

The Legitimacy Strategies of School Principals

Abstract

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The current study aims to understand how school principals' actions attain value that could assist them in reaching an understanding with various stakeholders and bolster their legitimacy in their role. The main research goal is to uncover the legitimacy strategies of school principals that promote shared understanding with the school's stakeholders. Another goal is to examine the principals' role in the converging challenges of autonomy and accountability in light of prominent conflicts in school during ordinary times, and their choice of different actions that promote solutions and agreements from all sides.

Literature review

Three important aspects will be specified in the study. **First**, we examined the challenges of autonomy and accountability in the discipline of education and in management roles. Many scholars maintain that despite decentralization reform in education, principals' autonomy is mostly limited to executing managerial tasks; this is due to the adoption of the principle of accountability among schools and their heads (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2015; Glatter, 2020). **Second**, the principals' role was examined through reviewing the reciprocal actions between them and the various stakeholders in school. Many of the stakeholders join forces and act together as involved players in the system (Addi-Racah & Friedman, 2019; Grinshtain & Gibton, 2018; Ni, Yan & Pounder, 2018). This necessitates a managerial sensitivity that characterizes the private-commercial sector (Ball, 2007). Due to the influence of additional factors on the school, scholars emphasize the increased feelings of uncertainty and precariousness among principals (Hameiri et al., 2014), in a manner that affects their legitimacy in their role

(Gibton, 2017; Greany & Higham, 2018). **Finally**, the main theoretical starting point in the study was the paradigmatic change based on Boltanski's pragmatic sociology (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999). In his theoretical approach, Boltanski (2011) combined practice with morals when evaluating the level of legitimacy in social roles, and introduced seven regimes of justification that promote legitimacy in situations of uncertainty – domestic, industrial, inspiration, civic, market, fame, and project-based. Therefore, the study wishes to raise awareness to additional disciplines for examining social reality and dialogue between different theories, that it does not aim to refute (Friedrich-Silber, 2001). The literature review details supplementary theoretical approaches that adopted this manner. Four research questions were defined to expose legitimacy strategies in principals' actions.

Research questions

(1) Who are the major stakeholders who are involved in disagreements at school during ordinary times? (2) What are the main controversial topics in the management routine of each stakeholder and how, if any, were the solutions and agreements reached among the sides? (3) What dominant legitimacy strategies, in terms of the regimes of justification, did the principals use to promote agreement and compromise? (4) Are there differences between principals according to their perception of degrees of autonomy and accountability in their role and between the following four criteria: (a) Choosing the most dominant stakeholder for controversies in school? (b) Perception of the disagreements in terms of intensity, frequency, and the chance to reach agreement and compromise? (c) The degree of variation in legitimacy strategies? And (d) the dominant legitimacy strategies, by stakeholder? To analyze the questions, we conducted a mixed method study, as detailed below.

Methodology

An exploratory mixed method study in the sequential order QUAL-quant was conducted (Creswell Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007). In the first, qualitative stage we conducted 20 interviews with elementary school principals from the Jewish public-school sector and 15 interviews with stakeholders with whom they had disagreements. The sample was recruited in the snowball method. Half of the principals came from the mid-low SES (socioeconomic status) index and the other half from the mid-high SES index. The data was analyzed thematically (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), using inductive

reasoning to establish categories in a new discipline –conflicts between principals and major stakeholders, justifications, and actions for conflict resolution reported in the interviews. In the second, quantitative stage we converted the principals' justifications to a summary of actions with values and principles. Using this as a basis, we composed three quantitative questionnaires to examine legitimacy strategies, and a device for analyzing variance degrees in principals' critical ability. The variety of legitimacy strategies were set as dependent variables along with the perception of disagreements in terms of their frequency, intensity, and chance of reaching agreements and compromise. The independent variables in the quantitative stage were four groups defined based on a combination of autonomy and accountability. In addition, we checked for correlations and associations between the variables, taking into account seniority and the SES index.

Results

In the qualitative stage, the principals selected three major stakeholders who cause controversy in the school during ordinary times: parents and their leadership, teachers in the management team (hereinafter management team), and the LEA (local education authority). The main topics of disagreement with the LEA were division of authority and the responsibility for the welfare of the students, lack of funds and local political disputes. The prominent disagreements with parents and their leadership groups were rooted in the authority to manage the school and lack of trust on both sides. The disagreements with the management team were about the level of commitment and the senior teachers' and management staff's responsibility for various tasks in school, and specifically new tasks that were not part of their traditional roles. An important finding arose from the similarity between the main topics of controversy among principals who reported efficient coping that leads to solutions and agreements with each stakeholder, and among the principals who found that difficult to achieve. The dominant legitimacy strategies changed according to the stakeholder, but the industrial regime and its efficiency principle were found to be dominant in most cases. However, the combination of strategies from different regimes improved the ability to promote agreement as opposed to the use of a single regime. Thus, the main finding is that the use of varied legitimacy strategies is the best way to promote principals' legitimacy in their role. In disagreements with parents and their leadership, most principals based their action on dominant legitimacy strategies from the **domestic and industrial**

regimes, but reached a higher rate of agreement when they used additional and varied actions from the **civic and the project-based** regimes. In disagreements with the management team, the dominant legitimacy strategies were varied strategies from the **domestic, industrial, civic and the project-based** regimes, and several principals added strategies from the **inspiration** regime. In disagreements with the LEA, most principals used dominant legitimacy strategies from the **industrial, civic and the project-based** regimes, and several principals opted for the **inspiration, fame, and market**. The quantitative stage (N=55) showed that of the four groups for the combined variable of autonomy and accountability, the largest group in the sample reported as high autonomy and high accountability. However, we did not find significant differences among principals according to their perception of autonomy and accountability when selecting the stakeholder and in their perception of intensity of the disagreements. In addition, we did not find differences among principals according to their perception of autonomy and accountability when selecting legitimacy strategies. We did find relations between the degree of variation when selecting a legitimacy strategy and the perception of autonomy and accountability. A correlation was also found between the variation in the principals' selection and their reports of the possibility of reaching compromise and understanding. These results were supported by the qualitative results.

Conclusions

Many principals perceive the internal stakeholders (management team) and external stakeholders (parents and LEAs) as a web of influence with limitations and constraints, exposed to uncertainty, but also as affording opportunities. The principals act in a changing system that has unlimited authority resources, and most report that their role consists of high degrees of autonomy and authority alongside a high degree of accountability. According to this conclusion, the principals' lack of autonomy in school can be enhanced through suitable accountability. This is also how school principals perceive their training that helps them lead their teachers by increasing the teachers' autonomy and accountability in a way that is not at odds with their autonomy in their role as principals. The study shows a gap in principals' coping with disagreements with the management team, which usually leads to agreement, as opposed to their coping with disagreements with other stakeholders, where they described difficulty in reaching agreement through suitable action.

In a time of demand for autonomy and accountability, the importance of principals' coping with uncertainty is amplified (Hameiri & Nir, 2016). The study enables recognizing actions that promote reaching agreement and compromise and increase the value of legitimacy in their role. The critique of the efficiency principle, which dominates different social disciplines, is substantial, but it is also vital to assess additional values to achieve multiple criteria of worth, that sustain a "Heterarchy" (Lamont, 2012). In light of the paradigmatic change (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999), this study shows how the principals' critical ability facing the three chosen stakeholders increased as the use of principles and values from the justification regimes was more varied. Therefore, the study's conclusion is that principals who depend on legitimacy motivate stakeholders into cooperation not only due to their efficient problem solving, but also because their actions are seen as appropriate during the agreement process between the sides. These conclusions support additional studies where the principal acted as a flexible agent according to the situation in an uncertain environment, navigating between the different stakeholders (Addi-Racah, 2015). This study provides supplemental understanding on the navigation necessary for attaining temporary and renewable legitimacy in a management position.

Contributions

(1) By exposing the varied repertoire of principals' choices, the study supports the approach of renewable legitimacy that must withstand critique and even be exchanged for better suited strategies according to the situation. The discussion surrounding the renewable legitimacy as a source of authority clarifies that a multiplicity of principles and pluralistic aspects are the condition to maintain the "Heterarchy" in schools, instead of zero-sum game analyses that focus on winners and losers in a competition for resources. (2) Many studies deal with autonomy and measuring accountability and the pressures on the role of principals, and this study examined their influence in four groups set by levels of autonomy and accountability. The largest group of principals in the research, over a third, perceived their degree of autonomy as high as well as their degree of accountability. According to the findings, these principals do not lose autonomy and accountability when they delegate more autonomy and accountability to the major stakeholders (external & internal) in school. (3) The use of varied strategies can assist in principal training programs, in understanding the process principals undergo when they manage to retain their role and legitimacy and create an

understanding with stakeholders at school. When principals are under contradictory pressures, whether these are top-down policies or bottom-up practices, and especially where the pressures of autonomy and accountability converge, the anticipation is that forming legitimacy strategies from their varied toolbox will serve as a moral anchor in coping with controversy during ordinary times.