

Excuse Me... When Will I Hear a Good Word about My Work? The Principal's Role in First Year Teachers' Success Stories

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Abstract: This article is based on qualitative research intended to discover the attributes of novice teachers' success stories of their subjective experiences during this year. The research literature mainly emphasizes the many difficulties encountered by the new teachers at the start of their careers, and diminishes reference to their success stories. Data collection was based on in-depth interviews with Arab and Jewish novice teachers from a teacher training college in Jerusalem during their first year of work. The research findings show their unique way of coping vis-à-vis the school principal. In an attempt to influence or change his attitude and behavior towards them, some of them employed daring and conflict and some used maneuvering and diplomacy. They thus also managed to integrate in the school system, and even initiate change and realize impressive results at diverse levels. These findings illustrate the principal's dominance and importance in their professional development as perceived by the novice teachers.

Keywords: New Teachers, Success Stories, Facilitating Environment, Mirroring Presence, Empowering Presence, Novice Teacher Work vis-à-vis the School Principal, School Involvement

Introduction

This study aims to describe and understand the attributes of novice teachers' success stories regarding their subjective experiences during their first year of teaching. The research literature emphasizes mainly the difficulties and diminishes discussion of their successes. Researchers have used diverse metaphors to describe the novice teachers' difficulties. Thus Goldstein (2005) compares the year of internship to a heroic journey whose end is interwoven with innovation and development, while Strachovsky, Marbech, & Herz-Lazarovitz (1995) describe the novice teacher as running a hurdles race until he wins. Zabar Ben Yehoshua (2001) notes the phenomenon of novice teachers being thrown into the waters of school life, drowning helplessly in the sea and not managing to swim.

The idea of conducting this study developed in workshops held in all the colleges and universities in Israel that are intended to accompany and support groups of interns during their first year in the educational field. We, as those accompanying these workshops, dealt with the questions and dilemmas from the novices' daily life (meetings with parents, dealing with the school staff, difficulties in creating connections with children and so on), and with their subjective experiences during this year. Being drawn into, and empathizing with, the novices' difficulties swept us into a debate over adversity, disappointment, despair, and burnout. The other discourse over the small and large moments of success was in the background and echoed as a weak and silenced voice. For this reason we wished to make heard the additional voices of the novices who, together with their difficulties in the stormy sea, manage to swim, to raise their heads above the water, and even to swim against the tide. In this qualitative study the data collection was documented through in-depth interviews with 30 novice teachers from both the Arab and Jewish sectors in all the training tracks at the David Yellin Academic College of Education in Jerusalem, who answered our call to share their stories with us.

The research findings reveal a diversity of novices' successes and achievements of significant coping in the various frameworks together with excitement, the joy of achievement,

faith, and compassion. We have chosen, in this article, to focus on their stories regarding their relationship with the school principal.

Theoretical Background

The year of specialization (induction) is the novice teacher's first year of teaching and represents the transition from the training received as a student in the college or university to real life as a teacher in the field (Fideler and Haselkorn 1999).

The first year of working as a novice teacher is described in the literature as very tough (Nir 1995; Talmor, Nabel-Heller and Ehrlich 1997; Strachovsky et al. 1995; Lazovski and Seiger 2004; Zabar Ben Yehoshua 2011). This bleak picture is almost universal (Amstrong 1984; Farber 1984; Van Manen 1991) and in many cases finds some of them dropping out of the system and leaving the teaching profession (Geva-May 1994). These and many other studies refer mainly to the difficulties of novice teachers in their first year and to dropping out of teaching during the first five years.

The school principal plays a key role in preventing dropping out, and, even more than so, in absorbing novice teachers and in their personal and professional development. To this end, the school principal must appoint a mentor teacher among the staff, who is sufficiently professional to accompany the novice teacher during the first year, to make time for personal guidance meetings, to observe his lessons (Talmor et al. 1997; Feiman-Nemser 2001; Youngs 2007), and to impart knowledge regarding the systems' procedures, employment and organizational components (McDonald 1982).

There is no doubt that the principal, as the educational leader, plays an important role in integrating the novice teacher in the school professional community and in his exposure to the culture there. Studies show that the principal is responsible for nurturing a work culture that is based on mutual trust, honesty and professionalism amongst the staff, between himself and the staff, and between himself and the novice teachers (Jones 2007). Such a work culture, that enjoys and appreciates the opinions and ideas of the novice teacher, facilitates the professional development of the latter (Fullan and Hargreaves 1996, 2002; Talmor et al. 1997; Feiman-Nemser 2001; Carver 2003; Jones 2007). The novice teacher can meet colleagues and experienced teachers and share with them knowledge about successes and failures, create partnerships around diverse issues, and develop effective action strategies in his work with pupils (Sergiovanni 1996; Wong 2003). This cooperation improves not only the work of the novice teachers but also strengthens the feeling of belonging to school (Bryk and Schneider 2002).

In a study by Shimoni, Gonen and Yaacobi (2004), that explores the contribution of various "agents" of absorption (the principal, the mentor, colleagues, and internship workshop supervisors) to the novice teachers' satisfaction with their work, finds that the principal's support of the novice was a decisive factor in the latter's satisfaction with, and commitment to, his work. Novice teachers need to feel valued by the school principal, since the positive and enhancing approach enables them to develop their personal and professional identities (Galbraith 1991). The study by Wahlstrom and Louis (2008), conducted amongst new teachers, finds that the trust created between the teacher and the principal greatly influences his self-confidence. A similar study by Bryk and Shneider (2002) finds that the respect, independence, and responsibility the principal affords his teachers reinforce their sense of trust and belonging to the system. Referring to the principal's demands of the novice teacher finds that they expect him to contribute of his professional knowledge and to integrate in the existing system without making far-reaching changes therein.

The study by Bullough and Draper (2004) observes that novice teachers often perceive the principals and the parents as enemies, and that this threat is liable to shake their self-confidence. Accordingly, a school principal who allows teachers to express themselves freely and respects

every idea they raise is likely to reduce the feeling of threat felt by the novice teacher, and instead of this to develop a sense of mutual trust that enables development and learning.

Leithwood (1988) claims that a teacher is an adult who learns, and therefore it is important to relate to him as such. A principal who perceives his teacher as having personal experience, knowledge and ideas helps him to navigate the system in a positive and constructive manner, and enables him to find the significance in what he does.

Methodology

This qualitative study aims to expose significant facets of the success stories of novice teachers during their first year of work in the educational framework. Thirty Jewish and Arab novice teachers from the diverse college tracks (special education, early age education, elementary school), who completed their first year of internship, participated.

The data were collected through in-depth interviews that enabled gathering the information from the participants and affords the primary source of knowledge (Creswell and Plano 2008; Creswell 2011). In-depth unstructured interviews with the novice teachers afford a thick description of the success stories and understanding of the components of the experience of success.

The data were analyzed both holistically and by units of significance, according to the stages proposed by Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell (1996).

The findings were analyzed by the four researchers and entailed two stages. Each researcher first analyzed the interviews he conducted, following which there was a discussion by the four researchers of each interview to find units of significance, common categories and unique categories for the interviewee and for the learning and cultural context from which he came.

Findings and Discussion

The success stories of the 30 novice teachers in the broad study (Diab, Green, Zadoff & Hijazi, 2013) discussed daily issues from school life such as the connection with the students, integration in school, working with parents and so on. A unique finding that was prominent only amongst the Arab novice teachers was their need for the principal's beneficent presence, who did not always respond to them and to their many attempts to recruit him.

This article focuses on the stories of six novice teachers in Arab schools who chose the subject of the need for the principal's compassionate presence as a central axis in their success stories.

Below we will present four representative stories that dealt only with the subject of the principal, as the other stories included other topics.

The four stories of Leila, Zinab, Shadi and Hiyam (pseudo names) illustrate the importance of the connection created with the principal and their successes in their first year of teaching.

The stories of Leila and Zinab deal with their need, as novice teachers, to enjoy respect and appreciation from the Arab principals who were epitomized by a powerful and aggressive style of leadership. They were relatively inexperienced, and their work was performed under a masculine style of administration. Several studies refer to this phenomenon: thus for example, the study by Adi-Rekach and Chen (2000) notes that Arab women in administrative positions in school adopt a masculine, authoritarian, monitoring style similar to Jewish males in administrative positions. The explanation for this is that female Arab principals, still a minority in administrative positions, tend to assume masculine patterns of administration that already exist in patriarchal Arab society. Later, Brunner and Grogan (2007) also note a similar process in which female Arab principals espouse an authoritarian style to meet the expectations customary in the Arab society in which they grew up. Arar and Abu-Rabia-Quedar (2011), interviewing female principals, conclude that the authoritarian masculine style adopted by female principals,

when they embark on their professional paths, is a survival mechanism in Arab society, in which the individual finds it difficult to accept authority from a woman who is considered inferior in her skills compared to Arab males.

Daring and Conflict with the Female Principal

Leila: "Learning to swim in order to dive deep"

Leila is 23 years of age, a novice teacher in a therapeutic-rehabilitational kindergarden. She narrates at length her complex relationship with a powerful, exploitative principal, and the way in which she found the strength to confront her and to insist on her rights: "My principal is a bit... strong. Not strong – she is sort of aggressive. She asks too much of me. I, for example, work 30 hours instead of 27. She asked me to do child diagnoses without giving me the hours for it and I simply can't say anything, because if I speak out she is stronger than me. I even asked the teachers' organization what I could do about this."

The hierarchy in relationships and the aggression demonstrated by the principal make Leila feel helpless, but she later gains courage and confronts the principal in a situation that she repeats several times in the interview and considers it the story of her success. She recounts the principal's reprimand of her and her assistant that enabled her, for the first time, to express anger and disagreement with the behavior towards her: "The principal took both of us to her office. We sat down together and she began to throw all the blame on me, removing herself from all responsibility...and then I said to her, Excuse me, I did not say anything and you didn't hear me... You only heard her and you have already started to throw out words and to say things that are not in place. And so, I argued with her a bit. And from that day on, when I put her in her place, when I did not let her cross the boundary, as it were, she knew that I knew my rights. She does not need to cross that line."

The way in which Leila managed to put the principal in her place arouses great amazement and admiration. She describes herself as a freedom fighter struggling for her place and using rich metaphors that refer to this – to put in her place, not to cross the boundary, to insist on her rights.

Following this encounter, something in the principal softened and Leila says: "And since that day, I ask for what I am entitled to. For example, I have a course today. I should leave early and she approves this...we had a sixth meeting with the principal and hold such a meeting every two weeks. For the first time she tells me 'I really feel that you are progressing in your work'...When I stressed to her that 'yes, I am' she saw something in me that I had not demonstrated to her previously."

Leila shares the way in which she managed to demand things and insist on her rights. I said to myself, "Shwaya, shwaya, in other words, slowly slowly. I will give her time and give myself time... I looked at the half-full glass...I understood that this is a relationship wherein one side has to understand the other side, contain it. Perhaps I, too, perhaps the other person, is suffering a crisis...I need to understand the other person and also myself. It's true that she judged us harshly, but I know that she has all the qualities for being a principal."

Leila's impressive observation and maturing process during the first year of teaching led her to a meaningful connection with the principal, in which there is a compassionate and more complex perception of the principal as a person who has strengths and faults.

Zeinab: "I didn't wait today"

Zeinab is 22 years of age and is a teacher in a therapeutic kindergarden in one of the Arab towns in Israel. She came to the interview with an organized portfolio containing letters of recommendation from educational frameworks in which she worked, but surprisingly, she chose to tell the story of her success in the third person. "Zeinab is the youngest, good-hearted

daughter. Everyone identifies her because of her very small stature, and her great sensitivity to every word addressed to her."

Zeinab tells how she invested thought and creativity in preparing lesson arrays and activities that she gives her pupils. Painfully, she recounts how the principal who observed her classes always chose to relate to the elements in need of improvement. "Even when the children appeared to be enjoying the lesson the principal chose to relate to what was missing, and dumped on me things that should be improved the next time."

Zeinab informed her colleagues in the internship workshop of her difficulties with the principal and employed role playing that helped her to understand situations in depth and to handle her fear of authority. "The difficulties with the principal resulted in my facing parts of myself with which I was not familiar or which I always feared exploring...a fear of authority and even more so, of female authority."

With rare bravery and openness she shares in a personal discussion within herself that led her to success: "My success was manifested in waiving my naïvety and innocence that I absorbed in my mother's home and during the Christian education I received in school. I decided not to honor people who hurt me, and that I must protect myself and demand that they see me and respect me and my work."

In contrast to the formal etiquette used by Zeinab when she addressed the principal, she chose for the first time to waive the principles according to which she was educated and to face her differently: "I used to address her as SET (Madam)... with your permission...I would like to ask your honor, and if you would allow me to ask..." For the first time I addressed her by her first name and said, "Suzan...I would like to talk to you.."

This was a tremendous achievement for her and she explains: "It is not easy to forgo the strict manners on which one was brought up, especially towards older people and those professionally more senior than oneself ". It was not by chance that Zeinab chose the title for her success story, "I didn't wait today".

If we observe the thread of her story, Zeinab's innocence and delicate and fragile presence are first emphasized, followed by the description of her maturation, the paradoxes in her daily life and the discovery of her ability to deal with them.

It would seem that Leila and Zeinab also saw the principal as a threatening authority figure who blocks their professional development and unnerves their self-confidence and professional security in school. This picture is compatible with the study by Bullough and Draper (2004) that finds that novice teachers sometimes perceive the principals and the parents as enemies, a threat that is liable to shake their self-confidence.

The Principal's Initiative and Maneuvering

"I, the teacher, the story-teller"

Shadi is 23 years of age and specialized in junior high school teaching in a comprehensive boys school in Jerusalem. As such, he was the special education homeroom teacher of a class in a regular school, Shadi says with a smile that he was "lucky" (Mahzuz) in choosing this school without being familiar with it and knowing what it offered him.

In his story, Shadi deals with a male Arab principal, whose administrative style is authoritative and supervisory (Adi-Rekach and Chen 2000). He, in his way, tried to find ways of demonstrating his ability, hoping the school principal would notice this and respect his work. This was a condition for developing his personal and professional identity on the one hand (Galbraith 1991) and for increasing his sense of belonging to the school and the children with whom he works on the other (Bryk and Schneider 2002).

He recounts how the teaching staff who work with his class is despairing and does not manage to cope with their pupils' tough behavioral problems: "Many difficulties with these pupils, problems of discipline, of rudeness, a constant mess in the classroom, hearty cursing,

dirty speech, and other behaviors and manifestations that I was not used to hearing and encountering."

With these difficulties in mind, the meeting with the principal entailed further disappointment and frustration: "I arrived at school and wanted to meet the principal and his deputies, and to observe and meet the pupils I would teach. I was surprised to discover that the principal decided there was no need for me to observe them in order to familiarize myself with them. He said to me: Take them, start working and teach them as you wish." And indeed, Shadi decided to teach them using a different method and to reduce the tough disciplinary problems in the classroom. "The pupils became more disciplined, they began to love me and my lesson...although some of them left the framework of my sessions I managed to retain most of them when I started using the method of teaching them through stories...They turned to me at the end of each day and asked me to bring another story the following day...And I would promise them to do this and kept my promise, on the condition that they observed the quiet and orderliness..."

Shadi recalls that he was forced to quarrel with the principal who, from the outset, did not support him. "In this school I understood that there was no support and encouragement of the new teacher, and therefore I was ready for criticism and negative feedback. I was confident in what I was doing and did not let them feel I was scared and weak. In the guidance that I received I was recommended to take the pupils out to the playground to release tension. The principal firmly prevented me from doing this, claiming that this is a prescription for disarray and for the pupils' wild behavior. He confiscated and hid the football and basketball in his room...after I argued with him at length and he was not convinced, I decided to open a petty cash kitty together with the pupils and we bought out own balls."

Shadi is determined and stubborn in his professional path despite the many difficulties he encounters. He openly admits that every time he took pupils out to the playground there were behavioral problems, but this situation only encouraged him to think how to manage the lesson there differently. After much effort he decided that going out to the playground would be a prize for good behavior and effective learning that occurred that day. And indeed, this strategy produced results and the disciplinary problems declined. Furthermore, before playing outside Shadi introduced a rule of cleaning up the area, so that the pupils could enjoy playing in a clean, respectful environment. Despite the change in the pupils, the principal stuck to his skeptical position and Shadi was asked to wait almost till the end of the year to enjoy the principals' supportive reaction and appreciation of his initiatives during the year. Shadi tells how the principal stopped him for a conversation in the corridor and said with a forced smile, "*Shadi, if you decide to stay in the school next year, please make sure to include a physical education lesson in the playground for your pupils.*" and continued on his way.

It would seem that Shadi's strong internal motivation and independent capability to teach are attributes that indicate his ability to survive and succeed in this school framework (Beltman, Mansfield and Price 2011).

Integration and Growth Thanks to a Supportive Administrator

Hiyam is 22 years of age. He works as a therapeutic kindergarden teacher for children with behavioral difficulties in a kindergarden in one of the Arab villages in northern Israel, with a staff of seven novice teachers.

Hiyam's story differs from those of the other subjects in her delicate weaving of descriptions of her daily successes that seem marginal but, for her, were most significant to her professional and personal growth. "*I translated the school vision in addition to many other things. I have very nice handwriting and the principal always called me when she needed something written. In other words, I helped her and never said "no" to her.*"

Another aspect she mentions is her difficulty in setting boundaries in her relationships with her colleagues. "I have no boundaries and this greatly disturbed me...I would laugh with everyone and would try to be as nice as possible in my relationships with each member of the staff...the principal always said to me: 'Hiyam, you have to set limits, but this is only my advice.' And indeed she was right."

Hiyam commends the principal often, who was, for her, a supportive and beneficial presence. "She greatly helped me...she listens and tries to consider what you experience...I also felt that she tried hard to get close to me and said to me, 'I am with you till the end', and as long as the principal is behind you don't need to be afraid..." I do not know whether another principal would have done what she did after work hours! I was under tremendous pressure; she phoned me and said, 'I want to meet you and have a coffee with you..' I began to feel that she fully understands me, she insisted that I meet the psychologist: she initiated the matter. I did meet her, and I felt that this helped." This presence of the principal enables Hiyam to feel equal amongst equals, to be heard and to express her wishes and opinions in a measured and mature manner. "I began to discuss things with her and to try to persuade her towards my opinions. I began to show her that what she said was acceptable, but I think otherwise, and she began to be convinced."

Summary

This article focuses on the place of the principal in educational frameworks in the success stories of novice teachers in conservative and patriarchal society. Aggrandizing and direct descriptions of a group of Arab novice teachers in their twenties are presented who try to gain and to enjoy the principal's esteem. It is exciting to see how they lead stubborn and uncompromising processes in an attempt to influence or to change the school principal's perception and behavior. These descriptions illustrate the dominance and the importance of the principal as perceived by the novice teacher and as appears in the professional literature reviewed here (Talmor 1997; Feiman-Nemser 2001; Youngs 2007). Furthermore, based on the results of the study by Jones (2007), principals can build leadership capacity at schools by first establishing a culture of trust, honesty, and professionalism between themselves and the teachers. School leaders must then provide and support opportunities for leadership by aligning teacher strengths and roles.

The difficulties vis-à-vis the principal presented in the Arab novice teachers' stories are compatible with the research by Elian and Zeidan (2011), who note that novice teachers ranked the difficulty of cooperating with the principal as the main impediment faced during their first year of teaching.

Moreover, all the recent studies emphasize the principal's role in providing dignity, in encouraging the novice teachers' self-confidence, and in assuring a feeling of belonging and commitment to the system (Bullough and Draper 2004; Bryk and Shneider 2002; Wahlstrom and Louis 2008).

The stories show that the principal as a leadership figure is perceived as someone who is supposed to be sensitive and attentive to the needs of novice teachers, affording them a beneficial and enabling environment that offers personal and professional growth. Winnicott (1971) coined the concept "facilitating environment" as a supportive environment that offers personal growth. He claims that just as the mother is responsible for creating conditions of a "facilitating environment" which is good enough, strong and suitable for her baby, so throughout life this will be the role of the environment - to accompany him and afford such an environment for him. Kolka (1995), in the introduction to Winnicott's book, "Playing and reality" (Winnicott 1971), claims that underlying the term "facilitating environment" is a serious statement regarding the intense responsibility of the environment towards the individuals who comprise it: to assure the generosity needed by the individual to fully realize his transcendental dream.

Hiyam's story emphasizes the presence of the principal as someone who manages to meet her personal and professional needs. She describes a principal who created a secure facilitating

environment that enabled her to feel significant, to enjoy a sense of belonging to the framework, to demonstrate her skills, and to learn from her professional mistakes. Hiyam proudly observes that many new teachers would have liked to have such a supportive, containing principal like her.

We find in this study that young novice teachers at the start of their professional path need a principal who knows, understands, contains and senses their personal, professional and emotional needs, and does the right thing for them. Should this environment not be facilitated by the principal, the novice teachers will not waive their rights and will not be silenced. They will seek the best way in order to enjoy a beneficial and facilitating environment that should be led by the principal, otherwise they will drop out of the system (Amstrong, 1984; Farber, 1984; Van Manen, 1991; Lazovski and Seiger 2004).

The Contribution of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study reinforce the importance of novice teachers' success stories as a resource that empowers them and links academic and practical knowledge. These findings can afford a basis for instruction in internship workshops, in which the issue of the principal's authority in a conservative society can be processed, and how to communicate with such a style of management. It further discusses the novice teachers' needs under his beneficent presence and the way to recruit him to their behalf. At the same time, we recommend involving as many principals as possible in the research findings and thus to raise awareness and sensitivity to the needs of the novice teachers and to his meaningful presence for them in order for them to succeed in their internship and integrate well in the education system.

As noted, this study was based on the analysis of a limited number of success stories of Arab interns. We propose a further, broader study that will explore in depth the various aspects of the issue of the principal, from listening to the voices of the principal and of the novice teachers.

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DIAB ET AL.: SORRY... WHEN WILL I HEAR A GOOD WORD ABOUT MY WORK?

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