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# Teachers and the religious socialization of adolescents: Facilitation of meaningful religious identity formation processes

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### A B S T R A C T

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This study investigated the effects of religious education on student religious identity over and above parent religiosity by examining student perceptions of two aspects of teacher functioning: teacher caring and teacher as role-model. We posited that effects of these variables on students' religious identity are mediated by student perceptions that the school provides a non-alienating religious atmosphere and meaningful religious studies. Participants were 2691 male and female students (grades 9–12) in 152 classes of 25 schools from the Jewish public-religious sector in Israel. Results indicate that in addition to their parents' religiosity, adolescents' perceptions of their teachers as role models and their religious studies as meaningful are important variables affecting their religious identity. Moreover, this research suggests that religious identity formation processes flourish in an educational environment which students perceive as accommodating religious exploration.

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A core concern of many religious communities is the religious socialization of the next generation. An extensive research review (King & Roeser, 2009) reveals that researchers acknowledge the formative socializing influence of parents, peers, and mentors as well as adolescents' experiences in families and schools on adolescent religious development. Nevertheless, research has traditionally focused on demonstrating the effects of *parental* religious socialization (Fisherman, 2011; Gunnoe & Moore, 2002; Martin, White, & Perlman, 2003; Myers, 1996) whereas the impact of *peers* and *schools* has garnered less research (Winograd Jean, 1999). King and Roeser (2009) note the relationship between religious schooling and religious socialization processes in adolescence is complex and call for more study of this important topic.

One particular issue debated is whether religious schooling has a direct effect on religious development. Benson, Donahue, and Erikson (1989) conclude that formal religious secondary schooling can have long-term effects on religiosity if it involves 1000+ hours of religious instruction. Similarly, Uecker (2009) claimed that schools' religious environments have long-term effects on young adults' religiosity. Gunnoe and Moore (2002) found that religious schooling during childhood predicts young adult religiosity. However, some researchers argue that religious education effects are mostly indirect, stemming from parents' channeling of their children into religious social groups as a byproduct of religious school attendance (Erickson, 1992; Gunnoe & Moore, 2002). Hood, Hill and Spilka's review (2009) concludes that religious schooling has little direct influence on

adolescent religiosity. The present study investigates the direct effect of particular aspects of religious education on student religious identity *over and above* parent religiosity. The research focus here differs from earlier studies by examining factors presumably involved in successful student *identity formation processes* occasioned by teachers and their subject matter instruction. We use the term *religiosity* to refer to the adherence to religious beliefs and practices whereas *religious identity* is used to refer to an individual's religious self-definition and to the significance ascribed to religion in one's self-definition.

### From religious socialization to religious identity formation

Researchers have traditionally used cultural socialization models that conceptualize successful religious socialization as the faithful intergenerational reproduction of particular religious behaviors and beliefs (cf., Hood et al., 2009). However, Maccoby (2007) notes that socialization models have changed. They now acknowledge the pervasiveness of generational change and recognize that socialization entails flexibility and development. Furthermore, many researchers now see socialization as an adult–child co-constructed endeavor wherein children and adolescents actively participate alongside their parents in constructing their own values and standards (Kuczynski, 2003). Accordingly, Schachter and Ventura (2008) suggested investigating the active identification processes involved in youngsters' decisions regarding adopting their elders' values and the attempts by adults to foster these processes. Reconceptualizing religious socialization as the promotion of *religious identification processes* shifts focus from exploring whether adolescents adopt particular behaviors and beliefs toward investigating processes whereby they actively reflect on the meaningfulness of religious values and behaviors through interaction with significant others (see Vermeer, 2009).

Two theoretical approaches discuss *identification processes* as antecedents of internalization: in Erikson's (1968) ego-identity theory identification processes are the foundation for identity formation, whereas Self Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) posits identification as the precursor to internalized motivation. In Erikson's theory, adolescents examine their childhood identifications for continued "fit" with other identifications and with the social and cultural communities in which they are developing. Adolescents' active identification and exploration processes involve meaning making rather than imitation (McLean & Pratt, 2006) and are key antecedents of adolescent internalization of social roles, values and beliefs.

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) emphasizes the importance of autonomous internalization and integration of social and parental norms. SDT defines *internalization* as "the process of taking in a value or regulation" (p. 60) and, *integration* as "the process by which individuals more fully transform the regulation into their own so that it will emanate from their sense of self" (p.60). SDT posits four levels of extrinsic motivation – external regulation, introjection, identification and integration – with progression through these levels occurring through processes of internalization and integration. Integration, the highest level, is evident when the cause of action is viewed as a core characteristic of one's identity. It occurs when individuals transform external motivation into internal motivation accompanied by true feelings of autonomy (see Waterman, Schwartz & Conti, 2008). According to SDT, social and parental support of three innate psychological needs–autonomy, competence and relatedness–facilitates progression to higher levels of internalization. Several researchers have used SDT to examine religious internalization (Assor, Cohen-Malayev, Kaplan & Friedman, 2005; Neyrinck, Vansteenkiste, Lens, Hutsebaut & Duriez, 2006; Ryan, Rigby & King, 1993).

Ego-identity theory and SDT see the self as an innate activator of processes guiding the individual toward more integrated and optimal functioning (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011). Due to this similar understanding, some scholars examined development using both theoretical lenses (e.g., Assor et al., 2005; Flum & Blustein, 2000; Flum & Kaplan, 2006). Soenens and Vansteenkiste suggest that "when people identify with the value of the commitment or choice, they feel volitional in maintaining and behaving on the basis of that commitment because they experience the commitment as a reflection of who they are" (p. 287). Based on this perspective, this study conceptualized religious socialization as a process wherein adults engage children and adolescents in the course of constructing meaningful religious identities.

### Religious identity formation in Israeli Jewish religious schools

Israeli public education enables parents to choose between schools providing secular education only which enroll the majority of the Jewish population, and religious schools that blend religious and secular studies. Many parents who choose the religious system see the religious socialization of their children as a prime educational goal as do many teachers, teacher educators and students in teacher education colleges associated with the public religious system (Rich & Iluz, 2003).

Various factors can influence students' religious socialization in religious schools such as their participation in the school community (Strike, 2004). Public religious schools in Israel are relatively homogenous religious venues in which students, parents and teachers share similar religious commitments and religious communities (Winograd Jean, 1999). Religious socialization may also be affected by religious academic studies students encounter. The direct instruction of religious subject matter may provide a *cultural moral order* (Smith, 2003) which orients students' consciousness and motivates their action.

In these and other religious socialization processes teachers can play a role vis-à-vis students' identity formation (Schachter & Rich, 2011). In the communal domain, students may view teachers as religious role models after observing their moral behavior or their struggles with religious conflict. In the academic domain, teachers of religious subject matter mediate students' understandings of religious ideas and can influence whether they are considered meaningful and thought provoking (see e.g., Layton, Hardy & Dollahite, 2012). Teachers of culturally valued texts can influence students' engagement in identity exploration (Galili-Schachter & Schachter, 2013; Rich & Schachter, 2013). Thus, following Erikson, we posit that religious identity is fostered when teachers serve as identification models, when they present academic content that adolescents deem meaningful in