



# "WE CONTINUE AS TEACHERS": SUCCESS EVENTS PERCEIVED AS MEANINGFUL BY TEACHERS AND ENCOURAGE THEM TO PERSEVERE IN TEACHING

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## *Abstract*

This paper presents success events which were perceived as meaningful by novice teachers and which encouraged them to continue teaching and persevere in the education system. The study was conducted according to the qualitative research method and the research population consisted of 36 novice teachers who studied in an academic college of education. The study was based on written accounts which were content analysed as is customary in qualitative research. The findings indicated the insights obtained by the novice teachers: believing in themselves from the personal aspect, believing in the learners from the professional aspect and believing in school from the organisational aspect. The research recommendations were to study the novice teachers' successes and derive from them the processes and insights which led to the success of individuals. Thus, the personal knowledge about success would be turned into a team-oriented and organisational knowledge in the education system in general and in school and teacher education colleges in particular.

**Key Words:** learning from successes, novice teachers, perseverance, dropout.

## INTRODUCTION

Whereas the reasons for novice teachers' burnout and dropout have been extensively researched, the factors which uphold teachers' perseverance have been studied to lesser degree (Kitching *et al.*, 2009). The main argument explored in this paper is that successes experienced by novice

teachers might entail personal empowerment, enhanced self-confidence and belief in their professional capability as teachers. Novice teachers involved in success experiences at school would tend to be happier, more joyful, more content and more satisfied. Hence, learning about successes would assist novice teachers to

be optimally absorbed at school and reduce dropout from the education system.

### *Theoretical background*

#### *Learning from successes*

Learning from successes is a methodology which has become a key component in organisational learning processes. It is prevalent in the world of business organisations and less in the field of education. Using what has already succeeded can constitute a basis for documenting the characteristics and processes which have induced successes and applying this knowledge in order to achieve results as well as attempt repeating these successes. This perception advocates the search for and learning of 'success generators' so that personal knowledge about success can be turned into a team-oriented and organisational knowledge. Furthermore, this knowledge can be implemented for the purpose of improving the system while empowering individuals, staff and organisation among groups in the education system in general and in schools and teacher education in particular (Buckingham and Clifton, 2002; Rosenfeld, 1996).

Dekel (2010) relates to learning from successes as an innovative learning versus learning from failures which is common and acceptable. She argues that optimism accompanies learning from successes. That is, in order to learn from successes, one

has to be optimistic, hopeful and see the end point.

Studies of schools which are learning from their successes in a consistent and continuous way showed that learning from successes: a. creates a more open school climate; b. empowers teachers' perception of their ability to cope with disciplinary problems and impact the improvement of learners' attainments; c. forms a practical and professional knowledge reservoir accumulated with the personal memory of every partner, from which teachers can retrieve knowledge for the purpose of their work; d. improves the culture of the school dialogue–discourse and constitutes a leverage for enhancing all school learning processes (Alenbogen–Frencovitz *et al.*, 2001; Weiss, 2007). Moreover, learning from successes is a way of life for educational work. The educational philosophy and the accompanying methodology might facilitate a better way of coping with short- and long-term uncertainty and challenges (Shechter, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2009).

The professional literature engaging in the promotion of teachers who graduated teacher education programmes presents a developmental perception of the professional career and indicates graduality in the socialisation for work and the commitment to the profession. This perception views teachers as creators of professional knowledge growing out of the practice. Goodlad (1990) stipulates facilitating factors in the success of the

professionalisation and the promotion thereof. He indicates that improvement of pre-service teachers' education processes is one of the elements of a successful professionalisation process (Goodlad, 1990). This assumption about the contribution of teacher education enables identification of success cases and their study. Gesser (2004) considers teacher education as a stage of professional development. Preparation towards this professional stage can be grounded in the attitudes and perceptions of those teachers even before they have started their professional training. Novice teachers bring their personal 'baggage' when they start working and it impacts their future, continuing career and professional development (Feiman-Nemser, 2000). The personal 'baggage' of graduates of the unique Ethiopian teacher education pathway at an academic college of education embodies unique personal-cultural experiences and challenges which brought about and consolidated the pre-teachers' overt strengths and particularly their covert strengths. These strengths enabled actualisation of success narratives later on in their professional development.

Hence, teachers' professional development and successes encompass all the stages they undergo while building their career. Teacher education is the first stage to which they come with their background and it might assist them and contribute further on in their career. Barzilay (2009) attempts to find the common features of the 'success stories', namely the individual narratives

which express success. She raises the question: "What are the actions and thoughts which helped the protagonists of the narratives she has collected to pull themselves out of the difficulties and to succeed?" (Barzilay, 2009, p. 171). Based on the success narratives she built a dictionary which comprises different and varied elements exposed in these stories such as: optimism, belief, activeness, choice, connection to the self, giving, creativity, will and moving forward.

### *Novice teachers*

Many studies (Ingresoll and Strong, 2011) indicate that the first years of teaching constitute a crucial period for teachers' professional development. Findings show that the first year shapes teachers' image and professional perception. It is essential for their long practice in the education system as well as for their continued professional development at school and in teaching. The literature points out a considerable dropout percentage (46%) of novice teachers during their first five years of teaching (Arbiv-Elyashiv and Zimmerman, 2013; Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2012).

The key teaching difficulties identified among novice teachers are managing the class, coping with problems of discipline, setting expectations for the pupils, coping with pressure at work and vis-à-vis the parents and settling conflicts. Moreover, they have to diversify their teaching methods and address learners' different capabilities (Moore and Swan, 2008).

During their first year of practice, teachers are engaged more in trying to solve problems of discipline and class management. In this situations they frequently find it hard to identify the appropriate way of teaching, namely integrating disciplinary knowledge and didactic-pedagogical knowledge. Moreover, they encounter difficulties in planning a lesson compatible with the curriculum and adapted to the learners, ensuring an optimal learning which leads to attainments (Eisenhamer *et al.*, 2010; Gilad and Alkalay, 2014).

Sabar Ben-Yehoshua (2001) argues that novice teachers' stages of adjustment are similar to those of immigrants. Novice teachers must adjust to organisational norms which are unknown to them and to break internal codes of the organisation. Hence, shifting from internship to the actual teaching stage during their first year, novice teachers undergo complex processes of re-socialisation and de-socialisation, while embracing components of the school organisational culture. Being unaware of the school culture characteristics, regulations and job requirements entail a sense of helplessness, weakening the teachers' self-esteem.

### ***Novice teachers' perseverance/dropout***

The dropout and perseverance of novice teachers are a known fact in many countries and relate to economic, social

and educational aspects of policy makers. Since extensive resources are invested in teacher education programmes, it is essential to keep the teachers in the education system and reduce their dropout as much as possible. Comprehensive studies conducted by several researchers (Johnson *et al.*, 2005; DeAngelis *et al.*, 2013) specify a variety of reasons for novice teachers' dropout from teaching. For example, school features (size, location and level), pupils' features, teachers' working conditions and rewards, teacher education characteristics, novice teachers' support characteristics and the relation between teacher education and support. Furthermore, Ingersoll (2002) argues that the workload also affects the dropout of novice teachers. Another interesting aspect of novice teachers' dropout is associated with the age of teachers leaving the profession. Researchers maintain that teachers who abandon the teaching profession are the youngest and oldest teachers (Luekens *et al.*, 2004; Hanushek *et al.*, 2004).

Another factor causing teachers' dropout relates to the type of school where they are teaching. The poorer the pupils in the public schools, the greater the rate of teachers' dropout in them and the higher the number of the school pupils from minority groups, the more frequent the teachers' dropout (Luekens *et al.*, 2004). Some researchers stipulate that the high teacher turnover at school is an evidence that teachers prefer working with good and

achieving pupils. Others claim that teachers leave school due to poor working conditions which are prevalent in those schools (Kraft *et al.*, 2012). Staffing these schools with effective teachers constitutes an obstacle (Allensworth *et al.*, 2009).

Findings of wide-range studies illustrate that the pattern of leaving "difficult" schools might reflect teachers' preferences for better work environments rather than for other pupils (Ladd, 2011; Johnson *et al.*, 2005). Shapira-Lishchinsky (2009), who conducted a study of novice male and female teachers in Israel, indicated the gender aspect. According to her, one cannot ignore the difference between male and female teachers in Israel.

Justice perceived by the teachers as lack of fairness in the balance between investment and rewards, was the leading factors contributing to differences between male and female teachers as was manifested by their intention to leave the school. Female teachers tend less than male teachers to plan retirement on the background of justice at school (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2009).

There is a relation between novice teachers' perseverance in and dropout from the education system. When the mentoring processes are more effective and provide optimal solutions for coping with teachers' dropout, novice teachers are less inclined to leave and they persevere longer in the system. The contribution of mentoring to novice teachers' perseverance in teaching is

a crucial element in enhancing perseverance in teaching and reducing the rate of dropout (Wilkinson, 2009; Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; Hallam *et al.*, 2012; DeAngelis *et al.*, 2013).

### ***Research question***

What are the success events which novice teachers perceive as important and which encourage them to persevere in teaching?

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Research method***

This research was conducted according to the qualitative method of a case study approach. Using the qualitative method facilitates comprehension, description and interpretation of events in the field. One of the major advantages of this type of study resides in its ability to provide insights about occurrences in the actual contexts and situations in which they transpire. The case study is inductive since it presents the data from the situation independently of the assumptions as well as enables expression of situations from different points of view (Shkedi, 2012).

#### ***Research population***

The research population comprised 36 novice teachers with a 1–2 years' seniority. These teachers have worked in both Jewish and Arab, secular and orthodox schools.

### **Research tools**

The research was grounded in accounts written by the novice teachers during their year of work at school. All the novice teachers who participated in the study documented the entirety of the various situations and activities in which they had been involved

### **Data processing**

The data collected from the written accounts were content analysed as is customary in a qualitative research. The content analysis was performed at two levels: a normative content analysis aiming to distinguish prominent trends and an interpretive-qualitative content analysis for displaying essences, perceptions and different insights. The categories were defined after a concurrence of at least 67% between the two researchers (Shkedi, 2012).

## **RESULTS**

The results present three narratives which reflect the success events reported by the novice teachers. The three events depicted three main aspects emphasising the novice teachers' insights: believing in themselves from the personal aspect, believing in the pupils from the professional aspect and believing in the school from the organisational aspect. The link between all the events was the novice teachers' in-depth understanding of (a) believing in

their own capabilities and (b) believing in the pupils' capabilities.

### **Event A: Believing in myself**

A home-class teacher in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade: "As a novice teacher I started working at school about two months after the beginning of the academic year. I replaced a home-class teacher who had left the school and was adored by all the pupils. Already at the beginning I was aware of the great expectations from me, leading to much fear and apprehension. Could I succeed? How would the pupils welcome me? After all this concerns adolescent pupils. I asked myself whether I should be like the previous home-class teacher or I should be me. I did not have clear answers not did I have much time to prepare myself and try answering the questions. The first time I entered the classroom I saw in front of me 38 learners sitting in four columns. I knew that the first encounter with the pupils was crucial and significant for building a good communication between me and them. Moreover, I knew that I was being tested by the pupils and they were waiting to hear me speak. I introduced myself and asked them to open the literature book. At this point I was surprised: some of the pupils did not take out the book, others caused a disturbance, two asked permission to go to the toilettes and others did not show any interest in the lesson. They repeatedly asked me how long I would be a substitute teacher. They praised the previous teacher, said she was very good, considerate and

interesting. They loved her very much and were sorry she had to leave. Deep inside I realised that I would probably not be able to manage the lesson as I had planned. I reminded myself that I had studied four years in order to become a teacher and still I did not know what to do. I felt like turning away from the classroom... I hesitated whether to flow with them or teach the lesson and confront the class. The pupils became noisier and noisier. Suddenly I had an idea, my intuition told me to flow with them. This surprised the pupils because they did not expect me to give up teaching and allow them to keep praising their home-class teacher. I gradually felt they became interested also in me, asking me personal and general questions which I answered. They came out of the lesson feeling good, knowing they had an attentive ear.

I also left the classroom with a good feeling and sensed that I had touched them and had been there for them. When I entered the teachers' lounge I told my colleagues what had occurred in class. They commended me for allowing the pupils to talk and ask questions which were not associated with the lesson. In the second lesson, when I started teaching, the pupils were less disruptive, more attentive and collaborative, more open to me. This made me feel good, realising I was on the right track. Slowly slowly I won their trust as a home-class teacher rather than a substitute teacher. The pupils surrounded me, telling me about their personal experiences, consulting me and feeling open to involve

me in different academic and social issues. In my opinion the pupils understood there was a variety of home-class teacher figures and I became a meaningful figure for them. I realised that although I entered "big" shoes, I succeeded twice, once as a substitute teacher and once as a novice teacher who replaced an admired teacher. I generated a conscious change in the pupils' thinking, I turned from an 'enemy' into a 'loving person' for them. This love which I received from the pupils greatly affected me, making me feel happy and meaningful for them. I sensed I played an important role in their educational process. I thought to myself that I too was a teacher loved by her pupils. I too was admired and I wanted to keep being an admired teacher. This could be done".

### ***Event B: Believing in the learner***

A mathematics teacher in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade: "My narrative started at the beginning of the year as a mathematics teacher in tracking B of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade with 34 pupils. I came to school with an extensive knowledge in this field as well as with innovative teaching methods and strategies, alternative assessment methods and love for the subject combined with apprehension of a novice teacher at school. Unlike me, the pupils did not love to study mathematics because they believed mathematics was a difficult subject. They disrupted almost every lesson, did not make their homework, usually came late and as a result I did not manage to teach them according to my plans. I might have succeeded in teaching

about 10% of the planned learning material. The pupils' behaviour stayed with me and constituted some material for thought. I studied so much mathematical didactics so what was wrong with me? Did it happen to all the novice teachers? How should I go forward? How could I turn this disadvantage into an advantage? What concerned me was the issue of explaining to the pupils that mathematics was not a difficult subject. I started thinking about other and surprising methods of mathematics teaching and knew that I had to make them achieve immediate successes already at the beginning of the year. I encouraged them to believe in their capabilities and convinced them they were able to correctly solve mathematical problems. I emphasised that their success was my success and that of the school. These statements evoked their self-belief and wish to succeed. We celebrated the success of each and every pupil and of the entire group. With time, more and more pupils joined the circle of success, personally stimulating them to believe in their competences. In parallel, I designed interesting lesson plans, used games, stories from their world, movies, contests and illustrated through examples the use of mathematics in everyday life. At midyear their scores increased by 20% and I was praised by the parents, the head teacher and the subject coordinator. The pupils' success combined with the encouragement of the environment empowered me and challenged me to look for various and innovative teaching methods in order to

change the pupils' attitude towards mathematics. Today I am the happiest person on earth, I managed to change pupils' perceptions, making them believe in themselves. I increased the number of mathematics lovers in the world".

### *Event C: Believing in the organisation*

A home-class teacher in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade: "I was asked to organise the Hanukkah ceremony for the entire school. On the one hand I was glad that the head teacher contacted me and considered it as a compliment. I was happy that she trusted me although I was a novice teacher without experience in organising a ceremony for all the school. On the other, I was apprehensive because I had never organised a ceremony on a school level. We were not taught how to organise ceremonies at the teacher education college.

The head teacher attributed great importance to the ceremony. She wanted it to be professional and interesting with contents befitting the holiday and the pupils' level. Moreover, she believed that parents should come to the ceremonies and be pleased with the school and with whatever was done in it. In her opinion, good and professional ceremonies strengthen the parents' relation with school. I started collecting materials and read a lot about the holiday. I addressed teachers who could assist me, e.g. the dance teacher, art teacher and social

education coordinator. I was pleased that they helped me consolidate the contents of the day including the setting, singing and reading excerpts and so on. I invested many hours of my time and this made me feel good. On the celebration evening I was extremely excited.

The children surrounded me and enveloped me much warmth and love. I felt that they too wanted to succeed and show their parents how much they had learnt, practiced, rehearsed and everything was wonderful. The ceremony was a great triumph, the children read, danced and were perfectly collaborative. I was greatly relieved and was flooded with happiness. I was on cloud nine. When the ceremony was over, many teachers approached me and said: 'you did it, you were great, you succeeded, well done, the ceremony was interesting and professional'. Everybody complimented me on the organisation, the contents and the integration of all the topics.

The head teacher also addressed me saying that the ceremony was professional and respectful. Following my success she invited me to join the school culture committee. Now I felt I was part of the school staff. The triumph and mainly the fact that the head teacher addressed me made me realise that I was professional, I was able and competent. This moment made me want to shout: 'For this I would remain at school'. This was a significant beginning for additional successes which followed. These triumphs made me want to

organise activities, lead initiatives and undertake roles at school".

## **DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY**

When they begin writing, teachers can experience states of uncertainty and failure side-by-side with success and challenge. The novice teachers who participated in this study and reported their meaningful success events were satisfied and felt good. Many of them were pleased to be acknowledged and complimented.

The three events presented in the study exposed the inner world of the novice teachers from three aspects: personal aspect – believing in myself; professional aspect – believing in the pupils; and the organisational aspect – believing in school as an educational organization. The triumphs they experienced enhanced their self-image and realisation that they could and were able to succeed. Moreover, the successes stimulated them to engage in more educational, social and organisation practice, based on the insight that they would succeed this time too. The sequence of successes which the novice teachers achieved in various areas entailed satisfaction with their work and perception of teaching as a challenging profession in spite of the difficulties involved, especially during the first years.

The event "believing in myself" made the novice teachers' realise the significance of believing in their capabilities and competences. In their opinion, another way of observing themselves and believing in their capability without comparing

themselves to other teachers and/or experienced teachers at school would lead to success. They accepted that they could also succeed and that probably every teacher had a unique way of teaching and achieving. In recent years the empirical literature has discussed two characteristics required by teachers: a sense of self-efficacy (teachers' belief in their ability to promote their pupils' attainments to a level of excellence) and a sense of teaching efficacy (professional teaching can promote and affect the pupils' attainments) (Friedman and Wax, 2000; Gilad and Alkalay, 2014).

The event "believing in the pupils" made the novice teachers attribute more importance to the belief in the pupils based on the awareness of the pupils' ability. The fact that teachers are capable of encouraging the pupils and increase their motivation to study and succeed is significant in learning and teaching processes. The novice teachers maintain that the pupils' success is also their own success (Dekel, 2010).

The event "believing in the organisation" made the novice teachers realise that they lacked the full organisational knowledge about school. However, 'jumping into the cold water' already at the beginning brought out their professional competences, proving to them that they were capable of organising and producing a ceremony at school (Alenbogen-Frencovitz *et al.*, 2001; Weiss, 2007).

The bodies which support the novice teachers should believe in them and challenge them with assignments at school and in the teaching process (Goodlad, 1990). Moreover, the novice teachers' support programmes should comprise relevant topics associated with the identification, learning and actualisation of capabilities and competences. It is important to study the novice teachers' successes in a fundamental and thorough way, particularly due to novice teachers' high rate of dropout from the education system already during their first year of practice (Gilad and Alkalay, 2014). Learning the success events of novice teachers would facilitate the absorption process and the reduction of dropout from school.

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