

**Longitudinal Study (Six Years) for Evaluation of a Model  
of a Professional Learning Community of District  
Superintendents in the Israeli Ministry of Education:  
Characteristics, Development, and Generation of a Model  
for Reform Implementation**

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מבדוק או ממונה ע"י זכויות יוצרים  
האחריות על הפרסום היא של  
אוניברסיטת בר אילן  
הספרייה

## Abstract

Professional Learning Community (PLC) has the potential to lead changes and promote them. This has been the subject of extensive discussions and research (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Fullan, 2006b, 2009a), but there is consensus among the researchers that it is hard to maintain a professional community for many years (Fullan, 2009b; Wegner, 2009). A construction of a PLC within the educational system is a particularly challenging task, since the educational system is characterized by a hierarchal leadership structure, while a PLC requires a distributed leadership. In addition, fostering of a professional community over years requires construction of relationship that are based on mutual trust, support and communication, which enable open and safe space for productive discussion. Moreover, forming continuity in the activity of a PLC needs time frames and routines that enable diligence of the participants.

The supervisory role of the superintendents in the education system in Israel and abroad raises many questions about its characterization, its essence and its meaning (Nir, 2014). Superintendents must intervene and direct to the challenges, and see that the schools act in accordance with the policy of the educational system, the district and the municipality. Accordingly, the modern superintendent must be experiences in educational methodologies, in data interpretation, and in ability to explain the students' performance. One of the approaches to train the superintendent for these requirements is by forming professional communities of superintendents (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005), but no published research was found to evaluate professional communities that include superintendents and pedagogical guides and the nature of their development, especially in view of changes and reforms in educational systems.

A large district head in the educational system of Israel has led over **six years** a change in the work culture in the district, in order to improve the functioning of the educational institutions and the students' achievements. To this end, the head has partnered with representatives from one of the academic colleges for education and together they have built a professional investigating community of a variety of superintendents and pedagogical guides who operate in the same practical environment – the schools. The community objectives were to develop a distributed leadership of the supervision in the district and to promote the professional development of superintendents, so they could be involved in the

processes of improving teaching and learning in the educational institutions under their supervision. These processes took place during an era of changes in the education system following the implementation of the "New Horizon" reform, which affected the superintendents and their role. This approach formed the basis for evaluating the professional community of the superintendents according to the ecological approach.

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on the ecological concept in education. The basic assumption in this approach is that professional community is a result of interactions among persons, and that the learning processes are social in their nature. There is a relationship between the individual and the reference group to which he/she belong, and any change in one of the components of the system leads to changes in all other components. In a professional community the learning individual is an important component of the system, and is an involved participant and reflective observer, who investigates his/her own practice in order to advance a common goal of the entire community. In this longitudinal research the professional community of superintendents that operated over 6 years was investigated from an ecological viewpoint.

The study objectives were to characterize the stages of development of the community during its years of operation, the learning culture created, and the outputs and impacts; to examine the impact of professional learning community on the implementation of the "New Horizon" reform in the district; and to present supervision model that has been formed in the district and the interactions that were created and affected community activity.

This research is based on a case study and is done through a qualitative research methodology, in an interpretive and naturalistic approach that allows observation of the phenomenon as a whole: the proposed interpretation of the processes taking place, beliefs and perceptions of participants in the community and reasoning. This study is a longitudinal study conducted over the **six years** activity period of the professional community of superintendents. Over these years the composition of the community and the number of participants have changed, which is typical characteristic of a professional community, and therefore the focus of this study includes 21 superintendents and pedagogical guides in the district, which since joining the team have persisted with the participation in it. Additionally, the district director, the district superintendent and representatives from academia also

participated in the community during its activities. Moreover, the study included three superintendents from the district who did not participate in the community's activity.

The research data collection lasted six years, and was done through four qualitative research tools: (1) interviews; (2) focus groups; (3) observations; (4) analysis of documents. The research data collection was done in all the environments in which superintendents that per part of the PLC have operated in: The superintendents forum - bi-monthly meetings that were held in the conference room of the district director; Steering committee meetings – sessions for preparation and steering of the superintendents community activities which were held in the district director's conference room; Schools – substantial part of the learning of superintendents was held in the practical field, while observing lessons. I joined the majority of superintendents meetings in the schools. I observed the inspectors while they were in class, in discussion held with the teachers they had followed, in a general meeting of members of the PLC, in discussions prior to entry to classes and in summary meetings; I also watched spin-off communities that were resulting from the main PLC activities.

During the 6 years of research I conducted 111 interviews. Some of the interviews were held in real time during activities of the community, and a few of them were held in reflection. Additionally, I interviewed 18 pedagogical guides that were part of the community, and 5 school managers which in their schools hosted learning meetings of the PLC. I conducted 16 focus group meetings, that included superintendents and pedagogical guides, and in which key questions were discussed, that were the basis for comparative analysis and for forming common themes. I observed all the learning environments of the superintendents, including a total of 34 observations, and transcribed everything that was said in those meetings. Moreover, I analyzed documents of steering committees, reflective diaries of superintendents, presentations that were given during the learning processes and tools that were prepared as a result of the learning process.

The analysis of the findings was done in accordance with commonly practiced methodologies in qualitative research: vertical analysis - individual analysis of each interview and coding of it. Horizontal comparative analysis – identifying common themes, contradicting patterns and differences. The data collection and analysis were performed simultaneously throughout the research duration.

In the analysis I focused on four major categories: (1) the construction processes of the PLC and the forming of its activities; (2) the learning culture of the PLC; (3) the network of relationships that drives the community activities; (4) The PLC outcomes.

This study demonstrated a mutual influence between the activity of the Professional Learning Community of superintendents and the implementations of the "New Horizon" reform, up to the levels of teachers and students. The learning of the superintendents community enabled the superintendents to deepen their practical and theoretical knowledge, as relevant for the new policy, while adapting to the culture and goals of the district. The results demonstrated a spiral and in-depth learning development, taking into account both the community branding as "select" and the regional mechanisms and routines that sustained learning process. The academy's role and influence on the learning processes of the superintendent community are presented throughout the study in all four categories mentioned above. There was also found an association between the presence of the district director in the learning sessions of the superintendents community on the sustainability of the community throughout the 6 years of its operation.

The research findings also described a new model of supervision - supervising team. According to this model, there is a new network of relationships within the superintendents community and between superintendents and players outside the community. The network of inter-relationships that was formed has driven the learning, influenced the development of the community, developed interdisciplinary along with expertise, and created new knowledge and a new set of relationships between supervision and schools. Furthermore, the research produced many additional learning outcomes of the professional community. These outcomes were examined with regard to a variety of spin-off communities that were formed, to the new perception of the role of superintendents and to the cumulative organizational knowledge.

The current study has implications for theoretical and practical aspects that can contribute to the understanding of the processes of professional development that are required for a systemic change and assimilation thereof. For the theoretical aspects, this study used the ecological education theory as a conceptual framework, an approach that enabled a broad and deep analysis of the processes that characterized the professional learning community in an era of reform implementation. For the practical aspects, this study's findings provide a broad and comprehensive picture on the theory and practice of formation of a professional learning

community and its sustained leadership for many years. This unique model of the community changed the ecosystem and the perception of the role of superintendents, from regulators to pedagogical leaders. The findings show that the combination of the new supervision model and life-long learning in the community have contributed to implementation of the "New Horizon" reform, which was adopted by the district as a policy document, and adapted to the relevant theories learned by the community of superintendents and translated into new practices in the district. This way the new knowledge was generated in the district. Accordingly, this research' findings enable formation of theory related to professional learning community as a method for implementing high level systemic changes. This research may assist policy makers in reconsidering the role of the superintendent and his/her professional development.

In this study I did not directly deal with the very long term results after the personnel changes among the leaders that were involved in the implementation of the reform, and did not compared the supervising model described in this research and other supervising models in the era of reforms. These subjects may be relevant for further research that will expand the theoretical and practical knowledge required for those who wish to introduce systemic changes in general and in the education system in particular.