

A Qualitative-Based Research on the School Principals' Perspective on Teacher Happiness in Arab Schools from Galilee District, Israel

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Abstract

This article discusses the perspective about the Arab teachers' happiness and well-being of Arab schools' principals from the Galilee District, Israel. Using a qualitative research approach, the researcher interviewed 15 school principals. Questions asked by the researcher were about the respondent opinion about teachers' happiness at school, its importance for school principals, actions to increase their happiness, to distribute the workload evenly among teachers and help them to maintain a balance between their workload and their personal lives. The sample was made 15 school principals from 8 urban and 7 rural Arab schools. All urban schools are performing at the same and above Arab sector average results of academic examinations while 3 rural schools are below and 4 at the average achievement in students' examination. Findings were are grouped around four main themes: a) the intrinsic connection between teachers' happiness, motivation and efficacy; b) the role

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1. Introduction

The teachers' work is a highly demanding intensive intellectual work. Thus, teaching and working in close human contact with many students daily and bearing a high responsibility for their education and learning, challenge the well-being of teachers since it is exposing them progressively to stress, burnout and quitting the profession. Therefore, school principals have to develop and maintain positive relationship of teachers with their colleagues when at school, first. Also, they have to stimulate teachers to establish positive relationships with their students and students' families, important stakeholders of the school. The main goal of school principals is to increase and maintain the well-being of teachers working in their respective school. The reason for it is that the teachers' level of well-being determines positive effects such as students' higher academic results.

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2. Literature review

Several authors such as (Lomas et al, 2023; VanderWeele, 2019; Diener et al., 2009; Gyeltshen & Beri, 2018; Benevene et al. ,2020) discussed the issue of happiness, well-being, and health. "Well-being is not just the mere absence of illness at work. Rather, it refers to healthy and successful functioning of teachers at work" (Fiorilli et al., 2020, p. 1). Lomas and his collaborators (2023) addressed thoroughly and with great detail the definitions, types and connections between terms such as flourishing, happiness, well-being and health. They defined "subjective well-being," as "a broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction" (p. 27, Diener et al. (1999) apud Lomas et. Al., 2023.), and "happiness" as "the relative attainment of a personal subjective mental state of quality" (Lomas et al., 2023, p.15). Happiness at work should be regarded as "spirit at work", defined as the "teachers experience about their work and their feeling associated to the work with great meaning in a positive way" (Gyeltshen & Beri, 2018, p.1820).

They proposed an extremely complex and original classification of types of happiness, consisting of "three types of experiential modality, 16 distinct types primarily grouped in three groups feeling (types 1-5); thinking (6-10); and doing (11-16)" (Lomas et al., 2023, p. 13). Highly original is the concept of human "flourishing" defined as "the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives" (VanderWeele, 2017; VanderWeele & Lomas, 2023, p.18). They proposed a classification of happiness consisting of five categories: first, "Meaningful happiness", defined as "feeling a sense of deeper meaning in their work" related to the content of their job; second, "Absorbed happiness" which is felt in relation to their level of engagement in their own job, due to various other factors such as motivation; third, "Chaironic happiness" which is about "feeling joy and gladness about their life at work", given several situational factors, such as interested students, high grades in exams,; fourth, is "Accomplished happiness", which is about "being happy about what one has achieved" both at work place and in personal life; and fifth category of happiness is "Relational happiness" which is about "functioning relationships with other people surrounding us, where our relationships have a strong influence on our health" (Lomas et al., 2024, p.17).

In conclusion, it is clear that living a fulfilling life is the key to personal well-being and health. However, happiness really mean different things from one human being to another individual giving it numerous facets. On the other hand, what human happiness is varies among various societal cultures and from one profession to another. These differences are explained by the fact on one hand, that happiness is a subjective perception and, on the other hand, happiness takes several forms, as discussed above.

For example, personal happiness is highly connected to health, age and to different situations in life (Steptoe et al., 2015; Keyes et al., 2010). Situational factor such as socioeconomic status, employment, social relationships, and life event, are

highly influencing the individual subjective well-being. (Sanadi et al., 2016; Western, & Tomaszewski, 2016). Individuals who report higher levels of emotional well-being and personal happiness are often individuals who live in favorable situations, such as higher income, stable employment, better health, and more intense social life. These subjective and objective dimensions of quality of life are closely intertwined, still having its distinct influence on human well-being.

There are four aspects of well-being: physical, emotional, social and mental well-being. According to Benevene et al. (2020) “well-being is a multifaceted concept, comprising cognitive and affective as well as physical and mental components; it encompasses dispositional, personal, organizational, and environmental factors” (p. 3).

The happiness at work increases the teachers’ positive work values and attitudes, moods and emotions. The workplace happiness of teachers is influenced by many factors such as individual expectations, interests and personality, by the support received from their school setting and by the external social support received in private life (Benevene, 2019, Lavy & Bocker, 2018; ; De Cordova, 2019; Peláez-Fernández et al., 2021).

3. The research sample

The 15 school principals interviewed by the researcher remembers of the Arab minority in Israel, which represents around 20% of the country’s population. They are experienced school managers, , mature individuals over 47 years old. Their 15 schools are located in the district of Galilee, made of a group of 8 urban school, with 5230 students, 453 teachers, ratio student/ teacher = 11,55, and another group of 7 rural schools, with 2620 students, 228 teachers, and a ratio student/ teacher = 11,50. According to final examination results of students the sample consists of 3 high achievement schools, all urban schools and 5 schools with results above the Arab sector average achievements, also urban schools. Next, there are 4 schools at the Arab sector level of average achievements, all rural schools, and 3 rural schools at the lower end of academic performance below Arab sector average. This indicates that a clear separation exists between urban and rural schools. All 8 urban schools are all performing above Arab sector average while the other 7 rural schools are in a worst situation compared to the Arab sector average achievement in students examination.

From the nature of served communities, two rural school are ethnically homogeneous, two schools are in traditional communities, one school has strong local ties in their community, one school is characterized by clan influence and one school is serving a community having lower socio-economic status. All rural schools are characterized by a homogenous body of students, while urban schools are different: four schools are more diverse, four schools are mixed sectarian schools, one school the students body has a common background, three schools have a body of students with a good socio-economic status, and one school is very liberal. In

conclusion, there is no urban school which has a homogenous body of students, which is normal for urban environment.

4. The Thematic Analysis of the Interviews. Results and Discussion

The findings of the qualitative research were synthesized around four main themes: a) the intrinsic connection between teachers' happiness, motivation and efficacy; b) the role of the school principal as a promoter of happiness; c) strategies to promote job satisfaction; d) the issue of workload and work-life balance;

The first theme found across nearly all interviews was the clear connection between a teacher's happiness, their motivation, and their self-efficacy. Happiness was perceived to be a core driver of teachers' professional performance and school success. School principals stated clearly that a happy teacher is an effective teacher. All respondents stated that in their personal experience inner feeling of happiness and self-fulfillment of a teacher represent a major driving force for their job self-efficacy. "I see happiness at work as a central component for educational success and for the personal and professional development of the staff members. He allows himself to dream, initiate, experiment and deal with challenges in a constructive and progressive manner" (school principal C from School 3). "Happiness and joy are the first motivator for any educational breakthrough" (school principal F from School 6). "When a worker feels appreciated and has opportunities for growth, his or her happiness level will increase, which will then impact his or her self-efficacy" (school principal E from School 5).. "Happiness is not a luxury; it is the fuel for motivation. If a worker is not happy in his or her work, it will not fuel the system, and he or she will eventually lose his or her self-efficacy" (school principal H from School 8). "We see a direct spiral here: happiness feeds the team; a nurtured team is a self-efficacious team that views challenging roles as challenges rather than threats" (school principal G from School 7). As stated by several school principals: "Happiness and joy are the first motivator" that directly fuels professional capacity.

The researcher concludes that Arab teachers who perceive themselves as capable and effective in their professional roles tend to experience higher levels of happiness, while positive emotional states enhance their confidence, resilience, and motivation to act effectively. The same conclusion was formulated by Oplatka (2016) whose findings indicated that school principals act effectively and respond adequately to the expectation of the community their schools is serving, are capable of building trust and good relationship between them and their teachers and create a collaborative school culture. Subsequently, the self-efficacy of their school teachers increases significantly, increasing their personal happiness.

The second major theme identified by the researcher from interviews with school principals is related to their commitment to teacher well-being and their role as a promoter of happiness. The large majority of respondents declared clearly that one of their major personal goals and responsibility as managers of the school is to ensure the happiness of their teachers by creating and maintaining a positive school climate to allow teachers to thrive professionally and personally. They considered

that increasing the well-being of teachers and other staff members staff, will lead to a better school working and studying environment and to better academic achievements of students on their exams.

The school principal B from school 2 described vividly this chain of events stating: "Yes. A teacher who comes to school happy indicates effectiveness and lack of burnout in the school. A happy teacher is a happy student and this happy student influences the achievements and climate of the school and the organizational culture in general" (school principal B from School 2). Also, school principal C from School 3 highlighted the direct impact on teachers' happiness on the quality of teaching : "The happiness of my teachers is very important for me. I believe that when teachers feel good, valued and meaningful, it directly affects the attitudes and academic results of students and the atmosphere at school. A happy teacher is a teacher who teaches out of love and a genuine desire to make an impact." (school principal C from School 3). The same conclusion can be formulated based on the statements of school principal E from School 5 such as "I strive to create an environment where teachers feel they are part of a supportive community. This feeling allows them to positively influence students and parents alike" (school principal E from School 5). He also pointed out the positive impact on the parents of students, major stakeholders of the school. The researcher also concludes from the interviews that one of the roles school principal consider that they are "emotion-generating" leaders, a component of the transactional leadership style which is the second mostly use leadership style after the transactional school style by Arab schools principals, as the quantitative results of this research indicate (Haddad & Bibu, 2025).

On another hand, not everybody agreed with common view about teachers' happiness. The school principal G from school 3 stated a dissenting, strongly different opinion, that happiness may be incompatible with the rigors of the teaching profession: "No. The work of teaching is stressful. A teacher who is constantly happy at work will adversely affect the teachers' work" (school principal G from school). This highly different opinion highlights the inherent pressures of the teaching role, as noted in the literature review regarding teacher burnout. However, we conclude that there is almost consensus among school principals that they are decisive agents to create conditions and promote the well-being of their teachers. Oplatka (2016) found that the Arab school principal's leadership acts as a force multiplier in their school due to their personal example and managerial actions in enhancing both teacher satisfaction and organizational coherence. The findings of (Halabi, 2014; Fuchs, 2017) pointed out that systemic challenges impact negatively the inspirational role of school principals for their teachers, impacting their job motivation and happiness at school.

The third main theme arising from the interviews is about strategies used by school principals for fostering happiness and job satisfaction. The researcher found that there are two directions for managerial action: the first, school principals are actively developing and maintaining a school climate based on providing support and appreciation to school teachers, through dialogue and listening. The second direction is to empower their school teachers through professional autonomy, encouraging

personal professional development and positively appreciating their professional results and dedication. School principal J from school 3 stated that "Empowering and appreciating when needed is vital" (school principal J from School 10). "I try to be an active partner with the teachers, to help, to promote them, to talk about the issues of concern" (school principal I from School 9). "I make sure to recognize their efforts and express appreciation on a daily basis" (school principal D from School 4). The researcher also identified that some school principals are using "distributive management." For example, (school principal B from School 2 stated that p Personal conversations and delegation of authority to each individual "helps in fostering a sense of ownership" (school principal B from School 2). "I believe in the dispersion of responsibility and partnership" (school principal F from School 6). School principal I from School 9 talked about school principals' cooperation with the teachers: "I think I try to meet the needs of the teachers through full collaborative work". Referring to the teachers professional growth, school principal C from School 3. stated: "I make sure to provide opportunities for professional development in accordance with each teacher's personal desires". The research of Oplatka (2016) found that school principals who develop trust with teachers, are effectively dealing with the expectations of the community their school is serving and support teacher's professional activities and development have a strong impact on their teacher happiness. It also helps to create a positive feedback loop that leads to increase the teachers' job satisfaction.

The theme of workload management and work-life balance was highlighted mostly by school principals who attempt to equitably distribute tasks among the teachers working in their schools. Referring to the transparency of this process the school principal C from School 3 stated: "I try to plan the division of tasks in a fair and transparent manner, taking into account the abilities, scope of the job, and the personal characteristics of each teacher". Referring to the equity concerns the school principal E from School 5 stated: "I make every effort to distribute the workload in a fair and transparent manner... It's important for me to hear the teachers' opinions about the workload so there are no teachers drowning". Several Arab school principals mentioned the systemic pressures felt by them and their teachers, for example the school principal B from School 2 declared: "It's very hard for me to help with work-life balance because the system is very busy and I find time for afternoon activities with the students, which definitely affects their personal lives. "They also mentioned the issue of scarce existing resource for Arab schools, such as the school principal G from School 7: "Yes, I try to distribute work fairly, but the problem is that it's hard to find serious and suitable teachers for all roles."

The researcher formulated the conclusion that all interviewed school principals considered that managing fairly a teacher workload is highly important for preventing burnout and for maintaining teachers' commitment. On the other hand, respondents have stated that they face difficulties to manage equitable distribution, mainly due to "a gap between the abilities of various teachers, being hard to recruit and keeping reliable and suitable young teachers. In addition to scarcity of financial

and material resources this situation is adding more challenges to school principals within the Arab school rural context.

Another finding from the school principals interviews is about taking actions aimed to help their school's teachers to achieve and keep a satisfactory work-life balance. Most of the respondents stated that they are aware of this important issue for keeping them happy, and that they are committed to act on it first, by allowing for offering flexibility for teachers and, second, attempting to not interfere in their personal life and time, mostly by not assigning them tasks outside of the school work schedule. For example, school principal L from school 9 stated "I try to ease the workload as much as possible and create an environment that allows teachers to maintain a healthy work-life balance. And school principal C from School 3 also stated that "I make sure to be flexible in my schedule, give teachers time to rest, and strive not to create unnecessary workload." These results are confirmed also by the findings of the research done by Donitsa-Schmidt and Zuzovsky (2020), underlying the fact that in Arab schools in Israel there is a strong impact on the Arab teachers' work-life balance due to high individual workload and systemic pressures specific to the Arab educational sector. "Arab teachers often face large class sizes, resource limitations, and heightened socio-cultural community expectations, all of which increase professional strain and blur boundaries between work and personal life" (Donitsa-Schmidt and Zuzovsky, 2020,p.193). This imbalance can reduce teacher well-being, lower motivation, and negatively affect job satisfaction, even for highly committed educators (Toren & Iliyan, 2008).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The main conclusion is that school management in the Arab sector is transitioning from traditional bureaucratic centralized approach to more collaborative less bureaucratic one. This change process is also influenced by external demands from the Israeli Ministry of Education and the specific local factors such as community political pressures based on the traditional clan forms, and ethnical groups. This leads to school principals using a mix of leadership styles mostly transactional and with some elements of transformational such as empowering teachers that are overburdened and feel strongly that they are underpaid.

In this environment the capability to inspire happiness in their school teachers is considered by the respondents to the main competence of an effective Arab school principals. Teachers' happiness is actually a professional resource for Arab school principals for enabling their teachers to mitigate the structural challenges of the Arab education system in Israel and to finally improve their students' academic results.

Another conclusion is that Arab school principals should induce happiness at work in the school in their teaching staff, and to maintain it at needed high levels (Haddad & Bibu, 2025, Nalipay, et al., 2024, Benevene et al, 2020, Eyal & Roth, 2011, Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021). This conclusion is completed by the specificities such as weak local governance and clan-based political dynamics within Arab

municipalities influencing the activities of schools, mainly by creating ambiguous authority structures and informal networks of influence (Zubeidat et. al., 2025, Haddad & Bibu, 2025, Yemini, M., & Addi-Racah, A., 2013).

The researcher recommends to Arab school principals to initiate a process of gradual change of their current school culture towards a school culture based on a fusion between traditional Arab cultural values and a set of modern educational values related to sharing ideas and assuming initiatives aimed to improve own and common teaching and assessing innovative practices, the value of collaborating and empowerment of teachers, open communication, and trust between school principals and teachers. We also recommend to Arab school principals to develop a special action plan to manage this complex change process, based on important actions to attract and acquire the support of those teachers willing to improve the academic results of their students and the image of the school in the local community their school serves for educating the young generations.

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