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"Learning Is Not the Main Thing; The Main Thing Is to Be Human": Teacher Identity in Vocational Schools in Israel

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Abstract

In light of previous studies, which emphasize vocational schools' singularity and their link to matters of social stratification (Shavit & Müller, 2000), examining teachers' identity in these schools is of critical importance. This study, which engages in Israeli vocational school teachers' identity, poses two main questions: How do vocational school teachers define their role? How do these definitions and descriptions relate to educational stratification and social inequality? Seventeen teachers working in vocational schools in Israel were interviewed and were asked to describe their teaching role and teaching experience. The data were analyzed using IPA (Interpretative phenomenological analysis) principles. The findings revealed that teachers view vocational school students as "at-risk youth" and suffering from an array of emotional vulnerabilities. The school was described as a "residual space" for students who had dropped out of several "regular" schools. Consequently, the teachers described their work as requiring therapy and caring to a greater extent than teaching academic knowledge. For a deeper understanding of teacher identity, we propose distinguishing between types of educational care. The discussion addresses the implications of care ethics for educational stratification.

Keywords

teacher identity, vocational education, care, inequality, vocational teachers

1 Introduction

In many countries, vocational schools are perceived as educational arenas that provide a "second chance" (Grubb, 1985, p. 529) for students with low academic abilities (Lappalainen et al., 2013). Against this background, these schools suffer from a negative stigma (Vlaardingerbroek & Hachem El-Masri, 2008) and were found to serve students from a primarily working-class background (Koo, 2016; Nylund et al., 2017; Protsch & Solga, 2016). Studies have also demonstrated that vocational education graduates integrate into jobs with low prestige and status (Rözer & Bol, 2019). These findings align with studies in Israel (Tzur & Zussman, 2010), the United States (Silverberg et al., 2004), the Netherlands (Oosterbeek & Webbink, 2006), and in various Asian countries (Agrawal, 2013). In light of these studies, which emphasize vocational schools' singularity and their link to matters of social stratification (Shavit & Müller, 2000), examining teachers' identity in these schools is of critical importance.



An examination of the research literature on teacher identity reveals that the concept refers to many aspects, making a single, uniform definition elusive (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Zembylas, 2003). Alongside the multidimensional concept of teacher identity, we propose to adopt Olsen's (2008) description of teacher identity: "Teacher identity is a useful research framework because it treats teachers as whole persons in and across social contexts who continuously reconstruct their views of themselves in relation to others, workplace characteristics, professional purposes, and cultures of teaching" (p. 5).

Only few studies have investigated teachers in vocational schools. They identified salient features of these teachers' identity: granting less importance to academic achievement (Rosvall et al., 2017); perceiving the teaching environment as characterized by futility (Van Houtte, 2004); and perceiving their students as having many problems such as lacking control or being raised in a non-normative family (Ben Peretz et al., 2003; Lahelma et al., 2014). This study, which engages in Israeli vocational school teachers' identity, poses two main questions: How do vocational school teachers define their role? How do these definitions and descriptions relate to educational stratification and social inequality?

2 Methods

This qualitative study is based on phenomenological orientations and interpretations that seek to inductively reveal the meaning people assign to their lives, life stories, and self-perception (Smith et al., 2009). In other words, our research seeks to reveal how teachers in vocational schools define, experience, and interpret their role and work environment.

Seventeen teachers working in vocational schools in Israel were interviewed. The teachers filled various roles in their schools, ranging from home room teachers, teachers of academic subjects, and vocational teachers.

This study's research tool was a semi-structured in-depth individual interview. After explaining the research objectives at the beginning of the interviews, we asked the respondents to describe their teaching role and teaching experience. At the end, the data were analyzed using IPA (Interpretative phenomenological analysis) principles.

3 Findings

3.1 Teachers' perception of their students as "at-risk-youth"

One of the study's prominent findings was how the teachers described their students. All but one of the teachers used the term "at-risk youth" at the beginning of the interview to describe their students or cited other similar terms, such as "everyone here is a street child," "leftovers", "uneducated," "street cats," "refugees," and "criminals". The teachers used these terms to explain their decision to work in a vocational school. Malka, a hairstyling teacher, said, "I have always been interested in working with at-risk youth". Some teachers stressed that "at-risk" was not the school's official descriptor but rather an informal one emerging from the field.

When teachers were asked why they described their students as at-risk youth, most teachers referred to the educational environment at home and the family as the main deprivation and risk factors, some teachers referred to the students' social surroundings as a factor negatively affecting their lives, others perceived their students as requiring "special education" or as having several learning disabilities and some teachers cited discipline issues and the danger of students descending into crime, drugs, and prostitution as an explanatory factor for labeling them as at-risk youth.

3.2 Caring discourse in teaching work

Many teachers used terms such as "family" or "home" to describe the school's uniqueness. Moreover, many teachers depicted their work routines through different roles they fill, borrowed from the world of family and home: They serve them food, make sure they come to school, take care of their physical needs at home, and being generally available to their students beyond working hours. Most teachers portrayed students as suffering from a lack of a supportive home or involved parents. Against this background, several teachers described their role by invoking metaphors of parenthood or family and subsequently reported that they often provide their students with needs that are unmet in the home.

Several other teachers adopted a discourse of love and concern on the one hand and discipline on the other as central to their teacher identity.

These descriptions may explain the finding that most teachers depicted their role as "saving" their students, as Ravit, a homeroom teacher, noted that "I am like a captain who saves the ship from sinking; that's how I feel, that I save a lot of students".

3.3 Teacher identity in the non-academic perspective

When teachers were asked to describe the vocational school using a metaphor, they used various metaphors ranging from babysitter, home, a rescue net, a playground and an emergency room. All the metaphors described various aspects of the school, but none of the teachers described it as a space whose main function is to impart knowledge or train for academic achievement. Furthermore, many of the teachers used the phrase "to be human" to describe their main task and conveyed that studies are not their primary concern. When asked what they mean by the term "be human", most teachers referred to educating for values, such as respecting others; teaching boundaries and rejecting immediate gratification; being better citizens of the State; being disciplined and performing tasks; adapting to the system and not being a "burden on the system" by falling into unemployment or claiming government support benefits.

The interviews with the teachers also revealed a teaching pedagogy based on low expectations. Many teachers used the phrase "at least they..." to explain the expectations they have of their students. A low-expectancy pedagogy simultaneously seeks to provide a corrective experience of success for the student and set extremely basic, minimum standards to "be saved" from an idle life or succumbing to roaming the streets. Moreover, a considerable proportion of the interviewees opposed the idea of striving to have their students attain a matriculation certificate. They viewed matriculation as an unrealistic goal for the students and as an achievement that would not help students in the future that awaited them.

3.4 Challenge, ambivalence, and conflict in the teaching experience of teachers in vocational schools

Throughout the interviews, the teachers revealed many contradictions in what they shared: a "significant teaching experience", but also "challenging to impossible". The contradictions arose covertly in some of the interviews and overtly in others. Several teachers also criticized the school's academic study level and described their work as involving a certain element of falsehood and deception, as Naveh, a metalwork teacher describes: "I feel like I'm lying to them a bit that I'm trying to teach them the field. I know that in this field, you are not paid well. I would wish them much more than just working at a machine for 15 years...". The sense of deception in vocational education arising from the teachers' reports was also suggested in Atkins's (2010) study regarding the theme of "opportunity" underlying the justification for having vocational schools in the U.K. This justification assumes that vocational school students are characterized by low aspirations, and therefore, this track offers them the opportunity for high-paying vocational work over time.

4 Discussion

The current findings indicate the teachers' dominant use of the therapeutic education discourse and the caring discourse to anchor their identity as teachers.

The caring discourse, has been described by many researchers as affecting mental well-being, academic achievements, and positive educational experiences (for a comprehensive review, see Mayseless, 2015). At the same time, we join several researchers who have argued that to achieve a deeper understanding of the caring discourse, one must avoid its sweeping romanticization and examine its darker sides or at least its suitability (or friction) for different populations (Lopez Kershen et al., 2018; Toshalis, 2012). Against this background, we propose to distinguish between “soft care” and “hard care” (Antrop-González & De Jesus, 2006) to suggest a nuanced analysis of our findings.

Soft care expresses teachers' emotional responses to students, expecting students to comply with supervision and discipline, even at the cost of not imparting academic capital. In contrast, hard care expresses respectful interpersonal relationships, the pedagogy of high academic expectations, and recognition of diversity.

The soft care in our research is reflected in the teachers' viewing their identities as based on therapeutic metaphors, on the definition of the school as a therapeutic space, more so than a “normal” educational space, and on the perception of students as lacking in many emotional qualities, being “excessively needy” (James, 2012, p. 165), and requiring “special” education and teaching. The teachers in our study expressed feelings such as pity and compassion toward the students, which indicate asymmetrical and hierarchical relationships. Moreover, the interviewees appeared to have strategically relinquished a teacher identity based on imparting academic and cultural capital to students due to their emotional vulnerability.

It is critical to point out that the teachers conveyed their good and sincere intentions throughout the interviews. At the same time, teachers also did not suggest a discourse of opportunity or actively encourage students to imagine an open future (Howard et al., 2014). Our interviewees described class and ethnic homogeneity in vocational schools as comprising an unchangeable “destiny”. These issues are crucial in that working-class students and stigmatized ethnic groups populate vocational schools in many countries. Moreover, the lack of engagement in the link between oppressive structures and life outcomes or a critical reading of the care concept is jarring.

A unique aspect of teacher identity in our research, which characterizes their soft care role, has to do with what we propose calling 'cruel pragmatism.' Analysis of the current findings makes reveals four features of this pragmatism: 1) teaching that includes settling for few or low expectations for their students, as expressed by several key aspirations (“at least they will have a profession”; “at least they will be human beings”); 2) that students will have employment so that they will not become a burden on the state, even in jobs that will not enable upward mobility; 3) the claim that although the vast majority of students do not graduate with a vocational certificate (or a certificate that has value in the labor market), vocational school education is preferable to “street life”; 4) the admission that education and teaching in school include elements of deception (“We sell them a cellophane wrapper, the inside of which is not all that close to reality”). Cruel pragmatism is harsh in light of many findings worldwide, reporting that, as adults, most vocational education graduates are not employed in high-income senior positions (Hanushek et al., 2011).

One of our key proposals is to develop a teacher identity based on critical teaching and consciousness (Seider & Graves, 2020). This teaching and consciousness need not formulate power only in negative ways, nor do they need to divert attention from social culprits (institutionalized racism, structural discrimination, and experiences of marginalization in everyday life). It is also crucial that this teaching and consciousness include engaging in the dialectic

between structure and agency and equip disadvantaged students with coping mechanisms (including active resistance). Critical consciousness may help vocational education students handle the many exclusions and structural limitations they experience in their daily lives.

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