

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **“Grades are not enough”: Critical Pedagogy, Achievement and the Self-Perception of Successful Underprivileged Students**

**Dalya Yafa Markovich**

Beit Berl College, Israel

E-mail: [Dalya.markovich@beitberl.ac.il](mailto:Dalya.markovich@beitberl.ac.il)

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**This paper explores the ways in which successful graduates from underprivileged backgrounds who studied at Kedma—a secular Jewish high school in Jerusalem, which was the first (and to date the only) school to adopt the principals of critical pedagogy in Israel, defined their self-perception upon completing their studies. Critical pedagogy holds great promise for promoting underprivileged students on both the educational and the personal levels and critical discourse and praxis bring together academic learning processes and personal empowerment processes.**

**Keywords:** Critical pedagogy, grades, underprivileged students, successful graduates, Kedma, Israel

## **INTRODUCTION**

Critical pedagogy holds great promise for promoting underprivileged students on both the educational and the personal levels. More specifically, critical discourse and praxis bring together academic learning processes and personal empowerment processes, which are perceived as connected to and anticipating each other (Freire, 1992; hooks, 2000; Banks, 2009). The integration of the academic and the personal is understood as a powerful tool for “negating” the negative influences underprivileged students’ backgrounds may have on their school performance and self-perception, as many empirical studies suggest (see: Brozo and Valerio, 1996; Carter, 2000; Powers, 2006; Duncun-Andrad and Morrel, 2008; Zirkel, 2008). But only a small number of studies have centered on students from underprivileged backgrounds who “completed the transition” from being underprivileged to being empowered, i.e. turned low-achieving students into high achievers after participating in critical learning processes (Steele, 1997; Nieto, 2005).

This paper explores the ways in which successful graduates from underprivileged backgrounds who studied at *Kedma*—a secular Jewish high school in Jerusalem, which was the first (and to date the only) school to adopt the principals of critical pedagogy in Israel, defined their self-perception upon completing their studies. The *Kedma* case study differs from those of other academic high schools, since *Kedma* was founded

by social justice and community activists as an achievement-oriented critical framework for the advancement and empowerment of underprivileged communities, particularly from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation *Mizrahi* communities (Yona, 2002). When the school’s first class of students graduated, these goals were put to the test. The graduates’ self-perception was examined through a series of in-depth interviews and observations that were part of a broader ethnographic fieldwork, held at the school over two academic years (2000-2002), and follow-up studies on the graduates in 2003 and 2009, respectively.

The examination of the graduates’ self-perception reveals an ambivalence that fluctuates between two opposing poles: that of the “good student” and that of the “bad student.” The graduates identified “good” and “bad” according to the meritocratic mechanisms embedded in the modern educational system, i.e. in relation to educational achievement and the educational success (in the Israeli case: above-average grades on matriculation exams). This normative definition, based on academic achievement, is also perceived by scholars as constituting an integral component of students’ self-definition and self-esteem (Steele, 1997).

The *Kedma* graduates turned these definitions into central reference points, for the most part displaying great ambivalence and refraining from thinking of

themselves as clear-cut “good students.” These identifications were surprising, since they did not stem from the quality of the graduates’ academic achievements. All of the research participants graduated from an academic high school, an institution that enjoys high status in Israel. Furthermore, most of them managed to register fine academic achievements and showed great appreciation for the empowering learning process they had (Dahaf, 2002). Therefore, their ambivalence did not stem from “objective” agreed-upon indexes (grades, behavior, evaluation of the school) structuring the binary good/bad student coupling. The perceptions formed by the students revealed that academic achievements and critical learning process not only failed to overcome ethnic-class “characteristics” and stereotypical labeling, they actually emphasized them. Thus, this paper diverges from studies that center on students’ a-priori cultural knowledge, such as habitus and other forms of capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986)—approaches that demonstrate how students construct “disadvantagedness” from their culture (Fine, 1991; Foley, 1990; Fordham, 1996; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Willis, 1977) and emphasize the tremendous cultural work required to build knowledge and reach success with disadvantaged students (Demerath, et al, 2010; Burke, 2006; Monkman, et al, 2005; Reay, 2004; Black, 2004). *Kedma’s* graduates, as mentioned earlier, had already overcome these structural obstacles and demonstrated academic success, and with it a deep, significant relationship with the school. In this sense, and as opposed to studies that ask what prevents underprivileged students from succeeding, this paper asks what defines this success as failure.

This discussion holds great importance for the current educational debate, which emphasizes achievement as well as alternative educational approaches, especially critical pedagogy, as possible channels for the social mobility of underprivileged students. Furthermore, this case study echoes a wider discussion on issues of power and difference and the ways in which they contour and construct the perceptions of the underprivileged student as s/he attempts to navigate the educational apparatus.

### **“Background Variables,” Achievements, Self-Perception and Critical Pedagogy**

The conjunction between background variables, achievement and self-perception has been discussed extensively in the literature premised on cause and effect, i.e. the assumption that one (background variables) may predict the other (achievement). More specifically, the background variables—namely ethnicity (Tomlinson, 1982; Portes and MacLeod, 1994; Fergus, 2009), race (Ogbu, 1990; Mickelson, 2001; Carter, 2003; Lucas and Berends, 2002; Muller, et al., 2010) and

socioeconomic status [SES] (Ramey and Suarez, 1985; Entwisle, et al., 1997; Gamoran, 2001; Downey et al. 2004)—of underprivileged students are assumed to predict poor academic achievement and low self-image. Background variables also influence students’ expectations and the ways in which they will perceive of themselves during the educational process. Thus, for example, findings have shown that not only do underprivileged students’ aspirations and expectations vary by race (Carter, 1999; Hanson, 1994; Rigsby, Stull, and Morse-Kelley, 1997), non-white students have lower aspirations than white students (Kao and Tienda, 1998; Ogbu, 1978, 1991), and their academic performance is salient compared to white students, due to the threat of stereotypes (Farrell et al. 1994; Steele et al., 2002). As Hannum and Buchman (2003) noted, “it is not safe to assume that expansion in access to education will allow disadvantaged minorities to ‘catch up’ with initially advantaged ethnic groups.”

Critical pedagogy promised to undo this Gordian knot, assuming that the key to educational success lies in a critical deconstruction of the oppressive social reality and the false consciousness in which learners from underprivileged groups are caught (Freire, 1970). An understanding of personal under-privilege as a product of socio-political oppression seeks to instigate processes of empowerment anchored in the culture and identity of the underprivileged student (Shor, 1992; McLaren and Kincheloe, 2007; Freire and Shor, 1987). The personal power the learners would gain during the learning process seeks to increase their motivation for learning, reinforce their positive connection with school, and improve their academic achievements (Freire, 1992; Darder et al., 2002). Various pedagogical strategies have been developed in order to foster the empowerment process: integrating the culture, everyday life issues, and storytelling habits of the underprivileged learner (Sleeter and McLaren, 1995; Scherff, 2010; Uhl, 2011; Porfilio and Matz, 2008; Delgado and Stefancic, 1995; Williams, 1991); encouraging critical examination (Kinchelo, 2008; King, 2012; Breunig, 2005; DeLeon, 2006) and extending the boundaries of the studied text (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1992, 1997; Sandoval, 2000); and increasing the teacher’s and the students’ agency during the learning process (Groenke and Hatch, 2009; Fisher, 2001; Boler, 1999; Giroux, 1988). Tying the learner’s under-privilege to the learning process is supposed to fight the influences of the students’ background variables, while turning them into achieving and powerful learners in the eyes of the system, as well as in their own eyes.

### **“Background Variables,” Achievement, and Self-perception in the Israeli Educational System**

The connection between background variables and educational achievements has concerned the Israeli

educational system since the massive *Mizrahi* Jewish immigration from Arab/Muslim countries to Israel in the early 1950s. The profound affinity *Mizrahi* Jews maintained with Arab culture cast them as the “dichotomous opposites” (i.e. traditional, primitive, irrational) of “Western” Ashkenazi Jews (Regev, 2000; Shenhav, 2006; Khazzoom, 2008). In light of these notions, politicians, policy-makers and educators argued that the negative attributes of *Mizrahi* culture will sabotage the potential academic achievements of *Mizrahi* students; “disturbed,” “deficient attention,” “laziness,” “feeble-mindedness,” “short memory,” “comprehension difficulties,” “bad behavior,” “nervousness,” “sexual vigor” (Brill in Orter, 1969, p. 575), and “failure to withstand pressure” (Smilansky, in Stahl, 1983, p. 196) are but some of the terms used. Following in this vein, the “fostering policy” (“*Teuney Tipuach*”) was formulated during the 1950s, especially for *Mizrahi* students, in order to help them overcome the cultural obstacles that ostensibly prevented their academic success (Algrabli, 1974; Mizrahi, 2004). A decade later the “integration reform” was conceived amid growing dissatisfaction with *Mizrahi* students’ poor achievements and the perceived need to modernize *Mizrahi* culture. This socio-cultural model, implemented solely during the three-years of junior high school, was supposed to enable children from middle-class families (mostly Ashkenazim) to serve as role models for poor children (by and large *Mizrahim*) who supposedly lacked the cultural attributes needed for academic success (Yonah, Dahan and Markovich, 2008). However, despite the common belief that school integration between children from different social and cultural backgrounds would provide equal opportunities, the scope of integration was in practice severely limited (Stahl, 1991). Furthermore, the perception that *Mizrahi* students’ homes were culturally inadequate, led to segregation policies and practices in high school. This process eventually created a dual system with two distinctive educational settings: one for privileged students, mostly Ashkenazi, and the other for underprivileged students, mostly *Mizrahi*. While the former enjoyed more established and better-equipped schools, the latter were relegated to ill-equipped and ill-staffed facilities (Dahan and Levi, 2000; Saporta and Yonah, 2003). The background variables, namely ethnic origin and economic class, were the main factors in light of which the placement of *Mizrahi* students’ in low academic tracks (and their subsequent low academic achievements) were explained throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Yogev and Roditi, 1984). This discourse had a crucial influence on the academic success and self-image of *Mizrahi* students, as it was reinforced and replicated in major studies on the issue for over five decades. For example, Hassin (1974) found that the educational system labels students from *Mizrahi* origins as disadvantaged, thus creating “a self-fulfilling prophecy” with regards to their academic achievement.

A decade later, Schwartzwald (1980) argued that *Mizrahi* students tended to adopt the labeled image constructed for them by their Ashkenazi colleagues. Sharni (1981) claimed that the level of expectations from underprivileged *Mizrahi* students and parents was extremely low, fostering negative views that were internalized and sometimes bordered on the absurd. The same phenomena was detected in the 1990s and 2000s (Shabtay, 2001; Mizrahi, et al., 2009). This tendency coincides with the ethnic inequality in Israeli society that has endured well into the 2nd, 3rd and even 4th generations of *Mizrahi* immigrants (Swirski, 1999; Stier and Shavit, 2003; Yonah, 2005; Shenhav, 2006; Haberfeld and Cohen, 2007), which dictates access to Israel's structures of opportunity (Ayalon and Shavit, 2004; Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein, 2004; Cohen et al., 2007).

### The Site

The *Kedma* school was founded in 1993 in one of the underprivileged neighborhoods of Jerusalem. The neighborhood was built in the 1950s for the mostly *Mizrahi* residents of the immigrant transit camps in the city. Housing-wise, it consists of large reinforced concrete tenement buildings with small, untended yards. The apartment sizes range between 25-65 square meters, despite the large families that inhabit them.

For years, the neighborhood suffered from overcrowding, lack of social services, and all around neglect. Negative publicity quickly followed, in particular the perception of the neighborhood as “a desolate space,” “a poor place,” and “a criminals’ nest” (Yona, 2002). Today, in addition to the *Mizrahi* residents, the neighborhood is home to underprivileged Jewish immigrants from the Eastern republics of the former Soviet Union and from Ethiopia. Many residents suffer from familial dissolution, embroilment in criminal activity and severe unemployment, and require the support of various social services. The educational services offered in the neighborhood are also inadequate. As a result, educational achievements are very low, standing at only 10% full matriculation among 12th graders (Kedma, 2001; Kedma, 2010), while the national rate of full matriculation stands at 41.4% (Swirski and Atkin 2002).

The school was founded by intellectuals, activists, educators and academics in order to empower the *Mizrahi* students in the neighborhood (Yona, 2002). The school has six grades (7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>), one class per grade, with a total of 160 students on average. The schools’ founders sought to adopt critical pedagogy and a multicultural curriculum in order to empower the students and help them cope with their academic tasks. These principles were manifested by integrating a critical point-of-view in the official curriculum, and in teaching methods (Kedma, Undated). The founders of *Kedma* believed that a main cause for the achievement gap and

the marginalization of *Mizrahi* students was the exclusion of *Mizrahi* history and culture from the textbooks (for a postcolonial critique of Israeli history textbooks, see for example: Shenhav, 1999). In order to modify the curriculum, the teachers developed special programs relevant to the students' own life experiences. Projects as "My History" and "Society and Culture" sought to encourage the students to reexamine their *Mizrahi* marginality within the Israeli socio-political context and in light of the hegemonic status afforded to Ashkenazim (Jews of European/American origin) (Yona and Zalmanson Levi, 2004). This process, based on the students' own investigations and self-reflection, enabled them to deconstruct and analyze their experiences by using a critical point-of-view. The ultimate goal of this process was to empower the students, and thus instigate growth on the pedagogical and personal level (Bailey-Ben Ishay, 1998).

The uniqueness of the *Kedma* project provoked enormous controversy in Israel. Getz (2003) goes so far as to claim that there has never been a school in Israel that attracted as much public hostility as *Kedma*. The Ministry of Education and the Jerusalem Board of Education expressed total condemnation for the critical ideology upon which the school was fashioned. In their view, it was an "unrealistic" project that sabotaged the special help programs designed for underprivileged students, and promised the latter academic success of which they were incapable (Yona, 2002). In this hostile environment, *Kedma* started operating in the neighborhood, promising the parents, the students and the community at large that its students would obtain higher academic achievements and succeed in their matriculation exams, as indeed happened six years later, when the first class of students graduated.

### About the Subjects Studied

Nineteen female students and 18 male students graduated in 2000 from the *Kedma* school in Jerusalem after six academic years. When most of them started studying at *Kedma* in the 1993-4 academic year, they made up the entire school—a single 7<sup>th</sup> grade, teetering between existence and extinction. Year by year they grew, and with them, so did the school. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, five different courses of study, or "concentrations," were opened for them: biology, mathematics, philosophy, art and theater. At the end of the process, 22 pupils were fully qualified to receive a matriculation certificate (similar to the British A-levels, German Abitur, French Baccalauréat, and Austrian Matura). Seven students were one matriculation exam short of getting the certificate.

I first met the *Kedma* graduates at their graduation ceremony in 2000. The graduating students opened the door of the small auditorium and burst in dramatically to the sound of roaring applause. Every year, thousands of

boys and girls successfully complete 12 year of study. But on that evening, the usual excitement was marked by a sense of achievement of a different kind, given the slim chances the educational system had given *Kedma's* experimental project (Bailey-Ben Ishay, 1998; Shalom Shitrit, 1996), and the low academic potential the establishment had ascribed to the students (Kedma, Undated).

I became acquainted with the graduates' personal educational experiences through the in-depth interviews I conducted with them during the years 2001-2002. The questions were designed so that the students would respond to each one in their own words (Patton, 1990). In the interview, I sought to find out: (1) How do the graduates define themselves in terms of culture, class and identity? (2) How do they understand the educational experience they had at the *Kedma* school (relationship with the school, expectations, and achievements)? (3) How do they define themselves at the end of the educational process that they have undergone?

These questions allowed the graduates to articulate how they constructed their self-perception along lines of ethnicity, class and achievement. I interviewed the graduates when they were in the midst of their military service. Most of the interviews were conducted at the interviewee's parents' homes in the neighborhood, where they lived at the time, and documented with a video camera. The interviews lasted two hours and sometimes longer. With some of the graduates, I conducted a second interview (or third), upon their request. In addition to the interviews, I recorded the graduation ceremony (2000), the class reunion organized by the graduates three years later (2003), and the school reunion (2009), on video. I was also relied on various reference materials produced by or with the graduates, including the protocols of various school committee meetings, the school yearbook, etc.

Following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) approach, the various categories that emerged from the graduates' narratives were extracted from the interviews. The categories related to the self-perceptions the graduates had constructed in light of their experiences in the critical learning process at *Kedma*. In the first stage, each of the interviews was read as a standalone text. Only in the second stage were two significant themes, articulated regarding the different perspectives of the graduates, chosen: "almost good" and "bad by choice." These two categories reflected the different positions assumed within the critical learning process. These themes do not demarcate two separate groups, but rather two different positions that assume dominance in different contexts.

## FINDINGS

### Positioning Grades in Context

Educational researchers have noted that ethnicity, race



and class identification are significant factors in the schooling experiences of students from underprivileged groups (e.g., Davidson, 1996; O'Connor, 2001; Lewis, 2003). This study sought to examine to what extent these characteristics influence the ways in which successful students from underprivileged backgrounds define themselves when the learning process is anchored in a critical pedagogy that aims to expose and deconstruct marginality so as to empower the learner's self-perception.

### “Almost Good”

Many of *Kedma's* graduates had difficulty defining themselves in a conclusive way. This ambivalence can be attributed to their high academic achievements on the one hand, and the negative labeling that the critical learning process exposed on the other. Sigal explain her ambivalent attitude:

People kept telling us that this is a school for Moroccans and for ethnic kids and for dummies, and for whatever [...] and it's true, we are a school for students from the hood, that's what the school mission is about [...] this is why we're learning in this unique school. So what does it say about us? Are we good or bad?

Sigal objected to the ways in which *Kedma* was labeled (“Moroccans,” “ethnicities,” “dummies”), but at the same time, she confirmed the existence of low-status ethnic groups as reflected in the schools aims, wondering how these contradictions should effect her self-perception. Roni was troubled by similar questions, which prevented him from identifying himself as a “good student,” despite his strong academic standing:

*When I studied at Kedma they [pupils from other academic schools] kept putting me down. And, I kept asking: 'why do you treat me differently? Why do you think I'm dumb?' But then again, people in the neighborhood are not like everyone else, right? This is a special school, special for us, right?*

For other graduates too, their “label” has become a constant companion—a social construct turned essence, which sabotages their image of the “good student.” The critical learning process highlighted these labels while trying to blur them. Liron added: Sometimes I'd think: maybe because we live in this neighborhood, we talk about it [the stigmatized image of Mizrahi neighborhoods] a lot in class, so we can't really be successful.” And Igal noted: “I studied here [at *Kedma*] but I always felt as if I was still one of those bad students because we learned about it, and because of the way the school (*Kedma*), and the stuff we studied, are perceived.

The graduates' awareness of the negative labeling attached to their origins was understood as an outcome of the critical investigation of the role Mizrahim and Mizrahiness played in Israel. This critical process highlighted their awareness of their marginal position,

causing them to doubt the quality of their educational achievements and the extent to which they were “real” and “regular.” Avi, one of the graduates who finished high school with a full matriculation certificate, explained how the process of recognizing and cognizing oppression worked against the empowerment processes:

*Maybe it's true that we can't function in a regular school, I mean in a real, regular, academic high school. I mean [...] it's like, if you are oppressed for so long you can't do it, you can't just succeed; I mean, you can't jump from zero to 100, it doesn't work like that. We were on the margins for generations; we studied that in our project ("My History") and talked a lot about that with our teachers. When one goes through that kind of trauma, he can't just fix it with grades.*

Sigal, another graduate who completed her studies with high marks, describes how the critical learning process that was supposed to reduce social hierarchies by exposing feelings of alienation and disconnectedness from the Israeli society, actually highlighted her “Otherness,” hence calling her achievements into question:

*You know [...] we learned it, it's not like we didn't know it before, we were learning about how Mizrahim were always on the margins, in the job market and in school, their living conditions, everything. So [...] when you are in a position like that, the only thing you can do is [...] be relatively good. It's always relative [...]*

The graduates' doubts in their ability to similarly succeed in the “real,” “regular” educational system was also connected to the fact that they were offered a unique school that employed critical methods. In this sense, critical pedagogy was not just about linking critical thinking with oppression. The graduates implied that critical pedagogy actually helped to construct oppression:

*Ordinary kids don't go to Kedma; they don't need to. They don't have to use criticism and stuff because they're not underprivileged. Kedma takes in the neighborhood kids, who, as a whole, come with a very, very bad history in school. It is for the oppressed, so every kid that goes to study there is thought of as oppressed, you know what I mean? [...] You go to Kedma and it's like, it gives you a negative label, you're not like the others.*

In this case, the graduate not only separated the worth of her grades from her actual achievements, she also anchored it in the fact that she studied in a school that was critical. In other words, the unusual learning process was to blame for serving underprivileged students and thus highlighting ethno-class lines that further divided graduates from their “regular” peers. Hence, the critical process, which the graduates experienced, became in their eyes a key variable for preventing them from defining themselves solely based on their academic achievements. Instead, the graduates' self-perception was ascribed to the unique establishment in which they

had studied (i.e. the critical academic process). Therefore, their academic success was perceived as a "situational" or "relative," a success that cannot be considered equal to the academic achievements of "real" "good students." As Efrat put it:

*Suddenly, I started studying [at Kedma], and it's like, you see the attitude, the dedication, the support, like, they'll always help you, they'll never give up on you. It's not like an ordinary school where you really have to be good from the beginning without anyone taking care of you.*

The graduate didn't understand the empowerment she experienced as inherent to normative learning processes, but rather as evidence of her disadvantage, and by the same token, she understood that her success was an unusual exception traceable to the critical learning process. From this perspective, it was the unique effort invested in the students during the critical learning process, rather than their personal abilities, that brought about the wished-for results. Moreover, the fact that other academic schools rejected most of them, while the *Kedma* academic high school had a place for them, also served as proof of their "Otherness." For, again, the *Kedma* School empowered its students, but it always empowered them from a position of inferiority. In other words, the empowerment process implied the students' inferiority. In dealing with their inferiority, the students felt that they were no longer "regular," but rather burdened with labels and stigmas, hence their academic achievements were just not enough; they were not "good" but "almost good."

### "Bad by Choice"

Many graduates chose to define themselves as the absolute "Other" of academic schools and the of the municipal educational system, i.e. as "bad students." This "separateness" occupied a big place in the students' self-perception, especially in light of the vehement criticism the school was subjected to, due to the critical approach it adopted. It seems that this criticism left the graduates no option but to define themselves as "bad" in order to resist their critics.

The graduates were exposed to the public criticism directed at the school from the outset, even when *Kedma* was still just an idea. It was its repetitive nature that discouraged them and served to confirm their "Otherness" and maintain it. Shai said:

*After a while, you don't react anymore. He wants to call it [Kedma] retarded, okay, let him call it retarded. What do I care, I'm going. At some stage, you get tired of explaining, because you realize that they say stuff out of racism. You see people whom you've told once, twice, three times what Kedma is, that it employs critical thinking to help us, and they still come and tell you again and again: "It's a school for the retarded, isn't it? Where is it?" eventually you just leave them be.*

Moran described a similar experience: "The fact that they define us like that, is something that for me can be very frustrating. Before, we didn't understand it, but through the studies at school, all this discrimination became clear." To which Sigal added:

*I had to explain to people the school and its pedagogy, like a broken record, again and again and again; in the end you can't be bothered anymore. People think that critical pedagogy is for the poor and the helpless, so what choice do we have but to agree? Now, what do you have to say?*

The graduates' claim that any response they gave their peers, while trying to explain critical pedagogy, was perceived as an "underprivileged" perspective. Furthermore, the need to defend the reputation of critical pedagogy, and that of the school, created stark awareness of the different and separate status of its students. Thus, the sense of separateness and the negative self-image that came with it, had become, in some cases, an alternative identity. A clear representation of this phenomenon appeared in the school yearbook, produced by the graduates at the end of their last year of school (2000). The majority of the students chose to represent themselves in the book through typically negative images that seemed to take overtly cynical pleasure in the stereotypes attached to them. The caricatured exaggerations missed none of the fringe subgroups commonly identified with *Mizrahim*. Thus, some of the students took on the figure of the thief: "Since being captured for stealing the entire contents of a newsstand, he has disappeared. Last seen in a black Honda next to the Refurbish Garage"; "Caught in the south of the country at a cosmetics factory while stealing products worth \$1,000"; "Accused of breaking into a factory in Tel Aviv and stealing 7,250 packs of scented toilet paper, but exonerated due to lack of evidence because of excessive liquidity." Others adopted the figure of the pimp: "Accused of employing about 5,721 innocent girls imported from overseas"; or the figure of the thug: "Esther, a.k.a. 'the nightingale,' was caught in a brawl at 'The Duck' club"; or that of the rapist: "The above is suspected of raping a minor in Acre," and so on. Such carnivalesque images characterize many graduation ceremonies in established schools in Israel (Lomsky-Fedder, 2012). But in this case, they served to objectify *Mizrahiness* and impose marginalized roles on its "carriers." Thus, although the *Mizrahi*-as-criminal image chosen by the graduates can be understood as a way to playfully resist the absurdity of the images others have of them, these images were also part of the intensive critical process employed by the school in order to dismantle them. As Or noted:

*We wanted to prove that students from the neighborhood are as good as everyone else, in line with the school's political struggle; that we're no longer pimps and criminals and losers. But in the end we said [...] "You know what, okay, if we're "bad," let us be bad; bad by choice.*

This duality juxtaposes the discourse of individual achievement with the labels it aims to dismiss. Thus, and although the pupils aspired to be equal to their peers, it was precisely their achievements, and the critical process through which they were attained, that exposed their ever-labeled position; in other words: a double-edged sword. In these instances, critical pedagogy made the negative labels hyper visible and even fulfilled an unwelcome expectation—that of being "bad by choice."

## DISCUSSION

An examination of the ways in which successful students from underprivileged backgrounds defined themselves reveals that despite the critical learning process they underwent and despite their academic achievements, the graduates' self-perceptions related more to their experiences of ethno-class identification than to any other variable. Even though the employment of critical practices contributed to the students' academic performance, it also sharpened the students' awareness of their underprivileged, "labeled" status, which manifested itself in their self-perception as "almost good" students who are "bad by choice."

Research findings have suggested that underprivileged students do less well in school because they undervalue their identity and its attendant cultural capital (Phiney and Rosenthal, 1993; Littlewood, 1999; Noguera, 2003; Lee, 2004), while positive racial or ethnic identity is associated with higher levels of academic performance, higher educational aspirations, and greater academic confidence (Oyserman, 2001; Chavous et al., 2003; Tatum, 2004; Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee, 2006). On the other hand, a growing body of research suggests that many underprivileged students (e.g. African Americans) have been empowered to succeed academically despite experiencing racism in schools (Andrews, 2012).

This case study problematizes the one-to-one relationship between positive/negative self-perception and academic achievement, while re-examining the critical pedagogical tools that seek to impact school outcome (strengthening self-perception as a tool for improving achievement). These insights bring into the discussion two central issues concerning critical pedagogy, achievements and self-perception.

Firstly, they undermine the ways in which many studies in the field of education describe the process of constructing the perceptions and self-esteem of the underprivileged student. Often, the study sketches a direct and unidirectional link between critical pedagogical practices and the students' future perceptions. Thus, for example, critical practices are regarded as constructing unproblematic critical approaches to the world among students (Buckingham et. al., 2005; Sefton-Green and Seop, 2007), and as encouraging the immediate adoption of a critical consciousness (taking action

against the oppressive elements in one's life) and the employment of identity politics due to exposure to critical theories (Duncum, 2009; Burn and Durran, 2006; Turnbull, 1998). Studies that point to the internal struggles experienced by lower class students and students within different educational frameworks (Morrison, 2010), and the "class hybridity" that characterizes this reality (Reay, 2001), also assume that under privilege is a temporary transitional phase, or a solvable problem. This paper disputes the perception of under privilege as a fluid and transformative "attribute" or "state," or as a consciousness capable of complete change. Furthermore, the students' perceptions suggest that it was precisely the help and support they required in order to improve their academic standing and increase their awareness of their underprivileged social position, that exposed the role played by ethnicity, class and ideological master narratives (Sandlin and Clark, 2009; Wickens and Sandlin, 2007) in constructing and shaping their self-perception and images of success.

Secondly, critical pedagogy assumes that academic success is a great formative force that is linked to self-perception and future social position. This vast body of theory and research has also created an overlap between achievement and identity, assuming that one (grades) helps to advancement the other (empowerment) (Reingold, 2000; McLaren and Da Silva, 1993; Giroux and McLaren, 1989). In the case study of the *Kedma* school, achievements contributed to changing the range of possibilities open to the graduates. However, sometimes the ethno-class context that was emphasized during the critical learning process had greater impact than grades. Thus, for example, in some cases achievement functioned as proof of inequality by exposing the differential ways in which the grades were achieved, and by exposing the dissimilarities and hierarchies between "good students" from different groups.

These contrasting influences oblige us to perceive critical pedagogy not only as liberating, but as embedded, both as praxis and discourse, in profound political and psychological contexts. In other words, critical pedagogical models should be understood as relative praxis operating in different macro-social contexts, in light of which students may disadvantage themselves, and thus contribute to the reproduction of social divisions. These dynamics do not suggest that the critical process is doomed to fail. But they certainly do suggest that the process of building students' self-perceptions requires continuous critical work, to which this study hopes to contribute.

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