

Staff Room as a Support Space for Optimal Absorption of New Teachers

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Abstract

This study explores the staff room as a support space in the process of absorbing new teachers at school. It was conducted according to the qualitative approach and the participants were 120 new teachers who had studied at an academic college of education in Israel. This study was based on reflective diaries and a content analysis was performed as is customary in qualitative research. The findings illustrate the staff room as a real and dynamic arena for the development of social, organizational and professional knowledge of teaching and education issues. This study recommends including in the support and tutoring program the learning of the staff room and the processes which transpire in it from the various aspects for the purpose of optimal absorption of new teachers at school.

Key words: new teachers, induction to teaching, absorption of new teachers, staff room.

1. Introduction

Support and tutoring programmes for new teachers upon their absorption at school and the dream of all those engaged in the induction of new teachers are designed to prevent their difficulties and dropout while underscoring preventive rather than therapeutic way of coping (Gilad & Alkalay, 2011). Nevertheless, the percentage of new teachers' dropout from the education system during their first year of practice is high and amounts to about 30%-40% (Arbiv-Elyashiv & Zimmerman, 2013; Ingresoll & Strong, 2011).

The main assumption explored in this study is that the staff room constitutes a real arena for the development of professional and collective knowledge of teaching and education. Like in an underground station, teachers walk into and out of the staff room. They go to different classrooms, they are always in a hurry and stay in this room for a definite and short time. They exchange phrases and ideas, while making coffee or going to the bathroom and usually all these activities together. In spite of the short stay in the staff room, it constitutes the centre of life of the school. It is here that the school culture is designed informally as well as in an overt and covert way. A professional language is shaped and it includes norms of behaviour, values, codes, social and professional relationships, politics, status and school heroes.

Consequently, it is highly important to expose this arena to new teachers. Studying the staff room and an in-depth observation of the occurrences in it might facilitate the development of a professional, organisational, social and personal knowledge which are essential to teachers in general and to new teachers in particular. Even if this study engages in staff rooms at primary schools in Israel, studying the various worlds of knowledge will assist the new teachers to be optimally absorbed at school. Thus, the incidence of teachers' dropout from school might be reduced.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 New Teachers and Induction

The research literature describes the world of new teachers as a world of struggle and survival. Many teachers try to deal with a new reality which for them is different from the reality they have known during their internship period (Fenwick, 2011; Gilad & Alkalay, 2011). Studies (Shimoni, Gonen & Yaakobi, 2006; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011) discuss the situation of new teachers during their induction into the education system, using images and metaphors. For example: "Wilting flowers", "Jumping into the cold water" and "Trying to survive in the battle field". New teachers have to cope with the reality shock, uncertainty and "walking in the dark". First year teachers face unexpected problems and situations which are difficult to manage (Gilad & Alkalay, 2011; Winstead & Betweens, 2007). New teachers are preoccupied with survival in the education system and are concerned with mastering the learning materials, planning the teaching, getting acquainted with school as an organisational organisation and being accepted by the staff, the pupils and the parents. Hence, only after attaining a sense of confidence at school and familiarising themselves with school as an organisational education the teachers are available to improve their professional performance (Floden & Stanulis, 2009; Samuel, 2005; Senge, 2008). When new teachers come to school they meet a more experienced staff and. Hence, they should be able to be integrated into a given reality.

The initial need is to be acquainted with the surrounding and with the procedures of the system which they enter. At the same time they have unique needs by virtue of being new. They need encouragement and empathy as well as develop a sense of belonging. They need others to listen to them and answer their questions in real time. Moreover, they require reinforcement of their ability to prove themselves without being curbed (Gilad & Alkalay, 2011).

2.2 Absorbing New Teachers during Their Induction-to-Teaching Process

Support and tutoring programmes are implemented in various countries, attempting to provide an appropriate response to new teachers' optimal absorption in the education system. In fact, these programmes differ from country to country. However, there are similar features which indicate a successful absorption and integration of new teachers at school. Three key partners are essential to the success of these absorption programmes: policy-makers, teacher education institutions and the schools. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the responsibility for the new teachers' successful absorption is incumbent not only upon the absorbing system but also on the new teachers themselves as absorbed educational practitioners (Gilad & Alkalay, 2011).

During the 1970s, support programmes for new teachers at schools were implemented in the United States. The programmes which were operated for example in Missouri, Wisconsin and Florida, illustrate the importance of support, involvement and attention to the needs of new teachers as well as building a support team which consists not only of colleagues but also of the head teacher and members of the school management (Wilkinson, 1997). Findings of a research of induction into teaching programmes in New Zealand (Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Yusko & Feiman-Nemser, 2008) highlight the need for developing new teachers' specialisation. This will promote the pupils' learning rather than only give advice and guidance associated with survival and response to tension factors induced by the new and demanding work.

In these programmes head teachers and mentors should be a role model and leverage for change. Furthermore, the school culture will provide new teachers with instructions and space for talking about their professional lives and about being part of the school organisation (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006). Japanese first year teachers attend guidance programmes of mentors and senior teachers. These programmes emphasise the importance of collaboration with experienced teachers and of allocating time and space for reflection processes (Howe,

2006). Richter et al. (2013) conducted in Germany a study of novice mathematics teachers. The study recommends choosing tutors in an informed way. Perhaps tutorship which supports only when new teachers need it, might be more adequate than rigorous tutorship. Ingersoll & Strong (2011) reviewed 15 empirical studies from the 1980s which emphasise the effects of support and tutoring programmes on new teachers. The researchers argue that most studies show that supporting new teachers has a positive impact from the following aspects: commitment to and perseverance in the profession, improvement of teachers' teaching methods and pupils' attainments. Nevertheless, support from these aspects is insufficient and schools should constitute an educational environment whereby new teachers can study the profession and succeed in it.

Studies of attention to new teachers' voice through social networks in Britain indicated the significance of peer relationships based on trust, mutual understanding and collective responsibility. New teachers pointed out that they were interested in maintaining contacts with appreciated peers also outside the school (Fox & Wilson, 2008). Support programmes in the IT age empower the new teachers. Those teachers who are connected to social network communities do not feel isolated and the networks enable them to conduct a professional and social discourse which enhances their professional development and improves their teaching quality (Baker-Doyle, 2012). Furthermore, the study conducted by Baker-Doyle underscores that the most important element in the sources of new teachers' support is the colleagues at school as well as the wider teacher community.

Desimone et al. (2014) argue that the combination of formal and informal mentoring mutually complements each other and might improve the mentoring process. Israel has been implementing a three-year long support and tutoring programme: one year of internship and two additional years whose main objective was to support, empower and respond to the personal and unique needs of each and every teacher (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Gilad & Alkalay (2011) stipulate that new teachers need support and counselling from any aspect of their practice: personal, professional and social. The researchers maintain that the new teachers are looking for support sources outside the school (e.g. support and tutoring setup, family and friends) as well as sources inside the school (i.e. experienced teachers, staff room and professional team). They expect to get from the partners to their teaching practice – both their peers and the school management – acknowledgement, support and appreciation of their strenuous work. Al-Dor (2010) specifies the importance of the systemic approach for a better absorption of new teachers, relating to all the system elements: support, training the tutors and the school to absorb interns and new teachers.

The reviewed studies provide empirical findings for the argument that support and assistance given to new teachers have a positive impact.

2.3 Staff Room

The staff room is the place where collective and professional knowledge about education and teaching is being developed. The teachers who sit there hold conversations, involve peers, study about pupils and provide a mutual support in order to comprehend the essence of their professional practice (Ben-Peretz & Sheinman, 2013; Hunter, Rossi, Tinning, Flanagan & Macdonald, 2011). The staff room facilitates interactions between teachers, school officials, parents and others. Moreover, teachers bring to the staff room their personal and professional narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). In fact, teachers, most of whom are females, need to involve other female-teachers in the narratives, share knowledge and consult with them out of caring and empathy (Gilad, 2014; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1999). Through discourse and interaction with colleagues, teachers acquire insights about their practice and the school where they work (Louis, 1990). The staff room is the only place at school where teachers can meet each other during the workday in relative privacy and rest between the lessons (Domb, 2014; Keinan, 1996; Robin, Avram & Asher, 1984). Mor (2010) stipulates that the staff room

is not merely a physical space but rather a vibrant internal body part of the school, converging the teachers into it. In this room teachers drink coffee, hold a conversation with another teacher about the state of a pupil, get updated on gossip, sometimes even work, prepare lessons or score tests. Either way, this work corner is in fact the teachers' home at school. New teachers have a strong need to belong to the school culture. They perceive that this sense of belonging provides physical and emotional confidence, acceptance, models of comparison and a basis for measuring success (Fisherman, 2005).

Keinan (1996) maintains that in the absence of a formal institution which allows teachers to express their opinion and affect what transpires at school, the staff room serves as a knowledge transferring channel whereby shared attitudes are consolidated and from which they go out in order to make an effect. Conversely, Matalon (2011) claims that teachers do not express their opinion aloud and that powers of functionaries and supervisors which are backed up by a political power are applied, activating mechanisms of oppression against teachers.

From the physical aspect, the staff room is a separate and defined place which pupils are not allowed to enter. The staff room plan is important and the space should be meticulously structured according to three aspects of interior design: aesthetic, micro-climatic and functional. Proper and suitable planning and design would result in an agreeable work environment which would enable professional practice and a pleasant stay (Robin, Avram & Asher, 1984).

A tour of staff rooms illustrates that this is not only a room. Sometimes it is a family and sometimes it is a state of mind. It is also a mirror which reflects relationships, teamwork, attitude towards pupils. Consequently, it is not surprising that no two staff rooms are similar. At the practice level, researchers (Hunter et al., 2011) invite the teaching profession to acknowledge staff rooms as sites which are important to professional learning and as places

which should support tutorship of novice teachers. Such acknowledgement can reduce the dropout rate as well as increase the satisfaction and effectiveness of both new and experienced teachers.

Research question: In what way does the staff room constitute a support space in the absorption process of new teachers at school?

3. Methodology

This study was conducted according to the qualitative approach and constitutes a case study. The use of the qualitative method enables comprehension, description and interpretation of occurrences in the field. Moreover, it includes the covert aspects from the viewpoint of the participants themselves. One of the major advantages of this type of research is its ability to offer insights about events in the actual contexts and situations in which they transpire. The case study is inductive since it presents the data out of the situation independently of the research assumptions and facilitates expression of situations from different points of view (Shkedi, 2012).

3.1 Research Population

The research population consisted of 120 new teachers with a 1-year teaching experience in Jewish and Arab primary schools.

3.2 Research Tools

The research was based on 120 reflective diaries written by the new teachers while working at school. The new teachers recorded all the various situations, occurrences and activities in the staff room as they have experienced and experimented them.

3.3 Data Processing

The data collected from the reflective diaries were content analysed as is customary in qualitative research. The content analysis was performed at two levels: a normative content

analysis for distinguishing prominent trends and a qualitative-interpretive content analysis for the purpose of disclosing essences, perceptions as well as comprehending different insights. The categories were determined after the researchers' extent of agreement about them was at least 67% (Shkedi, 2012).

4. Findings

The findings illustrate that the staff room constituted for the new teachers a place for studying the school during their absorption process. This was a gradual and combined learning which included three worlds of knowledge: social knowledge, organisational knowledge and professional knowledge. Moreover, throughout the study process, the presence of the head teachers in the staff room assisted the new teachers to be better integrated into the school.

4.1 Socialisation Processes in the Staff Room as Empowering New Teachers

The staff room was for the new teachers a place and an opportunity for socialisation and establishment of social relations. All the new teachers indicated that in the staff room they forge and consolidate friendship relationships which they believe are important for their integration at school. The social relations established with the teachers in the staff room made them feel a sense of belonging, caring, self-confidence and pride. Some of the new teachers used images such as: family, tribe, home and living room. One of the new teachers wrote: "*At the beginning of the year, as a new teacher, I thought that one only gossips in the staff room. However, with time I realised the advantages of the social discourse and its contribution to the teachers' consolidation. In my opinion the professional aspect is important but the social aspect is more important*". Another new teacher pointed out: "*I was absent from school for several days because I was sick. When I came back and entered the staff room all the teachers kissed me and were interested in my health. This was a warm welcome and it made*

me feel good. I understood that the interest in me was real, caring and concerned... I felt I had friends".

4.2 The Staff Room as a Source of Organisational Knowledge

Most of the new teachers reported that the organisational knowledge which they had acquired in the staff room enabled them to better understand the school culture in topics such as: school hierarchy, school officials, overt and covert powers, politics and relationships among teachers. They realised that the more knowledge and understanding from the organisational aspect they had, the better they would function as new teachers, becoming an integral part of the teaching staff at school. One of the new teachers said: *"Only when I realised about what I should be careful, how to speak, what the regulations stipulated, what exactly the head teacher wants... I felt better, I was absorbed and became like all the experienced teachers".* Another new teacher wrote: *"At the beginning of the year I made a big mistake because I addressed the wrong teacher and the head teacher reprimanded me for that. If I had learnt in advance the role definition in the school hierarchy, I could have been in a better place".*

4.3 The Staff Room as a Place for Acquiring Professional Knowledge

The new teachers emphasised that the staff room constituted for them a meaningful place for acquiring available professional knowledge from pedagogical and disciplinary-oriented aspects. According to them, discourse in the staff room allowed them to learn from their colleagues topics such as: preparing lesson plans, solving discipline problems in class, planning and assessing tests, writing grade sheets as well as teaching in an IT environment. Sharing and receiving knowledge about these topics helped the new teachers to become better teachers. One new teacher indicated: *"I am constantly learning from the success of my colleagues. They involve me in their successes as well as in difficulties of teaching fractions in the 3rd grade".* Another new teacher mentioned: *"In the staff room I hear many teachers referring to discipline problems in class. I feel that I am not alone in this matter and that this*

is not my personal problem. I use 'clues' from what I hear and implement them in my classes and this helps me a lot".

4.4 The Female-Head Teacher in the Staff Room

The new teachers attested that the female-head teacher's presence in the staff room has two aspects. From one aspect she pushes teachers to enter the classrooms, reprimands them when they stay on and continue drinking coffee, delivers informative notes and immediately leaves the staff room. From the other aspect, the female-head teacher makes teachers feel she is part of the staff, demonstrates real interest, compliments the teachers, pats them on the shoulder and praises them aloud. Sometimes she even sits with the teachers and conducts a peaceful conversation. One of the new teachers stipulated: *"The female-head teacher sat several times next to me in the staff room, asked me how I felt and how I managed in class and at school. The fact that she addressed me gave me a good feeling, power and good will"*. Another new teacher indicated: *"The female-head teacher entered the staff room and, in the presence of all the teachers who were at that time in the room, she said to me, 'You did a great job with the pupils and I'm very proud of you for leading the pupils to success in the final history examination"*. Yet another new teacher wrote: *"I like my female-head teacher, she supports me, demonstrates empathy and trusts me. When this happens in the staff room it greatly empowers me and I know I have come to the appropriate school"*.

5. Discussion and Summary

This study aimed to explore in what way the staff room constitutes a support space in new teachers' absorption at school. The support and tutoring programmes implemented today facilitate and promote the process of new teachers' absorption at school. Nevertheless, there is room for thinking about and in-depth observation of existing programmes mainly in light of

the high incidence of new teachers' dropout from the education system already during their first years of practice.

Findings of this study illustrate that the staff room serves the new teachers as a central space in the process of being acquainted with school, studying the social relationships, getting familiarised with the values and norms as well as with the procedures and regulations. This is in fact a wide and complex language which should be learnt in order to belong to the group and the organisation and become an integral and significant part of them.

From the social aspect, the staff room was an essential place for establishing social contacts. All the new teachers specified that it contributed to and empowered them from aspects such as: belonging to the workplace, empathy demonstrated by colleagues, enhancing their self-image and self-confidence. This stemmed from the reinforcement and praise they received in the staff room. Similarly, studies conducted by Keinan (1996) and Ben-Peretz & Sheinman (2013) showed that establishment of social contacts in the staff room empowered new teachers.

From the gender aspect, concern and caring manifested by the experienced teachers and the head teacher facilitated the growth of the new teachers (Gilad, 2014).

From the organisational aspect, most of the new teachers underscored that the organisational knowledge they acquired in the staff room enabled them to better understand the school culture. Other studies (Ben-Peretz & Sheinman, 2013; Mor, 2010) found that the staff room is not only a physical space but rather a room where one studies the school and its organisational and social aspects.

From the professional aspect, the new teachers reported that the staff room was for them a meaningful place for acquiring available professional knowledge from pedagogical and disciplinary-oriented aspects. This finding is supported by other studies (Ben-Peretz & Sheinman, 2013; Rossi & Hunter, 2013) which attest that an important knowledge is flowing

in the staff room. This knowledge assists teachers to become more professional in the areas of knowledge which they teach as well as in the areas of pedagogy and education.

Another finding which emerged in this study is the role of head teachers in fostering new teachers sitting in the staff room and in building relations with them. Nurturing the new teachers in the staff room was instrumental in their absorption process. Various approaches in the field of educational leadership enhance the need to develop teachers' leadership together with the development of head teachers' leadership (Cuban, 2010). In the long run, developing teacher-leaders could improve the quality of their teaching, lead the school to pedagogical growth and prepare their graduates as value-oriented and intelligent people who are optimally integrated in society and the labour market (Frost, 2012; Schleicher, 2012).

The staff room then is a central and essential place at school and it is there that interaction processes transpire among the teachers from different aspects. Close observation of the staff room and the occurrences in it can facilitate pre-service teachers, new teachers, experienced teachers and head teachers in the absorption process and reduction of the dropout from school.

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