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**Self-perception of teachers as identity agents for their
pupils, during crisis, following the disengagement
events (2005).**

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated teacher self-perception of their educational role in relation to pupil identity formation during crisis, following the Disengagement events in 2005.

The study tested the hypothesis claiming that teachers may see themselves as identity agents for their pupils. Namely, the project questioned whether the professional identity of teachers integrates a pupil identity-building component. The study exploited the extensive state of crisis posed by the Disengagement Plan, which bore the potential to elicit an identity crisis, to characterize how teachers perceive and express their role in the pupil identity forming process, particularly during times of stress and crisis. From this extreme state, one can extrapolate the teachers' definition of the most central and significant educational objectives during routine.

In the literature, an identity agent is defined as one who perceives himself as actively responsible for identity forming of the developing identity – e.g., parent to child, teacher to pupil, advisor to protégé relationships and the like. Schachter & Ventura (Schachter & Ventura, 2008) characterize the identity agent as one who A) engages the person developing his identity, B) bears identity-related objectives for the developing identity, C) has a plan of action as to how to achieve these objectives, D) seemingly adopts a developmental theory in regards to the identity guiding his actions, E) evaluates the environment in which the protégé developed, and its possible impact on the his identity, and F) constantly reevaluates his identity formation goals and techniques, in accordance with the values and circumstances.

Studies have described various individuals who perceive themselves as identity agents. Bowlby described these individuals as those who maintain a close and continuous relationship with the identity builder, allowing for safe communication (Bowlby, 1988), e.g., parents (Schachter & Ventura, 2008), colleagues/friends (Sugimura & Shimizu, 2010), teachers (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010 – nonempirical study) and siblings (Porat, 2014).

Schachter and Rich (2004) describe one of the principles binding identity to education, as that which claims that consolidation of a stable and coherent identity is a universal developmental psychology task, essential for further mental health development. As school-age is the window during which the developing individual is primarily preoccupied with this developmental task, authorities in the education system inevitably play a role in assisting them in the process (also see Waterman, 1994; Archer 1994). Schooling presents challenges and stress, which children must deal with as part of their cognitive and mental-social development. Therefore, the teacher-pupil relationship constitutes an additional platform for practicing important communication skills. Nonetheless, to date, the theory regarding the specific role of this relationship in states of stress that potentially threaten identity, has not been assessed. In addition, teachers' perception of both their educational role as identity agents in times of crisis, which can undermine pupil identity, and their ability to handle the situation, has not been evaluated.

This study assessed teachers' self-perception as identity agents in times of crisis. The analyzed teacher population lived in Gush Katif and experienced the Disengagement Plan together with their students in 2005.

The Disengagement from Gush Katif and North Samaria involved evacuation of 8600 civilians from Gush Katif and approximately 2000 from North Samaria and local army camps. The Disengagement Plan was executed in Av 5765 (August 2005), after a long public campaign to prevent it. After failure to thwart the program, the civilians were forced to leave their homes, communities and friends, and the land they were so dedicated to, and many lost their source of income. As a result, the civilians were faced with new states of stress. In addition, the marked ideology characteristic of the settlements in the Gaza strip, heightened the stress experienced with the forced evacuation (Sheleg, 2007). Dekel and Tuval-Mashiach (2009) assert that the inhabitants experienced three key losses: a loss of the physical place and landscape, loss of a feeling of connectivity with the Israeli society and loss of trust and estrangement from

the country's establishment. This trauma breached the psychological balance of many inhabitants and motivated them to begin an acclimation process in attempt to regain the balance and to reduce the associated distress.

The key research questions are:

1. Did teachers perceive pupil identity building and design as part of their role.
Namely, did they see themselves as identity agents for their students?
2. Did the teachers correlate between their pupil's state of stress and trauma and questions they raised during the Disengagement period relating to significance and identity?
3. Did the teachers' work during the Disengagement period express their perception of their role in identity building, as defined in the above research questions.

The research questions were approached within the framework of the questions posed in the introduction, where the questions were converged into a single question: How do teachers perceive their educational role toward their pupils in school? Namely, do they consider pupil identity building a part of their role, and if so, how do they execute this role? Did teachers, while relating to pupil stress, see it a part of their role to relate to identity issues? The assessment method was naturalistic-qualitative, influenced by the narrative approach. Sixteen (four men, ten women and one married couple) thematic life story interviews were conducted with both homeroom and specialist teachers. The interviewees were asked to recount their professional life story, along with personal information, while focusing on the reason they chose to become educators and how they perceive their role. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and then analyzed using the Guided multiple reading technique (Alexander, 1988), a method which allows for the data to come forth on its own from the text, without forcing the researcher's preconceptions on the text. In addition, it allows for extraction of specific data from the text in accordance with the theoretically directed questions that were posed.

The results section is divided into two parts. In the first part, questions, thoughts and insights arising from the experiences of the Gush Katif teachers, demonstrated that they indeed saw provision of answers to identity issues a part of their role, even though they were not pure scholastic topics. This section also provides a general background about the Gush Katif teacher population, to establish a broader, more personal and not merely professional acquaintance with them. The section also contains samples from a large number of interviews with teachers relating to the topic at hand.

The interviews demonstrated that the teachers felt that their educational duties significantly extended beyond pure scholastic matters. In times of distress, teachers perceived themselves as figures with a role that extended beyond concern for their pupils' academic progress. Their function as role models, as they and their students' perceived, particularly at times of distress, and the personal relationships they built with their students during periods of relative routine, enabled them to provide assistance at times of stress. Teachers dealt with physical issues, including safety rule maintenance and adaptation to housing location, emotional issues, including preservation of the authoritative status of parents and rabbis for the children, and expressing interest and nurturing personal relationships, generating calm and serenity by maintaining instructional routine, and spiritual issues, by way of various measures.

After presentation of the teachers' perception of their role in molding their pupils' identity, I used the Schachter & Ventura (2008) model, which defines six elements that characterize an identity agent, to assess whether this theory can explain the teachers' engagement in questions of this nature. The evaluation was performed via a case study of six Gush Katif teachers interviewed in this study, to illustrate the principle elements set forth in the Schachter and Ventura study. Using the Schachter and Ventura definition of an identity agent, this section assessed teacher self-perception as identity agents, and how it was manifested in practice. The findings

demonstrated that the teachers interviewed in this study, all of whom were evacuated from their Gush Katif homes, intimately integrated an identity agent role in their self-perception of their professional identity. The educational issues they dealt with as teachers, brought this study to seek a theory that connects teacher engagement in these issues and existing perceptions of teachers as identity agents. Using the Schachter and Ventura theory, this chapter established a relationship between engagement in broad topics that extend beyond the pure academic topics and teacher self-perception of an identity agent. The relationship between the two is based upon traits comprising the identity agent, traits that explicitly or suggestively came forth in the interviews conducted in this study.

This study contributes an additional level to the identity research discipline. The study assessed the professional identity of teachers, their self-perception as identity agents for their pupils in times of crisis. In addition, the project provides insight into the role of teachers during crisis, which is evidence to and accurately reflects their educational outlook and goals during routine and can hint to teacher functioning in various states of stress. In addition, since the forced evacuation from Gush Katif brought on a crisis of broad dimensions, i.e., spiritual, social-communal, familial, financial, mental and identity, the findings can be inferred to numerous other types of states of crisis. In essence, this retrospective case study exploited the evacuation from Gush Katif to demonstrate how to be an “identity agent” in practice.

Recommended direction for further studies:

1. To interview non-teacher parents of children who experienced the evacuation crisis and to compare their perception of their role in molding their childrens' identity at times of crisis, to that of teachers.
2. To interview principals who were directing educational institutions during this period, to provide a broader picture of their educational goals, as reflected in times of crisis.

3. Longitudinal studies of teachers, as well as observations of their classes, to enrich the information obtained from impressions during the interviews.
4. In addition, further focus can be placed on the impact of parents versus teachers and counselors versus teachers, as significant educational figures in a pupil's world. In an expanded study of this nature, the roles officially executed by the role player for the child can be clarified. The personality of the role-playing figure clearly impacts his function and influence on the student.