

# **Professional Identity of District Counsellors and Coordinators for the Induction Stage in Teaching as Reflected in Their Work Processes**

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## **Abstract**

In view of the difficulties that teachers experience at the start of their careers, the Israel Ministry of Education decided that alongside support workshops and mentoring programs a District Counsellor and Coordinator (DCC) would be appointed to provide support and assist teachers in their assimilation. This article sheds light on the professional identity of the induction stage DCCs as seen through their world perspective and work processes, thus enabling a common denominator to be derived and their further development to be planned.

## **Literature Review**

**The induction stage in teaching according to the policy of Israel's Ministry of Education:** The teacher undergoing induction does not have the benefit of a hundred-day grace period and he is expected from his very first day on the job to meet the requirements of the system no differently from the veteran teachers. Because of the high load he bears and the complexity of his tasks he must develop a survival mechanism that will allow him to withstand the demands and difficulties during his first year of work, which are threefold: (1) environmental; (2) pedagogic; and (3) emotional (Patrick, Elliot, Hulme & McPhee, 2010; Shaz-Openheimer, Mendel & Zilbershtrom, 2014; The European Commission, 2010).

(1) Beginning teachers enter a new system and must learn the organizational culture, professional jargon, norms, expectations of them by others, processes of socialization, and mode of conduct in the school where they work in order to be accepted as equals in the school community (Feiman-Nemser, 2012). These factors constitute part of the environmental difficulties that could result in frustration and disappointment in beginning teachers (Maskit, 2013).

(2) Although beginning teachers complete their studies with extensive theoretical knowledge, a gap exists between this knowledge and their ability to apply it, wherein arise the pedagogic difficulties, manifested generically and didactically (Maskit, 2013; Sunddip-Panesar, 2010).

(3) Emotional difficulties stem from the gap between vision and reality: between the perceptions that beginning teachers formed during their studies together with their aspiration to improve the young generation on the one hand, and stark reality on the other; between their desire to bring about a change, and the limitations inherent in teaching as well as the many voices being heard on the ground (Orland-Barak & Maskit, 2011; Zilbershtrom, 2013). The attempt to cope with the gaps and didactic difficulties create emotional problems in the

beginning teacher, accompanied by feelings of isolation, frustration, anxiety and helplessness (Shaz-Openheimer, Mendel & Zilbershtrom, 2014).

The difficulties with which beginning teachers have to cope result in a high emotional load, leading to ambiguity with respect to their professional identity and playing a part in their dropout from the system at the start of their professional career (The European Commission, 2010). In order to prevent the above phenomena and all that they imply, each beginning teacher receives support through two channels: participation in support workshops in a training institution, and receipt of support and assistance from a mentoring teacher once a week. In parallel with these processes a support network is available in all districts, composed of an inspector and a DCC (Zilbershtrom, 2013).

**Professional identity** – the professional identity of the teacher in his various roles includes two interrelated components: (1) a psychological component dealing with his identification with his work and his perception of his characteristics, talents, professional worth and success in interacting with his students, colleagues, principals and others around him; and (2) a professional component, relating to his social esteem as a professional and the image of his profession (Fisherman & Weiss, 2011; Horn, Nolen, Ward & Campbell, 2008). Fisherman & Weiss (2011) developed a tool to measure the professional identity of teachers in terms of four aspects: sense of mission, the image of the teaching profession, self-efficacy, and certainty in the choice of profession.

**The role of the DCC in the sphere of internship and induction** was institutionalized only five years ago. The DCC is engaged in implementing the policy of Israel's Ministry of Education on a holistic level with a view to achieving optimal absorption of beginning teachers into the system – meetings with principals and inspectors, guidance in creation of optimal models for the absorption of new teachers, meetings with teachers at the start of their careers and with mentors, focused assistance to beginning teachers belonging to special populations who are in need of particular support, etc. Due to the newness of the role, he is moulded by his actions and by his partnership in a professional group consisting of peers (the DCCs meet 6-7 times a year). Accordingly, it was not possible to find professional literature dealing with a definition of the DCC's function and it is from this reference point that the aim of the research evolved: identification of the common thread connecting the DCCs' world view and activities, followed by planning of their continued professional development, adding a further tier to upgrading and strengthening of their role.

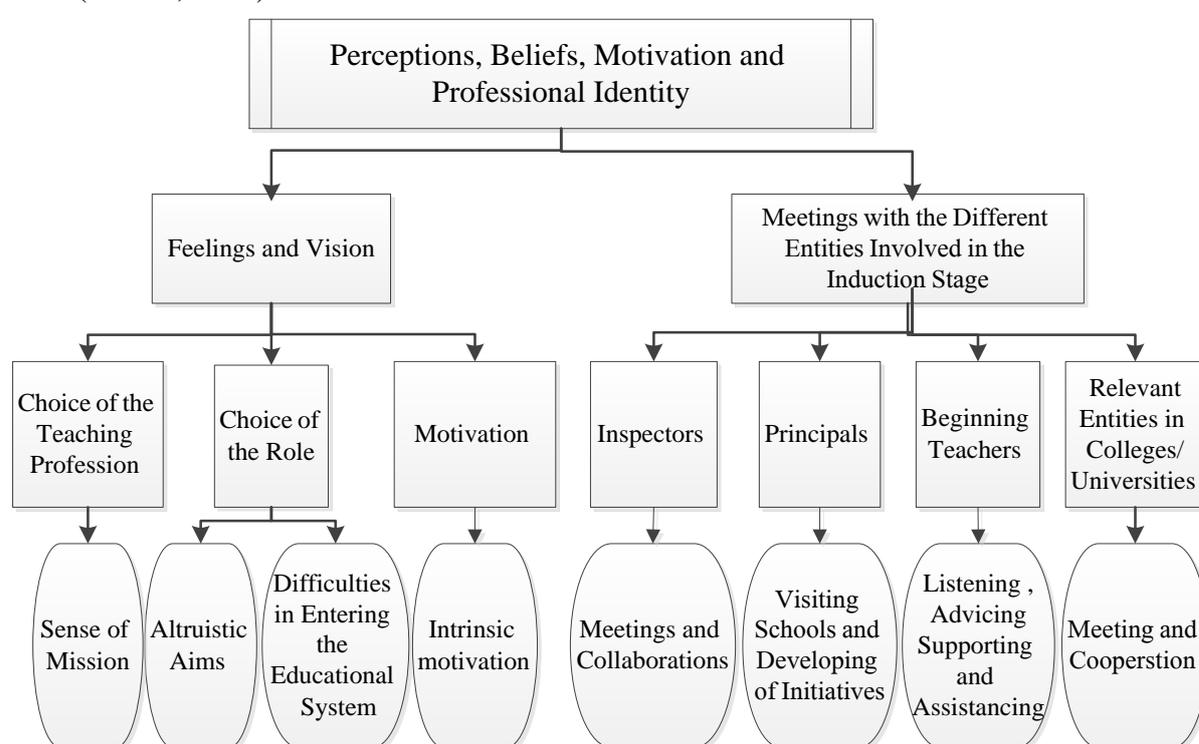
## **The Method**

DCCs were requested to complete a questionnaire online, thus allowing them to remain anonymous. The questionnaire included 11 open questions, enabling each DCC to freely express his views. Following completion of the questionnaire by seven DCCs, a content analysis was conducted according to Shkedi (2003).

## The Findings

The data show that all the DCCs make it a point of attending seminars organized by the Internship and Induction Division. In addition, five DCCs participated about a year and a half ago in a special training course for induction stage DCCs; four DCCs take part in a workshop for training of mentors for interns; two work as moderators in workshops and participate in meetings in colleges/universities in the framework of their duties; and the remaining DCCs hold meetings with staff in colleges and/or universities in the districts within their jurisdiction. In addition, all the DCCs participate in educational conferences and are particular about maintaining ongoing informal contact between themselves.

The primary and secondary categories created from the content analysis formed a "category tree" (Shkedi, 2003).



The feelings and vision that underlie the professional choices of the DCCs are manifested in their choice of the teaching profession in general, and their motivation and opting for the role of induction stage DCC in particular.

The DCCs referred to their sense of mission as the main incentive in choosing the teaching profession. An example of this may be seen in the statement made by Miri: *"I chose the teaching profession out of a belief that it was a question of a social mission and that I was able to directly influence the future of the younger generation and hence the future of the country in the long run"*. In Yakov's case too the element of mission appears as the basis for his choice: *"Support for novice teachers too is a mission. In order to empower interns and improve teaching"*.

Altruistic aims appear not only in the term "mission" but in other forms by other DCCs. Avraham talks about *"the sense of social and emotional support that we give to the intern ..."*

and Nira feels *"like a crusader for justice who is willing to take to the barricades ..."* In parallel, some of the DCCs state the difficulties involved in entering the system. Nira talks about her first days in the educational system: *"I remember the first days as being difficult and stressful, in which I felt like an alien who had landed on an unfamiliar planet ... I felt a strangeness and alienation, I did not know what to teach and how to teach in general ..."* Nissan describes the reality of beginning teachers as he now sees it: *"The load is huge, coping with the students, parents and teachers room is not easy, and the beginning teacher needs close support"*. Miri endorses his statement: *"Teachers who have just completed their studies and come with feelings of wanting to effect a change and assume a leadership role in the system, encounter bureaucracy, an impossible load, politics within the school system as well as without, and a multiplicity of voices. All these pressures act routinely on the rest of the educational staff, making them indifferent and non-containing towards the newcomers, not out of malice but because of the many constraints, load and erosion."* Naomi does make reference to the sources of support, but calls them *"a drop in the ocean"*.

All the DCCs who answered the questionnaire referred to the intrinsic motivation lying at the basis of their work, as may be seen in the following examples: Yakov: *"Belief, love and the joy of accomplishment"*; Avraham: *"Sense of satisfaction and self-realization"*; and Miri: *"The belief that with a lot of work, will, cooperation and empathy it is possible to spearhead changes that will affect not only the absorption of novice teachers but also the willingness for containment in general by the system, and not only outwardly"*.

The DCCs believe that they can make an impact on the optimal absorption of beginning teachers through meetings with the different entities involved in the induction stage:

(1) Contact with inspectors and principals – Naomi claims that: *"Meetings with the inspectors and their principals can contribute to an exchange of information between all the entities in the system and to the formulation of worthwhile models for absorption"*. Miri endorses her statement: *"A DCC who succeeds in attending meetings with principals and inspectors can conduct a dialogue with them on the essence and importance of optimal absorption, and on the other hand also provide an answer to concrete questions about bureaucracy and procedures, such that principals and mentors will be able to cross the hurdles without stumbling, which they would not stumble on if they were aware of them"*.

(2) Contact with principals and mentors – Avraham tells about his work procedures and their contribution: *"The meetings in the school and the meetings with the principal and mentor have given rise to a productive, positive dialogue on the process of absorption throughout ... improvement in the organizational culture and the level of action in schools"*. Miri tells about how *"to reach the principal"*: *"only when the DCC expresses identification with the unrelenting load on him and in parallel presents to him the advantages of optimal absorption and how he as principal and the system as a whole will benefit"* and Naomi believes that *"absorption is a springboard for growth"*.

(3) Contact with entities in colleges/universities – Yakov talks about: *"Assimilation and joint effort with coordinators in colleges"*, and Miri adds another aspect: *"Contact with the colleges can help in spearheading joint projects and in creating a bridge between academia and the field"*.

(4) Contact with beginning teachers – Avraham claims in favour of *"raising self-confidence in the beginning teacher and making him creative"*; Nira feels that *"attention and assistance to beginning teachers ... give the beginning teachers a feeling that they are not alone in the system ... beginning teachers feel that they have an ear and that therefore the system is perhaps not so threatening and strange"*; and Ruth believes in making room for listening through openness and empathy: *"Giving the beginning teachers the opportunity to consult with someone on every issue in a non-committal way ... dialogues with beginning teachers who were in need of a sympathetic ear, resulting in the strength to go on"*.

These beliefs, together with their feelings regarding their ability to make a dent in all matters relating to the optimal absorption of beginning teacher, have shaped their perception of the job and their vision, manifested in the metaphors that they chose to represent their roles: *"Watering of flowers"* (Yakov); *"A tree dripping water"* (Avraham); *"A mother protecting her children"* (Nira); *"Mother Goose"* (Ruth), *"Going upwind"* [standing for fighting the system] (Naomi) and *"A lighthouse – illuminating the way for a public that is party to the processes and must forge a path and shine a light [representing warmth and support] for interns and novice teachers"* (Miri).

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The tool for measuring professional identity developed by Fisherman & Weiss (2011) is a quantitative one, but a deeper look at the four aspects appearing in it (certainty in choice of profession, self-efficacy, sense of mission, and image of the teaching profession) allows a close correlation to be established with the statements of the DCCs. What may be clearly seen from these statements is their sense of mission and the intrinsic elements deeply embedded in their perception of the teaching profession, their ability to influence, their long-term contribution, and their belief in the correct choice of career. These principles are further underscored in the face of the personal difficulties that some of them experienced at the outset of their professional careers, as well as their identification with the difficulties with which beginning teachers have to cope today. Such understanding appears to constitute part of their personality, a fact that is manifested in their capacity for understanding and containment not only towards beginning teachers but also towards the load borne by all teachers and principals. Furthermore, the metaphors used by the DCCs to describe their roles shed light on the parameters by which they perceive their roles – "dripping tree" and "watering of flowers" refer to giving to and nurturing beginning teachers; "Mother Goose" represents protectiveness and an attempt to keep their protégés from having to contend with the external world; while the image of the lighthouse symbolizes light at the end of an obstacle course, charting of a

course and perhaps recruitment of different position holders to support the beginning teachers, just as a seaport uses a lighthouse to illuminate the way for ships' captain.

An understanding of the difficulties with which beginning teachers have to cope, on the one hand, and the highly complex nature of reality on the other, constitute a trigger for DCCs to develop a host of initiatives that would allow them to reach different populations in order to apply the policy of the Ministry and consolidate the status of beginning teachers. The creation of contacts strengthens the belief inherent in the DCCs and their sense of self-efficacy, stemming from a deep-seated willingness to offer advice, support and empathy, and a desire to spearhead meaningful processes.

There is no doubt that the traits of the DCCs, alongside their perception of their own role as well as the difficulties faced by beginning teachers, constitute an optimal basis for implementation of the initiative of the Internship and Induction Division (Zilbershtrom, 2013) in maximizing support to beginning teachers. It is important to continue to develop this professional community.

### **Recommendations**

DCCs generally meet several times during the course of the year for give-and-take sessions in the framework of peer groups. They also maintain routine contact for the purposes of consultation and collaboration. However, each DCC is alone in his district, and therein lies his isolation.

First and foremost, it is recommended to recognize and strengthen the role of the DCC in order to reinforce his professional identity. This can be made possible by professional development through involvement in a forum consisting of internship and induction coordinators in colleges and universities. Such a forum will result in academic recognition of the induction stage in teaching and creation of work relations that will enable development and implementation of new initiatives, based on the fact that all parties share the same goal, namely, to ensure optimal absorption of teachers at the start of their careers and prevent their dropout.

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