Doubt, Doubting and the Principal's Role: Exploring an Emerging Perspective

for School Change

*Chen Schechter

<a> In light of current social change and uncertainty, the educational system, as a key social institution, is undergoing a turbulent period. Increased demands for teachers' and administrators' accountability, racial and ethnic integration, parental and political involvement, to mention only a few, require us to cast doubt upon deeply rooted school practices. Doubt has been increasingly perceived as a means of introducing education renewal. Nevertheless, the doubting process and the principal's role that influences its effectiveness have not been explored. This lack of conceptualization is particularly serious in light of the growing number of restructuring efforts (e.g., Site-Based Management) that have rarely demonstrated positive outcomes in student achievements (Murphy & Beck, 1995). In other words, reflecting on the important process of doubt may enhance our understanding how doubt about current practices is induced in schools and how such a process might affect the implementation of restructuring efforts in light of the new era in educational accountability. Thus, the doubting process is clearly important at a time when there are increasing questions about efficacy of schooling, particularly public schooling.

This article is an attempt to reflect on the doubting process as an emerging perspective in school change. After introducing the notion of doubt and its importance to school change, conditions influencing the doubting process are described. Then, these conditions are reflected upon in a case example of a secondary school principal who doubted the rising violence level. This example is discussed in light of the principal's role in doubting schoolwork.

<a> Conceptual Framework and Definition

The root of the word doubt comes from the ancient Greek and means to look beyond, to search, to inquire. Webster (In Chandler, 1987) defines doubt "as the condition of being uncertain or unsettled in one's opinion or belief as to the reality or truth of something" (p. 139). Doubt calls for a human spirit, which continuously searches; thus its tacit assumption relies on an obligation to fight dogmatism. Put differently, Bradley (1925) asserts that doubt aims at "finding bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct" (p. xiv). The principle of doubt is to present an opposite perspective for every given opinion. Therefore, the purpose of doubt is to reach absolute cognitive freedom from the confinement of already existing opinions. Doubt illuminates how every entity can be perceived differently by another person, or even by us, in different points in time. Hence, doubt calls for every opinion and every statement to be scrutinized and analyzed, requiring continuous inquiry into the deeply rooted constructs of every perspective. With this said, doubt can serve as the underlying force for further inquiry, which is never satisfied with the results obtained (Haezrachi, 1966).

Although doubt is perceived as essential for inquiring into deeply rooted tacit assumptions, it is important to explore the impact of doubt on organizational members. Doubt increases feelings of unpredictability among faculty that relies heavily on the clarity of formal rules and regulations. Formality induces security and predictability, whereas doubt engenders feelings of confusion. Educators, who are the core agents in the practical implementation of school change, try to alleviate and avoid the feelings of confusion and threat aroused when doubting school core functions. In other words, they embrace what Kofman and Senge (1993) refer to as a

"quick fix mentality" (p. 9), focusing on short-term results that temporarily alleviate the threat caused by the proposed doubt.

When principals doubt ongoing school practices in a unilateral way, they prevent teachers from being continuous learners and strengthen their debilitating dependency on higher formal figures in school. This idea is clearly heard in the words of Marris:

> When those who have power to manipulate [doubt] act as if they have only to explain, and when their explanations are not at once accepted, shrug off opposition as ignorance or prejudice, they express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives other than their own. For the reformers have already assimilated these [doubts] and worked out a reformulation which makes sense to them [after an extensive period of learning]. If they deny others the chance to do the same [in a safe environment], they treat them as puppets dangling by the threads of their own conceptions. (Marris: in Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 749)

Consequently, imposing doubt diminishes internal motivation to contribute to and participate in possible school change. This, in turn, increases resistance to change, and as a result, reform initiatives in schools rarely progress successfully from their conceptualization phase to their practical implementation. With this said, teachers need the opportunity to discuss and consider the reasons for doubt. In this regard, Mitchell and Sackney (1998) acknowledge that framing through discussion and reflection is different from merely receiving external (e.g., principal, superintendent) doubt, which seldom provides an opportunity to develop understanding.

Therefore, in this article, doubt is defined as an inquiry into routine and habitual perceptions and assumptions that are generally conceived as appropriate within some social system of values and beliefs. The doubting process, however, is

defined as the ethical and productive inducement of doubt in light of the versatile, dynamic and contextual conditions of an organization, which, then, contributes to its effective use. The ethical and productive inducement of doubt requires consideration of the versatile, dynamic and contextual conditions found in each school. In other words, the doubting process may be better explored through the unique social, political and cultural conditions that influence its effective use in school communities.

<a> **Conditions Influencing the Doubting Process**

Although doubt is important, inducing doubt cannot be distinguished from the versatile, dynamic and contextual conditions found in each school. As school contexts vary, the conditions influencing the doubting process mentioned here are those that will be reflected upon in the case example, presented in the following section. These conditions are divided into three categories: level of doubt, source of doubt, and school conditions.

<b> *Level of Doubt*

Chandler (1987) makes a distinction between small, case-specific doubt, and large, generic doubt. Case-specific doubt attaches itself "to this and that concrete conviction and cause us all to waver in our confidence that we know a particular thing in a clear certainty…[thus, case-specific doubt is] modest in its epistemic consequences" (p. 139). In this case, case-specific doubt explores methodological faults or logical contradictions in various arguments. Put differently, case-specific doubt takes place within unquestionable logical laws and an already existing methodological system that leaves individuals' tacit values and norms unexplored, and therefore unfreezed (Schein, 1992). By contrast, generic doubt provokes more radical and far-reaching

epistemological questions, calling for fundamental inquiry into "the prospect of any kind of trustworthy knowledge whatsoever" (Chandler, 1987, p. 139). In this case, doubt unfreezes tacit assumptions, which then allows for the developing of new frames of reference or interpretive schemas within which new decisions and actions can be made (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Doubt that challenges deep-rooted assumptions involves less certain outcomes, a longer time perspective and more diffused effects (March, 1996), all of which reinforce the tendency of practitioners to rely on and be segregated in case-specific doubt. Thus, case-specific doubt is less cognitively and emotionally demanding than generic doubt.

<b> *Source of Doubt*

Doubt in schools may emerge from the principal and other high level administrators, directly and unilaterally imposed on teachers, which denies opportunities to develop internal understanding. In other words, when doubting emerges only from higher levels in the educational hierarchy, it may confound members' sense of control; thus increasing their tendency to withdraw from active participation in the ongoing organizational functions (Hirschorn, 1997) and to hide behind their formal organizational roles. Moreover, as a result of imposing doubt from higher levels in the organizational hierarchy, members become dependent on their superiors, developing a passivity stance, which shortens their time perspective (Fox, 1999). By contrast, schools that encourage interdependent collegiality "provide a context for understanding the place of self in the overall scheme of things" (Schechter, 2002, p. 158). This, in turn, fosters a process of framing through discussion, which provides an opportunity to doubt school practices from myriad vantage points.

<b> *School Conditions*

<c> Administrative-Professional Legitimacy

A productive use of doubt may consider how teachers perceive the principal's legitimacy. Administrative-professional legitimacy is tightly linked to practitioners' expectations regarding the expertise and knowledge of the principal (Beaulieu, Roy, & Pasquero, 2002). It is ineffective for a principal perceived as lacking administrative-professional legitimacy to doubt core organizational functions. That is, any attempt by a principal to cast doubt upon well-rooted pedagogical patterns in school, when educators perceive him or her as lacking professional knowledge, and therefore legitimacy, is likely to be countered with suspicion and distrust.

<c> School Success and Failure

It is harder to convince educators to doubt their ongoing practices when the current ones are quite successful. Success does not stimulate a perceived need to doubt actions, especially in light of unfamiliar new practices that may be accompanied by possible danger and inconvenience to practitioners (Sitkin, 1996). Put simply, success tends to induce overconfidence in routines that have proved to be successful in the past, making it harder to doubt organizational routines. By contrast, schools tend to doubt their ongoing practices when confronted with a crisis situation (Miller & Freisen, 1984). Thus, both actual failure and possible failure can produce a perceived need to doubt.

<c> The Rhetoric of Doubt

Whether the doubting process skillfully integrates both cognitive and emotional rhetorical approaches needs to be carefully evaluated. The rhetoric of doubt can shift

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on a continuum between strict cognitive, rational orientation, on the one hand, and emotional orientation, on the other. Doubting school practices based solely on rational arguments, while rejecting attempts to expose emotional impulses can be viewed as an act of reductionism. Dewey (1922) argued that both intellect and emotion need to be integrated and balanced for the productive use of doubt. Thus, doubt cannot rely solely on intellectual judgment, but requires emotional impulse as well.

<c> Sensitivity to Environmental Change

Schools that are sensitive to their external environments constantly gather information and evaluate it in light of current organizational procedures and routines. Put simply, perceiving external information as being of a complex and dynamic nature (an uncertain orientation) facilitates educators' inclination to doubt their schoolwork. In that regard, schools that perceive competition from other schools in their environment tend to doubt ongoing practices, leading to continuous adaptations (Klein, 2000). By contrast, schools that do not perceive competition in their environment become trapped in securing their status quo. They act according to predictable and constant patterns from past school memories, taking them as a panacea to solving future problems.

<a> **Doubting the School Rising Violence Level**

To illustrate, a case example of a school whose principal doubted the rising violence level is presented. The intention in presenting this example is to provide a basis for inquiry into questions relating to doubt and the doubting process in the context of school change.

<b> *The School*

Located in south Tel-Aviv (Israel), this secondary public school is surrounded by low socio-economic neighborhoods, in which scenes of poverty are common. When compared to other schools in the Tel-Aviv district, many students (out of the total number of 700 students) are from problematic homes (alcoholism, criminal offense). Moreover, the student population is religiously diverse. Jews, Arabs (both Muslims and Christians) and other minority groups co-exist within the school - a unique phenomenon in the Israeli society, particularly within the education system.

<b> *Level of Doubt*

The south Tel-Aviv school principal doubted the ongoing, entrenched and sometimes taken for-granted high level of violence within the school grounds. Violence, in the form of verbal and physical assaults, was common in the daily practices of this south Tel-Aviv school. Violent incidents (e.g., students assaulting teachers, teachers' cars being damaged) were noticeable in almost every function of schoolwork. Thus, the doubting process in this south Tel-Aviv school evolved from a practical and 'tangible' situation, which presented itself in almost every school function, demanding immediate doubt in current practices.

At first glance, this high level of violence, although distressing and disruptive, did not require large, generic doubt, but rather a more modest inquiry under the same conception of schoolwork. Thus, this modest inquiry into epistemic consequences aimed to 'unfreeze' errors within a given system of rules. Taking a step further, violence seems to be a non-legitimate and illegal phenomenon of school life, demanding clear actions to eradicate it within unquestionable laws. Therefore, doubt in this case can be seen as redundant and impotent. A second glance, however, views

the school as an open system, an organic element within its environment. Influenced by outside tensions, administrators aimed to provide students with shelter and protection from the difficult world that existed just outside the school gates. Thus, trying to decrease incidents of violence in an environment in which violence is common and taken for granted required a deeper level of doubt; one that would leverage a more radical epistemological questions.

<b> *Source of Doubt*

The south Tel-Aviv school principal encouraged sharing doubts from diverse sources and perspectives. In other words, he aspired for a reciprocal sharing of doubt and perplexity invoked from diverse worldviews. Thus, doubting the school practices could not be limited only to the principal. Rather, administrators, teachers and counselors were encouraged to raise doubt concerning this issue. This encouragement provided an opportunity for the entire school personnel to share their unique points of view, aiming at an accurate reflection of the school's level of violence. To do so, the principal expanded the doubting process from his office, where he deliberated only with his close administrative staff, to the school's auditorium where the entire school personnel could take an active part in this process. Expanding the doubting process to the entire school personnel enlarged the circle of commitment. By expanding the circle of commitment, the principal nurtured a trusting culture, which served as a precondition to the inducement of doubt in school's level of violence.

<b> *Cognitive-Emotional Continuum (The Rhetoric of Doubt)*

The south Tel-Aviv school principal did not perceive emotional responses as hindering the doubting process. On the contrary, emotional and authentic responses

during the doubting process were considered by the principal as a means for enhancing teachers' involvement in future school practices. "I am willing to hear anything from anyone. I want to hear everything at maximum openness. We cannot conceal anything. We have to speak as openly as possible," he contended at the first meeting at the school auditorium. In another meeting, he openly acknowledged his distress regarding incidents of sexual harassment (as a form of violence) in school. "Indications of sexual harassment in our school simply bowl me over. I really do not know how to react. Sexual assaults at school scare me the most." In an interview conducted with the principal, he added that he felt very comfortable in openly presenting personal difficulties from the current situation in school. "When you lay everything on the table, you do not deny the difficult situation. Rather, you present authenticity, which will allow others to doubt the current situation and tackle the issue more effectively." The school psychologist added that these collective meetings allowed teachers, for the first time, to hear the principal and their colleagues acknowledging their feelings of insecurity in school.

<b> *Administrative Legitimacy*

The south Tel-Aviv school principal gained administrative-professional legitimacy as he completed his seventh year as a school principal (fifth year at the current school). In his first years, the principal, as a newcomer to the unique context of the present school, had learned the schoolwork, and expanded what he termed "the circle of agreement-commitment" prior to inducing doubt in school practices. In doing so, he gained not only a unique historical perspective of the school, but also administrative and pedagogical legitimacy. Moreover, most administrators, teachers, school counselors and school psychologists were relatively young faculty, not yet socialized

in historical pedagogical and administrative traditions; thus willing to inquire and problematize ongoing school activities.

Timeliness

The south Tel-Aviv school just recently overcame a threat of closing down. As the Tel-Aviv municipality opened its school enrollment zones, potential students (from neighborhoods surrounding the school) enrolled in schools in the northern part of the city, which used to serve students from upper socioeconomic levels. Being on the verge of catastrophic consequences fostered a perceived need to doubt past practices, aiming to justify the school's existence in a problematic area. This critical time factor, when the faculty perceived an unpredictable and unclear future, together with the added belief that failure to achieve school goals could be disastrous (error criticality), could result in passivity and helplessness. However, in practice, perceiving the school as under a threat for its survival triggered a perceived need to doubt.

Parental Influence (External Influence)

Parents of the south Tel-Aviv school students were for the most part blue-collar workers, hoping for a better future to their children. Therefore, doubting school level of violence, which could improve school climate, enhance students' growth-achievement, and consequently close the existing gaps with higher societal levels was generally welcomed by parents. Therefore, doubting the rising level of violence was a major focus of administrators and parents as they made an attempt to instill in students the belief that 'they can do it'. Thus, because of students' environmental disadvantages, both faculty and parents perceived the need to join forces in order to doubt and consequently eliminate the distressing violence level.

<b> *Toward Implementation*

The doubting process at the south Tel-Aviv school resulted in a comprehensive school change to reduce school violence, which included the community, parents, administrators, teachers and students. At its fourth year of implementation, these attempts present indications of a gradual and consistent decrease in the school's violence level.

<a> **Discussion**

This example illuminates the principal's role and school conditions that influence a doubting process. The south Tel-Aviv school principal expanded his circle of agreement-commitment among school practitioners, only to lay the groundwork for doubting school level of violence during his fifth year in office. Principals need to inquire into and understand the local culture of their schools prior to questioning existing norms and practices. Thus, time is a crucial factor in learning the complex school networks, in inquiring into the tacit, usually implicit, school mental models, and in gaining support for possible doubt.

Acquiring administrative-professional legitimacy requires continuous attention. The administrative-professional legitimacy of a principal is a status conferred upon him or her by the faculty, not something which is given automatically when assuming this position in schools. Through continuous interactions between the principal, faculty and other stakeholders in a socio-cultural-political environment of school, legitimacy is determined and conferred. It requires gaining knowledge and "molding knowledge according to the prevailing beliefs about what constitutes social reality" (Hybles, 1995, p. 243) in a particular school, and how to doubt it.

The principal personally acknowledged his difficulty concerning the level of violence, arguing that presenting emotional difficulties is a sign of openness and authenticity among educators. This resonates with Dewey's (1909) emphasis on emotional reactions as the source of an ethical way of being and an appropriate cognitive judgment. According to Dewey, when principals doubt school practices, they cannot rely solely on intellectual judgment. Rather, doubt also requires "personal responsiveness--…an emotional reaction" (1909, p. 52). Put differently, Dewey (1922) does not view emotional reaction as an unimportant accompanying factor in inducing doubt, but as a necessity for widening intelligence.

Furthermore, the south Tel-Aviv school principal doubted the violence level in light of the constant need to justify the existence of the school in a competitive and problematic area. Schools tend to change ongoing practices after being confronted with a crisis situation (Miller & Freisen, 1984). Both actual failure and possible failure can produce readiness to doubt as a means for correcting actions, whereas successful actions foster almost no impetus to inquire into existing routines and policies (Ellis & Davidi, 1999). Sitkin (1996), in this regard, argues that failure stimulates higher willingness to consider alternatives, and to critique traditional working patterns. Similarly, Lant and Mezias (1992) found that the impetus for doubt is triggered by performance below aspiration level. Put differently, information that reflects problems and failures is more salient to the performer than information indicating success. This corresponds to Lounammaa and March's (1987) assertion that practitioners treat "performance improvements as confounded but treat performance decrements as containing information" (p. 116). Thus, failure signals unequivocally and explicitly that results are problematic, demanding doubt.

<a> **Concluding Thoughts**

Doubting schoolwork could involve tremendous risks for every principal. Whereas doubting can energize and direct attention toward continuous renewal, "it [might] be experienced as threatening and disruptive" (Gryskiewicz, 1999, p. 23) if the information casts doubt upon core practices. To overcome this possible impediment, principals need to encourage their entire faculty to collectively reflect upon their school's current image. Principals need to create institutionalized arrangements for collective doubt by allocating time, space and resources. Put differently, it is imperative to create spaces (Issacs, 1999), where practitioners can share their professional doubts as a means of improving pedagogical practices. Institutionalizing these doubting routines into standard operating procedures does not necessarily improve the organization (Feldman & March, 1981). Hence, principals are not only responsible for institutionalizing these tangible spaces for collective doubt, but also for nurturing the more intangible-abstract culture that ensures the productivity of the doubting mechanisms. To develop the essential culture, principals should serve as gatekeepers for any dispositional ideology, while empowering teachers to authentically share their doubts concerning schoolwork.

A productive use of doubt is essential when considering a new proposal for school change. A productive doubting process fosters practitioners' modification of mental models and clarifies their intrinsic motivation to the need for change. Facilitating a productive doubting process is essential if we aspire to meaningful change that fosters continuous growth within students and faculty alike, instead of the external imposition and great profusion of 'new fads' (frameworks, slogans, buzzwords) for change that restrict any possibility of personal and collective growth. To do so, it is important to consider how doubt can be productively induced in school

life, because "doing things right [will] help practitioners do the right thing" (Willower, 1994, p. 482). This article is a modest attempt to explore the principal's role, the underlying school's conditions and the relationship between them as the seed of a productive doubting process and consequently effective school change.

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*Chen Schechter, Bar-Ilan University, School of Education, Educational Policy and Administration Division, Ramat-Gan, Israel, 52900.