

**HAIM H. GAZIEL, YAEL COHEN-AZARIA, KLARA SKUBIC ERMENC**

## **ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND JOB STRESS AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: DO THEY DIFFER FROM PRINCIPALS OF REGULAR SCHOOLS?**

### **Abstract**

The objective of the present study was to compare principals' perceptions of their leadership roles in regular (Dovno, 1999) versus special education (Zaretzky, Faircloth & Moreau, 2005) schools, and how these perceptions affect feelings of job stress (Friedman, 2001; Margalit, 1999). We predicted that regular school principals would differ in their perceived roles and job stress from their counterparts. Using data obtained from samples of principals in regular education ( $n = 104$ ) and principals in special education ( $n = 60$ ), hypotheses were examined and partially supported. Implications for school principals' training will be discussed further.

### **Introduction**

Special education presents one of the key challenges facing educational leaders in contemporary contexts characterized by diversity and comprehensive school reform. As it is known from the literature, these challenges transcend international boundaries; in this case spanning the border of Israel. As expectations increase with more rigorous and demanding academic standards of achievement for all students, the progress of all must be accounted for. To this end the school leader's role has become increasingly important in developing, implementing and sustaining inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for students with special needs. Furthermore, principals need to be able to address the instructional needs of all students while leading in increasingly diverse yet ostensibly inclusive contexts (Fullan, 2003; Zaretzky, Faircloth & Moreau, 2005).

These complicated roles expected from the school principals lead some of them to quit the job (Billingsley & Cross, 1991). For this reason, the aim of this study was to understand better the role of the principal in the administration of education programs from a comparative perspective (regular versus special education) and to look for the factors attached to feelings of job stress in both categories. We argue that such an understanding can assist in the development of professional preparation programs and subsequent professional development activities that have as their focus an approach to instruction and instructional leadership within an accountability context that may better serve the needs of students.

### **School principals' roles perception**

While most of the studies related to principals in regular education are largely descriptive in nature (Dovno, 1999; Rozenblatt & Somech, 1998), studies related to principals at special education schools are normative in nature. They include how the school principal has to do such things as build effective relationships and collaborative work teams in their schools; provide instructional leadership and a language of caring; and have vision and courage, which counter-balanced most

principals' focus on achievement and standards embedded in their understanding of their roles (Friedman, 2001; Quigney, 1996). Very few studies are descriptive and ask the principals how they perceive their roles. The results of those studies reveal the following: In a study conducted by Newman (1990) among 59 principals of special education schools in the United States, the participants ranked their perceived roles as the following: curriculum planning, networking and communication with the various professional school members, coordinating with the school community inside and outside and finally mentoring teachers. Arick and Krug (1993) conducted a study among 1,468 principals of special education schools in the United States and the participants ranked their perceived roles as the following: instructional leadership, developing information systems at schools, evaluating school programs and communicating among school teams. Alper and Schloss (1996) found that the most important role mentioned by school principals was a strong collaboration with parents. A study done by Ronen (2003) among Israeli school principals revealed that the most important roles mentioned were instructional leadership, strong collaboration with parents and coordinating among professional staff members (school counselor, the school psychologist, the school nurse, the school doctor and other specialists). Richmond (2004) found that all principals articulated attitudes that were consistent with the philosophy of relational leadership. They were genuinely interested in what others had to say and they made time to listen. Zaretzky, Faircloth & Moreau (2005) found that the special education school principals perceived their roles as the following: the development of sound instructional and assessment practices linked to measurable goals, participating in placement and review committees' legislative processes, accessing and equitably distributing a scarcity of resources, nurturing relationships and networks within and beyond their schools and the development of effective mediation and negotiation strategies for interaction with parent advocates. When we compared these results to what is known from research about role perceptions of principals of regular schools, we found an important difference: the principals of regular schools attach more importance to their administrative and public-relation duties (budgeting, fundraising, marketing, controlling, coordinating), while special education principals attach more importance to their pedagogical roles (Ben-Arieh, 1998; Friedman, 2001).

### **Principals' perceived roles and job stress**

School principals' job stress factors in regular education were investigated extensively. The main results emphasized the following factors: principal work loading, accountability, standards, responding to parents' expectations for student achievements, role ambiguity, budget cuts and teachers' low motivation (Friedman, 1997; Gazieli, 1993; Titleboim, Zweig & Schor, 2003; Whitaker, 1999). The few studies done among principals in special education revealed that special education school principals experience some different factors of job stress that affect their day-to-day work. The most common factors found in the literature were the following:

**Work overloading** (Dobbs, 1998): the school principal has to fulfill tasks which his/her counterpart in a regular school is free of: admission, selection and placement of students, following each student's work and behavior, being in steady communication with professionals regarding each student (social worker,

psychologist, teachers, nurse, parents, and local education supervisors) and controlling and coordinating the student body.

**The heterogeneity of the student population:** Different age groups from 4 to 21 and with various disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995; Riffel, 1997; Vivinetto, 1990) attend special education schools. The school principal is expected—according to the 1988 Special Education Act—to build a particular educational program for each student according to the student's needs. This can include blind or deaf students or students with personality disturbances; the principal must help teachers develop pedagogical materials for the education of all students.

**A long working day:** While the principal in a regular school is usually expected to remain at school until 3 p.m., the principal at a special education school is mostly expected to stay at school until 6 p.m. (Antoniou, Polychroni & Walters, 2000). Besides his/her duties at school, the principal has other personal duties and play other roles, which can generate conflict and a stressful situation.

**Different expectations** from the educational staff from one side and the paramedical staff from the other side: both groups have different training and role perceptions and the principals have to maneuver among them.

**Parents' expectations and demands** (Alper & Schloss, 1996; Margalit, 1999): parents are expected to be involved in the education of their children, particularly if the school is for students with special education needs. The problem is that there is a fine line between involvement and interference, which creates a perceived stressful situation. Margalit (1999) even argued that some parents expect the principal and the teachers to cure all of the discipline problems of their children.

Following the related research, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1. It is expected that special education principals would perceive their main roles as instructional leaders, communicators and coordinators with schools agencies, while principals of regular schools would perceive their administrative roles as the most important.

H2. It is expected that principals of special education schools would emphasize heterogeneity of student population, work overloading, and parents' interference as the main job stressors while principals of regular schools would emphasize budget cuts, accountability, expectations for students' achievement and teachers' apathy as their primary stressors.

Because of the paucity of studies testing the differential effect of the demographic variables upon principals' feelings of job stress, we formulated the following research questions: (a) Are there differences among school principals of both categories in their stress level according to their differential ages and their job seniority? (b) How much do principals' perceptions of their roles affect job stress levels in regular and in special education schools?

## Method

### Sample

The sample was chosen randomly from the Tel-Aviv education district and included 152 principals of regular primary schools, 104 of whom responded (68%), while the principals of special education schools included all of the primary schools and 85 principals, 60 of whom responded (70%); this is quite a large percentage of responses in the Israeli educational context. The average age of the whole sample is

47 with a standard deviation of 7.33. The mean job seniority is 13 years. Regarding education, 62% have a post-graduate degree while 38% have an undergraduate degree.

### Instruments

The subjects were asked to complete two questionnaires regarding their perception of the principal's role, constructed particularly for the present study. After that, 15 regular school principals and 10 special education school principals were asked in for an interview conducted by the investigators regarding what it means to provide leadership in education and how this leadership is demonstrated in the day-to-day management of education programs services and personnel. The subjects of both categories, regular schools and special education schools, were also asked to describe how they perceive their roles as school principals. A subsequent cross-case allowed for the identification of common circumstances shared by the participants as well as cases that remained unique to individual principals. The categories stemmed from the review analysis for the building of the perceived roles inventory for school principals. A test-retest reliability run among 30 in-service training principals of both school categories at Bar Ilan University revealed a mean  $r$  of .76 for the regular schools. Then, the principals had to note their perception, which was stated as, "I perceive my role to include the following," followed by a list of twenty activities. Subjects had to note their extent of agreement on a Likert-type scale (from 1 = completely disagree to 6 = completely agree).

The questionnaire yielded the following factors: (Items factor loading 0.40 and up).

**Teaching planning and implementation** (47% of the variance explained) included items such as the following: teacher in-service training, organization of the pedagogic council, supervision of curricula, introduction of new teaching methods, homework educational activities, initiating and planning of new curricula.

**General management** (24% of the variance explained) included the following: school maintenance, school aesthetics, teaching organization, organization of extra-curricular activities, budgeting, exhibitions and displays.

**Human relations** (15% of the variance explained) included the following: solving teachers' personal problems, solving students' particular problems, interpersonal relations in teamwork, interpersonal relations with the local education authority officer, interpersonal relations with the school inspector and the Ministry of Education officers, relationship with parents, delegates etc.

**Extra-educational activities** (7% of the variance) included items such as the following: activating the student council, activating pupil committees, activating extra-curricular circles, activating special educational events, selecting textbooks, planning teaching aids.

The second questionnaire was adopted from Friedman (1995). The perceived stress questionnaire included 33 statements regarding the factors putting stress on principals in fulfilling their job. The subjects had to answer on a Likert-type scale (from 1 = completely disagree to 6 = completely agree). The Alpha Cronbach reliability test yielded a mean  $r$  of .84.

A factor analysis run on the data with varimax rotation yielded the following factors:

**Budget constraints** (items 15, 21, 23, 24, 25) Alpha = .76. Explained variance = 9.34%.

**Parents expectations** (items 9, 10, 12, 26) Alpha = .76. Explained variance = 8.80%.

**Work overload** (items 6, 17, 18, 19, 20) Alpha = .65. Explained variance = 8.17%.

**Problems with teachers** (items 8, 11, 27, 29, 28, 29, 30) Alpha = .74. Explained variance = 7.53%.

**Feeling of less support and loss of authority** (items 1, 2, 7, 16, 32, 33) Alpha = .58. Explained variance = 5.85%.

Total variance explained = 39.69%.

## Results

### Principals' role perceptions in regular and special education schools

The significant differences regarding role perceptions between regular school principals and special education school principals is in the following variables: general management ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $Sd = 0.85$  versus  $M = 2.60$ ,  $Sd = 1.00$ ;  $t = 2.98$ ,  $p < .01$ ); human relations ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $Sd = 1.11$  versus  $M = 3.56$ ,  $Sd = .93$ ,  $3.09$ ,  $p < .01$ ); and extra-educational activities ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $Sd = 1.27$  versus  $M = 3.08$ ,  $Sd = 1.21$ ;  $t = 3.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ). No significant differences were found between the two groups in the teaching planning and implementation variable ( $t = 0.25$ ;  $p = n.s.$ ).

### Principals' job stress in regular and special education schools

The significant differences between regular school principals and special education school principals in their perceptions of work stressors are the following: budgets constraints ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $Sd = 0.69$  versus  $M = 2.64$ ,  $Sd = 0.66$ ;  $t = 2.86$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); parents expectations from school ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $Sd = 0.64$  versus  $M = 2.17$ ,  $Sd = 0.60$ ;  $t = 3.075$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); difficulties in teacher management ( $M = 2.49$ ,  $Sd = 0.63$  versus  $M = 2.22$ ,  $Sd = 0.51$ ;  $t = 2.81$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). No significant differences were found between the two principal groups in work overloading ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $Sd = 0.59$  versus  $M = 3.64$ ,  $Sd = 0.82$ ;  $t = .988$ ;  $p = n.s.$ ) or feelings of loss of authority ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $Sd = 0.60$  versus  $M = 2.70$ ,  $Sd = 0.52$ ;  $t = 1.647$ ;  $p = n.s.$ ).

### Job stress levels among subjects according to age and job seniority

The most stressful school principals in both groups according to age is the 30 to 44 age group ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $Sd = 0.52$ ), followed by the age group from 45 to 51 ( $M = 2.40$ ;  $Sd = 0.56$ ) and the age group 52 to 64 ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $Sd = 0.37$ ). The analysis of variance shows a significant difference among groups:  $F(2,150) = 3.784$ ,  $p < .05$ . We receive the same picture when comparing the groups according to job seniority—the most stressful group is the new principals who have been at the job between 1 and 6 years ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $Sd = 0.54$ ), followed by the job seniority group from 7 to 11 years ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $Sd = 0.54$ ) and the job group who has been at the job 12 years or more ( $M = 2.24$ ;  $Sd = 0.56$ );  $F(2,150) = 4.624$ ,  $p < .01$ .

### Job stress level according to principals' role perceptions in regular schools

In the regular schools the factors that most account for work stress levels among school principals are the following: general management (explaining 35.2% of the

variance) and then teaching planning and implementation (25.9%) and human relations at school (12.7%). The other perceived roles do not have any significant effect upon work stress level.

#### Job stress levels according to principals' role perception in special education schools

In the special education schools the factors most accounting for work stress levels among school principals are the following: teaching planning and implementations (explaining 27.6% of the variance) followed by extra educational activities (13.5%), and human relations at school (10.1%). The other perceived roles have no significant effect upon work stress levels.

### **Discussion**

The present study was designed in order to investigate whether (a) principals of regular schools differ from the special education schools in their role perceptions (b) whether principals of regular schools differ from their counterparts of special education schools in their perceptions of work stress and (c) which role factors explain the work stress levels of both categories of principals.

Previous studies indicated that principals at special education schools attach more importance to their instructional roles such as monitoring teachers' work and human relations roles such as communication with staff, students and parents, while the present study shows that the main difference between groups is the administrative roles (general management), which is considered a more important role by regular school principals and less important by special education school principals. The principals of special education schools attach more importance to their human relations roles such as having intensive relationships with teachers, students and parents. The school principals have to lead a population that needs more care and treatment. In that population there are different categories; those students with intellectual disabilities and those with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

No significant differences were found between groups regarding educational planning and implementing curriculum. Both groups perceive that role as important. Regarding the extra-educational activities, the significant difference is not surprising because activating student councils or committees is much easier to do in a regular school than in special school. The results indicate that the first hypothesis was proven only partially. According to the second hypothesis, it was expected that principals of special education differ from their counterparts in perceiving the factors of their work stress. Previous studies found that both categories of principals have approximately the same work stress factors. However, previous studies also indicated that special education school principals reported that conflict among them and the para-medical staff and parents' interference are the main factors in their feelings of work stress. In addition, the heterogeneity of the student population due to having students of different ages or different problems at the same school puts a great work stress upon principals. Principals of regular schools are more stressed by work overloading, accountability, and parents' expectations than schools that have to deal with students' misbehavior. The present study shows that the main differences between groups in their perception of work stress are the budget constraints, parents' expectation from schools, and feelings of loss of authority. In

all these factors the regular school principals reported being more stressed than their counterparts, while in work loading no significant difference was found. Both groups reported that work overload is the most stressful factor. Finally, we may say that the second hypothesis was corroborated only partially.

Regarding the first research question, it was found that the younger principal and those with less experience in the principalship reported having more job stress, which is logically clear.

Regarding the second research question, results indicated the most work stress of the regular school principals is mainly due to the administrative duties and the pedagogical duties. School principals are less job stressed by interpersonal problems or conflicts. The situation is different in the special education schools, where school job stress levels are mostly explained by the teaching and planning and implementations of the extra educational activities and finally by the human relation aspects of the job.

These differences could be explained by the fact that the special education school principals are in charge of a special and vulnerable population, where paramedical staff and other professional groups are involved at schools. Every educational activity had to be coordinated with the school regular staff, with the professional staff such as the psychologist and the social worker and with the paramedical staff. School principals are less bothered by administrative work. Special education schools are small. Everybody takes care of the school and they have fewer budget problems. They could be defined as typical domesticated organizations. Meanwhile, regular schools are usually big schools, complicated with a lot of day-to-day management problems. Principals have to fight to have regular budgets, to respond to parents for students' achievements and to be accountable to the Ministry of Education officers; this is all in addition to their duties in running the curriculum and monitoring school staff.

## Conclusions

The present study indicates that principals of special education have to accomplish different roles than their counterparts in regular schools; they experience different job stressors and for that reason they need different professional development programs.

Findings from this study emphasize the importance of training school principals in ways that fit their perceived roles. Special educational leaders have to be prepared mostly in instructional and human relations domains; namely, to monitor teachers' work, to enhance learning for an increasingly diverse student body with a wide range of needs and to guide teachers and additional school personnel toward school aims.

A great part of their preparation has to do with human relation skills, which are needed to fulfill their job duties. They need professional knowledge and skills to interact among a variety of specialists (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). While principals who are required to administer regular education programs are also responsible for a broad range of duties, they are more stressed and concerned with their administrative duties. They need skills in budgeting, planning, organizing, staffing, fundraising and marketing.

## References

- Alper, S., Schloss, J. P. & Schloss, C. N. (1996). Families of children with disabilities in elementary and middle school: Advocacy models and strategies. *Exceptional Children*, 62, 261-270.
- Antoniou, A. S., Polychroni, F. & Walters, B. (2000). Sources of stress and burnout of school principals of special education needs in Greece. Paper presented at the international special education congress, Athens, Greece.
- Arick, J. R. & Krug, D. A. (1993). Special education administrators in the United States: Perception on policy and personnel issues. *The Journal of Special Education*, 27, 348-364.
- Ben-Arieh, A. (1998). Role perceptions of leaders in education: Principals and supervisors. Unpublished MA thesis, Tel-Aviv University, School of Education.
- Billingsley, B. S. & Cross, L. H. (1991). Teachers' decisions to transfer from special to general education. *The Journal of Special Education*, 24, 496-511.
- Dobbs, R. F. (1998). A study of burnout as perceived by special education directors in the state of Georgia. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Georgia. DAI-A58-12.
- Dovno, N. (1999). Education administration students attitudes toward management and education. Unpublished MA thesis Tel-Aviv University, School of Education.
- Fuchs, D. & Fuchs, L. S. (1995). What's special about special education? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76, 522-530.
- Friedman, I. (1997). To be a school principal the stress factors and how to cope within. In E. Paldi (Ed.), *Education in a changing time* (pp. 443-452). Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University Press.
- Friedman, I. (2001). A proposal defining school principals roles and duties in Israel. Forum: *The journal of school administrators in Israel*, 18, 7-10.
- Fullan, M. (2003). *The moral imperative of school leadership*. London: Sage.
- Gazieli, H. (1993). Occupational stress as experienced by educators and its possible determinates: The Israeli setting. *Curriculum and Teaching*, 8, 81-90.
- Margalit, M. (1999). Special education. In E. Peled (Ed.), *Fifty years of education in Israel*, (pp. 961-977). Jerusalem: Ministry of Defense Publications.
- Newman, K. S. (1970). Administrative tasks in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 6, 521-524.
- Quigney, T. A. (1996). Revisiting the role of the building principal in the supervision of special education. *Planning and Changing*, 27, 209-228.
- Richmond, M. J. (2004). Values in educational administration: Them's fighting words. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 7, 339-356.
- Riffel, G. M. (1997). A correlational study of organizational role stress and burnout among directors of special education in Kansas. DAI-A48-02.
- Ronen, H. (2003). The future of the special education schools. *Topics in Special Education*, 18, 75-81.
- Rosenblatt, Z. & Somech, A. (1998). The work behavior of Israeli elementary school principal: Expectations versus reality. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 34, 505-532.
- Titleboim, R., Zweig, H. & Schor, D. (2003). *The information needs of school principals in Israel*. Jerusalem: Zold Institute for Research in Social Sciences.



- Vivinetto, J. S. (1990). An analysis of the impact of the New Jersey special education referral process and its influence on the degree of stress of elementary school principals. *DAI-A* 51-04.
- Whitaker, K. S. (1999). Principal role change and implications for principalship candidates. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 8, 352-364.
- Zaretzky, L. (2004). Responding ethically to complex school-based issues in special education. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 32, 20-32.
- Zaretzky, L., Faircloth, S. & Moreau, L. (2005). School leadership in special education. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, Montreal, Canada.

Prof. Dr. Haim Henry Gaziel  
Bar Ilan University, School of Education  
Israel  
haim.gaziel@gmail.com

Dr. Yael Cohen-Azaria  
Bar Ilan University, School of Education  
Israel

Doc. Dr. Klara Skubic Ermenc  
University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts  
Slovenia  
klara.ermenc@gmail.com