

Abstract

Recent studies regarding dropping out of school indicate a growing phenomenon that embodies a social-economic crisis as well as a tragedy to the dropouts, their families, and the society around them (Mussida et al., 2019; Kristensen et al., 2018; Central Borough of Statistics, 2015). It is widely accepted to describe the dropping out as a process that comprises a continuum of situations of alienation and detachment towards school and studying, where actual dropouts are on one side and hidden dropouts are on the other (Arkin & Cojocaru, 2018; Vininger, 2014; Worku et al., 2019).

The dropping out process varies in its intensity and expression among different populations as a dynamic phenomenon that depends on the socio-cultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lahav, 2012; Ripamonti, 2018). Therefore, addressing the needs of the unique context factors of at-risk populations is vital to the efficiency of intervention strategies or programs addressing dropping out (Dupéré, 2019; Smink, & Reimer, 2017).

The present study aims to be a voice for youth in the process of dropping out, hidden and actual, that are/were enrolled at Religious-Zionist boarding schools (Ulpana for girls and high-school yeshiva for boys).

The study has three main goals: (1) to describe the perceptions and experiences of youth who dropped out of Ulpana and high-school Yeshivas regarding the religious and spiritual education in these institutions, and the place of these perceptions and experiences in their dropping out narratives; (2) to examine how the youth's process of

religious identity-formation integrates with the dropping out process; (3) to identify the informal code roles in the youth's dropping out processes.

The theoretical framework is based on the widespread approach in the literature that 'religiousness' and 'spirituality' are independent yet related constructs (de Souza, 2016; Piotrowski et al., 2021). The term 'religion' is mostly related to the external, social, and institutional components of the faith's traditions or search for holiness, as opposed to the internal, personal aspects that lack context, associated with the term 'spirituality' (Austin et al., 2017; Pargament & Zinnbauer, 2005; Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020).

In order to analyze the identity formation processes, we used the approach of Marcia (1986), who presented two dimensions of the identity of the self: commitment and exploration (of life alternatives). Marcia suggested a typology that comprises four statuses of the identity of the self: identity achievement, diffusion, foreclosure, and moratorium. The 'informal code' in the present study is based on Cahana (2007, 2012), who defines it as a symbolic and behavioral structure through which individuals and groups attempt to strengthen their authenticity, that is the true unique self-expression of their emotions and personal tendencies. This code emphasizes autonomy and choice on a personal, organizational, or social level.

To address the research goals, we chose the mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research strategies (Creswell et al., 2008). The predominant paradigm was the qualitative approach. The research instruments included in-depth interviews and structured questionnaires. The interviews were analyzed using Gross's (1995, 2002) method with the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The research population included forty youth: twenty boys (nine actual dropouts and eleven still enrolled in the education system) and twenty girls (ten actual dropouts and ten still enrolled). All the interviewees had visited the "Hazronnie's Zula" ("The shack of Hazronnie") center for at-risk religious youth in Jerusalem for some time.

The findings of the study point out the unique context factors of the Religious-Zionist society through the voices of the youth who dropped out of this society's educational institutions. The study found religious and/or spiritual meanings in the experiences of dropping out, as they affect the social, religious, and personal identity formation of the youth; meanings that perhaps offer a new social order to the entire Religious-Zionist society. The unique processes of this religious identity formation are combined with the informal code in different dimensions and on different levels during actual and hidden dropping out processes. The youth in the study were identified as rebellious on three different levels: the personal level (the micro-level), the sub-cultural level (medium level), and the cultural level of the Religious-Zionist society (the macro level). The result of this rebellion was the construction of a new religious identity, one with spiritual orientation, on three levels of identity: personal, social, and the social order in the Religious-Zionist society. In addition, the findings of the study portray "Hazronnie's Zula" as a unique space, being an informal institution giving youth multidimensional care on different levels. This place is a complex space allowing an exceptional combination of addressing spiritual needs, informal atmosphere, the autonomy to form one's personal and/or religious identity, and providing a social identity.

The research has theoretical and practical contributions:

The theoretical contribution of the study is that as far as we know this study is the only one yet that distinguishes between the effects of religiousness and spirituality in orthodox educational institutions in Israel, and their integration with the dropping out processes from the point of view of the youth. This in-depth examination contributes to expanding the existing knowledge in the field about religiousness and spirituality in general, and in education specifically. Additionally, the findings of the present study are important to the knowledge about dropping out in general and hidden dropping out specifically. They help to deepen the understanding of the dropping out process in the Religious-Zionist society as a unique phenomenon of its own characteristics. This study contributes to the identity field and deepens the understanding of identity formation processes by examining the religious identity as an identity content, in addition to examining the identity formation processes (by the identity statuses typology of Marcia, 1986).

The practical contribution of the study regards teachers, principals, parents, religious leaders, therapists, and welfare role holders, as well as teacher education institutions. First, it emphasized the importance of creating inviting spaces such as "Hazronnie's Zula" within the formal institutions of Ulpana and high-school yeshivas. To do so, it is recommended to incorporate into teacher education and training institutions programs about integrating informal attributes into the formal education systems, so they would allow more space for autonomy, choice, and authenticity of youth; as well as incorporating theoretical contents about the identity formation in the teenage years.

Second, this study encourages investing resources in developing educational treatment programs for dropping out prevention, that are adapted to Religious-Zionist

youth. These programs should address youth's religious and spiritual distresses that may affect their personal welfare and speed up detachment and dropping out processes that place the youth in multiple at-risk situations. These programs must be culturally sensitive and find a way to get the religious reality of the patient and the therapeutic style to work together in harmony.

Third, in the field of religiousness and spirituality, it is recommended that religious role holders in Ulpana and high-school yeshivas would become the address for youth's religious and spiritual distresses, and would try to provide for the personal needs of each student in those areas. Additionally, educational institutions are advised to invest resources in spiritual activities in order to assist spiritual processes that bring about internalization and inner connection to the religious practices and may help prevent personal distress among youth and even prevent or stop the dropping out process.