



CANDIDATES FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP AND THEIR DISCIPLINARY TRAINING BACKGROUND

Eitan Simon¹ | Emanuel Tamir²

¹ Vice-president Ohalo Academic College of Education, Sciences and Sport, Katzrin, Israel

² Lecturer at Education Management Program, Ohalo College of Education.

ABSTRACT

From which knowledge disciplines do principalship candidates come? Is there a connection between their disciplinary background and their acceptance for the process that trains them to manage schools? To which specialist discipline should a teaching candidate direct themselves if they wish to develop a professional and managerial career? The research described here is a pioneer study exploring these issues.

KEY WORDS: school principal, training process, identifying principals, management skills.

Introduction

The principal plays an important role in the school's successful functioning (Murphy et al. 2006). In fact, there is no other role in the school system whose contribution to the quality of education is so evident and large (Segiovanni 2002).

Educational research literature describes various aspects of management, leadership and pedagogy that can assist in identifying the skills needed for the role of school principal (Oplatka 2012). Nevertheless, it seems that an intriguing issue relating to the background from which the principalship candidate comes has not been sufficiently explored. Each principalship candidate begins their training for the managerial role equipped with their own toolkit, based on their first degree in a particular discipline and a teaching certificate. The construction of knowledge differs in the different disciplines, including different thinking methods and different consideration of the learner. If we examine the background from which the candidates arrive we can perhaps clarify which disciplinary foundations the educational system values and encourages and even open an educational debate on this subject.

Literature review

Blackmore, Thomson and Barty (2006) described how educational reform of teacher training caused changes in school learning programmes and pedagogy. These changes created processes that in turn led to a re-examination of the school principal's training, and careful investigation of the character and quality of the principalship candidate. In order to fully realise a prospective principal's managerial potential, in addition to providing information and preparation for the managerial role, it is necessary to ensure future career promotion paths, for example to superintendence. A study by Glass and Bearman (2003) shows that there are no consistent preparation and evaluation processes for principals. Yet these are the people who will lead the schools of the future.

The Evaluation of Candidates for Principalship

Baker (2001) investigated another aspect of these processes: how school principals are selected. He found that superintendents examined candidates in light of the school's needs, when deciding whether the candidate was qualitatively and culturally the right person for the needs of the school and its community. Baker also found that communication skills were considered more important for the selection of a principal than the candidate's teaching background in a particular discipline. If high quality candidates are found for the principalship they are able to develop learning programmes in light of their vision of the knowledge required and expected from future school graduates.

Wildy, Pepper and Guanzhong (2011) suggest a combination of different parameters that testify to the principal's ability to manage a school. They showed that the standards used by the education authority in their evaluation processes help to develop principals' professional work in these parameters. Performance-based assessment tasks allowed superintendents to make sound judgments about the principal's abilities. Using such standards it would be possible to follow-up the development of the principal, and also to foster their professionalism and responsibility at work.

Clifford (2010) noted that the choice of a new leader is not easy for the organisation and the school faces a complex task to identify and select the most suitable candidate. The strong demand for high quality school principals means that education ministries must choose those who have undergone suitable training to become state of the art leaders who will apply appropriate approaches to improve

learning and education and implement organisational changes to fit the school and its goals to the needs of the 21st century.

It is also suggested that it is possible to cope with the challenges of selection and enlistment of new school principals by modifying the regulations of regional selection committees. The regional committees that select school principals usually include educationalists and members of the community who understand and represent the local culture and procedures. A study by Catano and Stronge (2007) describes how alignment of these processes with common national standards that were developed for the selection of school principals helped to make local selection processes more effective.

Dynamic global changes have also affected the world of educational leadership. Stewart (2013) claims that educational leadership's ability to succeed depends on training and modification of what is learnt in that training to the particular education field. When principals' training programmes are developed, the disciplinary background of the candidate is usually ignored, however much importance is attributed to training combined with practicum experience in the educational leadership field.

Stewart (ibid) also found that the mentorship process was important for new principals and they should be prepared for skills required for 21st century management in line with innovative education and futuristic learning programmes that need to be developed by school principals. It also seems that team work skills and long-term learning can significantly improve support for principals. The Asia Society for Teaching and Leadership (2012) found that the principals' training process should aim to empower future education leaders, using in-school training during their practical work. They suggested that the entire teaching staff should also be empowered and, in turn, the process of staff empowerment should improve students' achievements. The national vision that they describe involves the determination of uniform standards that can be used for the construction of evaluation tools to evaluate the principals for licensing and authorisation, sometimes relating to the principals' expectations and behaviours, since there is evidence that the evaluation tools have no common language and this is consequently expressed in different evaluation.

The present study investigated what are the disciplinary foundations prevalent today among candidates for school principalship, what are the thinking methods and principle characteristics of the disciplines from which the candidates come, and how are they reflected in the establishment's eyes (meaning, the superintendents and the entity that selects the candidate).

The Methodology

The research employed mixed methods methodology, using both qualitative and quantitative data collection. The research tool was a specially designed questionnaire administered to students studying for a master's degree in management and organisation of education systems, in four different education institutions.

The research question was: what is the prevalent disciplinary background of today's principalship candidates?

Background data

In order to analyse the characteristics of the students studying for a master's degree, a specially designed questionnaire was administered to the students. The questionnaire was administered to master's degree students in Education Administration in four academic institutes, colleges of education and teaching. The

questionnaire asked several 'closed' questions (especially about the background of the student) and a variety of open questions in order to identify characteristics that influenced the student to develop in the direction of a managerial role.

The students' responses to the questionnaire underwent quantitative analysis. The main purpose was to try to identify the disciplinary areas from which the students who had decided to develop a career in educational administration originated. 132 students responded to the questionnaire, distributed among the four different institutions as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by academic institution

Academic Institute	Number of respondents
A	53
B	7
C	50
D	22

Most of the students answered almost all the questions. The students' responses to the 'open' questions were distributed over a broad range of possible answers. It is also noteworthy that in answering the 'closed' questions the students largely exploited the possibility of an 'other' answer.

Data Analysis

In order to measure the different responses to the open questions, they were encoded, where necessary. The purpose of the coding was to try to find significant characteristics in a wide range of different responses.

Findings

The analysis yielded the following data:

- Age:** The average age of the students was 42.5 years. The students' ages ranged over several decades, from 29 to 58 years old. It was noted that the difference in ages ($SD = 12$ years) was slightly higher in some of the studied institutions, but not significantly so.
- Gender:** 25% of the students were males.
- Age and gender:** The male students were older by a year than the female students.
- Country of birth:** The large majority of the students were born in Israel (94.3%).
- Years of teaching experience:** Mean years of teaching experience was 14 years. There was a gap of almost 3 years between the years of experience of male students in contrast to female students, who had on average 3 years more teaching experience than the males. This would seem to indicate that in general males tend to continue to further studies earlier or that the males already aspire to promotion to higher ranking managerial roles from an earlier age than the females.
- School education sector:** the respondents were asked to choose one of the following sectors as their own: Jewish state, Jewish religious state, Arab state, Bedouin state, Druze state. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the respondents by school education sector for all four colleges.

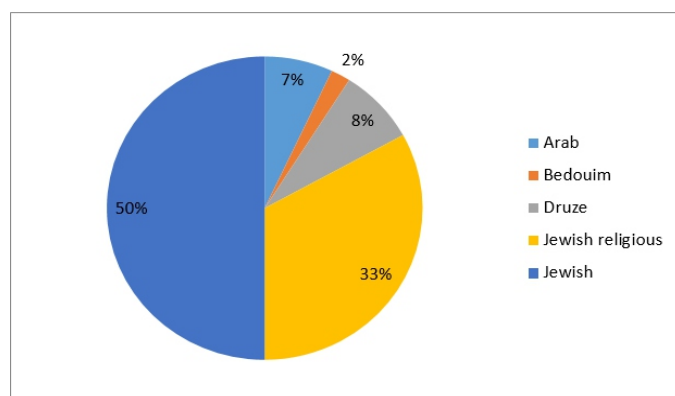


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by school education sector

- Learning stream in high school:** in contrast to the 'closed' or quantitative questions such as that relating to years of experience, the respondents were able to write freely to respond to this question. They did indeed respond with a wide range of responses to this question. Analysis of the responses yielded the following categories:

- Humanistic studies: Literature, Arts, Early Childhood, Humanistic Studies etc.

- Sciences: Mathematics, Biology, Physics, Computers etc.

- Other: Sport, Bible studies.

Some of the responses related to studies in more than one category (for example: drama and computers). In such a case the response was categorized in the sciences category. The underpinning logic for such a categorization was the desire to distinguish the extent of the students' 'scientific' background, under the assumption that even a student who had partial studies in a sciences stream would have such characteristics/abilities. In any case this did not relate to a high proportion of respondents.

54% of the respondents had studied in some sort of sciences stream in high school.

- Learning stream and education sector:** when the student's affiliation to an education sector was introduced into the analysis, it transpired that the difference regarding the percentage of those who had studied in the science stream in College D seemed to stem from the difference in education sector to which respondents belonged. Students in the Jewish religious sector (College D) tend to be less open to sciences than their colleagues in the other sectors (this was especially noticeable in the Jewish religious sector). Once this effect was neutralized there was no significant difference between the colleges in percentage that had studied in the science stream.

- Role held in school:** To answer this question the respondents could choose a wide range of possible roles that they held, when filling in the questionnaire, in their schools. Despite this wide range a significant proportion of the respondents chose the possible answer: 'other'. Thus most of the respondents chose to provide complex answers (such as subject teacher and coordinator or class teacher, subject teacher, coordinator for social education and gifted students' coordinator). To analyse these answers they were divided into a dichotomous division between 'managerial functions' (principal or deputy-principal) and 'other functions'. It is interesting to note that although the option of 'principal' was not suggested in the questionnaire, nevertheless the respondents chose to mention it. It transpired that only 13% of the respondents held managerial functions. This percentage was higher in College C (18%) and far lower in College D (5%). In other words, although the students had chosen to study organisation and management of education systems, in practice only a small minority were actually employed in these functions. Both these latter findings were significant.

- Area of specialised training:** the respondents could choose from a wide range of answers, and here also the respondents digressed from this range and added different answers and combined answers. This may actually be due to the fact that they were given a long list of possible answers, so that they did not bother to read the list and directly went to the 'other' option. This fact may, for example, explain why the students chose to write that their area of specialised training was 'Oral Bible Tradition studies' and did not choose the 'Judaism' option.

In order to analyse these data the following categorization was constructed:
Humanistic studies: disciplines such as Literature, Linguistics, Sociology

Sciences: disciplines such as Mathematics, Physics, Biology, Chemistry.

Education: disciplines such as Early Childhood, Special Education, Education for Diversity etc.).

Judaism: Judaism, Oral Bible Tradition studies, Bible studies etc.

Languages: only English (no other languages were noted).

Sport/Physical Education

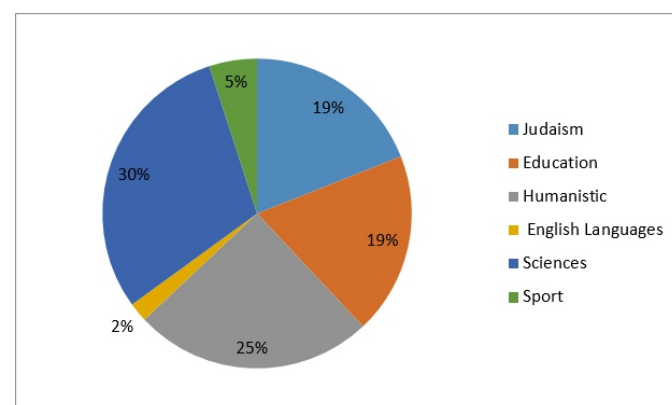


Figure 2: Distribution of all respondents by area of specialised studies

- 11. Courses studied in Bachelor's degree:** for this subject the respondents were asked to answer an open question: 'Do you remember which courses you studied in your Bachelor's degree that left an impression on you? Detail up to three'.

The respondents replied with a wide variety of answers. They also exploited the opportunity presented by the open question by answering in an open manner, for example: 'I remember a course delivered by Moshe Cohen' or 'Mainly my practicum year'.

- 12. Development towards management:** this issue was also investigated by asking the respondents to answer an open question: 'Are there components of your Bachelor's degree studies that established your development towards management? Please give details'.

In response to this open question the respondents provided very varied answers, so that it was impossible to deduce their components. Nevertheless it would be possible to extract valuable information after additional analysis by an expert in content analysis (for example, one of the answers was: 'I feel that my personality was built for leadership from the start and I have the ability to make an impact'). Despite the aforesaid, the answers to this question were coded as either 'yes' or 'no' responses (in cases where this was possible) to enable quantitative analysis.

The Limitations of the Analysis

No comparison was conducted with a control group or other population such as students in fields other than education administration. Due to this lack, it was not possible to examine whether these students had unique characteristics in a statistical, quantitative manner.

Response Bias: Respondents were chosen randomly as all the students present in one class in each of the studied educational institutes on the day when the questionnaire was administered. It is possible (at a low level of probability) that there was a deviation due to the fact that those with a well-established opinion on one of the subjects examined by the questionnaire tended to answer more/ OR provide more information on that subject.

The demographic questions did not include questions concerning the respondents' ethnic origin (apart from the question on country of birth), so that it was difficult to analyse the data according to this parameter. The open questions yielded much rich data. In order to extract this data we recommend that a person with knowledge in content analysis should encode the answers. For this purpose we need to read the answers and suggest hypotheses, and then to encode additional data to clarify additional indices.

Discussion and Conclusions

This was as far as could be ascertained the first study to examine the disciplinary background of educators aiming to build a career in educational administration. Analysis of the data from the questionnaires indicates that there is a significant disciplinary source from which students come to study a Master's degree in Education Administration. There is a clear preference for sciences in contrast to humanistic disciplines (63% and 35% respectively). Thus there was a minority of students with a humanistic background, who chose to pursue studies towards a career in education administration. No conclusions could be drawn with regard to the appropriateness of a sciences or humanistic background for the principalship role.

In the study of Kwan (2012) it was found that there were four criteria that can help to evaluate candidates for school principalship. These criteria are Generic Management skills; Communication and Presentation skills including rhetoric; Knowledge and Experience, and Religious Value Orientation. The choice of these criteria reflects the expectations from future school principals. When interviewing candidates for a managerial path it might be possible, in a good case, to elicit a little information on the candidate's communication skills, but the interview cannot be considered an objective and thorough evaluation of the candidate's management skills. Moreover, it is possible to see that high educational leadership policy standards are necessary as criteria to improve the quality of principal selection (Council of Chief State School Officers 2008). The establishment of leadership standards and standards of self-criticism and the updating of learning programmes should lead to changes in the current perception of school principal selection.

The present research tried to point up a connection between the disciplinary background of students and their studies for a Master's degree in Administration and Organisation of Education Systems. Although a certain trend was identified, we suggest follow-up research should examine the correlation between the principal's training stream and their managerial style in practice in the school that they manage.

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