

## Ego-Identity among Immigrant Dropout Youth

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### Abstract

The present study examined the differences between native-born Israeli youth and immigrant youth, both dropouts and those that persevere with their studies, with regard to level of ego identity formation. The study was conducted among adolescents aged 13-18, of whom 191 (39.9%) were native-born Israelis and 288 (60.1%) new immigrants. 239 of the adolescents were persevering students while 240 were dropouts. The comparison between native-born and immigrant youth revealed no difference in ego identity levels; however, when dropouts were compared to persevering students, the lowest level of ego identity was found among adolescents who dropped out of school, regardless of ethnic origin, age or sex.

**Keywords:** Ego-Identity; Immigrant; Dropout; Adolescents; School; Identity

### Immigration, Ego-Identity and Dropping Out of School

The most prominent ego-identity theory is Erikson [1,2], whereby adolescence is the most critical stage of psychosocial development, for it culminates in the formation of one's ego-identity. Identity means that the individual is able to assess his/her strengths and weaknesses, and decide how to deal with them. In a state of confused ego-identity, the individual may have emotional and behavioral problems, or experience maladjustment, aggressiveness, conduct disorders, involvement in criminal activities and a lower future orientation [3-8].

The ability to form an ego-identity during adolescence is associated, inter alia, with the age of respondents and sex. As age increases, there is a decline in the identity diffusion status and a rise in the ego-identity status, with girls tending to develop faster than their male peers. [9,10].

Immigration is another variable associated with ego-identity formation, and is defined as a change in one's physical, social and cultural environment [11]. The sociocultural distance between immigrants and absorbing societies affects the formers' ability to integrate into society and is reflected, inter alia, in the perception of ego-identity among immigrants' children [12,13].

Recent studies conducted among children of immigrants [14-18] show that these children demonstrated problems and confusion with regard to their ego-identities. These difficulties influence the individual long after the initial immigration period. Thus, beyond the problems experienced at the time of immigration, the effects of the move may become longstanding [19].

A manifestation of such absorption difficulties may be seen in high dropout rates from education systems. Israel is home to approximately 1.86 million schoolchildren, of whom some 150,000 are immigrants. Dropout rates among native-born Israelis are approximately 1.7%, whereas among immigrants they rise to 4% [20].

Subsequently, Expulsion from social networks onto the streets is considered a main risk factor for these adolescents, as they may turn

into a population potentially at risk of vagrancy, violence and criminal involvement [21-23].

The body of professional literature provides numerous reasons for dropping out of school [24-27] however, surprisingly; none of the explanations provided refers to the ego-identity variable, despite the fact that literature recognizes the importance of ego-identity as a factor in the adolescent's acclimatization, functioning and schooling [28]. The aim of the present study is to fill the void in professional literature by examining whether the level of ego-identity among dropout youth is lower than the level found among persevering learners, and whether the difference is also connected to age, sex or immigration; thus adding another dimension to the study of dropping out of school and its prevention.

### Rationale and Research Goal

Since no studies to date have been conducted specifically on the connection between dropping out and ego identity, the present study has attempted to fill the gap by both examining this connection and adding another dimension to understanding this problem in the educational system. In order to examine this connection, we used a sample taken from adolescent immigrant pupils—a population at high risk of dropping out. We also examined a pupil population not considered to be at risk—native-born Israeli youth—consisting of both persevering and dropout pupils. A comparison was made between persevering and dropout pupils by level of ego-identity formation.

The main aim of the current study is to examine differences in the extent of ego-identity formation between learning and dropout pupils and between immigrant youth and Israeli-born youth. Based on a previous study [28], the hypothesis was that dropout youth will have lower levels of ego-identity formation than learning youth, and that immigrants youth will have lower levels of ego-identity formation than native-born Israelis, of all age groups and regardless of sex.

### Research Hypotheses

1. Dropout adolescents will display lower ego-identity development than learning adolescents, beyond immigration, sex and age.

2. Immigrant adolescents will display lower ego-identity development than non-immigrant

adolescents, beyond dropping out/persevering, sex and age.

3. Young learning adolescents will display higher ego-identity development than young dropout adolescents, yet similar differences will not be found among older adolescents.

Method

The present study is a cross sectional correlative study, comparing persevering and dropping-out high school students. The sample is a convenient one. Learning adolescents came from several high schools, and dropout adolescents came from a national non-profit organization

for youth and children at risk. Inclusion criteria: ages 13-18, Hebrew speaking, normal daily functioning. Exclusion criteria: non-Hebrew speaking, known mental illness, drug addiction, or low IQ level.

Participants

The study was conducted with 479 adolescents aged 13-18: 239 pupils with learning perseverance (49.9%) and 240 dropout pupils (50.9%). The persevering pupils attended regular schools, mainly junior high and academic high schools (84.4%), but some comprehensive vocational/technology high schools (8.1%), an ulpana (religious high school for girls) and a yeshiva (religious high school for boys). Table 1 presents the adolescents' background information.

Difference	Dropout (n = 240)		Learning (n = 239)		Variable	
	%	n	%	n		
Z = 4.42***	30.0	72	49.8	119	Israel	Origin
	70.0	168	50.2	120	Immigrants	
Z = 0.82	52.5	126	48.7	115	Boy	Sex
	47.5	114	51.3	121	Girl	
Z = 2.39*	51.3	123	62.1	146	13-15	Age group
	48.8	117	37.9	89	15.1-18	
Z = 3.17**	68.5	89	83.3	194	Married	Parents' status
(married vs. other)	14.6	19	11.6	27	Divorced	
	6.1	8	3.4	8	Widowed	
	10.8	14	1.7	4	Remarried	
Z = 4.73***	23.2	36	40.9	83	Good	Economic status
	51.6	80	51.2	104	Moderate	
	25.5	39	7.9	16	Bad	
	SD	M	SD	M		
t(462.67) <sub>1</sub> = -1.94	1.51	15.40	1.27	15.15	13-18	Age
t(256) = 3.52***	2.16	10.91	2.89	12.04	1-25	Father's education
t(266) = 4.70***	2.21	10.87	2.65	12.28	1-25	Mother's education
t(422.55) <sub>1</sub> = 3.83***	1.62	3.59	2.27	4.29	1-15	Number of children in family

**Table 1:** Demographic and Background Characteristics of the Study Participants (N=479), \*p<.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001,<sup>1</sup>- t for unequal variances, Note: Z-Mann-Whitney U test, t-test.

The sample consists of native-born Israelis (13.9%, N=191) and immigrants (60.1%, N=288). Around 50% of the persevering youth are native-born Israelis, compared to 30% of the dropout youth, a difference found to be significant (Z=4.42, p<.001). Half of the participants are boys (50.6%, N=241) and half are girls (49.9%, N=235), with no difference between persevering and dropout pupils (Z=0.82). Most of the parents (where information is available) are married to each other (78.0%, N=283), but while 83% of the parents of persevering pupils are married to each other, this applies to only 68%

of the dropout youth, which is found to be a significant difference (Z=3.17, p<0.01). Persevering pupils reported better economic circumstances than dropout pupils, and 8% of the persevering pupils reported dire economic circumstances compared with 25% of the dropout pupils – a difference found to be significant (Z=4.73, p<0.001).

Adolescents in both groups are in the 13–18 age group, with an average age of 15. Even so, 60% of the persevering youth are in the younger age group (13-15), compared with half of the dropout youth -

a difference found to be significant ( $Z=2.39$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Among parents of persevering youth, education levels were higher than among parents of dropout youth (fathers-  $M=12.04$ ,  $SD=2.89$ , compared with  $M=10.91$ ,  $SD=2.16$ ,  $t(256)=3.52$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; mothers - $M=12.28$ ,  $SD=2.65$ , compared with  $M=10.87$ ,  $SD=2.21$ ,  $t(266)=4.70$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

## Instruments

The Socio-Demographic Questionnaire -respondents were asked to provide information about themselves such as age, grade, ethnic origin, etc.

Adolescent Ego-Identity Scale - the Adolescent Ego-Identity questionnaire was constructed by Tzuriel (1974) for the purpose of examining ego-identity among sample participants. The present study made use of Tzuriel's (1974) questionnaire because, as its basis, served the theories put forth by Erikson, Marcia and previous studies. The fact that it was specifically created with youth in Israeli society in mind also renders it advantageous for use in the framework of the present study [29].

The questionnaire was found to be reliable and valid in numerous studies conducted in Israel, inter alia, by Heyman, Fisherman, Wilchek-Aviad [28,30,31]. Half of the items in the questionnaire are phrased positively, and half negatively. The Likert-style response scale ranges from "Not at all" (1) to "Very much so" (5). When the tool's validity was examined, positive correlations were found between various components of ego identity and of other questionnaires. Internal consistency was found to range from  $\alpha=.50$  to  $\alpha=.81$ .

The questionnaire contains seven dimensions: (1) Sense of commitment and purposefulness - the individual's perception of self as having defined goals and a clear worldview; (2) Sense of solidity and continuity- the individual's view of him/herself as balanced, abounding in self-confidence and having a sense of continuity; (3) Social recognition- the individual's self-perception as being positively assessed by those in his/her environment; (4) - the individual's sense of attachment to and involvement with others, and the feeling that his/her actions are worthwhile; (5) Physical identity- the desire of the individual to preserve his/her physical appearance and behavior as they are; (6) Authenticity and naturalness - the individual's sense that his/her behavior and expression of emotions are a true reflection of what s/he feels; (7) Perception of self-control -the individual's sense of his/her ability to control his/herself under pressure. A score is given for each dimension, as well as an overall average score.

In the present study internal consistencies were low, and five of the seven did not exceed 0.60. A factor analysis of the items did not improve the results. Thus, the overall identity score, i.e. the sum of all (38) questionnaire items, with an internal consistency of  $\alpha=.88$ , was used. The variable's distribution is approximately normal; a higher score indicates a more solid ego-identity.

## Procedure

The Israeli Ministry of Educations' Ethics Committee was requested to approve the questionnaires for distribution in schools. The above Ethics Committee did indeed approve the questionnaire and authorized us to enter schools in order to distribute them, subject to the school principal's and homeroom teacher's consent, and subject to the students' agreeing to complete the questionnaire of their own free

will. Upon obtaining the approval of the Ministry of Education, we approached several schools and distributed the questionnaires by means of a research assistant, who explained the importance of the study to the pupils, and emphasized that the questionnaires were anonymous, and that their answers would not be shown to a representative of their school.

At the same time we were able to distribute questionnaires at a national non-profit organization for youth, in which volunteers help (inter alia) youth and children at risk. The questionnaires were distributed by the volunteers themselves (in order to protect the minors' identities) only among youth who are in overt or covert dropping out stages (some of whom are known to the police). The participants were told of the study's importance, the anonymity of the questionnaires, and the fact that their responses would not be shown to any formal representative.

## Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using SPSS ver.22. The research hypotheses were examined using two and three way analyses of variance (ANOVA), ego-identity by learning, immigration, sex, and age group. In order to avoid cells being too small, analyses were conducted in three steps: (a) ego-identity by learning and immigration (2x2); (b) ego-identity by learning, immigration and sex (2x2x2); (c) ego-identity by learning, immigration and age group (2x2x2). The significance level was defined as  $p<.05$ . Demographic group differences were examined using Mann-Whitney U tests ( $Z$ ) and  $t$ -tests.

## Results

The present study aimed to examine the extent of ego identity formation between learning and dropout pupils, as well as between immigrant youth and Israeli-born youth. Based on a preliminary study (Wilchek-Aviad), which found ego-identity to be dominant in predicting learning perseverance among boarding school pupils, the current study examined whether the level of ego-identity among dropout youth was lower than that found among persevering learners, and whether the difference was also connected to variables such as immigration, sex or age [28].

Correlations between ego-identity scores and the participants' main background characteristics (i.e., parental education and family size) were found to be non-significant and low ( $r=0.02$  to  $r=.09$ ). The only significant correlation was with socioeconomic status ( $r=0.18$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) coded as 1=good, 0=bad or moderate. However, socioeconomic status was provided only for 75% of the sample (as were other background characteristics). Thus, the analyses were conducted with no statistical control over demographic variables. Following them, statistical control was applied over socioeconomic status, and is reported. Age and sex were defined as independent variables and were not used as control variables.

## Identity Development by Learning and Immigration

Differences in identity development by group (learning adolescents/dropout adolescents) and immigration (Israeli-born / immigrants) were assessed using an analysis of variance for the total identity score, as shown in Table 2

Group x immigration	Immi-gration	Group	Dropout Adolescents (n=240)		Learning Adolescents (n=222)		
			Immigrants (n = 168)	Israeli (n = 72)	Immigrants (n=110)	Israeli (n=112)	
F(1,458) (η <sup>2</sup> )	F(1,458) (η <sup>2</sup> )	F(1, 458) (η <sup>2</sup> )					
			M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	
1.84 (.004)	2.06 (.004)	46.42*** (.092)	3.13 (0.39)	3.13 (0.37)	3.36 (0.50)	3.48 (0.47)	Total score

**Table 2:** Differences in Identity Development by Group and Immigration (N=462), \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001, Note: F-Two way ANOVA

Results show a significant difference in ego-identity by group (learning adolescents/dropout adolescents), whereas differences by immigration and by the interaction of group and immigration were found to be non-significant. An examination of the difference by group (learning adolescents / dropout adolescents) revealed that identity development was higher for learning adolescents than for dropout adolescents [learning adolescents (M=3.42, SD=0.49), dropout adolescents (M=3.13, SD=0.39)]. Similar results were obtained when controlling for socioeconomic status.

### Identity development by learning, immigration and sex

Differences in identity development by group (learning adolescents / dropout adolescents), immigration (Israeli-born / immigrants) and sex were assessed as before using an analysis of variance, as shown in Table 3.

Immigration sex	Group sex	Sex	Dropout adolescents (n=240)				Learning adolescents (n=220)				
			Immigrants(n=168)		Israeli (n=72)		Immigrants(n=109)		Israeli (n=111)		
F(1,452)(η <sup>2</sup> )	F(1,452)(η <sup>2</sup> )	F(1,452)(η <sup>2</sup> )	Girls (n=82)	Boys (n=86)	Girls (n=32)	Boys (n=40)	Girls (n =56)	Boys (n =53)	Girls (n=57)	Boys (n=54)	
			M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	
0.01 (.001)	0.36 (.001)	1.38 (.003)	3.15 (0.39)	3.11 (0.40)	3.19 (0.44)	3.08 (0.30)	3.38 (0.50)	3.33 (0.50)	3.48 (0.52)	3.49 (0.41)	Total score

**Table 3:** Differences in Identity Development by Group, Immigration and Sex (N=460)\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001, Note: F- Three way ANOVA

Results show no significant differences in the total identity score of the adolescents by sex, or by the interactions of sex with group and immigration. Similar results were obtained when controlling for socioeconomic status.

### Identity Development by Learning, Immigration and Age Group

Differences in identity development by group (learning adolescents/dropout adolescents), immigration (Israeli-born / immigrants) and age group (13 to 15/15.1 to 18) were examined using an analysis of variance, as shown in Table 4.

Results show no significant differences in ego-identity score by age group, or by the interaction of immigration and age group. However, a significant interaction of group by age group was found. That is, age was not found to be related to ego identity as a main effect or in the

interaction with immigration status. However, it was found to be related to ego identity in the interaction with perseverance / dropping out status.

An examination of this difference revealed that among younger adolescents (age 13-15), the difference in learning perseverance / dropping out was significant F(1, 451)=48.14, p<0.001,η<sup>2</sup>=.096(, as younger learning adolescents scored higher (M=3.47, SD=0.47) than younger dropout adolescents (M=3.07, SD=0.33). The difference was also significant among older adolescents (age 15.1-18) )F(1, 451)=5.80, p=0.016,η<sup>2</sup>=0.013(, however, its magnitude was substantially lower. Here too, older learning adolescents scored higher (M=3.35, SD=0.50) than older dropout adolescents (M=3.20, SD=0.43). The third order interaction (group by immigration by age group) was not significant. Similar results were obtained when controlling for socioeconomic status.

Immi-gration age group	Group age group	Age group	Dropout Adolescents(n=240)				Learning adolescents(n=220)				Total score
			Immigrants (n=168)		Israeli (n=72)		Immigrants (n=109)		Israeli (n=110)		
			older (n=80)	yng (n=88)	older (n=37)	yng (n=35)	older (n=46)	Yng (n=63)	older (n=38)	Yng (n=72)	
			M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	
F(1, 451) (η <sup>2</sup> )	F(1,451) (η <sup>2</sup> )	F(1,451) (η <sup>2</sup> )	3.19(0.44)	3.07(0.34)	3.20(0.42)	3.06(0.29)	3.32(0.50)	3.38(0.50)	3.38(0.51)	3.54(0.44)	

**Table 4:** Differences in Identity Development by Group, Immigration and Age Group(N=459)\*p<.05 , \*\*p<.01 , \*\*\*p<.001,Note: F- Three way ANOVA

### Discussion

The present study examined the differences in ego-identity formation between persevering and dropping out, native-born and immigrant Israeli youth, in interactions with sex and age.

Lower levels of ego-identity were found among dropout youth in comparison with learning youth. This result adds to the findings presented by a previous study (Wilchek-Aviad, ), in which ego-identity was found to be a central predictor of learning perseverance among boarding school pupils. It is possible that impaired ego-identity formation, occurring alongside other issues, such as inner deficiencies, family deficiencies, defects in the educational system, or involvement in crime (Roach), foster dropout. It is also possible that external, familial and school related difficulties foster dropout, which in turn hinders the development of ego-identity [26,28].

No differences in ego-identity were found between immigrant and Israeli-born adolescents. Chiang & Yang maintain that immigrant adolescents seek to integrate into the local culture but must also conform to the pressures of their parents' wishes and culture. This process is therefore stressful, and may impede ego-identity formation. However, in the context of Israeli society, the process seems to be different due to an immigrant absorption ideology. Immense importance and valuable contribution are attributed to immigrants, and many resources are invested in their absorption. Immigrants, for their part, are expected to adopt an Israeli identity and express commitment to Israeli ideology. It seems that this ideology plays a role in the formation of ego-identity among immigrant adolescents [32].

As for sex despite the conception that girls form their ego-identities earlier than boys, no differences were found in ego-identity between boys and girls in the present study. This finding is in line with some recent findings, according to which sex differences are no longer found in ego-identity levels. Greater sex equality may be one explanation for this finding, as Gilligan (1982) attributed sex differences in identity level to sexual discrimination. This may be reflected in the fact that girls did not receive a clear social message about their future roles, and were conflicted between femininity and professional or learning success; whereas boys received a clear message about the need to commit to future social roles. This explanation is apparently no longer valid or relevant [33].

With regard to age, differences in ego-identity formation between dropout and learning youth were apparent across both age groups, yet found to be more prominent among younger adolescents (aged 13-15) than older ones (aged 15-18). As age increases, there is a decline in identity diffusion status and a rise in ego-identity status. The process

characterizes all adolescents, learners and dropouts, and thus the difference by learning status is stronger among the younger adolescents, where ego-identity is still in the process of being developed. Still, it should be noted that older dropout adolescents have lower levels of ego-identity than older learning adolescents. These dropout adolescents have probably formed a negatively characterized ego-identity due to the many failures and frustrations they had endured [34-36].

### Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, low ego-identity is more common among dropout youth than among persevering ones, although there is no way of determining the cause and effect (dropping out or low ego-identity formation). Low ego-identity is likely to be but one factor contributing to dropping out, and other factors may be related to the "deficiency theory", the family situation, or flaws in the education system. Ego-identity among youth at risk may be treated, and serve to lower school dropout rates. Socialization agents (parents, teachers and youth leaders) may also assist adolescents, especially those at risk of dropping out, to strengthen their ego-identity and, thus, possibly lower the potential number of school dropouts and prevent adolescents from reverting to anti-social behaviors, unwanted pregnancies and crime involvement. Professional assistance may help youth who have already dropped out of school to find normative paths.

### Study Limitations and Future Research

This cross sectional study cannot determine causality: whether low ego-identity is the reason for dropout or its result. A longitudinal study is therefore recommended. Further, a cross cultural study of the topic may broaden the understanding of the relationship between ego-identity formation, immigration and school dropout rates.

The present study focused on one factor associated with school dropout rates: ego-identity formation. The scope of its conclusion is thus limited, and future studies that will examine additional independent variables may enhance our understanding of the reasons for this phenomenon. A future study may also search for social explanations of the absence of sex differences in ego-identity formation.

The importance and uniqueness of the present study lies in the fact that it is the first of its kind, as never before has the connection between levels of ego-identity and dropout rates been studied.

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