

**New Principals Entry to Post
and the Micro Politics in Schools**

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Abstract

The role of school principal in the current era poses many high order challenges to new principals entering this role. Personally and professionally challenged upon entering their role, new principals must present a vision and a way to cope with a new and unfamiliar school climate and school culture.

The micro-politics theory, that deals with the use of formal and informal power to promote organizational goals, has been found as appropriate for the analysis of dynamics generated in schools upon the entry of new principals to their role. People in the organization aspire to promote mostly their own personal needs and goals, which are not necessarily compatible with the goals of the organization, while the community and external factors surrounding the school dictate to the principal ways that promote their own interests, which might harm the organizational efficacy of the school.

The objective of this study is to examine the entry of new principals to their role as well as the practices they use in their daily conduct and in coping with objections in the micro political and macro political arena along their three years of entering their role, by means of a five stage integrative model that delineates this entry. The first stage in the model, the stage of pre-entry, is a stage of preparing for the role and includes formal training, actual practicing, forming a vision and learning from models of principalship. The first year comprises the second stage, the stage of entry and encounter, in which principals acquaint themselves with the organization and map it, and the third stage is that of taking hold of the reins. The second year comprises the fourth stage in which principals assimilate a major change, and the third year is that of the fifth stage, in which minor changes take place and previous action is refined.

The present study is qualitative and includes 46 semi-structured interviews conducted with 31 state high-school principals in five regions of the Ministry of

Education, in various stages of entering their role. Seven of them participated in a longitudinal study that included two interviews in various stages of role entry, and four others participated in a longitudinal study that included three interviews in various stages of entering their role.

The study includes five stages of entering the role:

The pre-entry stage, that of preparation prior to entering the role, is considered **an integral part of the stages of entering the role**. Regarding this stage, we examined the research question: "What ways of action and methods for entering their role do principals use prior to entering the role?" At this stage, we checked their formal and practical training, the vision and credo they carry with them from previous processes of socialization, and figures who served for them as models for emulation.

According to the literature, the role **entering stage** extends over the first three years in the role and includes four stages of entry as described above. Concerning this stage, we examined four research questions in each of the four years. The questions related to the following issues: principals' feelings about and conceptions of the micro-political relationships, modes of action and methods of entering the role that principals use in the various stages of entering the principal's role, principals' ways of coping with the micro political relationships and the effect of the environment on their conduct, in relation to the neo-institutional theory.

Findings in the pre entry stage

Ways of action and methods for entering the role that principals use prior to entering the role

The participating principals report that out of the various training courses they have taken, they derived the most significant contribution from their colleagues who

shared their rich experience with them along the courses, while the course contents themselves were deficient. The courses did not include practical preparation for the principal's role, such as managing human resources, organizational conduct and budget management. Principals who entered schools that had chaotic organizational culture claimed that the courses had not supplied them with tools for coping with the extant reality in the place. The principals argued that the practical training prepared them well for the principal's role, but so did previous vice-principal's role, level coordination and certainly previous principal's role in other schools. Also, the growing of principals' in their own schools was found to contribute to their training for the role due to their prior acquaintance with the organizational culture, and the fact that it allowed them to create social support networks in the political arena of the school in advance.

The participating principals presented the vision they had brought with them, which was quite highly compatible with the practices they used upon entering their role. Principals found to be moderate and sharing focused their vision on the aspiration towards sharing and the assimilation of values along with leaving their mark and a spirit of innovation and change. However, principals found to be forceful used power practices to establish their status in an ambitious striving to leave a mark, and showed leadership of dominance that shared little with the pedagogical staffs. The different principals derived inspiration from models for emulation that fitted their own principalship practices. The moderate and sharing principals chose for their models principals who managed well in the political arena to empower their workers, and who emphasized shared action. By contrast, the forceful principals chose as models principals who could control educational staffs and take advantage of their power, and knew how to avoid situations of lack of control or lack of knowledge of the small details of the organization.

Findings of the stages of role entry – the first three years

Principals' feelings about and conceptions of the micro political relationships

New principals entering their role often experienced loneliness, suspicion and lack of trust from their staff in their first year in the role, along feelings of insecurity and constant pressure to prove themselves and solve problems. The forceful ones also felt threatened by attempts to demote them, even when there was no actual base for that fear. Principals who grew in their schools enjoyed better trust and a smoother entry to the role in spite of the difficulties. Principals endowed with inspirational motivation experienced the whole process of entering their role on a much more positive note. In the second year in their role, the principals reported an improvement in their self-confidence and management methods, and described a sense of ease in the political arena and better ability to design the organizational culture in accordance with their worldview. Principals with passive management practices reported of negative feelings and inability to cope with difficulties they ran into in the political arena, in the second year as well. Principals in their third year reported of a deepening of their sense of security, along with relaxed ease and stabilization. However, it seems that in the political arena, the forceful principals continued to occupy themselves with their position and power in the organization. The sharing and moderate ones, by contrast, strove towards forming an organizational culture of cooperation, according to the goals they set to themselves.

Ways of action and methods for entering the role that principals use in the different stages of entering the role

In the first year in the role – **the stage of entry and encounter**, the moderate principals focused on studying the organization and on watching and listening, without

standing out. The forceful principals, by contrast, especially those who came to a school where the organizational culture was chaotic, moved fast to make changes before having studied the organization. In addition, in the **stage of taking hold**, that begins about two months after entering the role up to the end of the first year, the moderate principals kept taking heed to not making any changes. They acted to stabilize the current state of affairs and promote a culture of cooperation and a sense of belonging to the school. These principals chose to make changes only in places where there was a managerial vacuum, and worked to inspire the staff with motivation and in a spirit of pioneering and excellence. The forceful principals also used practices of moderation and spread messages of calm and stability, but what set the tone to their actions were the forceful practices in the political arena, enhanced in the context of a chaotic school, and they did generate organizational changes to establish their leadership in the organization. The principals whose conduct on the political arena was passive had difficulties managing their staff, and the reins dropped out of their hands.

In their **second year** in the principal's role, the various principals had more self-confidence and began to design the school in their own image and according to their own worldview. Sharing principals used moderate practices in the political arena and acted to promote values of professionalism and excellence, to create a climate of trust, stability and familiarity. They did all this while cooperating with the various staffs. The forceful principals, on the other hand, worked mostly to establish their leadership, for example, through sweeping firings of teachers and the creation of a reserve of young teachers that would help them to gain control over the organization. The moderate and sharing principles **generated major changes** charged with inspirational motivation, while empowering the staffs and sharing the processes of change with them. The forceful principals assimilated changes of a sharing nature as well, for the sake of

creating a sense of community in the school, and gained the support of the authorities for moves that responded to environmental demands. Principals whose conduct on the political arena was passive still had difficulties managing their staff in this year, and the teachers continued to hold the reins in their stead.

In their **third year** in the role, the principals had much higher confidence about themselves and their position, having lasted through about three demanding and challenging years. The ease of tension led to a reduction in the number of actions of forceful character in the school political arena. The forceful principals used practices that were more moderate in this year, emphasizing cooperation, although they did keep their leader dominance and low levels of sharing with their staff in their daily conduct. The moderate principals persisted in adopting patterns of sharing leadership to solve problems and make decisions, and kept advancing a positive and comfortable climate for their teachers. In contrast to the theoretical model, during this year as well, the principals **generated vast changes, and not necessarily minor ones**, in accordance with their world view and the demands dictated to them by the authorities.

Principals' ways of coping with micro political relationships in the school while coping with objections

In the **first year**, the participating forceful principals chose practices involving much use of power and exclusion for coping with objections in the political arena in the school. These principals used practices of threats, pressure and firing, operated social nets woven while they were growing in the school, and built power groups to neutralize opposing power groups and coalitions. Forceful practices were enhanced in schools of chaotic organizational culture. Sometimes the psychological cost of the forceful conduct was high, and possibly, under different circumstances, they would not have adopted such practices. Confronted by light objection, the forceful principals

chose practices that were more moderate. The moderate and sharing principals, on the other hand, preferred to use moderate practices even in cases of chaotic schools, and used forceful practices only on ideological and idealistic grounds, or as a consequence of teachers' immoral behavior. The moderate principals often inspired their teachers with a sense of vocation and motivation, which drove them to cooperate without objections. The moderate principals recruited power groups (coalitions) and key figures to their side, to promote policy and changes, and empowered staff members to gain cooperation and cope with objections. The moderate and sharing principals who were also dominant in their conduct could delineate clear lines to their staffs, not letting them cross the lines, yet even in such cases they chose not to behave forcefully.

In the **second year** in the role, the perception of the school as a struggle arena diminishes, and thus the uses of forceful practices to cope with objections is almost unnecessary, even though many principals make major changes in the organization during this year. The choice of some of the principals to stick to forceful practices, sometimes with no pedagogical justification, seems related to their personality. The forceful principals neutralized key figures and power groups they perceived as negative and empowered power groups and key figures that cooperated with them. Through this year as well, the forceful principals used moderate practices only in response to light, insignificant objection. The moderate and sharing principals, however, shared with their staffs the leveraging of projects, raised their self-esteem and recruited them to shared action that reduced objections. These principals focused on their objectives and not on their own self-promotion as an ultimate goal. They acted to create a positive climate through informal, warm personal relations, and enhance teachers' inner motivation. The principals neutralized key figures and power groups that expressed objections by drawing ethical lines.

Having survived over two years in their complex and highly challenging role, in their **third year**, the principals needed to use less force to get the pedagogical staffs to work with them, while the expressions of objection on the side of the staff were also reduced to minimal levels. The only principal who used forceful practices was busy constructing power groups around him and drawing closer to him key figures that were remote and controversial to neutralize last remaining objections and stabilize his control over the organization. Throughout this year, most of the principals used moderate practices, empowering key figures and drawing them closer so they can help neutralize objections, and rationally convincing them to work along their policy. A principal who was passive in the political arena was helpless in the face of the staffs' objections, and left the school at the end of the year.

Principals coping with the macro political relationships and the effect of the environment on their conduct in relation to the neo-institutional theory

In the **first year**, principals of various schools acted to fulfil the requirements of the institutional environment to gain legitimacy and resources. Expression of objections or resentment about these requirements appeared only among the forceful principals. The moderate and sharing principals acted energetically to fulfil the requirements of the environment, sometimes even by means of sanctioning the school staffs that deviated from these requirements, and acted to advance cooperation with the community through a proactive entrepreneurial approach. These principals responded to the demands of the Ministry of Education, authorities and school chain owners, for example, by leading schools of chaotic organizational culture towards improvement and growth, setting as goals the gaining of legitimacy and a sense of confidence for the pedagogical staffs and the removal of the clouds of uncertainty hovering above these schools. However, these principals were often exposed to difficulties, when the goals

were unclear, such as growing six-year schools, without clear objectives and aims posed by the authorities. The forceful principals, by contrast, complained of an overload of requirements from the environment, and of the need for public relations to gain legitimacy. The moderate and sharing principals conformed to the demands of the environment even when this entailed a **conflict between conforming to demands of the environment and the organizational efficacy of the school**. By contrast, the forceful principals had difficulties conforming to the environment's demands that in their perception contradicted efficiency and they circumvented environmental dictates, hiding their true school practice of "loose coupling" and "shock absorbers", so as to maintain their legitimacy side by side with their organizational efficacy. One principal whose conduct was passive found it hard to meet environmental objectives and collapsed under the weight of demands addressed at him, and under the conflict between conforming to the environment and managing the school efficiently.

In the **second year**, it seemed that the load of demands from the environment addressed at the principals keeps growing. As they have already positioned themselves in their role, they needed to assimilate the changes demanded by the environment. In this year, both forceful principals and moderate and sharing ones, acted decisively to satisfy the environment and comply with the demands from the outside. Apparently, the collaborations of the moderate and sharing principals were deep ones, based on values they wished to promote, such as creating a positive climate, adopting professional values, expectations for high achievements and inserting inspired motivation by means of projects that emphasize innovation and creativity. Some of these principals gained appreciation and endearment from the environment, expressed by official visits in the schools and receiving more resources and larger budgets. Still, the moderate principals complained of the high level of demands addressed at them,

and one of them even hired an outer public relations company to publicize her acts and help her gain the necessary legitimacy. The forceful principals also worked towards satisfying the environment, but their moves seem pragmatic and less value oriented than the moderate ones', aimed at gaining legitimacy from the appointed authorities. One principal whose conduct was passive failed to cope with the demands of the environment, collapsed under the pressure and lost his legitimacy, especially in his own eyes, since he failed to make the rehabilitating change. He announced he would leave his role at the end of his second year in it. Coping with **conflict between conformity and efficiency** in the second year, the forceful principals had difficulties conforming to environmental demands which they saw as harmful to organizational efficacy, and followed the objectives in a less dedicated manner than the moderate principals. A moderate and sharing principal who wished to advance a singular project that raised objections in her environment succeeded by practices of rational persuasion and inspirational motivation in convincing the environment of the efficacy and effectiveness of her wished-for change and eventually gained environmental support. By contrast, a principal who was passive in his conduct failed to convince the authorities of the effectiveness of a visionary educational project he devised, and on these ground, in addition to other factors, he decided to leave the school at the end of that year.

In the **third year**, principals rarely report of demands addressed at them from the environment, and **do not report at all about any conflict between conformity and efficiency**. The political arena out of the school calms down, and so does the political arena within the school. Apparently, principals who lasted three years in the role must have done what was assigned to them to gain the appreciation of their superior authorities, and indeed, except for one (passive principal), all the participating

principals reported they would continue in the role for another year. Two others – a moderate principal and a forceful one – reported about the positive relations they created with the community, having responded to demands and needs of the environment, and having lead schools that suffered from a chaotic organizational culture towards the road to success. The moderate principal reported of good communication with parents, based on dialogue and cooperation, and the forceful principal reported of his environment's appreciation and the respect he gained after having raised the rate of Bagrut diploma receivers in the school.

The current study suggests an optimal integrative model for the entry of new principals to the role, and recommends effective entering practices in the various stages of entering the role, suggesting an optimal behavior in the micro and macro political arenas, related to the neo-institutional theory. In the stage of formal preparation that precedes principalship, the model suggests that principals would take courses dealing with human resource management, organizational conduct in the political arena and budget management.

In the practical zone, the model recommends experiencing management roles such as grade level coordination or vice principalship. In the non-formal zone, the model recommends emphasizing peer learning, initiating learning from successful models of principalship and creating a vision. On practically entering the role, the model suggests leaning on moderate and sharing entering practices, which, according to this study, might contribute to an optimal entering into the role, reduce objections and contribute to a comfortable climate for assimilating changes in the school. The model relates to each one of the stages of practically entering the role, and recommends to the principals to use practices of moderation and rational persuasion, consultation and sharing daily and in the face of objections, while responding to the pedagogical and

personal needs of the staffs to gain their faith. It also recommends that they empower and make use of key figures and positive power groups in the organization to assimilate changes and neutralize objections to the policy they wish to advance. In addition, the model recommends creating a solid base of cooperation that they would develop over the years, paying respect to the staffs and their say and fostering their self-esteem, without unnecessary clashes or dictating policy and changes from above without consultations, which might heighten objections and harm the school climate. Inspiring the staffs with motivation and recruiting them to ideological activity might also mitigate objections.

In schools of chaotic characteristics, principals should demonstrate dominant leadership and use forceful practices, such as neutralizing negative key figures and power groups (coalitions). This should occur in the early entering stages as well, in order to promote organizational health and allow for effective management. The motivation for these actions should be value oriented, ideological and moral, and not only for the sake of establishing the principals' position in the organization. The model suggests that principals allocate a part of their time to get to know the acting figures in the school environment and the nature of the macro political relationships, to understand better the values of the environment (neo-institutionalism) and to be able to respond to its needs. It is preferable that they adopt a proactive, initiating approach to respond to these needs, so they can gain legitimacy and resources. In cases where principals perceive their conforming to the environment as contradictory to organizational efficacy, the model recommends that they apply moderate practices of rational persuasion towards the environment. Moreover, they should inspire the environment with motivation to ensure efficient conduct that would not contradict the

environment's objectives and would not make them use practices of loose coupling to cover up the true conduct of the organization.

The importance of this study derives from the significant lack of research dealing with the entrance of new principals to their role, in the first three years. Investigating the entrance of new principals and their coping with the micro political and macro political relationships in the schools might contribute to advance this field of research and offer an optimal model of the entrance of new principals to schools in periods of change. Furthermore, it might contribute to deepen the insights related to the micro political field of research that suffers from conceptual lack of clarity and lack of coherence. Moreover, this study might contribute to deepen the insights in the field of research of macro politics in relation to the neo-institutional theory that apparently has not yet been investigated in depth about aspects related to the entrance of new principals to their role and their coping with the myths and the demands the environment presents to them. Examining and offering a model of the entrance of new principals to their role and their coping with the political relationships within and without of their schools might shed light on the difficulties that new principals entering their roles face, and point out optimal entrance practices as well as the best ways to train principals before they enter their role.

The findings and conclusions of the study might contribute to the insights of decision makers in the Ministry of Education and the institutions for principal training concerning the need for reinforcing the various training courses with models of human resource management, organizational conduct and budget management. The findings might encourage emphasizing contents dealing with principals' conduct in the micro political and macro political arena in principal training courses. The courses should fit the various stages of entering the role, and institutionalize peer learning, learning from

successful principalship models and developing vision, in a way that would contribute to deeper and wider preparation for the optimal entrance of new principals to the role.

The study has a number of limitations. One derives from the one-sided approach of school principals to the micro political and macro political relationships, without crossing information with other factors acting in the system. This limitation is enhanced by the fear that principals' reports might be biased by social desirability and the wish to present their role entering as a success story, which would prevent the creation of a whole and credible view of reality. Another limitation derives from the fact that the study is based mostly on one-time interviews and a retrospective rendering of the earlier stages of role entering, which might bias the reports on these stages because of dimming of the initial entering experience. This limitation might be overcome by conducting longitudinal studies on the various stages of entering the role.