

Abstract

This dissertation explores a unique training process for mid-level school leaders, i.e., the intermediate leadership tier of role holders in a school. The training process consists of role-play simulations that confront the participants with ethical dilemmas associated with their leadership roles and simulate their work environment, including social aspects and multiple interactions. The study's conceptual framework is the social-ecological model (SEM), which considers the immediate and distant surroundings in which mid-level school leaders operate (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; King & Travers, 2017).

The present study proposes a novel interpretation of the SEM for mid-level school leaders. It sheds light on a unique prism of mid-level school leadership roles, along with in-depth examination of the different social factors in the work of these individuals and their classification into defined layers, categories, and sub-categories, as follows: individual (e.g., age, gender, seniority); interpersonal (e.g., students and colleagues); organizational (e.g., school principal, school regulations); community (e.g., parents); public policy (e.g., Ministry of Education Director General circulars); and technology (e.g., techno pedagogy).

In order to determine the different social factors associated with the role of mid-level school leader, the study utilized a qualitative approach. It utilized the transcripts of 30 role-play simulations and group debriefings where participants presented and discussed various mid-level leadership ethical dilemmas. The study comprised 30 mid-level school leaders of different Israeli high schools and districts who were all enrolled in a Master's degree program in educational leadership. It was conducted during an academic course that focused on role-play simulations.

The research findings are presented in three articles that form this dissertation and address the research questions. The articles offer a comprehensive review of mid-level school leaders and their training through role-play simulations in an ethical context, using a social-ecological approach.

The first article, "*Ethical dilemmas among mid-level school leaders through role-play simulations: Developing a social-ecological approach*", aimed to examine ethical dilemmas faced by mid-level school leaders. Its findings helped generate the "Fan of the Social-Ecological Model" (FSEM), a unique interpretation of the SEM for mid-level school leaders. This model, which is based on the original SEM model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), considers the ethical context of mid-level school leadership roles and examines the different social interactions related to the work of these leaders. The FSEM consists of six main layers: individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, public policy, and technology, with the

latter being a new contribution of this study. The findings show the concurrent presence of these layers, highlighting the complexity of the mid-level school leader's role, when simultaneously facing multiple ethical dilemmas with conflicting values. Furthermore, the study found the interpersonal layer to be the most dominant, reflecting the dual role of mid-level leaders as both classroom teachers and team leaders.

The second article, *“Exploring middle-level school leadership styles through role-play simulations”*, aimed to investigate different leadership styles that characterize mid-level leaders in a social-ecological context, as they practice leadership scenarios through role-play simulations. The study identified four main leadership styles: authentic, transformational, participative, and transactional. The interpersonal layer was found to be the most prominent, with a strong presence of transformational and authentic leadership styles. Authentic leadership was more prominent in the organizational and community layers, while transactional leadership was less noticeable. The research findings demonstrate multidimensionality in both the leadership styles and social-ecological layers, as different styles appeared in different layers concurrently.

The third article, *“Eliciting ethical guidelines for school middle leaders in a social-ecological framework via role-play simulations”*, aimed to elicit guidelines for school middle leaders as derived through role-play simulation training, and frame them within the SEM. The findings uncovered five core themes of ethical guidelines for school mid-level leaders, framed within the layers of the SEM: interpersonal relationship aspects, individual’s professional aspects, organizational relationship aspects, public policy aspects, and community relationships aspects. The findings showed that the interpersonal relationship aspects were found to be the most significant context for formulating ethical guidelines.

To summarize the overall findings, the research findings offer new insights into the SEM for mid-level school leaders, by specifying its categories and determining an additional layer that takes into account the contemporary social context and challenges associated with these roles. The findings highlight the complex and multi-faceted nature of mid-level school leadership in an ethical context. The interpersonal layer, which involves relationships with students and colleagues, was found to be the most prominent. This highlights the pressures faced by mid-level leaders as they navigate their dual roles as classroom teachers and managers. The results also show the multidimensional nature of their role, as each ethical dilemma requires balancing multiple conflicting values in different social interactions.

On the *theoretical level*, this study addresses the ethical aspect of mid-level school leadership and examines the ethical dilemmas associated with it, a topic that had not been

thoroughly explored previously among mid-level school leaders. The study proposes the development of the FSEM, a novel social-ecological model for mid-level school leaders that adopts a multidimensional approach and considers the contemporary and unique social context in which these leaders work. The introduction of the technology layer enables a more comprehensive and relevant examination of ethical challenges faced by mid-level school leaders. Additionally, the study presents an integrated two-dimensional theoretical framework that considers the contextual perception of mid-level leadership styles within a social-ecological framework. The findings can contribute to a better understanding of the nature and characteristics of mid-level school leadership. Finally, this study provides unique ethical guidelines that were developed specifically for school mid-level leaders through role-play simulations, which could form the basis for a future code of ethics for mid-level school leaders.

On the practical level, this study presents an instructional strategy for developing simulation-based preparation programs for mid-level leaders in an ethical context. The proposed training can be an essential component of mid-level leaders' professional development process. It can promote reflective practices, helping mid-level leaders address ethical dilemmas related to their role and develop knowledge and skills that can be applied to real-life problems. The proposed training strategy may enhance the effectiveness of mid-level leaders in schools, promote context-based leadership practices, and increase their self-efficacy and professional resilience. Additionally, it may foster a positive ethical climate in the school.