**Principals' peak experiences and changing management patterns**

**Abstract 200 words**

**Purpose**

The literature indicates that key experiences contribute to professional empowerment in several professions. The question examined here is in which ways do key experiences contribute to the professional empowerment of principals, beyond the insights acquired through during leadership preparation and cumulative on-the-job experience.

**Design/methodology/approach**

Qualitative in-depth interviews of 15 public high school principals with 4-19 years of experience elicited information about the extent of their exposure to this type of experience and its effect on their managerial thinking and work patterns.

**Findings:**

All of the respondents implemented significant changes in their work as a result of these experiences. The insights gained from the experiences had not been acquired during management training or on-going work experience.

**Originality/value:**

It appears that the process of professional development of principals contains a unique and significant source of knowledge that has not been investigated to date.

The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the process of professional development among principals, with this as yet unexamined component.

**Practical applications**

The possibility is explored of changing the principal training model to better utilize the benefits of reflective experiential learning.

**Abstract (150)**

The literature mentions the contribution of key experiences to professional empowerment in various professions. The question examined here is in which ways do key experiences contribute to the professional empowerment of principals, beyond the insights acquired during leadership preparation and work experience.

In-depth qualitative interviews with 15 school principals elicited information about the extent of their exposure to such experiences and how they influenced their managerial thinking and work patterns.

All participants introduced significant changes in their work as a result of these experiences. In their view, the insights they gained were not acquired during managerial training or on-the-job experience.

Evidently, the process of professional development of principals contains a unique and important source of information that has not been studied to date.

The findings contribute to a greater understanding of principal development. Options are examined for changing the principal training model to better utilize the advantages of reflective experiential learning.

**Abstract (100)**

The literature mentions the contribution of key experiences to professional empowerment in various professions. The question examined here is how key experiences contribute to the professional empowerment of principals.

In-depth qualitative interviews with 15 school principals elicited information about their exposure to such experiences and how they influenced their thinking and work patterns.

All the principals introduced significant changes in their work as a result of these experiences. They said that the insights they gained had not been acquired in managerial training or work experience.

The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the process of professional development among principals.

**Introduction**

Peak experiences contribute to the professional development of personnel in many domains (Braud, 2012). They occur suddenly, they leave a strong emotional or conscious impression on individuals and they affect perceptions and behavior over time. Empirical research of the phenomenon is quite limited (Naor, 2013) and until now has focused mainly on populations that are considered to be typified by these experiences, such as musicians and teachers (Evans, 2016). Few studies have dealt with principals (Peleg-Fadida, 2007; Yamamoto, Gardiner & Tenuto, 2014). The aim of this study is to examine the ways in which peak experiences affect school principals – if at all – during their career and whether these events have any significant effect on their thinking processes and professional functioning.

**Review of the literature**

*Peak experiences: The conceptual framework*

"Key experiences", "peak experiences", "critical incidents" or "foundational incidents" are described as rapid, one-time, significant, surprising, exciting, transforming and intensive events involving learning from successes or failures that imprint strong long-lasting conscious and affective impressions on individuals (Bassi & Delle Fave, 2014; Yair, 2008). Peak experiences are short-lived one-time events. In contrast, learning from cumulative on-the-job experience is characterized by gradual learning in which lessons are formed over time from a sequence of experiences not connected to one specific critical event. Short-lived peak experiences imbue life with new meaning, in part by expanding self-perceptions and triggering deep changes in basic values (C'de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; McDonald, 2005). James, one of the first to research the phenomenon, proposed that it be examined in terms of the psychological process that an individual undergoes during the experience (James, 1910). Maslow conducted experiments about peak experiences and noted that they entail a strong and ecstatic emotional upheaval, either positive or negative, leading to a form of internal enlightenment that imprints in the individual deeper meanings than do routine everyday experiences. Their effect is also long lasting (Ellis et al., 2017; Maslow, 1962, 1970; Vanderburg, 2016).

Peak experiences are frequent in certain populations, such as children and adolescents, young adults (Vealey & Perritt, 2015), athletes (Brymer & Mackenzie, 2017), musicians (Benovov et al., 2011) and students (Hoffman & Ortiz, 2009), and in different domains such as art (Charles, 2010), nature (McDonald, Wearing & Ponting, 2009) and science (Charlton, 2007).

*From peak experiences to turning points*

A cognitive or affective turning point in an experience represents a change in the sequence of ongoing events from the past to the future. Those experiencing it undergo a substantial change in their heretofore familiar conceptual structure. The turning point occurs when those who are exposed to such an experience conclude that the basic assumptions underlying their conception of reality as well as their modus operandi were erroneous and therefore they feel obligated to change them. While the content of the conceptual change is individual, in keeping with the situational context of events, researchers have nevertheless found that the characteristics of such experiences among professionals in the same field are quite similar (Yair, 2009). The unwillingness of those who undergo peak experiences to continue to act on the basis of their mistaken beliefs even for a short while intensifies the effect. In learning from cumulative multi-year experience, in contrast, no such rapid change is evident because it is an inherent part of the gradual process of learning about reality. In long-term learning, individuals do not suddenly become aware of their mistaken assumptions, learning is not characterized by strong cognitive dissonance and if conceptions and functioning are to be revised, the process entails slow, moderate steps. The decision to dismantle an old conceptual structure and replace it with a new one because of a peak experience engenders a new mental organization that changes one's perceptions and character (Ellis et al., 2017; Laski, 1990). Peak experiences create an extreme change in how individuals perceive their environment. At times those experiencing it feel that things will never be the same again. Dismantling and reconstruction are elements in a process of change, a transformation that substantially and continuously affects self-perceptions and self-identity (Naor, 2013). As a result of a turning point individuals may choose a vocational direction not previously considered or institute changes or radical innovations in their work. Something changes in their personality and they develop new tastes that deviate from those in their family and social background. The turning point constitutes a chaotic condition whose consequences cannot be predicted. It is an open, uncertain moment not subject to routine rules. When a serious turning point occurs, it is impossible to know which direction the individual or the social system will take. The consequences of turning points can be positive or negative (Sampson & Laub, 2005).

Expressions of turning points are varied and include heightened mental health, happiness, optimism, security, finding meaning in life (Kennedy, 2000), expanding one's concept of "self" and changes in basic values (C'de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004), awareness of personal potential and qualities one did not know existed before (Grady, 2010). Positive turning points empower individuals, upgrade their professional abilities and maximize their human capital (Hoffman et al., 2014). Turning points represent a type of narrative that tells a "before and after" story, usually entailing a strong shift in behavior. Yair (2009) classifies the influence of peak experiences into several areas: a. practical influences on one's course of life in terms of education, employment and leisure; b. influences on personality – character, world view and way of thinking; c. influences on values and religious beliefs; d. influences on long-term behaviors.

Behavioral turning points are explicated through three psychological mechanisms (Yair, 2009). The cognitive mechanism explains changes engendered by intellectual stimulation that cause a shift in perceptions and ways of thinking and also arouse curiosity. The affective mechanism oversees emotional changes elicited by exciting and stirring experiences that generate the desire for continued encounters with similar affective experiences. The third mechanism pertains to various components of self-awareness (elements of consciousness, affect and identity), the revelation of inner strengths, the development of self-confidence, self-fulfillment and feelings of uniqueness. This mechanism helps to mediate encounters with key experiences so that they become comprehensible and so that individuals can learn new things about themselves.

*Key experiences and professional empowerment in the educational setting:*

Extensive attention in the education field and research literature has been channeled into identifying effective ways to professionally empower teachers and principals within their OJT and work. Practical solutions include mentoring during the first years of work, workshops, peer teaching/learning, professional conventions and reflective learning throughout the career (Mestry, 2017; Oplatka & Tako, 2009). The question examined here is whether peak experiences in critical events make a unique supplementary contribution to improved functioning. It has been found that such experiences contribute to teachers' teaching methods (Tardy & Snyder, 2004) and to improved teacher-student relations. Teachers have reported that after exposure to such events they find greater enjoyment in their work as well as increased general and internal motivation (Wilkinson & Reid, 2013; Evans, 2016). Research into the learning that principals acquire from peak experiences has begun to appear in the critical incidents literature. The effect of affective critical incidents has been reported on their perception of authentic leadership and their role as high school principals (Yamamoto, Gardiner & Tenuto, 2014). Another study examined the effect of school closing, which principals perceived as a critical incident, on their professional and personal lives (Lenarduzzi, 2015). To date, research has focused on a specific type of critical incident, mainly those involving high emotional arousal, but the literature in other professions also describes the effects of critical incidents on functional changes emanating from powerful conscious impressions that compel employees to alter how they function (Naor, 2013).

In order to examine the full extent of the effect of critical affective and conscious incidents on principals and their work, it is necessary to examine the phenomenon in relation to the central elements of their leadership and administrative functions. Many models are proposed for describing leadership in general and especially educational leadership: pedagogical, moral, transactional and transformational leadership (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015), distributed leadership (Harris et al., 2013), authentic leadership (Northouse, 2015) and complexity leadership (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2015). The various leadership models are reflected in operative aspects (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Fiarman, 2015), which include building a school vision and formulating institutional policy, staff leadership and empowering the teaching staff, dealing with individuals, promoting innovation, managing relationships with the community and with educational authorities, school assessment and implementing an organizational-administrative system that can execute all of the tasks (Horng, Klasik & Loeb, 2010; Lunenburg, 2010). The question that must be asked is in which of these domains are changes in principals' functioning evident after they are exposed to critical incidents that arouse peak experiences? Are these changes reflected in work style or in other operative functions? This will be examined in our paper.

**Study method**

Of the many qualitative research methods available, use was made of the interpretive naturalistic approach that examines the meaning of phenomena as they are perceived and explained by the people involved in them (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Klenke, 2016). The methodology adopted was that used in critical incidents and multi-case studies (Merriam, 2009). The narratives of the school principals as well as their reflective interpretation of the peak experiences they underwent were examined. Information was gathered from them through semi-structured in-depth interviews that exposed considerable evidence of the phenomenon in many domains of their work and its contribution to changes in the principals' perception of management and of emphases in their work. The interview questions, which are detailed below, focused on the components of peak experiences that were investigated in other professions (Hoffman, Kaneshiro & Compton, 2012). This was done in order to create a basis for conducting a comparative study of peak events between principals and their counterparts in other professions. At the same time the interviewer allowed interviewees great latitude to raise subjects and to focus on domains that did not seem important to the interviewer (Berg, 2004). The interview focused on the life world of the principals being interviewed and sought to understand the meaning of foundational peak experience phenomena in their lives and whether they changed their ways of thinking and functioning. Each principal was interviewed separately, the interviewer was open to ideas of all types and avoided categorization or setting down preliminary guidelines (Levin-Rozalis, 2004; Brodie & Gustafsson, 2016). The four questions that were presented to the interviewees were adapted slightly to the specific context of school management:

1. **Description of the experience**: During your work as a principal, did you have any peak experiences that significantly affected your perception of your position or change emphases in your work? Please describe these experiences. When did this happen?

The emphasis at this stage of the interview was to understand the nature of the experienced event itself, in as much detail as possible, and not its ramifications in terms of the principal's functioning, which is addressed in the questions that followed. At times an interviewee would try to talk about the effect of the event on his/her functioning and the interviewer redirected the conversation to clarification of the event itself. Interviewees were given the option of raising more than one foundational peak event in the conversation as long as they could emphasize its significant prolonged effect on their work.

1. **Feelings**: How did you feel during the experience? Describe your immediate and long-term feelings.

The interviewer sought to examine whether the event generated a variety of emotional feelings and cognitive impressions. The principals were not directly asked whether the experiences and the impressions were affective or conscious. The aim was to learn about it from the examples that the principals themselves raised and in accordance with their personal perceptions.

1. **Turning points**: What in the experience caused you to change your educational approach or emphases in your work?
2. **Long-term ramifications** of the experience: What change(s) occurred in your management work over time as a result of the peak experience?

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format which provided flexibility for interviewees to present issues as they saw fit (Berg, 2004). The interviewer treated each interviewee as an expert (Becker, 1996), as they (individually and as a group) held all the information and they enabled the interviewer to become familiar with and learn from the phenomenon through the subjective meanings they ascribed to their descriptions, attitudes and world views (Patton, 2002; Nolen & Talbert, 2011). This method of investigation is characterized by a lack of pre-formulated assumptions, and theory is exposed by – and grows from – investigation of the events. These emphases taken together create an opportunity to develop a deep understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon under study (Bourgeault, 2012). Before the interview, the interviewees received a letter and a preliminary telephone call explaining the aims of the study. They were asked to report the number of significant peak experiences they had had – if they had had any during their work career; they were not limited to one. Fourteen of them reported more than one experience that influenced the perception of their role. The full interviews were digitally recorded, with the consent of the interviewees, and statements to which interviewees ascribed great importance were emphasized.

**Study population**

The criteria for the selection of interviewees were: academic education with at least a master's degree, employment as principal of a public high school, and a minimum of four years of management experience. The researchers sought similar representation for women and men. The principals worked in the various Ministry of Education districts. The first interviewees approached were personal acquaintances of the researchers and they were asked to recommend the names of other principals who might cooperate. In this way eight principals consented to be interviewed. The other principals appeared on a list of potential participants who met the above criteria. Letters were sent to 18 principals, on the assumption that only some would consent. The aim of the study was explained and they were asked if they were willing to participate. About two weeks after the letter was sent, the principals were contacted by telephone and the request was repeated with a more detailed explanation of the study and what was expected of them as participants. The interviews were conducted in 2014-2015. Of the 18 principals approached, 15 agreed to participate. The other three declined because of heavy workloads. Five of the 15 worked in the northern district, five in the central districts and five in the southern district. Of the 15, eight were female and seven were male. Average teaching experience was 21.5 years. Average experience in management was 10 years. All of the principals held master's degrees in a variety of subjects and some were working towards doctoral degrees. The distribution of the sample was similar to that of the population of principals in Israel, where average management experience is 11 years and the percentage of female principals (58%) slightly exceeds that of male principals (42%) (Hyman & Ofarim, 2012). The number of students in the schools ranged from 650 to 1142 students.

**Method of coding and analyzing the interviews**

The first stage of analysis included several readings and open coding of each transcribed interview separately. This entailed classifying the detailed transcript into central content categories that emerged directly from the text. In order to reduce the number of central categories to a minimum, use was made of central sentences that the interviewees had emphasized during the interviews. This reduction was also assisted by words and expressions that appeared repeatedly and thus reflected their centrality to the interviewees.

In the second stage comparative cross-case analysis was performed for all the interviews, to identify shared content categories. Repetitive patterns of expression and content emphases were examined for all the interviewees (Klenke, 2016). Afterwards, super- and sub- categories were constructed from the findings. The super-categories represented central issues that arose in the interviews and in the literature as well. The sub-categories were determined by more personal but still substantial insights that were shared by the interviewees. In order to ascertain the reliability of the analysis, the comparative examination was performed several times, several days apart. In order to determine classification stability in the judgment of main categories over time, each of the interviews was reread with a hiatus between one reading and the next. The benefit of repeated judgment over time has been discussed at length in the literature (Dane, 2017). In qualitative research it is customary to use the term "trustworthiness" when assessing the quality and reliability of the study (Burla et al., 2008). In order to maintain creditability, the equivalent of internal validity in quantitative research, three of the interviews were analyzed by two independent examiners, in order to formulate agreed-upon patterns of analysis

**Ethics**

In order to adhere to ethical norms in the study, the aim of the research was presented to the principals. It was emphasized that the aim was not to judge or examine them at the personal level but rather to learn about broader, more universal phenomena. They were asked to give their consent to participate in the study and to allow publication of the findings without any details that could identify the interviewees. The researchers requested permission from the interviewees to record them, and promised to erase the recording after transcription. All the names and identifying details in the text were changed so that it is not possible to identify the individuals.

**Findings**

The 15 principals interviewed reported having peak experiences which caused a turning point in the perception of their management position and in relationships with various agents: the teaching staff, students and agents from outside the school including parents, the Ministry Education and Culture and other educational institutions in the competitive environment. Change was also evident in the strategy for introducing innovations and changes in the school. Most of the interviewees reported two experiences and some even reported three. All told, 39 peak experiences were reported. These experiences were categorized into domains as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of key experiences

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In another classification of peak experiences, 19 of them were purely educational in orientation and 20 of them included organizational-educational aspects in addition to purely educational content. Experiences that focused on educational thinking with no organizational-administrative aspects were defined as having a purely educational orientation. Those that entailed a considerable element of organizational-administrative change were included in the second category. Of the experiences, 15 emerged from learning from successes and 24 from learning from failures.

***Exposure to peak experiences and turning points in events that caused a change in the principals' work***

All 15 of the principals said that the experiences they reported were very significant for them and caused them to understand the need to change their way of working.

Shai, who has 11 years of management experience, describes the moment his attitude changed to mainstreaming special education children in regular classes. *"Yes, to see a regular class with its challenging study demands where children from special education fit in and even more, to see that the 'regular' pupils accept the special ed kids as naturally as you please – that choked me up. That wasn't something I expected. At first I couldn't understand how it could work. How could mainstreaming fit into the system in general? Then I saw the interaction and how it works and I studied the method in greater detail, and I understood that this is something we have to look at differently, something we have to encourage."*

Shai's words reveal his surprise and his sudden realization that his basic assumptions were wrong, that integrating special education pupils in regular classes has great potential and that he personally has the ability to promote it. Consequently, he became a strong advocate and implementer of mainstreaming.

Dina, with six years of high school management experience, talked about her management turning point: *"Yes, my self-awareness suddenly came to life in a case in school and I realized that I was being managed more than I was managing. That shocked me. It dawned on me – I have to make a change."* Through reflection, Dina realized she was incorrectly interpreting her role and functioning and she was totally unaware that her work was not being done properly. She understood that she could change the management format and put her professional abilities to better use for the good of the school. The result was that she became an initiator and a leader of what transpired in her school.

***Timing of the first peak experience:***

When do peak experiences occur: In the professional training stage? In the early stages of the management career? Throughout all the years of the career and also during OJT?

Of the 15 principals, 11 noted that they underwent peak experiences during their first two years as principal and most of them had other such experiences in later years as well. Four of the principals had peak experiences only later in their management careers. Four reported more than two peak experiences in the first years of their management. Peak experiences early in the career occurred on the first day of work as principals, in the first week, in the first month or, in general, during the first year.

Hagit, a high school principal with 11 years of management experience, describes the timing of the key experiences: *"I had two very intensive experiences during my first year of work that affected it.* ***The first was on the first day of classes****…the other was* ***in the same week…"*** Noam, a high school principal with eight years of experience, said: *"I want to tell you about two significant experiences.* ***The first was in my first month as principal…****"*

***Domains in which peak experience influenced principals***

***Perception of the principal's role:***

Nine of the principals reported that concrete peak experiences caused them to change their previously formulated conception of their role, which reflected their world view, their experience in previous positions and their training for the post. For example:

Moshe, a principal with eight years of experience: *"I was told a pupil had been injured in a fight…he was beaten by a twelfth grader".* Later in the interview, Moshe described the thorough clarification he had conducted, in consultation with all the local agencies. Ultimately, he and his team came to the conclusion that the attacking pupil should be suspended from school for a limited time. When word reached the senior authorities in the Ministry of Education "*they forced me to take him back immediately. They ignored all my meticulous work. At the time I was a young principal, new in the job, and other than voicing my objection, I did nothing…I even thought about giving up the job…I learned a lesson for life, that there are real boundaries to my management authority, and this has had a strong influence on my educational decisions ever since… Since then I haven't done everything just because I thought it was right to do. I understood that my authority as principal is much more limited than I had imagined".*  Later in the interview the principal related that as a result of the event he learned that he had to avoid making decisions based solely on his opinion. His duty was to assess carefully and in advance whether other important agents in the professional environment would view them as effective. As a result he became much more cautious about promoting educational initiatives or responses and weighed them very carefully to make sure they would be acceptable to his superiors. He stopped creative and unusual initiatives almost completely from fear of criticism. As he saw it, his educational institution was the main loser, because his excessive caution prevented him from proposing creative and routine-breaking educational initiatives. This represents an educational rather than administrative case and learning from failure and not from success. Among the other interviewees, the focus was also in the educational domain.

***Changes in relations between the principal and other agents***

***Principal-staff relations***

Peak experiences caused 10 of the 15 principals to intensify their positive cooperative relations with the staff and at the same time they became more aware that as leaders, their obligation was to make decisions that promoted the good of the school, even if such decisions had negative effects on staff relations for a limited period of time. For example:

Orit, a principal with eight years of experience, recounted a serious mishap during one of the school's main annual social activities. After the fact, said, she understood that the problem resulted from a lack of sufficient consultation and coordination with the teachers. *"Since that time, I consult and share a lot more of my educational deliberations with the teachers about decisions I have to make. In the past I was more independent and made many decisions by myself."* She also noted that she has continued to cooperate with them *"…and of course in the long run this is important for me, to this day."*

Another example comes from a self-managing school where principal are increasingly involved in recruiting and firing teachers. The peak experience of one of the principals, with eight years of management experience, occurred when she had to fire a teacher. As she relates it, this was a mainly administrative task, with a lot of paperwork, but it also packed a strong emotional punch: *"It is a very very hard process for a principal to fire a teacher… It's so unpleasant to dump negativity on a staff that is so much like a loving family. I felt a lot of discomfort and insecurity. This experience shook me up a lot. After the firing, which was at the end of my third year as principal, my feelings changed dramatically. Suddenly I felt that I was really a principal, that I was really doing the job expected of a principal and this contributed a lot to my confidence in making decisions in all my work."* She added that as a result of this experience she manifested more activist leadership in the staff, proposing educational initiatives and implementing various types of school-wide assessments that involved the staff. Her actions were motivated by an understanding that this was the role she was expected to fulfill. She felt that the staff understood and therefore cooperated with her.

The first case deals with an educational aspect of school while the second is not purely educational. Workers are fired in all commercial bodies – this is administrative work with an organizational-leadership orientation. The first event, which involves a breakdown in school communications, entails learning from failure while the second demonstrates learning from success.

***Principal-student relations***

Some principals maintain very little unmediated communication with pupils and seek to promote their school's pupil body academically, affectively and socially through the teaching staff. The status of the pupils in the school as these principals perceive it as well as the attitudes they formulate towards the children are based on information and opinions received from the teachers. The peak experiences caused 12 of them to drastically change their relations with the pupils, creating new patterns of communication with them and formulating new educational attitudes toward pupils with low academic achievements.

A principal with eight years of management experience reported that his work load left him no time to teach. From limited experience early in his management career he deduced that being responsible for a homeroom class and dealing with pupils personally would limit his ability to attend to urgent management tasks. Following a comprehensive meeting with pupils he understood that without regular direct encounters with them, he would not have a true picture of their learning experience and how they perceive school as a whole. Therefore, *"I decided to be a homeroom teacher even though most principals refuse to. I felt I had to be personally involved in educating the children and not just issue directives, and that’s what I do to this day."*

A principal with seven years of experience in the job admitted having a low opinion of underachieving pupils and pupils with learning deficits. She related that her attitude was turned on its head after a pupil with considerable learning deficits excelled in school. *"A high school boy, a new immigrant from a very poor family…couldn't read and write the local language. With our intensive help, he graduated from high school successfully and continued his higher education. Our success with him went against all the odds and it made a deep impression on me. I learned how important it is to make the ultimate effort with each pupil and to instruct the teaching staff to devote their all to each pupil. This experience has affected my approach to pupils throughout the years.*

These examples have an educational rather than an administrative focus, with a long-term effect which the principals see as a significant change in how they think and work. The first reflects learning from failure – when the principal understood that weak ties with pupils created an incomplete picture of the school climate, he strengthened his ties with them. The second principal, in contrast, learned from the success of one pupil. After internalizing that her perceptions of and attitude toward underachievers and pupils with difficulties had been mistaken, she began to give them extra support.

***Relationships with the institutional environment***

The age of achievement-based competition has led to changes in relations between institutions and between institutions and parents. The competition raises tension and reduces cooperation between schools. Parents of children in the school urge management and teachers to strive for excellence. They expect the staff to be at their beck and call and to comply with requests transmitted through cellular and internet channels at all times of the day and into the late evening hours. Such a situation blurs the distinction between work hours and private hours and the result is often staff burnout. What emerges from the study is that peak experiences can sometimes contribute to a significant change in this situation. Such was the case for seven of the interviewees, for example:

Hagit, a principal with 11 years of experience in management: *"In order to promote registration for my school, I marketed the institution, but with only limited success. I spoke to the principal of a nearby school with a different educational orientation. I proposed that we market our two schools together, each one touting its uniqueness, instead of us competing against one another. Our first experience with joint marketing was an outstanding success and it made me change my whole approach to marketing."*

The change derived from learning from success with an emphasis on an administrative-organizational approach that differed from the past.

A principal with 10 years of experience related that *"pupils' parents were phoning me day and night, without stop, even during vacation. It got to the point where I thought I'd collapse – parents were calling after midnight. Nothing was really urgent. My family told me this was no way to live, I should leave management."* The principal said she decided to change the situation. *"The next day I informed the parents that I would be available specific hours during each school day, not in the evenings and not on holidays except in dire emergencies. At first some parents ignored my rules and called at unusual hours but I stood firm and it stopped."*  Later in the interview the principal told about the startling improvement in the quality of her work and of her family life that resulted from the change.

***Change in approach to introducing innovations***

Analysis of the interviews reveals that one principal reported developing enthusiastic support for the introduction of innovations as the result of a peak experience, something she had vigorously opposed previously.

The introduction of significant educational changes and innovations often requires a change in the educational conceptions, attitudes, work methods and habits of educators who have worked according to the old paradigms for long periods of time. Such changes entail the allocation of time to introduce the changes and overcome the resistance of staff members whose time-honored routines often serve as vocational security blankets for them. A willingness to change is often engendered by a lack of success in work or as the result of orders handed down from on high, both in and outside the place of work. A peak experience that was reported in the interviews showed another factor that contributed to a rapid transition by the principal – from resistance to changes in her institution to an open-handed readiness to adopt them.

Sigal, nine years as principal, related that because her school had such good academic achievements she and the veteran teachers saw no need to change. She said that constancy bolstered the teaching staff's feeling of self-confidence, as they did not have to contend with constant change. One day Sigal visited a friend, also a principal with a similar pupil population. This friend was always adopting new curricula, updating teaching methods and continually experimenting with innovative ideas, some of which she adopted. During the visit, Sigal was impressed by the teachers' high motivation and discerned a link between innovation and the positive institutional climate and high motivation among staff and pupils. The host principal later gave Sigal some practical advice about implementing innovations. In the interview Sigal noted that for the first time she understood that there are different – perhaps even better – ways for a school to succeed. She decided to experiment and to implement some of the ideas. *"The changes that resulted from this unusual experience gave me new powers I didn't know I had, powers that grew stronger and made me stronger. I'm not afraid of changes now. On the contrary, I think that one of the outcomes of the meeting was to make me think constantly about how and where to introduce change."* During the interview Sigal gave examples of some of the changes in terms of innovative curricula and enriching teaching-learning methods like the "flipped classroom" which she had opposed in the past.

The insight emerging from this event is that not only failure promotes change in individuals and organizations. Exposure to extreme success by another admired person or agent may also generate this turnabout. Here too the experience is educational and the turning point derives from learning from success.

To summarize, all of the interviewees reported peak experiences that significantly affected their work. This was evident in many aspects of their managerial functioning, most of them in the context of typical relationships between principals and other agents with whom they work on a regular basis.

**Discussion**

The professional development of school principals is a product of pre-job training (Normore, 2010; Sanzo, Myran & Normore, 2012), mentoring during the first year of work (Geismar, morris & Lieberman, 2014) and on-job-training (OJT) throughout the career. Principals formulate what they see as the essence of the position from formal learning and from introspective and reflective observation of their personal strengths, weaknesses and self-efficacy which together determine the patterns of work they devise for themselves (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Oplatka, 2012; Petrie, Lindauer & Tountasakis, 2000). Cumulative evidence has gradually shown the added contribution of unplanned, one-time, foundational peak experiences to significant change in principals' perceptions of their role and their functioning (Lenarduzzi, 2015; Yamamoto, Gardiner & Tenuto, 2014). The effect of these events is a deep imprint of meanings and insights that are generally not acquired through cumulative life experience (Maslow, 1962, 1970; Vanderburg, 2016; Ellis et al., 2017). This form of professional empowerment should in no way be considered a substitute for planned and orderly OJT. It is an additional source. Even though principals may be exposed to peak experiences very few times in their career, these experiences are perceived as significant events that remain indelibly inscribed in memory for many years.

Until now peak experiences were known to carry a high emotional charge and to contribute to significant changes in work. Our findings indicate that peak experiences that create cognitive dissonance without involving affective issues also engender significant changes in the work of principals. This phenomenon was reported in other professions (Ellis et al., 2017; Yair, 2009) and has now been documented among school principals. Dissonance causes principals to observe their work reflectively and question long-held conventions. When they become aware of more effective ways of managing their school they feel compelled to introduce what they see as meaningful changes in their work. Can this sharp change in consciousness be ascribed to insufficient pre-job training? Did principals find that the plans and expectations they nurtured in their pre-management years were un-implementable and therefore felt compelled to make significant changes in their work emphases? From the findings it is not possible to answer these questions. That will require further research.

Conscious changes in management functioning stemmed in part from the strong impression the successes mainly of others made on the principals, and in part by failures they themselves experienced. While the literature describes the potential for organizational learning from successes (Schechter, Sykes & Rosenfeld, 2008), cumulative evidence indicates that significant learning may result from failures (Barouch & Kleinhans, 2015; Dos, Sagir & Cetin, 2015). In this study, more peak experiences involved learning from failures than from successes. A possible explanation for this finding is that principals perceive failure – and avoiding failure at work as even more important than succeeding in a task. As the saying goes, success has many fathers but failure is usually pinned on one person. As such, failure is viewed as their personal responsibility and is therefore unacceptable. The peak experience literature provides many examples of learning both from success and from failures (Vanderburg, 2016).

From the broad range of leadership styles described in the literature, changes occurring as the result of peak experiences were evident most often in transactional leadership (LeFevre & Robinson, 2015), collaborative and distributed leadership (Harris et al., 2013) and complexity leadership (Northouse, 2015). This is evident *inter alia* in management with a more distributed orientation and more intensive cooperative relationships between principal and staff, principal and students and principal and external agents such as parents, local authorities and the Ministry of Education and Culture. In one case, the foundational peak experience resulted in the complete removal of opposition to the introduction of innovations in the school. Updating an educational institution by means of innovations is one of the principal's functions (Horng, Klasik & Loeb, 2010; Lunenburg, 2010).

Before the present study was undertaken, the researchers heard how a formative event brought about a sharp transition from centralized to distributed management. This was the trigger for the study. Two school principals related to the researchers that the most significant change in their functioning during their career stemmed from a one-time foundational experience. Both principals employed the centralized management style in their schools. In the midst of a school year they both had to cease work for four-five months, one due to a serious injury and the other after giving birth. Replacements were appointed in their stead. The principals were sure that their schools would not function properly in their absence because of the difficulties they expected their replacements to encounter in assuming such dominant roles and earning the trust of the staff in the limited time allotted to them. In both cases they were surprised to see that their schools functioned very well. The replacements decentralized the functions, involved other personnel and teachers in decision making on a variety of issues and in this way earned staff cooperation. The principals confessed that this turn of events led them to critical reflective thinking about their assumption that centralized management was the most effective management style for their specific school situations. When they returned to their posts they gave greater trust to the staff, altered their management style, making it much more decentralized, and felt that the change contributed greatly to staff motivation. Feelings of work satisfaction also rose. The reports from these principals also support the potential inherent in research based on grounded theory.

Almost one quarter of the peak experiences entailed significant changes in perceptions of the management role. Thus, for example, principals suddenly understood that their alleged autonomy was much more limited than they had imagined and in actual fact, the opinions and initiatives they advocated in their daily work were conditional, to a great extent, on the sanction of those overseeing them. This finding is of considerable importance in light of formal declarations about decentralization in education, greater autonomy for school principals and their staffs and definitions of institutions as "self-management schools" (Dimmock, 2013). Thus the principals' original perception of their roles turned out to be significantly different from actual circumstances and from what was actually required for successful performance of their job.

Many peak experiences are connected to relationships between principals and others in and outside of school. Sizeable chunks of work time are allocated to conducting dialogues with educational staff, students, parents, local authorities and other educational institutions (Horng, Klasik & Loeb, 2010; Lunenburg, 2010). It is not surprising, therefore, that the incidence of peak experiences is so high in this domain. As a result of these experiences, principals acquired awareness and understanding of the strong points of those agents, points of which they previously may not have been aware, and the outcome of these experiences was a reorganization of their work. Because of frequent changes in parent association leaders, local authority personnel (as a result of elections) and teaching staff (because of retirement and transfers), interactions and discourse are often dynamic, increasing the likelihood that they will serve as catalysts for critical events and peak experiences.

The number of peak experiences with a full educational orientation was similar to that of an organizational-educational orientation. Principals are viewed by some as educational-pedagogical leaders (Catano & Stronge, 2007; Huber, 2004; Styron & Styron, 2013) and by others as organizational leaders who lead and coordinate their staff in rich educational and scholastic activity (Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009). The literature shows that in practice, principals engage in both domains (Horng, Klasik & Loeb, 2010; Lunenburg, 2010). The similar number of key educational and organizational-educational experiences confirms the contention that principals are deeply involved and seek greater efficiency in both. This finding reflects the reality in public schools in Israel where principals are required to deal intensively with both educational and administrative tasks. Most have a limited office staff instead of administrative officers. Those who see school management as a mainly pedagogical occupation would do well to examine whether their perception passes the empirical test in educational settings such as those examined here and elsewhere.

Principals with all levels of managerial tenure encountered key experiences in their first years of work and in later years of their career as well. Despite the professional knowledge acquired during pre-job training and OJT, another potential source of professional empowerment is revealed in this study, as is reflected in changes in functioning engendered by foundational critical events. This corresponds to the findings of Yamamoto, Gardiner and Tenuto (2014) who identified the existence of affective key experiences throughout principals' careers and not only in the early stages of management work. The education system has undergone many changes over the years, including comprehensive reforms in educational vision and ways of implementing it. Gradual incremental changes accumulate over the years into large changes in the modus operandi regarding emphases in learning and in education. Changes in basic educational assumptions that were once valid require life-long learning. This paper reveals that such learning can also be achieved through one-time peak events that engender significant changes in management work.

Elementary and high schools differ in several ways and some of these dissimilarities are reflected in differential management emphases (Burcar, 2017). This paper examined the contribution of peak experiences to the functioning of high school principals. It is hypothesized that such influences will be found among elementary school principals as well but this has not been investigated to date. It is also worth examining peak experiences as they affect middle management school personnel such as vice principals, pedagogical coordinators, grade level and subject coordinators, and other executive personnel. Educational decentralization has cast greater and growing responsibility upon them (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) but while school principals receive systematic professional training, in many places similar training is not available to middle management personnel (Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014). It is in such situations – where preliminary training is lacking – that many peak experiences can be expected.

Our article, like previous ones, discusses the inherent benefit of professional self-empowerment from learning based on personal experience. This learning can be enhanced by encouraging principals to examine and update their basic assumptions and work plans in light of key experiences and other events. There is no guarantee that principals will respond positively to such a suggestion. The prevailing organizational culture favors the maintenance of constant organizational values and patterns of action. Therefore principals, including the veterans among them, must be given the legitimacy to "recalculate" (as the Waze speaker would say) when it becomes clear that alternative routes can lead to the desired organizational objectives faster and better. Distinguishing between core organizational values that are not open to negotiation and peripheral areas of a discipline or actions that offer flexibility may serve as guidelines for principals when setting the parameters for possible changes.

Giving public voice to principals who made significant changes in their work patterns as a result of key experiences may motivate other principals to relate their own experiences, which may reveal additional insights. The principals who have undergone peak experiences learned from them without sharing with others. They did not discuss the experiences with other principals or staff members in their school, nor did they write about them in any framework or setting. The staff members felt the changes, they said, but no deep discourse was conducted to explain the factors underlying these changes. Helping principals to become aware of the existence of the peak experience phenomenon on a broad scale may encourage them to discuss it publically and without hesitation. This will promote more complete utilization of the insights from key experiences, through regular guided analysis during periodical meetings between principals and school supervisors. Collegial discourse may encourage principals who have not personally experienced such foundational events and their consequent ramifications to apply the lessons learned from key experiences to their own personal functioning after being exposed to them during joint discussions.

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