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Assessing the roles and training needs of educational superintendents in Palestine

154

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research study was to examine the role perceptions of superintendents and their supervisors in Palestine regarding the roles and training needs of superintendents. It was part of a larger study conducted by the Department of Administration and Educational Leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Design/methodology/approach – A grounded theory approach was used in this study. Data were collected by interviewing 16 superintendents and four general directors using guided qualitative interviews, in addition to examining Ministry of Education documents and archival data.

Findings – The grounded theory approach analysis revealed that superintendents and general directors held variant perceptions regarding the roles and training needs of superintendents. Most superintendents felt they were ill prepared for the job and had to rely on the Ministry of Education for support and direction. They perceived their role as a combination of educational managers and educational leaders. Their supervisors, however, perceived them as keepers of the status quo. The findings showed that superintendents in countries similar to Palestine (newly emerging) appear to experience problems similar to their counterparts in other transitional societies.

Originality/value – The findings of this research are important to new educational systems. It shows clearly the difficulties experienced by superintendents in a newly emerging system. Furthermore, superintendents in such systems may require training needs different than their counterparts in developed systems. The findings are discussed in terms of their relevancy and contributions to educational leadership theory.

Keywords Training, Palestine, Educational administration

Paper type Research paper

The reviewed literature shows clearly that the role of superintendent cannot be separated from the context of the job (Johnson, 1996; Owen and Ovando, 2000). It also indicates that the degree to which superintendents are effective in their jobs is related to the nature of their pre and in-service training (Milstein, 1999; Milstein *et al.*, 1991; Murphy, 1992), and that the training should be tailored to the context in which they work (Newton, 1996; Reilly and Brown, 1996). This interrelationship among role, context, and training poses the following question for educational systems within newly emerging countries: what kind of training do superintendents need to become promoters of change in light of existing political and economic conditions?

Although the topic of educational leadership and administrative training has received expansive attention in the West, particularly in the United States and Canada (McCarthy, 1999; Murphy, 1992), few studies have focused on developing, newly emerged, or in transition countries. Furthermore, the findings of such sparse studies are based primarily on personal anecdotes, observations, experiences, and advice, rather than on rigorous scholarly research approaches and techniques (Newton, 1985,



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1993, 1996; Reilly and Brown, 1996; Rodwell and Hurst, 1985; Weeks, 1988). As might be expected, this type of literature does not provide either empirical research findings or clear, decisive guidelines for preparing and supporting educational superintendents in such countries. This deficiency not only has academic ramifications, but also professional ones, in view of the trend to apply the concept of globalization to all sectors of life.

The study described here was part of a larger study being conducted at Teachers College, Columbia University, on the national and international superintendency and its challenges. It was designed to explore the roles and training needs of educational superintendents in newly emerged countries by focusing on Palestine as a case study. Its significance lies not only in remediating the existing deficiency in the superintendency literature on newly emerging counties; it also can serve as a source of useful information for transitional nations (e.g. former Soviet Union countries) that are currently in the process of developing their educational vision, and setting their administrators' certification and training policies (Bursuc, 2001; Reilly and Brown, 1996). The study also provides a methodological prototype for future researchers who wish to employ empirical approaches to educational training needs in such countries. It should be noted here that the terms "emerging countries" and countries in "transition" do not refer or infer political order or system. Rather, the terms refer to countries whose educational systems were revamped dramatically due to political changes such as gaining independence (e.g. countries of the former Soviet Union) or autonomy over their educational system although they have yet to gain their political independence (e.g. Palestine). The common denominator between such countries is that they are in the process of building a national and indigenous educational system. Hence, this study serves as a pilot attempt to do scholarly research in a country experiencing such conditions and circumstances.

Theoretical background

The recent literature on educational leadership has identified school administrators as the key factor in school effectiveness (Fullan, 1993; Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991; Sergiovanni, 1995). Furthermore, having a firm belief that the content and form of leadership preparation programs contribute to leadership effectiveness led to much attention being given to the kind of training that administrators need (McCarthy, 1999; Milstein, 1999), with the inclusion in training programs of certain elements based on the role that program designers perceived for superintendents (Mulkeen and Cambron-McCabe, 1994).

During the last century, bureaucratic and scientific management principles laid the foundation for the development of specialized training programs for school administrators in the United States. Subsequently, for a protracted period, training programs rested on an intellectual paradigm that is based on principles derived from psychology and sociology. Recently, some researchers have argued conversely that the management method model designed for the industrial era has been rendered obsolete in Western developed countries (Mulkeen and Cambron-McCabe, 1994). Thus, the hierarchical top-down educational bureaucracies resulting from the earlier paradigm are being replaced by democratic, flattened, egalitarian structures that curricula designed to prepare school system leaders now promotes (Lambert, 1995; Loredó and Carter, 1993; Walker, 1995).

This paradigm shift in the structure of educational organization changed the expected leadership role of administrators and the nature of their training. Most new Western programs, which are based on the principles of participatory leadership, differentiate between management and leadership training (Milstein, 1999). In most newly emerged countries, however, the educational system is highly centralized and participatory leadership has not reached a high level of practice. Given that most of the research on leadership has focused on developed countries, a very sparse amount of it is devoted to research on the roles and training needs of educational administrators in emerging, developing, and transitional countries.

The existing literature shows that newly emerged (i.e. became politically independent) countries encounter specific problems in planning, designing, and delivering training programs for their administrators (Newton, 1985, 1993, 1996; Reilly and Brown, 1996; Rodwell and Hurst, 1985; Weeks, 1988). Lack of adequate financial resources, centralization, inadequate technical and technological resources, lack of knowledge and skills, and inappropriately trained and qualified teaching and administrative staffs are among the factors that are believed to hinder training. Also, small developing countries suffer from major problems emanating from their general proclivity toward centralization and bureaucratic control (Newton, 1996). The degree of centralized control is critical for determining the nature and form of the educational experience and preparation of school leaders and teachers. Reilly and Brown (1996) believe that a system cannot decide whether it needs to train leaders, managers, or both until questions of goals and centralization are answered.

Hence, this study was based on the premise that a functional relationship exists among:

- (1) the geographical-cultural setting where the superintendency takes place;
- (2) the content and delivery design of the training programs;
- (3) the leadership domains, balances, and tensions existing within the context in which the superintendent works;
- (4) the superintendent's effectiveness as a change agent; and
- (5) the degree to which policy makers could depend on imported theory while designing training and preparation programs.

Newton (1985) and Weeks (1988) advised that policy makers in developing countries should analyze their professional needs within their own unique national context, and exercise prudence before adopting models that may not be congruent with them. It is crucial, therefore, for Ministries of Education in newly emerging countries to define the desired roles for their superintendents and then to map a training program in terms of the skills, competencies, and personal and professional attributes the superintendents need.

Educational system in Palestine

The signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993 between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) afforded the Palestinian people their first historical opportunity to gain control over their educational system. Palestinian education prior to that date was under the control of Israeli (1967-1993), Jordanian (1948-1967 in West Bank), Egyptian (1948-1967 in Gaza Strip), British (post WWI until 1948 during the mandate period), or Ottoman (pre-WWI) control. Primary and secondary education in

Palestine is organized according to funding source. Hence, schools are grouped as governmental, UNWRA (United Nations Works and Relief Agency for Palestinian Refugees), or private. Although the Ministry of Education maintains responsibility for standards, national exams, and basic curricula, direct supervision of the schools is delegated to the agency funding them. Nearly three-fourths of the schools in Palestine are government funded and supervised. They are grouped according to the district in which the school is situated. Each district is headed by an educational "director" comparable to a "superintendent" who is aided by "assistants" and "supervisors". Superintendents (district educational directors) are supervised by General Directors within the Ministry of Education (MOE), and who are directly responsible to the Minister of Education.

Research questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions pertaining to superintendents in Palestine:

- (1) what are the roles of newly appointed superintendents and the degree to which they are modified as a function of time;
- (2) to what degree the perceptions of newly appointed superintendents regarding their roles is congruent with those of their supervisors at the MOE;
- (3) what are the training needs of the newly appointed superintendents; and
- (4) to what degree are the perceived and received training needs of the superintendents are congruent with MOE officials in terms of relevance?

Methodology

Study sample

The sample of this study consisted of all 16 superintendents (males and females) administering school districts in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the scholastic year 2000-2001. In addition, four General Directors (General Education Directorate, Training and Educational Supervision Directorate, Field Development and Follow up Directorate, and Administrative Affairs Directorate) working at the Palestinian Ministry of Education were included. They were selected from among the Ministry's several directors because:

- (1) their directorates were in direct contact with the district offices while conducting their day-to-day work; and
- (2) they served as immediate supervisors for the 16 studied superintendents.

The selected sample fell in the category of purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990; Maxwell, 1996), or what LeCompte and Preissle (1993) called criterion-based selection procedure.

Characteristics of sample population

All but one of the interviewed Palestinian superintendents were men, and all were married at the time the data were collected. Their ages ranged between 43 and 67 with a mean age of 55.7. Four of the superintendents have exceeded retirement (60) age, and most began their educational careers as teachers (75 percent) or educational supervisors (56 percent), and progressed through several administrative positions

prior to being appointed as superintendent. Thirty-one percent of the superintendents held the post of assistant superintendent prior to being appointed, and one-fourth of them either held the post of school principal at one juncture in their life or were transferred from an administrative post at the Ministry. It must be noted here that none of the superintendents received formal training in administration although some held administrative or supervisory positions.

Nearly one-third of the superintendents were promoted from a supervisory post at the district office. Only one served as a head of a department at the district office prior to his promotion to superintendent, and one-fourth were promoted to superintendent from being an assistant superintendent. Another 25 percent of the superintendents were directors at the MOE before they were transferred to the district offices. Only one superintendent was hired from outside the system where he held the post of financial manager at another ministry prior to his appointment as a superintendent.

The number of years the superintendents spent in any administrative post (e.g. school assistant principal, principal, supervisor, head of a department, assistant superintendent, director at the ministry) varied from 1.5 to 47 years, averaging 17.2 years. The mean number of years the superintendents have held their post was 4.3 years, with a range of 1.5-8.0 years.

Most superintendents had no educational or administrative preparation for the position, and 76 percent of them had only a BA degree in the arts (63 percent) or sciences (13 percent). Four superintendents were holders of Masters degrees and two were holders of either a PhD or a degree in business. One-fourth of the superintendents were recipients of an educational diploma in teaching methodology, and all had graduated from local urban public schools. Most superintendents attended colleges in the Arab world – one in a Palestinian university, while four are alumni of American universities.

Research tools used

A semistructured interview guide was first developed in English based on NCATE (1995) criteria and the reviewed literature on administrative training in developing countries (Newton, 1996, 1993; Reilly and Brown, 1996). The guide was translated into Arabic, and a back-translation procedure was used to validate the protocol. The Arabic version was then given to three specialists in the field (local university faculty members) who critiqued its content, scope, and appropriateness within a Palestinian cultural context, and modified it accordingly. This process yielded an interview guide composed of the following three major sections in which nearly two identical versions were presented to the superintendents and general directors in MOE:

- (1) Section one consisted of a series of 18 items related to role perception, needed competencies, and challenges facing Palestinian superintendents.
- (2) Section two consisted of 13 items revolving around training needs of the superintendents, how they were being trained, and how they wish to be trained.
- (3) Section three dealt with demographic and educational information.

Procedure

All interviews were conducted in Arabic in the superintendents' offices during June-July 2001, and each interview lasted 60-90 minutes. The interviewees were given

the freedom to respond freely, but probing questions were utilized whenever a response was in need of further clarification or prompting. Whenever permission was granted, the interviews were tape-recorded and were then transcribed into English by the researcher. Owing to the restrictions on mobility prevailing at the time the data were gathered, the four Gazan superintendents had to be interviewed by telephone.

The validity of the translation and transcription was measured by examining the degree of concordance (percent agreement) between the number and type of themes that emerged in the independent observations of the researcher and a colleague who scrutinized the audio recordings and transcribed their content. Three taped interviews were selected randomly and subjected to this procedure, and the mean degree of concordance was found to be 85 percent. Furthermore, written notes were taken during each interview to note remarks on body gestures, facial expressions, non-verbal elements, or points needing further probing. Responses to items in section three (e.g. demographic background) were noted directly on the questionnaire itself.

The interview procedure was first pretested on three retired superintendents to determine its strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, the superintendents used in the pilot study were asked to suggest additional questions they felt were crucial to generate needed data for the study.

Available documents and archival data obtained from the directorates on Training and Educational Supervision, Planning and Development, and Administrative Affairs were also collected and reviewed. The Ministry's five-year plan was reviewed and examined to ascertain the Ministry's future plans regarding the training of its administrators.

Data analysis

A "grounded theory" methodological approach was used in this study in which the primary method of data collection and analysis was inductive and derived its meaning from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Following Miklos' (1988) advice, the researcher chose qualitative methodology because it was regarded as a viable approach to investigate the professional experiences of the superintendents and what they perceived in order to develop a theory about leadership preparation for them.

Following the transcription of the interviews, each type of emerging data (e.g. superintendents' interviews, General Directors' interviews, reviewed documents) was analyzed using qualitative, inductive methods based on open codes, themes, and emerging categories. The raw data were arranged in text units (sentences or paragraphs) that addressed a research question or a portion of it. Following the advice of Miles and Huberman (1994), initial codes were developed inductively from the data, and then were reduced through the integration of similar topics. The emerging codes were then arranged into themes upon which the structure of the results was built. Adherence to this procedure ensured that the emerging themes were based on the converging responses of a number of participants, thus minimizing the effects of personality and other individual differences, and allowing the identification of common patterns.

All data analysis steps were conducted in a constant comparative method in order to determine the similarities and differences in the interviewee's responses both within and across each type of data collected. Specifically, a comprehensive comparison was conducted between the perceptions of the superintendents and their supervisors to

determine observed congruencies or discrepancies, and how this information could bear on administrator training programs. The emerging data were also compared to and contrasted with current US and Canadian theory and practice about the nature of the superintendency and its preparation.

To ensure the validity of the analysis of the data, a doctoral student colleague was asked to spot check the first coding. When coding problems arose, they were discussed until consensus was reached. The transcribed interviews were also reexamined for additional insight and accuracy of information provided by the interviewees. The data emerging from the items in section three of the interview guide (e.g. demographic items) were either tabulated or analyzed in simple percentage terms or means.

Findings

Role perception

When asked about the components of their job immediately after being appointed, two-thirds of the superintendents specified school configurations and teacher allocation as the most two important tasks for them to accomplish. None of the superintendents seemed to perceive the job as an integrated whole. The interviewed General Directors agreed that the superintendents focused primarily on administrative and technical aspects of the job during the first two years, and described the superintendent's role at that time as "middle manager", or "agent of the Ministry".

The majority of the superintendents thought that changes had taken place since they were first appointed. Most agreed that the major change was in their relationship with officials in the MOE who decentralized some administrative areas within five years. Similarly, ministry officials believed that the superintendents began to enjoy greater autonomy primarily due to a policy shift toward decentralization.

Fifty percent of the superintendents described their job as unpredictable. Half of the interviewed General Directors shared this perception by voicing their skepticism regarding whether a fixed description of the superintendents' tasks could be formulated in light of the political situation prevailing at that time. More than half of the superintendents and all the General Directors described the job as "crisis intervention management". Given that Israel maintained control over the movement of people, services, and goods throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the educational system was continuously hampered by Israeli measures of closures, curfews, and blockades; it was difficult to predict which schools, locality, students, or teachers would be affected. "How can you plan your day when you don't know in the morning whether you will be able to reach your office," stated one superintendent. This situation perhaps explains why monitoring students' and teachers' attendance was the first task of the day for most of the superintendents.

When asked about their major duties, 44 percent of the superintendents cited implementing and organizing educational programs as the most important task, followed by monitoring the performance of "educational supervisors," and reading and distributing the mail, especially correspondence with the Ministry. General Directors, on the other hand, perceived the function of superintendents mainly as delegating certain powers to their deputies, and shifting to a mode of providing real leadership rather than being a customer service provider.

Palestinian superintendents appeared to gain satisfaction from duties related more to management and maintenance of the physical plant than to the academic

functioning of their schools and districts. Nearly 81 percent of the superintendents voiced the sentiment that implementing their plans and achieving their goals without impediment or conflict were sources of satisfaction for them, as voiced by one superintendent: "I feel best when the schools in my district are functioning – physically operating". By contrast, three major themes characterized the responses of the superintendents' source of dissatisfaction:

- (1) occupation-related challenges;
- (2) paucity of available resources; and
- (3) rigidity of Ministry rules and regulations.

Given the depressed economic conditions of the territories under the control of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), it was not surprising to find that over four-fifths (81 percent) of the superintendents mentioned the scarcity of resources, the lack of school buildings, and the poor educational infrastructure as the major problems facing them when they assumed office. Slightly more than half of the superintendents (56 percent) felt that their lack of certain professional administrative and managerial skills was a major challenge during their first days in office, especially competencies related to financial (e.g. preparing bids, raising funds) and budgetary skills. Furthermore, nearly one-third (31 percent) felt they lacked knowledge about the construction of facilities and school buildings. A similar percentage acknowledged deficiencies related to professional evaluation techniques and procedures, time management skills, public and community relation skills, and dealing with the media.

The findings in this area indicated that all General Directors identified correctly that the major challenge facing the superintendents was to rid themselves of "90 percent of their administrative responsibilities," as expressed by one of the respondents. The General Directors thought that superintendents faced enormous planning responsibilities, which they relegated to the Ministry. One director elaborated: "They chose to be the Ministry's agents rather than being leaders. They tried to please the Ministry rather than conduct their job, and this was a real challenge for us and for them". One-half of the General Directors considered the superintendents' deficiency in professional skills to be the chief problem, especially in light of the Ministry's new policy of delegation of authority and decentralization.

Slightly more than one-half (56 percent) of the respondents used the term "delegation" to describe their mode of supervision. However, when probed about their definition of delegation, the majority explained they did not view it as a complete relegation of a task to a subordinate, but, rather, as a form of assignment with explicit instructions for implementation. "I give my assistants clear directions as to how they should perform the task rather than doing it myself" was a statement repeated by many of the superintendents when probed about delegation of authority. Nearly all (94 percent) of the interviewed superintendents reported not having direct contact with their respective schools; they "delegated" this function to their deputies, department heads, or educational supervisors who conducted site visits for them. Fewer than one-half (44 percent) mentioned that they coordinated their job by forming teams or committees to accomplish certain tasks. Furthermore, superintendents seemed to prefer verbal and personal, rather than written, communication when dealing with their staff.

When asked to choose from five leadership roles (educational leader, managerial leader, political leader, leader of reform, and a keeper of the status quo) to define

their role, the majority of respondents had difficulty responding. Some could not select one from among the five, while others viewed the roles as "interrelated", "complementary", or "inseparable". Hence, more than two-thirds (69 percent) of the superintendents responded that "all of them", rather than a particular role, applied to them, although 12 percent of those who fell within this category excluded "keeper of the status quo" from their perceived "general" role. A minority (19 percent) of the superintendents perceived themselves as "leaders" in general because "all these roles are essential for leadership". A similar (12.5 percent) minority emphasized their political role because "the circumstances we are living in require the superintendent to be an astute politician". No consensus could be extrapolated from the responses of the General Directors regarding how they thought the superintendents perceive themselves.

With respect to the qualities needed by an effective superintendent, the superintendents cited three major skill types as essential: professional, personal, and community-related. Most (87.5 percent) emphasized personal attributes of the effective superintendent as exemplified by this comment: "A superintendent is born, not a made person". This sentiment was reinforced by the attributes most frequently mentioned by the interviewees. One or more attributes of a strong character (e.g. clever, patient, confident, balanced, flexible, honest/fair/objective) was mentioned by all the superintendents, followed by social (having a good reputation) and administrative (decision maker) traits (19 percent and 25 percent, respectively).

The findings seem to suggest that General Directors and superintendents do not deviate appreciably in their perception of what makes a good superintendent. Three-fourths of the Directors regarded a good reputation within the educational field as crucial for job success: "...like one of the indicators, how much he was successful in his previous educational post, even as a teacher ...this is important." All four General Directors were in agreement that possessing a "strong character" and being a "decision maker" are the foremost important traits of an effective superintendent.

The findings also suggest that the position of a superintendent in a newly emerging educational system may be laden with stress and work, as expressed by nearly all (94 percent) superintendents. "We are working from scratch. The roles, responsibilities, expectations, and procedures within the system have yet to be developed fully. This can be very stressful, especially when add the difficulties imposed by the occupation" was a sentiment that reflected the feelings of most of the superintendents interviewed. Furthermore, the volume of work involved, the long hours spent on job-related activities, and the lack of time available for family and social activities have caused some minor friction within the families of some of the superintendents. Nearly one-third (31 percent) of the superintendents reported that their wives complained about the amount of work and time spent by their husbands on the job.

Training needs

According to the interviews, none of the superintendents had received any formal preparation before or after assuming his/her post. Interviewed General Directors agreed that the superintendents had not been trained because:

- (1) there was an urgency to the appointments;
- (2) the selection was based on political criteria; and

- (3) the Ministry held the opinion that superintendents would learn the job by experience, providing they were “patriotic, good educators” as one General Director stated.

Most superintendents agreed that some form of preservice preparation would have been beneficial. Nearly one-third (31 percent) stated that a detailed job description would also have been very helpful. According to the interviewed superintendents, the Ministry remains the major source of assistance for the superintendents six years after its inception, and most cited it as “the most beneficial source at all levels”. Although the Ministry was perceived as a major source of assistance, the superintendents experienced difficulty identifying the official who could provide the assistance. “It’s difficult to know which Ministry official to address when you need assistance because clear roles and job descriptions have not been delineated,” stated one superintendent. Nearly one-third (31 percent) also considered their colleagues at the office, especially heads of departments and supervisors, as an important source for assistance.

Both the superintendents and their supervisors were asked to list the superintendents’ areas of weaknesses, and the aspects of the job for which they were least prepared. The superintendents felt they were least prepared in advanced computer and information technology skills (62.5 percent). Only a few cited other areas (e.g. strategic planning, management skills, public relations, budgeting, English language skills, and problem solving). In contrast, the General Directors did cite other areas where they thought the superintendents were lacking; three Directors expressed unequivocally that the superintendents were most deficient in “educational leadership”. When probed to clarify which area of educational leadership they meant, one respondent said, “. . .their leadership skills. They lack self-confidence. They don’t believe in their role”.

When asked about the role that local universities were expected to play in their training, the views of the superintendents were divided among: no role (44 percent), joint programs between the Ministry and the universities (31 percent), and universities alone (25 percent). Some superintendents believed that university training programs are insufficient to prepare superintendents for the “real” job because of their focus on theoretical aspects of leadership theory and use of lecturing. In contrast, all four General Directors agreed that local universities could have a major role in the training, accreditation, and certification of MOE employees.

Although the superintendents did not receive any formal mentoring, they agreed that mentoring and internship programs should be an integral part of a superintendent’s preparation program. Their preferred learning style is practice over theory. They engaged in modest training programs, ranging in duration from one intensive week (6 percent) to three to four months (25 percent), to three to four years (6 percent), suggesting that most of the respondents regarded these programs as orientation rather than rigorous preparation.

Of the 11 competencies identified by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (1995), both the superintendents and General Directors ranked three as most necessary for an effective superintendency. Professional and ethical leadership was first; followed by educational law and public policy; and then curriculum, instruction and supervision, and the learning environment.

Discussion

The Palestinian experience does not appear to have deviated from the experiences of other developing and newly emerging countries where centralization of the educational system seems to be a common practice (Newton, 1996; Reilly and Brown 1996), and where educational leaders are hired primarily for their bureaucratic managerial expertise. Use of bureaucratic control within the educational system appears to dominate the managerial leadership style exerted by Palestinian superintendents while coordinating their district offices and schools. The lack of specified job descriptions, ability to identify the Ministry official who can be called upon when a superintendent is in need of a consultation, and the absence of well-articulated and clear educational policies or law to frame their work posed a major challenge to the superintendents (and Ministry) when they assumed their position. Hence, it is not surprising that their jobs were characterized by extreme frenzy during the first two years, though for different reasons. The superintendents complained about the micro-management style practiced by the Ministry during that period, although Ministry officials felt overwhelmed by the frequency and number of consultations the superintendents requested of them. It appears that superintendents were unable to assume full leadership roles in a newly emerging system, especially when the legacy of the country is characterized by over centralization and bureaucracy. Consequently, superintendents may be forced to focus on the basic logistics of the job at the expense of a leadership role. The fact that the studied superintendents spent most of their working hours in their office on low-level tasks or at community functions rather than in the schools under their jurisdiction, is an indicator of the extensive size of their administrative and political responsibilities, and of the absence of instructional duties. Nevertheless, three-fourths of the respondents perceived their role as an amalgamation of managerial, instructional, and political functions, and as a leader of reform, in contrast to the Ministry's perception of them as middle managers. This finding poses interesting challenges for the superintendency in a newly emerging educational system. Ministry officials do not appear to be fully confident that the superintendents they hired possess the qualities needed to institute the desired changes. By the same token, the Ministry may be impeding such a direction by not providing the necessary training for this shift on the one hand, and reinforcing the proclivity of the superintendents to seek their assistance on the other hand.

This view of the superintendency in a newly emerging educational system appears to be in sharp contrast with that in a developed country such as the US where the position was conceived to encompass instructional, managerial, and political duties (Cuban, 1988; Johnson, 1996; Owen and Ovando, 2000). Instructional functions in the US are seen as an essential component of educational leadership (Leithwood, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1995). While Western references provide cutting edge research and theory of effective educational leadership, much of the content and delivery methods of training programs stem from Western ideology of democratic and participatory leadership (Mulkeen and Cambron-McCabe, 1994). The applicability of such resources may be problematic, however, in light of the centralization of educational systems in newly emerging systems such as in Palestine.

Comparing Palestinian superintendents with their American counterparts is perhaps inappropriate given that the Palestinian MOE is operating under conditions of occupation, and the resources of the nation are channelled toward maintaining a

political and national identity and achieving liberation. The immediate goal of the superintendents, then, is to prepare for the future development of the educational system when a more conducive political climate would prevail (e.g. establishment of an independent state). Educational leaders can then focus their efforts on developing a vision that will transform the educational system into a vehicle of social and economic change. Hence, while the primary role of a superintendent in a developed country has evolved to encompass educational leadership, the political, economic, and social problems facing nations similar to Palestine seem to hamper a superintendent's ability to assume the role of being an educational leader. Many African, central Asian, and Middle Eastern countries gained their political independence within the past few decades. They view education as the mean to "liberate" themselves from previous colonial rule. To what extent their newly established and politically and economically over-burdened educational systems will allow their superintendents to achieve this objective remains speculative at best.

Despite their varied backgrounds, the data show that all the newly appointed superintendents were promoted or reshuffled from within the system. Enjoying good reputations as educators and being patriots seems to be the only common characteristics of the superintendents. This finding is not in contradiction with situations prevailing in developing countries where appointments to administrative positions are based on political considerations rather than on administrative expertise (Marshall and Newton, 1983). The political role of superintendents in newly emerging systems may, however, differ from that of their colleagues in the West. While most of the literature on the political role of American superintendents focuses on their relationship with their boards of education (Blumberg and Blumberg, 1985; Holloway and Genge, 1995; Jackson, 1995), the political role of a superintendent in a newly emerging country appears to be more a function of supporting the principles and activities of the existing political regime.

The findings showed that Palestinian superintendents voiced the sentiment that doing their work without conflict or impediment, preventing influential people from interfering in their job, and reducing crowded conditions were their primary sources of satisfaction. Just being able to get the job done within a tribal society in the midst of a political uprising and with a paucity of resources seems to be enough satisfaction for these superintendents. It seems that the political and economic pressures bearing on superintendents in a newly emerging entity may constrict their aspirations. These pressures seem to reduce the position to keeping the system afloat. This finding is not in complete contradiction with previous findings on American superintendents. Rusch (1999), for example, has shown that American superintendents appear to gain satisfaction from sources that are related more to the physical than the academic functioning of their schools and districts. One aspect of superintendents in emerging educational systems may differ from its counterpart in developed ones. While both superintendents are subjected to social pressures, the degree of "meddling" in the affairs of a superintendent may be more pronounced in emerging countries than it is in developed ones. This may be due to what Newton (1996) ascribed to small developing societies as being "transparent", where individuals know each other well, and relationships and affiliations are important to the extent that political influence and consideration impinge directly on official action and decision-making.

Although the educational systems within emerging nations are characterized by centralization and bureaucratic control, some, as in the studied population, are

attempting to shift their policy toward decentralization. The findings of this study showed that the superintendents and General Directors claimed that the nature of the relationship between the Ministry of Education and district offices has moved toward decentralization. Their definition of "decentralization", however, is not consistent with the common meaning held in western countries practicing this policy. While the meaning in emerging countries focuses on assignment of tasks without providing the freedom to make decisions, decentralization in the developed countries means effective power-sharing and delegation of authority. This discrepancy may be due to the conception that the superintendency in developed countries is perceived as a central office that acts more as a service agency staffed by facilitators and coordinators than as an enforcement agency that controls and issues mandates as the case in emerging countries (Murphy, 1992). Furthermore, there also may be some apprehension on the part of the system in emerging countries regarding the superintendents' ability to cope with true decentralization once it is implemented fully.

Conclusions and implications

Three main conclusions could be drawn from this study: first, newly emerging educational systems may be hindered by their past educational legacy. Given that such countries emerged recently, or are in the process of emerging from occupation, colonization, or political oppression, it is difficult to erase this legacy within a short period of time. Consequently, educational systems of countries in a transitional state often assume the reigns of power without a clear vision of the new roles the superintendents are expected to perform. Furthermore, due to the urgency under which the appointments of superintendents may be taken, it is not uncommon to find that the superintendents that were appointed are under qualified, received no prior preparation, or underwent training. The combination of superintendent un-preparedness and the absence of an articulated role vision or job description could lead as it did in this study to the Ministry of Education adopting a tight supervisory micro-management policy. It is not surprising, therefore, to observe that such a policy leads to a highly centralized educational system in which the superintendents of education are seen as "middle managers" or "agents" of the Ministry despite their call for decentralization and promotion of educational leadership.

Second, appointment of superintendents without experience or prior preparation, and the absence of certification requirements and recruitment policy (e.g. in-breeding, last minute appointments, political appointments) constitute serious hindrances to promote or affect change. The situation may be exacerbated further if a viable in-service training program is not instituted to offset these deficiencies. Ministries could fall prey to the fallacy or assumption that job-needed skills could be acquired as the superintendent fulfils his/her duties. The superintendent may be able to acquire "managerial" skills as a result of experience, but it is doubtful that she/he could be transformed into a leader of reform and change.

Third, effective change can take place only if the educational system develops a clear vision of its mandate and provides an atmosphere conducive for training the unprepared superintendents. The findings of this study demonstrated clearly that officials at the Ministry did not possess a clear vision of what education is, what needs to be accomplished and to what ends. This deficiency resulted in their inability to articulate a clear vision of the role they aspire for their superintendents. This was

reflected in the confusion shown by the superintendents regarding their perception of their role, and in the discrepancy between the superintendents' and the Ministry's perceptions of that role. It is difficult, however, to formulate the needed vision while one is operating under virtual "gunfire" as was the case in the present study. Furthermore, Palestinian General Directors and superintendents bequeathed an educational system that did not encourage initiative or independent thought throughout the British mandate rule, Jordanian and Egyptian Administration, and Israeli Occupation. Finally, Palestinian superintendents were basically recruited from within a system that has bequeathed a negative legacy. It may be difficult to expect from educational leaders in a newly emerging country to liberate themselves from a legacy of being "managers" to becoming "leaders" spontaneously. Hence, one must seriously question the feasibility of transforming superintendents from being in a managerial role into becoming leaders of change given that they neither have formulated a clear vision for the future, nor they have the underpinnings necessary to undertake the training required to propel them into such a role. One cannot expect change when the most urgent priority is to "survive the day".

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