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**The opinion on doctoral dissertation by 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)”.**

**This work was carried out under the supervision
of Professor Witold Wrzesień (UAM)**

General remarks on the research issues

Mentoring in schools is not only a sign of our times in which both adults and children struggle to cope with the uncertainty and fluency of social functioning, but first of all an effect of neo-liberal changes introduced into educational systems, with certain consequences in the context of professionalism and quality of education. For that reason, the dissertation of Ronit Windzberg Sasson has an innovative character and contributes to the development of sociological thought targeting improvement of education. The subject of mentoring is unequivocally defined and clearly presented from the exploratory and explanatory points of view. The central issue discussed is the social role of a mentor in a specific type of schools: democratic schools in Israel – a country with a particularly complex history. Therefore, not only the theoretical background and study results are important for this dissertation, but also the presentation of the system conditions (history, politics, religion, worldviews) affecting the functioning of a school as an educational institution with its sub-systems (students, teaching staff, parents). The analytical perspective adopted for the dissertation, i.e. sociology of education and, partly (selectively) sociology of organization, allowed the Author to have a scientific look at mentoring that, in real life practice, is more often associated with business than education. The Author examined and described the very complex social role of a school mentor, skilfully linking the pedagogical and sociological dimensions. However, the research project has some drawbacks that are discussed in subsequent parts of this review.

Notes on the structure and formal side of the dissertation

The dissertation's length extends to over 380 pages, including more 26 pages of references used by the Author and 13 pages of appendices presenting a description of methodological tools (interview dispositions). The main part of the dissertation includes as many as six chapters. Chapter 1 and 2 are purely theoretical, Chapters 3 and 4 are descriptive. Their compact form made them somewhat difficult to read, for better clarity these chapters could be divided into sub-chapters. Chapter 5 (over 170 pages) is strictly empirical – includes a description of the methodology, findings and discussion (confrontation the professional literature and the research findings). Chapter 6 is a visibly distinguished section in the structure of the dissertation and it includes a model of the development of the mentor's role in the democratic school. The dissertation is written in the English language. It complies with formal requirements concerning editorial correctness and the writing technique. The Harvard style is used for literature references. The bibliography is compiled in a neat manner, however, it would be useful to separate publications written in English from those written in Hebrew. There is inaccuracy in the footnotes and bibliography (Bourdieu 2004). In places there are incomplete bibliographic descriptions.

Notes on the conceptual framework and theoretical knowledge

In Chapter 1, the Author presented a comprehensive overview of the concept and theory of social role, referring to the experts of the idea (including Giddens, Turner, and Ritzer), but also mentioning earlier classics of sociology (Durkheim, Parsons). Choosing the structural and functional paradigm as a starting point seems understandable as the paradigm represents a macrosocial perspective and involves the notions of status and social role, as well as the fact that the said paradigm does not fully explain the specific role of a mentor in school.

Therefore, the Author's description of the interactionist perspective (Mead, Blumer, Goffman) is a justified element of this theoretical chapter, where the Author underlines the significance of role construction through relations (interactions) of an individual with other members of society. The Author explains the adoption of the interpretative paradigm for the analysis of educational phenomena by making a reference to Z. Bauman's concept of liquid modernity – which looks interesting and justified. What is exceptionally valuable is the reference to Bourdieu's theory of social fields; however, the chapter lacks a precise explanation how this

theory may be linked to the role of a mentor. There is no clear statement that school constitutes an example of an educational field on which members of that field play certain social roles, and that a mentor plays a specific educational role.

P. Bourdieu's theory was dealt with more extensively in the chapter devoted to socialization (Chapter 2). In that chapter, the Author juxtaposed two perspectives of socialization: micro-socialization – underlying the issue of identity construction; and macro-socialization – connected with the preparation to play social roles. In the latter case, the Author described the functional approach (Durkheim, Parsons), mentioning also the theory of conflict. However, the most important feature of this chapter is the illustration of how the perspectives of an individual and society approximate. To that end, the Author described the concept of habitus (Bourdieu) that is acquired in the process of socialization, with reference to school as an institution. In the understanding of the Author, habitus includes certain abilities and behaviour patterns that generate a cultural capital, although that capital is built on the basis of the already possessed, home-inherited capital. Hence the question that stems from the dissertation: should school (and how) work with students' habituses? Naturally, this question is not new, as Bourdieu's theory of reproduction is commonly known in sociology, however, in this context, the 'yes' answer forms an indispensable background to start discussions on the role of mentoring in schools.

The juxtaposition of the macrosocial and microsocial perspectives, as suggested in the dissertation, with references to the category of cultural capital, lacks an approach based on educational inequalities that are connected with Bourdieu's theory of reproduction. Although the Author declares that the subject of her interest is socialization to a role in an organization, i.e. to the role of a mentor in school, yet socialization of students is part of the fulfilment of that role. This dual dimension of the socialization process in the case of school mentors is worth underlying. Furthermore, the Author's preference for the microsocial perspective would require a more precise discussion of the habitus in view of the desirable or advantageous patterns of behaviour shaped during school or organizational socialization. The habitus description makes a reference to conversational abilities, abilities to adapt to various social situations, and to environmental patterns of behaviour – but these have not been characterized fully enough. A closer look at the specific character of the educational / school habitus would be valuable in the discussion on school mentoring.

Further on in the chapter devoted to socialization, the Author sketched this process against the background of an organization, indicating three stages of becoming a member of an organization (Greenberg & Baron), not forgetting the issue of professional development through life-long learning. Basing on the literature review and selection, the Author compiled five graphical illustrations. The first three present the process of role building according to M. Mead's theory, in the Berger-Luckmann model, but also building of a role within organizational socialization. The fourth graph presents the Author's own fusion of the first three, leading to a model of the development of professional identity of a democratic school mentor, which is presented in the fifth graph.

The summary of the Author's theoretical discussions and her interesting conceptual proposition is included in graph No. 6 "The Development of the Role in the Organization and the New Social Construction" that distinguishes between the dimensions of an individual, role and institution. The model reflects both the perspective of an individual and that of an organization. Although the text mentions institutionalization, the Author's arguments fail to include organizational socialization in a meso-social perspective.

Notes on the description of the research area

The studies designed and carried out by the Author concerned democratic schools in the educational system in Israel and, for that reason, two chapters were devoted to the description of the study area. Chapter 3 includes the characteristics of the country's five co-existing educational sectors that are subject to different values: the general sector, the workers' sector, the Mizrahi religious Zionist sector, the Ultra-Orthodox sector, the Agudat Yisrael sector, and Arab education. The Author gave an extended description not only of the historical background of the development of the Israeli educational system (after World War Two), but also the ideological and political background, including the postulates and activities striving to unify the country's education in a Western style. The chapter presents a balance of the changes and illustrates the evolution of the Israeli educational system, highlighting the phenomena of decentralization and privatization that fostered the rise and development of democratic schools (since 1970's). It ends with statistics concerning the numbers of students and teachers, depending on the type of education (Jewish or Arab) and type of school (division into different education levels).

Chapter 4 renders the specifics of the democratic schools in Israel that act as an alternative to the state educational system. In this chapter, the Author presents the idea and history of the development of these types of schools worldwide, and describes the mechanism of establishing and operating such schools in Israel starting from the 1980's. However, references to the thinkers who are identified with the main ideas found today in democratic education (e.g. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, Leo Tolstoy, John Dewey, Janusz Korczak), give this part of the dissertation a more pedagogical character (accentuating the perception of the child and work with children). An important element of this chapter is the discursive picture of democratic education, often identified with progressive or humanistic education. The Author stresses the equivocal role of a teacher who not only conveys knowledge to the students but also constantly interacts with them.

The final part of the chapter (unfortunately only 11 pages) is devoted to the idea and specifics of mentoring. Bearing in mind the subject of the doctoral dissertation, it would be reasonable to compose a separate chapter dedicated to the idea of mentoring as an example of sponsored education, and to the competences and work of a teacher-cum-mentor. Furthermore, the bibliography does not include current literature on mentoring in education, often equated with tutoring.

Notes on the methodology

The methodological and empirical section (Sub-Chapters 5.1, and 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, respectively) is the largest section of the chapter entitled "The Social Role of the Mentor in Democratic Schools in Action". In Sub-Chapter 5.1, the Author presented a coherent description of the adopted research strategy, justifying the choice in a satisfying manner. The study had a quantitative character and complied with the requisites of a sociological ethnographic examination. It was a field study that concerned subjective experience of mentors working in Israeli democratic schools. The main research question (*What are the most important characteristics of social role of mentor in democratic schools and how this role should evolve and improve in the future?*) is so general that it contained issues referred to in 9 detail problems and gave the basis to formulate 6 hypotheses. The Author's aim was to examine (i) expectations concerning the role of a mentor, (ii) competences required in connection with

this role, (iii) practicalities of functioning as a mentor, and (iv) mentor's relations with other actors engaged in educational processes in school. Accordingly, she presented a practical approach to the subject, which she confirmed herself, indicating a possibility to map *the stages of the development of the profession and to support it in the outline of the in-service training courses for professional development*. And it is particularly in this context where the research concept visibly misses to take into account characteristic features a professional mentor's operational techniques (for example by indicating how they differ from other methods of personalized education: coaching and tutoring), i.e. mentor's methods and tools (as opposed to purely administrative activities). Identification of these elements would allow the Author not only to describe the role of a mentor in a more comprehensive way, but also to achieve the above-mentioned practical goal more effectively.

The study sample involved 8 schools. In total, the Author conducted 54 interviews, including 8 with management staff representatives, 26 with mentors and 20 with parents. The triangulation of the study sample (purposive sample) allowed for a more holistic look at mentor's work, so the idea of choosing three groups of interlocutors is understandable. Given the definition and the specific character of the study problem, the choice of research techniques (Individual In-Depth Interview (IDI) and Participant Observation) is reasonable. The study proper was preceded by a pilot project, which deserves a positive note. The content analysis used to examine the interviews was based on a coding method, the results of which are presented in the Findings (Sub-Chapter 5.2).

Notes on the empirical sections

Sub-Chapter Findings (5.2) includes study conclusions presented on the basis of the examination of 42 interviews with school directors, mentors and parents. Missing information: why only 42 interviews were analysed instead of 54, as indicated in the description of the methods (5.1). The conclusions are presented by the Author in accordance with 5 theme categories identified in result of the analysis: (1) Facts that are important to know to understand the characteristics of the role of the mentor, (2) Perception of the role of the mentor, (3) Role of the mentor in everyday life in school reality, (4) Characteristics of the role-holder, (5) Presentation of the findings related to the practices of the mentoring role.

As regards the facts (theme 1), issues related to the choice / selection of mentors and students were emphasized, which highlighted the placement of this role within a network of interactions with other actors of the education process, but also the psycho-emotional dimensions of how mentoring functions in schools. In the case of the perception of the mentor's role (theme 2), it is worth to notice its socializing effect on the students through mentor – mentee relations, yet these conclusions do not refer to the process of organizational socialization of school mentors. Everyday practicalities of the mentor's role (theme 3) show the importance of elasticity (especially cognitive elasticity) depending on the situation and needs of the mentees. What is valuable from the perspective of the specific character of personalized education is the study-based identification of characteristics and traits required in the role of a mentor (theme 4), i.e. the art of attention, reflective ability, empathy, communication / dialogue and inclusion. The Author underlines that although the interlocutors used different words, a consensus in the perception of the mentor's role could be visible in the interviews. As regards the practical aspects of the role of a mentor (theme 5), what stands out as an important issue is professionalization of the mentor's role – although it is not conspicuously stressed in the description.

To sum up, Sub-Chapter 5.2 presents a comprehensive description of the role of a mentor with regard to work with students, and it can be viewed as an example of research in the field of microsociology / sociology of education. Elements that are less visible in the study results (although emphasized by the Author in the theoretical section) include aspects characteristic of sociology of organization and problems connected with professional development (e.g. institutional preparation to the role of a mentor and its organizational development).

A big asset of the dissertation is the Discussion (Such-Chapter 5.3) in which the Author confronted the results of her own research with the subject literature. She distinguished seven axes: (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 individual definition of social role of mentor*, (4) *what are most common types of playing 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*. Especially worth mentioning is Graph No. 19: *Flowchart for Learning about the Role of Mentoring* showing a multi-aspect character of learning the role of

a mentor (in the context of democratic education, mentor's practice, methods, school community / environment). Despite the fact that the sub-chapter was an opportunity to demonstrate acquaintance with current literature, the Discussion, sadly, includes references to classic publications already mentioned in the theoretical section (e.g. Blumer and Bourdieu). For instance, *The Sage handbook of mentoring and coaching in education*, S. J. Fletcher and C. A. Mullen (2012) has not been made use of.

Chapter Six, being a continuation of the summary of the study results, includes a proposition of a model of the social role of the mentor in the democratic school system in Israel in the future. Graph No. 22, *The Model of the Development of the Mentor's Role in the Democratic School*, is an example of a meticulous research work that could lead to the creation of a programme to develop mentoring in schools (not only democratic) and constitute the base for a template for various educational systems.

Final notes and conclusion

I assess the dissertation of Ronit Windzberg Sasson as an example of solid and reliable research, both in the dimension of using theories and concepts, identifying research problems, arguing, as well as designing and carrying out empirical analyses. The Author coped well with the combination of theory and empirical evidence, not only for academic needs, but also for practical applications, as shown by the *Model of the Development of the Mentor's Role in the Democratic School*, described and illustrated in the form of a graph in Chapter Six. It proves the Author's ability to analyse and synthesize empirical material.

My critical notes about the dissertation focus on neglecting the whole spectrum of personalized education methods (because of the similarities if only to tutoring, typical of education). Given the fact that the empirical section frequently refers to professional development and training, the dissertation should have provided a comprehensive description (based on literature) of the specific character of mentor education or the process of becoming a mentor (for the sake of an example: in Poland we have a fairly potent "tutor training market").

Also, the Author demonstrated her competences to use classic literature on the subject (in English and Hebrew) but failed to appreciate current literature items dealing directly with mentoring in education.

The structure of the dissertation also deserves some critical comments:

- Sub-chapters in Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 are not distinguished;
- Bibliography contains inaccuracies (it does not feature an item included in the main text – Bourdieu 2004).

Nevertheless, in view of the above, the presented thesis complies with the statutory requirements for doctoral dissertations. Therefore, I motion that Ronit Windzberg Sasson is admitted to take a viva voce examination.

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*Apłucyła
Dziedzieln-Folym*