

Midlevel Management as a Link between the Principal and School Success

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The greater the expectations from schools for effectiveness and improved achievements, the roles of midlevel managers take on greater significance. At the same time, historical, political, and social factors contribute to broad and varying definitions of midlevel managers and their contribution to students' achievements. The aim of the present study is to understand who these midlevel managers are, how they are selected for their positions, and how they contribute to students' achievements.

It has been found that most of the principal's influence is indirect and stems from high expectations, teamwork, and a well-designed learning environment (Bryk et al., 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Tubin, 2011). However, the path of this indirect influence between the principal and students' achievements is still unclear. One possible answer is distributed leadership.

The advocates of distributed leadership claim that by utilizing leadership energy throughout the school staff, the principal shares the school vision while avoiding the shortcomings of the formal structure. Assuming that formal structure tends to block leadership influences due to rigid hierarchy and narrow role definitions, distributed leadership is expected to enhance collaboration, egalitarianism and trust, and better address the complexity of the school in its turbulent environment (Harris, 2008). In this paper we suggest that under certain conditions, formal midlevel positions can serve as an effective and necessary link between the principal and students' achievements. Following Mintzberg (1979, p.2) who states that "The structure of an organization can be defined simply as the sum total of the ways in which it divides its labor into distinct tasks and then achieves coordination among them", we suggest that for distributing leadership, the principal needs to formally restructure the management team by developing agreed role definitions, a clear hierarchy, and open channels of communication.

Midlevel positions, however, present some ambiguity. For example, the multiple titles accorded to this group in the educational literature, such as "teacher leadership", "mid-level managers", "middle leadership", "leadership team", "senior management team", and so forth. Additionally, the roles included in midlevel management, such as head of department, departmental chair, assistant principal, deputy principal, subject leaders, and grade-level leaders, largely depend on context and the school system's regulations. Finally, the prerequisite requirements for these roles, such as recruitment sources (within or outside the school), ways of appointment and nomination, and the matter of tenure and promotion, are broadly diverse.

It is also not clear how midlevel managers contribute to school success. If students' achievements, socially and academically, largely depend on the teachers (McKinsey, 2007), how can other high-ranking teachers help? Furthermore, if the principal has to lead each teacher, why not distribute the leadership down the chain of command? Organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schon, 1996) provides some of the answers. According to this theory, an organization learns when lessons learned by its members become the property of the organization and are implemented in organizational routines. For this to happen in a school, the principal and midlevel managers, that have the formal authority to allocate sanctions and rewards, have to coordinate the multiple practices and innovative ideas that teachers have toward

the school's goals. To study these ideas we explored three research questions: Who are the midlevel managers? How does the principal develop such a team? How do the midlevel managers contribute to the advancement of students' achievements?

Methodology

To explore the complex relations between the principal, midlevel managers and students achievements, we chose the multiple case study method (Yin, 1989). To distinguish between events and their interpretation (Poole et al., 2000) a number of tools were employed (interviews, observations, and document analysis) from a variety sources (principals, midlevel managers, teachers, parents, and students).

School selection procedure – The four schools constituted a sample of polar cases in which the phenomenon under study is fully developed (Merriam, 1990), and are similar in the studied subject and different in students' background. Based on studies showing the efficiency of midlevel management in successful schools (Bryk et al., 2010), four large successful high schools (of more than 1,000 students) were chosen according to the Israeli criteria of high achievements, low dropout rate, and good reputation (Tubin, 2011).

Data collection tools - Varied data collection tools were employed:

Interviews – 18 interviews were conducted in each school with the principal, midlevel managers, teachers, and counselors. In addition, three focus groups were held with teachers, students, and parents. The semi-structured interview included open questions asking the interviewee to describe the school, its successes, and how the midlevel managers contribute to these successes.

Observations – At least three observations were conducted in each school on midlevel managers' meetings such as department team meetings, staff meetings, and so forth. All the interviews and observations were recorded and transcribed.

School documentation – Relevant documents were collected such as test results, school schedule, regulations, school vision, and material from the bulletin board and school website.

Data analysis – A within and between cases analysis was conducted. In each school we mapped the midlevel managers' roles, their job definition, the part played by the principal in constructing the leadership team, and ways by which they contribute to students achievements.

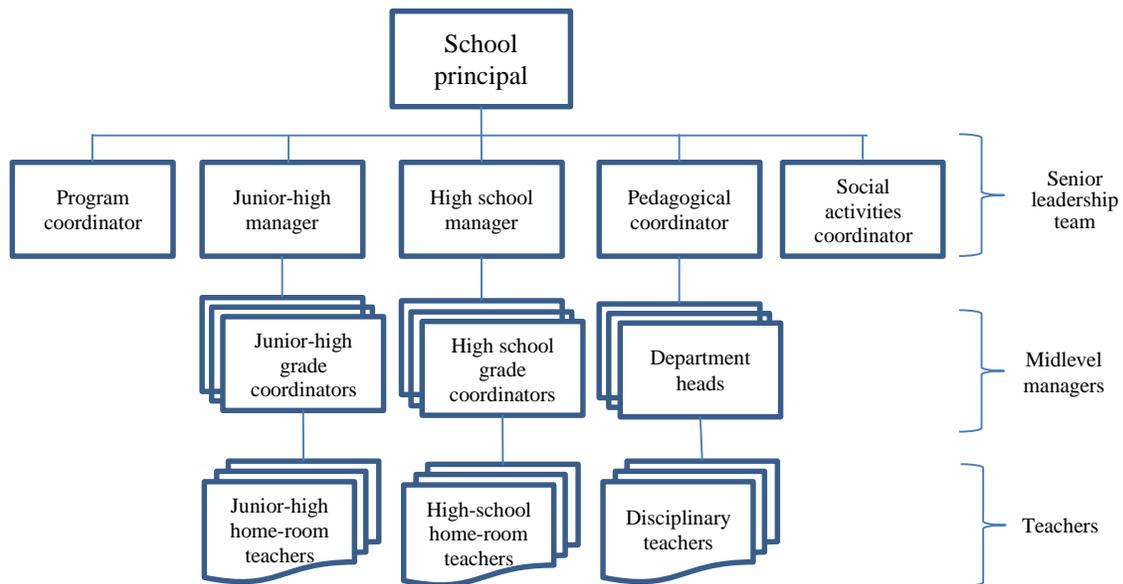
In the cross-case analysis, similarity and differences between schools were looked for. Reliability and trustworthiness were reached by diverse resources and data collecting tools in different venues. To avoid bias toward the conceptual framework's supportive evidence and to reduce researchers' blindness to contextual aspects (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) we employed a critical review by the research team members, and sought the principal's comments on the written school reports handed to them. Contradictions and different interpretations in the research team were discussed according to the data and literature until agreement was reached.

Findings

The midlevel managers – In each high school (7-12 grades) we found about 25-30 midlevel roles in two hierarchical levels – senior managers and junior midlevel managers, as presented in Figure 1.

Principal actions - To construct the midlevel management, the principal operated five principles: 1) choosing the teachers based on a shared pedagogical vision and abilities; 2) constructed weekly schedule meetings with varied combinations of personal input and teams of the midlevel managers; 3) an open-door policy for ongoing communication; 4) backup and providing the necessary resources of time and space; 5) demanding accountability and constant reports.

The midlevel managers contribute to students' achievements in four main processes: 1) forward planning of the school schedule and placing the right teachers for each group of students; 2) a continual requirement for mapping each student's improvement; 3) encouraging teachers' learning from problems and success; and 4) involving the teachers in decision-making processes.



Conclusion - The findings show that the midlevel management construction, at least in the studied Israeli schools, rests on the principal's shoulders to appoint, approve, develop, and discharge if necessary. This might compensate for the principal's weakness as a manager who is not the employer (who in Israel is the ministry of education), but at the same time creates an essential challenge. This situation questions the meaning of distributed leadership. According to our findings, it is not about leadership activities that are "stretched over the work of a number of individuals" (Spillane, 2001:20), but a constant structuration of the midlevel managers' formal positions, which is needed for maintaining the school's stability and adjustment while improving it toward its goals.

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