

Identity Literacy: Reading and Teaching Texts as Resources for Identity Formation

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Background/Context: *Literacy has been traditionally posited as a primary educational goal. The concept is now understood in the literature as extending way beyond the mere technicalities of proficiency in reading and writing, encompassing a broad range of skills and practices related to comprehension, communication, and the ability to use texts in multiple settings. Cultural literacy and critical literacy are two conceptual models frequently used to understand the essence of literacy and why it is a worthy educational goal. Each model prescribes different curricular goals and preferred teaching practice in educational settings spanning all disciplines and age groups. In this article, we suggest a third conceptual model, identity literacy, based in developmental psychology's concept of identity. We define identity literacy as readers' proficiency and willingness to engage the meaning systems embedded within texts and to consider adopting them as part of their own personal meaning system—that system within which they define themselves and their relation to the world. Setting identity literacy as a goal of teaching frames the practice of teaching texts differently than the other models.*

Focus of Study: *The concept emerged from a qualitative study focusing on high school teachers who primarily teach texts in the classroom. The study examined their goals and justifications for their chosen practices of teaching texts and examined these in light of extant literature regarding literacy, and the literature on identity development.*

Setting and Participants: *Twelve expert teachers of the curricular subject of Jewish thought taught in the Israeli nonreligious school sector served as the empirical foundation for developing the concept.*

Research Design: *Qualitative methodology was used to explore teachers' ideas regarding teaching texts. Teachers were interviewed twice: once regarding their life story, reasons for*

becoming a teacher, and general goals in teaching, and once after they were observed teaching, regarding their reflections on the practices they employed in teaching texts. Common themes were identified using techniques based in grounded theory analysis.

Findings/Results: *Three themes regarding teachers' ideas on the proper way to teach texts emerged from the analysis: Good textual study is potentially personally meaningful; good teaching accentuates the potential of texts to trigger identity processes in the reader; and for students to learn to read in this manner, a particular stance toward texts needs to be taught.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *The concept of identity literacy is suggested as an alternative conceptual lens with which to frame the purpose and practice of teaching texts in the classroom that may be relevant to teachers in a broad range of school disciplines.*

Promoting literacy has long been a focal concern of educators and educational researchers. Albert Snowden (1907) compared literacy rates between countries in *Teachers College Record* more than a century ago, and concern with literacy rates continues unabated to this day (Jacobs, 2008). Extensive research efforts have gone into studying the most effective ways to promote literacy in schools (Pressley, 2005). However, although literacy remains a leading educational goal, the meaning of the concept has changed dramatically over the century, and *literacy* is now often used quite differently than merely referring to the technical ability to decipher and produce written text. The concept is now evoked to prescribe curricular goals and to specifying preferred teaching practice, and this not only in the early grades and in reading classes but also in a diverse range of academic disciplines spanning multiple age groups targeting a wide range of skills (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Concurrently, different ideas regarding what exactly literacy actually “means” or “is” have emerged (Gee, 1989; Scribner, 1984). In the academic discourse devoted to literacy, it is now widely accepted that rather than speaking of “literacy” in the singular, it would be wiser to speak of “literacies” in the plural (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1995) because there are many different ways in which literacy manifests in practice in different contexts, serving different purposes. And yet notwithstanding, often in the educational field and in popular writing, these different understandings of literacy still share the same overarching and seemingly uncontested title. In our view, a diversity of conceptual understandings of literacy can be helpful in opening up alternative ways of thinking about the teaching of texts, in the setting up of curricular and pedagogical goals, and ultimately in the practice of teaching. However, because different understandings can afford and constrain teachers’ thinking regarding classroom practice in markedly different ways, we must clearly and explicitly delineate different approaches to literacy and not refer to them all using the same singular

concept. Accordingly, in the present article, we introduce the term *identity literacy* to refer to a specific approach to literacy that we have identified. We explain the ways in which this approach differs in emphasis from other extant approaches that have been offered to conceptualize literacy. In doing so, we hope to provide researchers and practitioners with yet another lens through which to think about what it means to study texts and to teach the study of texts in the classroom. We are not trying to say that “our” conceptualization of literacy is “superior” to others or is “*the correct*” way of thinking of literacy; rather, we claim that this particular way of thinking of literacy has a distinct emphasis and offers certain theoretical and practical advantages.

By way of introduction, we define identity literacy as readers’ proficiency in the practice of engaging the meaning systems embedded within texts, considering while doing so whether to adopt, adapt, or reject these as part of their own personal meaning systems. A personal meaning system is a semiotic system (socioculturally based, but personally adapted) with which individuals make sense of themselves, the world they are in, and their relation to it (Valsiner, 2007). In other words, as they engage texts, readers are engaging in processes of personal identity development. To unpack this condensed statement and clarify this concept of literacy and its implications for teaching, we need to present a broad background. The article is therefore constructed as follows: We start by briefly sketching how the concept of literacy evolved from a technical autonomous skill possessed by an individual, to current conceptualizations of multiple local and situated literacies that are purposeful social practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1999; Street, 1984, 1993, 1995, 2003). Within this conceptual context of *multiple literacies*, we discuss the prevalent concepts of *cultural literacy* (Hirsch, 1987, 1993) and *critical literacy* (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 2002; Kincheloe, 2008; Shor & Pari, 1999). These will serve as contrasting concepts with which to eventually compare identity literacy and introduce its novel perspective. We stress outright, however, that the difference between these frameworks is sometimes a matter of emphasis and that bridges between them and combinations can be made. They should not be understood as necessarily mutually exclusive. Yet, for analytic purposes and for clarity of presentation, we choose at first to highlight the differences between the three, rather than the commonalities. The possible bridges will be discussed in the discussion section. Next, we present developmental psychology’s conceptual framework for discussing identity development (Côté & Levine, 2002; Erikson, 1968; Schachter, 2005a; Schwartz, 2001). Traditionally, this literature has not focused on classroom study or on the place of reading and studying texts. However, we will demonstrate that it provides a

theoretical framework with which to discuss certain processes involved in the study of texts. Following this, we describe a study of Israeli high school teachers teaching the subject of *Jewish thought* in the nonreligious public school sector. It was during interviews and observations conducted with these teachers that we identified an approach to teaching texts that was based on an implicit concept of literacy. However, this implicit concept did not comfortably fit the model of either cultural or critical literacy. This field study spurred our formulation of the idea of identity literacy as implicitly guiding these teachers' practice, and we describe it in detail. The article concludes with a discussion of whether and how such an approach to teaching texts in class, observed in such a particular context, can be a relevant option for teachers teaching texts in a much broader range of school disciplines.

CONCEPTS OF LITERACY AND THE FRAMING OF TEACHING: "CULTURAL" AND "CRITICAL" LITERACY

It is by now a commonplace observation that the educational literature on literacy, originally focused on studying the basic ability to read and write, long ago expanded the concept (Kazemek & Rigg, 2002; Mullis, Kennedy, Martin, & Sainsbury, 2006; Olson, 2009). For example, a task group of experts from UNESCO (2004) defined literacy as

the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society. (p. 13)

This definition includes many aspects related not to the technicalities of reading and writing, but to the uses of written material—aspects such as understanding, effectively communicating, social participation, self-enhancement, and goal achievement. The premise of this expansion is that the ability to decipher written text or to put words into writing does not encompass all that individuals and groups do with text in various contexts. To learn to be literate thus involves acquiring the abilities needed to use texts to forward goals in a broad range of different contexts. Furthermore, researchers now assert that the technicalities of reading and writing acquired in childhood are not sufficient for comprehending and producing the complex texts used in advanced and/or specific settings (Moje, 2002; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Technological

advances also bring to the fore issues of multimodality (Kress, 2003), meaning that texts are represented in multiple forms—as words not only on paper but also on screen, and as graphics, sounds, and animations, often together with more traditional forms of text. This requires an even broader conceptualization of literacy. Broadening the concept of literacy has enabled extending its application to educational settings, such as secondary schools and higher education in diverse disciplinary fields, and to populations that already possess the basic technicalities involved in deciphering texts. Literacy has now become a concept used in framing the educational goals guiding textual study in different fields—for example, in setting curricular goals for scientific literacy, computer literacy, math literacy, health literacy, economic literacy, and the like (e.g., Laugksch, 2000; Mullis, Martin, & Foy, 2008; Selber, 2004; Walstad, 2001; Warschauer, 2007; Zarcadoolas, Pleasant, & Greer, 2006).

The prevalence of the literacy discourse with regard to virtually every branch of education requires us to consider whether and how the assumptions we have regarding what it means to be literate prejudice the way we think about textual study, perhaps constraining other possible ways to approach texts and the possible pedagogies with which to teach texts. This idea has been extensively developed in what is referred to as *new literacy studies* (NLS) (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1999; Street, 1984, 1995, 2003). NLS theorists have introduced and forwarded a theoretical framework that conceptualizes literacy as a social practice rather than as an autonomous transferable skill. They hold that reading and writing take place in diverse social contexts for particular local social purposes. As such, they conceive of “literacies” rather than “literacy”: “There are different literacies associated with different domains of life” (Barton & Hamilton, p. 8). These are sometimes referred to as “situated literacies” or “local literacies.” NLS theorists demonstrate how these diverse literacies are “purposeful,” meaning that literacy is engaged in, in certain ways, as a means to achieve certain ends. As such, these practices cannot be understood and evaluated without taking these end-goals into account while ignoring the social and ideological contexts that give literacy meaning. This contrasts with a hierarchical decontextualized approach, in which certain approaches to literacy are considered better than others without considering what they are for, and in which literacy skills are seen as easily transferable from one context to another.

Accordingly, given the assumption that there are indeed multiple literacies and that the usage of the term *literacy* in the singular requires us to unpack what exactly such usage attempts to accomplish, we present two prominent and very different comprehensive notions of literacy—cultural literacy and critical literacy—and demonstrate how each of these

notions is actually framing what textual study “is” in distinct ways, and how both harbor different implicit notions of what literacy intends to achieve. Each, therefore, naturally leads to a different model of teaching while marginalizing others. This is not to say that there is something wrong with this; rather, it allows us to consider that alternative conceptualizations might also be possible, based on other assumptions and goals. Though not exhaustive of all approaches to literacy, the two represent leading tendencies and help us clarify the alternative approach based on identity that we present afterward.

The concept of cultural literacy was introduced by E. D. Hirsch Jr. as the possession of “the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world” (Hirsch, 1987, p. xiii). Being literate—meaning being able to understand texts—requires background information. This information is considered cultural in two senses: first in the sense that the specific information needed to thrive is different in different cultural contexts, and second in the sense that such information, although needed in the present, is nevertheless anchored in a historical past of a community. Therefore, Hirsch claimed that for individuals to be able to comprehend written texts, they must be taught core bodies of knowledge. This is necessary because communicators within a culture assume that certain background knowledge is already known to those they are communicating with in speech or in writing, as part of a shared cultural background. Such information is “taken for granted” by authors and left out of the text. To understand and communicate effectively within any given culture, one needs to share in access to such knowledge and meanings. Hirsch claimed, therefore, that students’ acquisition of any new knowledge will be dependent on teachers laying down a foundation of prior knowledge. This is necessary so that knowledge becomes networked—that is, noticed, considered relevant, understood, differentiated, and integrated with prior knowledge.

Hirsch’s agenda is academic in the sense that learning is conceived of as related to intellectual processes of accumulating impartial knowledge with predetermined objective meanings. Thriving within a community is the end goal, and understanding is the means. To understand, one needs to have the background knowledge that is taken for granted and understand it in a culturally appropriate manner. Education is entrusted with transmitting to children such background information—“the specific information shared by the adults of the group or polis” (Hirsch, 1987, p. xvi; see also Gallagher, 1992, p. 213). Hirsch used the concept of core knowledge to relate to this specific shared information and participated in attempts to define it (Hirsch, 1993). This concept of literacy suggests a directive, sequential, and guided approach to teaching that is basically

intended to transfer the required background knowledge. The predetermined meanings in the texts are reproduced in the classroom. Certain critics of Hirsch's approach found fault in his presenting knowledge as mere information and supposedly emphasizing memorizing facts over developing learning skills. However, this specific criticism does not contest the basic academic goal (Perkins & Salomon, 1989). In principle, skills can also be incorporated in an overall approach holding that with regard to any subject matter, for students to succeed in reading, understanding, and communicating their thoughts to others, they must be taught basic concepts, writing genres, and conventional academic skills characteristic of the specific discipline in a direct systematic manner, following a logical progression (Kendall & Marzano, 2004). Thus, to be literate in statistics would mean, for example, (1) knowing the meaning of concepts such as sampling, level of confidence, and power; (2) being able, when relevant, to recognize that these concepts are part of the statistical discourse and that the word *power* is not being used within the specific sociocultural context as part of another discourse (such as sociology, auto mechanics, or military strategy); (3) knowing basic skills such as how to go about computing averages and standard deviations; and (4) practicing the customary notation of statistical writing. To be literate in American law would entail knowing concepts such as a hearing and the Bill of Rights, knowing how to go about drafting a binding legal agreement, and perhaps also being aware of the connotations of such concepts for Americans and for different groups of Americans. The stated goal of teaching literacy remains students achieving the ability to understand texts in order to use them to thrive within a relatively fixed society that considers such knowledge basic.

The concept of critical literacy is rooted in the wider theoretical framework of critical pedagogy, with roots in the work of educator Paulo Freire and philosophers of the Frankfurt School (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008). In brief, the basic guiding principle behind this concept is that literacy extends beyond the ability to decipher the written text and comprehend the content, but rather entails the ability and willingness to relate to it critically. The critical relation discussed here is not the logical critique of the claims made in the text. Rather, it refers to the ability to recognize the text as political and as claiming authority in the guise of neutrality. Literate students learn to understand the implications of this authority in either empowering or oppressing them or others. They learn that knowledge and ways of talking and writing about knowledge is social capital (Gee, 1989) and that their mastery of approved ways of doing so (i.e., mastering the discourse) yields power. They also learn to recognize how knowledge is produced and how knowledge serves interests of

individuals and social groups. According to this approach to literacy, an authoritative uncritical teaching of core knowledge *à la* Hirsch is actually reproducing social structure and reifying knowledge by privileging certain bodies of knowledge over others, thereby privileging the groups that consider such knowledge essential (Giroux, 2002). The purpose of teaching the knowledge to the student in this manner is not really to enable the student to function adaptively and thrive in an evolving society, but rather to reproduce historic values privileging bodies of knowledge that empower certain social groups over others. This specific concept of literacy recognizes texts as performances of power. Being literate involves having the skills and willingness to encounter, engage, and/or resist this power to bring about desirable social change. Teaching critical literacy is a political act intended to bring about social change and involves instilling critical attitudes (Ball, 2000; Moje, 2000).

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND MEANING

As noted, the purpose of this article is not to argue for or against one of these conceptions of literacy as *the* correct conception of literacy. We prefer to conceive of them as “local literacies” (see NLS theorists noted earlier), in the sense that each conception has identified and promoted one particular way of engaging texts and that each of these needs to be evaluated according to the purposes and implications of doing so. In this article, they also serve as background for understanding a third conception of literacy and its concomitant notion of teaching, oriented toward the idea of texts embodying meaning systems that readers consider resources for identity development. This third conception is also a particular way of engaging texts, which too needs to be evaluated according to its purposes and implications—a point we get to later on. To introduce this third conception, we take a brief look at the psychological developmental literature on identity formation.

In the classical account of identity formation developed by Erik Erikson (1968), identity serves as a dynamic psychological structure providing the individual with a “sense of continuity and invigorating sameness” (p. 19). It is important to point out that Erikson’s conceptualization of identity differs from other psychological and sociological conceptualizations of identity that have employed the concept to either refer to an individual’s group memberships and affiliations (Hogg, 2003; Tajfel, 1981) or to refer to local, fluid, dynamic, and highly context-bound “positions” that an individual “performs” and “claims” with the hope of being “recognized” as such in order to achieve goals that are dependent on such recognition (cf., Bamberg, 2011; Côté & Levine, 2002; Goffman,

1959; Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005). Erikson's theory instead focused especially on "ego-identity," that is, on identity's function in providing an individual with a sense of cohesion, unity, and purpose (McAdams, 1988). Much of the research on identity within developmental psychology follows the Eriksonian tradition. More than just a construct pointing out an individual's objective group memberships or subjective sense of affiliation with groups, or as pointing to local transitory positions undertaken in specific social interactions, Erikson's concept focuses on how an individual's self-understanding in relation to groups and ideas serves to organize his or her different roles and self-perceptions, thus enabling meaningful agentic self-directed participation in society (Côté & Levine; Schwartz, 2001). Precisely because individuals traverse multiple contexts and enact different local identities, Erikson theorized that they have a need for a "core" executive function that provides sameness and continuity—and "identity" is what serves this purpose (Schachter, 2011). Although the debates within psychology regarding the most profitable way of conceptualizing the essence of identity continue unabated, in our discussion of identity literacy, we follow the Eriksonian tradition as it has been adapted in recent publications to deal with concerns raised by critics that have emphasized the more fluid and relational aspects of identity (e.g., Côté, 1996; Schachter, 2005a, 2011). We will thus refer here to identity as a psychological executive function providing self-coherence, unity, and purpose by way of adopting and creating stable (though flexible) meaningful self-understandings vis-à-vis the world.

Erikson portrayed ego-identity as a developmental achievement. An individual is not born with a coherent sense of identity; rather, he or she needs to work out a sense of identity in the course of development, and this is accomplished by different individuals with varying degrees of success. Through processes of *identification*, *exploration*, and *commitment*, the individual constructs a sense of who he or she is and wants to be. *Identifying* with roles, ideas, role models, heroes, and inspirational or otherwise significant individuals and communities, the child incorporates possible images of who to be. *Exploring* available social roles, ideologies, partners, communities, and worldviews, the individual attempts to determine how these might fit existing identifications or require their transformation. *Commitment* refers to the outcome of the ability to fit self-chosen significant identifications to specific social roles, ideologies, relationships, communities, and worldviews explored and found meaningful—which is a willingness to persevere in action directed to actualize them.

Less highlighted in the developmental portrayal of identity formation until recently, and more consonant with current conceptualizations of identity based on sociocultural models (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995;

Schachter, 2005a), was Erikson's emphasis that identity is co-constructed. The developing individual does not construct identity on her own; rather, a collaboration and negotiation goes on between the individual and her social environment. Adults provide (or fail to provide) identity models; enable, legitimize, scaffold, and guide (or not) exploration; and encourage and assist (or not) in the making of mature, thought-out, viable, socially recognized commitments (Schachter & Marshall, 2010; Schachter & Rich, 2011; Schachter & Ventura, 2008). This co-construction with particular adults takes place within broader societal contexts that afford and constrain identity development (Côté & Levine, 2002; Schachter, 2005b).

Identity, Texts, and Schooling

Interestingly, the psychological literature has not, by and large, directly addressed texts and scholastic study as part of the process of mature identity development. Although the research literature does concentrate on processes of identity exploration, it has done so in a way that serves to exclude much of regular ongoing scholastic study. Even when schools are studied as sites of identity construction, it is usually not in relation to the contents studied, but to personal identity aspects of social relations that develop in schools (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006). The overlooking of the contents of scholastic study in the research discourse of identity formation may be due to the way exploration has been defined in the developmental literature. A commonly used definition of identity exploration is of "problem-solving behavior aimed at eliciting information about oneself or one's environment in order to make a decision about an important life choice" (Grotevant, 1987, p. 204). Exploration is thus depicted here as triggered by the need to make an impending real-life decision, and therefore as a concentrated effort guided by the need to bring about closure (see Flum & Kaplan, 2006, for an alternative view). Such a conception of identity formation narrows the focus of study of processes of identity development to a very specific range of behaviors, leaving out much of what might be important building blocks in the work of identity—the ongoing construction and adoption of those broader meaning systems that serve as the basis from which an individual deliberates specific personal identity issues when they arise. Consider, for example, an individual confronting an identity dilemma regarding an impending choice of a college major. This dilemma might entail deliberating issues such as whether the specific major will satisfy the individual's desire to have an impact on society,

whether it will enable her to be economically self-sufficient, whether the available places of study will satisfy needs to affiliate with interesting individuals, and whether it will enable her to be close to her parents' home. A view of identity development focused on the immediate time period and context of the decision would focus on the manner in which that individual goes about exploring these options and making a decision. We are suggesting a broader perspective and claim that to understand this person's identity, we would also need to understand how she came to believe that such issues as having an impact on society, being economically self-sufficient, affiliating with interesting individuals, and being close to one's family are important. In other words, identity dilemmas and decisions are experienced and deliberated within personalized wider frameworks of meaning. Identity development is thus, in the broadest sense, inseparable from the processes whereby individuals adopt and personalize those meaning systems within which experience is considered meaningful.

Recently, a promising strand of research has begun to study processes of meaning-making in relation to the self and to conceptualize these as inherently involved in the formation of identity (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Singer, 2004; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). These researchers especially emphasize the privileged place of narrative (in contrast with paradigmatic modes of thinking based on propositions) as a means to construct meanings related to the self (Bruner, 1990). Individuals construct identity by the ongoing creation of meaningful stories out of their life experiences. Notwithstanding, Erikson discussed frameworks of meaning based on paradigmatic modes of thinking, such as ideology. The contributions of such modes of thinking within the meaning systems with which identity issues are deliberated should not be ignored.

Building on this broader perspective, we recognize identity work as encompassing the ongoing adoption and construction of personally significant frameworks of meaning across the life span. This is accomplished through processes of identification and exploration, and the development and construction of the regulatory frameworks that guide them. It is within such frameworks of meaning, previously set up, that subsequent commitments and decisions regarding the self take place and make sense. Researchers have begun studying how such frameworks of meaning are co-constructed within family interaction through narrative storytelling (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006); however, the place of study and reading as a site of meaning construction relevant to identity, whether in or out of school, has yet to be formulated.

It is within this conceptual context that we believe that textual study

has substantial bearing regarding identity development. Obviously, frameworks of meaning are constructed in many contexts not related to reading. However, texts, especially many considered worthy of being included in school curriculum, often explicitly and implicitly formulate and embody claims about the world and ways to understand and relate to the world. They make claims with regard to what the world is, or what about it is true, good, worthy of attention, beautiful, divine, or the like, therefore suggesting how one should relate to it. As such, they call out to the reader to actively engage with these claims and to adopt and integrate them within his or her meaning system, thereby potentially redefining who one is and how he or she relates to the world. Texts are not always read or taught in such a manner and do not necessarily have to be; yet, they can be, and they sometimes are. (To be clear, we are not here addressing the important issue of whether to choose texts meaningful to students so as to promote their authentic engagement with literacy assignments; rather, we are discussing how students might be taught to approach texts not heretofore personally meaningful, as potentially meaningful to the self.) Particularly within modern pluralistic school systems, students encounter a broad range of texts in different disciplines (mostly of the traditional written variety), representing diverse and often competing meaning systems all vying to be adopted. Texts such as these are frequently at the basis of school disciplines and embedded in curricular texts. Such meaning systems may be subconsciously acquired by exposure (Gee, 1989) and naturally become sociocultural “tools” (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995) with which to deliberate identity. However the question remains, what, if at all, do schools do, and what should schools do, to facilitate the way texts promote personal meaning-making and identity development (Schachter & Rich, 2011)?

To deal with this, we are suggesting the term *identity literacy* to describe the ability and willingness of readers to approach the study of a text with the implicit intention of engaging with the meaning systems embodied within it in order to *explore* whether and in what way they are meaningful enough to be incorporated within one’s own preexisting personal meaning system. Such a concept of literacy suggests a distinct approach to teaching texts. Teachers would teach the abilities and foster the motivation that facilitates students’ engaging text in such a manner and would mediate the way this is done. Student learning might then be aided by the added motivation spurred by the developmental trajectory toward forming an identity. Student and society might gain by citizens with identity capital (Côté & Levine, 2002) by virtue of their being adept at deliberating identity issues, in relation to culturally valued texts.

Teaching for Identity Literacy in the Classroom: An Exemplar

The concept of identity literacy emerged in the course of a larger study that focused on Israeli teachers of a curricular subject called Jewish thought (Galili-Schachter, 2009), and their ideas regarding the teaching of texts. We first present a brief explanation of the background, local context, premise, methodology, and general results of the larger study, and then we expand on the further analysis that we specifically conducted regarding literacy, which is the focus of this article.

Background. The Israeli state public school system is divided into two sectors open to parental choice. One sector is religious, mostly catering to the orthodox Jewish population, and the other, larger sector is, by matter of principle, nonaffiliated and open to all (Iram & Schmida, 1998). However, because of processes of natural self-selection, the schools are mostly populated by students from nonobservant secular homes. In this nonreligious sector, some high schools elect to teach Jewish thought. The curriculum of this subject includes classical and modern texts written by Jewish philosophers, theologians, Talmudists, and others, addressing issues considered to be of perennial existential interest. The theoretical framework guiding the larger study was educational hermeneutics (Gallagher, 1992). The larger study's purpose was to understand how teachers who teach this subject matter choose to interpret classical texts—often embodying religious commitment—to a nonreligious uncommitted student population, assuming that this disparity raises issues in teaching. We interviewed and observed expert teachers of Jewish thought, and using qualitative methodology based on a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), we found that they espoused diverse hermeneutical approaches in addressing this quandary (Galili-Schachter, 2009). Although not a preconceived issue, the study also revealed that despite the important differences in their interpretive approaches to texts, teachers constantly referred in interviews to the issue of student identity formation as an overarching goal of teaching Jewish thought. The teachers held to a common ethos that a major goal of teaching such subject matter is to cultivate students' identity development. They described employing pedagogies that we recognized as focused on fostering identity processes of identification and exploration: identification, by mediating the subject matter in ways that demonstrate its potential meaningfulness for contemporary Jews of differing commitment, and exploration, by presenting viable, multiple, even competing perspectives in an open, pluralistic atmosphere, allowing a critical, deliberative, involved yet noncommitted stance on the part of students.

The current study. The impetus for the current study evolved during the stage of second-order analysis (Shkedi, 2005; Shkedi & Harel, 2004) of the teachers' approach to teaching texts. Second-order analysis within a grounded-theory approach is the attempt to turn to the theoretical literature in order to improve the conceptualization of qualitative field data first organized according to themes gleaned from informants. Such analysis is intended to contribute to our understanding of our informants' theories, but can also bring informants' theories to contribute to the broader theoretical field in what is known as theoretical generalization (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003, p. 264). The constant comparison of the themes gleaned from recipients with extant theoretical constructs and frameworks, examining if and how they fit or do not fit (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), serves as the basis for generating new concepts if and when needed. As we became aware that the teachers practiced careful reading of primary texts and extensively discussed the importance of doing so, we naturally approached the literature on literacy with the hope that it would provide explanatory theoretical frameworks that could help in conceptualizing and organizing the teachers' ideas regarding their specific approach to *teaching the reading of texts*. However, our attempt to fit these teachers' goals and practices into the prior theoretical conceptualizations of literacy we encountered (i.e., the literature on cultural and critical literacy) was unsuccessful (Galili-Schachter & Schachter, in press). As will become apparent from the forthcoming data presentation, the teachers' approaches toward reading text in the classroom, though very well thought out, did not fit what might be expected if they were following the logic of either cultural literacy or critical literacy. This prompted us to search for a better conceptualization.

The present module's premise. Given that the analysis of the larger study highlighted the teachers' emphasis on identity, that they considered the reading of texts to be an important part of their teaching, and that we did not find cultural literacy and critical literacy to be helpful in understanding teachers' approaches toward teaching texts, we turned to the literature on identity (described above) and then returned to the interviews once again to explicitly analyze the teachers' ideas regarding teaching the study of texts. We attempted to more pointedly analyze what ideas they had about the goals of reading texts, the way to go about reading such texts, and the way to teach this way of reading—and how this specifically relates, if at all, to their identity goals. We did not interview the teachers again; rather, we reanalyzed the materials already collected, this time with the help of a different theoretical framework—that of identity. This move from the field to theory and back again is characteristic of

work undertaken in the grounded-theory tradition and is also referred to as iterative-cyclical problem-solving (Strübing, 2007).

We are aware that the specific setting and content of this example are somewhat unique. It might be claimed that the teaching of subject matter that explicitly deals with philosophical worldviews obviously calls for a different teaching approach than the teaching of texts in, for example, science, mathematics, and art. Furthermore, the specific way of approaching texts might have a strong background in Jewish cultural modes of learning, adapted to modern Israel. In a sense, this might be an example of what the new literacy theorists call a *local* or *situated* literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1995). We nevertheless will attempt to claim that this local literacy, and many of the ideas expressed by these teachers regarding it, might, if carefully done, be profitably applied to other settings and subject matter, and we discuss this issue in detail in the discussion section.

Participants. Our database included the transcripts of interviews and class observations conducted with the 12 teachers of Jewish thought recruited for the original study. These seasoned, experienced teachers, purposefully sampled (Mason, 1996) to represent "best practices," were recommended for the study by supervisors and colleagues. Five of the 12 were themselves involved in teacher education, and 2 were involved in creating the curriculum. All were academically trained, and some had also studied extensively in settings devoted exclusively to Jewish learning.

Procedure. Each of the teachers participated in a three-tiered process. In brief, first they were interviewed regarding their life stories and their goals as teachers. Next, each teacher was observed teaching a class. Third, each teacher was interviewed again regarding the specifics of the observed class using a stimulated recall protocol (Edwards & Marland, 1984). All interviews and observations were conducted by the second author, herself a veteran teacher of Jewish thought in the nonreligious sector.

In the initial interview, the *thematic life story* interview procedure was used. Interviewees are asked to tell their life story but are also guided to relate to a specific theme of interest to the researcher (see Schachter, 2004, and Schachter & Ventura, 2008, for two different examples using this procedure). Life story interviews are conducted in an open informal manner, requesting the interviewee to provide detailed stories and anecdotes and to reflect on the thoughts and emotions that accompanied them. The initial interview opens with a "grand tour" question (Spradley, 1979), in this case, along the lines of, "Before we discuss your teaching, it is important for me to get to know you a bit more. So please tell me your life story in as detailed and colorful a manner as possible. I would want

to hear of all sorts of things, such as about your parents and where they came from, their characters and concerns, and what kind of home you grew up in. I love stories, and I would be happy to hear about your growing up, your childhood and adolescence, your friends, relationships, what was important to you, and anything you think is important that will help me understand who you are and how you think you came to be the teacher you are today. Of course, I especially would like to hear about your educational experiences and relationships with teachers along the story if you think these might be relevant. I would want to hear of how you came to become a teacher in your field, and also about your personal educational outlook and where that came from. We have around an hour and a half for this, so please take your time. Just start and let it roll, and I will help you if you get stuck.” The question is formulated in this way so as to transfer the responsibility for active navigating of the interview to the interviewee, rather than him or her passively waiting for directives or pointed questions. During the interview, the interviewer encourages the interviewee in the recounting of his or her story and limits questions to requesting examples, explanations, and further expansions. Toward the last third of the first session, the interviewer makes sure that the teacher has begun to discuss his or her teaching. The rationale of this interview protocol is to ensure that the interviewee discusses teaching in a personal fashion, using terminology of his or her own choice.

In the second stage, each teacher was observed teaching a class. The purpose of the observation was to secure a verbal recording of a lesson and for the interviewer to be present in the setting so as to enable her to conduct the third stage. The observations themselves were not analyzed per se and only serve as the foundation for obtaining teachers’ reflections in the second interview. In the third stage, each teacher was interviewed again using a stimulated recall protocol (Edwards & Marland, 1984). Teachers were presented ahead of time with the transcript of their lesson. They were then interviewed regarding the general goal of the specific class and regarding certain pedagogical decisions and situations that came up in class. In preparation for this interview, the interviewer prepared a pool of questions based on approximately 10 classroom incidents viewed as having the potential to reveal teachers’ perspectives on the purpose of teaching texts and the right way to teach texts. Incidents were chosen on the basis of their possibly harboring a purposive choice on the part of the teacher—for example, teachers explicitly directing students to relate to certain aspects of the text; teachers waiting for certain kinds of answers from students before proceeding in discussion; teachers bringing additional texts not in the curriculum; teachers ignoring certain kinds of student responses while encouraging others; teachers’ introductory

remarks made before reading a text; and more. Teachers were presented with these incidents and asked to share the reasons and reflections behind such decisions. The purpose of the first interview was to obtain information regarding the teachers' broader teaching philosophy, and the second interview was intended to obtain ideas about teaching embedded in pedagogical practice. Together, these interviews allowed us to gauge teachers' subjective educational theories (Kelchtermans, 2009)—specifically in the context of teaching texts.

Data analysis. We read the interviews multiple times, extracting all passages from each case in which individuals discussed issues related to literacy or to the reading of texts in the classroom. After this winnowing process, we analyzed the excerpts in two stages. The first was based on Gilligan's (Brown et al., 1988) guided multiple reading. Here, we read each teacher's excerpts multiple times, each time from a different theoretical perspective, using the theoretical constructs that it provides. In our case, we asked, how would E. D. Hirsch read this teacher's interview (using concepts such as core knowledge, shared cultural background, and understanding communication)? How would critical literacy theorists read this teacher's interview (using concepts such as resistance, social change, and power)? How would Erikson read this teacher's interview (using concepts such as identification, exploration, and meaningful identity)? The purpose of this stage is to examine what each theory adds to our understanding of these teachers' ideas and to examine how well the theories fit their way of thinking. This kind of reading sensitizes the researcher to possible options inherent in the interviews that might otherwise be overlooked. It also enables the researcher to determine how relevant or apt a particular theory is in understanding the focus of the interviewee's ideas and to search for or develop theories that make for a better fit. Erikson's theory was used in addition to the other two, given that our previous analysis had already revealed that the teachers discussed identity formation as a general curricular goal; however, at that time, we did not specifically examine the connection to reading texts. In the second stage, we used Alexander's (1988) technique of "asking the data a question." Given that our multiple reading seemed to suggest that Eriksonian concepts were indeed relevant to teachers' ideas regarding teaching, we continued the analysis and specifically attempted to formulate each teacher's perspective on what it means to *read a text* in class with student identity development in mind, and what ideas each had about how to teach such reading.

Combining the insights from the Eriksonian reading of the interviews from the previous stage with the specific issues that arose from focusing on the relation between teacher, text, and student identity, we began

recognizing common themes. Common themes found were then categorized as tentative concepts, which were then applied to more interview material and further refined. For example, at a preliminary stage, we formulated the idea that teachers of Jewish thought understood good teaching as facilitating and guiding the identity *exploration* process by using texts. However, going over the materials again, we noticed that teachers discussed their role regarding other identity processes such as *identification* and *commitment*. We therefore changed the category to *Good teaching accentuates the inherent potential of texts to trigger identity processes*. Or, while originally noting a category of what teachers consider “good teaching,” we later found that teachers discussed “good study”—describing the form they thought the study of texts should take not only in the context of teaching, but also when a person studies texts on his or her own. Thus, the construction of categories is a cyclical process. Tentative concepts are corroborated when multiple instances exemplifying them can be found.

At each stage, tentative concepts were compared between the two researchers (the two authors) and discussed until consensus was reached. We continued this cyclical process until a relatively coherent picture emerged that answered the questions asked and that could be backed by multiple excerpts from the interviews. The result of this process was a categorization of a common set of three ideas connecting study, teaching, and student identity. These are presented henceforth, each accompanied by multiple examples so that readers can judge for themselves the appropriateness and trustworthiness of our interpretations and conceptualizations (Mishler, 1990). It is important to remember that our goal in conducting research of this kind was not to prove that teachers think in categories we had previously derived from preconceived theory, but rather to systematically facilitate a creative process in which new theoretical concepts can emerge from a “dialogue” between extant theory and data from the field (Strübing, 2007). The emergent concepts need be further established by their applicability to different contexts and by their pragmatic utility in assisting us in understanding aspects of teachers’ classroom practice.

RESULTS: COMPONENTS OF IDENTITY LITERACY EXPRESSED BY TEACHERS

By and large, we found that the teachers in the study shared a common set of ideas regarding the relation between the purpose and practice of the study of texts, student identity formation, and teaching. Not every teacher explicitly expressed each of the following ideas, and some

stressed certain aspects more than others. However, these common ideas were not disputed and were expressed repeatedly in different forms:

1. *Texts should be studied as potentially personally meaningful.* Teachers repeatedly expressed the idea that the essence of good textual study, in school or out, includes the attempt to relate to the text being read as potentially personally meaningful. Reading texts in class in this way was not described as an instrumental manipulation of the text for external “educational” purposes unrelated to “real” study, but rather as enacting an authentic engagement with what a text inherently calls for. This does not mean that teachers espoused achieving personal relevance by distorting texts or by dispensing with disciplinary scholarship. Rather, teachers saw this approach as putting disciplinary scholarship in its correct context, in pointing toward the identity potential of the text.
2. *Good teaching accentuates the inherent potential of texts to trigger identity processes.* The teachers recognized that many texts have the inherent power to trigger processes of identification, exploration, and commitment. This property is seen as basic to texts worthy of reading and teaching. Teachers sought means to teach texts in ways that accentuate the activation of these processes.
3. *For students to learn to read in this manner, teachers must teach a particular stance toward texts.* Independently reading text for identity requires an approach that needs to be taught. Teachers mentioned diverse abilities and dispositions that they considered necessary for students to recognize and engage texts as meaning systems of potential relevance to the self, such as aspects of cultural literacy allowing access to the text, basic trust toward the text, a willingness to engage identity issues, respect, reflectivity, and certain critical faculties. Different teachers stressed different abilities or dispositions, but despite this diversity, almost all described dealing with such issues in class. Teachers attempted to teach these qualities by modeling them in class and essentially saw themselves as scaffolding these abilities.

In the following section, we present excerpts from the interviews of the teachers discussing their teaching, on the basis of which we formulated these three points. Space limitations prevent us from describing each of the fine points described above; we concentrate on the main points. Most excerpts naturally express more than one point; we categorized them here according to the central issue they discuss. All excerpts were translated from Hebrew by the authors. All names used are pseudonyms. After

demonstrating the three themes, we explain how they relate to identity literacy.

1. Texts should be studied as potentially personally meaningful.

The teachers' interviews revealed a common theme regarding their understanding of the purpose of textual study. Aliza for example, related her belief regarding what study should be, contrasting this type of study with study that is exclusively academically oriented:

The study of the text has to be of the kind which the students say, and about which I also feel, that it's extremely significant and that it contributes to them. It teaches you something about yourself, about the world, about life. You do something with it, gain some sort of new insight. . . . [It causes me] to reexamine my beliefs as a person in relation to the question posited. It has to sharpen my inner questions, it doesn't leave me indifferent.

Notice how Aliza discusses how the "right" type of textual study should be oriented toward teaching you something "about yourself, about the world, about life." In the type of study mentioned, the knowledge studied connects the "self" and the "world" relating to "life." More, however, than just relating the text to the self (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997) to foster better comprehension, the text is described as dealing with questions that have implications regarding one's own beliefs. Good study brings about self-examination and personal involvement ("it doesn't leave me indifferent"). The text potentially transforms the self, either in action or insight. Aliza's use of the first person tells us that this is something she practices or believes not only with regard to teaching adolescent students but also with regard to her own study. Aliza added,

I go back and forth from the text to the "me." We can only enter the text's world from where we are ourselves. It's not that the text is a trigger [I use] because *I* want to discuss the meaning of life or adolescence or whatever. The text truly *does* have the potential to address the self. It calls out, it touches your life.

Aliza here explained that the text is not misrepresented, falsified, or taught out of context in order to raise valued educational issues in class; the text itself really does call out for the reader to engage in meaningful questions and to make self-relevant meaning. However, because Aliza believes that one can only, in her words, "enter the text's world from

where we are ourselves,” the reader has to “go back and forth” from the text to the self.

Valerie discussed this connection between the studied text and the self using the word *dialogue*. She explained how understanding necessarily relates the text to the self to the point where there is dialogue between the text and the self: “Understanding is the connection between me and the knowledge in the text. [It’s] when I’m not alienated from it. When there suddenly is dialogue.” She discussed her teaching goals in a similar fashion to Aliza: “When I teach, the text itself is very important. Knowledge is very important—but not just knowledge on its own. There has to be discussion, internalization; knowledge has to make a difference, to move the student from his former place, to awaken within him questions.”

Valerie stressed that textual knowledge is important; however, the significance of knowledge is in its potential to transform the student “to move the student from his former place.” Similarly to Aliza, she said that the text needs “to awaken” questions (this also relates to point 2, about texts triggering identity exploration processes). Here too we see that the essence of good study is when it *becomes* personally meaningful. Valerie continued and stressed that the teacher’s duty is to provide meaning frameworks by use of texts that enable meaningful deliberation of personal experience:

I was 16 the first time I became aware of homosexuality, and I didn’t know what to think of it, how to think about it, with the help of what concepts, under which conceptual framework—a religious one? a social one? [So] I went to my cousin and I asked him for some anchors. He introduced me to some concepts, and I could now look at this from a more knowledgeable perspective . . . that’s what I want the students to understand. Everything socially, politically, everything we experience is embedded in the cultural world of ideas.

Valerie related a personal story of how she became aware that paradigmatic concepts and conceptual frameworks become useful anchors, and this helped her in a stressful, personal confusing situation. She thus explained that her justification for teaching (and reading) texts (“that’s what I want the students to understand”) is that the ideas embedded in the texts become conceptual anchors that will enable students to relate to personal experience meaningfully. In other words, Valerie explicitly discussed how she helps students construct a meaning system.

Orly explained her approach to studying and teaching texts similarly:

The teacher can choose texts with regards to the text's meaningfulness, and what the text says about our lives, not just from the standpoint of what academic research says [about the text]. Academia is a lot more alienated from the texts with regards to raising issues that touch on life through textual study. . . . For me, a meaningful learning experience is when I see that it touches on issues related to myself [but] also coming together with study.

Orly contrasted the study of the same texts in an academic setting with her own high school teaching setting regarding the choice of text and the goal of study. She pointed out that the goal of study in her own life is identity and meaning related, touching on issues related to the self. She believes that teachers can choose the text to teach considering how "the text says (something) about our lives." These considerations are not academic by nature. And yet, Orly also stressed that such identity-related issues are meaningful when they "come together with study," meaning the attempt to authentically decipher the text, not just use it for personal purposes.

Orly explained that she herself learned this way of reading in her teachers' college:

It is there that I learnt to talk about questions that touch on life through the text. And it's not only with regards to a specific question that was bothering me at that specific moment, and that all of the sudden I'm getting an answer in the text; it could also be with regards to a question I never in my life would have thought about, but now that it has come up in the text, well—let's think about this now.

Orly explained that she learned to relate to texts as having bearing on life and learned that questions that come up during study can raise personal issues that require the reader's engagement, even if such issues are not initially raised by the reader herself as matters of personal concern. Once the reader relates to the text as potentially personally meaningful, the text and the reader engage in dialogue surrounding the issues raised in the text.

All these excerpts demonstrate that these teachers discuss how good textual study is that which takes place in the context of meaning-making and personal exploration—both of which, as we have seen above, are deeply tied to the identity literature.

2. *Good teaching accentuates the inherent potential of texts to trigger identity processes.*

The first theme discussed the teachers' perspective on the "good" study of texts, both in and out of the educational context. The second theme concerns the teaching of texts. The teachers explained what kinds of texts they prefer to teach and explained that good texts trigger identity processes in class. Many focused on the identity process of exploration in the sense of questioning previous ideas, but others mentioned processes of identification, and even commitment. Recall Aliza's comment regarding questioning: ["Good' study causes me] to reexamine my beliefs as a person in relation to the question posited [in the text]. It has to sharpen my inner questions. . . ." and Valerie's discussing teaching as awakening questions within the student. Other teachers expressed this theme as well. Michael discussed his pedagogy of contrasting opposing texts intended to trigger processes of exploration. He said, "My job is to open up options for students, different ways of looking at reality through Jewish texts, and then empower them to make their own educated choices." See how Michael framed his job as opening up options through the study of texts. To trigger processes of exploration in class, Michael brings two opposing texts.

Yaara pointed to the potential of texts in assisting self-exploration by presenting something different from the self, and from the teacher:

Texts can be a vehicle to examine unsolved questions, to gain knowledge, to clarify concerns, to awaken debate between students. I could give up on the text and phrase the question myself, but a text enables the students to step out of themselves, look at something else and return to the self . . . to find out what they think.

Notice how Yaara believes that texts have the power to trigger processes of identity exploration that she as a teacher cannot accomplish. The text enables a reflective self-exploratory process.

Teachers, however, did not mention only texts as triggering processes of identity exploration; Ori mentioned processes of identification. He explained how texts taught become part of the building blocks of later identity formation:

A primary goal is that they [the students] learn the text and become familiar with it. Because nothing is worse than ignorance . . . I see students that don't know nothing about nothing.

How can they then identify with anything!?! What can they base their identity on!?! I want them to know something because the more we know, the more complex our identity can become, and the more complete. There are persona and texts that constitute who we are; they make us up—our ability to think, to live, the values by which we live.

Note how Ori tells us that his teaching of knowledge is ultimately geared toward identity formation. The passage begins by deriding ignorance, supposedly placing knowledge as the ultimate goal. However, he goes beyond that to explain that the problem with ignorance is not in not knowing, but in not providing materials for identity construction. In other words, he teaches because he believes that texts constitute “*who we are.*” The problem with ignorance is not that one cannot be successful, but rather, that one cannot *be* someone. Being someone is based on identification [“How can they then identify with anything?!”] with persona and texts. These are the meaning systems discussed above through which one thinks, lives, and values. Ori sees his job as fostering identification by bringing texts that are worthy of identification.

Sarah touched on texts’ facilitating processes of identity commitment. She explained why she teaches texts from the students’ cultural heritage even though they express commitment to values not necessarily shared by the students: “Students have a well-developed individualistic perspective that borders on ‘I’m the center of the universe, I can do anything’—it’s narcissistic. It’s important to develop affiliation towards the moral, social, cultural and national too.”

Sarah forcefully contended that culturally embedded texts stimulate affiliation with and commitment toward identities that are larger than the self. The identity processes involved in commitment toward moral, social, cultural, or national identities counter self-absorption and narcissism. It is not any specific social identity that she highlights here as important, but having a commitment toward an identity that is not self-centered.

We brought Ori and Sarah’s reference to processes of identification and commitment in order to complement the previous descriptions of processes of open exploration. The educational literature has recently also discussed the importance of fostering an exploratory orientation (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). However, an exclusive focus on open exploration was seen by teachers as leaving students without the psychological tools to connect the self with the social. This echoes Côté and Levine’s (2002) claim that Erikson held that a well-developed individual identity should be sociocentric, and Newman and Newman’s (2001) emphasis that

adolescent identity development needs to foster belonging as well as individuation.

3. For students to read in this manner, teachers teach a particular stance toward texts.

The third theme that emerged in the interviews with teachers was that they all discussed certain traits and dispositions that they considered necessary for reading texts in this manner, and they discussed the ways that they structure teaching to scaffold them. In other words, teachers are not only teaching intellectual skills but also attempting to influence an approach to texts that involves a certain kind of engagement that fosters identity development. Different teachers discussed different traits and psychological approaches to texts and the concomitant practices they use to foster them. Usually, teachers discuss this when proudly bringing examples of students approaching the text, on their own, similarly to how teachers have taught them. The particulars of the specific approaches are less important than demonstrating that the teachers reflected on which approach to a text they wanted students to adopt, and on how to go about teaching this. We bring three examples, from Avigail, Roi, and Valerie's interviews.

Avigail demonstrated how she structures learning texts so that students practice reflection based on knowledge:

I think that the right way [to teach texts] is to sit in small groups studying the text, and to reflect on the text. . . . On one hand they're learning a lot of lot of lot of material, tons of information, lots of stuff; but also, in each and every class we have a discussion. Let me tell you a small story. We were studying Buber, going over material for the exam. We had previously studied his ideas on I-Thou . . . and he writes something like, "What makes man different than an animal? That he can see every object and every person (both) as itself and in his relation to it/him." So one of the girls said, "Yeah, like just two months ago I realized that my mom is a human being too." And I couldn't have put it better myself—she's both my mom and she's a human being too. I think that's great. You can see she took Buber's words, internalized them, and brought them back again in a different form that explains what he says exactly. And then we started talking about other examples. . . . [other students] took what Buber said and they started projecting it onto their own relationships. And I think *that's the way to study*. On the one hand, you give the text a

lot of respect, you don't just straight away say what you think about the text. On the other hand, the text makes you think about your life.

Avigail says here that in *every class*, she structures both “study” and “reflection,” both “a lot of information” and “discussion.” The “way to study” she prefers involves both suspending immediate personal involvement while giving the text “a lot of respect” by intellectually analyzing it, and yet also later thinking of the text in relation to one’s own life. These latter aspects of each of these three pairs—reflection, discussion, and thinking of the text in relation to one’s own life—are part of authentically going about comprehending the meaning of the text. This is epitomized by the student, who came to recognize Buber’s concepts in her own experience of dually recognizing her mother as both “mother” and a human being. Avigail sees this as apprehending the Buber’s exact meaning. Although the student brought Buber’s words back in a different form, Avigail said she explained Buber “exactly.” The text triggered identification and became part of the student’s meaning system. Avigail then described how other students picked this up and themselves discussed this point from a personal perspective, practicing the personal approach to reading the text.

Avigail encourages students to “add their own interpretations (to the text). . . . They can be independent. The moment a student feels independent it turns into something that he owns.” According to Avigail, fostering a sense of independence and ownership with regard to the text enables students to engage texts as identity resources in the future.

Avigail’s example demonstrates a teacher practicing a reflective approach to reading texts with students so that they learn the way she believes such reading should be done.

Roi described a different approach toward both what is necessary to read classical texts and how he teaches such reading. Speaking of his general outlook toward teaching, Roi said that he teaches students that there is a broad range of options regarding important questions in life found in different texts. He said he doesn’t buy into postmodern relativism, nor into

the [Jewish] orthodox dichotomy of right/wrong, pure/corrupt, good/bad—I believe in diversity; but within diversity I tell students let’s each find our own “water of life” Students need someone to help them consider [existential issues] quietly. Serenely. It can be difficult. But they see me constantly struggling with such issues. . . . Part of my being a model is that I don’t

get frightened by it. When a student sees that, it opens possibilities. I ask questions, I look for answers, for what invigorates me. I want to develop my character and my spiritual world, and “Hey, c’mon up in the backseat, there’s room, let’s go.”

INTERVIEWER: So you’re the driver and they’re in the back?

ROI: Driver? Well, I’ve already been on the road for quite a while. I know how to deal with the road and the machinery; I can show them some techniques. I’m no guru, but I know a few things. . . . I spent my time learning along the way. I’ll share general principles but no more, because each one has a different car.

Roi sees his responsibility as helping students navigate their way without falling for what he views as either simplistic dichotomies or “anything goes” postmodernism. To do this, he shares his personal approach to classic texts:

[I approach the text] assuming that there must be an element of truth somewhere within it. I approach the text humbly . . . taking my hat off before the text with awe, like I’m saying I know the text is powerful and full of mighty strengths and I can only uncover part of them, and I have respect. That’s the initial stance. But it’s not like I sign my name at the end.

Roi feels that in order to engage classical texts as potentially meaningful for the modern self, the reader needs to approach the text humbly, trusting that it has something to teach, looking for what is potentially invigorating. This does not require acceptance and commitment, but the basic stance is of trust and not suspicion. Reading the text this way, Roi finds teachings that are relevant. He discussed how he models his engagement and deliberations in class, enjoying when students take the same approach:

I was teaching a text from Maimonides’s¹ *Guide to the Perplexed*, which discusses the problem of evil, the part where he writes about that most of the evil in the world emanates from what man does to himself—primarily too much food, drink, and sex. Here I stopped and talked about the primary causes of mortality today—heart attacks, cancer, AIDS, not war I said, “Ladies and gentlemen, you’re killing yourselves with indulgence, glut-tony and addiction.” . . . Personally I think that’s pretty strong

stuff. And the text did its work. This provocative arrogant unruly kid who until then lead the class's "society for the reburial of Maimonides" was awestruck. He who after every sentence we studied would brush it off, saying, "Oh that was way back then"—his eyes lit up. From constantly trying to be the class clown, he became the class philosopher. The next day, he read his own treatise on the subject to the class.

Roi's modeling of how he approaches classical texts trustfully and gleans meaningful insights for contemporary issues transformed the student's position from a cynical approach to a similar willingness to engage the text in dialogue.

Valerie too discussed teaching respect for the text as a prerequisite for the ability to engage texts in a meaningful manner, yet from a slightly different perspective:

One day we discussed postmodernism, and [students said things] like "everybody's right," and "everyone's got their own narrative," and yada yada yada. And I said to them, "What's the difference between voicing an opinion and 'breaking wind'? Everybody here's just 'breaking wind'—saying, 'This is what I think.' But on what do you base your thinking? Study first, and then you can think!" And I always tell my students, "You need an anchor in the text. And why is that? Because there is respect for whoever thought before I did and took the trouble to formulate this in words. After you do that [anchor yourself in the text], your opinion will be an opinion and not just 'breaking wind' that the world can do without." . . . So respect toward the text and confronting the text is very significant.

INTERVIEWER: Wait. When you say confrontation and respect, isn't there some contradiction?

VALERIE: [No]. One confronts the text from a stance of respect. Meaning, that I respect the text so much that it requires my engagement, I can't make as if it is not there. It has presence. I can't just say like you know [derisively] "Oh Leibewitz said" [Yeshayahu Leibewitz was a renowned contemporary Jewish philosopher - Schachter] NO! Leibewitz said! And that means I have to think about it more than once. Maybe I will still disagree, but I took the "main road," I went via the text.

Valerie, like her fellow teachers, is teaching her students how (and why) one approaches a text. A text is approached with respect, because someone took the trouble to formulate his or her ideas in words. According to her approach, paying the supposed respect of “everyone has his own narrative” is no respect at all—because the words are not seriously engaged. She shows her students her contempt by calling this “breaking wind the world can do without” as opposed to the “main road.” True engagement may involve confrontation, but it is first based on knowledge and respect, and then one’s confrontational opinion can also gain respect from others. Valerie is thus also teaching a particular stance that she believes a student needs to take toward the text to be able to productively engage it as a resource for meaning-making.

These three examples demonstrate that teachers concern themselves not only with how the contents embodied in texts engage students in identity formation, but also with how to develop skills and dispositions that they believe are necessary to approach texts in ways that facilitate identity formation.

CAN CULTURAL OR CRITICAL LITERACY EXPLAIN THESE TEACHERS’ APPROACHES?

It should now be clearer why our initial attempt to use the conceptual frameworks of cultural and critical literacy to assist in second-order analysis (Shkedi, 2005) of the teachers’ ideas was unsuccessful. The identity goal adopted by these teachers extended beyond the circumscribed goal of promoting cultural literacy. It does not serve to promote the knowledge acquisition or academic skills employed in the disciplinary field of Jewish thought, nor was the knowledge practical in any way for thriving in the students’ nonreligious communities. These scholarly academic or practical goals were deemed secondary or irrelevant, respectively. Most teachers studied do believe that fostering meaningful identity needs to be based on a bedrock of students’ knowledge that enables accessibility and appreciation of texts. Teachers were concerned that identity issues regarding the text should be based on authentic interpretation of the text, and this sometimes required them to teach basic concepts. However, neither the knowledge itself nor knowledge’s practical functional aspects were considered primary goals.

The identity goal of the teachers interviewed differs also from the goals of critical literacy in two related senses—first, in the sense that texts are not approached a priori with a *hermeneutic of suspicion*, but rather from a basically trustful attitude attempting to restore meaning (Ricoeur, 1970), and second, in the sense that in the eyes of the teachers, the most impor-

tant aspects of students' identities (and those of the authors of the texts studied) are not those that are fixed in social categories constantly in political conflict because of interests, this even prior to engaging the texts. Identity is, rather, a result of engaging with the text and its meanings and can transform and transcend previous identifications and social, historical, and cultural identities. It's not that critical attitudes were discouraged, but neither were they assumed to be the most important road by which one approaches previously constructed knowledge.

The three themes we described above are better accounted for by an implicit theory that sees the goals of textual study as engaging the meaning claims seriously enough to consider adopting them. According to the teachers, teaching such an approach requires practicing and fostering identity processes with the help of texts, and teaching dispositions and stances that enable studying texts this way.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we introduced the concept of identity literacy to draw attention to an important way that texts can be read and to suggest a conceptual framework of literacy that might be attractive to teachers interested in student identity. We have described identity literacy as readers' proficiency in the practice of engaging the meaning systems embedded within texts, with an attitude of basic trust, although not suspending criticism, considering while doing so whether to adopt, adapt, or reject these as part of their own personal meaning systems. This does not mean that texts are read with the immediate pressing intention of defining the self vis-à-vis some decision; it does mean that the text is recognized as embodying a meaning system that calls out to be adopted or integrated (rather than rejected or ignored) in relation to the self. This call is not necessarily met by agreement on the reader's part; however, once dialogue begins, this can potentially redefine the self.

Teaching identity literacy means teaching students to read in such a manner. Rather than emphasizing the attempt to teach students concepts with the primary goal of providing them with the means to understand the shared communal knowledge embodied in texts that is needed in order to thrive functionally, professionally or academically, and rather than emphasizing the need to teach them the ability and propensity to identify and be critical of texts, with the goal of empowering students to reject the imposition of oppressive exploitative meanings, texts would instead be taught with teachers guiding the process of individuals learning how to create self-relevant meanings in relation to, and with the help of, the text. To enable reading texts in this manner, teachers would

foster a basic respectful attitude toward texts. Although texts might be considered open to exploration and criticism, they would nevertheless be recognized as authentic honest attempts to deal with meaningful issues deserving of respect. Our empirical study does not address the question of whether students actually learned to read in this manner; it only addressed the teachers' perspectives regarding their aims in this regard. Further research is needed to address the issue of the effects of such a teaching approach on students.

Such a focus can understandably raise apprehensions. Those tending toward disciplinary erudition might be concerned that a focus on identity might dilute, distort, or dumb down schooling if choosing texts is guided by a crude conception of what students might find personally relevant (Scheffler, 1973). Those tending toward critical pedagogies might be wary of a concept of study that is perhaps insufficiently aware of the malevolent workings of power; that is somewhat open to addressing ideas divorced from their material and historical contexts; and that is relatively at ease with students deliberating identity issues also through texts perceived as canonical within mainstream culture, thus perhaps marginalizing other texts and groups that define themselves through them. These concerns are not trivial at all. However, the concept of identity literacy we have introduced is not essentially opposed to either of the other two literacy models. Aspects of either cultural or critical literacy that are deemed important by educators can be integrated within it. Teachers inclined to do so can stress careful academic reading of the text as a prerequisite to addressing the aspects meaningful to the self. They can choose texts that promote academic identities and that exhort students to scholarship, precision, and studiousness. Relevance is not to be understood as catering to students' overt interests, such as yesterday's new music clip. Critically inclined teachers can choose to promote activist identities through critically reading texts. Or, through *content integration* (Banks, 2004), they would introduce texts that introduce knowledge that empowers by building on students' cultural identities. Such texts might do so by affirming students' cultural identities, and perhaps thereby also engaging students in dialogue. Yet although we here now acknowledge that identity literacy is not necessarily essentially opposed to the other forms of literacy we have just chosen to contrast them with for the sake of a clear typology, we nevertheless underscore that the concept of identity literacy still remains very different—given its central emphasis regarding meaning-making in relation to the self.

We acknowledge that the teachers described in our exemplar were from a particular sociocultural setting, dealing with a specific school topic. This raises the question of whether the concept of identity literacy

can be applied to other settings and disciplines, and even to reading in general. On a theoretical level, and speaking hypothetically, we believe that to a certain extent, and with proper adaptation, it can. The particular way in which we framed the concept transcends, in our mind, socio-cultural borders. Individuals and communities worldwide use texts to convey and promote meaning systems about what the world is, or what about it is true, worthy, beautiful, divine, or the like, therefore suggesting how one should relate to it. Not all texts do so to the same extent; however, many do, and those taught in schools even more so. Thus, approaching texts in ways that acknowledge this can be a worthy kind of reading. Granted, readers of academic texts, for example, often do need a strong background of prior knowledge. They also need to acquire the ability to understand the context of what is written, and the political implications of such context. Yet it is also true that such readers, while reading, are engaging the explicit and implicit claims within the texts, thinking whether they are meaningful in their personal and professional experience and worthy of further engagement and consideration. To the extent that they find the claims in a text to be engaging and meaningful in relation to their prior personal or professional identity, they position themselves as allies or adversaries of the text, perhaps this also changing who they are. If this sort of reading responds to some basic aspect of what many types of texts call out for, then this might be a type of reading that should be explicitly (though by all means not exclusively) taught.

In multicultural classrooms and communities, teaching identity literacy might take a different form, but is no less necessary, and perhaps even more so. In multicultural contexts, identity formation is an even more pressing developmental task. Teaching students to relate to the identity issues inherent in texts, provided they are diverse and inclusive, is an important goal (Banks, 2004; Zirkel, 2008). Although it is important that cultural texts be diverse, students of all ethnic backgrounds can benefit from examining texts, attempting to transcend their own, and the text's, local and particular context.

It is quite another issue to ask whether teachers in other contexts actually teach in similar ways. We believe that many teachers implicitly teach this way; however, this calls for further research. Rosenblatt's (1938) transactional approach regarding the reading of literature is very similar in some aspects, and the pedagogy of writing "reading response" journals that is based on her approach shares certain assumptions with what we have presented. Recently, a popular new approach to teaching literacy (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997) called for relating text, self, and world. We also find commonalities with this approach, although the express idea of reading to develop identity, rather than just to enhance engagement and

comprehension, has not been developed by this approach.

Regarding subject matter, at first glance, we might assume that identity literacy is more appropriate for reading texts in social studies, philosophy, literature, religion, history, and the arts. However, limiting the concept of identity literacy to the humanities and social sciences would be wrong. The sciences and mathematics have much to say about how the world is to be viewed, what is meaningful, what is true, and how the individual fits in the world. Although perhaps not every text approached in these fields is read, and should be read, with such issues in mind, we assume that good science teachers look for opportunities to address issues regarding the meanings and ethos basic to the discipline's perspective, partly through reading such messages in the discipline's texts and partly through teaching the rationale of its writing conventions (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Obviously, in different subjects, the relative importance accorded to teaching different types of reading may differ.

Our concept also offers identity researchers another important site for studying meaning-making in the course of identity development. Although the importance of looking at meaning construction in relation to identity as they occur within family relationships or concerning life experiences is an extremely important recent contribution to the study of identity formation, we have stressed the importance of studying the ongoing construction of frameworks of meaning in educational contexts and through encountering ideas.

In conclusion, we believe that we have demonstrated the rationale for conceptualizing a different model of literacy. As mentioned, more research is, of course, needed to further develop this concept. Important research directions we identify would be to investigate how well this concept holds up in different disciplines and what of the particulars we identified carry over. We also suggest studying how teachers come to teach in this fashion, which pedagogies they employ to foster such literacy, and how teachers can be taught to do so. As mentioned, the actual effects of such teaching practices on students' identities and approaches to texts need to be examined separately. It is hoped that the availability of such a concept can open up new options for teachers dealing with texts in the classroom and for researchers studying teachers' practice.

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Note

1. 12th-century Jewish philosopher.

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