

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**School Middle Leaders' Perceptions of
"The Meaningful Learning Reform"**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Master's
Degree in the School of Education, Bar-Ilan University

Ramat Gan, Israel

2017

Abstract

In the course of the last two decades school systems throughout the world have begun to implement a new wave of reforms aimed at educating students to become good workers in the age of information of the 21st century. As part of these reforms school systems have come to stress skills such as initiative, creativity, teamwork, information and technology literacy, critical thinking and problem-solving. In 2014 Israel's Ministry of Education began to implement a reform aimed at promoting 21st-century learning, called "Meaningful Learning". The reform is aimed at every student in the school system, but the most significant changes concern the secondary school curriculum.

The purpose of the present study is to examine how the reform was implemented in its first year as perceived by school middle leaders in secondary schools. Many studies have shown that school middle leaders play a crucial role in the success of reform implementation, especially the implementation of pedagogical reforms. This study examines how school middle leaders perceive the 21st-century learning rationale, the perceptions of the reform, the opportunities it presents and the difficulties involved in its application. The research included semi-structured interviews held during the reform's first year of implementation with 28 school middle leaders holding various management positions in high schools.

An analysis of the data shows that school middle leaders perceive the concept of 21st-century learning in concordance with the Ministry of Education's rationale. However, some mixed perceptions were also revealed; the overall perceptions of the teachers were that the reform's objectives were worthwhile, but that its implementation on the ground has been less than optimal. On the one hand, the reform seems to have encouraged teachers to apply practices of 21st-century learning of 21st-century. The reform was

formulated in general terms, providing secondary school teachers with space in which to initiate and try out creative ideas. On the other hand, the generally-outlined reform aroused a sense of uncertainty, anxiety and confusion among some teachers. Teachers were faced with numerous difficulties, including a heavy workload, not enough time to plan their lessons and tutor students in complex learning processes, significant training gaps, a lack of computer infrastructure, and difficulties in the application of 21st-century learning practices in large classes. In addition, a possible conflict was perceived between the principles of accountability, with its stress on measurements, tests and grades, and the principles of 21st-century learning. The stress on grades and matriculation exams may overshadow the reform's rationale and have an adverse effect on its application.

The present study's importance lies in the detailed description it provides of the first year of the implementation of the national 21st-century learning reform. It highlights the difficulties that characterize reforms of this kind and the opportunities their implementation provides. In addition, it demonstrates the various ways in which school middle leaders can perceive this reform, and the importance of this perception to the reform's success. The study is also important because it sheds light on the crucial importance of school middle leaders in the implementation of reforms, specifically the dominant position occupied by curriculum coordinators and subject coordinators in the implementation of 21st-century learning. The study stresses the need of pedagogical reform planners to pay particular attention to these functionaries and demonstrates how important it is that they receive proper professional training. The study also includes operational recommendations for policy-makers in Israel and for managers of teachers' training and continuing education programs in the coming years.