guard (Hashomer Hatzair), Working and Studying Youth (HaNoar HaOved VeHaLomed), and Bnei Akiva have had an established presence in Israel for many years (Naor 1989; Lamm 1991; Kahane 1997; Cohen 2015). Some argue that the *Mechinot* are an extension of these youth movements and are inspired by them (Michali and Gartal 2022). Could this help elucidate their widespread popularity in Israel? This intriguing question warrants deeper inquiry and further research, particularly given the enduring interest in informal education within Jewish educational circles (Krasner 2019; Kelman 2019). Furthermore, there appears to be a growing global interest in this field (Manaig 2020, 9), suggesting that research in this area will likely expand in the future.

Let's end with the words of Chazan (2003):

There is much to learn from serious research and from case studies of prominent forms of contemporary informal education in the Jewish world and the world at large. The practice of informal education is blossoming and is worthy of serious and diverse modes of research and analysis.

Our study aligns with this idea and aims to contribute to the development and refinement of educational practices. It holds the potential to address the needs of participants, not only within the context of Jewish education specifically but also beyond it.

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