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To cite this article: Chen Schechter, Haim Shaked, Sherry Ganon-Shilon & Miri Goldratt (2016): Leadership Metaphors: School Principals' Sense-Making of a National Reform, Leadership and Policy in Schools, DOI: [10.1080/15700763.2016.1232836](https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2016.1232836)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2016.1232836>



Published online: 28 Sep 2016.



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Leadership Metaphors: School Principals' Sense-Making of a National Reform

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ABSTRACT

During reforms, principals often experience ambiguity, contradicting demands, and lack of information. As critical change agents and system players, principals interpret reform demands and translate them into school practices through a process of sense-making. The current qualitative research explored 59 elementary school principals' sense-making of their leadership within a national reform through the use of metaphors. Data analysis yielded three reframing themes: (1) principal's role; (2) principal's work; and (3) relationships with teachers. This study expands the currently limited knowledge about principals' experience with and responses to reforms, while suggesting implications and further research regarding metaphors within the sense-making framework.

Policymakers are constantly in pursuit of a successful reform blueprint, aiming at transforming schools into more beneficial institutions (Gawlik, 2015). Effective results of an education reform depend not only on a proper design of the reform or on its conceptual foundations, but also on its successful realization by the principals who lead the reform in their schools (Black & Shircliffe, 2013; Flessa, 2012; McDonald, 2014; OECD, 2015; Young & Lewis, 2015). As change agents, principals play active roles in negotiating nationwide reforms and school initiatives (Spillane & Kenney, 2012), thus providing a unique insight into the ways by which administrators mediate, negotiate and contribute to reform mandates in their unique settings (Koyama, 2014).

School principals' work during an education reform usually involves large-scale changes, requiring both reorganization and rearrangement. Principals must support and develop teachers and other staff, set clear goals, as well as ensure high-quality education, all the while observing and implementing new reform guidelines (Fullan, 2014; Gawlik, 2015). This intersection of internal school goals and external demands is a central concern for school principals, as it questions common practices, threatens existing routines, and challenges the status quo (Alabi & Okemakinde, 2010; Saltrick, 2010). Accordingly,

school principals' role is generally characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, confusion, and misunderstanding during periods of education reform (Kaniuka, 2012). Meeting this growing educational challenge, principals have to make sense of their role (Rice, 2010; Spillane & Kenney, 2012), thus deriving meaning from the confusing array of inputs and options as a means for developing productive change strategies to suit their particular situations (Seashore Louis & Robinson, 2012).

While studies have addressed the role of principals in influencing teachers' sense-making (e.g., Coburn, 2005), only limited research has examined the sense-making of principals themselves within the context of reforms (Gawlik, 2015; Jennings, 2010; Spillane et al., 2002; Thomson & Hall, 2011). The present study explored school principals' sense-making of their leadership within a national reform through the use of metaphoric language, highlighting principals' use of language to define what the leadership role is and how its practices unfold within a reform context. Our central argument is that metaphors can serve as a reflection of principals' efforts to make sense of a national reform. Thus, this study explored the metaphors school principals formulated to describe their role as they face the complexity that characterizes a national reform.

Theoretical framework

The study's conceptual framework is grounded in the literatures on sense-making and metaphors. Therefore, these literatures are examined below.

Sense-making

Sense-making is an ongoing process through which people work to understand issues or events that create ambiguity in organizations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). More specifically, it is an active process of constructing meaning from present stimuli mediated by prior knowledge and embedded in the social context, which allows individuals to navigate through profound disruption. Sense-making has become an important topic in the study of organizations, providing insights into how individuals and organizations give different meanings to events (Cornelissen, 2012; Monin, Noorderhaven, Vaara, & Kroon, 2013). In today's reality, sense-making offers a useful theoretical construct to educators, because it goes beyond interpretation as individuals play an active role in constructing the events they attempt to comprehend (Smerek, 2011).

Sense-making aims to create a holistic picture of the given ambiguous event through three interrelated processes: creation, interpretation, and enactment (Weick, 2009). First, individuals explore the broader system by collecting various data sources in order to map the unfamiliar situation. In

this regard, sense-making provides the mapping technique as a useful tool for people who are faced with confusion. Maps explain, illustrate, and invite people to discuss and contribute ideas in order to achieve better understanding of the situation, so that their actions will become more effective (Ancona, 2012). And yet, there is no single “accurate” map, as sense-making is about creating a holistic picture rather than being about finding the “correct” answer. The creation process suggests bracketing, noticing, and extracting cues from the actual experience of the ambiguous event. Second, through multiple interpretations of the ambiguous event, individuals develop the initial sense which they have created into a more organized perception. Then comes the third and final enactment process, which invites individuals to translate their knowledge into actions. Hence, this third process consists of incorporating new information and eventually taking action based on the interpretation created beforehand.

Sense-making refers to how we structure the unknown so as to be able to act upon it. We actively construct meaning by relating new information to preexisting cognitive frameworks, labeled by scholars as working knowledge, cognitive frames, enactments, or cognitive maps (Coburn, 2006; Slegers, Wassink, Veen, & Imants, 2009). By retrospectively turning our lived experiences into cognitive frames, we create and enact a new sense of how to engage in a complex situation. This action-oriented thought process suggests cognition and action as integral parts of sense-making (Weick, 2009). Making sense of things involves constructing a reality by creating meaning from prior knowledge, experiences, values, and beliefs (Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Therefore, sense-making is a process which explains “how people select information from the environment, make meaning of the information, and then act on those interpretations to develop culture and routines over time” (Gawlik, 2015, p. 398).

Sense-making perspectives are valuable in understanding leadership practices, because “problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain” (Weick, 2009, p. 9). Using a sense-making approach in the educational leadership context suggests that school leaders make and enact their meaning of reform demands based on preexisting understandings and overlapping social contexts inside and outside of school (e.g., policymakers, district, local council, teachers, parents, and students). This internal process, through which leaders respond to reform, involves interplay between personal values and school culture. In other words, school leaders’ sense-making process is influenced not only by their set of values but also by colleagues’ values, school norms, and traditions (Koyama, 2014). As such, school leaders’ sense-making is nested in multiple and often conflicting school contexts (Coburn, 2005). For this reason,

Beabout (2012) recommends that sense-making be a central element for understanding school leaders' complexity.

Integrating traditional practices, as well as principals' backgrounds, experiences, and specific context, with reform demands, school principals construct a new meaning of their leadership. National reforms create a gap between an aspiration and an existing capacity as school environments change rapidly, thus requiring a response outside principals' existing repertoire (Czarniawaska, 2008; Saltrick, 2010; Weick, 2009). Given interacting knowledge, beliefs, context, and experience, principals translate and interpret reform demands into school practices (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010; Coburn, Tours, & Yamashita, 2009). In essence, within the context of reform characterized by ambiguity and conflicting demands, principals make new meanings of their leadership (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Diamond & Spillane, 2004). Thus, school principals make sense of their leadership role as they look for new ways to enact, negotiate, and mediate the reform to suit their particular situations (Maxcy, Sungtong, & Nguyen, 2010; Spillane & Kenney, 2012). In other words, policy enactment is the process by which school leaders interpret and re-contextualize policy mandates (Fullan, 2014). According to Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012), policy enactment conveys "the creative processes of interpretation of the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualized practices" (p. 586). This highlights school leaders' active role in creatively interpreting a particular policy into a specific set of actions.

Metaphors within the sense-making framework

Metaphors are a dominant component of figurative language, reflecting cognitive processes through which humans encounter the world, perceive reality, and envision change (Witherspoon & Crawford, 2014). They are mental constructs, which reflect how human beings experience and shape their reasoning (Gunbayi, 2011). Thus, metaphors can help us account for our perspectives of the world, how we make sense of our realities, how we frame the problems, and which are the possible paths to resolve these difficulties (Schön, 1993), thus developing a deeper understanding of our reality within the specific social context.

Aristotle defined the metaphor as a linguistic structure based on a linguistic transfer, producing an anomalistic meaning. However, contemporary researchers define it as an image in which two elements or characteristics become identical through the transfer from one semantic field to another, creating a new linguistic combination carrying a surprising meaning (Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). When different semantic fields are brought together, two things occur—the resulting image serves as a clarifying function by helping individuals better understand new situations, and the interaction of the two semantic fields creates a new idea

not inherent in either field alone (Statler, Jacobs, & Roos, 2008). Thus, metaphors have the power to create meanings beyond those unique to the original semantic fields. In this regard, Murray and Rosamund (2006) defined the metaphor as a fundamental mechanism of cognition, meaning that the essence of the metaphoric process lies in thinking about a certain issue in different terms than those of its original field.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) claimed that metaphors correspond to neural mapping in the brain and reflect a way to organize human experience by creating images. Accordingly, the abstract metaphorical approach to learning allows learners to grasp complex concepts in the context of their existing practical repertoire. Through metaphors, learners can reinterpret their practical repertoire, influencing the way they act (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011). Thus, metaphors can assist in understanding well-known processes in new light, reflecting on the underlying values of organizational culture, and suggesting suitable intervention avenues (Gunbayi, 2011).

Studies on exploring metaphors in education emphasized their ability to unify language, cognition, and emotions along with social and cultural dimensions. Research methods such as personal narrative texts, interviews, and questionnaires have explored educators' thinking by locating figurative language (such as images and metaphors) in educators' discourse, thereby revealing their genuine perceptions of their work and describing their current educational beliefs (Court, Mayrav, & Ornan, 2009). A different group of studies, most of them in education, focused on exposing either the hidden or the explicit dimensions of participants' interpretations for a certain situation, either by analyzing the metaphors found in the texts or by approaching the participants with a list of existing metaphors (Kupperberg & Green, 2001; Taehyung, 2007).

Limited data are available about the metaphors principals use while making sense of their role within reform's implementation. For example, Lumby and English (2010) identified seven metaphors of educational leadership: machinery, accounting, war, sports, theater, religion, and lunacy. They argued that each of the seven metaphors had been used in the policy discourse to frame different dimensions of leadership, and contended that instrumental metaphors have been reflected in the U.S. standards approach (ISLLC standards), and integrated in the landscape of leadership (Ehrich & English, 2013). Similarly, Reitzug, West, and Angel (2008) described how metaphors have changed over time in response to the education system's contemporary high accountability. Coinciding with the currently high focus on accountability, leaders have shifted to a more bureaucratic, scientific management approach, thus perceiving themselves more as "inspectors" than as "facilitators of teacher growth."

School principals make sense of their role within broader symbolic systems through which their everyday experience is constructed, interpreted, and

maintained. In particular, metaphors can be used to understand principals' expectations of themselves and the role that they play within a reform context. As metaphors connect key understanding of policy mandates, educational context, and school culture, they can reflect multiple frames for how principals make sense of expectations, meanings, and personal role identities regarding a national reform (Witherspoon & Crawford, 2014). Metaphors can explain principals' understanding of what the leadership role is and how its practices unfold within a reform context. Metaphors can reflect principals' personal theories that help them navigate through their leadership role in the face of multiple and conflicting demands. Thus, our central argument is that metaphors can represent and reflect administrators' efforts to make sense of a national reform.

Research context

The national school system in Israel, where this study was conducted, serves about 1.6 million students, with approximately 73% in the Jewish sector and 27% in the Arab sector (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Israeli students' academic achievements remain among the lowest in the industrialized countries, and students' achievement gaps (achievement distributions) remain the widest (Ben-David-Hadar & Zideman, 2011). Mindful of the great diversity among school populations, recent educational policy in Israel has been directed toward achieving across-the-board high levels of equality in educational outcomes.

The New Horizon (In Hebrew: Ofek Hadash) national reform was initiated in 2009, and is being implemented in elementary schools, encompassing many aspects of school life. This systemic reform includes five main, complementary targets. (1) *Promoting individual-centered education-teaching-learning processes*. These processes are a means for increasing student achievements as well as narrowing educational gaps. (2) *Structuring teachers' work*. The teachers' educational-pedagogical work was reorganized and diversified to include whole-class teaching, individual teaching, and non-teaching hours. The individual teaching hours, which did not exist in the teacher's schedule before the New Horizon reform, are intended mainly for working with groups of up to five students, enabling personal tutoring which promotes learning achievements and builds teacher-student connections. Non-teaching hours, which did not exist either in the teacher's schedule before the New Horizon reform, are intended mainly for work that teachers used to do at home. These hours provide time for the educational staff to carry out various school-related activities, such as planning classes, meeting among themselves, professional development, and communication with colleagues and stakeholders (parents, experts, etc.). To ensure teachers' compliance, the teachers' lounge now features a computerized time clock, and teachers must

either register their swipe card or enter a PIN (personal identification number) upon entering and leaving the school. (3) *Reinforcing the teaching staff and school management*. This is a career-long initiative, directed at enhancing the professional development of teachers and management personnel (assistant principals and principals). It also involves boosting teachers' status and raising their salaries. (4) *Empowering school principals* by expanding their impact on the tenure and promotion of teachers. (5) *Evaluating performance*. Accounting for teachers' and school management's performance through continuous evaluation (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2012).

At first, many teachers felt they were not being treated as partners in the process of reform; rather, they felt they were being used as pawns who must simply accept the reform as is and implement it as they were told without asking questions (Reichman & Artzi, 2012). Teachers' resistance to the upcoming reform resulted in a 64-day teachers' strike in 2007, the longest strike in the history of Israel's education system (Berkovich, 2011). Although several years later some teachers reported that the changes brought about by reform implementation were positive (Zach & Inglis, 2013), in the initial stages it was school principals who had to deal with many teachers' fierce opposition to them.

Research design

Given the theoretical framework described above, this study explored the metaphors school principals formulated to describe their role as they face the complexity that characterizes a national reform. We chose a qualitative methodology to allow the collection of rich textual descriptions. In particular, this study is a narrative inquiry into meaning, being attentive to what principals are experiencing at the moment (Patton, 2002).

Participants

The 59 participating elementary school principals (38 women, 21 men) who implemented the national reform came from all school districts. On average, participants had 22 years of teaching experience (range = 7–43), and 8 years of experience as principals (range = 1–36). Participants had 3 years of experience as principals in this national reform. Seeking to maximize the depth and richness of the data, we used heterogenic sampling in order to create a sample of maximal differentiation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2014) regarding principals' seniority, urban, suburban and rural schools, and gender.

Data collection

Data were collected at the second semester of the 2012–2013 academic year, using semi-structured interviews designed to explore participants' personal

perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Individual interviews with principals, which generally lasted an hour, were conducted in places chosen by interviewees: their schools, coffee shops, and other locations. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were translated from Hebrew to English by a specialist in both languages. All participants were fully informed of the aims of the study and were promised complete confidentiality as well as full retreat options. Pseudo names were assigned to all interviewees.

During the interviews, principals were asked identical questions intended to reach an understanding of their metaphors concerning their leadership role. Specific questions were asked in order to achieve full clarity in understanding principals' use of metaphorical language. The interview focused on three major questions: (1) Looking at the national reform, what kind of metaphor would you use to describe your leadership role? (2) Can you explain and provide examples? (3) Can you come up with additional metaphors to describe your role?

Data analysis

Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously in an ongoing process throughout the inquiry, with analysis being a three-stage process—condensing, coding, and categorizing. Once data were collected, we found that not all the material collected could serve the purpose of the study, and that the material required sorting (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Thus, in the first stage of analysis (condensing), we looked for the portions of data that related to the principal's role, which was the topic of this study. In the second stage (coding), each segment of relevant data (utterance) was coded by the aspect of the principal's role it expressed (Gibbs, 2007). In contrast to the previous stage, this stage was data-driven and not theory-driven because we did not use a priori codes but rather inductive ones, developed by direct examination of the perspectives articulated by participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). After capturing the essence of utterances in the second stage, in the third stage (categorizing), we clustered similar utterances to generalize their meanings and derive categories. At this point, we reworked categories to reconcile disconfirming data with the emerging analysis (Richards & Morse, 2013). Thus, the dimensions of categories were explored, identifying relationships between categories and testing categories against the full range of data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

A confounding property of category construction in qualitative research is that data within the categories cannot always be precisely and discretely bound together; however, we grouped and regrouped utterances when their codes had common elements, until satisfactory categories emerged. It was somewhat like “decorating a room; you try it, step back, move a few things,

step back again, try a serious reorganization, and so on” (Abbott, 2004, p. 215). Then we consolidated the categories we had established in various ways, until we realized how different components were interconnected and influenced each other as parts of a single conceptual construct. Charmaz (2006) explained this figuratively: “Coding generates the bones of your analysis; theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton” (p. 45). Our analysis process as described thus far may be seen as an orderly and efficient process; in fact, it was quite complex and messy. We went forward and backward, and the various stages mingled with each other.

Several measures were taken at different stages of the study to ensure trustworthiness. First, the diversity of study participants was maintained, in terms of gender, seniority in post, and geographical districts (all school districts). Second, the analytic process described above was conducted by the four researchers, with each analyzing the data independently. At the next stage, we met to discuss and reflect on the emerging themes, as well as to search for data that would either confirm or disconfirm these themes. Third, to properly evaluate the soundness of the data, we conducted a member check (Schwartz-Shea, 2006) with all participants. Transcripts were sent back to participants, along with a request to evaluate their responses and make any necessary additions or refine their responses if needed. Using this strategy allowed for an examination of the descriptive data versus the participants’ reactions, thus endorsing and solidifying participants’ metaphors regarding their leadership role. Fifteen of the interviewees changed their answers, clarifying their remarks and adding things they forgot to say.

Findings

Principals were asked to propose their own metaphors, while explaining their meaning and their connection to their leadership role within the context of the national reform. The content analysis revealed that the principals’ metaphors as a representation and reflection of their sense-making during a national reform include three major themes: (1) reframing the principal’s role, (2) reframing the principal’s work, and (3) reframing the relationships with teachers. Although these themes are distinct, they are closely interrelated in the context of the leadership role.

Reframing the principal’s role

Principals’ metaphors illuminated their need to provide new meaning to their role as school leaders. The changes required by the national reform led principals to formulate new perceptions of their leadership role. Sarah, a principal with 12 years of experience, chose Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, as her metaphor:

Like Ben-Gurion, who was one of the founders of the nation, I too have the responsibility of creating a new education system, instilling a new culture of instruction, meeting external standards. I feel the labor pains of a new, more complex education system...There are new things to cope with, and they aren't pleasant. Teachers have to sign in. There was an attempt in our school to rebel against continuing the new reform, and I had to enforce the rules on a system which had tried to act dishonestly. To this day I'm dealing with teachers who find it difficult to meet external standards.

Sarah views the reform as creating a new education system, and sees herself inseparable from this creation. She is part of a national mission of renewing the education system. This is an important and complex mission, one that entails trailblazing and facing difficulties. Rose and Ariel (each with eight years of experience as principals) talked about the fact that their work involves new vistas. Rose chose a key as her metaphor for moving into new realms of action: "It's like a key. The world of professional development has opened up for me. All of a sudden I have a part in mapping my teachers. I can assume responsibilities I wouldn't have dared to assume previously." Ariel chose startups as a metaphor to express the power of the potential to innovate: "I have to be some sort of hi-tech person who takes a startup and has to advance it in the best way possible!"

Other principals saw the main role in adapting the reform to the reality of school. They felt that they must interpret the reform in such a way that it would be compatible with school life. Rebecca, a principal with 16 years of experience, chose a magician as her metaphor:

More than anything else, I think a school principal is a magician. He has to be a virtuoso. Reform guidelines are laid out, but understanding what you are required to do is like performing magic. Your ability to translate and interpret reform demands into school practices means you need to look beyond black and white written guidelines. I feel I have to be a magician. I need to develop my own magic tricks in order to make it into something that works better for the school.

Adapting the strict letter of the reform to the reality of one's school was not without risk to the principals who defied the directives. David, a school principal with 17 years of experience, said:

I'd go to court for deciding that a certain student would get more hours than the system allowed. Because, in the real world, it's obvious that he benefitted from it. I can provide explanations if the number of students was not balanced in a learners' group. Leave the managerial independence to me. Let me be an independent principal on my own turf. You guys sit there in headquarters, and have no idea about the running of a school! If I notice that a teacher isn't managing in class, and I put a teacher in the adjacent class, I may have deviated from the number of hours or the number of students. But good Lord! Yes, there are rules, yet let a principal act according to his own professional judgment. This will make national reforms work.

David sees himself as the person who shapes school policy. He deviates from the rules of the reform because he is familiar with his school's daily needs. It is important to him to maintain his independence as school administrator. Therefore, he believes that if principals are allowed to act, the reform will be a success. Moses, a principal with seven years of experience, echoes David's thoughts:

I'm the one who makes decisions where things happen. Personally, I do one of the most informal, and perhaps most dangerous things—I open the school on Fridays and let teachers come to work on a day that is officially not a work day, because we are supposed to meet standards. My teachers are uninsured on Fridays. What would happen if they got hurt? I let teachers leave early or not sign in, because I want to introduce the reform gradually. These things too, aren't formal, and maybe not by the book, but I think that's what helped our integration of the reform and prevented unnecessary objections.

Moses, too, views himself as the shaper of school policy demands. Therefore, he deviates from reform guidelines, and this deviation stems from his desire to implement them gradually. From his point of view, it is he who must find ways to adapt the daily work to the demands posed by the reform. He deviates from the formal guidelines by going into yet-to-be-defined gray areas.

While most principals expressed active metaphors regarding their role as principals in the reform, it is important to mention role perception that views the principal, in the period of reform, as one who has a limited range of freedom to act and very much work. Sharon, who has been a principal for 21 years, used a marionette metaphor to express others' control of the principal's work:

Marionette—a puppet on a string—someone decides, moves, and determines, and I have to perform. No one asks me. No one gives me the time to think and react. There are lots of things that I, as a principal, should be deciding on, but it's not my decision because things are handed down from above. I'd always been able to make my own decisions, and now someone else decides on things that are my responsibility. In the past no one interfered with my work and authority in school to this extent.

Like Sharon, Megan (two years of experience) and Susan (three years of experience) said that the reform has limited them:

Megan: The reform leaves me no space, there is no oasis. In the past I had almost unlimited authority, now I'm bound by constant guidance, I'm obligated to report. Supervision has gotten heavy handed. Big Brother examines my each and every step.

Susan: The reform laws put me into a tailspin. We used to do things differently. If I needed a day off I could take one without problems. Now it's a problem. I have to report it and get the supervisor's approval, and that can take a few days. Also, up to now I didn't have to fill in an attendance sheet, and now I have to sign in, to swipe my card or enter my ID number. As far as I'm concerned—that's terrible. Because I don't work the 40 hours I'm supposed to work—I work 60 to 80 hours a week. If I leave school early because I have a meeting elsewhere—do I have to come back to school and sign in? So my metaphor is a Swiss watch—tick tock, tick tock.

In sum, principals' metaphors reflected a development of new meaning of their role during the implementation of a national reform. Some principals saw themselves as partners in a national educational change, others as local policymakers, who interpret the reform in accordance with the school reality, and some described themselves as a puppet worked from above.

Reframing the principal's work

Additional reform tasks that were imposed on principals required them to choose new courses of action so as to carry out their leadership role. Principals' metaphors express their need to maneuver between different work demands while implementing reform demands. Dina, a principal with 12 years of experience, presented the image of an octopus, because "I have to deal with so many things simultaneously and lead them all to one place. I have to carry one head with many roles, have more than eight arms." The octopus was also chosen by Joseph, a principal for five years, because it has "arms from all directions and they all have to be attached to each other. Transferring information from one arm to the other means being in the center and making sure everything works correctly."

Isaac, a principal with four years of experience, compared his work during the reform to juggling:

What I have in mind, very clearly, is juggling. Throwing the balls and keeping them in the air. Think about how many things it involves, and how much responsibility it takes: Following up on the individual hours, which is not easy in itself. Even the schedule is complicated—should I enter the hours? Shouldn't I enter the remuneration for the teachers? I also have to maneuver between the desires of four different populations—the Ministry of Education, teachers, parents, and students. The ministry wants me to meet the guidelines it has set, teachers want to safeguard their rights and welfare, parents want individual hours to advance their children, and finally the students. It's really frustrating!

Simon, with eight years of experience, sees himself as a catchall:

The principal is the catchall—he has to handle everything, from the scent of the floor-mopping detergent to visits by the CEO and the Minister of Education. The full range of our work is very difficult. See, work is very challenging, and you take it home with you. Principals are supposed to work a forty-hour week, that’s their job. Do I work forty hours? Absolutely not, I work much more than that. Does anyone pay me for it? Not at all, no one pays but they demand so much—all those reports, lots of mapping for each child, for each class and for the whole school.

These principals’ metaphors emphasized direct responsibility—the principal was directly responsible for various issues. Principals used different verbs to emphasize their multitasking work. One said that the principal must “care, lead, command, succeed, move, and advance.” Another said that principals are required to “be everywhere, inspect, supervise, and arrive.” Linda (14 years of experience) used the CEO metaphor:

Where I came from, a CEO works with managers, banks, a government office, and that’s it. Here, everything is going crazy. You’re responsible for the students’ security and safety, and that is really complex. There are so many interfaces, and inevitably they clash. Lots of entities here, each with different demands you have to please.

Principals are responsible for many aspects of school life, and this imposes a heavy burden on them. Donna, a principal with six years of experience, used the image of a workhorse. Diana, with 11 years of experience, added that work was like “a spider’s web. I was used to working hard before, and now I work double. It is constant spinning.” Ilana, a principal with eight years of experience, added that in addition to the great amount of work, she is also under pressure to meet preset deadlines, and therefore used a metaphor of “a clock that’s constantly ticking, tick tock, tick tock. There’s work, pace, and there are demands. This is work with a rhythm, work were you have to deliver, here, immediately, and now. Today I have a questionnaire and by tomorrow you’ll give me the answers. You work around the clock. Everything is online and out there.” Noah, who has 17 years of experience as a principal, used a 24/7 kiosk as a metaphor to explain the great load that the inspection entails:

We feel the load is too heavy to carry. I feel like a very popular 24/7 kiosk which has huge demands, lots and lots of them. I just can’t get it all done. It’s work during the day, in the evenings and at home. The stress is amazing. Not only do you spend too much time out of school, “hang out” with people in the municipality and in the ministry, you do that instead of being here in school. I’m a 24/7 kiosk that doesn’t have the time to deal with what’s really important—my students and teachers. There are numerous meetings we must attend, and it’s not only meetings on school premises. I have to meet with the supervisor once every two or three weeks so as to show what I did and how I advanced. There are group and online meetings and all principals have to come because that’s part of the reform regulations. Too many tasks, too many demands and too much stress: Everyone has their

demands, everyone has their reports, everyone has their inspections. Lots of inspections of school work, especially of individual hours and teachers' evaluations.

The principals repeated the word work (I work, there's work, work-horse, etc.) to express their heavy burden. They have to do this hard work at a present time, while also being required to prepare reports and show results.

School principals' work is supposed to meet the reform demands. This idea is expressed through metaphors which deal with the principal as a valve that must maintain coordination, harmony, and equilibrium in the systems with which he has been entrusted. Hannah, in her fourth year as principal, described the principal as a traffic policeman and a physician in the emergency room:

Being a principal means being a 24-hour traffic cop. I'm not the one who has to make the decision, but the one who's supposed to give direction. I'm always somewhere sitting at an intersection and constantly pointing in a direction. A policeman, ER physician, and a school principal are similar—they all have to react quickly. Every minute is critical! Just like in the hospital, my work requires fast diagnosis, identification, and treatment.

Ellen, who has four years of experience as principal, sees school as an orchestra, with many instruments playing simultaneously while producing pleasant music to the audience, with the principal being the conductor:

School work has become more complex because there are multiple demands that I'm responsible for. Being a conductor means heading and producing pleasant music—giving the signal to start, to end, to play forte or piano. I'm setting the direction—where things should get louder, softer, or let go. For instance: sometimes one of the instruments plays off key, too loud, or just doesn't work as it should, and this ruins the music for the audience.

The orchestra and conductor metaphors were also used by Tammy, a principal with 11 years of experience:

Conducting is all about creating connections and harmony between the educational and the pedagogical, the personal and the collective. I have to be constantly on the watch that things are flowing, while at the same time finding the right balance between reform demands and teachers' abilities.

Cynthia, who has been a principal for 22 years, also described her role as a conductor:

As a conductor I need to please different audiences: teachers, supervisors, and the Ministry of Education. Conducting is not an easy work. You can easily fall between the cracks, so I use a range of notes and hues in order to produce pleasant music.

To summarize, principals' metaphors revealed that during the reform's implementation, they gained a new perspective on their work. They

perceived their leadership role as more multidimensional, centralized, and very stressful. In addition, they believed that their main purpose is to regulate the growing pressure that their faculty members encountered.

Reframing relationships with teachers

While leading the teachers toward a new educational work, principals used metaphors to make sense of their relationship with the teaching staff. Rachel, a principal with three years of experience, described leading her teaching team through a metaphor of a ship captain while adding both a headlight and a compass:

Everyone on board has a role but I'm the captain who navigates, leads, and makes everything happen. I need my whole team in managing this sail together. I have a headlight that lights up the path, the way the Ministry of Education demands, and the beam from my lamp is like a compass—my beliefs and the teachers' needs guide me toward the desired goal, that's where I'm heading!

Rachel integrated a number of metaphors, which together emphasize the principal's role as one who sets goals and leads the staff toward meeting them. The principal is the one who sketches out the path, and the entire staff becomes partners in the advancement toward the reform's implementation. Like Rachel, Ruth, a principal with five years of experience, also described her role as a captain, whose duty is to bring the ship to its destination for the good of the passengers, while caring for the welfare of the crew. She expanded on the many roles of the captain:

As a captain I have to make sure the ship comes safely to port. I must lead the school toward the goals we had set for ourselves, whether achievements, education for values and excellence, while implementing the reform guidelines. Meeting multiple and often contradicting demands is not an easy work. I must make sure that my staff finds coming to school pleasant, feels secure despite all changes imposed by the Ministry of Education.

This principal is trying to integrate leading a ship to its destination with the help of the crew, while caring for their welfare and benefit. Like the captain metaphor, other principals chose metaphors that expressed motivating their staff toward a shared goal. Diana, a principal with 17 years of experience, used a horse-and-buggy metaphor: "I'm a buggy with a horse that pulls the staff. I deal with the gap between the ideal and the real. All along, I have to pull the staff forward." Diana felt that one of the main reasons that she must pull the buggy is the gap between reform demands and school goals. Leah, who is a principal with 11 years of experience, chose a mountain-climbing metaphor:

The mountain is covered with hikers. We're just started climbing and I see teams higher up on the mountain and others lower on the slopes. There are those that we

pull and drag up from the bottom so they meet both the reform guidelines we were given and the goals we set for ourselves. All of a sudden, there's this huge boulder on the mountain right in front of us, and we have to climb it.

Leah mentioned school goals which were set by external forces, and there are those that their school had set for itself. Not all teachers have reached the same place in terms of the reform's implementation, as some did only a little climbing, and others climbed a lot.

Anita, who has nine years of experience as a principal, used the compass metaphor—mentioned earlier—to explain how she leads the staff to carry out their tasks and meet external demands:

I've been asked often how I manage to lead the school and staff toward meeting reform's demands, while other principals are still struggling to meet them. The values I believe in guide me like a compass. I motivate my staff according to each person's abilities. So if you ask me, yes, you have reform demands as coordinates but you need to follow your guiding principles as well.

Jacob is a principal with 11 years of experience. His metaphor of choice was that of a stork:

I'm a stork leading a long journey from one continent to the next. As far as I see it, there is a leader, strong birds and then all the rest. I see the administrative staff as the strong birds that support the weaklings and fly as high as possible. The leading stork calls the shots—determines the migratory route, the place for resting, and makes decision for changing direction. No less important, the stork considers other birds' abilities.

Anita and Jacob included two components in their metaphors—the principal is the one who sets the direction as well as leads the staff decisively toward the goal. At the same time, the principal takes into account staff members' abilities.

Several principals used a parent metaphor to note their attention to the processes teachers undergo during the reform's implementation. This metaphorical frame describes a parent who embraces his/her child while setting boundaries and expectations. Esther, a principal with six years of experience, said:

I'm a caring mother that knows when to stroke, compensate, or reward her child. I need to be very careful with my teachers, while at the same time being tough, and use sanctions when necessary. A mother does not lose the bond with her child, and yet she can't cross the fine line between closeness, friendship, and setting boundaries. For example, when I say that teachers need to swipe their card and explain in case they're leaving early, I have to be very sensitive because this whole business of explanations and reports calls for a question—"Hey mom, don't you trust us?"

With 16 years of experience as a principal, Miriam, too, sees herself as the parent who has to train her children so that they can meet reform demands:

“The teachers are my children. There are big and small ones. I always see myself as the teachers’ mother. I have to train them for life, to become responsible for their work.” Similarly, Tanya, who has been a principal for 26 years, sees herself as a mother who has to contain the teachers’ frustrations, which is rooted in the load of tasks included in the reform:

As a mother, I feel that I have to take care of everything—the ongoing running of the school, keeping in touch with the Ministry of Education, taking good care of my teachers’ welfare while struggling to contain their frustration.

The principals who saw themselves as parents expressed their role as paying attention to teachers’ growth processes, and dealing with the teachers’ difficulties adjusting to new working habits. Bob, a principal with 18 years of experience, uses a date palm as metaphor to describe the managerial attention to his staff’s development. The date palm, unlike other fruit trees, keeps its fruit close to itself:

The fruit of other trees falls off and rolls away. The tree loses contact with it. But the date palm always stands by its fruit, remains in contact. However, the palm can still make sure that its fruit expansion is within the limits of what is permissible.

Principals used metaphors that symbolized leading the staff onward, when describing their relationships with the teachers. They guided the teachers toward that worthy goal—turning reform demands into schools’ new reality. School principals also used metaphors from the worlds of flora and family which symbolized the need for empathy and care for the staff while meeting reform demands. In this regard, the way the principals described their containment of teachers’ feelings emphasizes schools’ complex atmosphere, which is rife with conflicts that focus on finding a balance between external demands, the ministry’s new regulations, and internal school goals and expectations.

Discussion

Principals’ metaphors illustrated their particular understanding of their role during a period of a national reform. Despite of the wide variety of metaphors chosen by the interviewees to represent their leadership, metaphors related to three major aspects: (1) reframing the principal’s role; (2) reframing the principal’s work; and (3) reframing relationships with teachers. The explanations accompanying the metaphors explicitly delineated what was perceived as required from each principal in the context of a national reform. This is why sense-making is so important in understanding policy implementation, since people apparently act on the basis of what has meaning for them within a specific school community. National reform implementation, in this regard, is

strongly influenced by principals' set of values, as well as by colleagues' values, school norms, and community traditions (Coburn, 2005; Koyama, 2014; Russell & Bray, 2013).

The continuous conflict zone between external demands and internal interests has become a central concern of school leadership, as it complicates the already challenging role of school principals (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Fuller, Henne, & Hannum, 2008; Rigby, 2015; Wagner et al., 2006). In this regard, principals' metaphors revealed their need to serve as local policymakers. The principals played active roles in negotiating federal regulations and local capacities, using "organizational creativity" while implementing reform demands. Specifically, principals negotiated their power to exercise influence in the ways they best see fit (Marks & Nance, 2007), and became active, although unofficial, local policymakers by adapting the external demands to suit their schools' practices (Hamilton & Hillier, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002). In this regard, Brewer and Carpenter (2012) suggest the term "savvy participants," and Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) view principals as "enacting" their policy roles.

Interestingly, the transparency required by the national reform (mapping reports, individual-hours reports, time clock, etc.) was experienced quite differently by principals. Perceiving their role as "organizational policymakers," as discussed above, represents a more active leadership role, while the marionette metaphor represents a more mechanistic, top-down leadership perception. This is in line with recent studies (e.g., Slegers et al., 2009) that have demonstrated how principals constructed different meanings of a similar problem based on their beliefs and values in a specific professional culture. Thus, as principals grasp what is going on in their environments and adopt distinctive approaches to their tasks based on past experiences and available means (Ancona, 2012; Koyama, 2014), sense-making is a key leadership capability, resulting in various metaphors of their leadership role.

Principals' ways of making sense of their positions highlight heroic notions of leadership, expressed by their use of metaphors such as magician, conductor, captain, etc., while others prefer the metaphors of marionette or puppet on a string, emphasizing a more mechanistic notion of management. Perhaps top-down reforms, such as the New Horizon reform in Israel, result in unilateral perceptions of leadership, thus accentuating the duality of heroic leading notions versus notions of being mechanistically led. It is important to note that the charismatic-heroic leadership approach enjoys a reputation of having explained effective leadership in the past 25 years (e.g., DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; Judge & Piccolo, 2004); however, current research suggests that leadership research and practice are better off abandoning the charismatic-heroic leadership model (Van Kopperberg & Sitkin, 2013) in favor of a more collaborative/deliberative perception of the leader's role (Schechter, 2011).

Principals focused more on metaphors representing their multitasking administrative role (e.g., CEO) than on their role as developing staffs'

instructional capacities. In this regard, principals are not seen as simply managerial or organizational administrators any longer; instructional leadership is one of principals' most significant responsibilities of today's schools (Rigby, 2015; Schleicher, 2012; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013). Twenty-first-century school principals must combine the traditional school leadership duties, such as budgeting, scheduling and facilities maintenance, with the additional challenge of deep involvement in teaching and learning issues that directly affect student achievement (Fullan, 2014; Marzano, 2011; OECD, 2015). However, the principals' metaphors revealed their focus on the administrative and structural changes—organizing teachers' work through the framework of whole-class teaching hours, individual teaching hours, and attendance hours—rather than explicitly focusing on promoting teachers' instructional capacities.

Similarly, principals did not share metaphors focusing on mechanisms for their staff to internalize wide expectations for their work (Knapp & Feldman, 2012). Analyzing the data, no metaphors focused on how principals make sense collaboratively, coach teams, and construct data for the purpose of learning improvement. The implementation of the current national reform may aim toward achieving a higher level of control (mapping reports, time clock, etc.), and not merely toward instructional and collaborative performance, resulting in a more top-down, unilateral perception of leadership. This is in line with Inbar's (2009) argument that the Israeli education system is highly centralized, with the Ministry of Education's control extending to many fields such as writing and distributing curricular materials, setting standards, formulating testing, and hiring and firing of school staff. Although in recent years the Ministry of Education has a declared policy of facilitating school autonomy, principals still hesitate to act autonomously since in reality the ministry does not seem to be relinquishing control. Similarly, Reitzug et al. (2008) argue that the education system in the United States, with its high-stakes accountability, has shifted principals' metaphors to a more bureaucratic, scientific management approach, thus perceiving themselves more as "inspectors" than as "facilitators of teacher growth."

Principals' metaphors expressed their role as leading the staff toward achieving national-external demands while caring for them and creating positive motivational dynamics. Maitlis and Christianson (2014), for example, showed that positive motivational dynamics enable discussions in which members engage in deeper sense-making and greater agreement about an appropriate course of action, while motivational dynamics that are mixed or negative are associated with more superficial sense-making and a failure to act collectively. In this regard, Rath (2006) argues that when leaders care for teachers as an "extended family," the sense-making process moves beyond the principal's actions to an integrated picture of how education and change processes actually work as a social practice.

Implications, limitations, and further research

In the current study, we used metaphors to represent how principals understand new situations, how they perceive and interpret reality, and how they structure patterns of activity in ambivalent settings. Metaphors provided symbolically encoded representations and “ways of seeing” of how principals experienced complex and unfamiliar situations (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Thus, metaphors can shed light on administrators’ representation and reflection of their sense-making during a national reform. Nevertheless, a complementary and action-oriented framework of metaphorical analysis can also assist principals to re-construct their role identity in the face of education reform complexities (Oswick & Jones, 2006; Witherspoon & Crawford, 2014). Put simply, to make sense and deal with confusing events principals can turn to symbolic processes which allow them to reestablish their understanding, move away from the confusion engendered by the events, and ultimately maintain stability (Cornelissen, 2012). Therefore, metaphors have a generative quality in facilitating a process of sense-making (Jensen, 2006; Witherspoon & Crawford, 2014). The goal of this metaphorical analysis, then, is to create a better understanding of how to respond and function effectively within a specific educational culture, thus promoting meaningful reflection and purposeful action (Patriotta & Brown, 2011).

Using this action-oriented metaphoric analysis might offer a contribution to knowledge in the educational leadership/policy field, as metaphors provide ways of “seeing” and “understanding” which influence and suggest how sense is made (Patriotta & Brown, 2011). Thus, relevant questions to be addressed include: what kinds of metaphors do principals draw on and why? How do those metaphors shape action? Are some metaphors more conducive to effective performance of principals within a national reform context? As there has been little research regarding the sense-making of principals themselves (Jennings, 2010), future inquiry focusing on metaphoric analysis has the potential to enrich the literature regarding the school principal’s role in meeting large-scale, federal demands.

Compared with prior studies, this study provides new data on principals’ metaphors while implementing an education reform in their particular school context; however, several limitations of this study deserve consideration. First, these metaphors were collected in the specific Israeli educational context. Inasmuch as metaphors may be culture-dependent, further research of principals’ metaphors should be replicated elsewhere in various socio-cultural contexts, enabling generalization of the findings to a broader population and substantiating their international validity. Second, the sense-making process in this study was limited to school principals’ perceptions only. This structure does not explain the more expansive usage of sense-making as a group-based and network-focused framework

(e.g., Coburn & Russell, 2008; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Thus, co-developmental metaphoric processes require exploring also superintendents, policymakers, and school middle-leaders' metaphors. Third, the interviews with the principals were held at the second academic semester of the 2012–2013 school year. Longitudinal research is needed to examine whether and how principals' metaphors of their leadership role shift from entering the reform throughout the implementation stage. Fourth, this research focused on principals' verbal interpretations of their leadership role within a national reform. Further research should complement principals' verbally expressed perceptions with more objective measures such as direct observations, so as to evaluate actual implementation of metaphors in diverse school settings. Thus, further study should be conducted to explore what principals say, and how “successful” or “effective” they are, exploring how they actually reconstruct their practice based on their sense-making of the situations they are faced with. Finally, we used maximal differentiation sampling (Creswell, 2014) to capture a wide range of perspectives and gain greater insight into principals' sense-making; however, in this study we could not differentiate between each principal's metaphor and the school context from which it emanated, or particular principals' identities. Therefore, it would be advisable to explore the interconnections between principals' metaphors and factors such as gender, seniority, and districts.

National reform policy implementation is strongly influenced by principals' understanding of it. Therefore, comprehension of principals' sense-making process is of great importance (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Diamond & Spillane, 2004). This study's findings indicate that principals reframe their role during periods of a national reform. The fields they reframe in particular are the principal's role, work, and relationships with teachers. For this reason, policymakers should allow school leaders more leeway to maneuver their sense-making processes. Leaving room for interpretation of policy intent, as well as sensing practitioners' perceptions regarding reform regulations, is crucial. In doing so, sense-making should become a more reciprocal, co-developmental process among policymakers, principals, and teachers. Thus, co-metaphorical construction, explanation, and evaluation may provide the learning framework necessary for communal negotiation of meanings at times of reform.

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