

**Educational Policies and Management Strategies  
of School Principals in an Age of Competition  
and Achievement**

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## Abstract

In recent decades, in the spirit of neoliberal ideology, the Israeli system of education has been going through a process of decentralization, which has delegated more powers of authority to field levels. The government allocates resources for the activities of the system, regulates its performance and encourages the introduction of competition and market mechanisms. To ensure the efficacy of decentralization, the leaders of the system of education in Israel have established rules of regulation and strengthened the mechanisms of regulatory control and supervision based on monitoring achievement and outcomes (Justma & Bukobza, 2010). In the age of decentralization, field level accountability keeps growing stronger as a consequence of requirements for managerial and achievement transparency and public demand for managerial accountability for success and failure (Au, 2007, 2011; Zohar, 2013). This process is accompanied by constant improvements of the mechanisms of regulation and control, which include standardized national and international exams that check chiefly quantitative achievements in the core academic subjects, paying lesser attention, in practice if not in theory, to aspects of cultural and social values.

These processes raise accumulating sharp criticism from different factors within and without the system against the excessive orientation towards achievements, and lead to an intense public debate on the benefits or harm they cause to the system of education. Most of the literature describes school principals' public and formal ways of working in the situation under discussion. Recently, however, research evidence points to informal ways of working, often more tenacious than the formal and open ones, unofficially diverting organizational and educational resources to success in external exams and placement in the league tables (Au & Apple, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Elmore, 2004; Koretz, 2008; Mansell, 2007; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ravitch, 2010; Rothstein, Jacobson, & Wilder, 2008; Zohar, 2013). The current study is motivated by the wish to understand the experience of principalship in this complex setting, both in relation to the inter-relationships between the principal and his external environment and within his institution. In addition, we examine the strategies and ways by which principals find balance between their commitment to regulation demands and factors external to their school, and their autonomic pedagogical aspirations adapted to local community needs.

The **research questions** relate to the way by which principals conceive through their personal interpretation the processes of democratization, decentralization and regulation in the system of education, as well as the excessive orientation toward achievement

competition. They also deal with how principals interpret their commitment to satisfy the demands addressed to them, as they formalize the pedagogical school program by means of formal and informal strategies aimed at balancing the school with its external environment. In addition, the research questions relate to the implications for the pedagogical activity in schools from the principals' point of view, and to the way these principals perform as school principals.

The **research method** chosen is qualitative. The decision to apply this method of research derives from the need to understand and describe principals' experiences and their interpretations in their own terms and from their own point of view. The **study participants** are principals, teachers and role holders in the ministry of education. We held semi-structured interviews with 35 principals currently in office. The principals interviewed work in six-year state and state-religious schools from different areas in the country, divided into 4 regions as defined by the ministry of education. They were selected randomly or semi-randomly, as with some of them I had a personal acquaintance, while others were approached by recommendation or following their consent to be interviewed in various places. In addition, 5 of the participants holding major positions in the ministry of education and the municipality (head of the education department, supervisor, regional administration role holders) were interviewed in semi-structured depth interviews, as well as 40 teachers divided into 4 focus groups (10 in each group), all in all comprising 80 interviewees. For deeper investigation, the study analyzed the contents of documents and directly collected and validated data from the external factors that affect the schools.

Our research **findings** offer new insights regarding school principals' role, and highlight the challenges that principals face vis-à-vis the current changes in the systems of education in Israel and around the world.

Here are the study findings in brief:

1. There is a large gap between the announced managerial autonomy, for example, by the so declared "self-managed schools", and the daily practice of management in which principals enjoy little freedom of action on the pedagogical and organizational level. The findings also shed light on the limited scope of the inner institutional autonomy.
2. The processes of democratization, accountability and strengthening of the regulative supervision mechanisms relating to achievement and outcome control contribute to the development of competition between schools and to their excessive orientation toward achievements. From the principals' point of view, conducting achievement

competition has become a central issue on the school informal daily agenda, pushing aside other central and important issues.

3. The large number of external factors responsible for the school or interrelating with it turn the principal into the servant of multiple masters (the ministry of education, regional supervision, municipal authority, parents), and bring about a high measure of complexity in the principals' conduct vis-à-vis these factors. Disharmonic demands are addressed to the school principals. Some are conveyed formally and some tacitly, and the principals see these demands as driven by different interests and ideologies. The principals dedicate much of their time to providing answers and maneuvering between the demands of the external factors, and they find it hard to navigate among the floods of contradictory demands.
4. As makers of institutional policy, school principals examine and interpret the interests and the inner and outer organizational politics, forming – in most cases mainly on their own – creative strategies of adjustment, like bridging and buffering strategies, in order to fit external demands to the complex internal institutional process.
5. The pressure for achievements coming from high ranges in the ministry of education derives from their being under competitive pressures themselves. Consequently, the principals view and interpret the environment as competitive and achievement-based, and as judging their success by these main criteria. This greatly limits their ability to fulfil their personal vision which they would like to promote, and enhances the deep gap between their role as expected in reality and the one declared officially, with which they identify. They think that their role has been diverted from leading a pedagogical system to leading a business organization that is compatible with a market economy.
6. The excessive orientation toward achievement and the publicizing of achievements in league tables structure the principals' patterns of performance. They distinguish between the formal and declarative aspect, that is, the formal strategies of management, and the informal, covert aspect, that is, informal management strategies. Every principal uses his own unique way to balance between the two strategies according to his own pedagogical vision, his personality and the situational conditions, which allows principals to balance between the inner requirements of the school to those of the external environment.

7. Because of the achievement competition, principals feel that the quality of education is marred and that it is devoid of important value contents. They claim that the profession of teaching has been perverted, and has turned into exam-focused instruction with no proper answers to the needs of weaker students, which entails damage to the principles of equal opportunity and does not allow suitable answers to the needs of specific school students and community.
8. The principals describe their difficulty in their role as school managers, expressed both on the personal-emotional level, reporting loneliness, contradictory loyalties, overload and physical as well as psychological stress that come into expression in their personal lives, and on the organizational-professional level. At that level, they feel overloaded because of the need to cope with bureaucracy and complex mechanisms, and they face difficulties in developing adaptation strategies to cope with the environment. All these, combined with their feeling that the systems occupying them have no faith in them, lead to mental exhaustion.

The study offers **practical recommendations** concerning the main issues that come out of the findings. We recommend a reexamination of the emphases of the regulation mechanisms, a moderation of the pressure for achievements and an examination of the influence of the processes of decentralization, the regulation and the many external factors on the pedagogical, organizational and teaching orientation in high schools. It is recommended to moderate the conflict principals are caught in, between their wish to express their pedagogical vision and adapt the service they provide to the needs of the community in the framework of decentralized management, and the requirements of regulation. Within this framework, we suggest allowing principals more autonomy *de facto*, in the pedagogical as well as the organizational realms.

The findings of the study also indicate the need for updating pre-service and induction programs for principals that would relate to the conflictual reality they experience constantly between the regulator's strict requirements and their own autonomic expectations, in addition to the need for providing them with efficient strategies for coping with this duality.

The study contributes a comprehensive systematic understanding of the processes of neoliberal globalization, decentralization and regulation mechanisms, all contributing to the creation of achievement competition and the development of highly dominant informal management strategies in schools.