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THE CONTRIBUTION OF SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AS PERCEIVED BY TRAINEE TEACHERS TO THEIR FUTURE COMMITMENT TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Abstract:

The process of training to become a teacher involves learning the cultural codes which give meaning to daily life at school. Teachers are a social creation molded by the expectations and actions of the "culture carriers" in the school: principals, other teachers and students. It is in relation to these "culture carriers" that trainee teachers develop their professional persona.

A school's culture consists of rules that define what is normal, acceptable and legitimate. Such codes differentiate between matters of greater and lesser importance and identify the sources of power in the school, as well as the significant ways of taking the necessary power to guarantee one's status in the school.

The aim of this research was to investigate the contribution of a school's organizational culture, as perceived by trainee teachers, to their future commitment to the education system. To this end I applied a qualitative methodology based on responses to open-ended questions.

The study's main findings indicate a complementary relationship between organizational culture and commitment to teaching. A trainee teacher who sees most of the components of the organizational culture – principals, students, colleagues – as sympathetic, attentive and supportive, and in particular, who understands the norms and behaviors within the hidden layers of the organizational culture, will tend to develop a greater commitment to teaching.

Keywords:

School organizational culture, trainee teacher, commitment to teaching, teaching career.

JEL Classification: A00

1. Introduction

1.1 Trainee teachers and their commitment to their chosen career

Starting out is considered an intrinsic phase in the course of a teacher's career. Young teachers enter the profession filled with a sense of mission and the feeling that they will be able to implement changes in society, as well as in the education of their students. But despite their good intentions and despite being equipped with the proper training, they discover that the "real" world of teaching is significantly different from their idealized vision of it. Reality slaps them in the face; dreams and ideals quickly change into a daily struggle for survival (Gavish Friedman, 2007; Starhovsky, Marbach & Hertz-Lazarovich, 2002).

The psychological processes teachers undergo in their first years of work are especially demanding. In Israel they cause more than half of the teachers to quit in their first year of work (Starhovsky, Marbach & Hadar-Lazarovich, 2002).

It has been claimed that the many changes education systems in Israel and elsewhere have undergone in recent years, changes which have altered the organizational reality of schools, have added to the difficulties, because teachers are now expected to be organization-oriented (Friedman & Kass, 2002). In other words, they must have deep knowledge of the school's organizational environment and be able to operate efficiently within it.

Becoming a teacher is a process during which teachers define themselves as members of the teaching profession and internalize their own social-cultural codes as well as those of the school in which they work, and feel as if they are performing the job with personal and professional mastery.

Fuller (1975) offers a model that describes the concerns of the teacher in three stages:

1. The survival stage: the concerns of the novice teacher focus mainly on survival as a teacher and on his or her personal wellbeing. The teacher asks, "am I suited to be a teacher?", "Will the pupils like me?", "What do the others think of me?" In this stage the novice teacher adapts to the school routine.

2. The task stage: the novice teacher begins to feel secure in his or her ability to deal with the daily routine of the classroom, to plan lessons and deal with classroom management. The teacher senses improvement in teaching skills and in command of the learning content. The concerns are now: "How good are my teaching materials?", "Will I have enough time to teach all the material?", "What is the best way to cover all the material?"

3. The influence stage: the novice teacher begins to worry about actualizing the individual potential of the students. The questions asked are: "Did all the students understand the material?", "To what extent are the students capable of applying what they have learned?", "How might I arouse the interest of the students?"

In this model, successful teaching experiences and overcoming difficulties in any stage is a prerequisite to advancing to the next stage. Novice teachers must satisfy the immediate demands that stem from feeling their self survival is threatened as well as feelings of lack of self-confidence in performing their teaching tasks, before they advance to their worries about influencing their students.

Borich (1999) offers a different approach in which the teacher's concerns do not proceed sequentially, but are dependent on context. There may be regression to previous stages of development, for example reverting from concerns about influence to concerns about tasks, as a consequence of unexpected demands to teach a new subject or a new age group. Consequently, there may be overlap between the stages: a teacher might be worrying about issues of two stages at once.

Examining the various stages of a teacher's career, Huberman (1989) identified six stages according to seniority:

1. The stage of survival and discovery: teachers confront the complexity of managing their teaching, they are overly concerned with themselves, the gap between ideals and daily reality in the classroom and the tremendous number of teaching tasks to be performed. Discovery is connected to the initial enthusiasm of "being responsible for my students, my classroom and my plan for the year" and the feeling of being a colleague among peers. The elements of survival and discovery exist side by side: the latter enabling the survival of the novice teacher.

2. The stabilization stage: here teachers make their final choice in favor of commitment to the teaching profession (joining the professional community and forgoing other options) and the sense of control over and comfort with teaching grows.

3. The investigation and diversity stage: teachers attempt to increase their influence on the system; these attempts raise their awareness of the difficulties that limit such influence. Teachers try out different teaching methods, experience new areas of responsibility in the school, and look for new challenges.

4. The assessment and doubt stage: the "mid-career crisis", this begins with a sense of being worn down by routine which leads to an existential crises relating to question of whether to remain in the profession or to leave it. There is a growing sense of repetitiveness and sobering up from an illusion that comes after all the efforts to change the work in the school. Teachers realize that if they don't act fast, alternative careers will be out of reach.

5. The clarity and serenity stage: moving from energetic activity to a more mechanical style, in which the gradual loss of energy and enthusiasm is compensated, as it were, by the growing feeling of confidence and self acceptance.

6. The detachment and liberation stage: the gradual liberation from investing in one's work. This often accompanied by a feeling of bitterness deriving from external pressures to vacate ones place to younger colleagues and new ideas.

Beginning with the third stage, the picture becomes complicated and the teacher's development forks off into several tracks that eventually merge into one track (clear detachment or bitterness).

Kagan (1992) claims that the experience of teaching a class always remains rooted in the personality and is an integral part of personal experience, and learning how to teach requires a journey into the deepest pathways of an individual's self-awareness, where failures, hopes and fears reside". She defined professional growth as "changes over time in behavior, knowledge, beliefs and perceptions of novice teachers" (p. 131)

She believes that the process of transforming the trainee into a teacher is connected to the construction of an independent professional identity. This is a process which takes place by way of a complex negotiation between the ideal image of the individual as

teacher, the expectations of others and the teacher's understanding of what must be done in order to survive. According to Kagan (1992), the professional development of the teacher in the course of the first year of work consists of five parts:

a. Developing the awareness of the novice teacher – of initial knowledge and initial beliefs of teaching. Candidates enter the training programs with personal beliefs about the classrooms and students and with images of themselves as teachers. In most cases, these early beliefs and images are connected to the biographies of the candidates: images of teaching by good teachers, images of "myself" as a teacher, and memories of themselves as students in the classroom.

b. Restructuring idealistic images – of students, and of the prior images of the "me" as a novice teacher. In this stage teachers tend to focus on their own behavior more than on the behavior of the students.

c. Moving one's attention away from the "me" towards teaching the students – the self-image of the teacher crystallizes.

d. Developing standard procedures for classroom management and discipline.

e. Developing problem solving skills – the teacher becomes able to identify problems. Thinking becomes more concrete and focused on solving problems.

The manner and the time in which these developments take place depends on the biography or personal history of the novice teacher, on the specific nature of the training program and the context in which the novice teacher works (type of students, relations with colleagues, parents and principals, availability of materials, etc.)

Olson and Osborne (1991) found that novice teachers have a strong need to belong to school subcultures. This belonging provides a sense of physical and emotional security, of acceptance, models for comparison and a basis for measuring success. Cheong (2000) found that one can attribute success or failure of the teacher to the extent to which they adopted the cultural norms of the school and to the question of how well they understood the power relationships in the school and in the school district. These factors are interconnected and structure the expectations of the new teacher.

The principal culture carriers of the school are the students, the principal and fellow teachers:

1. Students: they are the principal influencers on the career development of novice teachers. They have the greatest, and perhaps the most critical, impact on building the teacher's identity. Teachers spend more time with students than with any other factor in the school. They get immediate feedback from the students regarding their success as teachers, and in the insulated conditions in which they find themselves, this feedback has the greatest impact on how they feel about their abilities and their professional worth. (Schempp et al., 1999; Wildman et al., 1989). Lortie (1975) notes that controlling the students is the most important task and is vital to defining the identity of the job of the novice teacher. However, creating significant personal relationships with the students gives the teacher the greatest personal reward and satisfaction.

2. Principals: they have the greatest influence over teachers entering the profession and play a key role in their professional growth. Principals control most of the factors relating to the teacher's work. They determine the job expectations and whether these expectations have been fulfilled. Because principals are the primary factor in

hiring the teachers and deciding whether or not to keep them on, novice teachers are indebted to them and develop loyalty towards them. Principals mediate between external supervision, parents, etc. and the novice teacher. They act as a filter for these various influences and relay them to the teacher according to their relative importance. Principals are an important source of support for teachers at the start of their career, even though these teachers might think that sharing their worries and problems with the principal is an admission of lack of ability. (Brock & Grady, 1996; Schempp et al., 1999; Wildman et al., 1989)

3. Fellow teachers: they help novice teachers look after their own interests. They help them identify important tasks, give them ideas on how to reduce the work load and guide them in everything having to do with decisions about the curriculum. Colleagues inform novice teachers about things having to do with their status in the school and about criteria for advancement. Novice teachers need their colleagues in order to share ideas, solve problems and lessen the aloneness and uncertainty. (Marlow, 1997; Schempp, 1999; Wildman. 1989).

Olson and Osborne (1991) found that novice teachers saw their colleagues as their strongest sources of security in the school.

1.2 Organizational culture and school culture

Organizational culture is the aggregate of beliefs, feelings, behaviors and symbols that characterize a particular organization. It includes the philosophy, ideology, norms and values that are common to all the members of the organization. The culture includes the successful solutions to organizational problems that have accumulated over the years and which have been passed on to new workers as the proper way to identify and solve problems. This culture is rooted in the organization and becomes what is acceptable. Organizational culture has a tremendous impact on the level of an organization's effectiveness (Campbell & Southworth, 1992). Edgar Schein defined organizational culture as "the pattern of fundamental assumptions common to members of the group, which have become rooted in the group while solving problems having to do with the work of the organization" (Schein, 1992, p. 12).

A school, like any other organization, operates according to its values, goals, and unofficial procedures, which help define what goes on within, and are thus termed "the school culture".

Definitions mentioned in connection to the term "the school culture" are:

"A school's culture expresses the spirit of the school, its ethos and its climate." (Friedman, Horowitz & Shilev, 1988.)

"A system of symbols that subsume within them special meanings and not just economic, technical and material characteristics." (Smircich, 1983).

"Fundamental assumptions accepted by all members of the organization, which are perceived as self-evident – mostly not consciously – and which determine the values of members of the organization and direct their behavior" (Schein, 1985).

"A given aggregate of assumptions, values, beliefs and social conventions that members of a particular organization hold in common; this aggregate of terminology and symbols functions as a common denominator for the behavior of the members of the various sectors of the organization" (Samuel, 1990).

Organizational culture is composed of overt and unseen levels (Samuel, 1990): at the overt level we find patterns of behavior, language and symbols; at the unseen level we find norms, values and fundamental assumptions. This level is immanent to understanding the school's organizational culture, as its components reflect the underlying assumptions of the organization and define what the employee is expected to do in order to excel and persevere at the job (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). The values that are common to all the members of the organization - the norms, procedures and basic assumptions - define the unique character of the school and the "proper" standards by which to function in it – what is "worthy" and "unworthy" with regard to the behavior of the teacher, the principal and other functionaries of the school.

The cultural components of the school create a diverse cultural picture. Different types of school culture appear, with distinctive value systems and norms that reflect different standards and have different forms of expression. Evans, R. (2001) developed a model that defines four types of school culture, which differ from each other in their values and dominant symbols:

1. The family culture – the images stressed are family, home or team spirit. The principal is seen as a strong or weak parent, friend, brother or counselor. Concern for one another is great, and so is the commitment to students. Teachers give much more than they have to according to official job descriptions. The atmosphere in the school is friendly, caring and cooperative.

2. The machine culture – the machine metaphor envisions the school as a well-oiled machine. In this kind of framework the principal is seen as a workaholic, an army man, a leader and so on. This kind of school will present itself in very utilitarian terms: the driving force derives from the structure of the organization and the principal is judged according to his ability to control and safeguard the existing educational procedures. The school is a machine in which the teachers achieve the goals of their job.

3. The cabaret culture: the school culture is like a circus, a show, which is performed by admired artists. The principal is seen as an organizer of ceremonies, as an acrobat or a high wire walker in the circus. The teachers in the school experience many social processes which are part and parcel of their colleagues in a family culture school. The main difference being that in the performance culture, relationships are based on performance and the reaction of the audience. Teachers who excel in the classroom gain great respect.

4. The 'little shop of horrors': this kind of school is depicted as unpredictable, packed with tension and nightmares. Such a school is seen by its teachers as a prison, the principal's main job being to ensure that the educational process be smooth and without disruptions. The teachers function in isolation and there are almost no social relationships between colleagues. Most of the communication takes place in the form of official documents. The teachers are hostile to one another and the language they use is not appropriate and even rude.

2. Method

2.1 Research Method: qualitative. According to Schein (1985), qualitative research is preferable to quantitative research in diagnosing organizational culture because it is context-oriented to the specific context in the field. Typically, qualitative research interpretation is "open" and in most cases does not provided definitive answers but

rather takes into account different points of view and different explanations for the same phenomenon.

2.2 Research aim: to examine the contribution of school organizational culture, as perceived by trainee teachers, on their future commitment to the profession.

2.3 Research questions:

- How does the trainee teacher perceive the school organizational culture?

- How does this perception influence the trainee teacher's future commitment to the teaching profession?

2.4 Research tools: open-ended questionnaires dealing with how teachers perceive the five components of the organizational structure of the school: clarity of procedures, attitudes of the management, the essence of the connection to the students, how colleagues relate, interaction with parents.

The questionnaire has Face Validity, since the questions relate to the popular and accepted components of culture taken from the extensive literature on the subject.

**2.5 Research sample:** 15 novice teachers from two Israeli teacher education colleges.

3. Results

Table 1: Summary of findings from the open-ended questionnaire

|	Area	Sample statements
1	**Clarity of school procedures and norms** Total positive responses: 8	"Procedures are repeated in various forums at school" "I know what I have to do" Things are made public and reach everyone" "The procedures and norms are adequately clear"
	Total negative responses: 7	"Norms and procedures are not sufficiently clear" "Students interpret things as they wish" "Teachers take short cuts"
2	**Principal's attitude** Total positive responses: 13	"The principal gives us a platform" His/her attitude is "respectful", assertive but pleasant", "fair", "personal", friendly", "attentive"

	Area	Sample statements
	Total negative responses: 2	"a poor attitude" "there is no contact"
3	**Quality of connection with the students** Total positive responses: 13	"a connection of mutual understanding" "dedicated and warm", "respectful", "personal", "open" "I have become very attached to them" "It will be hard to leave them"
4	**Quality of professional and personal reciprocal relations among staff members** Total positive responses: 12	"the staff makes me feel like a real teacher" A relationship of "encouragement", "esteem" A relationship that is "forgiving", "supportive and family-like", "warm", "understanding", "friendly".
	Total negative responses: 3	"No relationships were formed" "Teachers keep their distance" "Apart from the guard, I haven't make any connections"
5	**Their conclusions from contact with parents** Total positive responses: 5	"There is respect and understanding on both sides" "Parents are usually cooperative" "Parents highly appreciate being constantly informed and in contact"
	Total neutral responses: 6	"At my current status I have no contact with students' parents"

	Area	Sample statements
	Their thoughts about their future in the teaching profession Total absolutely positive responses: 7	"I will be a caring, friendly and encouraging teacher" "My thinking is good – I will do things differently!" "I will invest time and energy in being a significant homeroom teacher" "The work is very satisfying" "It is a joy to take part in this important and essential role" "I hope I am up to the task"
	Total absolutely negative responses: 2	"I will continue my education to a position of decision-making" "I don't want to be in a classroom with 40 students and just spew out material!"
	Total responses involving doubts: 6	"My thinking is divided 50-50" "It's not clear" "Ambivalent feelings"
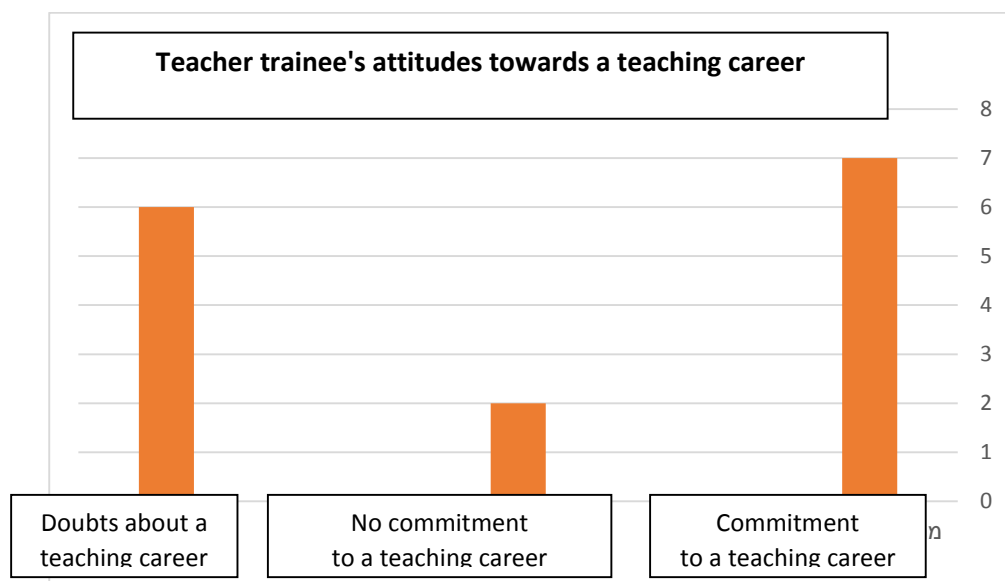
Figure 1: Distribution of commitment (7), lack of commitment (2), doubts about a teaching career (6)**.**
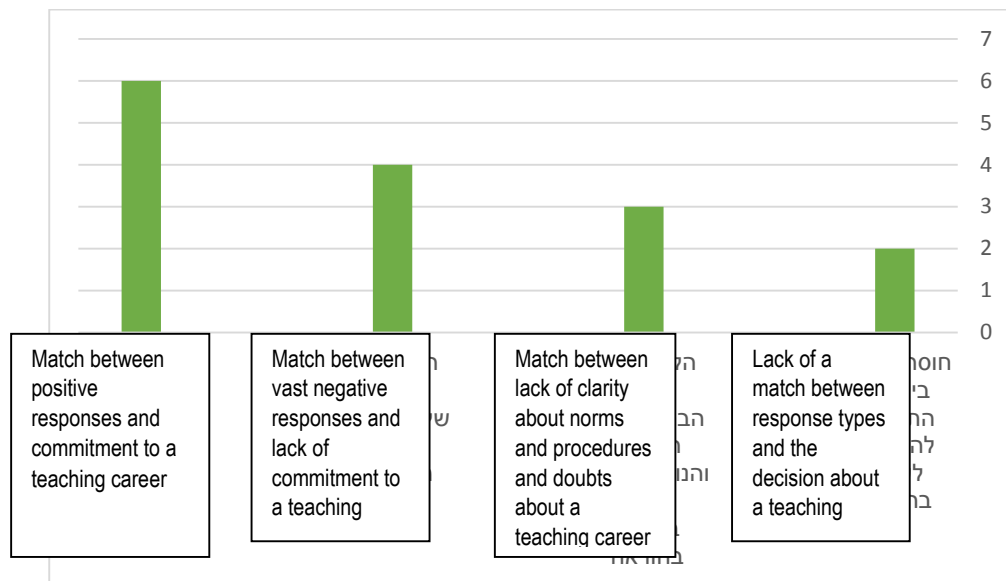
Figure 2: Contribution of the perception of the components of the culture to the commitment to a teaching career

The figure shows that 6 out of the 7 who said they were committed to teaching (85.7%) perceived the school's organizational culture as positive for all parameters: clarity of procedures, attitudes of the management, the essence of the connection to the students, how colleagues relate, and interaction with parents (if they had contact with them).

4. Discussion

The process of becoming a teacher is accompanied by learning the cultural codes that give meaning to daily life at school. Teachers are a social product molded by the expectations and activities of the "culture carriers" of the school: principals, fellow teachers, students and even parents. In relating to them, novice teachers construct their own professional identity. Schempp (1999) describes the culture of a school as being composed of rules that describe what is normal, acceptable and legitimate. Cultural codes differentiate between what is important and what is less important, identify the school's power centers and the significant ways to apply the necessary power to ensure one's status in the school. In his words, the novice teacher learns "how things really work in the school".

As they integrate into the teaching profession, beginning teachers experience many difficulties at the outset, most of which are connected to the school's organizational culture and its various components. Beginning teachers have the most difficulty in basic understanding of the organizational life in the school, and therefore may find themselves lacking the tools to deal with the problems and difficulties of their job (Kremer-Hayon & Ben-Peretz, 1986).

The findings of the research reinforce the difficulty of the initial encounter of the trainee teacher with down-to-earth reality: of the 15 respondents, only 7 are positive that their future is in teaching, within a school framework. Most are not at all convinced of this. Huberman (1989) notes that the survival and discovery stage is decisive in the development of the teacher; this stage is characterized by the confrontation of the teacher with the complexities of managing the teaching experience, of over-absorption

with themselves, with the gap between ideals and the daily reality in the classroom, and the tremendous number of tasks the teacher must perform. He notes that the teacher experiences initial enthusiasm of "being responsible for my students, for my classroom and for my yearly program" as well as being a colleague of fellow teachers.

Of particular interest is the issue of clarity of procedures as a component of the school organizational culture. This component is significant in relation to the commitment to teaching, since the trainee teachers who saw other components of organizational culture as positive and sympathetic to their work, were less inclined towards a future career in teaching, if procedures and norms in the school were not clear enough. Unlike the overt components of a school's organizational culture (attitude of management, connection with students, peers and parents), the hidden components, i.e. the procedures and norms, are the principle codes of that culture and deciphering them is actually what enables a teacher's wellbeing and security within the organization. It is precisely the hidden level that is immanent in the school's organizational culture, since its components reflect its underlying assumptions and define what the employee must do in order to advance (Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

The literature stresses the importance of "healthy" interaction between the newcomers and their fellow teachers. These reciprocal relationships are based on mutual aid as well as cooperation and support in regards to personal and professional problems, collaboration and collegiality; Norms of reciprocal support among the teachers, respect for the ideas of colleagues, receiving open and honest feedback from colleagues, words of praise for colleagues for their successes, and sharing of ideas, materials and information (Friedman, 2001).

The vast majority of the respondents (12 out of 15) have great praise for the relationship between themselves and their colleagues; most of the trainee teachers sense support, understanding, and encouragement from the veteran teachers. According to Olson and Osborne (1991), the need to feel a sense of belonging is a powerful immanent component among novice teachers. Belonging provides the trainee teacher with emotional security, acceptance, and the ability to compare oneself with veteran teachers, and thereby, have a basis for measuring success in the field of teaching. It could be that the warm attitudes of the veteran teachers is connected to the fact that they do not see the trainee teachers as a source of competition or a professional threat, and therefore they support them in their first steps in their teaching career. One may also assume that the veteran teachers identify with the difficulties of the trainee teachers as they see in them a mirror of the young struggling teachers they themselves once were.

Trainee teachers receive especially strong support from their assigned mentor teacher. Conversations with the mentor enable a reflective process that reveals the gap between the desired self-image and the one that is reality. The mentor is an essential component who provides the novice teacher with emotional and professional support. Schempp, Sparkes, & Templin, (1999) have demonstrated that colleagues give a great deal of support to new teachers. They pass on a great deal of knowledge to the new teachers regarding questions of status in the school; they let them test out their ideas, prepare plans and solve problems. They reduce feelings of loneliness and uncertainty and help develop a greater sense of self-esteem.

Six of the respondents had no direct contact with parents other than by way of the mentor teacher. No doubt, this spared them from the frequent confrontations with the demands and expectations of the parents. Israeli society is in a heightened process wherein parents want to exercise their right to influence the education given to their

children in school (Fisher & Friedman, 2002). The increased level of the parents' education, increasing processes of democratization, budget cuts in the educational system side by side with growing competitiveness that encourage learning achievements – all or some of these promote involvement with the school, and in extreme cases real conflict with the teacher who actually has to implement the education policy. Trainee teachers who do have contact with parents expect them to be partners in the educational process, to help and support them, to appreciate their work and support it; to be involved but not to interfere.

The research findings show that the principal is a significant factor in molding the school culture. 86.6% of the trainee teachers noted that the principals' attitudes to them were: "respectful", "assertive but pleasant", "fair", "personal", "friendly", "attentive". There is no doubt that the principals' influence over the organizational culture is manifested through their daily administration, their values, their decisions, their actions and their missteps as well as their reactions to crises or critical events – all are standards that served them in enlisting employees, developing their careers or destroying them.

In conclusion: the first steps in teaching are seen to be one of the most difficult periods in a teaching career. Taking the first position is seen as a most significant milestone in a teacher's professional development. Some of the difficulties experienced by novice teachers are rooted in the organizational reality and how their perception of reality.

 The trainee teacher in the first stages of a teaching career who experiences an organizational culture in which most components are difficult or unclear, will tend to doubt this choice of profession and even retreat from it. The very fact that at the same time the school has a mosaic of sub-cultures that very often come into conflict with one another does not make it easy at all for the trainee teacher's chosen path: commitment to or retreating from a teaching career.

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