

School Principals as Mediating Agents in Education Reforms

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School Leadership & Management (In press)

Abstract

School principals may be seen as mediating agents, standing between the extra- and intra-school worlds. This study explores how principals mediate between the demands of a national reform policy and teachers' attitudes and needs. In this qualitative study, 59 school principals were interviewed. Findings indicated that principals used two complementary mediation strategies: (1) mobilizing the teachers towards the reform; and (2) mobilizing the reform towards the teachers. Practical implications and further research are discussed.

Introduction

Reforms have become one of the main characteristics of current education systems (Robinson and Aronica 2015). Research on education reforms pays much attention to policy effects, typically student learning outcomes. Literature also deals extensively with the way in which reforms influence classroom instruction. Nevertheless, the principal's complex role in implementing education reforms deserves more academic and practical attention (Spillane and Kenney 2012). This study explores the ways in which school principals reconcile education reform guidelines and requirements, which are part of the extra-school world, with teachers' attitudes and needs, which are part of the intra-school world. The existing research literature regarding the principal's role as a mediating agent, particularly while implementing

education reforms, is meager. The present study seeks to expand the available knowledge on this topic.

Theoretical background

School principals as mediating agents

While in the past organizations were considered to be closed systems hardly affected by their environments, many researchers today agree that they are actually open systems, interfacing and interacting with their surroundings by receiving inputs from and delivering outputs to them (Scott and Davis 2006). Being that a school is an organization, it too should be seen as an open system with permeable boundaries. Through these boundaries the external environment influences the school, and the school influences it in return (Mitchell and Tarter 2011).

In this context, a school principal may be seen as standing at the school doorstep, between the extra- and intra-school worlds. The extra-school world includes the school board as the immediate formal authority and employer of both principal and school staff; the parents, either as individuals or in the form of a parents' committee as an organized actor; policymakers at the national and regional levels; and the local community. On the other hand, the intra-school world includes the school staff and the students (Kelchtermans, Piot, and Ballet 2011). Internal and external stakeholders often have different, and even incompatible, goals, desires, views, expectations and demands (Ewy 2009). Thus, seeing principals as mediating agents, who must walk the tight rope between inside desires and capacities and outside demands and expectations, may serve as a conceptual frame for capturing some of the particular complexities of their work (Seashore Louis and Robinson 2012).

As a mediating agent, the school principal often determines whether the school will work by bridging or alternatively by buffering external influences (Kohansal 2015; Maxcy, Sungtong, and Nguyen 2010; Paredes Scribner 2013; Rutledge, Harris, and Ingle 2010).

Rooted in organizational and institutional theory, the concept of bridging and buffering has been utilized by researchers to explain the complex relationship between educational institutions and their environments (Johnson, Mirchandani, and Mezner 2015; Su, Mao, and Jarvenpaa 2014). Organizations respond to external influences in two basic ways: they either conform to them, increasing coordination and information flow, or they try to insulate themselves from these influences, treating them as threats (Gössling 2011). The bridging strategy seeks to adapt organizational activities in order to conform to the expectations of external stakeholders, thus emphasizing the organization's openness to change. Put simply, bridging promotes the organization's internal adaptation to external circumstances. In contrast, buffering is an activity aimed at preventing external factors from interfering with the organization's functioning. Organizations using the buffering strategy try to either control or resist the external environment (He, Tian, and Chen 2007; Kim and Kim 2015).

Returning to schools, bridging and buffering refer to numerous demands that are directed at schools. These demands come from various sources, such as federal and state governments, local school boards, and unions and community groups, focusing on a broad range of school-life aspects, such as curriculum, time management, testing, administration, professional development and parental involvement. Facing these demands, principals choose how to manage their schools' relationships with their environment – by bridging or alternatively by buffering (Rutledge et al. 2010).

However, bridging and buffering do not represent two opposing options of either totally meeting external demands or totally rejecting them; external demands may also be partially accepted or modified. If they are basically accepted while being adjusted to the school reality, their incomplete implementation can be regarded as bridging. However, if the external demands are implemented only superficially, without internalization and real change, this would be regarded as buffering, which is 'not the blind dismissal of external demands but

strategically deciding to engage external demands in limited ways' (Honig and Hatch 2004, 23). In many cases there is only a slight difference between the two options. In this regard, Honig and Hatch (2004) argue that implementation of external policy should be understood as a process of 'crafting coherence', in which school actors negotiate multiple external demands in their efforts to achieve internal goals.

The question of bridging versus buffering becomes more crucial during periods of education reform (Rutledge et al. 2010). Such reform usually involves a barrage of external demands, which requires the school leadership to decide whether it wishes to truly undergo a process of change under the reform, or rather find ways of getting around it, effectively closing the school to change and maintaining existing practices (Murphy and Torre 2013). Bridging and buffering, in this sense, emphasize the complicated situation in which school principals have to struggle to negotiate external pressure with local values, goals and capacities.

While bridging and buffering reforms, principals can implement a reform partially, deciding which aspects of the reform they might introduce into the school, which they will emphasize to the staff, and which they might filter out (Diamond 2012). They mediate between external authorities and the school, adapting and incorporating particular policy elements and practices, creating new norms that alter the original reform plan over time. Thus, different schools may relate to the same policy in ways that differ in content, focus, and intensity (Levin and Datnow 2012; Koyama 2014; Seashore Louis and Robinson 2012). Moreover, school principals often interpret reforms creatively (Salter 2014), serving as mid-level policy managers who leave their 'thumbprints' on policies received from above (Flessa 2012). They become local policymakers who adjust external reforms to suit their particular situations (Spillane and Kenney 2012).

Teachers' attitudes towards reform

One of the internal factors which school principals consider while implementing an externally-initiated reform is teachers' reactions to it. Policy makers assume that after launching the reform, teachers will become familiar with it and adjust their practices to its guidelines while taking part in the necessary additional professional training; however, this cannot be taken for granted (Loeb, Knapp, and Elfers 2008; Terhart 2013). Teachers' resistance to imposed reform may be formally organized, represented by teachers' unions (Pogodzinski, Umpstead, and Witt 2015; Young 2011), but may also be reflected in teachers' actual practices. When teachers enact policy reforms in daily school and classroom situations, they actively redefine the reform (Imants, Wubbels, and Vermunt 2013). Over time, teachers' work under the reform guidelines often leads to a change in their attitudes (Donaldson 2012; Fredriksson 2009); nevertheless, their initial reactions regarding the reform policy can make or break its implementation (Ma, Yin, Tang, and Liu 2009). Thus, understanding the nature of the interaction between teachers' attitudes and needs on the one hand, and external imposed policy demands on the other, may be the missing link needed in order to improve the implementation of such reforms (Smith and Southerland 2007).

There is a wide range of factors that influence teachers' responses to reform, including personal factors, such as the teachers' biography, internal factors, such as the schools' aims and features, and external factors, such as educational policies (Ryder 2015; Ryder, Banner, and Homer 2014; Yin 2013). Top-down reform policy, for example, reduces the interest of teachers in the reform. Even a decade following its formal initiation, the reform may still not engage the teachers considerably (Hallinger and Lee 2011). On the other hand, professional learning communities may create positive attitudes about policy reform among teachers (Sargent 2015). Beside professional development programs that support reform

implementation, teachers need opportunities to work through problems and difficulties with their colleagues (Park and Sung 2013).

How do principals cope with this challenge? How do they reconcile the reform requirements with teachers' attitudes and needs? As aforementioned, the existing research dealing with these questions is meagre (Darensbourg 2011; Park and Jeong 2013), calling for further exploration.

Research context

The current study focused on Israeli school principals. Israel's national school system serves some 1.6 million students, with approximately 73% in the Jewish sector and 27% in the Arab sector (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics 2013). The primary role of Israeli school principals as articulated by Capstones, the institute spearheading school principals' development in Israel, is to serve as instructional leaders in order to improve all students' education and learning. Four additional areas of management support this function: designing the school's future image – developing a vision and bringing about change; leading the staff and nurturing its professional development; focusing on the individual (referring to both staff members and students); and managing the relationship between the school and its surrounding community. Thus the principal, as a school leader, must manage a variety of dimensions and aspects pertaining to the school, creating close links between them in order to ensure the success of all students (Capstones 2008). The Israeli education system is highly centralized, with the Ministry of Education controlling schools by writing and distributing curricular materials and standards, testing and hiring and firing school staff. Although facilitating school autonomy has recently been declared a policy of the Ministry of Education, principals are still hesitant to undertake professional autonomy due to the Ministry's attempt to retain a strong centralized control system (Author 2 2012; Inbar 2009).

Israeli students' academic achievements remain among the lowest in the industrialized

countries, and students' educational gaps remain the largest (Ben-David-Hadar and Ziderman 2011). Against this background, the New Horizon (In Hebrew: Ofek Hadash) national reform was initiated in 2009, and is being implemented in elementary and middle schools, encompassing many aspects of school-life. This systemic reform includes five main, complementary targets: (1) *Promoting individual-centred education-teaching-learning processes*. These processes are a means for increasing student achievements as well as narrowing educational gaps. (2) *Structuring teachers' work*. The teachers' educational-pedagogical work was reorganized and diversified to include frontal teaching, individual teaching, and non-teaching hours. The individual teaching hours, which did not exist in the teacher's schedule before the New Horizon reform, are intended mainly for working with groups of up to five students, enabling personal tutoring which promotes learning achievements and builds teacher-student connections. Non-teaching hours, which did not exist either in the teacher's schedule before the New Horizon reform, are intended mainly for work that teachers used to do at home. These hours provide time for the educational staff to carry out various school-related activities, such as planning classes, meeting among themselves, professional development, and communication with colleagues and stakeholders (parents, experts, etc.). To ensure teachers' compliance, the teachers' lounge now features a computerized time clock, and teachers must either register their swipe card or enter a PIN (Personal Identification Number) upon entering and leaving the school. (3) *Reinforcing the teaching staff and school management*. This is a career-long initiative, directed at enhancing the professional development of teachers and management personnel (assistant principals and principals). It also involves boosting teachers' status and raising their salaries. (4) *Empowering school principals* by expanding their impact on decisions pertaining to the tenure and promotion of teachers. (5) *Evaluating performance*. Accounting for teachers' and school management's performance through continuous evaluation (Israeli Ministry of

Education 2012).

At first, many teachers felt they were not being treated as partners in the process of reform, but rather were being used as pawns who must simply accept the reform as is and implement it as they were told without asking questions (Reichman and Artzi 2012). Teachers' resistance to the reform resulted in a 64-day teachers' strike, the longest strike in the history of Israel's education system (Berkovich 2011). Although several years later teachers reported that the changes brought about by reform implementation were positive (Zach and Inglis 2013), in the initial stages it was school principals who had to deal with many teachers' fierce opposition.

Research design

In light of the theoretical framework described above, the current qualitative study explored how principals mediate between external policy demands and teachers' attitudes and needs during the implementation of a national education reform.

Participants

The 59 participating school principals (38 women, 21 men) who implemented the national educational reform came from all school districts (Centre, Tel-Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem, North, and South). Participants worked in elementary schools ($n = 32$) and middle schools ($n = 27$). On average, participants had 22 years of teaching experience (range = 7-43), 8 years of experience as principals (range = 1-36), of which 3 years of experience as principals in the New Horizon national educational reform (range = 1-5). Seeking to maximize the depth and richness of the data, we used heterogeneous sampling in order to gain maximal differentiation (Creswell 2014) regarding principals' gender, seniority in position, school level (elementary, middle), school types and sectors within the Israeli education system (state schools in both the Jewish and Arab sectors, state religious schools), and geographical districts (all of the country's districts).

Data Collection

Data were collected during the second semester of the 2012-2013 academic year through semi-structured interviews designed to explore participants' personal perspectives (Rossman and Rallis 2012). Principals were asked to retrospectively reflect on their role throughout the implementation of the national education reform, through questions such as: 'What does the reform mean in terms of your role as principal?'; 'What factors promoted or inhibited the implementation of the reform?'; 'Throughout the reform implementation process, what factors significantly influenced your decisions?' Individual interviews with principals generally lasted one hour. They were conducted in places chosen by interviewees: their schools, cafes, and other locations. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were translated from Hebrew to English by a specialist in both languages. All participants were fully informed on the purpose of the study and were promised complete confidentiality as well as full retreat options. Pseudonyms were assigned to all interviewees.

Data analysis

Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously in an ongoing process throughout the research, with a four-stage analysis process – condensing, coding, categorizing and theorizing. Once data were collected, we found that not all of it could serve the purpose of the study, and that it required sorting out (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). Thus, in the first stage of analysis (condensing) we sought the portions of data that related to the principal's role, since this is the topic of the study. In the second stage (coding) each segment of relevant data (utterance) was coded according to the aspect of the principal's role it represented (Tracy 2013). In contrast to the previous stage, this stage was data-driven and not theory-driven because we did not use a-priori codes but rather inductive ones, developed by direct examination of the perspectives articulated by participants (Rossman and Rallis 2012). After capturing the essence of utterances in the second stage, we turned to the

third stage (categorizing) in which we collected similar utterances in order to generalize their meanings and derive category definitions. We then proceeded to rework these definitions so as to reconcile disconfirming data with the emerging analysis (Richards and Morse 2013). Thus, category dimensions were explored, testing them against the full range of data and identifying relationships between them. The fourth stage was theorizing, aiming to transcend categories and reach a unified conceptual construct (Richards and Morse 2013), which we did by consolidating the categories formed in the previous stage in a variety of ways, until we realized how different components were interconnected and influenced each other as parts of a whole.

A confounding property of category construction in qualitative research is that data within the categories cannot always be precisely and discretely bound together; however, we grouped and regrouped utterances when their codes had common elements, until satisfactory categories emerged. It was somewhat like "decorating a room; you try it, step back, move a few things, step back again, try a serious reorganization, and so on" (Abbott 2004, p. 215). Then we consolidated the categories we had established in various ways, until we realized how different components were interconnected and influenced each other as parts of a single conceptual construct. Charmaz (2006) explained this figuratively: "Coding generates the bones of your analysis; theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton" (p. 45). Our analysis process as described thus far may be seen as an orderly and efficient process; in fact, it was quite complex and messy. We went forward and backward, and the various stages mingled with each other.

The analytic process was conducted by the researchers, with each analysing the data independently, then meeting to discuss and reflect on the emerging themes, as well as to search for data that would either confirm or disconfirm these themes. To properly evaluate the soundness of the data, we also conducted a member check (Koelsch 2013) with all

participants: transcripts were sent back to participants, along with a request that they evaluate their responses and make any necessary additions or modifications if needed. Using this strategy allowed for an examination of the descriptive data versus participants' reactions, thus endorsing and solidifying participants' voices regarding their leadership role. Fifteen (out of 59) of the interviewees changed their answers, clarifying their remarks and adding things they forgot to say.

Findings

In light of the theoretical framework described above, the current qualitative study has explored how principals, as mediating agents, coordinate external policy demands with teachers' attitudes and needs during the implementation of a national education reform. Findings emerging from the data analysis indicated that principals used two complementary strategies, which we will presently explain in detail: (1) mobilizing the teachers towards the reform; and (2) mobilizing the reform towards the teachers.

Mobilizing the teachers towards the reform

The first strategy that principals employed in order to mediate between the national education reform and teachers' attitudes and needs was obtaining the teachers' support for the reform. This strategy has been used all along – before deciding to join the reform, when first introducing it, and when objections arose.

During the first years of the national reform implementation, not all schools were obliged to adopt the reform. Several principals utilized this policy of gradual implementation to gain the teachers' support for the reform. David, a principal with 3 years of experience, for example, described a persuasion process during which he tried to explain to teachers that the reform is beneficial for them. This process ended in a free vote:

The process of joining the reform was a process of talking the teachers into believing that the reform is worthy and suitable for them. There were meetings of the teachers'

staff to persuade them that this reform will help fulfil their needs. In the end I even asked the teachers who wanted to join the reform and who didn't, and most of them decided that they did. That enabled me to persuade them more easily that the reform is not that bad.

Although David could have decided alone, he wanted the decision about adopting the reform to be made by the teachers. Utilizing this policy of gradual implementation, David assumed that by passing on the decision about adopting the reform to the teachers it would be easier for him to win the teachers' support for it. Similarly Lisa, a principal with 2 years of experience, asked the Education Ministry to postpone her school's joining of the reform, believing that a delay will help her gain her teaching staff's support for it:

The teachers expressed total opposition to joining the reform. I was worried about confronting them directly, and on the other hand I was reluctant to be perceived as weak by the superintendent. I turned to the reform committee and explained the problematic situation of making changes when the relationship between principal and workers is unstable. They understood the need and agreed to put it off for one year.

As a new principal, Lisa was afraid to confront her teaching staff, and at the same time wanted to be appreciated by the school superintendent. Thus, she opted for a moratorium, delaying the change. It was only a temporary relief, because the end was near; however, Lisa believed that her mere request for postponement would please the teachers, proving to them that she wanted their good.

When first introducing the reform, principals sought to create a positive disposition toward it among teachers. To this end, they presented the reform as an opportunity rather than as an imposed or even forced ruling. Mary, for example, a principal with 6 years of experience, introduced the reform as an opportunity for improved educational work, which would help teachers advance their students:

A principal has to cause his staff to want the reform. That's why he has to think how to present it to them. It's best to start talking about the present situation. Then you ask the teachers: where do you need more tools, or things that would help students make progress? So teachers will say: 'We don't have enough time to sit with them' and so on. And then you suddenly say: 'OK, I have good news! We have a new reform program and it will enable every teacher to sit with students and tutor them privately'.

You don't present it like 'Here's a reform, that's it' – that's the worst thing to do!

Mary connected the reform to the teachers' professional needs. However, she did not tell the teachers what their needs were; she asked them questions, fishing for the answer that would enable her to present the reform as providing a response to the teachers' needs. Similarly James, a principal with 15 years of experience, wanted teachers to understand that the reform was to their advantage. He also presented the reform as addressing the teachers' needs; however, he emphasized the teachers' personal needs and work conditions. The focus of James was on the teachers themselves rather than on the students:

As a principal you have to market it from the perspective of 'Buddies, I believe this will benefit you too'. I try to show this also in the schedule, that the reform will ease things in some ways, and improve their work routines.

Also Linda, a principal with 4 years of experience, emphasized the positive side of the reform. She introduced it as carrying national importance:

I introduced the reform as something meaningful and valuable in our work as teachers. We don't come to do our hours, we're here to shape a generation. What we don't give these students, I'm not sure they'll get anywhere else. And we will all see this as a blessing – not today, not tomorrow, but in years to come. So first I spoke to their hearts and souls and that's how I got into many of their hearts.

Linda presented the reform as carrying national significance, considering the educational work as a mission. She turned to sentiments, emphasizing the emotional aspect. Similarly, Barbara, a principal with 6 years of experience, first introduced the reform in a festive manner:

I held a staff meeting and prepared a surprise for them: balloons all around and a sense of something new. We cut a ribbon that said 'reform' and I brought home made refreshments – the teachers' committee helped me with that. I prepared a questionnaire for them: why reform? What will we gain from it? For whom? How does the teacher perceive this? And what about the student?

Several principals chose a different way to get teachers' cooperation. They preferred to explain that the reform was not their own decision, and that they were forced to implement it just like the teachers were. Robert, a principal with 12 years of experience, chose to empathize with the teachers and express understanding for their difficulties:

I coped with the situation by showing them that it didn't come from me, but rather from the system. I didn't ask for the reform, it came to me. I brought all kinds of speakers from outside to explain the teachers' duties under the reform. It was convenient for me to tell the teachers that this is the program, these are the conditions obliging the teachers, and like in any other school, we will enforce it. I didn't go against them. I told them I'm with them, I'm in a pinch just like they are, it annoys me no less than it annoys them.

Another method to obtain the cooperation of teachers is to first introduce the reform to a small selected group, and only later on to the rest of the school employees. Presenting the reform only to a narrow circle of teachers means that principals often first share the information about the reform with the management team:

At the moment I'm in the process of holding talks with leading staff members. Next week we're having a general meeting where the program will be explicated, and we're preparing ourselves for all the tough questions that may be raised there. First of all, work with a leading staff – so that first it will be convinced that the essence of the reform is beneficial.

Even after the initial presentation of the reform, principals preferred to work with anyone who was willing to be 'on board', avoiding confrontation with opponents. Elizabeth, a principal with 11 years of experience, said:

You have to mobilize teachers gradually, take those that are willing to learn, listen, try and implement. From among them you take one that is a bit opposed to the reform and get him or her into this milieu, and that way you progress with the assimilation of the reform. You can't do it all at once. You always have to think what can be presented to everyone at once and what should be introduced gradually.

On a different note, Jennifer, a principal with 9 years of experience, said that she ignored the objectors. Over time, she said, they either joined the process or retired:

When there was opposition to the reform, I simply began with those who went along with me. You always have the few who try to go against the grain. But once they understand that I disregard them and ignore their stance in this context, they fall into line and go with the rest. Otherwise they feel like they don't belong, like they're not keeping up. And there were teachers who left.

Susan, a principal with 9 years of experience, increased teachers' willingness to implement the reform by means of letting them recount some of their success stories:

I began letting teachers talk about their success with students. And I always asked: When did that happen? So that they'd understand that it happened thanks to the reform. I wanted to hear them tell stories I had overheard. For example, during

tutoring hours, teachers discovered that students who didn't seem intelligent were actually quite intelligent. I asked them to tell success stories so that the whole staff would be exposed to the reform's potential. The thing is to learn from success and talk about the positive.

Susan believed that she should 'talk about the positive'. Therefore, she chose the path of selective attention to success, which involves collectively focusing on teachers' successful practices. Linking the successes described by teachers to the reform, Susan gained the teachers' support for reform.

When opposition did surface, principals preferred to talk with each opponent in person rather than with the whole teaching staff. According to Margaret, a principal with 5 years of experience, solving a teacher's personal problem may sometimes prevent general disapproval:

All the assembly meetings only create unrest. The most important thing is to take each teacher aside and deal with him or her individually, not to raise general problems and make a big deal out of them. Help with finding solutions to the personal problems of the teachers gives them and me confidence in the reform.

Some principals legitimize teachers' resistance, believing that this containing approach will reduce the risk of actual objections. William, a principal with 7 years of experience, said:

You have to know that there are points where resistance arises. This means that at every stage in the process of assimilating the reform, there's room for opposition. There is opposition all along and we let it be expressed. It's not that we silence it. Opposition is legitimate. Oppositional discourse is legitimate in order to bring the teachers closer to accepting the reform.

In sum, the first strategy that principals used to mediate between national reform and teachers' attitudes and needs was gaining teachers' support and reducing their resistance to the reform.

Mobilizing the reform towards the teachers

Analysis of principals' utterances suggests that a complementary strategy that principals used to mediate between reform guidelines and teachers' attitudes and needs was to implement the reform only partially. The reform involves teachers' changing their work habits and accepting a heavier workload; therefore, some principals found it necessary to 'bend' reform requirements so that teachers accept them more readily.

Due to teachers' difficulty in getting used to the reform, John, a principal with 13 years of experience, decided to implement the reform 'in a flexible manner':

I implement the reform in a flexible way so as to bridge between the reform's goals and my teachers' needs. The Ministry of Education set the rules of the game but they didn't see fit to give us tools to implement the change. The Ministry's representatives were totally non-empathetic and inattentive. They let us understand that we'd better accept the decree as it is. I think that a school principal has to preserve the existing state of affairs, and develop and lead the staff based on both teachers' individual and collective abilities, otherwise it is impossible to get the staff to step onto unfamiliar territory. I believe it's better to act professionally in order to get teachers to adjust to new practices, so I implement only the changes that suit our capabilities.

John creatively introduced some of the reform's guidelines into his school, implementing them selectively. The only changes he made were those that were in line with his school's capacities. In this way, he maintained a good atmosphere among the staff, gradually acclimatizing the teachers to the new arrangements.

Steve, a principal with 3 years of experience, believed that the reform should be 'user-friendly'. Although no one has given him formal permission to adapt the reform to teachers' needs, he developed a bridging strategy while making sure not to deviate too much from the reform guidelines:

The Ministry of Education came up with a lousy reform, but made sure to sell it wrapped up nicely. When teachers sober up, they turn to you since you're the principal and let all their rage out on you. I coined a term - 'user-friendly reform' – because I want my teachers to enter the reform without harming the goals for which it was created. Still, we must not forget that I have staff members here whose needs, troubles and pains must be understood. I try to fit the reform to each teacher individually, helping him or her adjust to it. No one pointed out to me that it's possible and effective to be attentive to teachers' needs; I developed my own balancing strategy without deviating too much from the 'red lines'. It turns out to be better if you allow greater flexibility.

According to Aaron, a principal with 6 years of experience, being overly strict about the reform guidelines is simply cruel:

A principal who is not flexible with his staff is a downright fool, and should know that he'll end up in a pretty bad state. A principal must be sensitive to his teachers' needs and use his common sense while behaving humanely; for me, being considerate of teachers' needs means taking the time to think how they feel. Being inconsiderate means sticking to petty details, and that just doesn't work. It doesn't take much for a principal to fail. If he wants to be successful he needs to be a Superman, and that makes all the difference. It takes knowing how to weigh reform guidelines and teachers' needs and desires. Lots of balancing is required, plenty of emotional intelligence, and openness towards the staff.

Aaron believed that without flexibility a principal would not be able to succeed. Therefore, the principal should take both teachers' needs and his/her common sense into account, behaving 'humanly' rather than strictly following the reform's instructions. Similarly, Bella, a

principal with 21 years of experience, believes that while implementing the reform, what is good for the teachers is good for the school:

Sometimes I say no because that's what the reform regulations dictate, and then later on I exercise my own judgment and say yes, telling myself that this [deviation from the regulations] is for the school's benefit. To me it is very important that the teachers feel supported and able to do their very best in this reform climate. So I do my best, but sometimes that's not enough, because it is not all up to me.

Bella described hesitation, but presented a clear position: from her perspective, the teachers' sense of being supported is important, and therefore deviating from the reform regulations is justified. In this vein, Simon, a principal with 5 years of experience, decided to partially fulfil the reform directives by checking the teachers' individual teaching hours only:

I don't want to spoil my relationship with the teachers. That's why I've decided not to check on the teachers as far as their attendance hours. I don't get down to such minutiae. I am pedantic about checking individual teaching hours because that's required of me and the Ministry of Education's representatives check me on it. At least three times a year I have to present the new reform portfolio. Not that I like this either, but I inform the teachers, 'Listen, I need to write a report which I have to present'.

To maintain a pleasant atmosphere, Simon followed up on teachers' presence only partially, limiting himself to what was absolutely necessary. Muhammad, a principal with 9 years of experience, not only did not check on teachers' presence, but even allowed them to leave early, as a transitional stage on the way to implementing the new working conditions. From his perspective, this flexibility prevented unnecessary resistance:

When we entered the reform, I dismissed teachers earlier than the time stipulated by the new rules because I wanted to implement the reform gradually. This may be

considered improper in terms of formal reform guidelines, but I think that's what helped the staff to digest the reform successfully and prevented unnecessary resistance.

Muhammad was aware that his policy 'may be considered improper in terms of formal reform guidelines. However, in his eyes the usefulness of this decision justified it. Similarly Michael, a principal with 13 years of experience, related:

Deep systemic change happens through people, so as a principal I am obligated to maintain an ongoing and supportive dialogue with each and every individual on my staff. In order to fully implement the reform, I allow teachers some freedom to move within the reform guidelines so that they get acquainted with the new setting in which they're about to work. You do not want your teachers to feel they are 'pinned down' but rather that they have some leeway. Allowing my teachers room to manoeuvre means giving them a chance to learn the reform demands. If you implement the reform rigidly you will eventually break your staff.

According to Michael, since 'deep systemic change happens through people', the principal has to 'maintain an ongoing and supportive dialogue'. In his view, this dialogue means allowing the teachers a certain degree of 'freedom to move within the reform guidelines', enabling them to adapt to it gradually. Eva, a principal with 6 years of experience, was not particularly strict with her teachers either, as she wanted to make things easier for them. She explained that she preferred to trust them rather than force them:

Sometimes mentioning the reform creates difficulty and deters the staff. My job is to remind them that we already work according to reform guidelines. I eased the way in for teachers by not being too strict about their hours. I trusted them to give the hours they're obliged to give instead of forcing them to do so. If they worked fewer hours

one week, they made up for it the following week. I allowed the teachers to determine when and how, I was very easy-going.

Noah, a principal with 9 years of experience, hinted that flexibility should be exercised in order to avoid teachers' exploitation. He wished not only to follow instructions but also to use his own judgment, believing that principals are not supposed to merely comply with the superiors' instructions, but also to be allowed to interpret the reform's principles in accordance with their own educational discretion:

Because this is being recorded I don't want to talk about it, but I think there is room to exercise discretion for the benefit of the staff. Let it be clear, I'm in charge of public money allocated to the school, and I'm aware that I cannot do whatever I please with this money. Yet, I cannot exploit my teachers. So I exercise my discretion in order to come up with creative solutions for all parties. As long as the school gains valuable practice in meeting reform demands, I allow myself to do it for the benefit of the teachers here and there; eventually, they will return this favour to the students. There was no formal permission to do this and I can say it was kind-of turning a blind eye on the teachers, implying that they'd better think how they choose to deal with this new situation.

Solomon, a principal with 14 years of experience, defined it as 'tricking the system'. He accused the reform of creating situations in which he felt he had no choice but to use manipulation:

I do my best to slice the reform the way I see fit, matching its guidelines to each teacher's personality. It's not easy, because the reform has created situations in which I sometimes have to manipulate or 'trick the system'.

In short, principals' wish to facilitate teachers' adaptation to the reform guidelines was one of the reasons for their development of creative bridging and adjustment strategies. They feel

committed to their teaching staffs, and therefore balance between external demands and local conditions.

Discussion

The findings of the current study's qualitative analysis of principals' interviews show that in order to mediate between reform policy demands and teachers' attitudes and needs, principals used two complementary strategies: earning teachers' support towards the reform, and adjusting the reform to the teachers' attitudes and needs. Principals explained to teachers that the new reform requirements are reasonable and can be met, so that the system can operate and hopefully even thrive under the reform; at the same time the principals also considered teachers' attitudes and needs in light of the externally-imposed instructions, which resulted in a partial fulfilment of the reform.

The use of the first strategy, which involves advocacy of the reform, is based on communication between the principal and the teachers. Communication is an important element in school-life and the most frequently used tool by organizational leaders. The leader's role requires the use of communication to develop shared meanings and create visions to enhance an organization's future and guide it through times of change (Helmer, Holt, and Thompson 2015; Price 2015). Thus, one of the means that effective principals use when carrying out their leadership responsibilities is communicating (Porter et al. 2008). During the implementation of a national education reform, it is to be expected that principals communicate with teachers in a variety of ways and on various occasions in order to reduce resistance and gain their support for the reform.

The use of the second strategy, that of implementing the reform incompletely out of consideration for teachers' attitudes and needs, indicates that principals aspire to serve as local policy makers, wishing to play an active role in negotiating national regulations and local capacities while enacting reform demands through the prism of their organizational

creativity. School principals often interpret reforms creatively, therefore they should not be regarded as mere gatekeepers (Salter 2014). They serve as mid-level policy managers, who leave their 'thumbprints' on policies received from the authorities (Flessa 2012), becoming local policymakers who adjust external reform to suit their specific situations (Spillane and Kenney 2012). This study's findings show that although unofficially, principals became active local policymakers by creatively bridging and adapting external demands to suit their teaching staffs' attitudes and needs. Thus, the reform was not only a top-down process; in fact, agents at all levels (e.g., district's officials, principals, middle leaders) contributed to this process (Levin and Datnow 2012). In this regard, Brewer and Carpenter (2012) suggest the term 'savvy participants' to describe the multiple actors who actively, although generally implicitly, negotiate reform implementation in light of schools' particular needs and capacities.

The strategies used by principals as reflected in this study can be perceived through principals' sensemaking processes. Sensemaking is a concept used to describe an ongoing process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate their expectations (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). Sensemaking is a process that applies to both individuals and groups who are faced with new information that is inconsistent with their prior beliefs. In this sense, a national education reform involves comprehensive changes, uncertainty, and lack of information. The reform involves alteration of previous working habits and new arrangements (Kalenze 2014). Namely, as principals interact with a reform program, which is generally characterized by initial ambiguity, causing confusion and misunderstandings, they seek to make sense of their new situation (Allen and Penuel 2015; Matsummura and Wang 2014). Through their sensemaking process, principals in this study facilitated their adaptation to the reform both by motivating teachers to accept the reform and by adjusting the reform to the teachers.

Principals described their role as that of leading the staff towards achieving external-national demands while also caring for the staff and creating a positive motivational dynamic. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) have shown that positive motivational dynamics enable discussions, which engage members in deeper sensemaking and greater agreement about an appropriate course of action, whereas motivational dynamics that are mixed or negative are associated with more superficial sensemaking of policy demands and a failure to act collectively.

An education reform can only be effective if policies are well implemented. To improve the quality of education that schools provide, policies must focus on balancing external pressure and intra-organizational support for the change (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2015). Put differently, policymakers should promote an understanding that encourages an effective balance between reform demands and the school's internal goals and needs, thus leaving room for school principals' professional judgment. If the district puts too much pressure on a school to implement the reform policy it has designed, it will either be ignored or excessively altered, failed, or rejected. For this purpose, the district needs to invest time up front communicating and working with school leaders and teachers to help them attain a deeper understanding of reform demands, thus providing educators with clarifications on reform priorities, as well as making sure that these priorities are acted on.

Providing prospective principals with leadership education programs of relevant theoretical contents in order to develop an upgraded understanding of their role as mediating agents between the inner and outer spheres of school-life is crucial for their professional identities. It will also enhance their understanding of what makes mediating agents act effectively, as well as how they can engage others through a shared process. In addition, one of the most effective ways to learn about the mediating agent's role is either to listen to current leaders talk about their own mediating activities or to watch videos of leaders in

action and analyse their mediation activities. In this context, providing guiding questions (e.g., 'how did the leader know that mediation was needed?') will prompt a fruitful dialogue. Through various mediating examples, current and future school principals can reflect on what those leaders actually did during reform implementation, evaluating these mediating practices in light of their specific school contexts.

Compared to prior studies, this study provides new data on principals' mediation between national reform demands and teachers' attitudes and needs; however, it has several limitations. First, since the data for this study were collected in a particular context, the cross-cultural validity of its findings has not been proven. Replicating this study in various socio-cultural contexts will enable generalization of the findings to broader populations, possibly substantiating their international validity. Second, this research focused solely on principals' verbal interpretations of their leadership role within the context of a national reform program. To complement principals' verbally expressed perceptions, further research could employ more objective measures such as direct observations, and evaluating principals' mediating strategies between external reform policy demands and internal school factors in diverse school settings. In addition, this study explored the ways in which school principals reconcile education reform guidelines and requirements; however, it is still unclear why they acted precisely as they did. Further research should investigate the reasons for principals' specific modes of action, drawing particularly on the literature about sense-making, which "involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005, p. 526). Additional longitudinal studies, including repeated interviews with the same school principals in order to explore how their mediation strategies have evolved and unfolded throughout reform implementation, will also be useful.

(7,913 words)

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