BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

The roles that teachers play in adolescents′ processes of identity formation as they are reflected in graduate students′ life stories

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master's

Degree in the School of Education, Bar-Ilan University

Ramat Gan, Israel   **2016**

Abstract

This study examines the significance of teachers in contributing to identity processes and the building of identity capital in adolescents. We examined whether teachers recognized as significant by the students are described as such due to their perceived influence on the identity processes undergone by the students: identification, exploration, and commitment; as well as positioning, resistance, and negotiation. Furthermore, we examined whether the significance of teachers is associated with the students' experience of those teachers as contributing to the students' construction of "identity capital": a sense of belonging, a sense of uniqueness, a sense of, a sense of acknowledgement, a worldview, and sense of coherence.

The literature regards a *significant other* as someone who positively affects another person (Tatar, 1998a). The term "significant other" describes a person who holds a high degree of "importance", whose opinions are considered meaningful. Thus, a significant other can have considerable influence over an adolescent (Lackovic-Gergin & Dekovic, 1990). Tatar classifies significant figures in the lives of adolescents: in the family – mother, father, siblings, and other relatives; and outside the family – same-gender friends, romantic partners, teachers, and others (Tatar, 1998). While the relationship between adolescents and their peers has been examined extensively, the relationship between the adolescent and the teacher has been studied relatively little (Tatar, 1998a).

Tatar and Kessler (2002) have paid particular attention to the figure of the "significant" teacher, and formulated a "psychological profile" of the significant teacher, noting potential attributes of such a teacher. They claim that teachers seen as significant by their students are those who provide emotional support and foster cognitive development (Tatar, 1998b). The literature has shown that studies made thus far have primarily addressed the relationship between the student and the "good teacher", and have focused on the figure of the "ideal" teacher. Thus for example: Kubovi, 1978; Zilberstein and Katz, 1998; Goldberg, 1994; Maor and Eshel, 2001. These studies however were not concerned with the figure of the teacher as co-shaper of students' identity, or as having long-term influence on the individual's understanding of self and personal identity. This study therefore will attempt to examine the teacher's significance as it results from his or her contribution to, and

role in, *shaping the identity* of adolescents; and his contribution to their *identity capital* from the adolescents' point of view.

The study is based on the view that school is a key component of the adolescent's social context, and thus holds important potential for identity formation (Schachter & Rich, 2011). They defined Identity Education as educators' taking an active, guiding role in psychological processes and experiences involved in students' identity formation. The individual's identity defines the individual as individual, as a separate and unique entity, but also defines his place in society. The individual's identity formation starts in childhood and early adolescence (Flum, 1995), but in adolescence a reexamination of the various identifications takes place, at the influence of three significant developmental factors and changes typical of adolescence: puberty, cognitive development, and societal demands (Kroger, 2007).

Erikson stresses the critical role of society in identify formation. He claims that the role of the older generation in society is to provide a variety of significant identity models to help the adolescent organize his identifications (Schachter, 2004). Erikson's process-oriented view holds that throughout the life cycle, on a continuum of eight developmental stages, the individual deals with a series of psycho-social crises. A crisis according to Erikson is a normative turning point, providing opportunity to tackle constituent issues of the individual's identity formation. The identity-formation stage is the fifth developmental stage, normally taking place in adolescence, in which the individual internalizes various identifications collected in childhood, and reexamines those identifications towards the formation of the self's identity. The adolescent's role is to adopt an identity definition and commit to it. This commitment is essential for transitioning into the world of adults.

According to Erikson, therefore, the individual must undergo three meaningful processes so as to form a stable, coherent identity: identification, exploration, and commitment. This study has examined the claim that, since teachers are present during students' significant developmental periods, there is reason over time to assume that students will link their experiences with the "significant teacher" to processes of identification, exploration, and commitment.

In his studies, Korobov (2015) presents the "symbolic interactionist" approach to identity, and discusses "discursive (dialogic) positioning". In this approach, identity processes involve the production/reception of implicit or explicit claims regarding the "self". The individual positions himself vis-à-vis his surroundings, and at times the

surroundings position him. When an individual wishes to examine the positioning offered to him, he can negotiate with his surroundings regarding this positioning. In addition, when this positioning fails to serve the individual, and he has no wish for it, he can enact a process of resistance. Although identities take shape over time, this perspective sees identity as open to negotiation and resistance. It also recognizes that the broader context affects the individual's ability to manage and express his identity in a given situation.

This study has set out to examine the claim that students who spend many hours meeting teacher figures during their lifetime will encounter positioning attempts by teachers. In addition, we've hypothesized that teachers can encourage negotiation and resistance processes in their students, and thus our claim has been that the "significant teacher" will be perceived as such because he was involved in students' positioning, negotiation, and resistance processes.

The significance of teacher involvement in the various identity processes is related to the processes' contribution to building "identity capital" (Cote, 1997). Cote's model of identity capital stresses that the establishing of personal identity is made possible through interpersonal negotiation with social elements (such as one's peer group, social institutions, and family) - and by both using resources (social capital) in those interactions, and acquiring from them additional resources that enable the person to claim a particular identity valued by society. Identity capital resources vary by their actuality and tangibility. More tangible resources tend to manifest in the behavior of individuals, while intangible ones, constituting personality traits, must be abstract in order for us to learn them. The acquisition of identity capital regards the individual's net assets at a given point in time.

Tangible attributes may include financial resources, academic credentials (degrees and certificates), human capital (friendships), language capital (speech patterns), and cultural capital (social standing). Intangible attributes may include psychological vitality, and capacities such as the exploration of commitment, ego strength, an internal locus of control, self-monitoring, self-esteem, a sense of meaning to life, the taking of a social viewpoint, critical thinking abilities, and moral reasoning abilities. What these qualities all have in common is that they enable individuals to understand and conduct social negotiation during the obstacles and opportunities encountered later in life as adults.

As mentioned, the building of identity capital is related to the psychological

resources that the individual acquires throughout life. These resources will ultimately shape the individual's personality, helping him to define "who he is" – by which the individual will be positioned, and get ahead, in society. Therefore, this study has hypothesized that educational interactions with teachers are perceived as significant because they enable the individual to build identity capital, and thus develop his identity. In other words, teachers can have a meaningful role in their ability to provide specific identity resources, and thus broaden the students' identity capital, enabling them to "maintain an identity" as adults in the world.

This study's research population includes fourteen students in emerging adulthood (ages 20-25) studying in various academic settings in Israel, including colleges. The study employed a qualitative method, using semi-structured "theme-based life story" interviews. In this approach, subjects are asked to tell their life story, or part of it, but also to address particular subjects of interest to the researcher. In this study, the subjects were asked to tell their life story, as well as to relate to particular experiences that they recall with teachers in general and with significant teachers in particular.

The reason that the narrative approach was chosen for this study is that narratives are interpretive tools that constitute a practical, but also very selective, view through which people see the world around them and assign it meaning. Narratives help the individual to interpret and structure his experiences (Gudmundsdottir, 1995). A narrative identity is a unit in a person's life as experienced and formulated in the stories expressing this experience. The individual lives his life according to a script ensuring that his actions are part of a meaningful whole, organized in such a way that he can examine them and justify them by clarifying them (McAdams, 2001).

During our analysis, we created tables according to the various categories we'd assembled from the research literature. After repeatedly and meticulously reading the interviews, we marked the relevant statements for each criterion, entering the texts in our table where appropriate. The table was comprised of identity processes: identification, exploration, and commitment; as well as positioning, resistance and negotiation. In addition, there were components of "identity capital": a sense of belonging, a sense of uniqueness, a sense of ability to act in the world towards self-realization, a sense of acknowledgement, a worldview, and coherence. Finally, we

created a report (the results chapter), containing a sufficient number of quotes pertaining to each of the relevant components. The report also stated the circumstances in which the testimonials were collected, in order to show that the data collection is logically related to the research questions.

The study's findings support the hypothesis that a significant teacher is perceived as such due to his taking part in promoting adolescents' identity processes and building of identity capital. It was found that, by and large, the significant teachers are indeed described as such because they were involved in identity processes undergone by the students. The use of theoretical terminology on identity development processes helps to understand the teachers' significance within the students' stories. Students have testified that the teachers were an encouraging and facilitating factor in their identity processes - such as identification, exploration, and commitment; as well as processes like negotiation positioning and resistance. In addition, students testified that significant teachers they'd met had enriched their identity capital with a sense of belonging, a sense of uniqueness, a sense of ability to act in the world towards self-realization, a sense of acknowledgement, a worldview, and a sense of coherence. In this study, we will detail how the identity experiences manifest in practice, and will notice differences among different processes and different types of identity capital in the stories.

The results of this study indicate that identification processes of the Erikson school were found to dominate students' experiences with the significant school-time teacher. Many respondents mentioned significant teacher figures with whom they'd identified during school. In addition, we found that most respondents described exploratory processes, mainly pertaining to religious identity, but also ones in academic and professional spheres. We found in the interviews that respondents mainly mentioned the encouraging of exploratory processes about their identity, the educators' destabilizing of the students' adopted worldviews, and the educators' legitimization of asking questions. Finally, we found that students attribute significance to a teacher who encouraged or demanded of them commitment to aspects of their personality, particularly during (early and late) puberty. These educators expected the students to decide on their identity and commit to it. In the students' experience, they are expected to choose a religious, professional, familial,

etc. identity.

The study further found that students mentioned processes they'd undergone that can be understood using terminology from the symbolic interaction tradition, including positioning, negotiation, and resistance, and linking them to experiences with the significant teacher. We found that students perceive the significant teacher as someone who promoted positioning processes in them, or who positioned their identity. Positioning can be positive but also negative: we found in the respondents' stories negative experiences with significant teachers, related to the resistance processes undergone by the students. The findings show a link between significant teachers in the negative sense and the student's resistance to the way in which the educator positioned his identity. Teachers are perceived by students as negatively significant when they position the student's identity, and the student reacts by resisting this positioning. The study found no student experiences in which the significant teacher encouraged or promoted in them a process of resisting an identity positioning. Finally, we found that educators who encouraged or responded to students' need to negotiate about their identity were perceived as significant by those students. In addition, the interviews mentioned educator figures who were perceived as positioning the students' identity, and the respondents described a process of inner or interpersonal negotiation with the educational figure that positioned their identity.

Lastly, the study found that the "significant teacher" is perceived as such by students due to his being linked and involved with products of identity capital acquired by the students during life. We've shown how the six attributes described in Schachter's model (Schachter, 2014) - a sense of belonging, a sense of uniqueness, a sense of ability to act in the world towards self-realization, a sense of acknowledgement, a worldview, and a sense of coherence - were indeed seen in the interviews as elements reinforced in, or added to, the respondents' lives following encounters with the significant teacher. In addition, we have provided stories in which teachers were perceived as negatively significant due to their undermining the previously mentioned feelings.