Learning from Successes: Personal Story of an Ethiopian Teacher Education Graduate as an Expression of a Cultural Narrative of Will, Determination and Power

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the professional development narrative of an Ethiopian graduate of an college of education and to learn the characteristics of the success story. The research method was based on the interpretive-qualitative approach of the case study type. The narrative represents the story of the individual. This story is intertwined in the cultural narrative of the Ethiopian community which immigrated to Israel during the 1980s and 1990s. The personal, cultural, professional and systemic characteristics illustrated by the narrative can constitute a basis for improving teacher education and referring graduates to various positions in the field of education.

Keywords: learning from successes, life narrative, narrative, personal-self narrative, Ethiopian teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Learning from successes has been found as an effective method designed to create learning processes for the promotion of changes. Learning from successes of individuals and/or of processes is a methodology which has become a key layer in organisational learning processes. Application the principles of this methodology in the education system assists teachers to become more professional in the areas of knowledge which they teach as well as in the areas of pedagogy and education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What Does Learning From Successes Mean?

Learning from successes is a methodology which has become a key in organisational learning processes. It is prevalent in the world of business organisations and less in the field of education. Using what has already succeeded can constitute a basis for documenting the characteristics and processes which have induced successes and applying this knowledge in order to achieve results as well as attempt repeating these successes. This perception advocates the search for and learning of 'success generators' so that personal knowledge about success can be turned into a team and organisational knowledge. Furthermore, this knowledge can be implemented in order to improve the system while empowering individuals, staff and organisation among groups in the education system in general and in schools and teacher education in particular (Buckingham and Clifton, 2002; Rosenfeld, 1996).

Dekel (2010) relates to learning from successes as an innovative learning versus learning from failures which is common and acceptable. She argues that optimism accompanies learning from successes. That is, in order to learn from successes, one has to be optimistic and hopeful and should see the end point.

Studies of schools which are learning from their successes in a consistent and continuous way showed that learning from successes: a. creates a more open school climate; b. empowers teachers' perception of their ability to cope with disciplinary problems and impact the improvement of learners' attainments; c. forms a practical and professional knowledge reservoir accumulated with the personal memory of every partner, from which teachers can retrieve knowledge for the purpose of their work; d. improves the culture of the school dialogue-discourse and constitutes a leverage for enhancing all school learning processes (Alenbogen-Frencovitz, Russo and Rosenfeld, 2001; Weiss, 2007). Moreover, learning from successes is a way of life for educational work. The educational philosophy and the accompanying methodology might facilitate better way of coping with short- and long-term uncertainty and challenges (Shechter, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2009).

The professional literature engaging in the promotion of teachers who graduated teacher education programmes presents a developmental perception of the professional career and indicates graduality in the socialisation for work and the commitment to the profession. This perception views teachers as creators of professional knowledge growing out of the practice. Goodlad (1990) stipulates facilitating factors in the success of the professionalization and the promotion thereof. He indicates that improvement of pre-service teachers' education processes is one of the elements of a successful professionalization process (Goodlad, 1990). This assumption about the contribution of teacher education enables identification of success cases and their study. Gesser (2004) considers teacher education as a stage of professional development. Preparation towards this professional stage can be grounded in the attitudes and perceptions of those teachers even before they have started their professional training. Novice teachers bring their personal 'baggage' when they start working and it impacts their future, continuing career and professional development (Feiman-Nemser, 2000). The personal 'baggage' of graduates of the unique Ethiopian teacher education pathway at an academic college of education embodies unique personal-cultural experiences and challenges which brought about and consolidated the overt strengths and particularly their covert strengths. These strengths enabled actualisation of success narratives later on in their professional development.

Hence, teachers' professional development and successes encompass all the stages they undergo while building their career. Teacher education is the first stage to which they come with their background and it might assist them and contribute further on in their career. Barzilay (2009) attempts to find the common features of the 'success stories', namely the individual narratives which express success. She raises the question: "What are the actionsand thoughts which helped the protagonists of the narratives she has collected, to pull themselves out of the difficulties and to succeed?" (Barzilay, 2009, p. 171). Based on the success narratives she built a dictionary which comprises different and varied elements exposed in these stories such as: optimism, belief, activeness, choice, connection to the self, giving, creativity, will and moving forward.

Life Story and Personal-Self Narrative as a Basis for Learning from Successes

The classical definition of a story was conceived by Labov (1967). He defines a personal story as one of the methods for transferring some life experience from the past through verbal description. This is a reconstruction of a past experience performed by adapting a verbal sequence of sentences presented in a specific order to a sequence of events which have transpired in reality. The time order is a highly important component and it determines the meaning of the story. The story has a beginning, middle and end. It is followed by definitions and additional extensions to a story and a life story. The concept 'narrative' which has been widely used in the last decade is also grounded in the narrow definition formulated by Labov (1967). The extension relates to the product obtained as an answer to an open-ended question which invokes a story and particularly a life story (Tuval-Mashiach and Spector-Marzel, 2010). In her book '*Secret of the Success Story,* Barzilay (2009) includes life stories which express success. She underscores that sentences and stories which reflect an existential reality in fact also create it. Barzilay's assumption relies on the narrative approach, namely that language creates reality. Chase (2005) describes narrative in three forms: "a) short and focused story about a specific event or specific protagonists; b) extended story about a continuous and meaningful aspect in the life of the narrator; c) narrative about the entire life course of the person" (Chase, 2005, p. 652). Tuval-Mashiach and Spector-Marzel (2010) make distinctions and find a common denominator of all the accumulated definitions regarding the form of discourse entitled a narrative. They differentiate between narratives of different types. The prominent distinction is between those where the object is external to the narrator – organisation, ethnic group, country – and those whose direct and focused object is the narrator him/herself, namely self-narratives. "All the 'self-narratives' relate to the narrator's life history – record of the events and series of facts which comprise the narrator's life course. In the 'self-narrative' the narrator refers to a definite aspect of his life" (Tuval-Mashiach and Spector-Marzel, 2010, p. 13).

A personal-self narrative which is part of a life story constitutes a means of expressing the 'voice' of individuals in society. The voice of the individuals who attempt to reconstruct life story and particularly the events which were the milestones in their personal and professional success can serve as indicators and examples of personal empowerment processes. Analysis of success stories, personal events and personal turning points of individuals on the background of the collective narrative of the Ethiopian community allows expression of the critical pedagogy theory (Freire, 1997) as well as of multiculturalism ideas in general and reflexive multiculturalism in particular (Hoffman, 1996). Reflexive multiculturalism facilitates a dialogue between individuals in society and different groups while looking at the 'self' and the 'other' (Ezer, 2004). Life stories constitute in fact a way for understanding the 'self' and the 'other' (Munk, Gidron, Keynan, Bar-Zohar and Shochat, 2002).

Ethiopian Pre-Service Teacher Education

Perception of pluralism and education for multiculturalism in training patterns is manifested by developing a unique programme for Ethiopian pre-service teachers who come from a different background, different culture and different socio-economic status. The basic assumption underpinning the need to open a class for this population is providing an equal opportunity to learn, acquire a profession and be integrated in the labour market (Gilad, 2006; Millet and Gilad, 2004). Moreover, in recent years the need for educating Ethiopian pre-service teachers for school has been growing. Out of about 130.000 teachers in the education system, from kindergartens and up to high school, only 150 Ethiopian teachers have been integrated in the system, 62 of them working in kindergartens (Ministry of Education, 2014; Kalniski, Millet and Cohen, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

The research method was based on the qualitative-interpretive approach of the case study type. This study is part of a comprehensive follow-up research of Ethiopian graduate of a teacher education programme. The chosen graduate holds a B.Ed. and a M.Ed. degrees and demonstrated success in his studies and integration into the education system. Five in-depth interviews were conducted, exposing his personal narrative and success story. During the interviews the narrator was requested to tell his life story – his 'self-narrative' – highlight his successes and describe how he accomplished them on the background of the Ethiopian community culture. He was asked what in fact the meaning of success from his personal viewpoint was and what the secret of his success was. The interviews were analysed according to the key themes in Ethiopia and prior to immigration to Israel; the journey to Israel and the immigration process; absorption and integration in Israel.

The definition of a 'self-narrative' is in line with the success stories gathered from the graduate of the Ethiopian teacher education programme since the 'self-narrative' is positioned at the junction between the personal and public domain. The 'self-narrative' brings with it the story of the personal experience which is also part of a social process (Keynan, 2002). A personal success story of an Ethiopian immigrant is a 'self-narrative' in which are intertwined the collected narratives of the community and social-cultural processes in Ethiopian and Israel.

FINDINGS

The findings which describe the success story of an Ethiopian graduate of a teacher education college comprise simultaneously the insights one can draw from the life story. On the one hand these insights are a story of a personal-self narrative and on the other a story of reflexive way of coping with the multicultural story of teacher education and the education system while paving the way to a success story. The figure of Avraham in the story transmits 'a climb up the ladder towards success' throughout the entire narrative. The story embodies flashes of a will to move forward, change both his personal condition and that of his environment. The narrative symbolises progress of an ambition to serve as a social-educational driving force and a leader.

Avraham's Narrative

"*The good deeds of a father will promote his children, success depends on what the father gives*", this is the way Avraham started the interview about his life story. He explained that "*every story is accompanied by proverbs. Without a proverb, a story is actually not highly qualitative*". Proverbs in the Ethiopian culture have double meaning: they express philosophies and accumulated life wisdom on the one hand and serve as grounds for learning and memorisation of behaviour rules and building a life-style in present and future on the other. They consist of short sentences and in many cases include metaphors which summarise great ideas to which one can adhere in any situation.

Avraham divided his life story into two periods: 'pre-immigration' and 'post-immigration'. The immigration story to which he refers as the 'journey' constitutes a story by itself. In all the parts of his life story, his narrative, his parents play an important role. Consequently, he included the proverb which connects the father figure and the education he provides in his success story, right at the beginning.

Pre-immigration in Ethiopia

Avraham spoke about his life in Ethiopia: *"I was born in the region of Gondar. In order to succeed I have always known that I must learn. Studies are the key to the continuation of life. Unfortunately, as a child I did not learn in regular frameworks since my role in the family was a shepherd. My father chose me because he trusted me. Whatever the father builds and does determines his children's future. The next generation depends on the parents, the grandparents and the heritage they transfer. The communication skills which my parents and grandparents taught me were the basis of my behaviour, of my success. As the saying goes:*

'Education is good for children like the twitter of birds at the end of the night'. The idea is that a serious and good investment in children is essential and yields positive and tasty fruits like birds at the end of the night. That is, the environment will always appreciate a child who was properly educated and the child will appreciate and respect his parents, be loyal to the community, contribute and be proud of his legacy".

The Journey

According to Avraham, the journey from Ethiopia to Israel was arduous: "*The entire family started the journey to Israel through Sudan. On the way we faced shootings, extreme cold and many hurdles. At some point I got sick and was unconscious for a while. My parents did not give up on me and carried me on a stretcher. All the time I knew that I should exert every effort and get well. I must live in order not to cause any pain and suffering to my parents. I strongly believed that if I arrived to Sudan I will also reach Jerusalem. This powerful will helped me to overcome the numerous physical difficulties. My determination was supported by hope. All my thoughts were about my parents and the fear of death. I lived between despair and hope and hope prevailed*". The impact of the parents, the family, the grandparents' legacy and the stories on which Avraham has grown up continue accompanying him and motivate him to achieve and attain as well as to build his success story. Avraham came to Israel without knowing the language, without being able to read and write and without understanding the social and culture codes. Yet, within five years he managed to bridge a huge gap, complete 12 years of studies and be integrated into the society of Israeli youth and become a leader. This is definitely an exceptional life narrative. Avraham explains that this resulted from a combination of hope, wish to learn, make progress, be integrated, words of the parents, rabbis and teachers, the strong belief in the ability to succeed as well as knowing that this is the right way. All these factors constituted the secret of his strength and prevented him from giving up at any stage of the way, driving him to go on and succeed.

Post-immigration

Avraham's success story after the immigration to Israel consists of the absorption process, discovery of his self-powers to strive forward and description of what is transpiring today. Avraham has acquired education, fulfills a senior position in the educational practice of a local authority and has a family. He contributes on a daily basis and tries to change the image of the Ethiopian community among members of the Israeli society.

Absorption

Avraham described the absorption process: "*We immigrated to Israel by plane in 1984 and I was sent to the boarding school in the Hofim Youth Village where I was warmly welcomed. The first encounter with the boarding school rabbi was the 'heart of the absorption'. His words have followed me until today. I was 14 years old and was strongly empowered by the rabbi's words which emphasised that we had to be strong and ignore expressions such as 'negroes' or 'blacks'. With time I turned into a leader*". Avraham has always known that studies and education would promote him and he expresses it through the proverb: "A person without education is like food without salt". He tells about the struggle to learn: willpower, understanding and belief by way of acquiring education. "*In 1988 they wanted to stop our learning. We objected because we wanted to complete 12 years of schooling. We demonstrated in front of the Jewish Agency and the Youth Immigration Authority. I was the leader, using the strength given to me by the parents' figures and the first rabbi whom I met in Israel. We succeeded... we were allowed to study another year in the boarding school*". The turning point in Avraham's life was the higher education studies. These studies combined with perseverance and diligence at work resulted in a successful professional career. Avraham explains with enthusiasm: "*Learning in the academic college of education opened to me gates, the gates of Jerusalem – the gates of success*". A special component of success which Avraham reiterates both in his life as a leading youth in the boarding school, his studies at the academic college of education and his work and various functions is his willpower. He wants to be just like the others; his skin colour and origin should not matter. Moreover, this willpower brought about ways for coping with the difficulties on the background of multiculturalism. The figures that supported him on his way since its arrival to Israel had a strong impact on him. He feels that the support entailed an urge to succeed, pushed him to prove that those who believed in him and in his friends were not wrong, just the opposite. Avraham managed to demonstrate that if one wants and builds the right way, one can succeed and have high attainments.

Today

Avraham says: "*Today I hold a senior position in the Ministry of Education and I deal with everyone, not only Ethiopians. I try to provide the best care and I believe I will not remain successful only here. I hope to be promoted to a high position. I strive to move forward with my strengths. I graduated my M.Ed. studies and was integrated as a lecturer in the practicum stage of a unique course at the college - heritage of Ethiopian Jewry. I am really excited by the offer which promotes me. I lecture to the students and I really believe in my capabilities*". Avraham's message of his success story is transmitted every day to the students he encounters, the parents, teachers, community members and everyone around him. "*I try to delivery my credo to the students to whom I provide care. I try convincing them to believe in themselves. I assure them that their capability will be manifested once they make a little effort. I guide them to cope with all kinds of difficulties which they face on the way to success*". As the proverbs say: *"'Let bygones be bygones, we have to think about the future'* or *'the horse will bring you to the battleground but it will not fight for you'*".

Avraham Explains What Does Success Mean to Him and How to Accomplish It

At first Avraham tries to explain what directed his success during the first period of studies at the Israeli boarding school, after the immigration, as a youngster bridging in five years a gap of at least 15 years. He points out: "*If you don't try and don't dare to do something, then you will certainly not succeed. One should always aspire to succeed and never give up*". Avraham's success story manifests the secret of success in his eyes: a huge willpower to learn and progress, belief that the way is the right one, belief in your capabilities, transition from failure to success and continued gathering of failure and success experiences on the way to success. His narrative is indeed a success story: from a 14-year old boy, a shepherd in Gondar who has never studied and was illiterate to a college graduate with a M.Ed. degree, leading educational processes and building a wonderful and happy family. Avraham's narrative can serve as a model of learning from successes. His analysis of the meaning of success in his eyes illustrates insights about a way of constant coping, experiencing failures, ambition to progress forward, strong belief in himself, acknowledging his limitations and empowering his personal capabilities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Avraham's narrative, the success story presented in this paper expresses the insights it embodies for teacher education. It comprises scaffolds for learning from successes. The story analysis highlights the will, determination, perseverance, belief in yourself and in others, deriving the motivating force from the heritage of one's parents' home somewhere in the villages of Ethiopia and the roots of the unique Ethiopian culture born thousands of years ago. All these have survived and are undergoing transformations in the Israeli present.

The programme which Avraham attended was designed as a social and value-oriented need. This was due to the fact that at schools in the neighbourhood of the college there were no Ethiopian teachers and there were no Ethiopians pre-service teachers. The programme was built according to the principles of the particular multicultural education (a separate group of Ethiopian students in the first stage of the training) and according to the pluralistic education for multiculturalism in the second stage. The programme was based on individual support and group backup while putting an emphasis on individual development, cultural association and professional empowerment (Kalniski, Millet and Cohen, 2014; Gilad, 2006; Millet and Gilad, 2004).

The professional literature shows a relation between self-image and success or failure. According to Kaniel (2000), 'self-value' is the core of one's personality which is enfolded by additional wrappings. Self-image, personal identity, control focus and inner motivation are concepts which constitute wrappings and sections of the concept 'self-value'. All people know themselves in different ways and from different perspectives. There is an 'individual self for oneself' and there is a 'self which represents oneself' to others. People have schemes and representations regarding various concepts and at the same time they have representations and patterns about themselves. The self-value and self-image supply the force, motivation and power to deal with goals set along the years. They enable people to overcome difficulties and failures and stimulate them to go forward. Self-esteem nurtures the ambition to progress and vice versa (Kaniel, 2000). These components are prevalent in Avraham who advances from failure and difficulty to success.

Common elements to what was illustrated by the narrative discussed in this paper can also be found in Patkin and Gesser (2007) who describe success stories of mathematics teachers. The researchers connect the success to various characteristics such as: admittance to the college data, attitude of the family towards teaching, personality and self-image, studies at a college and continued learning, induction to the education system and school features, educational initiatives and plans for the future. The characteristics of the family's attitude, studies at college and continued learning, educational initiatives and plans for the future constitute the fundamentals of success stories of Ethiopians who have had professional training at an academic college of education. An Ethiopian's success story illustrates what is discussed by the professional literature. The cultural hue emphasises and highlights the elements of success which can be adopted in teacher education both from the self-narrative and the self-narrative of other individuals and the group.

The treasure encompassed in the success story described in this paper can undoubtedly penetrate the educational space and be a candle for many additional success stories. Teacher education should embrace this way of learning and turn the success stories into the basis for professional development.

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