

**The Contribution of Educational
Dynamic Processes to a Person's
Narrative Change -**

Case Study: "SEMEL" Program

by

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Abstract

"Treat a man as he is and you make him worse than he is. Treat a man as he has the potential to become and you make him better than he is".

(Covey, 2008)

Over the last two decades, there has been a revolution in the world of research, counseling and therapy – a narrative revolution, which gave the researchers and therapists' community new tools for individual, familial, group and community level intervention. The renewed interest in narrative as a research tool in the 1970s and its enhancement during the following decade was part of the fundamental transformation in the field of social sciences. Since the 1990s, the narrative approach and its capability to allow people to influence their own lives sparked a lot of interest and exceeded the boundaries of therapy, penetrating into new disciplines, such as law, medicine, social work, communication, history, anthropology, and education (Riessman & Speedy, 2007).

The narrative approach focuses on the individuals who lead their lives according to their knowledge, intentions, uniqueness, values, dreams, and aspirations. The basic hypothesis of the narrative approach is that every person has a life story, and the story told by a person about their life has a significant impact on the way they live it. The approach, which serves as the foundation for the current work, offers a new way for getting to know people and changing their life, using their life-story as they tell it (Bruner, 1987).

The narrative therapy and counseling method – which is implemented in many centers in Israel and worldwide – is based on the narrative approach, and allows people to expand their identity in the directions of their choice and fulfill their destiny. During this process, a person explores the impact of dominant narratives on their life, and discovers the best stories among the many possibilities, which suit their ideological perception (White & Epston, 1990).

The current dissertation presents a research study, which explored innovative educational processes as part of the Semel program (Stories Lead to Success), which has been implemented in official, public, and private institutions since 2004. The program is based on the principles of the narrative approach, which recognizes the power of the story a person tells about their life and its ability to shape and direct them, while translating this understanding into the educational-therapeutic act.

These innovative educational processes are based on the theoretic foundation of the narrative approach, and have been developed over the last few years in educational institutions throughout Israel. The research, which also focuses on the question of the meaning and significance of dealing with one's personal story in the wider educational context, explores the path of change that is paved through these educational processes.

Semel program has two different channels: working with students and training education, counseling, and welfare professionals. The program is based on the ability to change one's narrative through group and individual processes, which may lead to changes in motivation, self-image, and future orientation, while being inspired by success stories. The variety of narrative strategies in the program allows the participants to reconstruct their life-story, possibly leading to a change in their lives (Barzilay, 2009).

The current research is based on the qualitative research paradigm in a case-study scheme, during which an informed observation was conducted on an existing model, in an attempt to construct both theoretical and practical knowledge concerning motivating teachers and students in the educational field. The research explored the effects of the Semel program from the perspectives of the various stakeholders involved in its implementation: Teachers, students, mentors, supervisors, the program's developer, and other key figures.

This dissertation will describe the educational processes in which the narrative paradigm can be infused in the field of education, and the ways in which the implementation of a narrative theory can contribute to processes of personal empowerment of teachers and students alike.

The research questions focused on a number of relevant issues, in an attempt to shed light on a unique program, which trains teachers and educational counselors and give them qualitative tools and skills needed in order to lead an empowering dialog. The main questions were how the changing narrative processes were taking place among teachers and students, and how teachers led their students to a change using the tools they have gained through the program.

The data was collected through a variety of qualitative and quantitative tools, among them: semi-structured, in-depth interviews, general observations, participant observations, field work\research journal and semi-structured summative feedback interviews.

In the context of the group of teachers studied, the findings suggest that in general, the belief in the other's ability to change starts with a process of self-belief, and specifically, they stress the circular connection between teachers' beliefs in themselves and their belief in their students. Furthermore, the findings show that by participating in the program, teachers can have a variety of experiences, which involve self-discovery and deep self-understanding, and later lead them to discover and understand the other.

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In the context of the group of students who participated in the study, the findings show that the program uses the power of writing and imagination as two main channels in constructing the favorite stories of the students taking part in the program. It was found that the theme of education occupies a central place in describing their future picture, since education is perceived by them as a sign of success in the future. As a result of the program, the students succeed in sketching, for the first time, a horizon for future professional development and legitimizing the dream of the future and imagining it. It is also possible to learn about the power of writing as a major strategy in expanding their preferred identity. The study found that writing organizes, focuses, illustrates, defines and summarizes the story.

The students' testimonies suggest that the motive of education is an important part of their descriptions of the future, since they consider education to be a sign of future success. Due to the program, the students can visualize, sometimes for the first time, a future of professional development, and gain legitimation to dream about the future.

The argument that an individual can significantly change him\herself by reconstructing their life story (Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1991; McAdams, 1993) is reinforced by the findings of the current research. The research shows how the change of conception leads to behavioral change. The findings of the study from the two groups: teachers and students, emphasize the contribution of the program to the group level. Both teachers and students describe the change in the classroom, scholastic and social climate as a result of the messages conveyed in the program.

In addition, the findings suggest that the process of constructing meaning through one's personal story is significant and even crucial in the educational field. The personal story is the main and most significant resource of students and educational professionals alike, and it functions as a compass, helping students and teachers to construct their identity.

Furthermore, in a highly advanced technological era, in which a revolutionary change is created, transforming the teacher from a vessel of knowledge to a mentor and supporter of learning processes, the current research calls for reconsideration of teachers' roles and their power in constructing better stories. The research verifies the assumption that the value of various educational reforms, innovative teaching techniques, and telecommunication technologies cannot be compared to the quality of the teacher as one of the most important educational resources (Baber & Mourshed, 2007).

As for the graduate of the program who participated in the study 8 years after taking part in it, it appears that the extent of the program's impact has not ended, and some of it continues to be revealed in the present, despite the time that has elapsed. These dimensions of influence continue to shape and strengthen her current perception. The first, central, valuable dimension is the recognition that each and every child and young person has a story that deserves to be told and that can be opened and changed to an extent that it is not comfortable within him. A second dimension is the dimension of the future imagination that has been woven into the program and its value in shaping the story in the present.

From the findings of the diverse group of facilitators that participated in the study, it is possible to identify a personality model suitable for the mentors of the SML. This prototype represents a profile that expresses itself in a positive personality, develops, believes, contends, initiates and primarily inspires others. The process of choosing facilitators from among the graduates of the Semel course, is related to the question of how the person represents his story as a leading story of success in his identity, biography and consciousness. This is because in the mentoring program, the mentor's personal story is one of the most important tools. The findings show how their personal story expresses their unique identity and at the same time establishes and creates it.

The findings of the group of key people participating in the study point to the existing connection between the contents of the program and the educational vision of each and every one of them, and how this connection is also connected to the personal philosophy of each one, thereby reinforcing the triangular connection created: the educational vision - the personal story – the Semel program, that motivates their educational activities for many years. The research findings of this group highlight the relevance of the program that the key people involved in its implementation find. This

relevance is attributed both to the populations of students who they are in charge of in the Ministry of Education's Shachar Division, a population with unique characteristics. The relevance of the program relates both to the age of students in the junior high school and high school, and to the teachers who use the tools of listening, belief and empowerment for their students as a result of their participation in the program. The use of these tools and principals is a positive "snowball", i.e., an empowered manager is a manager who empowers staff, empowers teachers to empower students, and thus the program's impact is circular and broad.

The current research focuses on a unique educational-therapeutic program, aimed to strengthen and empower the personal significance of teachers and students by using their personal narrative as a tool for developing this significance. Thus, the research expands the body of knowledge concerning the various ways available for teachers\counselors\principals in using the narrative tool for their own and their students' empowerment, growth, and fulfillment. The theoretical contribution of this research is the ability to minimize the existing gap between theory and practice, by trying to illuminate processes in which theoretical principles are implemented in educational field work.

Its practical contribution is the innovative way presented for dealing with problematic stories as a whole, and particularly those of underprivileged populations – using the individual's own strengths and powers and avoiding the hardship perspective. Furthermore, the practical tools presented in this research may make education professionals' day-to-day routine easier, and reduce the high burnout rates that characterize the educational profession.

Finally, the study presents the implementation of innovative theoretical ideas, which lead to the creation of a new, proactive language within the education system. Moreover, the study describes an "in-action narrative" within an educational field, which may contribute to the theoretical and practical understanding of implementing a narrative theory in the educational field.