**Educating School Principals in Israel: From Candidacy to Mentoring, Professional Development Programs, and Initial Experience in the Field**

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# Introduction

There is a gap between how school principals are educated and the way they conduct themselves in practice that calls for a multi-dimensional examination. On the one hand, we have the processes the candidates undergo and the information they receive during their preparation stage for their future position as principals. On the other hand, we have the framework of knowledge, modes of action, and perception of administration as dictated and directed by those in charge of the state’s education system. To these two dimensions, we could add a professional-administrative one, which seeks to determine the optimal professional education process for preparing the school principals for their upcoming role, where this dimension is devoid of personal and political interests. I wish to focus on this third dimension and examine it through a triple prism which includes the current program, the desired program, and the proposed one.

This chapter focuses on the gap between the professional education programs and how the school principals carry out their roles, especially during the initial stages of their administration. First, I will present the existing professional education program for principals in Israel, as implemented in school management professional education programs supervised by the Avney Rosha Institute in Israel. After a discussion and critique, I will propose an optimal professional education program that includes guidance during the principal’s initial stages of school administration.

**Keywords**: Professional education for school principals, practical experience, administrator guidance, pedagogical leadership, leading change

# Professionally Educating School Principals (in Israel)

Over the past few years, programs that train school principals, particularly in Israel, focused on several points. Pedagogical leadership,[[1]](#footnote-1) meaning that the principal serves as head of the school’s pedagogical hierarchy, is concerned not only with leading the students to achievements and quality learning (Male & Palaiologou, 2012), but also – and primarily – with laying the groundwork that will enable teachers to improve their methods of instruction and conduce learning processes (Forssten-Seiser, 2020).

The profound meaning of the principal's task lies in the pedagogic aspect of his role. (Evans, 1991, p. 17)

Bozo-Schwartz and Mendel-Levi describe pedagogical leadership as the school principal’s responsibility for spearheading teaching and learning processes and improving them:

Processes for improving instruction by directing the teachers’ professional training are complex, and necessitate expertise. The leadership practice with the greatest impact on improving students’ achievements is the creation of formal and informal opportunities for learning processes and teachers’ professional development, with the participation of the principal as both participant and leader. If so, the principal’s role as a pedagogical leader is to strengthen and deepen the skills and knowledge of the school staff, and to create a school culture of information sharing and its use.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The second focal point is the ability of practical experience of leading change as a vital and central skill required of the school principal (Shahaf et al., 2011). Those identified as potential candidates to be school administrators are encouraged to gain experience in the area of leading school change. The issue of change, beyond being part of management, includes spearheading pedagogical processes which, within the framework of the professional education program, prepare candidates for their future positions as school administrators. The process includes a “practice study” which provides the candidate with the administrative skills necessary for enacting change, through trial and error as well:

Leadership in the workplace is acquired through trial and error (Wasonga & Murphy, 2006).

The practical experience is guided by experienced tutors who served in the past as school principals and are now in charge of mentoring the candidates as they implement change in the school environment. This process is part of the training, mentoring, and support that the school administrative candidate needs:

A process in which one person supplies personal support and challenge for another professional (Bush, 2009, p. 379).

Other focal points in the principals’ professional education programs in Israel include personal and interpersonal skills, developing a professional identity and ethical worldview, and a data-based method of administration. In addition, the programs include professional guidance for the creation of organizational infrastructure and managerial orientation.

The objectives of the principals’ professional education program in Israel, as well as the necessary skills and core content, are presented in a document drafted by Avney Rosha.[[3]](#footnote-3) In addition, see the report put out by Avney Rosha (September 2009), “*Hakhsharat menahale batte hasefer beYisraʾel – dua”kh vaʿadah miqtsoʿit*” [Training School Principals in Israel – The Report of the Professional Comittee], which includes the theoretical basis for the professional education program components. All these components are delineated as principles, core content, and skills. The following diagram presents these components:



**Diagram 1: Principles, Content and Skills in the Professional Education Program for Principals in Israel – Avney Rosha: Structure and Process**

This diagram shows that if we commence with a precise definition of principles and educational objectives, and add to them or express them through the core content, then we will get a school principal with optimal administration skills.

# Professional Education Programs for Principals in Israel: Reality and Ideal

A look at the details and examining the input and the output reveals issues that are defined as the program’s objectives (the “ideal”) for preparing principals for school administration but do not appear at the end of the process as administrative skills (the “reality”). The administrative identity found in the list of principles does not find its expression in the skills. In addition, “preparing for administration,” which means motivational encouragement for progress toward the position of school administrator, is also not found in the “reality,” not even indirectly in the core content or skills. The “ethical-educational worldview” and its development are mentioned as part of the core content but are missing in the principles and skills. The topic of organizational infrastructure also appears in the core content but is not expressed in the skills stage nor even in the initial stage of setting principles. Especially prominent in their absence from the skills and core content stages are the personal and interpersonal skills mentioned in the skills stage.

We are dealing with the professional education of human beings, whose worldviews, strengths, and weaknesses differ from one to another. Given the complexity of administrating a school, we cannot expect a complete correlation or the lack of any gap between what is expected during the education process and skills which are demonstrated in the field. However, when speaking of personal and interpersonal skills, an administrative identity or an orientation toward administration are key elements within the professional education process. This model is lacking and calls for an update or modification.

We should ask whether, under these circumstances, the candidates for school administration receive the professional education most suitable for the position they are about to fill. Perhaps there is a need for rethinking and formulating a new proposal to bridge the gap between that which is acquired during the professional education process and the demands of the job in the field.

Before turning to the proposed program, we should note that critique has also been directed at the process of selection and acceptance to the professional education programs for principals in Israel, given the reported shortage of school principals.

The report (which is backed by research) on the processes of appointing school principals in Israel (Luboshitz, 2018), emphasized this shortage:

Many educational systems have reported a shortage over the past few years in quality principals. A number of countries even reported a ‘leadership crisis’ (p. 3).

He points to the failure of the selection process for the professional education programs:

The failure of the method stems from it not providing an adequate response to the local authorities’ and educational systems’ need for quality principals (p. 21).

After examining the reasons, factors, and unique characteristics, the report suggests canceling the tenders and selection processes for the professional education programs, and in their stead appointing principals according to their compatibility with the needs of the hiring committee:

The tender method should be canceled. In its stead, each local authority should select a hiring committee for appointing principals. The main standard for appointing a principal should not be technical (meaning, adhering to the prerequisites) but the candidate’s past achievements and his suitability for the position (p. 24).

These conclusions testify to the inadequacies and deficiencies in the current processes of selection and appointment of candidates for school administrators in Israel. When a principal is appointed based on suitability for the job and past achievements, the correct timing for professional education should be upon entering the position, in the form of mentorship. This is the basis for the program proposed below.

One study, from the United States, examined the effectiveness of having school principals mentor and coach colleagues who had just entered their position as principals. Results show four components that were found to be effective in the process of mentoring and coaching: relevance, common goals, trust, and a significant duration of the mentoring for about two years from commencing school administration (Bertrand, L.A., Stader, D., & Copeland, S., 2018).

The conception of professional education in Israel is based on the need for a modular structure, which includes candidate selection-education-entering the role-mentoring. One must go through the professional education program while concurrently being mentored during the hands-on experience which is usually synchronized with the material being taught, and only afterward can one meet the requirements for the tender for school principals and start administrating in practice. Many school principals are faced with multiple difficulties at the beginning of their position as administrators, and the professional education programs cannot encompass all that is necessary to remove or minimize those difficulties.

The education processes, even accompanied by practical experience, do not correctly simulate the types of situations that the school principals will in fact be dealing with, and thus the “relevance” is lacking. This is because the practical experience does not take place in the same educational institution as the one they will later administrate, and even if the two institutions are similar in their pedagogic or organizational character, the difficulties and struggles will probably be different and varied. In addition, administration trainees are involved in change either as agents of change or as partners within the system. This is not the same as spearheading change processes as a school principal. Furthermore, the “laboratory conditions” for inducing change that are available in the education process lack spheres of responsibility and authority, and do not reflect the interpersonal relations required of a serving school principal, which also differ from those required of an administrative candidate.

Experiential learning is significant when the learner is an active partner in the process and is characterized by a process of deliberate discovery.[[4]](#footnote-4) That same partnership in learning can be expressed in thought, speech, or action. For our purpose, we can say that the experience helps prepare the candidate for school administration. However, we still need to ask when and where that practical experience will be most effective for investigative learning within the optimal education for the administrative candidate.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The procedure of effective learning is accompanied by an experiential process. During the stage of professional development, different abilities can be actualized through a learning schema that includes four stages. These stages can be viewed as a learning cogwheel, where each component leads to the next: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and the ability to apply these abilities in other domains (Kolb, 1984).

These four components of experiential learning can be utilized in the initial preparation for the position, but the trainee’s experience before entering the position enables only limited observations and therefore less precise reflections. Even the conceptualizations can be erroneous due to the lack of sufficient involvement in the ins and outs of the school where the education takes place.

Therefore, we suggest that preparing school principals takes place during the initial period of their fulfilling the position.

A study presented by the office of the Chief Scientist of Israel’s Ministry of Education discussed the topic of mentoring principals in the United States. The abstract of the survey says that:

This study surveyed over 60 studies from the past two decades that examined the role of the county in the improvement and support of the principal’s position, professional development, and ensuring his success. Mentoring processes, as well as professional development, were found to be highly important. In addition, countries that perceived principals as learners raised the chances of their future success.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Mentoring principals as they enter their positions, professional development (which is part of the education process), and perceiving the school principals as learners form the bases for improving the principals’ professional education and contributes to their success as they initially fill their position as well as in the future.

Therefore, we propose that the professional education process for school administration candidates take place at the beginning of their active service as school principals.

This proposal seeks to integrate the professional education processes for school principals when coping with the difficulties they will face during their first year by having the learning and practical experience concurrent with their actively filling their position as administrators. This will include both personal and group mentorship given by leaders of the administration course, practical experience coaches, and the other learning components which are included in the professional education program.

Within the framework of what was said and proposed both earlier and below, there is no intention to change the topics or content of the professional education programs as they exist today, except for the modifications necessary for having them take place within the first year of school administration.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The following model, therefore, includes the principles, content, and skills as presented in the previous model. However, this model expresses a different relationship between the components, and a different structure of connection and interdependence:



Core Content of the Educational Program and Mentoring during the First Year of School Administration

a. Developing an ethical-educational worldview

b. Leading the professional development of teachers in the school

c. Managing the relationship between school and community

d. Data-based administration

e. Organizational diagnostics and creating a work plan

f. Formulating a pedagogical vison for the school

g. Creating and leading an organizational infrastructure

Principles and Objectives during the First Year of School Administration

a. Pedagogical leadership and school improvement

b. Experiential learning

c. Developing a personal professional identity

d. Preparing for administration

Skills during the First Year of School Administration

a. Leading learning processes in school

b. Leading pedagogical improvement in school

c. Interpersonal skills

d. Personal skills

e. Knowledge and perceptions

**Diagram 2: Principles, Content and Skills in the Professional Education Program for Principals in Israel which will take place during the First Year of School Administration**

Diagram 2 proposes a structure that integrates all the components of mentoring and coaching such that the principles, goals, and core subjects that are relevant as the school principals enter their position. The professional education components serve as an effective factor in the coaching process, as the principals face challenges during the initial stage of their professional careers. The cogwheel of experiential skills receives content and skills from the two other cogwheels which are integrated with it, such that the learning content is expressed and acquired within the principal’s actual domain of action. The practical experience, beyond being a functional professional education program, also serves as professional mentoring for the school administrator.

The processes of preparing and mentoring the school principal are no longer structured as principles that are added to the core content to create administrative skills (such as presented in Diagram 1). Rather, they should be viewed as cogwheels with mutual connections between learning, practical experience, and mentoring, which all take place during the first year of school administration (as presented in Diagram 2).

# Discussion and Conclusion: Professional Education, Practical Experience, and Mentoring During the Initial Period of Administration

Another option that should be considered is the formation of an alternative that is equivalent to studies in the Avney Rosha program or changing the rule that a prerequisite for serving as a principal is to be a graduate of the program, allowing the training to be incorporated after the appointment.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Conclusion and Recommendations chapter of the State Comptroller’s detailed report that examined the appointment and professional education procedures of school principals in Israel mentions the need for considering alternatives to the extant professional education programs. One such alternative is integrating the professional education program within the first year of the principal’s administration.

The “*Hakhsharat menahale batte hasefer beYisraʾel – dua”kh vaʿadah miqtsoʿit*” report (9/2009) [Training School Principles in Israel – The Report of the Professional Committee][[9]](#footnote-9) views the component of practical experience as the basis of the professional education program for principals in Israel, as it is centrally placed within leadership development in general. The assumption is that observation, mentoring of the administrative candidate, and a certain degree of involvement within the administrative work will lead to optimal preparation for entering the position (Keogh, Dole & Hudson, 2006; Wilmore, 2002).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Learning combined with administrative-educational work was found to be more effective, applicable, and vital to professional education and success in the position. The new principals perform the same “work” in the experience of leading change within the school chosen for them, and that is their “experiential domain” for the duration of their professional education period (under a year). As noted above, the connection between the candidates and the school in which they receive their practical experience in the present system is fraught with difficulties, starting with the definition of the principal’s role (change leader, agent, partner, or something else?), continuing with the limited time spent there, concluding with the lack of compatibility between enacting such a change and the issues they will face in their future position as the school principals in their own school.

Therefore, the professional education model proposed in this chapter sets the candidates’ practical experience during their first year as school principals. This proposed program has several operational advantages, on several planes:

1. “On the job” learning: A professional education program which is accompanied by theoretical studies […] and is, therefore, more suitable and significant.
2. Practical work and enacting change are carried out by the one who holds the position of principal, and not as simulation or parallel experiential domain.
3. A natural and comprehensive connection exists between preparing professionals for administration and the mentoring necessary for principals at the onset of their service.
4. Acquiring personal and interpersonal skills for the administration of a school:
5. Learning abilities and effective experience in identifying issues, improving performance, and feedback, at a time when the administration itself is the domain within which these skills are acquired and practiced.
6. Help and support together with learning the practice, evaluation, and feedback for the beginning school administrator.
7. From “preparing for administration” to “beginning, settling in, and horizons in administration”: The professional education and mentoring program will focus more on support and coaching toward professional administration, of several years’ duration, and less on attempting to convince the candidate to progress toward administration.

The professional committee which formulated the program for professional development of principals in Israel, based its recommendations, among other things, on Goldring’s aphorism on the processes of professional development: To know, To do, To be.

Through exposure to theoretical knowledge, experience in school, and development of personal and professional awareness, the program will relate to what the principal ‘knows,’ what he should ‘do,’ and who he should ‘be’ (Goldring, 2008).

These three components of education and experience – to know, to do, and to be – will surely be found to be more effective and fitting when the education and experience take place during the principals’ first year of school administration. Their qualifications, as well as their skills and abilities (to know), will be more practicable and connected to their domain of administration. They will be accompanied by a professional team who will give them feedback, and their actions (to do) will be evaluated and studied as research on their practice. Filling the role of principal (to be) will provide a true experience of being a school administrator, and will give optimal preparation for administration both during the initial period and in the future as well.

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2. Bozo-Schwartz & Mendel-Levi (2016), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “*Tokhnit hallimmudim umisgartah*” [Hebrew], no date. This document is distributed to those interested in school administration in Israel as part of the selection and registration process. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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