



**THE ARRIVAL OF A NEW WOMAN PRINCIPAL
AND TEACHERS' SELF-RENEWAL: REFLECTIONS FROM
LIFE STORIES OF MID-CAREER TEACHERS¹**

The first years of a principalship are marked by unique tasks and experiences. Studies conducted with beginning principals (BPs) indicate that they experience shock of transition to their new position, intensity of the job, high levels of personal insecurity, professional inadequacy, lack of practical knowledge, a profound sense of isolation from peers, anxiety, high levels of stress, self-doubt, and constant fear of losing control and becoming ineffective (Bennaim & Humphreys, 1997; Daresh & Male, 2000; Hall & Parkay, 1992; Oplatka, 2001; Parkay, Currie, & Rhodes, 1992; Robbins & Alvy, 1995). BPs were likewise found to face enormous responsibilities including the necessity to reduce conflicts and solve problems for a wide range of stakeholders (Daresh & Male, 2000), culture-building (Hall & Mani, 1992), and a need for vision-introduction (Reiger & Bradley, 1995). Furthermore, BPs' primary focus is on setting priorities and seeking ways to manage, to control, and to promote meaningful change in the school (Hall & Parkay, 1992).

One of the questions commonly addressed in studies concerning the first years of principalship is staff reaction to the arrival of the BP. A large quantity of research reveals hostile staff reaction and tension between staff and BPs (Bennaim & Humphreys, 1997; Daresh & Playko, 1995), staff resistance to their changes in schools (Oplatka, 2001; Robbins & Alvy, 1995), and fear and apprehension of the unknown by teachers and BPs (Weindling & Earley, 1987). New BPs often have to confront poor morale and support ineffective teachers (Dunning, 1996), and cope with anger and denial from veteran teachers (Daresh & Playko, 1995).

However, while the literature abounds with examples of "negative" influences of newly-appointed principals on the staff, potential "positive" impacts have so far received scant attention from researchers. Thus, in order to fill this gap, my aim here is to demonstrate the process of self-renewal that was experienced by Israeli mid-career teachers subsequent to the arrival of a new woman principal, and to discuss contextual and biographical determinants of that process.

Examining the connection between the arrival of BPs into the school and veteran teachers' self-renewal may increase our intellectual and theoretical understanding of the principal-teacher relationship and its impact upon teachers' careers. Furthermore, congruent with feminist scholars (e.g., Blackmore, 1999), as the voices presented in this article are virtually women's stories of school reality, their career accounts provide vital and generative



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insights into a potentially alternative interpretation of the relationships between newly-appointed principals and their staff.

The rest of this article is organized as follows: The first section deals with the concept and process of self-renewal and the second with methodological issues. The article then goes on to present the research findings. The last section presents major conclusions of this study, and suggests implications for principal preparation.

The Phenomenon of Self-Renewal

The phenomenon of self-renewal appears in philosophic writings and theological views, and is a common theme of myth, poem, and literature (e.g., Gardner, 1964; Jaffe, 1985). Renewal is seen as “rebirth,” “re-beginning,” and a means to revitalize one’s religious commitment. In its “modern” meaning, renewal is conceived of as a response to routine and lack of intellectual stimulation, which characterize many occupations in our society (Gardner, 1964; Hudson, 1991). A person who experiences a process of renewal is assumed to refresh his perspectives and enlarge his sphere of knowledge. In doing so, he is likely to break the routine and the habitual and find new meaning in the world (Tien, 1989).

A number of researchers have explored a stage of renewal in careers (what Young coined “late blooming”) in which the individual doubts his life structure and creates new commitments to other life structures (Bejian & Salomone, 1995; Oplatka, Bargal, & Inbar, 2001; Young, 1992). Renewal is considered a transitional stage characterized by (a) reappraisal of career commitment and choice, (b) integration of the polarities in one’s personality, and (c) modification of one’s life structure (Murphy & Burck, 1976). In a three-year study, Riverin-Simard (1988) discovered that adults in mid-life were raising questions about the purpose of their personal and professional lives, trying to identify meaningful aims for the future while remaining committed to the past. These issues are referred to as a part of the renewal stage in the analysis of Bejian and Salomone (1995). Similarly, Williams and Savickas (1990) indicated that workers between the ages of 35 and 44 years tend to raise more questions about their personal and vocational purposes and either renew their commitments to their career by updating skills and developing new competencies, or redesign their life structures to devote more time to leisure and family. In education, Oplatka (2003) and Oplatka et al. (2001) documented a process of self-renewal among Israeli women school principals in mid-career that included, by and large, reflecting, reframing, energy-replenishing, up-dating, and innovating behaviors. Self-renewal was related to desired change initiation, career transition, Sabbatical year, and personal dispositions.



To sum up, five major elements of self-renewal are discussed in the literature: (a) Internal reflection, i.e., re-evaluating one's career choices and commitment to different life structures and questioning one's present beliefs and faith; (b) Reframing existing perspectives, i.e., reorganizing old plans and restructuring attitudes about self and society, like wearing new glasses to explore reality; (c) Searching for new opportunities and tasks, i.e., looking for challenging new goals and objectives rather than simply adhering to the known and safe; (d) Enthusiasm and replenishing of internal energy, characterizing people in renewal who perceive their jobs as very exciting and feel satisfied with life; and (e) Professional updating, through training, self-reading, self-education, etc.

Mode of Inquiry

The study described here represents one part of a wider qualitative study that sought to understand the phenomenon of self-renewal among school teachers in mid-career. The larger study employed a qualitative methodology known as the life story (Creswell, 1997). The life stories of 20 women teachers aged 45-55, who had been schoolteachers for more than 15 years, were collected. Choosing teachers within this age range was based on Tamir's finding (1991) that the mid-career stage occurs, in parallel with the mid-life stage, usually between the ages of 40 and 50. In addition, the study employed a "theoretical sampling" based on the assumption in qualitative research of a theoretical connection between the researched phenomenon and a set of common features. In the larger study, teachers in mid-career, who had experienced career transition, who were returning from a Sabbatical year or who were involved in school changes, were chosen, due to the connection already found between these features and self-renewal. But, as the study progressed, it identified unexpected forms of self-renewal among them, particularly the experiences of self-renewal of four women teachers subsequent to the arrival of a new woman principal into their schools. Their life stories are the base upon which this article stands. The women, non-observant Jews, are over 50 year old veteran teachers with more than 20 years in the field.

The schoolteachers' life stories were divulged through an open interview, which exposed the personal perspectives of the interviewees (Paton, 1990). The interviews were conducted face to face in each teacher's home, with their contents and evolution not defined a priori. This resulted in some variations among the interviews. The contents of the interviews included reflection on the women teachers' professional as well as personal lives, which in turn suggested some implications regarding their abilities to restructure their past experiences in their professional and other life spheres. They were



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asked, for example, to indicate the most challenging task they had had to deal with in their first years of teaching, to depict their feelings in recent years, to reflect upon their first years of teaching and so on. The data collected from the life story interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by inductive methods directed towards the development of a grounded theory. The analysis used complementary methods: a “thematic analysis” aimed at identifying central themes in the life stories (Luborsky, 1994) and “grounded theory” in which open and axial coding of the data engendered conceptual categories leading to the conceptualization of self-renewal processes grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In order to increase credibility and authenticity of the data, the analysis was conducted by one person and was strengthened by structured analysis and by peer review, two common indicators qualitative researchers use to build confidence in their analytic procedures (Marshall & Rosman, 1995). However, consistent with most qualitative researchers who assume that those whom they study interpret reality from multiple perspectives for varying purposes (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), the researcher was interested in revealing participants’ subjective ideas of reality, rather than finding some objective reality.

Findings: The Story of Renewal Subsequent to the Arrival of the New Principal

The life accounts of the teachers in this study reveal career stories that begin with difficulties for some and challenges for others. Their stories are embedded with career transitions, such as changing teaching areas, moving from one role to another, or moving to another school. In the last act of the “plot,” when three felt stagnated and one perceived herself as being at her peak, new women principals appear in their schools. This event is interpreted in their career accounts as a trigger for their self-renewal, mainly due to the unique leadership style of their BPs. Their stories are discussed here at length.

Consistent with many reports on teachers worldwide (Huberman, 1993; Lortie, 1975), choosing teaching as a career derives from societal norms which expect women to give more weight to their families. One teacher indicated that “my mother saw me as a nurse or a teacher, and I felt good with teaching,” and another highlighted that “teaching wasn’t my main focus; I got married, I had children, I came to teaching because of that.” In contrast, one teacher felt attracted to teaching from early childhood, stating that “I always wanted to be a teacher, I admired my teachers and wanted to be like them.”



The Arrival of a New Woman Principal and Teachers' Self-Renewal

Regardless of their initial motivation to teach, and similar to findings in many other accounts of teachers (e.g., Day, 1999; Huberman, 1993), these teachers perceived their first years in teaching as a difficult time in which they had to persist in the face of many disciplinary problems, helplessness, and insufficient instructional knowledge. One teacher transmitted this situation in the following quote:

Because of discipline problems that were very hard, I felt helplessness; I felt I was standing alone in front of a class with many, many problems without being able to teach or to handle these kinds of problems.

However, in spite of the difficulties in their first years in the career, the teachers interpreted these years retrospectively as a period in which they felt very satisfied and fulfilled due to their success with disadvantaged students. This success was characterized by “the fun it is to see that a child who didn’t want to study, who felt contempt towards everything, suddenly could communicate and start to believe in himself,” as one teacher said. Her self-actualization in those days appears to indicate emotional commitment to students along the career cycle.

Several years after their induction stage, the teachers held small instructional roles with other faculty which, while not managerial in nature, were presented as contributing to their professional growth. For some these roles replenished physical energy while others indicated new challenges and a time of revitalization.

The Arrival of the New Woman Principal

Interestingly, when the new women principals appeared in the schools, the four teachers were in different internal and external conditions. Some teachers felt stagnant or even a lack of self-actualization at that time, which led them to consider early retirement. One teacher expressed this sense explicitly and clearly:

I thought maybe I could retire, everything had become so routine, so shallow. I had roles, the ceremonies (I organized) were the same, didn’t make me feel elated anymore, but she (BP) came with entirely different things, that I had never thought about doing before....

The teacher alludes to the changes brought about by the BP. In contrast, another teacher perceived herself to be at her peak, chiefly due to a transition she had made four years earlier to a new school. But when a new BP entered her school, she still felt challenged by the new tasks she was then given.

In conjunction with reports of the induction stage of principals (e.g., Daresh & Playko, 1995; Weindling & Earley, 1987), the four teachers felt fear



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and apprehension of the unknown accompanying the entrance of any BP. These sorts of feelings impeded them in taking on new roles, engendered negative emotions towards the BP, or as one teacher confessed: “In the beginning I was very sad. I liked working with the previous principal very much, and it was so sudden, I couldn’t get used to a new person.”

Nevertheless, despite their initially negative emotions towards the BP, the contribution of the novice woman principal to their self-renewal is strongly manifested in their life stories. The teachers emphasized the role of the BP in their energy replenishing, personal empowerment, and reframing of old instructional perspectives, all components of their self-renewal to which I shall return later in this article. One teacher illustrated the contribution of the BP to her career, connecting the BP to her internal world:

Out of the blue a new person arrived. If the previous principal had stayed, maybe I would have retired already...but the new principal gave us new life, she revitalized us with her energy, she illuminated different things, and then I saw it was fun to be with her....

Let us expand on this point and try to understand the characteristics of the new woman principals that the women teachers in this study subjectively interpreted as contributing to their self-renewal. The first prominent and recurring characteristic in the life stories is the new woman principal’s tendency to encourage professional growth of staff and to provide them with the autonomy to actualize their latent creativity, two strategies that have been found among effective principals as well as among principals who strive to revitalize burned-out teachers (Blase & Blase, 1994). One teacher clearly stated:

(The BP) treats us very well, I am talking about myself, she says good things to me, speaks nicely, is very kind, and encourages us. She gave me a new role: outside of the classroom...I am responsible for reading encouragement in the school, and I am doing wonderful things with the kids....

From the above citation and in contrast to research findings indicating that BPs usually express fear of losing control (Parkay et al., 1992), the BPs were perceived to empower the teachers in this study by delegating a greater number of tasks to them that are by and large compatible with their dispositions. One teacher, for example, indicated that “because of her personality the woman principal wants to promote teachers, to encourage teachers to take on non-instructional tasks.” In her case, the BP offered her responsibility for the program for students with special needs. Furthermore, the BP is presented in the life stories of the teachers in this study as having the ability to identify the teachers’ latent and unfulfilled potentialities that, in turn, promote their self-renewal. One teacher, for instance, commented that “the BP, probably, touches parts of my mind that I was not even aware existed...I don’t know how she



knew that I would manage the role of reading encouragement successfully, that I could do it....” The teachers who accepted more responsibility given to them by the BP appear to allow their schools, as Leithwood (1992) contends, to benefit from their accumulated expertise.

The second characteristic of the BP likely to contribute to the teachers' self-renewal is the new educational attitude she holds and her innovative perspectives, two features of BPs that so far have been seen to produce high levels of stress and resistance among staff (Parkay et al., 1992; Robbins & Alvy, 1995). But as opposed to the notion arising from current literature on BPs, the changes that the BPs introduced for the teachers in this study are conceived of in the life stories as a source for teachers' revitalization and self-renewal, chiefly due to their need to accomplish new tasks. This is evident in the following citation:

I think that thanks to our dynamic BP, whose educational perspectives are very modern, our school is very progressive, it is developing in many new and interesting directions and that's giving me a good feeling, as if I were young again, because I always run forward, never stop, never....

When asked what the BP expects from the staff, one teacher replied:

To work very hard. It is so different from what was in the past, and someone who can't stand it has to retire...and she is always ready to listen, anytime of the day, as opposed to the previous principal with whom we had to fix an appointment one week in advance.

In line with findings on effective principals (e.g., Blase & Blase, 1994), the BP conveys high expectations for teacher performance, consistently encourages teachers to take on new responsibilities, and provides direct administrative and instructional assistance, which in turn motivates the teachers to invest more energy in work.

The third characteristic of the BP that is subjectively related in the life stories to the teachers' self-renewal is caring for the staff, a recurring feature of women principals worldwide (Blackmore, 1999; Oplatka, 2002; Shakeshaft, 1989). It encompasses caring for teachers' difficulties as well as rewarding them for good performance. This feature can be best demonstrated in the following quotes:

She lets me feel that from outside she sees what I'm doing, she absorbs the situation and gives me a constructive word, she is so different from the previous one.

The previous principal never rewarded us for the roles we performed...but the new one is very generous, she rewards us for every role we take, she encourages....

It is likely that these new women principals have established an atmosphere of



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trust and support, with opportunities for teacher empowerment and leadership, and therefore the teachers' response to their initiatives is positive. Furthermore, the BPs seem to energize and bring out the best in their teachers. They choose not to impose their vision on the staff or mandate changes, but rather the teachers believed that they had been truly empowered and that they were able to grow professionally.

Elements of Self-Renewal Among the Schoolteachers

The discussion to this point showed that the arrival of a BP into the schools of the teachers in this study encouraged them to take on new roles and tasks. This change in the teachers' workplace coupled with the perceived characteristics of the new woman principal discussed above are connected in the life stories to reframing instructional perspectives, increased self-concept and self-efficacy, and energy replenishment and enthusiasm, all elements already conceptualized as part of self-renewal (Bejian & Salomone, 1995; Hudson, 1991; Oplatka et al., 2001).

Reframing instructional perspectives. The arrival of the BP brought about the introduction of a new educational philosophy into many areas of the school. In that sense, every teacher experienced a process of viewing old perspectives from new angles to reframe school reality. One teacher makes the connection between the new emphasis given by the BP to academic achievement and her self-renewal, saying that:

Before (the appearance of the BP) we just looked after the students with special educational needs, but now we prepare them for the final exams, and I'm part of this process, which contributed a lot to my renewal.

Interviewer: How did it contribute to your renewal?

Teacher: It forced me to think in a different way, not just like a 'psychologist'....

Another teacher considered the procedure of staff meetings initiated by the BP to be a means through which her attitudes toward class management had been reframed:

...The staff meeting contributed a lot to my way of working and enriched me, the brainstorming that has taken place there had a strong impact upon me...the meeting made me look at disciplinary problems from an entirely different point of view...that I have to get students interested in the class....

No doubt, the reframing process experienced by the teachers is explicitly associated with the appearance of the BP, mainly through the changes she



implemented in the school. Without the changes accompanying the entry of the BP, the teachers either would have retired or remained stagnated, as can be seen from their life stories.

Increased self-concept and self-efficacy. One of the significant consequences of the arrival of the new woman principal and her inclination to delegate responsibilities and empower the staff is the teachers' increased self-confidence and efficacy. They feel a much increased self development, as one teacher put it: "Thanks to the new tasks she (BP) gave me, I feel that I enrich myself and empower my ego." Another teacher intimated that she feels confident to take on any new role in school and accomplish it successfully, something she had never felt in the past. She makes an explicit connection between her feeling and the BP's propensity to empower the staff:

I'm different today. I'm more open to taking on new responsibilities; I removed any internal barriers. I'm ready to try everything that, in the past, I didn't want to, because I was unconfident, (but) the new woman principal pushed me to take on that project, and I succeeded, and I will continue with it next year.

Energy replenishment and enthusiasm. According to Fessler (1993), it is not uncommon for frustrated teachers to be recharged by new leadership if it gives them a fresh start and opportunities for renewed growth. Indeed, the last element of self-renewal embedded in the life stories of the teachers in this study is high levels of enthusiasm and energy replenishment. The teachers, who had described themselves in terms of stagnation and frustration prior to the appearance of the BP, clearly expressed this renewal element in their life stories:

My new roles take a lot of time and energy from me, but I enjoy them very much; the responsibility over new areas just makes me feel good and fulfilled...I feel empowered, fresh, involved and interested thanks to the new role I've got.

Another teacher manifested her enthusiasm in a slightly different way:

I love school more than ever; I could retire, but I just like what I am doing every day...I like the kids, and I feel that I contribute, I know the woman principal supports us, providing us what we need...the (arrival of the) new principal was a turning point for me, I feel revitalized.

She and the other teachers who experienced self-renewal subsequent to the arrival of a new woman principal use phrases such as "I have more energy today," "I feel much stronger," "it's so much fun to do it at my age," and the



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like to describe their renewed energy after a time in their career when they felt overwhelmed and listless.

Conclusions and Implications for Principal Preparation

The purpose of this article was to demonstrate a process of self-renewal experienced by Israeli mid-career teachers subsequent to the arrival of a new woman principal at their schools, and to discuss contextual and biographical determinants of that process. The teachers' interviews provide insight into the plausible association between the arrival of a BP and mid-career teachers' self-renewal. Thus, analyzing their stories as a "plot" shows that in the middle of their career cycle most teachers in this study felt stagnated and perhaps even frustrated. During the final "act" of their narrative they reported reframing old instructional perspectives, feeling enthusiasm and high levels of energy, and enhancing their self-concept and efficacy subsequent to the appearance of a new woman principal. It is likely that their internal condition prior to the advent of the BP had some influence upon their positive response toward their BP.

Likewise, the characteristics of the new women principals are indicated by the teachers as enabling their self-renewal. In other words, the life stories of the four mid-career teachers imply some characteristics about the BPs that are crucial for veteran teachers' self-renewal. It is likely, therefore, that when a BP adopts a "feminine" leadership style and orientation, "negative" influences of his/her arrival are mediated and minimized. More specifically, if a new principal provides teachers with autonomy to actualize their creativity, establishes an atmosphere of trust, caring, and emotional support, provides senior teachers with opportunities for growth, and emphasizes innovation, all elements referred to as a "feminine" leadership style (Blackmore, 1999; Gray, 1989; Oplatka, 2002; Regan & Brooks, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1989), then veteran and sometimes even stagnated teachers can be recharged and experience self-renewal.

In that sense, the stories of teachers' self-renewal and new BPs presented in this article belong to a unique group of teachers. Current literature on the induction stage in principalships highlighted, after all, the fears and apprehension accompanying the entrance of BPs and veteran teachers' negative responses to their initiatives and changes (e.g., Bennaïm & Humphreys, 1997; Oplatka, 2001; Robbins & Alvy, 1995). It seems, though, that the positive impact that the new women principals had upon the mid-career teachers in this study stems, at least in part, from the particular voice and interpretation attached to the workplace by women, as many feminist scholars contend (e.g., Blackmore, 1999). However, the writer is well aware of potential determi-

nants of the mid-career stage, such as the empty-nest syndrome, parents' death and the like, that have possible influence upon the teachers' self-renewal at this time. Based on the holistic standpoint of a qualitative paradigm, this study assumes the existence of multiple determinants of the self-renewal shared among those teachers who experienced the entrance of a new woman principal into their school, and refrains from isolating each one's weight in their story.

This study was descriptive and exploratory in nature. Four teachers obviously do not provide a representative sample, but their stories may be useful for pointing researchers and practitioners to the opportunities available for mid-career teachers whose school principal is replaced by a new one. It is important, therefore, that prior to the entrance of a BP, districts establish a support system for preparing senior teachers to identify their opportunities following the impending change, which will, in turn, decrease their high levels of stress and anxiety. At the same time, however, educational leadership preparation programs should make their participants aware of the significance of being supportive to senior teachers and stimulating their renewal through change initiation and empowerment. Future principals should be aware of the special needs of senior teachers and the potential contribution of this group of teachers to school improvement. By doing so, these future principals will be better prepared to handle the difficulties and stress related to their arrival into the school.

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