

# ABSTRACT

This study deals with the educational perceptions held by Jewish thought high school teachers in the general educational system in Israel. The study examined whether the teachers perceive the involvement in identity formation processes of adolescents as a part of their role in the post-modern era context.

The theoretical rationale my study relies on is the Identity Education model in the school (IdEd) conducted by the researchers Schachter and Rich (Schachter & Rich, 2011). These researchers postulated that some teachers actually see their educational role along the same lines that is their involvement, through their teaching in the identity formation of their students. The researchers define identity education as the active deliberate involvement of educators in the psycho-social processes and in the practices which are involved in the identity development of the students. The researchers claim that school teachers have the ability to be deliberately involved in processes and contents of their students' identity formation and many teachers implement this approach since the characteristics related to their students' identity seem to serve educational purposes, in their opinion. In their perception, one of the rationales which bind identity formation to education is the claim that the consolidation of a stable, coherent identity is a developmental task which is vital to the continuance of a healthy mental development. Since the time period in which the individual develops, for the most part, in this developmental task is during high school the teachers might perceive the role of educational system authorities to be of assistance in this process. Therefore, their assumption is that there is cause to assume that teachers operate in an active deliberate manner in order to form their students' identity (Schachter & Rich, 2011). This claim has not been tested empirically with this focus thus far among high school teachers, and this is the purpose of the current study.

My study views high school teachers as identity agents. The term identity agents can be found in the study of Schachter and Ventura (Schachter & Ventura, 2008). According to their definition identity agents are people who conduct active interactions, face to face, with children and adolescents with the intent and purpose of participating in their identity formation, who reflect and intermediate vast social influences on the identity formation of the children and adolescents. Parents, teachers, mentors, religious mentors, and youth group leaders are all potential social agents. The researchers explain that the word partners comes to emphasize that these agents are not simply people from whom the adolescent has to be separated but also serve as a potential source for a positive formation of the adolescent's identity. Schachter and Ventura conducted a qualitative study among religious parents and derived from their life stories that they perceive themselves as **active**, reflective, face to face partners in the formation of their children's identities. Furthermore, the parents developed a clear point of view in regards to the hows and whys of the extent of their involvement in this process. They claim that the social agents have a deliberate consideration of the needs and goals of the desired identity formation of the adolescent. The

analysis conducted by Schachter and Ventura discovered six components/characteristics which identity agents have. **The characteristics are:** Assessment, Praxis, Goals, Identity concern, implicit theory, Reflexivity. In my study I will try to detect whether these characteristics are realized in the perceptions and actions of Jewish thought teachers.

In addition, this study aims to innovate in the fact that it refers to teachers as workers in the special context in which identity formation occurs – the postmodern era. The study wishes to examine whether teachers justify the involvement in identity issues as a result of this context which is characterized by frequent and continuous changes, multiple simultaneous cultural frameworks, multiple realities, mind reduction to information, cultural and moral relativity, desperation and uncertainty from progress, extreme individuality, disassembly of community and family frameworks, and a feeling of social alienation (Schachter, 2005; Avissar, 2005; Aloni, 2005). The teachers in high school operate in a postmodern context and this can affect their perception of their role as social agents in the classroom and require them to deal with the difficulties and challenges which the postmodern era summons for their perception in this context.

In my study I chose to focus on a unique study arena which in my opinion will shed some light on the issues of teachers' perceptions in regards to being social agents in the postmodern era in an accentuated manner. The chosen arena is Jewish thought – an area of study taught in high school in the national educational system. Jewish thought is an area of study which belongs to Jewish studies in high school. The uniqueness of Jewish thought lies in the fact that according to the ministry of education it allows the students to deal with existential topics which are important to them and to handle the questions raised by the students about these topics (Schachter & Galili-Schachter, 2012). According to this approach, the study of Jewish thought contributes to personal and national identity consolidation as Jews, as Israelis and as humans. The students meet the world of the greatest Jewish thinkers throughout the generations in their reference to topics which are relevant to their worlds (Jewish thought supervisor coordinator of profession site <http://cms.education.gov.il>). Jewish thought and the traditional contents which are included in its study in non-religious schools might serve as an especially fertile context for teachers in dealing with identity issues. The traditional contents (the context) are perceived as being in constant stress against the secular identity of the student and against the characteristics of the postmodern era which include: globalism, relativism, chaos and fragmentation. As a result, identity stresses and identity issues arise in relation to personal and cultural association. Therefore, the area of study of Jewish thought might present the teachers with a vocation in identity issues in a more intensive manner.

In light of all the aforementioned, the purpose of my study was to find out the perceptions and viewpoints of Jewish thought teachers in regards to their ability and will to be involved in the identity formation of their students; to examine whether they address the postmodern era characteristics in their way of thinking as a consideration for this involvement and by which means; and the way they describe the means in which this involvement presents itself in their classroom operation.

Additional questions can be derived from the general purpose of my study about Jewish thought teachers' perceptions, in high school, in the postmodern era – questions to which this study will try to provide answers:

- 1) Do Jewish thought teachers perceive themselves as identity formation creators for their students and if so, in what way? In other words, does dealing with identity issues perceived by teachers as a part of their role?
- 2) If so, what are the educational goals Jewish teachers have in regards to identity development of the students in this situation?
- 3) Which educational practices do Jewish thought teachers implement on their perception in order to be a part of their students' identity formation process?
- 4) What are the difficulties and restrictions presented by Jewish thought teachers during the process of their students' identity formation ?
- 5) Do Jewish thought teachers perceive the students' social reality in the context of postmodern era characteristics and do they relate this reality to their role the context of identity ?

In order to provide answers to these study questions a qualitative study was conducted among ten teachers who teach Jewish thought in the same national high school. This study is case study. Ten teachers participated in this study, all of them have an academic background, men and women alike whose age range falls between 25-65+ , secular and religious, with different tenures in teaching. The study was conducted in adherence to the rules of ethics and morals required from an academic researcher. In order to collect the data I conducted Qualitative marketing researches with each teacher during the first stage of the study. Using the "life stories" analysis technique the teachers' perceptions about the perception of reality in the child's environment, their identicalness development goals in the situation, and an implicit developmental theory in regards to the means by which this type of identity is created were revealed. In order to enhance the reliability of the collected data, I implemented the customary triangulation of qualitative research. After conducting the interview, I observed five teachers during one Jewish thought lesson, and after the lesson ended I conducted a short referencing interview with each teacher. This process will allow me to understand the collected data and to enhance the reliability level of the qualitative data.

I analyzed the results by using qualitative research methods. I mainly relied on two methods which were developed in this context – created by Gilligan and Alexander. Gilligan et al. (In Brown et al, 1988) proposes a "top to bottom" method called "text directed reading". She claims that a researcher

has to read the text and all the while search for topics and questions which he would like to research. Gilligan claims that the researcher "sheds light" on the text in this way. When I analyzed the interviews, theoretical concepts came to my mind. These concepts were reviewed in literature and they relate to the content field of identity and of identity education. Furthermore, I also used Alexander's method (Alexander, 1988). He proposes his own method called "asking the data a question". In this method the researcher approaches text analysis within a certain question and for each segment, paragraph he asks the same question and checks whether the data provides an answer to the main question. In order to implement this method I "asked the text" my study questions (shown above) in each one of the interviews. In the results chapter the main themes are presented with several subthemes which were presented in the teachers' perceptions in reference to each study question. Each theme displayed some quotes from the teachers and results from the observation which demonstrate the theme. From the analysis of the teachers' words it was discovered that Jewish thought teachers indeed perceive themselves as identity agents in the classroom.

The first study question found that most Jewish thought teachers perceive themselves as affecters on identity formation of students and three main themes were identified: 1. Identity concern, 2. Implicit theory, 3. Jewish thought as an identity forming discipline.

The second study question which dealt with educational goals of Jewish thought teachers identified five educational goals which teachers have in regards to the student's identity development. They are: 1. Commitment, 2. Social identity creation, 3. Identity literacy, 4. development of cognitive identity skills such as, critical thought, commitment and presentation attitudes and testing different alternatives, 5. Being sociocentric connection and involvement in society.

The third study question dealt with educational practices implemented by Jewish thought teachers in regards to their perceptions in the identity formation process. Five main practices were detected: 1. Using texts to discuss the adolescent's life, 2. the teacher as a model, 3. creating a personal relationship with the student, 4. Circle of friends, 5. asking questions and opportunity for exploration.

The fourth study question found the reflexivity component in the teachers' role as identity agents. The teachers criticize their achievements and their work and identify six areas of difficulty and restriction in their role as social agents. The difficulties are: 1. risk of over influence on the teacher's part, 2. risk of becoming missionaries and having a religious indoctrination, 3. risk of inserting personal opinions of the teacher or the student, 4. Risk of over

exposure of the teacher or the student, 5. risk of inserting political viewpoints, 6. Risk of superficiality and lack of philosophical depth.

The fifth and final study question found a reference to the assessment component which the social agents make in regards to the social context in which the students live. This assessment referred to the postmodern era and to its characteristics, and to the role of teachers as social agents, in this unique context. The teachers described our era in congruence to the descriptions and characteristics of the postmodern era as reviewed in theory and research. They presented four main roles which to their perception should be implemented in this era which relate to the students' identity. The roles are: 1. Creating distinct boundaries, 2. Supplying tools for handling temptations, 3. Listening and containing the student's problems, 4. Responsibility and deepening as opposed to shallowness.

The main conclusion raised by my study is that Jewish thought teachers in the national high school on which the study was conducted do perceive themselves as identity agents for their students. An empirical reinforcement for Schachter and Rich's model (Schachter & Rich, 2011) and for Schachter and Ventura of parents as identity agents (Schachter & Ventura, 2008) was found. The six characteristics of identity agents which were presented in Schachter and Ventura's research were detected in the teachers' perceptions: Goals, Identity concern, praxis, assessment, implicit theory, reflexivity.

In reference to the postmodern era a conclusion is raised about the integration of modern approaches and postmodern approaches which deal with identity. On the one hand the teachers discuss the fact that their role is to maintain a clear and stable anchor for the student in order to allow him to consolidate his identity in a clear manner. This reinforces the modern approaches to identity such as the theories of Erikson (Erikson, 1987) and Marcia (Marcia, 1966, 1976, 1980). On the other hand, the teachers discuss the need for flexibility, search, testing different alternatives and critical thinking characterized by the postmodern approaches which deal with identity such as Gergen and Lifton (Gergen, 1991; Lifton, 1995).