

# The Sky Is the Limit: Being the Best We Can

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## Abstract

The model of developing excellence in education differentiates between two processes of excellence. The first is a comparable excellence, in which you compare yourself to others and will be referred to in this article as “excellence.” The second is incomparable excellence, in which you develop your own excellence without reference to anything, or to others, and will be referred to in this article as “excel.” This model offers ways for developing incomparable inner excellence, i.e. developing excel.

It is a three-dimensional theoretical model: preconditions of the model, means that enable the development of the students' personal potential and basic assumptions which comprise the model's base.

This paper also reveals the practical aspects of the theoretical model, showing that personal excellence can be developed in each and every student. Developing personal excellence will actually lead to the creation of an excellent society.

**Keywords:** personal potential; excellence; excel; multiple intelligences; values; educational programs

## 1. Introduction

When people say that the sky is the limit, they mean that the possibilities are endless and that the potential is limitless. This phrase basically means that there is no limit, just as the sky appears to be never-ending and infinite. The theoretical model that will be introduced in this paper will demonstrate this philosophical approach by distinguishing between different approaches to the word excellence. What is excellence? This question is foremost in the minds of both researchers and education professionals who aim to find ways for improving the education system. Today, with increasing criticism directed against those who take part in the work of education, we search for ways to augment the education system; methods that will lead to better personal and group performance among students.

However, the purpose of the education system is not only to improve student performance. We hear public criticism, mostly in the Western world, that the education system does not place sufficient emphasis on the development of values, social integration and equal opportunities for all. However, saying this, do we really know what we mean when we mention these concepts? Are we unanimous in our views about them? What, if any, is the relationship between these ideas and the development of personal and group excellence?

The model of developing excellence in education distinguishes between two processes of excellence. The first is comparable excellence in which you compare yourself to others. This process will be referred to in this article as “excellence.” The second is incomparable excellence in which you develop your own excellence – your own potential, without reference to where you stand compared to others. This process will be referred to in this article as “excel.” The two terms differ not by a dictionary definition but by systemic and personal factors.

The paper will also discuss the application of the model, showing how it can be used to lead students towards developing their personal potential, and was therefore named “the sky is the limit,” meaning that the potential is limitless. Just as the sky seems never-ending and infinite, this phrase basically means that there is no limit to personal potential. The philosophical aspect of this approach supports the idea that developing personal potential and personal achievement could or might actually cause the betterment of the education system as a whole.

## 2. Defining Excellence and Excelling

The described model is based on distinguishing between two processes which are usually not differentiated in the relevant literature. The Oxford Advanced Learning Dictionary (1992) defines *excellence* as “thing or quality in which a person excels” or as “the quality of being excellent”. *Excelling*, on the other hand, is defined as “exceptionally good at something.” These definitions indicate that there is no clear-cut difference between the two terms, and one can assume that they are synonyms. Thus, is an excellent person necessarily outstanding? Few researchers address this difference.

Three researchers who dealt with this issue were Gonen (1994), Kasher (2003) and Fisher (2007). Gonen (1994) described excellence as a relative (to other people) phenomenon, external and limited in its conditions for occurrence. Excellence is relative to others and occurs in a particular time, place and function (activity, class, etc.). It is presented externally. It can be easily understood by an example from sports: scores given in competitions such as athletic competitions or any other competitions, as demonstrated by achieving first prize, second prize, etc. The first prize is awarded for better results than the second prize and the second prize is awarded for better than the third prize. As we see, this is a comparable phenomenon.

Let us examine this concept by observing the way athletes are chosen for the Olympic Games. In order to participate in the games, the athletes must achieve a minimum score in an event, below which they will not be accepted. Most athletes who participate in the pre-Olympic competitions are well-known national champions in their countries, are perceived by their fans to be excellent, and achieved the Olympic Committee's minimal requirements for competing. In the games themselves, although some excel relative to their foreign counterparts, many do not advance beyond the preliminary round. Does this mean that they no longer excel? Indeed, it means that their excelling depends on time and place, and is not inherent. They may one day win a medal in their own country, and on another day win nothing at all abroad. Naturally, there are athletes for whom excelling is a more universal phenomenon, but still quite dependent on time and place.

Gonen (1994) describes *excel* as the fulfillment of the potential within an individual. As such it is an internal process of development that has an absolute value at any given moment. Excellence is not comparable and depends solely on the individual and his/her self-actualization, which can be limitless.

The following story can shed light on the idea. Linda, a young student from India, traveled to Stockholm, Sweden, as part of a student exchange program. When the program held a skiing competition, Linda, who had never skied before, told the activity organizers that - lacking the experience or ability - she would rather not participate. The organizers encouraged her to try, and she did. As expected, after several falls, Linda finished in last place. But she completed the task. At the awards ceremony, Linda was called upon to receive the gold medal. She assumed it was a prank, but was told that considering her starting (no experience) and end point (finishing the assignment), her achievement was the most impressive. The activity's organizers rewarded excellence and not excelling. This is not to imply that developing excellence and striving to excel are mutually exclusive, but the emphasis is different.

Few distinguish between excellence and excelling – between one's achievements with respect to oneself, and one's achievement relative to others. There are those who confuse the two. Professor Asa Kasher (2003) created a five-layered *scale of excelling*, which begs the question of what it means to excel. The first stage is developmental excelling. For instance, a baby can initially only say the word "dad", but several months later has a larger vocabulary. Kasher described this as the personal excelling of an individual at one point in time relative to another point. We can imagine Gonen calling this excellence.

The second stage is comparative excelling. The sprinter who finishes first excels compared to his or her competition. A group that wins over other groups in a competition also excels. A financially successful factory excels compared to its bankrupt counterparts. Gonen (1994) would have agreed that this is excelling, since performance is judged externally.

The third stage is excelling in ability. An employee who was promoted or a student making progress is an example of the third stage. This type of excelling deals with fulfilling one's potential: the nearer one is to the limits of his/her potential, the more stable he/she is on this stage of the ladder. Gonen would have viewed this as excellence, since it describes the personal qualities within an individual, his or her potential.

Kasher's fourth stage is essential excelling. The objective criteria of the activity performed determine if one excels. It can therefore be considered absolute excelling, based on the level of professional, social, cultural or organizational performance. A teacher, student, leader, engineer, social worker, industrialist or army officer must possess the relevant knowledge, refined skills, deep understanding and relevant values in order to pass the test of essential excelling. For Gonen, this would constitute both excellence and excelling. The person develops with reference to himself, but meets comparable standards.

The last stage in the scale is transcendent excelling. It demands adherence to lofty standards of professionalism, knowledge, skill and ethics, as well as a drive for improvement and understanding. A person at this stage despises sloth and is under constant pressure to avoid mediocrity. It is not easy to be a "bottom-feeder" and equally difficult to be an "elitist". Transcendent excelling requires the courage to excel, together with a measure of humility. It is not, in the end, reward-oriented. Gonen would have probably perceived the fifth stage as the ultimate fulfillment of potential, or excellence.

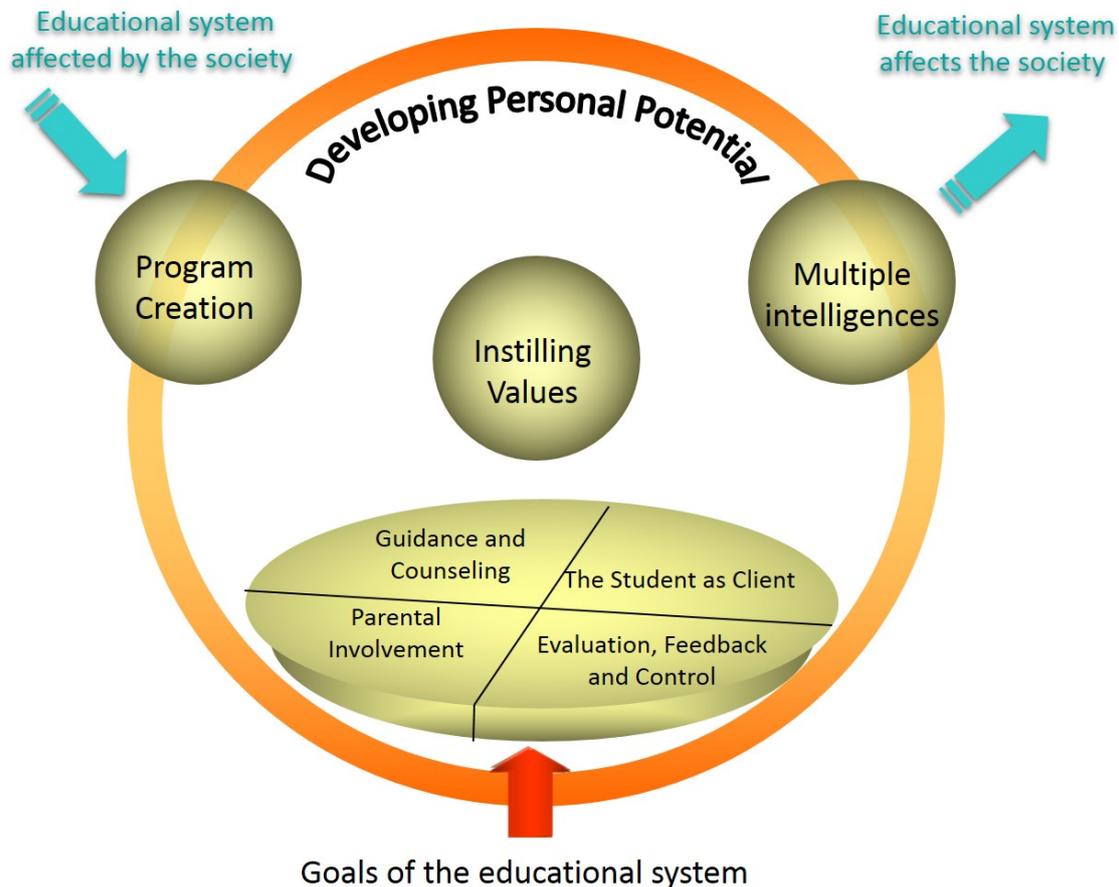
It is clear that the meaning of words changes with their use. What does the education system mean when it states that student excellence should be developed? Does it mean raising the bar of academic achievement? Or does it mean that the potential within each student should be fostered? This paper adopts the stance taken by Gonen, and views excellence as the self-actualization of the individual student. Excelling will be treated as an external achievement comparable to others. These definitions will be used to construct a theoretical model aimed at developing a student's personal potential – the *Developing Excellence in Education Model* (henceforth, the model).

### 3. The Model

The model describes ways for developing the personal potential of every student. The development of personal potential leads to the development of excellence. The model is three-dimensional and is comprised of three main parts. The first includes the preconditions for the model's viability. These are the external effects on the education system: direct effects such as the system's purposes, as well as indirect effects that are not part of the system but nevertheless influence it. The second part includes the means through which the student's potential is developed (encircled in figure 1). The third part describes the axioms on which

the model stands (ellipse, figure1).

The development of personal potential and excellence has an inexorable positive influence on society. It is also cyclical, and its processes actually never cease.



**Figure 1:** Developing Excellence in Education Model

### 3.1 Preconditions

Students do not enter the education system from a vacuum. The system is affected by its surroundings, as are its students. These environmental influences exist regardless of developing excellence, but must be taken into account for the latter to be effective. A school must consider environmental factors as well as the objectives of the education system of which it is part. These dictated objectives are obligating, since they are part of a system of law.

What are the external factors that influence the education system?

#### 3.1.1 External factors

Education is affected by three main factors:

- a. Changes in the social and cultural environment.

b. Market changes.

c. Political and ideological elements.

Changes in the social and cultural environment, in this context, refer to changes in the daily routine, consumption, youth culture and familial structure and function. For instance, the culture of adolescents changes irrespective of the education system. It is the system's duty to adapt to such a change, rather than try to change the culture through continuing conflict. There is a tendency for each generation to perceive its successor as inferior in some respect. This "nostalgia" leads us to judge students through subjective lenses.

A classic but far from unique example is the culture of youth attire. For example, today youngsters commonly wear tight shirts and low-hanging pants. Many adults perceive such clothing as unacceptable. Young people will justifiably claim that it is fashion. One can try and oppose this, but designers are unlikely to conform. It follows that the adults should adapt to this culture.

The education system must also adapt to changes that have taken place in the structure and function of the family over the past twenty years. Until recently, a teacher would ask a student to invite his mother and father for a teacher-parent-meeting. Today it is more appropriate to invite the parents, since they can be of the same sex, or the child may be raised by a single parent. As educators we should not criticize this change, but instead familiarize ourselves with it and recognize its influence.

The education system must also take market changes into account. We all recognize, for example, how technological advances impact education. There is a saying – "how can yesterday's teachers teach today's children tomorrow's material?" Teachers who fail to make use of technological progress are unable to teach today's children. The internet has become integral in our lives; email has turned us into a truly global village; the ability to conduct trans-oceanic conferences in real time, etc. These and other advances have a great impact on the education system. Educators must conform to these technologies, to which their students are exposed regardless and usually outside of the education system.

The web continues to be populated largely by younger generations, as more than half of the adult internet population in the USA is between 18 and 44 years old. However, larger percentages of older generations are online now than in the past and they are doing more activities online, according to the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project surveys taken from 2006-2008 (Jones, 2009). Similar data have been reported from other Western countries (Internet World Stats, 2009).

There is no corresponding information for teacher usage, but it is estimated to be far lower than the students' (Shamir, 2002). Teachers know that the internet is a source of rich, new and varied information, but most have yet to make regular use of it. There is a gap between a positive theoretical stance towards the web and actual usage of it among educators. This results in a lesser ability of teachers to make use of this technology than students.

The third external influence is political and ideological events. These affect the education

system without being directly affected by it. The issue is how the system should handle these events after their occurrence. How do such events affect the education system? Do they enhance certain values through emphasizing them? Do they foster social activism? Do they reduce conflict and nurture tolerance? Questions such as these help us understand the effect that such events may have on the education system.

### 3.1.2 Objectives of the Education System

Throughout history, almost every Ministry of Education around the world has stated specific goals. This is especially true for countries that have compulsory education systems such as the USA, England, France, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Singapore, Israel and many other countries. The educational objectives are normally formulated by the Ministry of Education and therefore all state schools are obligated to them. The objectives are (formally perceived) preconditions for developing excellence in any country that has mandatory formal educational laws, and while they can be given different interpretations, they cannot be ignored.

### 3.2 *The Means for Developing Personal Potential*

The model is based on the assumption that each individual can develop his or her potential, but that there is no set way or formula that can be applied for all. Means must be adapted to meet the requirements of the individual, who is regarded as a unique whole. How does this tailoring take place? Through three main means:

1. Making use of multiple intelligences.
2. Instilling values.
3. Program creation.

#### 3.2.1 Multiple Intelligences

What kind of student is considered good by his teachers? It is common to hear teachers say that good students are adept in mathematics, writing and verbal expression. Do we hear of a talented painter being described as a good student? Or the star athlete? Not normally.

Until twenty years ago the concept of intelligence was clearly defined. Questioning the real meaning of the word resurfaced in the 1980s. Dr. Howard Gardner led the change. Gardner (1983) defined intelligence as “the ability to solve problems or produce a product that is valued by one or more social frameworks”. The product to which Gardner referred can vary greatly between persons, expressing the differences in human abilities. His work emphasized the multi-dimensionality of human intelligence, which is manifested in the many layers of our mind-body structure. Gardner defined seven basic intelligences: logical-mathematical, verbal-lingual, rhythmic-musical, interpersonal, personal, visual-spatial, motion-physical and later (Gardner, 1993) added the eighth, the naturalistic. Every person has all of these intelligences to a greater or lesser degree.

Gardner maintained that these intelligence types can be enhanced through various environmental stimuli. Relevant training can produce the same effect. There is a dialogue

between our genetic inheritance and the environment. If there weren't, there would be no purpose in advancing students' development.

Gardner emphasized that the dominant intelligence in each person should first be fortified, without abandoning the other seven. The eight intelligences interact and allow for the creation of an intelligence profile for each person, which indicates their level of function by type of intelligence.

What does the theory of multiple intelligences mean for the education system, and how can it be used to develop excellence? This writer agrees with Gardner in adopting the position that a student's personal potential can be nurtured through nurturing multiple intelligences. If we accept the basic supposition of the model, that excellence is developed through individual potential, then the link is clear. Excellence is enhanced by enhancing one's dominant intelligence. If we used to describe students with a high logical-mathematical or verbal-linguistic intelligence as good, the category is now expanded to include those with other strong points. A student's potential is therefore developed by correctly identifying his/her dominant intelligence and nurturing it. One of the common themes in Gardner's theory is that of *alternative evaluation* (Silver, Strong, & Perini, 1997).

### 3.2.2 Instilling Values

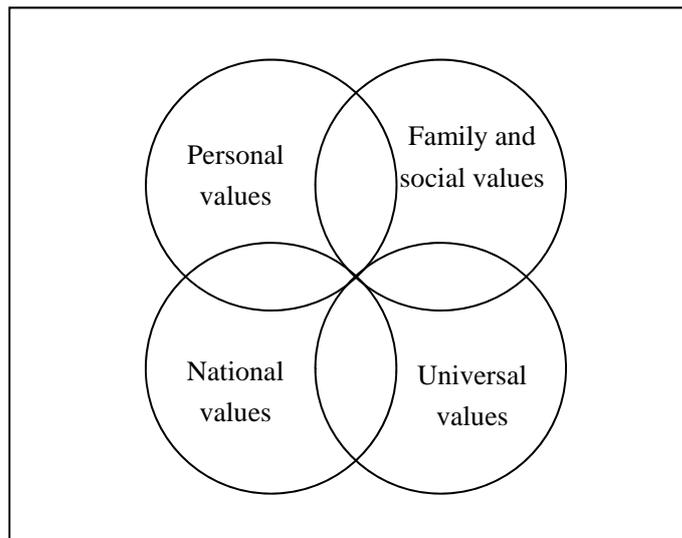
All too often we hear about the importance of instilling values in students, and how this process is central to education. We are unanimous in the validity of this idea, but must first clearly understand what a value is, and then discuss three main issues:

1. Can values be instilled?
2. How are values instilled?
3. How do values contribute to developing excellence?

Many thinkers have attempted to define value. The Oxford Dictionary gives the following definition: "moral or professional standards of behavior". Others call it an attitude or preference towards a type of behavior, consequence or character, held for a time by an individual or group (Friedman, 2001). Not everyone agrees on whether values can be developed (instilled). Some argue that values are that for which one is willing to pay the highest price (Leibowitz, 1999). Leibowitz contended that value grows out of one's experience, and therefore cannot be instilled.

It is clear that opinions on the matter vary. This does not necessarily result from the definition of value, but from the absence of a consensus on the values themselves. When we use terms such as "respect for fellow man", "friendship" and "love of country", we sense that these are values. But can we all agree on the content of these values? Can they be developed in students, and if so, how?

The realm of values is made up of four spheres. Understanding these four will lead to an understanding of the difficult issue of developing values. The spheres are shown in figure 2.



**Figure 2:** The Values Spheres

The figure shows four value spheres: personal values, family and social values, national values and universal values. The spheres cross over, but each contains areas unique to itself. Different people tend to interpret values such as “friendship” or “respect for fellow man” differently. The meaning of these values changes based on the sphere to which they are assigned, and the discrepancy between the spheres is a source of conflict. For instance, there are some family values that are not a personal value of each member of the family; similarly with national values, and the members of that nation.

Let us look at the example of “Zionism”, which is a part of the State of Israel’s national values. In 2004, Education Minister Limor Livnat stated that she wanted Zionism to be re-instilled in schools. Can we reach unanimity regarding the meaning of this value? 15 years ago a national committee (Being citizens: the Kremnitzer Committee, 1995) was established in order to emphasize “universal-democratic values” alongside an “affinity for Israel and the Zionist ideal”. The committee suggested ways to develop an affinity for Zionism:

- a. An understanding and appreciation of the contribution of early settlers to the state’s development.
- b. Augmenting a feeling of belonging to Israel – its landscape, sites, people, culture and faith.
- c. Expressing the responsibility and obligation one has for the state, the land, its people and landscape in various ways.
- d. Enhancing a sense of identification with the state, its people and the land.

A closer look at three of the above raises the following problems:

1. With reference to *a*, the value depends on the person’s political orientation; if he or she comes from the right-wing, settlement would mean a much greater territory. If from the left-wing, settlement means within the 1948 borders.

2. With reference to *c*, we can draw examples from social and familial value spheres of secular Jews, and Arabs who are neither Bedouin nor Druze. The former will interpret the sense of responsibility as enlistment to the armed services. The latter will not.
3. With reference to *d*, it can serve to examine two groups and their relationship to the word “people”. Israeli residents identify with the Jewish “people” naturally, being Israeli Jews. American Jews also consider themselves part of the “Jewish People”, but find it more difficult to associate this category with the Jewish State of Israel. American Jewry recognizes Israel as the homeland of the Jews, but to date only 37% of them have visited the country. One easily infers a limited sense of identification from this figure.

The committee’s members were aware of such issues. Conflicts that result from incongruent value spheres imply that a consensus must be reached on the meaning of values, before we can start instilling them. A uniform understanding should eliminate the discrepancy created by the differences in the spheres. A school cannot teach its own version of a value, or the version of this or that committee. In order to avoid indoctrination, the value has to first be discussed with everyone involved, including the students and their parents. Any value can in fact be instilled once it is made clear, but must be taught alongside ways of coping with conflicts that might arise due to an incongruence of value spheres.

Similar issues can be found in research conducted in the United States. Many educational institutions disregarded shifts in values as well as shifts in adolescent preferences (Eccels, Wigfield, Midgley, Reumen, Mac Iver, & Fellauffer, 1993). A lack of congruence between adolescent and school values is inevitable. Congruence can be achieved without the school’s abandonment of its educational values. However, the dialogue between the school and its students will be more potent if the former recognizes the latter’s value hierarchy and shifting preferences.

Most research to date has focused on high school students (Asor & Eilot, 2001). Elementary school values have hardly been looked at and few addressed this issue (Prencipe, & Helwig, 2002). According to the research, each of us has a value hierarchy which in children and adolescents is determined by three factors:

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Parental occupation status

The hierarchy does not change only with age, but is also different for the two genders. Values such as “regard for others”, “conformity” and “self-guidance” are perceived differently by girls and boys. Girls, for instance, place regard for others above “achievement”. When they reach adolescence, boys place a greater value on self-guidance and achievement. “Regard for others” becomes more prominent in girls. The value hierarchy of the two sexes is more similar for adolescents than for children. Youngsters between the ages of 10 and 14 are better able to distinguish values such as conformity, self-guidance, academic achievement, and

regard for others. If values are conscious at these ages, it follows that they can be developed (Asor & Eilott, 2001).

Parents are assumed (Eccels, Wigfield, Midgley, et al., 1993) to transfer their values to their children. Parents from a low socio-economic stratum who normally engage in jobs that require less self-guidance and more obedience to authority tend to absorb the values of the workplace. With time these occupational values become parental behavior and values, and the children adopt the same values - that is, conformity over self-guidance.

An interesting example that conveys the conformity value deals with the prevention of smoking. Schools with a higher percentage of children from the higher socio-economic stratum present greater student concern with the prevention of smoking (Mosconi & Emmett, 2003). That is, there is a connection between the socio-economic status and the value of conformity and it would therefore be easier to convince students from a low socio-economic stratum to stop smoking. In social strata with a lower education level there is a greater discrepancy between the hierarchies of boys and girls. Girls of lesser educated parents place greater emphasis on conformity and regard for others than on self-guidance and achievement (Mosconi & Emmett, 2003). Likewise, children from lower socio-economic strata place more weight on values *per se*. These phenomena must be taken into account by educators who wish to develop values. Teachers must be aware that socio-economic and gender factors influence the perception of values.

There is no doubt that the value hierarchies of children and adolescents are different. Eighth graders place less importance on the value of being involved in school activities than fifth graders. This datum is especially alarming, since it indicates an adolescent's growing alienation from the school. A likely reason for this effect is the greater degree of choice and expression available in elementary schools, as compared with junior high and high schools (Mosconi & Emmett, 2003).

Must we instill universal values in order to promote personal excellence in our students? Or can a person achieve excellence with respect to himself or herself, irrespective of his/her environment? These questions highlight the relationship between the concepts of *excellence* and *excelling*. Since the vast majority of us are part of our surroundings, it follows that our excellence will affect and will be affected by the environment. Educators must therefore strive towards an excellence of values – values that are important to the student's surroundings – and guide them towards living by these values. Such values are relative. The educator must then lead the student to fully develop each value with respect to his or her self. This will lead to an excellence of values.

### 3.2.3 Program Creation

Program creation allows for and promotes the tailoring of unique programs for students, in an effort to develop their personal potential based on their tendencies and wishes. The process entails three elements:

1. Program development in informal education.
2. Program development in schools.
3. Program development in alternative education schools.

#### 3.2.3.1 Program Creation in Informal Education

The process of education does not stop outside the school. On the contrary, the greater part of a child's education takes place in his/her home and community (parent's home and extended family, friends, various community institutions, etc.). The adolescent and child's emotional persona is underplayed in the school environment. The emotional-spiritual needs of a person, especially one who is growing, are expressed through music, art, acting, social activity, sport and playfulness. This creates a demand for an informal educational framework (Cohen, 1999). We shall consider informal education as that which takes place outside the school.

The thesis of informal education was developed by community and educational organization outside of schools. Such organizations operate at the leisure of the community members, and aim to offer freedom of choice. Informal education can be grouped into four sectors (Gal, 1985):

1. Youth movements.
2. Supplementary education: youth centers, extracurricular activity and supplementary classes.
3. Informal education for dissociated youth: children aged 14-18 who have not become integrated within the formal education system.
4. Semi-informal education: activities within schools run by non-school organizations, normally during school hours.

The thesis of informal education rests on the supposition that it is desirable to realize educational and social goals through organizations, values and subject matters that are less institutional and more pliable than those normally found in schools. The goals of informal education are to foster social activity and personal fulfillment.

Informal education organizations and groups have certain distinguishing characteristics and methods of operation. They normally exhibit the following: voluntariness – freedom of choice whether to join the group, take part in its activities, or leave it; symmetry – mutual benefit based on equality; moratorium – a wide berth for trial and error; multi-dimensional activity – a wide array of valuable activities and classes; stress reduction; friendly supervision – based on dialogue rather than prohibition.

Thus viewed, informal education exists to answer a need not met by formal education. The latter should encourage, and even adopt, some of the programs of informal education. Introducing such programs into formal education is a means for developing personal potential and excellence.

Three programs that can be adapted from informal to formal education are:

1. Programs created by youth movements towards the development of young leadership. Students in youth movements, as opposed to their situation in the formal system, are bestowed with authority and responsibility to act as equals with adults. The student's knowledge of his/her area of responsibility is no less than that of the school teacher, and he/she is able stand out socially by displaying leadership and initiative (Cohen, 1999). Schools are advised to recognize the importance of these programs as greenhouses for the next generation of leaders. Formal institutions can adopt such programs that have proven successful in youth movements.
2. Programs created as supplementary education. Supplementary education includes youth center activities, private extracurricular activities and private academic lessons. Within this framework, a young person can acquire hobbies and areas of interest, based on his talents and preferences, thus discovering ways for self fulfillment. It is similarly advised that schools adopt successful programs from supplementary education.
3. Programs created for dissociated youth. Such programs treat youth that has been rejected by formal educational frameworks and requires an alternative. A change in the approach towards dissociated youth has taken place in recent years, from a prevention-centered approach to an intervention-centered approach. Group-based treatment has also shifted towards individual attention (Lahav, 1992). That is, programs that help in the development of personal potential have been created, without which such youth would not be able to reintegrate into society. The success of such programs can provide incentives for their adoption by schools. Schools can treat distressed youths in-house, and perhaps even prevent their dissociation from formal education.

### 3.2.3.2 Creating Special Programs within Formal Education

The development of excellence through personal potential requires tailoring educational programs to the specific requirements of each student. These are special programs within schools.

For example, in Israel the Ministry of Education has wizedened to the need for such programs, and they are part of the obligatory education law (State Education Law, 1953). Four programs are prescribed under this law:

1. Voluntary program: educational programs created by teachers in a pedagogical council. Such programs are meant to be implemented during regular school hours.
2. Supplemental program: determined by the minister according to parental demand. The parents can control up to 25% of the educational program if there is at least a 75% agreement among them. This program should also be part of regular school hours and does not incur extra costs.
3. Addendum program: a parent-initiated program subject to the minister's approval. This program adds to regular school hours, and is funded by parents and local district authorities. It does not entail curtailing of regular educational material.

4. Experimental program: initiated by the school, parents or local authorities and funded by them. Such programs do not need governmental approval.

Special programs constitute one of the main means for developing a student's personal potential and personal excellence.

### 3.2.3.3 Alternative Education Schools

Just as special programs meet students' special needs, so do Alternative Education Schools (Note 1) (Magnet schools, Charter schools and other schools of choice (Note 2)). There has been a notable expansion of these educational frameworks since the early 1980s. The motivation for the initiators of these processes is to match their values with the right educational institution. For local authorities the motivation is to create as varied an educational environment as possible (Neumann, 2003; Trickett, 1991).

Alongside the growth of alternative schools outside of a child's residential area, the school autonomy movement became widespread in the 1990s both in Europe and the USA (Coghlan, & Desurmont, 2007). The trend continues in the current decade with new countries adopting this type of school. The driving force behind this movement was and still is to encourage schools to define their "educational creed", and to implement their creed into the school's organization, management and curriculum. These trends originally typified regional schools but grew to encompass a national net of experimental, self-governed and community schools.

The spread of alternative schools has in recent years given rise to a debate about the significance of a school to its locality. The debate focuses on the social implications – dangers and opportunities – inherent in the phenomenon.

There are two main arguments. On the one hand, the educational advantages of such schools are acknowledged, as well as their contribution to the lawful right of parents to take part in their children's academic direction. On the other hand, alternative schools are feared to be socially divisive, especially between socio-economic strata. They also damage the educational value of integration that is perceived as fundamental in societies around the world.

The system of alternative schools is driven by parents, teachers and regional authorities towards greater educational diversity. Research demonstrates that students' achievements improve when they can choose their place of study. Furthermore, worldwide research suggests that special schools impact their environment, leading surrounding schools to improve (Newman, 2003; Shavit & Shapira, 1996). If the idea of alternative schools had not taken root in the education system two decades ago, the educational status quo of today would be quite different. Can we imagine a system without schools of arts and sciences, democratic, experimental or open schools? Those opposed to this concept would point out that a more equitable system which contributes to the bridging of social gaps would exist without alternative schools.

### *3.3 The Axioms of the Model*

The model for developing excellence in education contains four equally valuable fundamental premises, each of which deserves our attention:

1. The student as client
2. Guidance and counseling
3. Evaluation, feedback and control
4. Parental involvement

#### 3.3.1 The Student as Client

The supposition that the student is a client of the education system is based on the principles of the Total Quality Management (TQM) theory. The theory of management, which originated in the 1980s, encouraged organizations to constantly improve through continuous adjustment to their clientele. TQM thus became increasingly popular in education (Crawford, & Shutler, 1999). It was suggested that schools should adopt TQM principles by developing an awareness of and obligation towards all of their clients - be they internal or external. Internal clients include students, teachers, management and administration. External clients include parents, local authorities, the community, suppliers and others (Crawford, & Shutler, 1999).

A discussion on developing excellence and regarding the student as a client obligates the school to be familiar with each student. A student's potential cannot be furthered without the education staff's total commitment to her or his progress; progress reached through quality education. The paradigm shift required for educational excellence begins with educators' dissatisfaction with "good enough". Even if a student has achieved coveted A grades, but has done so through mediocre work, an educator should push the student further.

The conceptual change is based on the idea that personal growth occurs through high-quality educational processes. The school must establish standards that emphasize the development of students' abilities. The latter are not a memorization of some particular subject matter, but skills that enable one to handle "real life" problems.

Treating the student as a client means creating a supportive environment. Assigned work must be beneficial, and students must be made aware that they are expected to do their best. The teachers as well as the students should evaluate their own work and improve accordingly. Treating the student as a client entails shifting from a paradigm of traditional education to one of quality education.

#### 3.3.2 Guidance and Counseling

In order to develop a student's personal potential, his or her unique needs must be identified, and his or her aspirations should be used to guide and advise the student towards personal fulfillment. Guidance and counseling replace selection, which is based solely on grades and teacher evaluation.

An event that took place in 1996 in central Israel exemplifies the meaning of guidance and counseling. David (fictitious name) was a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student. He had low grades in math with a D+ average. As the year neared its end, the students were asked to decide their focus subject. David chose to focus on math and test at 5 units, a high level (Note 3). His math teacher explained that based on his past performance, David will not be able to focus beyond 3 units. David insisted. His parents argued that David now understands the importance of his studies and will surely improve. However, this was to no avail. David dropped out of school and transferred to an external school. Three years later he graduated with honors, with an A+ in math. David went on to complete a bachelor's degree in computers and mathematics from the Tel-Aviv University.

David's story is one of many examples where teachers use selection rather than guidance and counseling. The math teacher should have given David the opportunity to fulfill his wish. The teacher and David could have arrived at reasonable criteria for success, and the measures needed in case David fails.

### 3.3.3 Evaluation, Feedback and Control

Two processes allow us to ascertain whether or not we are successful as educators: Evaluation methods that use feedback techniques, and control methods that gauge whether decisions reached via the evaluation process are properly implemented (Fisher, in print).

As we have seen, the development of personal potential is equal to developing non-relative personal excellence. In order to guide students from their present position to the point of fulfillment, we, as educators, must provide continuous evaluation, feedback and control of the processes they are undergoing. Let us take a closer look at these three processes:

1. Evaluation: There are two basic types. *Formative evaluation* begins at the same point as the program and lasts throughout the course. The goal of such an evaluation is to provide continuous improvement as the program progresses. *Summative evaluation* takes place at the end of a program and measures its success.
2. Feedback: The feedback process derives conclusions from the evaluation process, and suggests ways of putting these conclusions into action. Feedback provides a mode of communication within an organization. It is a form of expression for the concerns and attitudes of the school's staff, students and parents. Through it conclusions can be reached regarding internal and external school processes. Possible solutions or improvements can then be suggested.
3. Control: Serves to guarantee that decisions made as a result of evaluation and feedback are properly carried out.

How does control verify that excellence has in fact been reached? Here we use five criteria for a project's success (Fisher, in print): relevance with respect to predefined goals, the efficacy of goal fulfillment, resource usage efficiency, the impact on the client and the project's continuity.

### 3.3.4 Parental Involvement

Many researchers, as well as parents, ask whether parents should be involved in the education process, and if so why? This writer maintains that a child's potential cannot be realized without his/her parent's involvement, since the latter knows the child best and has his or her best interests at heart. Most studies on this issue point to the conclusion that parental involvement leads to better achievement and self-respect in the child (Fisher & Friedman, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2004; Fan, 2001; Vassallo, 2000). These studies are reason enough to note the centrality of parents in the education process.

At the same time, defining what such involvement entails, and finding its proper limits, is no easy feat. While opinions vary, there is a consensus that parental involvement is meant to constructively bridge the differences between the mindsets at home and at school (Fisher & Friedman, 2009; Friedman & Fisher, 2002; 2003). More exact definitions differ between the Ministries of Education, teachers, principals, students and parents. It is therefore very important that the nature of parental involvement be clearly defined, and that parents, children and school staff be involved in the process.

Hypothetically, different schools may come to a different idea of parental involvement, which is acceptable. The collaboration in the process of defining the idea will point out its limits, which may vary from school to school, but exist through a consensus. It is clear that parents want only the best for their children, and will try to attain it. Some hold that, excepting three specific situations, the limits of involvement should not be touched at all (Fisher, 2007; Goldberger, 1996):

1. When the parents display physical or verbal violence towards school staff.
2. Right of privacy.
3. Exceeding child or teacher's rights.

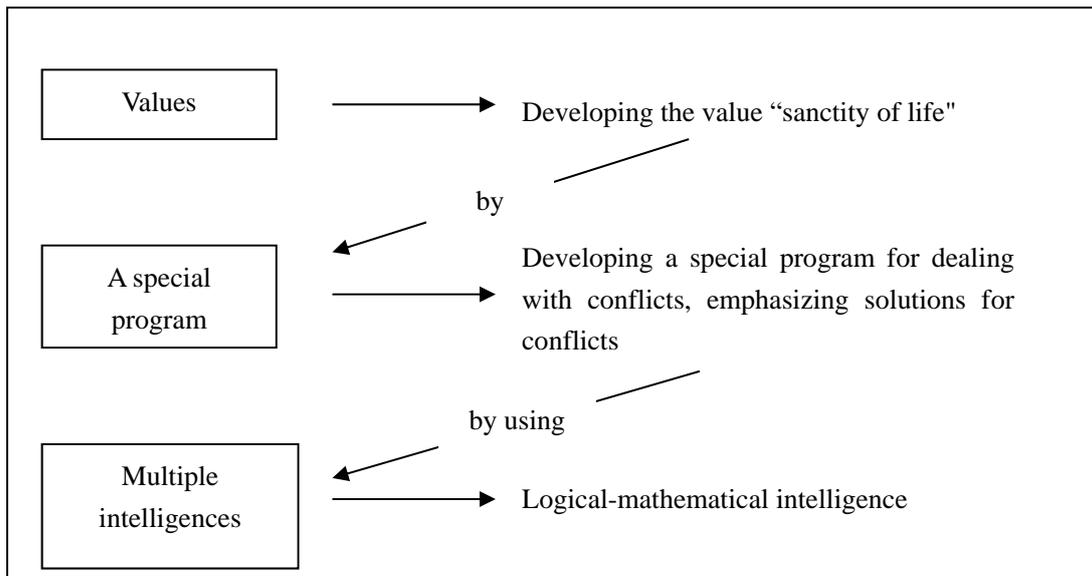
## 4. The Model's Pedagogic Implications

As stated, the primary purpose of the model is to develop a student's personal potential. How can education professionals use the model and adhere to its guiding principles?

The model presents a philosophical-holistic aspect and a practical-applied aspect. The former emphasizes the development of excellence through self-fulfillment and is based on internal and external processes that differ from one student to the other. The model regards the student as a private and complex entity with unique needs. The student's potential is realized by treating him/her as an individual, without comparison to other students or to pre-established standards. The proper place for such standards is later, when we wish to determine *excelling*. Nevertheless, standards and *excelling* are important, since we live in an achievement-oriented society, and students must be encouraged to reach high social and academic goals.

This is where the model’s practical implications take effect. The model suggests operative methods that can be put into action. These are presented throughout this work, and highlight educational tools for developing excellence.

A teacher can chose to implement the whole model or parts of it. How? Let us take a deeper look at value development, having already noted the conflict created by incongruent value spheres. The following method, one of many that can be used to develop values, creates a special program that includes multiple intelligences. This special program is based on handling dilemmas:



**Figure 3:** Creating a special program for the purpose of instilling values

The following example demonstrates an instance where logical-mathematic intelligence enables handling a dilemma pertaining to the value “sanctity of life” (“Yoter” site, 2004). The process starts by exposing the students to a short story.



*“Developing the value “sanctity of life”:*

*Every year experiments on animals are carried out for human medical, military or cosmetic purposes. The animals are subjected to operations, poisons, burns, paralysis, blindness and explosives. You have a relative, to whom you are very close, who suffers from a rare and severe illness. One of the large pharmaceutical companies has an experimental drug that might save your relative’s life. In order to administer the drug to your relative, it must first be tested on dogs that will die as a result.*

*Before discussing the dilemma*

*In order to reach a conclusion we shall look at the issue from the different angles of different intelligences:*

*Logical-mathematical intelligence: plan a mock trial in which you represent the views of both the prosecutor (against the testing) and defender (in favor of the testing), and finally present the verdict. The arguments must be based on your consulting with a: veterinarian, lawyer, animal rights representative, family member and pharmaceutical scientist.”*

Following the short story, the students are asked three questions before discussing the dilemma:

1. *What is your general view?*
2. *Are these experiments moral?*
3. *Are they necessary?*

After commenting in general, the students are asked how would they prefer to address the issue, and are given eight options, each concerning one of Gardner's eight intelligences. An example for addressing the dilemma through logical-mathematical intelligence is as follows:

*Logical-mathematical intelligence: plan a mock trial in which you represent the views of both the prosecutor (against the testing) and defender (in favor of the testing), and finally present the verdict. The arguments must be based on your consulting with a: veterinarian, lawyer, animal rights representative, family member and pharmaceutical scientist.”*

The above exercise is one of many that highlight the practical-applied aspect of the model.

Figure 1 describes the entire model, and shows that developing excellence impacts the surrounding social environment (the arrow exiting the right side of the excellence circle). How does this take place? The process described is cyclical and infinite. By tracking its various components we can develop the student's personal potential, which in turn will lead to excellence. Personal excellence will contribute to a better society with well-founded values, a society that does not abandon its standards for excelling.

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## Notes

Note 1. Alternative education, also known as non-traditional education or educational alternative, includes a number of approaches to teaching and learning other than mainstream or traditional education.

Note 2. School choice is a term used to describe a wide array of programs aimed at giving families the opportunity to choose the school their children will attend. As a matter of form, school choice does not give preference to one form of schooling or another, but rather manifests itself whenever students attend school outside of the one to which they would have been assigned by geographic default.

Note 3. The learning levels in the Israeli education system are defined by learning units. These units indicate the level at which the subject was studied, the difficulty of the examination, as well as the number of hours allocated to the subject. The number of learning units for the various subjects ranges from one to five. In general, the number of classroom hours constituting one learning unit is approximately 90. Thus, at least 450 classroom hours are devoted to subjects studied at a level of five learning units.

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