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Opinion

about the doctoral dissertation of Ronit Windzberg Sasson:
THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE MENTOR IN THE DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL IN ISRAEL.
THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICE (IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION)

Written under the supervision of Prof. Witold Wrzesień
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Preliminary remarks

I read the dissertation with a great interest for two reasons. The first is the question of how a school can work, in which emphasis is placed on the student's relationship with his social environment – the school as an educational institution, family, and the role played in this respect by someone who plays a specific role of mentor, guardian, educator, but also a link between the student and his environment. The area of study is democratic schools, a type of experimental school, present in many trained systems, but constituting in principle their margin in terms of coverage, number of schools, and students to other types of schools. However, although few are a challenge for traditionally organized schools, they are more student-friendly and perhaps more effective as a result. It is also a question of whether someone who is not a traditionally understood teacher, school pedagogue, or psychologist can act effectively in school (and outside it).

The second reason is a kind of exoticism of the area of research – the society of Israel, the formation of the state and its institutions in a seemingly homogeneous environment (except for Arabs living in this area), but – this is shown by the analyses contained in the dissertation – very diverse. A society in which different cultures of migrant Jews and varieties of Judaism clash. But also a modernizing society, open to development trends of the modern globalized world and technologically advanced. But also the nation-state and the nation continuing to create its identity.

The doctoral student undertook the not very easy task of taking up research issues, which fall within the area of sociology (sociology of education, theories of socialization and upbringing, theories of social roles, organizational culture), psychology (psychological dimension of the mentor's personality) and pedagogy (the way the school and its staff function, methods of influencing the student). This requires, on the one hand, orientation in these fields and theoretical approaches functioning within them, and on the other hand, balancing the proportions. However, the dissertation under review has the strongest foundation in sociology.

Issues of the dissertation

The title of the dissertation indicates the area of its Author's research intentions. The subject of her interest is the specific social role of a mentor functioning within a democratic school. Apart from this term, it is difficult to find another one that would describe the activities assigned to it. The closest is probably the role of the tutor functioning in the English academic system, an academician who supervises the student and helps in choosing courses or solving difficult problems, but also exercising control over the progress of studies.

However, what is important, the considerations about the role of the mentor are inscribed in a specific social context, a democratic school, an educational institution deviating from the standards of the school as an institution. If you were looking for social institutions with the highest degree of inertia, the school would be at the top of the ranking. It is very reluctant to change, even though there are ideas that would change the way it functions. One of them is the concept of a democratic school, breaking with hierarchy and authoritarianism inscribed in the organizational culture of the school as an institution. One can get the impression that these two features are crucial for the model of the school functioning today.

The dissertation is an empirical study. The Author intends to focus on the characteristics of the role of a mentor. As she writes: "The main aim of the project is to explore, describe and explain the main features of the social role of mentor in democratic school in Israel. I will attempt to present the definition of the mentor's role in democratic schools. In addition, I will attempt to propose an outline of the mentor's development in democratic schools and of the constellation of in-service training courses that support his development. Last,

I would like to clarify the basic abilities required of the mentor who works in the democratic schools" (p. 7). Thus, the thesis is to be not only academic but also practically oriented towards the development of an optimal model of the role of a mentor in a democratic school.

However, the main effort is directed toward the implementation of the research project. Would like to answer the following questions: "(...) what are the most important characteristics of the social role of the mentor in democratic schools and how should this role evolve and improve in the future? The detailed research problems are as follows. First, what are the major expectations of the role of the mentor in democratic schools? Whose expectations of the role of the mentor in democratic schools are most important? It is very important to research the object of the expectations of the role. The mentor in his role is found in relationships with

a range of people and interested parties, and therefore it is very important to research the expectations" (pp. 7-8). These questions also generate several other, more detailed, aimed at various aspects of the role of a mentor – differentiation of individual definitions of the role, types of role-playing, how it is adapted to the expectations of the environment, which helps the mentor achieve success and finally the search for the necessary features of the mentor's model of operation and the possibility of its improvement. As a result, the Author also

formulates some practical recommendations to help modify the role of a mentor, and improve its implementation.

In the research plan, starting from the above-mentioned questions and problems, the Author formulates 9 detailed research problems¹ and 6 research hypotheses². All of them refer to the way of fulfilling this role and are the axis of the interviews and the analysis of their content.

I wondered about the theoretical context of the dissertation. I understand that in the first two chapters *1. The concept of the social role theory in sociology*, *2. Socialization* in the Author's intention is the theoretical basis for research, and therefore the research questions posed the formulation of hypotheses and the interpretation of the obtained results. In this part of the dissertation, the Author reviews various theories of social roles, analyzing a very wide literature on the subject. I may be an inattentive reader, but I have not been able to determine which of the discussed concepts she adopts as the leading one in his research project.

I suppose these are the concepts of E. Goffman (the closest) and P. Berger and Th. Luckmann. I did not find their operationalization in research (research questions, hypotheses, analytical categories). The same is true of the category of socialization. The distinction between primary (I understand that takes place at the level of the family and peer groups) and secondary (for the Author in an institutionalized school environment) is legitimate and necessary, but probably insufficient. Is the mentor a mentee or a parenting actor? More on this topic below when characterizing the content of chapters.

The Author emphasizes several times that the theoretical and methodological approach that she adopts for the use of her analyses is interactionism, focusing on social relations and the individual entangled in them, and how they give meaning to their actions. There are references to the works of G. H. Mead, Blumer, E. Goffman, P. Bourdieu, Z. Bauman, A. Schutz, and many others associated with the humanistic, subjective approach. I miss the work of M. Archer in this company, especially those devoted to the agency. They would be a good complement to this review of positions.

Similarly, I miss the reference to the institution of the school and its social functions in the chapter devoted to the democratic school. I wonder – after reading the text – whether the

¹"1. What are major expectations of the role of mentor in democratic schools? 2. Whose expectations of the role of mentor in democratic schools are most important? 3. What are the most frequent (and most typical) differentiations of the individual definition of the social role of the mentor? 4. What are the most common types of social role-playing of the mentor? 5. How is the mentor's role translated into his work in the field? 6. What are the abilities required of the educator to succeed in the mentoring work? 7. What are the conditions required for the mentor's success? 8. What are the main necessary features of the model of the social role of mentor in democratic schools? 9. How can the role of the mentor in democratic schools be improved in the future?" (pp. 173-174).

²"1. Differentiations of expectation towards the role of mentor are the cause of differentiations in playing the social role of the mentor in democratic schools in Israel. 2. The success of secondary socialization in democratic schools highly depends on the specificity of playing the social role of the mentor. 3. The mentor's dominant abilities differentiate and modify the ways of playing the social role of the mentor. 4. Age is a variable responsible for differentiation of the ways of acting in the role of the mentor. 5. The number of mentees differentiates and modifies the quality of the work of the mentor and his ways of playing the mentor's social role. 6. The more the mentor role is focused on negotiating between youth problems and surrounding realities (sub-worlds - family, peer group, school, city, etc.) the more effective their work is" (pp. 174-175).

democratic school is only a kind of pedagogical innovation, a continuation of the model of a child-oriented (student-oriented) school, or whether there is something more behind it – the formation of a member of a democratic society? This would mean that behind the name there is a specific educational program aimed at forming an individual familiar with democratic procedures and able to function in a democratic civil society, in which the activity and subjectivity of the individual are being promoted.

Another question that comes to my mind in this context is whether Israeli democratic schools are pursuing a program to form a member of a national, religious, or political community (a citizen of the State of Israel). Whether such activities are also inscribed in the role of a mentor or not. Would this be indicated by the highlighted type of guide? Is the mentor someone who is supposed to take care of the child's educational well-being and act rather as a case manager, limiting himself to routine, technical activities? I am afraid that this aspect did not interest the Author very much, which is a pity.

I have a problem not only with the educational functions of the school. After all, it is a mechanism for the allocation of individuals in the social structure. What is the nature of democratic schools, are they elitist, more difficult to access (educational costs), educating the future elite of the country, or are they widely available, free of charge like state schools? Is it known what the fate of their graduates is?

I ask this because the idea of a democratic school is part of a long discussion about the role of the school – the school system – in modern society. The necessity of its existence is not questioned (except for *deschoolers* from the 70s such as I. Illich or E. Reimer), but various dysfunctions of its functioning are indicated – encyclopedism of teaching, failure to adapt the offer to social expectations, especially labor markets, excessive social selectivity. Maybe it was worth spending a few paragraphs in the chapters on Israel's school system and democratic school. Democratic schools do not operate in a social vacuum, but, whether they are not, part of a country-specific education system.

The first two chapters and the third one show the Author's orientation in contemporary sociology, and her various theoretical approaches. This is an advantage of the thesis.

Structure of the dissertation

The hearing is 389 pages long. It consists of: *In gratitudes, Introduction, 6 chapters (1. The concept of the social role theory in sociology, 2. Socialization, 3. The school system in Israel, 4. The democratic school, 5. The role of the mentor in democratic school in action, 6. Model of the social role of the mentor), Ending, References (382 texts), List of figures (22), List of tables (13), and 5 appendices: 1. The Democratic Schools in Israel, 2. Letter to the School Management and Mentoring Staff, 3. In-Depth Interview – Mentor, 4. In-Depth Interview – School Principals, 5. In-Depth Interview – Parents.* I do not intend to summarize the contents of specific parts of the text. I will only pay attention to their particular content.

The first two chapters are theoretical, trying to outline the specificity of the subject of research – the social role of the mentor in the Israeli democratic school. Hence the review of the

concept of the social role in various theoretical approaches in sociology. It is indeed a review, and not deliberately oriented, due to the research problem, analysis of different approaches to the category of social role in different theoretical currents. I regret that they have not been clearly defined and separated from each other.

When analyzing the category of socialization, it may be worth referring to its two spheres (fields). One is socialization understood as learning social norms, and culture through relationships with others – we learn from others by communing with them and entering into relationships. But for our actions (behaviors) we face sanctions – positive when we meet expectations and respect norms and negative when we ignore them. This is how the family, the social environment, peer groups, professional collectives, and the wider society (both, religious, and legal norms) work. The second field is a type of conscious influence on the individual-oriented to the formation according to the functioning of a given group is the subject of the process, the ideal of its member. This is a sector of specialized institutions, which include, first of all, a school that is not only to educate, transmit knowledge and form the skills to reach it and use it, but also to form its students according to a specific educational pattern, to create a man with a specific system of values, attitudes, worldview. It was to this sphere that Znaniecki and earlier E. Durkheim referred in their concept of education (upbringing, goal oriented action) in the family (for a society with mechanical solidarity) and school (for a society with organic solidarity) – *Education et sociologie* (a series of lectures at the College de France, published in 1920). It is a pity that in this fragment of the work there are no references to school education – education and upbringing, especially since it is an important thread of the next chapter (*The school system in Israel*).

Analyzing the history of the formation of the Israeli education system, it may be worth reaching for M. Archer – *Social Origins of Educational Systems* as an analysis of the process of moving away from education dominated by religious institutions (churches) to a system managed by the State, with an emphasis on the formation of a loyal citizen (subject in monarchies) or by local communities (municipalities) oriented towards the formation of a member of the community.

This is important because Jewish communities that lived in relatively isolated communities (shtetls) in Eastern Europe cultivated traditional religious teaching and upbringing in cheders and yeshivas or Talmud-Torah. Assimilated Jews attended private or state schools in the countries of settlement. Thus, they had different experiences relating to educational systems, education systems.

The M. Mead *School in American Culture* writes interestingly about the acculturation role of the school in immigrant communities, analyzing the functions of a provincial school (red brick school) focused on maintaining the American local system of values and a metropolitan school in which immigrant children learn the language, but also the culture, values, patterns of behavior of the national community to which they aspire. This was important in the early days of the creation of the Israeli school system, which was to serve as a platform for social integration, acculturation, various groups of immigrants using different languages (the

Ashkenazim – Yiddish, the Sephardim – Ladino, the Mizrahim – Arabic-Hebrew), or the national languages of the countries where assimilated Jews lived (German, Russian, French, English, Polish).

The most interesting and convincing for me are chapters 5 and 6, which are part of an exposition of the methodological approach, research questions and hypotheses posed, and the presentation of research results. In this part of the dissertation, the Author consistently reconstructs the models of functioning of the mentor (played and the role of the mentor) based on the statements of the mentors themselves (self-awareness of the role) and principals and parents. It is worth emphasizing that there is not a dry presentation of the data obtained, but also their interpretation. Their graphic presentations are an additional advantage

Chapter 5 *The Social Role of the Mentor in Democratic Schools in Action* is the most extensive part of the dissertation (147 pages). Its advantage is not only the presentation of data and its interpretation but attempts to generalize and build models of expectations towards the role and ways of its implementation. The axes of analysis of the obtained data are the research questions and hypotheses discussed above. Material analysis tends toward finding arguments to help answer questions and verify hypotheses.

A section entitled *Discussion* is particularly valuable because in it we have a return to the theories of social roles discussed in the first two chapters (especially the first). The Author states: "Seven axes will lead the discussion: (1) expectations of the role of mentor, (2) whose expectations of the role of mentor in democratic schools are most important, (3) the most frequent (and most typical) differentiations of the individual definition of the social role of mentor, (4) what are most common types of playing the social role of mentor, (5) mentor's role translated into his work in the field, (6) the abilities required of the educator to succeed in the mentoring work, and (7) the conditions required for the mentor's success" (p. 267). This is confirmed by analyses that go beyond the empirical material itself, referring to the theory of social roles, and socialization, but also the broader theoretical context, especially the theory of action and social interaction. A kind of summary of the research and construction of models can be a statement formulated at the end of Chapter 1 (*The Concept of the Social Role and Role Theory in Sociology*) "The combination between interpretative sociology and the role theory that has emerged during self-definition, the understanding of the dynamic system of interaction between roles, and the taking into consideration of the individual's personality and the social definition may help the understanding of the development of the mentor's role in the democratic school. (...) The attempt to understand the mentor's role in the democratic schools and from this understanding to build manners of development and professional support is necessary, in my opinion, primarily because of the period in which we are found, the post-modern period in which the person is perceived as expressing positions of power and control over others, and one of the means of the direction of the subject in conversation. Conversation enables the creation of social constructs" (p. 34).

In the summary of the chapter, the Author returns to hypotheses again, indicating those that have been confirmed and falsified (2 out of 6).

Chapter 6 (*Model of the Social Role of the Mentor*) is of great importance for the interpretation of research results. There is again an attempt at interpretation concerning the research questions posed and theoretical contexts, more importantly, it is building models of the role of a mentor in a democratic school in its most important aspects. In my opinion, it is very successful. It uses the types of implementation of social roles of the mentor distinguished in the previous chapter, ways of perceiving the role (basically role regulations); focuses on the qualities necessary to achieve success in this activity. One can get the impression that these are the communication skills and competencies of the role holder, the willingness and ability to constantly learn, openness to relations with the environment, and empathy.

At the end of the chapter, the Author reflects on the directions of future research. Writes: "Two continuation questions of this research study related to the development of the mentor's role may be the reference point in the future research on the graduates of the democratic schools. Is mentoring in democratic schools functional for society at large or only for the subworld of democratic schools? (...) Are the graduates of the democratic school better or worse or the same future citizens of the country (members of the adult society), compared to the graduates of the state schools? (pp. 340-341). Therefore, these are questions that did not fit into the current research plan, but, in my opinion, are even more important than describing and explaining how to implement the role of a mentor, because they provoke reflection: why do we do it – mentoring in a democratic school.

The quintessence of the last part of the dissertation (*Ending*) is a quote: "Here is the main message of the mentor's role. In other words, this is the magic secret of the democratic schools. The mentors really, in practice, change the equation of the teacher who teaches in favor of the accompanying teacher, the instructor, the mentor. Instead of teaching, guiding. Instead of instructing, challenging the independent thinking. Instead of determining, to be in a conversation, in a dialogue, to encourage, to decipher things, and to know yourself and what is around you" (p. 343).

This empirical part of the dissertation is, in my opinion, convincing. It is probably more interesting than the chapters focused on the analysis of the literature on the subject and the presentation of sociological theoretical concepts. Perhaps the Author's professional experience played a significant role in the research and the analysis of its results.

After reading the text, a certain remark is imposed on me – is the role of a mentor carried out without conflict? It is known that every individual in society plays many social roles, resulting from membership in various groups, social categories, and formal organizations. This, according to theorists and researchers, leads to a conflict of roles. Is there not such a challenge in the case of a mentor? Similarly, in a similar problem, referring to the conflict in the role – you can have trouble reconciling the requirements of the role and your definition of it. Perhaps it was worth paying attention to.

Workshop and editing of the dissertation

I have no comment on how the research project was carried out. The Author confirmed that she had mastered at least satisfactorily the basics of the sociologist's research workshop. She can navigate the complicated and extensive literature on the subject (the number of texts used is impressive), she can formulate problems, research questions, and hypotheses, and choose appropriate research methods to collect material for their verification. As I have already emphasized, it copes very well with the analysis of research material, not limiting itself to the presentation of the collected data, but interpreting them, and linking them to the theoretical context of research.

However, I have minor comments. The Author writes that she will use the content analysis. If so, it is only its simplified qualitative version. In the classic, B. Berelson's approach is a method of quantitative analysis of explicit texts, which means the construction of a detailed code book. To analyze the material from the interviews, she uses the technique of exemplification – she defines the topic, and conceptual category (e.g. features of the role of a mentor), formulates a thesis and looks for quotes in the text to illustrate them (support or denial). Reading Chapter V, I often thought of the grounded theory method, which could be consciously used to saturation analytical categories (properties of roles, types of mentors' actions, perception of the role by different actors). Chapter five reminds me of this method a bit *à rebours* – the Author does not so much come as a start from more general categories.

The Author also had another, more contemporary possibility of analysis using QDAS – computer software for qualitative text analysis, e.g. MXQdata, QDMiner, Atlas.ti using *in vivo* encoding. This way gives primacy to the text and allows its basis to create from more specific to more general conceptual categories. In addition, these programs have built-in analytical and presentation tools – e.g. conceptual maps.

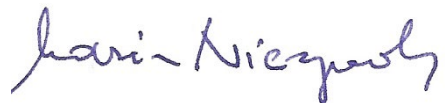
But, it is necessary to emphasize the Author's ability to control the extensive textual material and build generalizations and models showing the relationships between different conceptual (analytical) categories. It is not a simple research report, but a successful attempt to go beyond the collected specific material and refer to specific sociological theories. This is the main advantage of the fragment of chapter V – Discussion. Here you can see the usefulness of the considerations contained in the first two chapters devoted to the theory of social roles and socialization.

I also have a minor comment regarding the editors of the thesis. They refer to the first 4 chapters. It is a pity that they were not divided into subsections and paragraphs, as was done in the empirical chapters. This would allow the reader to follow the course of arguments more easily. Maybe it was worth ending these chapters with conclusions showing their importance and functions in the dissertation.

Conclusions

I do not doubt that Ronit Windzberg Sasson's doctoral dissertation meets the standards of doctoral dissertations. Most of the comments relating to the text reviewed I have included

above when analyzing individual aspects of the thesis. Taking into account the reading visible in the text, thinking (you can discuss the solutions) of the problems studied, attempts to find a way to describe and analyze them, and a kind of creativity of the Ph.D. Student, I consider that the reviewed dissertation meets the criteria set out in the Act on the title and degrees and the accompanying regulations for scientific papers prepared for the doctoral degree. Therefore, I apply for the admission of Ronit Windzberg Sasson to the further stages of the doctoral proceedings.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Jacek Niezgodny". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial 'J'.

Kraków, August 14th, 2022