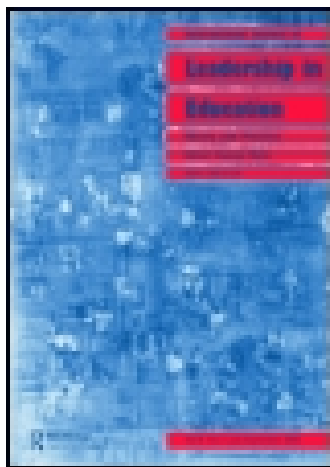


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# The naturalist approach among future educational leaders: an Israeli case study

ORLY SHAPIRA-LISHCHINSKY

This study aims to elucidate the learning aspects of the naturalist approach through meaningful learning. Fifty participants, who were enrolled in a BA programme in leadership and management for teacher trainees in Israel, were encouraged to research a question on a topic that interested them in educational leadership. The analysis was based on the qualitative approach. The data analysis followed a three-step process: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The data were organized using ATLAS.ti 5.0. The findings indicated that most of the questions revolved around a four-dimensional model that included 'student in the centre', 'school social aspects', 'school discipline' and 'effective learning'. These dimensions included topics that were taught explicitly or implicitly in the 'Introduction to educational leadership and administration' course. However, these dimensions also included topics that had not been taught during the introductory course and were of interest to the participants as a result of the unique Israeli context. The present paper proposes some ideas as to how to bridge the gap between what students perceive as interesting and what experienced faculty perceive as important, given the time constraints of the introduction course.

## Introduction

The introductory course for BA students entitled 'Introduction to educational leadership and administration' is part of the leadership and management programme for teacher trainees at one of Israel's largest universities. The goal of this course is to teach general concepts and to expose future leaders to the main educational leadership and management theories. This course includes a variety of topics which are taught at universities such as Columbia University, Ohio State University and California State University. Among the topics: differences between management and leadership, organizational structures of educational systems, organizational systematic approaches, school culture and climate, educational systems' vision, changes in educational systems and marketing educational systems. However, one main criticism among Israeli students in this programme is that the courses are too theoretical, with very little time spent on practical aspects.

Exploring future educational leaders' perceptions is very important, especially when we consider the challenges that the Israeli educational system faces. These include an ethnically stratified immigrant society which is deeply divided and conflict-ridden, economic and educational inequalities that are higher than in most other economically developed societies, a

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culture characterized by informality and a disrespect for authority (Almog, 2004; Shavit & Blank, 2012).

The 'economic naturalist approach' argues that meaningful learning is based on asking questions about real-life experiences (Frank, 2006). Based on the naturalist approach, this study tries to answer the following questions: (a) What worries future educational leaders regarding current educational systems? (b) From the answers to (a), can we determine central concepts that interest future educational leaders? (c) What theoretical concepts appear most frequently in the answers to (a)? Answering these questions may help promote meaningful learning among future educational leaders, which in turn may help them deal with the Israeli challenges mentioned above.

### *The Israeli educational system setting*

The Israeli educational system reflects the divisions of its different populations, including ethnically heterogeneous immigrants, and is divided into the Hebrew (nonreligious public schools, religious public schools and ultra-orthodox independent schools) and Arab school systems (public schools and private parochial Christian schools). After six years in elementary school, most Israeli students enter junior high school (grades 7–9), followed by high school (grades 10–12).

Students finishing junior high school can choose between the academic track, which prepares them for academic studies, and the vocational track, which usually caters to scholastically weaker students who have not done well in junior high school. Both tracks prepare students for the matriculation examinations required for higher education; however, acceptance rates to higher education are much higher for students in the academic track (Ayalon & Shavit, 2004).

Israeli education is severely underfunded. Israeli expenditure for education per student, as measured by the purchasing power parity, is low compared to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) mean, resulting in classes that are larger and teachers that are paid less than in the OECD average (OECD, 2011). The latter factors may explain why Israeli teachers often complain that it is difficult for them to maintain an effective and orderly learning environment. In most Israeli schools, classes are typically very large and noisy, and the disciplinary sanctions that teachers can legally employ are limited (Almog, 2004). Thus, the difficulties inherent in the Israeli setting increase the importance of effective learning among the students in the leadership and management programme.

### *The learning-based naturalist approach*

Previous studies have indicated that most students who take an introductory course finish it without having learned the basic principles, which may reflect ineffective learning. The problem seems to be that the course tries to cover too many principles, resulting in very little retention

(Frank, 2002; Hansen, Salemi, & Siegfried, 2002). Frank (2006) described a successful economic learning experience using a simple pedagogical device, which he termed the 'economic naturalist writing assignment': students posed an interesting question about something they had personally observed and then used basic economic principles to answer it. This pedagogical approach is based on previous studies indicating that the human brain is adept at absorbing information in the narrative form (Doyle & Carter, 2003).

Frank's writing assignment plays directly to this strength. It is an effective strategy for encouraging students to become 'economic naturalists'. Just as studying biology allows people to observe and marvel at details of the natural environment that would have otherwise escaped notice, studying economics can enable students to see the mundane details of ordinary existence in a new light. According to Frank (2002), learning the economic way of thinking is essentially like learning a new language. Even the best students seldom acquire genuine competence in a second language unless they frequently use it. The same holds true for economics. The strength of the economic naturalist approach is that it forces students to speak and write economics.

Frank (2006) gave a number of reasons why the use of the writing assignment is likely to lead to success: (a) In order to come up with an interesting question, students must consider numerous preliminary questions. This itself is an important exercise; (b) Students who raise interesting questions devote more energy to the assignment; (c) Students who pose interesting questions take the assignment outside the classroom and, as a result, internalize the exercise; finally, and most importantly, (d) When students encounter difficulties in explaining an event according to core principles or a theoretical model which they have learned, the writing assignment facilitates a deeper understanding of the basic theoretical principles. According to Frank and Bernanke (2003), the naturalist approach is not just an effective device for helping students master basic economic principles; it is also an effective vehicle for testing whether they have in fact acquired an in-depth understanding of those principles.

### *Learning-based naturalist approach as promoting learner-centred education*

Learner-centred education (LCE) as a concept is best studied phenomenologically, allowing for different definitions and interpretations across different contexts. However, for the purposes of this article, LCE will be defined as one end of a continuum of pedagogical practices. In contrast to lecturing, drilling and other methods derived from a fixed curriculum and rote learning, LCE '... gives learners, and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the contents and processes of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by learners' needs, capacities and interests' (Schweisfurth, 2013, p. 20).

This seemingly simple definition has been expanded in different directions by theorists, policy-makers and international agencies. One such

example is the *cognitive narrative*. Evidence from cognitive psychology (Ginnis, 2002) supports the notion that learner control over the content and learning process helps the learner build neural connections and meaningful patterns from existing knowledge, which leads to more effective and sustainable learning. There is an intrinsic motivation that comes from learning something that is significant and important to the learner. This helps the learner focus on learning.

A second narrative, *emancipation*, emphasizes how pedagogy can help learners develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours which over time can transform society (Freire, 1972). The emphasis on learner control is central, but made more radical with the introduction of critical pedagogy, in which learners not only have more control over what they learn and the process of learning, but are also encouraged to critically question canons of received knowledge. A third narrative, the *preparation narrative*, has considerable relevance for educational policy. This narrative emphasizes that the skills developed through inquiry-based, self-regulated learning such as flexibility, critical independent thought and entrepreneurship, build and sustain an effective knowledge base regarding educational policy such as improving students' achievements (Colclough, 2012).

Schweisfurth (2013, p. 146) proposed a set of minimum standards for LCE. The present study suggests that LCE can be enhanced by incorporating the naturalist approach into Schweisfurth's following proposed standards:

- (1) LCE proposes that lessons should engage students and motivate them to learn. This may be achieved through the naturalist approach by asking students to devise questions which interest them.
- (2) LCE proposes that learning challenges should be based upon learners' existing knowledge. This may be achieved through the naturalist approach by asking students to explain phenomena according to a theoretical model they are familiar with.
- (3) LCE proposes that dialogue should be used in teaching and learning. This may be achieved through the naturalist approach, when students finally settle on a question of interest after discussing it with their professor and with people outside the classroom. LCE proposes that learners be exposed to tensions that exist between global, national and local understandings of relevance, as in real-life situations. This may be enhanced using the naturalist approach, because by trying to find answers to questions outside the classroom, students are exposed to the tensions between the different forces.
- (4) LCE proposes that the curriculum be based on skills and attitude outcomes as well as content. These include skills of critical and creative thinking. This may be enhanced using the naturalist approach, because when students consider numerous questions in order to decide on a question they are most interested in pursuing, they develop their critical and creative thinking.

In summary, the characteristics of the naturalist approach may promote LCE among future educational leaders.

## Method

### *The study approach*

Quantitative studies tend to test pre-determined hypotheses and produce generalizable results—an approach pre-eminently useful for answering more mechanistic ‘what?’ questions. By contrast, the present study’s aims to provide illumination and understanding of complex psychosocial issues, such as the naturalist approach, could better be served by the methodology of the qualitative study, the goal of which is to answer human ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ questions (Marshall, 1996).

*Sample.* In this study I used a *judgement sample*, also known as a *purposeful sample*, which is the most common sampling technique in qualitative studies (Marshall, 1996). In this technique, the researcher actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question. The judgement sample technique involves developing a framework of the variables, partly through scrutinizing the available literature and evidence from previous studies. Another advantage of this approach is that it can specifically target professionals—in this case, educational practitioners—who have plenty of real experience in the practice of their field. During the interpretation of the data, it is important to review both participants who support accepted interpretations and participants who disagree (Ritchie, Lewis, & El Am, 2013).

The present study was conducted using a qualitative method. This choice was made despite Marshall (1996) argument for how quantitative studies of random samples may provide the best opportunity for generalizing study results to the rest of the population. Because the aim of the qualitative approach is to improve our understanding of complex human issues, and is more important for the study’s success than generalizability of results, probabilistic sampling is neither productive nor efficient for qualitative studies.

Indeed qualitative studies include few disadvantages such as: (a) Samples for qualitative investigations tend to be small. Even if a representative sample was successful, the sampling error of such a small sample is likely to be so large that biases are inevitable; (b) For a true random sample to be selected, the characteristics under study of the whole population should be known; this is rarely possible in a complex qualitative study; (c) Random sampling of a population is likely to produce a representative sample only if the research characteristics are normally distributed within the population. There is no evidence that the values, beliefs and attitudes that form the core of qualitative investigation are normally distributed, making the probability approach inappropriate.

However, qualitative studies enjoy one significant advantage, which was important enough to justify choosing a qualitative methodology for



the present study. The qualitative methodology can locate and privilege informants who are 'richer' than others, i.e. more likely to provide the researcher with insight and understanding (Ritchie et al., 2013). Accordingly, since the focus of the present study is on the naturalist approach among future educational leaders, I decided to focus on students who were enrolled in a BA programme in leadership and management (who, as participants, are 'richer' than others), and encourage them to ask questions that interested them, for the purpose of evoking conflicting or agreeing opinions among the interviewers.

*Participants.* The study included 35 women students and 15 men students. These numbers for the two populations roughly represent the average educator personnel in Israeli educational systems (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013). The average age of the students was 24.30 (SD = 3.15). The students were enrolled in a BA programme in leadership and management for teacher trainees at one of Israel's largest universities. In addition to taking part in this programme in order to learn how to become educational leaders (such as educational coordinator, vice-principal, school mentor), the participants were also enrolled in a teacher training programme towards a BA in a discipline of their choice (e.g. biology, mathematics, history and Bible studies) which they intended to teach at different school levels (elementary, junior high school and high school). All students had taken two courses in qualitative research and had already had experience in conducting field interviews.

### *Data collection*

The data were collected during 2011–2013. Ethical considerations regarding research procedures were made on the basis of guidelines taken from the 'Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct' (2002). Initially, permission to perform the study was obtained from the university's institutional review board. Following the approval, I organized group information meetings with the students who had *finished* the course 'Introduction to educational leadership and administration' and asked them to volunteer to provide questions which would serve as the data for studying how to design meaningful learning in this introductory course. The students who decided to participate were motivated by their desire to improve the effective learning in our department. In addition, each student who completed the tasks was awarded a 100\$ stipend and a letter of gratitude, mentioned the fact that the student had helped promote scientific research in our department. This letter might be useful for the student for future employment prospects.

More specifically, based on the naturalist approach theory, I asked the students to pose a single question about something that interests them regarding leadership in educational systems. Each student was asked to answer his/her question by conducting a field interview and transcribing it, then providing a document including the interview plus his/her interpretation of the interview findings (Appendix 1). This interpretation was



expected to connect his/her answer to the theoretical background that had been studied in the introductory course. The students were asked to submit their questions and answers, including the relevant part of the interviews, anonymously to my research assistant.

In total, 55 interviews were conducted by 50 students. Forty-five students conducted one interview each, and five conducted two interviews each. It was the student's choice whether to conduct a second interview, which could allow him/her to reflect more on the material.

### *Ethical considerations*

It is important to note that the present study *was not conducted within my classroom context*, and that there was no conflict of interest or dependence between me and the students since I did not teach these students during their BA studies. The students and their interviewees participated on a voluntary basis and were assured that their statements could not be traced back to them upon publication of the findings. They received a formal letter describing the goals of the study, the pledge to preserve anonymity and confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the research at any time.

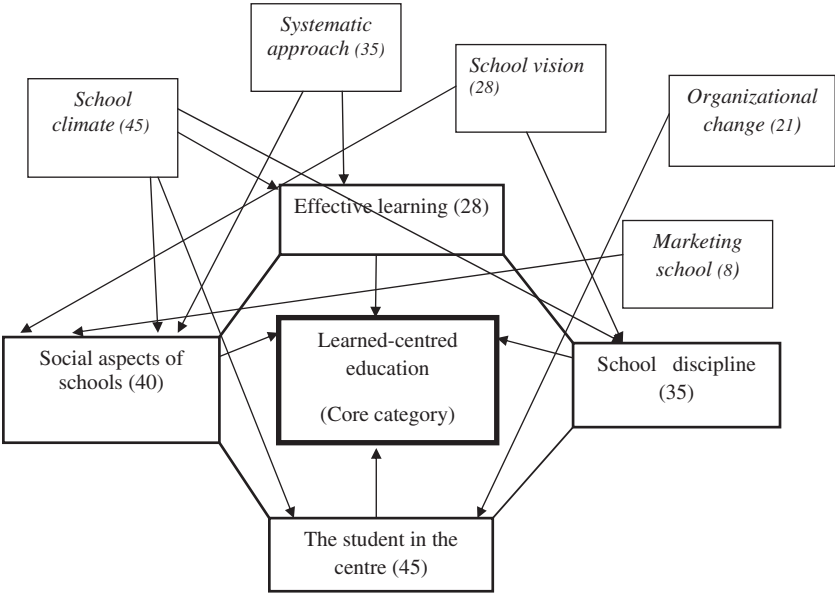
### **Data analysis**

The study analysis was based on a qualitative methodology. We used the students' documents, which included the following sources: (a) Students' questions; (b) Field interviews conducted by the students; and (c) the conclusions students drew, in which they relate their ideas and findings to the theoretical background.

The data analysis, presented in Figure 1, involved a three-step process: open coding, axial coding and selective coding, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Table 1 demonstrates the code mapping through examples of three iterations of analysis, revolving around the core category 'learned-centred education'. The three steps are explained in the following.

### *Open coding*

Open coding is the process of breaking down the data into separate units of meaning through analysing, comparing, labelling and categorizing the data (Brown, Stevenson, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002). In this study, the coding began with the students' documents, which included their questions. The text was then analysed to recognize similar questions and cluster them together. For example, the questions: 'Does the physical learning environment affect students' achievements?' and 'What is the effect of class size on students' achievements?' raised the concept of effective learning.



**Figure 1. Summary of findings: The emerging model of LCE**  
**Notes:** *Italic font*—subcategories; **Regular font**—categories; **The number in parenthesis**—frequency of category/subcategory.

*Axial coding*

This stage focused on reducing the number of subcategories and grouping them together according to more general concepts. Axial coding consists of continuous grouping of subcategories into categories and exploring variations between categories and between subcategories (Brown et al., 2002). The focus of axial coding is to construct a model that details the specific conditions that give rise to the occurrence of a phenomenon. In this study, each key theoretical topic was treated as a subcategory which was placed along the axis of one dimension of the ‘LCE’ category. In some documents, several categories emerged simultaneously from the same narrative. For the sake of clarity, for each document, only the most salient categories were considered. For example, from the above question ‘Does the physical learning environment affect students’ achievements?’ raised the subcategories ‘school climate’ and ‘systematic approach’. These subcategories were placed along the axis of the category ‘effective learning’.

*Selective coding*

Selective coding can be described as the process by which categories are related to a core category (Moghaddam, 2006). In this study, the core category was ‘LCE through the naturalist approach’, and four dominant categories of learning aspects were found to be related to this central concept: ‘effective learning’, ‘school social aspects’, ‘school discipline’ and ‘student in the centre’.

Table 1. Code mapping: Examples of three iterations of analysis revolving around the core category ‘learned-centred education’ (to be read from the bottom up)

	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3	Example 4
<b>Third iteration:</b> <i>Selective coding</i> — Investigating the dominant categories of learning aspects SI	Effective learning	Student discipline	Social aspects of schools	Student in the centre
<b>Second iteration:</b> <i>Axial coding</i> — Investigating the theoretical subcategories ST, SIN	‘school climate’ (2)  ‘systematic approach’ (1)	‘school climate’ (2)  ‘school vision’ (1)	‘school climate’ (1)  ‘systematic approach’ (2) ‘school vision’ (1) ‘marketing school’ (1)	‘school climate’ (1)  ‘organizational change’ (1)
<b>First iteration:</b> <i>Open coding</i> — Recognizing similar key questions SQ	(1) Does the physical learning environment affect students’ achievements? (2) What is the effect of class size on students’ achievements?	(1) What is the purpose of the recess bell? (2) Do we need to show respect to teachers to improve the learning process and school discipline?	(1) Why is distance learning not a more widespread phenomenon? (2) Does integrating special needs students in regular schools lower the school’s image in the community?	(1) Why are tests the main method used to assess Israeli students’ achievement in schools? (2) Why are there so few vocational schools?

Notes: Source of data: SQ = Student Question; ST = Student theoretical background; SI = Student Interview; SIN = Student Interpretation. The number in parenthesis—frequency of category/subcategory.

To ensure the accuracy of analysis, the data were organized using the ATLAS.ti 5.0 software package that assists in qualitative analysis of textual data (Muhr, 2004). This software helps in methodically organizing and documenting themes within data and enables the user to retrieve text passages from one or more text documents (Crego, Alcover de la Hera, & Martinez-Inigo, 2008).

Two steps were taken to establish the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis procedures. First, the data were analysed by a research assistant, who has had extensive training in qualitative analysis, and myself. Second, we used a cross-checking procedure of independently coded data and then held a meeting to discuss preliminary findings to ensure the consistency of the analysis (Boardman & Woodruff, 2004).

## Findings

Some of the topics that were taught in the introductory course, such as 'the difference between management and leadership', and 'the structure of educational organizations' did not appear in the questions that were raised by students. Other topics, such as 'school vision', 'the need to change' and 'marketing in educational systems' appeared implicitly in their questions. However, the findings also show that several topics that students found interesting were not part of the introduction course curriculum, such as 'the influence of technology on student learning', 'the effect of assessment on student learning' and 'the effect of the physical environment on effective learning'. Some questions touched on the issue of integrating special needs students in mainstream schools and its effect on the school image in the community, and several questions discussed the issue of developing student responsibility.

The questions that were raised by participants can be divided into four central dimensions: (a) *effective learning* (e.g. the effect of class size); (b) *student discipline* (e.g. code of respect); (c) *social aspects of schools* (e.g. learning in the classroom versus distance learning) and (d) *student in the centre* (e.g. considering students' input when creating the school timetable).

The next few sections describe in greater detail the questions that interested participants and the learning dimensions that those questions touch upon. This study focuses on the students' experience of the naturalist approach. Thus, the interview excerpts, and the students' conclusions based on them are brought *only to demonstrate the participants' (students and interviewees) perceptions and their learning process and not whether their conclusions are right or wrong.*

### *Student in the centre*

The question 'why are tests the main method used to assess Israeli students' achievement in schools' emerged from the following issue described by one of the students: 'In the Finnish educational system, students are given very few internal tests, but score high in international tests for elementary and secondary schools' (Simola, 2005). In contrast, assessment

in Israel's educational system is based on many internal tests, but students score low-medium in international tests. The *Israeli educational management circular* (2012) states that despite the advantages of internal tests to assess students' knowledge and capabilities for all parties of interest (students, parents and teachers), testing is only one assessment tool of many other assessment tools such as observations, projects and assignments'. The student argued that relying on tests as the main assessment tool can result in academic pressure, emotional stress, lower motivation to excel and lower validity of the knowledge emerging from tests. The interviews revealed agreement that tests cause anxiety to many students and as a result, may not reflect students' knowledge or skills:

**Student in fourth grade** (female, 10 years old, studies in a public Arab elementary school): 'Before a test, I study all the material. In math, my father helps me ... Sometimes I get anxious. Today for example, the math test was difficult. Whenever we finish a subject there is a test ... Usually, I don't have a problem doing the homework on my own. On the test, however, I don't do too well because of the pressure'.

The student related the question to the theoretical aspect of 'school climate' and summarized: 'tests make students study and develop learning strategies. Conversely, many students become quite anxious before a test. Therefore, teachers should use tests wisely in a way that will not put too much pressure on the students'.

The question 'why are there so few vocational schools' emerged from the following issue described by one of the students: 'According to Lotan (2007), there is an acute shortage of technicians in Israel. There is a great need for high level technological education, but very little choice of vocational schools. Students who attend such schools are stigmatized as low ability students, thus discouraging registration and inevitably leading to school closures'. The student argued, based on the interview below, that the reason for the few vocational schools in the country was care for the students' well-being:

**Technology teacher** (male, 48 years old, teaches in a public Jewish vocational school): 'I think that the existence of vocational schools should be supported. There are students who are very handy and technically oriented. Some of them have learning disabilities and do not do well in regular schools ... Programmes which give good professional training will help these students acquire a profession with an honorable income which matches their talents ... Students who are not given the opportunity to express their natural talents are more likely to develop low self-esteem and may end up choosing the road to self-destruction'...

The student related the question to the theoretical aspect of 'organizational change' and concluded: 'vocational schools have disadvantages: students are labeled as low achievers, the trades that are taught are of low prestige, and high operational costs are involved. However, vocational schools also have many significant advantages: They help reduce student drop-out rates; students who are not suited for academic studies have an opportunity to learn a trade that generates income. In addition, vocational schools boost students' self-esteem, reduce social gaps, and help supply trained manpower to the Israeli economy. The Ministry of Education

should find the resources to advance and develop vocational schools to help students who find it difficult to learn in academically oriented schools. This will reduce their drop-out rate and provide them with a vocation which will benefit both them and society’.

### *Social aspects of schools*

The following questions raised by one of the participants, ‘why is the practise of teaching in the classroom still prevalent in today’s technological world and, conversely, why is distance learning not a more widespread phenomenon’, were based on the student’s argument that ‘the advantages of learning via multimedia are many: it appeals to the learner, the material is up-to-date and the learner has access to a variety of information sources. However, in 2013, the vast majority of Israeli schools still prefer teaching in the classroom to distance learning’. Based on the teacher interview below, the student found that the subject of classroom teaching versus distance learning is connected to the social aspect of school. Teachers say that they prefer teaching in the classroom because they believe in the importance of having a student–teacher relationship:

**Teacher** (female, 43 years old, teaches science in a public Arab junior high school): ‘I am not much in favor of distance learning. Students need the physical interaction with the teacher, the availability of the teacher and peer interaction. These needs are just as important as knowing the subject matter’.

The student related the questions to the theoretical aspect of ‘systematic approach’ and concluded: ‘Distance learning requires high self-discipline and responsibility, which are not characteristic of the average Israeli student. However, schools should consider promoting distance learning in high school to prepare students for universities and boost self-discipline. In addition, since Friday is a short school day in Israeli elementary and junior high schools, and on Friday, students are already looking forward impatiently to the freedom of the weekend, Friday is usually regarded as an ineffective learning day. Schools should therefore consider turning Friday into a distance learning school day’.

The question ‘does integrating special needs students in regular schools lower the school’s image in the community’ emerged in the following context described by one of the students. According to the Israeli special education law (2002), regular schools are encouraged to integrate special needs students in their classes. *Parents of special needs students* are divided on the issue. On the one hand, a mainstream school can improve special needs children’s cognitive skills. On the other hand, integration with regular students may have a negative effect on special needs students, instilling in them perception of failure and lowering their self-esteem.

*Parents of regular students* are also divided on the issue. Some resist the idea of having special needs children in a regular class because they are afraid that integration will hinder their children’s achievements, and will stigmatize the school. Conversely, some parents believe in the empowerment of special needs children through integration. The student argued

that during the interviews below, social aspects of this question emerged: when the school explained the issue and prepared the students and parents ahead of time, the idea of integration was better received by all.

***A mixed class teacher*** (female, 28 years old, teaches special education in a public Jewish elementary school): 'In the beginning of the year we explained to the students that some students in the class are slightly different in their ability to concentrate and understand the material. We explained that we need to help them integrate in the classroom and invite them to our homes. As a result of this talk, everyone in the school respected those kids and the prestige of the school was not affected'.

The student related the question to the theoretical aspects of 'school climate', 'systematic approach', 'school vision' and 'marketing schools' and concluded: 'It seems that when the educational system supports mainstreaming, and the school policy, including the teachers' attitude, encourages it, the prestige of the school is not affected'.

### *Student discipline*

Student discipline appeared in a large number of questions. From the question 'what is the purpose of the recess bell' emerged the main concept of self-discipline among students. The participant opined that 'in most Israeli high schools there is a recess bell system which indicates when the lesson begins and when it ends. However, there is now a tendency to cancel this system, in order to increase student responsibility. This is predicated on the assumption that each student has a watch as a means of knowing the time'. Below is an interview with a school principal in a school without a bell system:

***Principal*** (male, 53 years old, working in a public Jewish high school): 'One of our goals is to teach responsibility. According to our school vision, freedom and responsibility are central factors. There are no recess bells in real life and therefore, there shouldn't be any in school. Students should learn to be aware of the time, to be responsible for the time and to enter class on time. In the beginning, it was difficult for the 7th graders to get to class on time, but they got used to it faster than I had expected'.

In comparison, another interview was conducted by the same student with a vice principal whose school was using a recess bell system:

***Vice principal*** (female, 53 years old, working in a public Jewish high school): 'When the principal or I need to remind the teachers that the break is over, this is unbefitting for both us and the teachers. We expect the teachers to exercise self-discipline and get to class on time, just as we expect this from the students. Everyone should strive to be a positive role model, and teachers who have influence over a large number of children should strive even harder. The bell system helps teach the students responsibility, discipline and punctuality. Therefore, it is important that school management take a stance on the issue of getting to class on time right when the bell rings'.

After comparing both interviews, the student concluded that: 'school climate may be reflected by the presence or absence of the recess bell system. While in the school without a recess bell system, the principal dealt with student self-discipline issues only, in the school with a recess bell



system, the vice principal dealt not only with student self-discipline but also with teacher self-discipline'. The student related the question to the theoretical aspect of 'school climate' and 'school vision' and concluded that: 'values of responsibility and self-discipline among students are taught both in schools with a recess bell system and in schools without a recess bell system. However, it seems that the value of being responsible is stronger in schools without a recess bell system'.

The question: 'do we need to show respect to teachers to improve the learning process and school discipline' emerged because the student who raised this question claimed that: 'Student discipline is a major problem in Israel'. The student explained that according to Shavit and Blank (2012), a significant relationship was found between low achievements in math and lack of discipline in Israeli junior high schools, pointing out that students' discipline problems reflect the Israeli culture. The question reflects the issue whether creating a formal distance between students and teachers will improve student discipline. Following are interviews that the student conducted with teachers in a school where a code of respect has been implemented and in a school without a code of respect:

*In a school implementing a code of respect:*

**Teacher** (male, 28 years old, teaches Bible in a public Jewish high school): 'The school's code of respect does not state that students must stand up when a teacher enters the class. Some teachers demand it, while others do not. For example, I do not demand it of 12th graders. When I enter the class, they see me and respond accordingly. I have never had the experience of entering the 12th grade class and having to get their attention. In the lower classes, however, I do demand that they stand up, to show that they have realized that I am in class and that they know that there is no more playing around'.

*In a school without a code of respect:*

**Teacher** (female, 32 years old, teaches English in a public Jewish junior high school): 'In our school, the students are not required to stand up when the teacher enters. I believe we should keep up with the times. Having students stand up will not help a teacher who does not know how to manage a class. I enter the class, say hello and start the lesson ... Sometimes, I just stand in silence and they silence each other. They call me by my first name, not "teacher"; it sounds strange not to be called by my first name. Codes of respect belong to the old world. In our time, such requirements do not add anything and do not change anything'.

The student argued that 'it seems that formal expressions of respect are only symbolic and depend on school culture. However, they do not contribute to the learning process in school'. The student explained that teachers in schools with formal respect practices think that those practices are beneficial because they show a degree of respect to the teacher and mark the beginning of the lesson. Teachers in schools without formal respect practices think that they are unnecessary. Standing up or calling teachers by their first name will not change the students' attitude. Finally, the student connected the question to the theoretical aspect of 'school climate' and recommended that research should be done on what best creates school discipline, the student's home environment or the school's code of respect.

### *Effective learning*

The participants were not required to investigate how effective learning affected students' achievements. However, we found that a variety of the questions referred to this issue. For example, regarding the question: 'Does the physical learning environment affect students' achievements?' the student who raised this question argued that: 'Today, a lot of resources are dedicated to designing schools to fit the school's pedagogical needs. Therefore, it is important to examine whether the resources dedicated to improving the physical learning environment really affects student achievements'. Based on an interview with the school's principal brought below, the student argued that there is a positive relationship between the state of the physical learning environment and student achievements:

**Principal** (female, 43 years old, working in a public religious Jewish junior high school): '... The first thing I want to take care of is school climate. That means taking care of the school's aesthetic appearance and enforcing school rules. I know that one of the issues that affects school climate is the school's aesthetic appearance. Therefore we have invested many resources towards improving the aesthetic appearance of the school ... Now the students' achievements in national tests are higher than before'.

The student related the question to the theoretical topics of 'school climate' and 'systematic approach', which had been taught in the introduction course, and concluded that 'school leaders should dedicate financial and human resources to improving the physical learning environment at school. Lack of effort in this direction reflects mediocrity in the school's overall performance, including learning'.

The question: 'What is the effect of class size on students' achievements' was based on the following argument posed by one of the students: 'In contrast to the paradigm that a small class relates positively to high achievements, studies indicate that this is not necessarily true. For example, according to Pong and Pallas (2001), based on TIMSS data, there is no significant effect of class size on student achievements'. Based on an interview with a teacher, the student suggested that the answer to the question was that a small class size is advantageous in the social aspect but not necessarily in the achievement aspect:

**Teacher** (female, 53 years old, teaches math in a public Arab high school): 'In a large class, much time is wasted on attaining quiet. In small classes, the students tend to disturb less because I see everyone. In large classes I have difficulty giving each student personal attention and at the end of the day, I feel exhausted. In general, it is easier to teach a small class and finish the required material. The atmosphere in a small class is more conducive to learning than a large class. However, it is difficult to say that in a small class the achievements are higher. In every class, there are strong, average and weak students'.

The student related the question to the theoretical topic of 'school climate', and argued that: 'the social advantages of a small class size include a closer relationship between teacher and students, and less disciplinary problems. However, it seems that the teachers perceive that the climate in a large class may not necessarily be related to students' achievements'.

From our findings, the following model emerged (Figure 1): Regarding the subcategories: 'School climate' was found with the highest frequency (45 cases), followed by 'systematic approach' (35 cases), 'school vision' (28 cases) and 'organizational change' (21 cases), and finally 'marketing school' (8 cases). These subcategories were nested in a systematic network of the following categories: 'The student in the centre' with the highest frequency (45 cases), then 'social aspects of schools' (40 cases), medium frequency 'school discipline' (35 cases), 'effective learning' (28 cases). The categories were found to be related, and each subcategory may be related to several categories.

## Discussion

Student-centred education—which is designed to promote students' active engagement in the learning process (Lindholm & Astin, 2008)—has been placed in the centre of attention in this study through enhancing students' intellectual curiosity and creativity, by getting them to ask questions that interest them regarding leadership in educational systems. In agreement with the Pederson and Williams (2004) study, the extent to which students engage in their assessments, taking responsibility for their questions, interviews and conclusions, has been found to impact both their depth of understanding and intrinsic motivation to find the answers.

Drawing on the naturalist approach, four central dimensions of LCE came to light: the 'student in the centre' and 'school social aspects', the most dominant categories, following by 'school discipline' and 'effective learning'. These findings highlight the fact that for schools in the twenty-first century, the real challenge is the focus on the student, through social relationships and taking care of discipline problems, and thus bringing about effective learning. These dimensions included topics that were taught explicitly or implicitly in the 'Introduction to educational leadership and management' course among Israeli students. Some of the topics taught were: 'school climate' and 'systematic approach', the dominant factors, following by 'school vision' and 'organizational change', while 'marketing school' was found the less dominant. These findings bring to light the fact that organizational factors are important for focusing on learning process in school.

The present study found that the four dimensions also included a few topics that had not been taught during the introductory course and were of interest to the students. Some of those topics were the importance of the physical learning environment, student and teacher responsibility, school discipline, schools in the current technological age and students' achievements. From these findings, we can conclude that although the goal of the introductory course is to give the students a 'taste' of different fields of research, we inadvertently missed a few topics which were perceived to be interesting and relevant to the students.

Based on LCE, these findings indicate that in order to have meaningful learning in leadership programmes, we may consider also the students' wishes in creating the curriculum for the course. In addition, it seems that

the naturalist approach is not just an effective device for helping students master basic leadership principles, but is also an effective vehicle for testing whether they have in fact acquired an in-depth understanding of topics that interest them and topics that should be taught in leadership programmes. The naturalist approach provides an excellent basis for discovering what may interest future educational leaders, and what they consider to be the most interesting aspects in educational systems. This approach will give meaning to learning. Students also suggested policy changes and other helpful ideas to improve the educational system in Israel (e.g. distance learning on Friday, increasing the number of vocational schools). During the process, students developed critical thinking skills by asking questions and analysing the answers received.

However, the study also indicates that most of the subjects that arise through the naturalist approach were taught in the introductory course. In addition, while considering the advantages of the naturalist approach, we may also note the fact that students who are embarking on becoming leaders have not experienced the complexities of school leadership and their interest may be limited to their own experiences. In addition, in some countries (e.g. the US and Canada), there are standards that drive the curriculum taught in educational leadership programmes, which would simply not be covered if we only followed the interests of the students.

This study's findings raise the challenge to bridge the gap between what students are interested in and what their experienced faculty in leadership programmes perceive as important. The need to balance between the students and their faculty may be supported by Kain (2003) and Miller (1994)'s studies illustrating the complexities that educators face in aligning theory with practice, and the limits of theory in helping educators create useful assignments, manage potentially confrontational classrooms, evaluate student responses and figure out how to balance the perspectives of teacher and student.

The question why effective learning, school discipline, school social aspects and the student in the centre were the main dimensions that interested the students may be traced to features that distinguish the Israeli school system from other educational systems. Sociological studies on Israeli culture portray it as inconducive to *discipline* (Shavit & Blank, 2012). Almog (2004) traces the roots of Israeli disrespect for authority and lack of discipline to the Diaspora Jewish existence. Diaspora Jews were often surrounded by a hostile environment and developed a sense of alienation from the host country's laws and customs, and Jewish immigrants brought these attitudes and practices to Israel.

A comparative study of 52 countries found that Israelis hold the lowest regard for authority (Hofstede, 1994), and current studies indicate that in Israeli schools, discipline problems correlate significantly and negatively to student achievements. For example, results from the 2002 PISA test showed that student absenteeism is more frequent in Israel than in any of the other 41 countries that participated in the PISA test, and that Israel scored well below the international average on measures of discipline (Kramarski & Mevarech, 2004).

The *social aspect* of schools in Israel may also explain the discipline problem in Israel. Israel has higher levels of economic and educational inequalities than most other economically developed societies (Ben-David, 2012), and this may create tension among students and cause disciplinary problems at school. Moreover, in recent years, Israel has displayed an *ineffectiveness in student learning*. Israeli students have scored substantially lower in international learning assessments (PISA, TIMSS) than students from other countries. This despite the fact that Israel's educational system stresses the concept of 'the student in the centre' through, for example, organizing learning in small groups or organizing learning for individual students in core disciplines such as math, science and English (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2013).

The study's findings, which show mutuality between the different dimensions of LCE—such as effective learning, school discipline, school social aspects—and the student in the centre, mirror the specific challenges that the Israeli educational system faces today, especially when we consider the above international context.

### **Conclusions and practical implications for leadership course designers**

Modern society is increasingly competitive. A corresponding competition has accordingly been noticed in student enrolment in universities as well. There are many appealing courses in the university curriculum, and even more tempting diversions outside the classroom. Students are freer to pick and choose their courses. Therefore, we, as instructors, must become not only more selective in what we teach, but also more effective as advocates for our discipline. We must persuade students that we offer something of value.

There are a few subjects which the students think should be reduced or added, while the leadership educational planning programme thinks the opposite. In order to reduce this gap, a committee, similar to the one formed in the University of Washington (Kelley & Peterson, 2007), composed of faculty, administrators, students and alumni should meet in order to guide programme development and reform in curricula, drawing on varied academic background and experience. As suggested by Jackson and Kelley (2002), professors should collaborate with school districts managers, school principals and superintendents on reform in curricula for leaders' preparation. These committees may discuss which topics should stay or be jettisoned, and what new topics should be taught, given the limit time dedicated to each course. In this way, the preparation programmes will emphasize the theoretical knowledge, applied research and practice that may promote leadership preparation programmes to be relevant to the job demands of school leaders. Collaboration between all parties having interest may move to an effective learning in which relevant teaching topics for each country are learned through introducing a theoretical background.

The study findings may indicate that students need to be taught more explicitly how to identify theory in practice. This may be achieved not

only by planning programmes, but also by combining the practice into the course process. For example, the methodological courses (qualitative and quantitative method) should be taught as soon as possible in the leadership programmes. In this way, the students may identify the theory in practice in a more valid way, through reflecting on assessments required by their professors. Faculty members should increase the use of simulation, case studies, role playing, visiting lectures by educational practitioners in their courses. They may also encourage attaching a mentor—an experienced educator—to each student in their programme from the beginning of their studies, which may help the students synthesize the theoretical models to educational practice.

### Directions for future study

The present initial findings should be followed by further research regarding the effectiveness of the naturalist approach. This further research could show whether the use of the naturalist approach generates additional concepts of LCE in educational leadership and management studies that have not been defined by the present study. In addition, longitudinal research should study the effectiveness of the naturalist approach on students' learning educational leadership and management subjects by examining reports from the students themselves and their professors. Researchers would also do well to investigate the cross-cultural validity of the current findings.

Finally, future studies should be designed to collect data regarding students' expectations of the learning process through the naturalist approach by LCE. The core issue in this developmental process is to address theoretical questions about the nature of LCE, and define useful leadership and management principles that could be employed to plan, assess, and implement the learning process towards dealing with contemporary challenges of leadership in educational systems.

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## Appendix 1. Written directions

Thank you for your agreement to volunteer to participate in a study which will serve as data for a study on how to design meaningful learning in our 'Introduction to educational leadership and administration' course. In order to help me with this study, please:

- (1) Pose a single question about something that interests you regarding leadership in educational systems.
- (2) Find an answer to your question by conducting a field interview (Interview each participant about 30–45 min. You may ask any relevant question). You may conduct two interviews in case you seek to broaden your perspective). Please transcribe your interview/s.
- (3) Provide your interpretation to the interview findings by connecting your answer to the theoretical background that has been studied in the introductory course.
- (4) Please submit anonymously to my research assistant the final document, including the following sources: (a) Your question (up to three lines); (b) Field interviews conducted and transcribed by you in order to answer the question (2–3 pages); and (c) the conclusions based on your ideas and findings relating to the theoretical background (up to 2 pages).

I assure you that your statements will not be able to be traced back to you upon publication of the findings, and I pledge to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. You have the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

**Thank you for helping to promote our teaching, learning and research in the department!!!**