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Review of the Ph.D. dissertation by Sarah Oved, titled: “*The Perceptions of Principals and Middle Managers of the Role of Middle Managers in the School Management*”. Thesis prepared under the direction of dr hab. Associate Professor, Małgorzata Rosalska, Faculty of Educational Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań.

Introduction

The purpose of this review is a critical and explanatory assessment of the dissertation by Mrs. Sarah Oved, prepared under the supervision of dr hab. assoc. prof. Małgorzata Rosalska. The assessment will be concluded with an answer to the question; does the submitted work meet the requirements specified in the article 13 section 1 of the Polish Bill on Academic Degrees of March 14, 2003, with later amendments (Journal of Laws of 2018, item 1669). (Ustawa o stopniach i tytule naukowym z dn. 14 marca 2003 roku wraz z uzupełnieniami zawartymi w Prawie o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce (Dz.U. z 2018 r. poz. 1669)).

In my evaluation, I will focus on the conditions set out in point 1 article 13 and point 6 of the Act. Therefore, the priority for the evaluation of the presented dissertation are the following aspects: 1) The originality of the solution to the scientific problem posed by the researcher, 2) the visibility of the author's theoretical knowledge in the discipline of pedagogy and finally, 3) the ability to independently conduct their scientific work. My review will be conducted in English for 3 reasons; English is the language of the dissertation and the medium of communication between the Doctoral Candidate and the Polish University. English is also the predominant language of scientific exchanges and knowledge sharing, therefore this evaluation has been prepared in English, but will also be accompanied by an abridged conclusion in Polish (annex 1).

The doctoral thesis by Sarah Oved “*The Perceptions of Principals and Middle Managers of the Role of Middle Managers in the School Management*” contains a very interesting case study, which is distinctive and therefore forms a truly unique contribution to the field of education and educational leadership studies. It adds to our understanding of leadership in education, educational management at the middle-management level and the perception thereof by both the principals and middle managers themselves. What is important for the discipline is that the topic, the scope of the research and the research participants from the contributing institutions are positioned neatly and directly within the field of pedagogy and raise no doubt about the pedagogical character of this dissertation.

In her empirical contribution, the Author presents an analysis of the opinions of 89 principals and 133 school middle managers about the role of the middle managers in Israeli secondary schools. The empirical data was obtained using the quantitative methodology of a survey. The data is presented against the background of theoretical chapters dedicated to the education system in Israel, the education policy and the reforms of education. The Author presents administrative context, the issues of educational leadership in Israel and how the above translate into action, all of which influence how managerial roles, expectations and obligations of middle managers are shaped.

To reveal and interpret the fissure between principals’ and middle managers’ perceptions of the middle management role in high schools is of high interest. This thesis may be inspiring and interesting not only for pedagogues, sociologists of education or researchers of educational policy, but also for policy makers, educational leaders embracing the principals of lifelong learning, comparatists and historians. I am convinced that the thesis is of sufficient standard to be granted a public defence and I will vouch for it in the detailed analysis of the content.

My overall assessment of the thesis is very positive. However, there are some small shortcomings that I will detail over the next few paragraphs. These comments should be considered of such a nature to provide positive feedback and to assist the Author in addressing any issues during the defence of their thesis. I also trust that they will be instrumental for the thesis to be published as a book, as I am confident that the study is worth publishing, as the topic is unique and may serve not only as a scientific enquiry but also as a useful pool of data to inform educational leadership policy development.

Formal aspects of the thesis and the situated knowledge of the researcher

The thesis consists of 252 pages, including an expression of gratitude in the foreword section, an abstract in Polish and one in English, a table of contents and 9 chapters with multiple sub-chapters, followed by an extensive bibliography in English. The bibliography alone contains approximately 250 references, (which shows a solid knowledge of the field and extensive effort in combining both national and international authorship). Furthermore, there is an appendix presenting the main tool of the empirical enquiry – the survey questionnaire design. The thesis includes 34 charts, 2 diagrams and 6 tables. The thesis has a classical structure, opening with theoretical and methodological chapters, followed by empirical data and conclusions. What grips the attention is the acknowledgment made by the Author on page 209, that Chat GPT was used for editing in chapters 7 and 8 (empirical data presentation). Considering that English is not the native tongue of the Author, the use of AI for editorial purposes related to English grammar and the structure of sentences seems justifiable. Full disclosure of these facts shows maturity of the Author and long-term vision for the future developments of AI use practices in education.

The titles of the chapters are coherent with their content, indicating clearly and quite precisely what is to be expected from each chapter. The thesis commences with a description of the socio-cultural and historical context to set the scene of the environment in which the study took place.

It is important to highlight that the Author has been serving as a school principal for a number of years (this information can be found on page 197, in paragraph 2), and therefore has significant insight and a deep interest in the researched area. My supposition is, and I see it as a positive aspect, that this role was probably also helpful with access to the respondents and their willingness to take part in the research. The sample size is therefore adequate for the purpose and the scope of the study. It allows for typical statistical operations and importantly, the Author is aware of the limitations and the statistical margin of error. It is important to highlight the high reflectivity of the Author, visible in the interpretation of the obtained data and in the subchapter dedicated to the limitations of her study that shows a deep understanding of the research methodology and the implications for applicability and extent of the research findings.

Content presentation and detailed assessment of the theoretical chapters

The Author uses a classical structure of the Ph.D. thesis, starting with the definitions, review of literature and previous theoretical investigations, placed in 3 initial chapters, followed by methodological considerations of her own empirical study placed in chapter 4. I will focus here on these first four chapters as they provide a contextual setting for the presentation of the empirical data collected by the Author.

The Introduction in my view is the weakest part, probably rushed at the end of the writing process. Upon introduction when the abbreviation MM (Middle Managers) is used for the first time it should be explained what it stands for and spelled out in full. It is unclear why the explanation appears so late in the text (p. 14). The use of hyperbole “enormous” growth potential is unnecessary and overstated. Bold statements about the fragmentation of knowledge appear to not be connected to the next sentence that follows and could be better supported by evidence. The intuitive hypothesis that there will be differences between the view of principals and the middle managers on their role (p. 14) is somewhat to be expected, yet it is of value to test it statistically on a sizable sample. To dwell on the hypotheses: the first hypothesis is that a positive correlation will be found between principals’ perception of the role of the MMs in school management and the expectations, tasks, support, and power sharing they give to their MMs. The second hypothesis is that there are differences between the perception of the MMs’ role expressed by principals and the MMs themselves.

The Introduction is followed by the first chapter, which is aimed at setting the scene of educational policy in Israel. It starts with the subchapter on a well-tailored theory cluster about how educational policy can be understood. There is an attempt to emphasize the global context, reforms, and the issues of accountability, yet the initial subchapter dedicated to reforms is comparatively very short (a single page), general and based on the OECD-inspired reform agenda. The Author return to the issue in more detail further on, in subchapters 1.4 and 1.4.1 dedicated to globalization aspects for education. More focus is dedicated to accountability, where the Author purposely explores in depth the Levin’s feedback loop for accountability in education (1974). This forms a strong part of the argument. Then the Author moves on to explore the twenty-first century’s central issue of sustainability of reformed educational

systems. In conclusion, I highly value this theoretical part of the dissertation. Subchapters 1.5 and 1.6 loop back to explore in more depth the issues of school reforms in Israel and beyond. Subchapter 1.7 is dedicated to the description of the Israeli education system and educational policy in Israel, treated as separate yet intertwined issues.

Chapter 2 discusses the aspects of administration in education. The Author chooses Educational Administration (EA) as the key term to describe processes and structures, although she acknowledges other terminology including Educational Management and Educational Leadership. The Author provides a solid overview of the existing volume of literature and research pinpointing the transition from EA to leadership in education. There is a discussion on “labelling” in EA (*typing error in spelling of labelling – missing L), followed by an overview of the theoretical perspectives in educational administration and an interesting take on knowledge production within and about EA. The parts dedicated to EA conclude with modern definitions of leadership in general, school leadership and the understanding of success and successful leadership at the school level. Finally, the essence of the dissertation emerges. Subchapter 2.8 titled 2.8. Middle management, provides further information split into sections:

- The practices of successful school leaders
- Professional standards for educational leaders
- Leadership functions and allocation of time
- Attributes of excellent leaders
- Roles and responsibilities of MM
- The effects of MM on school outcomes
- International research on MM

This is a very strong part of the dissertation, leading to the development of the concept of MM. This quote catches one’s attention as it provides a foundation for understanding what middle managers are meant to do within the system: page 78 “Leadership from the Middle can be briefly defined as: a deliberate strategy that increases the capacity and internal coherence of the middle as it becomes a more effective partner upward to the state and downward to its schools and communities, in pursuit of greater system performance.” (Fullan, 2015: p.23). Part 2.8.3 is based on a handful of studies and takes a mere 1.5 pages, which may mean two things, either the volume of studies in this area is indeed very limited, or the Author narrowed down this overview to a bare minimum.

Chapter 3, the final theoretical chapter of the thesis, is dedicated to the role of school principals. The Author uses the term: “principalship”, known to me from the works of L. Joseph Matthews and Gary Crow (2009). This chapter indicates that the Author has a sound grasp of the role and the complex implications of the role, providing a profound and exhaustive, literature-based case study of the matter. This chapter focuses on the following aspects: school viewed as an organization, how the role of principals has evolved and what it takes to become a principal, including preparation and the required qualifications. Then the Author discusses what may happen if a principal’s performance falls below expectations, the dynamic setting with changes in policy and societal demands, reflections on diverse and changeable contexts and on power structures. This is followed by subchapters about specific success factors for principals around the world, and a principal’s identity and traits. The chapter concludes with sections dedicated to psychological aspects affecting the principal, and the role of school leaders in promoting school outcomes. This chapter could be a stand-alone publication, it is comprehensive, well-thought-through and executed with mastery and passion for the topic.

Chapter 4 describes methodological considerations adequately and rather clearly, with straightforward and well-operationalized research questions. However, methodological consideration on the sample selection could be described in more depth and there are some small typing errors (*e.g., p. 116 and page 178: “much lesser...”). In places there are missing pronouns and adjectives, or additional unnecessary words (*example p. 117: “This research is rooted in the field of educational leadership and management which often ~~time~~ overlaps with the field of education policy.”). The process of research and the development of the questionnaire are well described.

I find the Author’s habit of adding the content of each chapter at the beginning of each chapter in the form of a list of content and to call it an introduction rather odd. I would change it into continuous text and avoid repeating the numbered list of subchapter titles (it is repetitive and redundant).

Content presentation and detailed assessment of the empirical study

The empirical part of the study is of value to the volume of knowledge on leadership in education and a better understanding of the role of middle managers in high-school education settings, as it is based on their own opinions and lived experiences, confronted with those of school principals. The Author presents her research findings in the form of descriptive statistics placed in chapter 5 and 6, presented separately for school principals and for middle managers, followed by chapter 7 containing results of the statistical analysis aimed at testing the research hypotheses, which are indeed statistically confirmed for both hypotheses. The Author demonstrates fluency in carrying out statistical operations and data interpretation. Amongst formulas used for testing the hypotheses, one may find Pearson's correlation coefficient and the p-value, Pearson's chi-squared, and Cramér's V (phi). The correlation was used when two quantitative variables were tested, and a chi-square test of independence was used when two categorical variables were tested. Furthermore, a non-parametric U test (Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney U-test) was applied to the two samples of principals and middle managers to determine the difference between these two groups. There are some minor typing errors, for instance on page 126, chart 1 in the words: 'inclusion' and 'councillor', and it is not clear why number '3' appears in every category. Page 156, chart 21, the description of colour coding is missing. In many in text and in charts, there are missing apostrophes. It may be interesting to add the gender aspect to the discussion, as there was a greater gender disproportion amongst middle managers than within the principals.

The advantage of this study is that the main topic is narrow and precise, therefore achievable. Statistically significant differences in the perception of the MM role by Principals and middle managers themselves were confirmed for most perceived tasks and expectations, apart from budgeting, where both groups had similar views. Amongst the most interesting findings, the results showed inconsistency in the preparation of MMs for their role, that the role is not clearly defined and understood by the teachers and staff, nor viewed as distinctive or significant by students or parents. Middle managers in the majority did not feel that their role influenced the whole school, even though they resolved problems independently on a daily basis, without seeking Principals' assistance. Furthermore, MMs reported that their principals are approachable and offer support, which enhances performance and increases job satisfaction. The discrepancies in perceived levels of participation in decision-making were very interesting

to observe and of value to a scientific enquiry within leadership in education. Considering that the survey results were based on declarative statements (which the Author is aware of) the difference in perception between the two groups may be caused by hindered awareness of the principals regarding the amount of space they offer for shared decision making. About 50% of middle managers did not feel empowered to take part in those decisions. Perhaps, this is because the final responsibility for major outcomes is placed on the top of the institution by policy makers in Israel and is not officially cascaded down to middle managers. This situation very much resembles current education policy in Poland, also in relation to public higher education institutions and the increased and undivided responsibility of university rectors, which makes this dissertation even more interesting for the Polish context.

Chapter 8 contains discussions on the research findings with the backdrop of the existing volume of other studies to interpret the results further and deeper. It is very well-written and exhaustive. Amongst the most important findings on page 180 Author claims that: “principals have not yet fully understood the culture of shared decision-making.” Page 191 offers another important conclusion: “Results showed statistically significant perception gaps between principals and MMs in the following areas: self-efficacy, expected tasks and responsibilities of MMs, necessary managerial skills, and perception of the MM role as part of school management as reflected by participation in school decision-making processes, having authority as a line manager of a team, and being informed about management decisions before other teachers.”

Chapter 9 contains the final conclusions and recommendations. It repeats the research objectives, hypotheses, and questions, summarising the results and drawing practical concepts for policy development. The conclusion section contains deep situated knowledge derived not only from the volume of literature and statistical data but from professional practice of the Author and her lived experiences including participant observation that emerges with great benefit to the integrity of this work. It is a shame it was not presented earlier as part of the study, under the framework of autoethnography or autobiographical self-reflection, yet the combination of this personal experience and the quantitative enquiry would be somewhat problematic and therefore, it might have been a conscious decision to not mix the two perspectives. The recommendations based on the findings can inform policy-making and future development of the role of middle managers in Israel and beyond.

*Please note that most of my constructive criticism remarks focus on linguistic discrepancies, typing errors, and minor omissions, which are of no consequence to the substantive contribution of the reviewed dissertation to the field. From the grammatical perspective, if the thesis is to be published, the Author may wish to re-word the title, in particular by removing the last 'the'. "*The Perceptions of Principals and Middle Managers of the Role of Middle Managers in the School Management*".

Conclusion

It was with great pleasure and honour to review the doctoral dissertation (thesis) by Sarah Oved, prepared under the supervision of Prof. Małgorzata Rosalska. It contains a unique approach to a universal problem of high importance for leadership in education. The topic is niche and novel in the landscape of Polish pedagogy, the execution is precise and clearly described. The concept of the study is original, and the group of research participants could be considered as hard to reach for the outsiders, enhancing the value of the collected evidence. This issue is relevant to many fields, including leadership in education, pedagogy, management and administration, comparative studies, and sociology of education. The Author demonstrates deep and relevant knowledge of pedagogical and managerial theories derived from more than one cultural context. The quality of the data presentation and the erudition of the Author demonstrate their thesis' suitability for further proceedings.

Specifically, it is clear, that the Doctoral Candidate presented an original and unique solution to a scientific problem, that enriches the relevant field of scientific enquiry. Mrs Oved demonstrated the ability to carry out independent research, plan and conduct quantitative analysis of obtained data using statistical software and formulate conclusions, constructions, and reconstructions of relevant theories. She has been able to communicate clearly and to a high standard the research findings and prepared a dissertation that fulfils the Polish and international criteria for Ph.D. dissertations. I strongly recommend, therefore, that the assessed thesis be subjected to a public defence and that the dissertation be directed to further relevant proceedings.

In summary, despite some minor shortcomings, in my opinion, the dissertation by Sarah Oved complies with Polish and international standards for Ph.D. dissertations in the field of social sciences, and in particular, in the field of education, in the Polish context understood especially as pedagogy. It meets the requirements of article 13 section 1 of the Polish Bill on Academic Degrees of March 14, 2003, with later amendments (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1789) in connection with the Article 179 (2) and (3) of the Act of July 3, 2018. Provisions introducing the Act: Journal of Laws of 2018, item 1669. (Ustawa o stopniach i tytule naukowym z dn. 14 marca 2003 roku wraz z uzupełnieniami zawartymi w Prawie o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce (Dz.U. z 2018 r. poz. 1669).

Warsaw, 22.08.2023.

Konkluzja w języku polskim

Rozprawa doktorska autorstwa Sarah Oved, przygotowana pod kierunkiem dr hab. prof. UAM Małgorzaty Rosalskiej i zatytułowana "*The Perceptions of Principals and Middle Managers of the Role of Middle Managers in the School Management*" (w wolnym tłumaczeniu: *Postrzeganie przez dyrektorów szkół i kierownictwo średniego szczebla roli kierowników średniego szczebla w zarządzaniu szkołą*) spełnia warunki stawiane w art. 13 ust. 1 ustawy z dnia 14 marca 2003 r. o stopniach i tytule naukowym oraz o stopniach i tytule naukowym w zakresie sztuki (t.j. Dz.U. 2017 poz. 1789, dalej jako: u.s.n.), mającego zastosowanie w sprawie w związku z art. 175 ust. 1 Przepisów wprowadzających ustawę – Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce z 3.7.2018 r. (Dz.U. 2018 r. poz. 1669). Na podstawie przygotowanej dysertacji stwierdzam, że przedstawiona do oceny rozprawa doktorska stanowi oryginalne rozwiązanie problem naukowego oraz jednoznacznie dowodzi ogólnej wiedzy teoretycznej doktoranta w zakresie metodologii badań społecznych, teorii pedagogicznej oraz zarządzania w edukacji, jak również umiejętności samodzielnego prowadzenia pracy naukowej. W mojej ocenie rozprawa spełnia warunki stawiane pracom na stopień doktora i standardy krajowe i międzynarodowe w tym zakresie. Wnioskuje zatem o dopuszczenie rozprawy i jej Autorki do dalszych etapów postępowania w tym do publicznej obrony*.

*Szczegółowa recenzja została sporządzona w języku rozprawy, języku angielskim, będącym językiem komunikacji z doktorantką oraz wiodącym językiem komunikacji naukowej na świecie. Na wypadek tłumaczenia recenzji na język polski, należy zaznaczyć, że angielska wersja recenzji jest wersją oryginalną tj. wiodącą.

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