

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Peak Experiences in Principals' Career as
Designing and Changing Management Patterns**

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ABSTRACT

The professional development of school principals consists mainly of training programs, supervision and shadowing in the first few years, and various continuing education workshops and seminars throughout their careers. The literature reveals an additional avenue for professional actualization in what is termed the “peak experience.”

The “peak experience” is defined as a meaningful experience that leaves an indelible and lasting impression on the person who experiences it.

This peak experience has three main components: **A.** The actual experience described as quick, unexpected, moving, and intense. **B.** The ‘turning point,’ described as an event that changes the person’s (professional) trajectory and a break in the expected chain of events. **C.** Personal growth/change/development as a result of the peak experience in the educational and vocational areas. Additional effects are seen in the personal realm, as a long term change in values or ideals.

This notion of a peak experience affecting one’s professional development and expected trajectory is discussed in the literature as it pertains to different populations including students, children and adolescents, young adults, musicians, and university/college students. In addition, this has been researched in different fields of study including the arts, sciences and others.

Despite the importance of this field of study, there has been minimal research in the area of education and in particular in educational administration. The purpose of the current study was to assess if school principals experience a ‘peak experience’ and if so, how does it affect their professional development and their day to day performance.

The study was conducted in a qualitative method consisting of semi-structured interviews of 18 school principals; 10 men and 8 women, with at least 5 years of experience, in both public religious schools.

Analysis of the data was conducted in an inductive, bottom-up approach. In this way, the data revealed patterns of common values, and contextualizes the gathered information.

The “trustworthiness” and validity of the study was examined using a number of main criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

The participants were assured full anonymity and informed that all information they provided would remain confidential.

Analysis of the interviews reveals that indeed most of the principals report having experienced a ‘peak experience’ at some time in their careers that affected their administrative philosophy and focus. With further analysis of the important experiences, certain categories were identified which epitomize the key experiences of the principals; these include the timing of the event, the type of event (positive/negative, educational/administrative), the type of turning point, and the important lessons gleaned by the principals due to the experience. Additionally, a gender difference was found in regards to the participants’ interpretation of the event. These categories represent the changes and influence that were described by the principals as a result of a peak experience.

This study revealed that the experience of a ‘peak experience’ does occur among school principals and this finding has a number of implications; the educational and personal process of training to become a school principal is deepened when it includes a peak experience, thus instruction about peak experiences should be included in

curricula and training programs. This can be implemented in the form of mentoring programs between more experienced and less experienced principals. Peer-to-peer learning among new principals can also facilitate discussion and improve their personal and professional development. The underlying framework for these recommendations is based on both problem-based learning (PBL) and success-based learning (SCL) approaches within the education programs.

A holistic learning experience is necessary for the principals' growth and development of leadership skills. In this study, I present peak experiences that stemmed from both problem-based and success-based learning. Incorporating instruction about peak experiences into the various training program will aid in the professional development among school administrators.

This study offers recommendations pertaining to policy-makers, and the executive administrators of principal-training programs about the importance of studying and interpreting the influence of peak experiences.

The current study may assist school principals to process and interpret their peak experiences and its influence on their work as well as aid in the training programs of new principals.