THE INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS' ATTACHMENT AND SUPPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' MENTAL RESILIENCE

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Abstract: *The present research study examines the relationship between the teachers' attachment and level of empathy and their belief towards the cultivation of mental resilience among students in the elementary school. Hence, the main research question is: does the teacher's attachment and empathy influence the development of the students' mental resilience? The research findings may show that teachers' positive attachment with a focus of their empathy and support on the students is supposed to cultivate and develop their mental resilience. The main conclusion of the research study indicates the importance of the teachers' different personal traits (empathy, attachment, and support) for the development and reinforcement of the students' mental resilience.*

Keywords: *Attachment, empathy, mental resilience, teachers*

Introduction

This research study examined the relationship between attachment theory and teachers' support and the development of the students' mental resilience. The attachment theory of Bowlby (1973) emphasizes that the system of attachment facilitates the coping with distress. The assumption at the basis of the research study is that in a situation of distress and threat the system of attachment is deployed, when the aim is to maintain closeness to the distinct and preferred adult who can help reduce the distress and instill a sense of safety. Another assumption of the present research study is based on the arguments of attachment researchers regarding the contribution of the encounter with a non-parental figure that acts as a "secure base" and helps the mental health. The figure of the teacher, as an attachment figure who acts as a "secure base", is available, accepting, and close and helps the student both develop the mental resilience and use coping strategies in times of

routine in general and in times of distress in particular (Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007).

The reference to the influence of the teachers' empathy and attachment on the development of the students' mental resilience is addressed by Hoffman (2009) in his research work that delineates a picture of the teacher's work also as a therapist who helps in the cultivation of the students' emotional aspect. The contribution of the teachers' attachment and empathy to the development of the students' personality and mental resilience was presented in different research studies that focused on the examination of the relationship between empathy among teachers and the development of different aspects among students. Cooper (2004) noted that the teacher's empathy characteristics are divided into three broad areas: (1) basic, (2) profound, and (3) functional. Through them the teachers maintain the "very developed individual mental model" of every student, as well as the mental model of "groups of students, when for both of them the change develops and fluctuates on a momentary and daily basis" to respond to the students' changing needs. Cooper also addressed the different uses that teachers make of these mental models in order to deploy the empathetic understanding of their students, create interactions in the class from moment to moment that support the student's academic and moral development, and use continuous formative assessment for the purpose of the examination of the students' advance and learning activities. The teachers' empathy helps the feeling of enjoyment and achievement among students.

It is possible to summarize that emotional attachment with a teacher develops as a result of reciprocal relations that offer the child a feeling of security in the context of the relations. We assume that regular and continuous relations that the child holds with the teacher enable him to build mental representations regarding emotional social factors in the class, in the school, about others, about himself, and about his relations with others, who are special to him in the school system. On the basis of these assumptions, it is possible, in our opinion, to address the teacher-student relations in concepts of a 'secure base'. According to these work assumptions, we will search for the mechanisms that promote secure teacher-student relations. In order to examine the relationship between attachment theory and teachers' support and the development of the students' mental

resilience, this article presents central concepts such as attachment and mental resilience, namely the relationship between them.

Attachment Theory

The concept of "attachment" is a dynamic developmental concept that assumes that early systems of relations shape the life at a later stage. The "work model" constitutes a style of attachment in which there is continuity from childhood to adulthood, and it is possible to explain through it dimensions in the adult's behavior. Accordingly, there are three different styles of attachment:

1. Secure attachment style. The child has the ability to distance from the parent and to return to the parent as a basis of support.
2. Anxious avoidant attachment style. The child tends to disconnect from the parent.
3. Anxious ambivalent attachment style. The child behaves with anger and anxiety, and it is hard for him to separate from the parent and he does not respond to the mother's presence or absence (Ainsworth, 1990).

The main focus of attachment theory is on the formation and dissolution of relations, and as such it includes descriptions and explanations about factors and phenomena that influence emotional relations between children and their caregivers. Bowlby (1973) assumed that the quality of the functioning of the attachment system and the achievement of closeness and security depend on the integrity of the child's attachment system, but also on the availability of the partner in the relationship when necessary, on his sensitivity and response to the hints of the search for closeness and support and the ability to ease the stress. Interactions with sensitive figures, which are responsive and supportive as needed, enable the best functioning of the attachment system and advance the creation of a constant feeling of security in the attachment. Consequently, optimistic beliefs regarding the coping with stress are established, optimistic expectations regarding other people's good intentions are created, a positive view of the self as having ability and being appreciated is formed, and constructive ways are created for the regulation of emotion. In contrast, when the partner in the relationship is not available or does not respond to the attachment needs, the search for closeness does not ease the stress. In this situation, the

individual does not achieve a feeling of security in the attachment, negative representations of the self and of the other person are created in him, and other strategies, different from the search for closeness, develop in him, in order to achieve emotional regulation.

Mental Resilience

Definitions of resilience include the ability to handle challenges. Researchers (LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006) propose that resilience factors of adolescence include intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community experiences, while culture influences all three of the areas in order to predict levels of resilience. It is possible to see that resilience can develop when the external resources (including close relationships, high expectations, and positive participation from the school, family, and peer groups) meet the adolescents' psychological needs, including security, love, and belonging. It is possible to make them into internal resources, such as self-efficacy and self-awareness, which facilitate the adolescents' development and personal growth (Li & Zhang, 2006). In view of this, it can be seen that resilience is also increased in the process of developing internal resources, which is commensurate with the principles of the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which indicates that people's mental health and well-being improve when their innate psychological needs, including ability, autonomy, and connection, are satisfied. It can be said in general; „Resilience is a social construct which identifies the processes and outcomes in which people put meaning of well-being. This categorically proves that in the process of counseling the probability of developing resilience depends on the support we provide. That's how the children would cope a better way that is meaningful to them, their families and the community." (Krasteva-Ivanova M, 2020)

Mental resilience is composed of seven traits and skills: insight, independence, forging relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality. (1) Insight is created from the ability to see the presence of a problem, to ask the hard questions, and to provide honest answers. (2) Independence is the ability to take emotional and physical distance from the source of the problems in the person's life. (3) Relationships are intimate and satisfying relations with others. (4) Initiative is the search for control. (5) Creativity and humor are related abilities when talking about mental resilience. (6) Humor expresses the ability to

find the comical in the tragic. (7) Morality is the knowledge of what is right and what is not right and the willingness to act according to this knowledge. Effective coping in complex situations relies on a relatively high degree of the feeling of internal control, on the connection to destiny and meaning, and on a good level of the person's involvement and flexibility that enables the adjustment in a reasonable time to the new situation. A person with high internal resilience will tend to adapt and recover more rapidly and to cope more effectively and with less stress with the new situation than a person with low internal resilience. The internal resilience is composed of innate variables, characteristics acquired and learned over the course of life and from the environment, and the nature of the relationship with it. Hence, internal resilience can also be strengthened and cultivated intentionally, both on the level of the awareness, the identity, and the relations and on the level of the skills that will strengthen the person's trust and security in his ability to act to achieve his objectives also under the new circumstances (Bar-Hai, Zigal, & Lavi, 2019).

Influence of Teacher Attachment and Support on the Development of Student Mental Resilience

The development of mental resilience among students, as noted by Edelstein and Cohen (2008), depends on different factors of perception perceived as factors that express hope, optimism, and the individual's internal resources, social acceptance, plans for the future, social involvement, acquisition of a higher education, positive self-image, and interest in a hobby that leads to satisfaction and excellence in any field, which enable him to cope better in the present and have an optimistic and positive view of the future. Abu-Ajaj (2016) addressed personal protection factors, such as academic success, personal fitness, and sense of humor, and dynamic protection factors, such as normative age group, warm and supporting family, optimistic perception of life, close relations with a significant other, and receiving encouragement and reinforcement of positive behaviors. Researchers found that adolescents who perceived respect and support from their parents or teachers have higher levels of resilience (Gómez-Ortiz, Rey, Romera, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015; Liebenberg, Theron, Sanders, Munford, Van Rensburg, Rothmann, & Ungar, 2016). Therefore, the teachers' support can be an external resource, which is most important to the development of resilience among adolescents, and can improve even further their mental wellbeing.

The teachers' attachment, empathy, and support influence the development of the students' mental resilience. According to Cooper (2004), empathy is directly related to the development of the morality, develops over time and during interaction and depends on the partners in the interaction. It is composed of basic empathy and constitutes the start of the relationship between the teacher and the student. In contrast, profound empathy is significantly related to the sense of self-worth of the teacher and the student, to the creation of a relationship between them, and to the student's motivation to learn. Empathetic teachers are found to have a high moral level, to emotionally and mentally connect to their students, and to succeed in encouraging a strong relationship with others. They are a moral model for their students and for their fellow teachers and create with them positive interactions. These personal interactions contribute to the rise in the quality of the teaching and learning, to the improvement in the behavior, and to partnership (Tettegah & Andersen, 2007). Cooper (2004) added also that empathetic teachers use all the senses and a multimedia approach in the lessons, as well as the continuous formative assessment of the students' progress and the learning activities. She emphasizes that teachers who encourage and shape profound empathy have students "who feel appreciated and supported", as well as "involved" and with higher self-esteem. In the end, this allows the students "to open up" and to enjoy greater "achievement". In addition, this gives them greater ability to "appreciate others".

The development of the students' mental resilience is based on different programs that the teachers can cultivate, the goal of which is to promote also emotional and social aspects. Shemesh and Shemesh (2010) broaden the understanding of the professional uniqueness of the education-therapy work in the work of youth advancement in Israel. They emphasize the role of education-therapy work in the inculcation of factors of protection that have considerable importance for the reinforcement of the adolescents' mental resilience in their coping with situations of risk. The reinforcement of the resilience of the youths in the advancement of youth is based on activities that lead them to successes and achievements in the significant fields of life such as education, occupation, leadership, social activity, and the relationship with the parents. Research studies that focused on the examination of the influence of intervention programs based on social-emotional learning and their effectiveness emphasized a number of characteristics and contributions of these

programs, especially as noted by Durlak (2016) that social-emotional learning programs helped develop systems of relations between teachers and students and among students, namely this system of relations would cause the students' success and the development of the teachers' social-emotional efficacy and pedagogical skills in teaching and social-emotional learning among students. Rahn (2019) presents the effectiveness of these programs, noting that they improve the development of positive approaches, pro-social behavior, and academic performances.

In recent years, the student attachment relations with teachers in the elementary school and secondary school have been examined. It was found that secure relations with the teacher are especially important when the significant figures in the child's family do not provide security. In these cases, the meaningful relationship with the teacher may serve as a protective and compensatory factor. Alongside negative representations of relationships, with, for example, the parents, the child will construct a positive representation that will guide him at least in some of the future situations in his life (Ahnert, Harwardt-Heinecke, Kappler, Eckstein, & Milatz, 2012). One of the important predictors of secure relations with significant others is sensitive behavior on the adult's part. The teacher's sensitivity is defined as awareness of the students' academic and emotional needs. Hence, a sensitive teacher is a teacher who consistently provides comfort, calm, and encouragement. This teacher is aware of the problems and emotional distresses that may occur in the student and pays attention to lack of understanding or difficulties in the studies. When the teacher is sensitive, it is possible to see that the students feel comfortable searching for his support and guidance, participate in the lesson freely, and are not afraid of mistaken or erroneous statements in the learning process. A meaningful emotional relationship with the teacher can also be a protective factor for children who are found at potential risk, as in cases of children who come from a low socioeconomic background, children who begin studies in the school at a level of preparedness lower than the norm, or children with emotional or cognitive adjustment difficulties (Shoyer & Gur-Yaish, 2014).

The research of Akin and Radford (2018) examined the relationship between mental resilience and self-esteem in the supporting learning environments. The research findings showed that a supportive learning environment based on the teachers' support

greatly helped the development of the students' mental resilience and their positive self-esteem, which influenced their learning achievements. The research findings include recommendations that the participants proposed for specific actions of educators, as well as ideas or suitable learning environments, in order to cultivate the resilience and self-esteem that contribute to the students' academic and positive success both personally and professionally.

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