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Review of the PhD thesis "The social role of the mentor in the democratic school in Israel. The concept and practice (in the perspective of sociology of education)" by Ronit Windzberg Sasson, supervised by dr hab. Witold Wrzesień, prof. UAM.

The concept of schooling different from the mainstream goes along with the critique of public schools, works of pioneers of educational philosophy and the advent of new paradigms in the pedagogy. Even if the number of alternative schools worldwide is scarce, they are living laboratories, testing assumptions of new approaches in the pedagogy, training new generations of teachers and providing a space for freedom for students (and/or their parents). Some solutions developed in these schools are transferred to mainstream schools. Dalton Plan, Waldorf pedagogy, and a processual approach to grading (progression lines, formative assessment) can be used as examples here. Therefore research on non-systemic schooling seems to be prospective from the general sociology of education point of view.

The reviewed thesis focuses on the democratic schools, which may not be the biggest movement within alternative education, when counted by the number of institutions and students, but are visible and influential, at least in Poland. They are not well researched by sociologists. As far as I know, there is only one sociological monography by Katarzyna Gawlicz and just a few dozen papers in international journals. Apparently, the Author identified a gap in existing knowledge. Choosing the Israeli democratic schools seems to be an obvious choice considering the Author's professional background however it raises the question of the transferability of conclusions to other educational systems. It is also a challenge for the reviewer who does not have a deeper knowledge of the Israeli educational system.

The Author focused her research on one aspect of the democratic school: mentoring. The choice is well justified as mentoring is a key feature of democratic schools. She uses a perspective of the sociological role theory (rather than the sociology of education mentioned in the title), combining it with the elements of a more general, mostly phenomenologist,

sociological theory. The goal was partially explorative, partially applied: to explore specifics of the social role of the mentor in the democratic school and to propose its future development. I will start by reviewing the thesis structure and its content, divided into the theory, methodology and results, and then present some more general comments.

Structure

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first two provide the theoretical framework, namely the role and socialization theories. The third chapter describes the Israeli educational system (I am still grateful for it!), while the fourth introduces the history and specifics of the democratic schools. The thesis's second part focuses on the methodology and empirical outcomes. The Author included the majority of her findings in chapter five, dividing it into three subchapters: methodology, finding and discussion. The last chapter proposes an empirically and theoretically based model. Finally, the thesis finishes with a summary.

The general structure of the thesis is well planned. However, the content of theoretical chapters is somehow messy. The Author practically does not divide it into subchapters nor provide connections between particular parts, which makes following her statements challenging.

Theoretical framework

The first chapter provides an insight into the sociological role theory. The Author refers to classics (Durkheim, Simmel, Mead) and, let's say, modern writers (Parsons, Goffman, Garfinkel, Turner, Bourdieu). It should be noted that both Durkheim and Simmel did not refer directly to the notion of the role, G.H. Mead proposed it in 1934. The Author discusses differences between Durkheim and Simmel, but it is not – historically – the core of the role theory. What is missing is the approach alternative to Mead's concept: the structuralist definition first introduced by R. Linton in 1936. By the way, Broom and Selznick's definition quoted on page 26 is exactly Linton's definition. The Author superficially refers to the structuralist approach by referencing T. Parsons and freely mixes these two paradigms when discussing Goffman and Bourdieu. On the one hand, the focus on the symbolic interactionism perspective following Mead's heritage is justified, as this is an orientation chosen by the Authors, but on the other hand, I would expect from PhD candidate to show more expertise in the roots of the role theory. After all, R. Turner, whose work is heavily referred to by the Author, attempted to merge interactionist and structuralist approaches. The core of the role theory presented in the chapters comes from R. Turner and E. Goffman, which, considering the general

paradigmatical orientation of the Author, is the adequate choice. I enjoyed attempts to integrate Goffman's and Garfinkel's thoughts on the biases avoidance. The Author also introduces a constructivist paradigm (Berger and Luckman) but does not name the differences between this approach and the prevailing interactionist orientation of her work. I think that some elements of the constructivist theory might be useful. For example, the concept of institutionalization, discussed in the next chapter, may work in the analysis of the mentor's role. Surprisingly the chapter does not refer to authors who developed the role theory in the 1970s and 1980s: Th. Newcombe, P. Converse, D. Levinson, and B. Biddle.

The second chapter explores socialization theories. The Author consequently bases on the interactionist paradigm, including Mead, Cooley and Schütz (with a typo in the surname), intertwining it with references to the constructivism of Berger and Luckman and the structural-constructivist approach of Bourdieu. The narrative moves from the general, sociological theory of socialization to the secondary socialization in organizations (van Maaned and Schein, Greenberg and Baron). The Author proposes her own interesting framework at the end of the chapter (pp. 74 and following). She distinguished three modes: establishing an own individual perception of the role, setting the elements of the role and adjusting the role to the organization. This processual model merges bottom-up (individual) and top-down (organizational) perspectives. Following the constructivist approach, the Author shows the mutual, individual-organization influence on forming the professional identity.

Chapter three includes a landscape of education in Israel. I do not think there is a need to describe its content here, but I have to note two remarks. Firstly, it is a must-have description and helpful for readers unfamiliar with the Israeli educational system. Secondly, the way the Authors present the statistics, repeating the same structure and even the same wording page by page, requires a lot of endurance from the reader. Significant editorial changes would make this chapter far more reader-friendly.

Chapter four describes alternative education and democratic schools. The Author builds the description on the opposition between mainstream and alternative education. It is historically true, but I have a feeling that this opposition is oversimplified in the thesis and that the Author seems to treat mainstream schools as a homogenous group, which may be not necessarily right. The three most popular types of alternative schools: Waldorfian, Montessori and democratic, are described. The orientation on institutional forms may justify the lack of homeschooling, but the Author should be aware that in many OECD countries, homeschoolers form institutional networks and umbrella organizations. The chapter provides an interesting

insight into the history of creating an alternative approach to education on the margins of educational systems. The Author traces the philosophical roots of democratic schools in the works of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Fröbel, Mills, and Tolstoy, then provides a wider analysis of Dewey's thoughts. The modern democratic schools differ one by one, but all follow the rules of respecting the laws of each member of the community, equality and participation. School is focused on ensuring the learners' needs; teachers accompany the students in the developmental process. There are 20 democratic schools in Israel nowadays. Of course, it is not a significant number in statistical terms, but the global specifics of alternative education worldwide is its relatively small scale. By the way, Poland, with its population over four times bigger than Israel, hosts only about 30 democratic schools.

The Author proposes an interesting typology of the approach to education (p. 132): she describes opposition between the socialization model, which is focused on preparing the individuals for functioning within the society and the acculturation model, spreading the rational or supernatural, religious cosmology. The first model was typically applied to the working class, while the latter – was to the privileged. However, the advent of individualism changed the course of education by placing individual liberation and development at its core.

Even if the intellectual and social roots of democratic schools are visible, there is no one unified "theory", which comes from the variety of educational paradigms and schools' autonomy (p. 153). Nevertheless, the Author sees some commonalities: democratic institutions (parliament, committees) and the approach of teachers to students, which is shown as different from mainstream schools. She emphasizes the nation orientation of mainstream education, where (p. 155) teachers are responsible for transferring knowledge, skills and values important to the state policy/ideology. I believe that huge quantifiers are overused here, and some internal differentiation within mainstream schooling should be assumed.

The last part of this chapter introduces mentorship in democratic schools. The mentor accompanies students in their learning and development and forms a deep, long-term relationship with the learners. Mentors are chosen by students, which reflects the process of empowerment of students. The Author provides two key arguments for the importance of the thesis. The first is a lack of other studies exploring the subject (p. 165). The second: democratic schools may be used as a model for future changes in education; research on mentors can be used in the professional development of teachers (pp. 159 and following).

Methodology

The research was designed to answer nine research questions, addressing the expectations from the role, hierarchy of expectations, differentiation, commonalities and routine of the role-playing, necessary abilities and external conditions for mentorship performance. The two last questions are meta-level questions and refer to the mentoring model and its future development. The Author also formulated six main hypotheses, which deepen the research questions. What is important, the RQs and hypotheses are relevant to the theoretical framework and have a significant potential for exploring theoretical assumptions.

The Author conducted an impressive amount of 54 IDIs during the two years of fieldwork. Some elements of the methodology description are, however, unclear. The Author states that "The sample of the research study consisted of principals of democratic schools, mentoring coordinators, mentors, and parents from ten different democratic schools located in different cities and communities in Israel who participated in this research study" (p. 177). However, there are nine schools listed (pp. 173-176). Moving further: "The school principal met for an interview with the researcher. The school principal referred the researcher to the mentors in the school." (p. 178). "All the mentors were interviewed after the interview with their school principal" (p. 184). There were eight IDIs with principals, so how were the mentors from the other two schools recruited? How were the informants dispersed between the schools? How were parents recruited? And on a different level, why aren't students sampled?

As a reader, I would also appreciate more information about the local communities the schools are located in, like demography, economy, characteristics of local educational network, the proximity of smaller cities to the bigger educational centres, etc. Are the communities and schools differentiated enough to allow any comparisons between them? There are two methods described: ethnographic research and field research (p. 179). I would love to learn what exactly is the second one.

I would also like to emphasize that the analysis plan and ethics are well written.

Results

Working with qualitative data is undoubtedly a strength of the Author. She provides a substantial analysis of data collected and proposes empirically-based conclusions. From a technical point of view, I would recommend the usage of more complex codes for each IDI. Some additional information, for example, experience in democratic schools and/or in education in general and gender, would allow a better understanding of quotations. By the way,

gender is sometimes indicated by pronouns. The size of many quotations can be reduced without any loss of information value (see pp. 208-209 or 253 as examples).

The results' description is divided into two parts. The first one provides a deep picture of the mentors' practice, while the second one addresses RQs. The Author show the process of mentoring: establishing relationships, providing accompaniment and meeting the mentor's duties. The mentors are vital actors in children's empowerment, listening to the students' voices, catching their points of view and combining different levels of schooling. Their role includes mediation between the child's different micro-worlds (p. 232) and can be recognized as a separate lifestyle, which indicates established identity (p. 236). The Author provides a data triangulation by showing the perspective of different actors.

The second part contains an attempt to answer the RQs and connect findings with the theoretical framework. The first two RQs focus on the expectation of the role. The obtained data proves that the expectations are embedded in the values specific to democratic schools and their vision of childhood and schooling. One note on the margin: the Author uses the classic Durkheimian distinction between organic and mechanical solidarity, arguing that expectations of the role mirror societal expectations (p. 270 and following). The problem with using such general sociological categories is that it is hard to see the added value. In fact, Durkheim used it to compare two highly opposed models of societal division of labour, so the adequacy of this distinction seems disputable here. The claim that schools reflect societal organization is an old idea in the sociology of education (see classic work by Bowles and Gintis, for example). Still, the very specific and niche type of schooling is being researched here. I wish to say we are living in a society where democratic schools mirror the whole society's values, but I am afraid it would be more accurate to say it about the mainstream educational system.

The section on RQ2 introduces an interesting typology of mentors: partners, supporters and leaders, and the operational definition of success, which will work in the following sections. The Author shows which mentoring model increases the probability of autonomy achievement by the student. Albeit all this work is valuable and interesting, the starting question about the hierarchy of importance of expectations toward the mentor's role remains unsolved. I also think that usage of a basic distinction between expected and performed roles would help to organize the analysis.

Contrary, the third RQ is sufficiently addressed. Differentiations of the performed role depend on the mentor's individual characteristics. This analysis is deepened in the next section,

where the Author falsifies the hypothesis about age. It should be noted, however, that the section mainly addresses the hypothesis, while general RQ4 is touched only superficially.

The fifth RQ concerns the transition (speaking in the role theory terms) between expected and performed roles. The mentors walk a blurred line between the school management, parents, and their visions of the children's school performance and well-being. The self-perception of the role and the environment provided by the school play a key role here. Answering the RQ6, the Author, basis on the fieldwork, gives a comprehensive list of skills necessary to successfully play the role. Consequently, in the analysis of the material obtained to answer RQ7, she shows training as a key feature of the mentor's professional development. These outcomes' practical value is unquestionable and probably relevant to a wider population of teachers. I must note, however, that A. Schütz (consequently with the typo in a surname) is incorrectly described as a representative of ethnomethodology (p. 312). Schütz's work, the Author refers to, was published when H. Garfinkel was 17 years old.

Chapter six addressed two last RQs. As I mentioned above, these two questions are more of the meta-level, as they target projecting the mentoring model in democratic schools and its future development. The Author combines collected data with her expertise in the analysis. She refers to the role as a constant process, recognizing stakeholders' strengths, focusing on interpersonal relationships, seeing different points of view, being open to change and being helpful to others' changes as the necessary components. Finally, the mentor must be able to transfer the conceptual assumptions into practice. The school should provide an environment for development, seeing the unique positions of individual role-holders. The ways of future mentoring development are twofold: first by incrementing the knowledge and professional skills, and second by forming the professional identity.

Like every developmental model, this one is also idealistic but can be used in planning professional development. The main critical remark I have in regard to this chapter is the model transferability and (again) the overuse of huge quantifiers. Of course, the Author clearly declared that her primary audience does not go beyond alternative schooling. But in the same chapter, she tries to show the functionality of mentoring in democratic schools for the entire society, while her statements are very general. It is not enough for the policy-making to say that if the micro-level solution works well, it should be simply scaled to the macro-level. A concrete analysis of necessary resources, changes in the teachers' professional development, school management and curricula is necessary. The huge quantifier appears on the stage when the Author starts to compare democratic schools with the mainstream educational system. Let me

quote an excerpt: "In light of the accumulated knowledge, it is possible to assume that the graduates of the democratic schools will have different characteristics from the graduates of the state schools. The graduates of the democratic schools will have greater self-confidence, will be characterized by ability of self-motivation to act, will believe in their ability, will trust people older than them who have influence, will acknowledge the importance and influence that they have while they choose to act for some purpose, their ability of expression will be better, and the ability of decision making and finding solutions for the issues that arise from life. The graduates of the democratic schools will better succeed in meeting the challenges of life." (p. 341). What is the empirical basis for these statements? The Author conducted fieldwork in democratic schools, so any data-driven statement about this particular branch of education may be justified. But it seems that inefficiency of the mainstream schooling in developing the abilities described in the quotation is taken for granted. Of course, the critique of the national educational systems is as old as the sociology of education, but it needs data to be scientifically reasonable. The other question is about comparability between the elite, niche model and the complex educational systems. The basic differences in resources (a student/teacher ratio, for example) and selection (economic, class and probably ethnic) make this comparison disputable.

Editorial comments

The thesis is generally well and clearly written but contains a significant number of typos (even in the title!). Some typos may be misleading, for example, IDI's code "H13" instead of "M13" on page 214. The Author does not use gender-sensitive pronouns; she even masculinizes the nouns with a neutral form in English (a child is referred to as "he"). The mistakes in vocabulary change the meaning, for example: "structure theories" (p. 13) instead of structural theories, "Three main sociological changes" (p. 143) instead of societal changes etc. Graphs (pages 139-143) should be merged in the text, not blocked together. I also noted the lack of references, for example, on page 54: "The critics of the approach of Berger and Luckman (1991) maintain that there is considerable investment to show that the world is not natural and that people shape it and there is no reference to the interests of people". Who are the critics?

If the Author plans future publication, I strongly recommend careful proofreading of the entire thesis.

General comments

To sum up, I would like to emphasize the main strengths of the thesis. First, it provides an expert, emic insight into the key role in an innovative educational approach. The research

was well planned on a reasonable scale. It fills the knowledge gap and has significant potential for application. Third, the theoretical framework is well suited, and I enjoyed the analysis (even if the answers to RQ2 and RQ3 are not comprehensive) and the Author's original typologies. The conclusions are well embedded in the data and theoretical framework. Moreover, the Author brings an additional theoretical perspective which widens the conclusions.

On the other side, there are gaps in the role theory description, minor mistakes in interpretation of the theories and a meandering structure of the theoretical chapters. Some parts of the description of the methodology need clarification. But the biggest weakness of the thesis, at least from my perspective, comes from one of its strengths: the Author deep involvement in democratic schooling. Democratic schools are idealized, while there is visible a bias toward mainstream education. No critical approach to democratic schooling was applied except for short excerpts on mentors' frustration and difficulties in the process. The success criteria are self-referential and not confronted with wider educational research. On the other hand, the mainstream schools and teachers are shown as a homogenous group, but no actual data are provided.

Summary

The thesis proposes a comprehensive insight into interesting phenomena, fills the knowledge gap, provides original solutions and has significant applied potential. Therefore, despite noticing some areas for improvement, I assume that it meets the criteria for the doctoral thesis. I recommend moving to the final stage of the doctoral degree procedure and the public defence.

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