



# To seek or not to seek professional help? School leaders' dilemma

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – School leaders are professionals who need professional help to enable them better to cope with the ever-changing challenges characteristic to their daily routine. Yet, in considering their hierarchical position in schools, they may be reluctant to ask for professional assistance even when help is available and needed, attempting to maintain their power and firm image. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore how school leaders cope with this assumed dilemma.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In-depth open interviews were conducted with Israeli school principals. These interviews were structured around a set of key issues that the literature identified as being related to help-seeking behavior.

**Findings** – Data indicate principals' loneliness on the job and need for professional help. Yet it appears that the threat implied in exposing one's weaknesses, lack of reliable sources of help within the formal system, personal inhibitions and fears of damaging self-image and losing capacity to influence are barriers undermining their inclination to formally seek help. Therefore, they prefer to informally ask the assistance of lay individuals, but even then adopt various strategies such as avoidance, buffering and differentiation, attempting to prevent the assumed negative consequences associated with help-seeking behaviors.

**Originality/value** – Theoretically, it is possible to conclude that those who are most in need due to their hierarchical position and role complexity are least likely to become involved in help-seeking behaviors. Creating an organizational culture that will encourage school principals to ask for help and establishing a discreet channel within the formal system that will provide professional advice are further discussed.

**Keywords** Principals, Employee assistance programmes, Leadership, Public education

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The centrality of the school principal in determining the quality of school processes and outcomes is widely acknowledged; they are recognized as the school's most influential factor (Day *et al.*, 2001; Hallinger and Heck, 1998). As a result, much emphasis is placed on school principals' professional development and training (Bush, 1998; Harris *et al.*, 1999; Peterson, 2002) assumed to enable them to better and more effectively cope with managerial challenges.

However, the milieu of public schooling is rapidly changing and professional development programs and processes that individuals undergo prior to their appointment as school principals can hardly anticipate all future changes likely to take place in the context of schooling and prepare future principals accordingly. In this sense, it is most likely that school leaders will experience a discrepancy between their professional knowledge and qualifications and those needed in order to effectively cope with changing circumstances. Therefore, school leaders are professionals likely to need



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professional help to enable them to better and more effectively cope with the ever-changing challenges of their daily routine. Yet, in considering their status and hierarchical position in schools, they may be reluctant to ask for professional help even when help is available and needed, attempting to maintain their power and firm professional image.

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Are school leaders likely to ask for professional help when encountering a discrepancy between their professional knowledge, proficiencies and their managerial challenges? The following exploration attempts to provide some answers to this question.

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### **Help seeking**

Help seeking refers to a proactive act of asking for assistance that will enable the help seeker to better cope with difficulties she/he encounters. Help-seeking behaviors are fundamentally interpersonal and their occurrence is contingent on the willingness of the help seeker to actively ask for help. Therefore, help seekers play an active role in determining whether or not they get the help they need.

In organizational settings, decisions about whether or not to seek help are driven among other means by organizational members' motivation to maintain their power and to avoid appearing powerless in front of others (Lee, 1997). While the empirical evidence focusing on help seeking in organizational settings is rather scarce, some evidence may be found on proactive behaviors similar to help-seeking behaviors. Feedback seeking is one proactive behavior often taking place when individuals perceive a discrepancy between current performance and goals (Ashford and Northcraft, 1992; Ashford and Tsui, 1991; Morrison and Bies, 1991). Information seeking is another proactive behavior typically occurring when individuals face a high level of uncertainty in their environment and actively try to reduce their sense of uncertainty by extending their knowledge (Morrison, 1993). Although these behaviors are rather distinct, all of them reflect proactive behaviors enacted to gain additional resources (Lee, 1997).

Seeking help is a rational act likely to benefit individuals who face lack of proficiency and uncertainty through acquiring new skills and knowledge (Leonard-Barton, 1989). Yet, it inevitably has some costs. In addition to the need to invest time and effort in the processes of asking for and receiving help (Tyre and Ellis, 1993; Tyre and Orlikowski, 1994), help seekers acknowledge their lack of proficiency (Karabenick and Knapp, 1988), their dependence on another person (Druian and Depaulo, 1977; Lee, 1997) and may develop negative perceptions of their self-image (Lee, 1997). These in turn create a negative public impression of the help seeker (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker and Weingold, 1992) and decrease individuals' relative power which is considered highly valuable in organizational settings (Kanter, 1977; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977).

### **Help seeking and educational leaders**

While help-seeking behaviors have been extensively researched in relation to gender (Addis and Mahalik, 2003; Ang *et al.*, 2004), adolescence (Boldero and Fallton, 1995; Raviv *et al.*, 2000; Ryan and Pintrich, 1997; Wilson and Deane, 2001), emotional difficulties and disorders (Angermeyer *et al.*, 2001; Roness *et al.*, 2005), ethnicity (Kaniasty and Norris, 2000) and the context of learning (Aleven *et al.*, 2003; Newman, 1998), the empirical literature lacks substantial evidence indicating leaders' inclination

to seek professional help. This is hardly surprising considering that the difficulties individuals need to overcome when seeking help are even more intense when serving in managerial and leadership positions in organizational settings. This statement may be better explained bearing in mind that leaders in most cases are characterized by "power motivation" (Winter, 1993) and are, therefore, concerned with having influence over others. In considering that help seeking adversely affects the power attributed to the help seeker, it may be understood that individuals who serve in leadership positions will less likely seek help as a means to promote their competence (Lee, 1997). The symbolic function that organizational leaders have for setting the direction for the organization while leading and controlling their followers may cool their propensity to seek and ask for help as help seeking is typically perceived as a weakness that may undermine the leader's power and potential influence.

Since the need for professional guidance is well documented in mentorship literature, it is of value to point out that mentorship and help-seeking behaviors are distinct in several respects, although both tackle a similar issue.

Mentoring refers mainly to systematic and long-lasting interactions between veteran and novice practitioners, intended to improve the socialization of the novice to the profession and to decrease his or her stress. In school leadership, mentoring is about the potential contribution of an experienced school leader (the mentor) for the professional conduct and development of his/her inexperienced protégé (Barnett, 1995; Bush and Coleman, 1995; Bolam *et al.*, 1995; Daresh, 1995; Ehrich *et al.*, 2004; Ragins, 1997). Since the professional repertoire and self confidence of novice school leaders is rather limited, mentoring is considered to fill this gap by easing the transition of the newcomer from a previous role to the new one (Southworth, 1995), and better enabling his/her socialization into the principalship.

Help seeking also emphasizes the importance of support for an individual's professional conduct. As far as school leaders are concerned, though, it differs from mentorship in several domains. First, it draws attention to the complexity of issues and circumstances involved and to the lack of simple predetermined solutions rather than to the individual's lack of professional experience. Second, since a large proportion of professional difficulties result from the inherent complexities of educational processes, these complexities become the bread and butter of school leaders' daily life, regardless of their professional experience and seniority. Third, applying for professional support is considered to increase educational leaders' stress following the dilemma of maintaining their "power motivation" (Winter, 1993) or exposing their professional difficulties when requesting help. Fourth, requests for help may be directed to individuals who are not necessarily educators or experienced school leaders. And, finally, help-seeking behaviors occur occasionally when professional difficulties arise.

Hence, while mentorship is about the socialization of novice school leaders, help seeking is more about the motivation and inclination of the professional and experienced school leader to enter a situation in which one needs to confer about one's professional difficulties and ask for the advice or support of others.

The conflict leaders are likely to face between their need for help and their motivation to maintain their power and, therefore, to avoid seeking help is likely to be shared by school leaders in particular, considering the structural characteristics and complexity of the educational realm which constantly challenge their educational proficiency.

Complexity characterizes educational goals, which are systematically ambiguous (Wildavsky, 1979); this is evident in the vague relation between means and ends (Rose, 1984) and in the unreliable measures typically employed to assess goal actualization (Hogwood and Peters, 1985; March and Olsen, 1976; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984). Complexity also characterizes the social and political interests that schools are expected to satisfy and which are typically contradicting (Drucker, 1980; Schön, 1983). Furthermore, a significant number of the problems that school leaders face are unpredictable, unclear (Leithwood, 1994) and ill-defined (Rittel and Webber, 1973), frightening and stressful (Leithwood and Stager, 1989) and must be solved in contexts that are highly variable (Leithwood and Steinbach, 1994). Therefore, effectively coping with these circumstances often requires professional knowledge and skills that principals do not always possess (Leithwood and Stager, 1986). Additionally, schools are characterized by a rather short span of control evident in their flat school hierarchy (Dalton *et al.*, 1980; Elboim-Dror, 1973) and, therefore, the power distance between school leaders and teachers is relatively low. Finally, schools and educational systems are loosely coupled (Weick, 1976), providing limited opportunities for school leaders to share their professional difficulties with their colleagues and to obtain personal or professional support.

Hence, while the complex characteristics of the educational milieu increase school leaders' need to seek professional help, their hierarchical position and symbolic role may inhibit their willingness to become involved in help-seeking behaviors since help seeking implies lack of proficiency and dependence and, therefore, is associated with powerlessness (Lee, 1997).

The purpose of the following study, consequently, is to explore how school leaders cope with this assumed dilemma. Specifically, it attempts to answer the following questions:

- (1) Are school leaders in need of professional help?
- (2) To what extent are help-seeking behaviors common among school leaders?
- (3) To whom do school leaders apply when seeking help?
- (4) What measures do school leaders take to avoid criticism when seeking help?

## Method

### *Data collection*

Interviews were chosen as the major data collection method to enable large amounts of data about interviewees' perspectives to be collected relatively quickly and the immediate follow-up and clarification of equivocal issues (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

Interviews lasting from 45 to 60 minutes were conducted in three different educational districts with eleven Israeli school principals – four men and seven women. Eight principals come from elementary and junior-high schools and three of them from high schools. This group of principals was randomly chosen to participate in the study, representing all levels of public schooling in Israel.

Although the average time interviewees have served as school principals is approximately 12 years, seniority ranged between two and 24 years indicating that this group of interviewees included novice as well as veteran principals.

In-depth open interviews were structured around a set of key issues that the literature identified as related to help-seeking behaviors. The use of an open-interview strategy enabled better exposure of personal perspectives of the interviewees (Paton, 1990) and their deeper thoughts, emotions and ambitions (Bromley, 1986). This less-structured approach allowed the interviews to be much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories, enabling the respondents' views to unfold rather than the predisposition of the researcher (Marshall and Rossman, 1997, p. 80). All interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission to ensure better accuracy. Later on, the recorded interviews were transcribed onto computerized text files, which eventually formed the data set.

#### *Data analysis*

Using the perspective of Marshall and Rossman (1997, p. 111), who see qualitative data analysis "as a search for general statements among categories of data", and the procedures outlined by Marton (1988) and Forster (1994), comments were brought together on the basis of their similarities into categories that differed from one another in terms of the subject matter and meaning which each category represented. The central themes in the interviewees' perspectives were captured, thus, by the analysis (Luborsky, 1994). To enhance the validity of the data categorization and of the interpretations, peer review and structured analysis (Reissman, 1993; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) were employed.

#### **Findings**

##### *The need for help*

When school leaders were asked about their need for professional help, they all confirmed that this is a rather prevalent phenomenon:

*Bob:* There are many situations in which principals need help – knowledge gaps, difficulty in coping with teachers' problems, with parents, with the Ministry of Education, with the municipality – you encounter many issues you don't know how to deal with and there is nobody who can help you.

*Ann:* As a school principal, you find yourself in very difficult situations and you are expected to provide solutions rather than ask questions.

*Pam:* Principals need help all the time: in budget planning, in allocating resources, in dealing with parents.

*Betty:* At the beginning, I got the impression that all the other principals knew a lot and that it is only me who lacked the knowledge. As the time passed, I learned from their questions that the rest of the principals have knowledge gaps similar to mine.

##### *School leaders' loneliness*

When asked about help seeking, one major theme that emerges is the feeling of loneliness they all shared. This feeling intensifies when principals realize while searching for help that they are expected to deal by themselves with the difficulties they encounter rather than ask for help from others:

*Sally:* Basically, you are a lonely wolf and it is all a question of your mental strength. There are many complex issues you encounter and you constantly search for advice. I realized

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rather quickly that people are not willing to provide advice because they don't want to share with you your responsibility. So, less and less you ask for help but rather try to improve your coping techniques.

*Betty:* I am lucky to have a group of close friends who are educators themselves with whom I can consult. But, those who don't have this privilege are totally alone.

*Pam:* When you ask for the help of colleagues, you realize that they don't want to expose their cards. Therefore, you find rather quickly that it is lonely at the top.

*Linda:* Nobody is willing to say the final word. Everyone expects you to decide and, eventually, you are left alone.

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### *Barriers to help seeking*

School principals report on a number of barriers that prevent them from asking for professional help even when such help is needed:

*Exposure and threat.* Asking for professional help implies exposing one's weaknesses, and is considered an act that school leaders are reluctant to undertake:

*Ben:* In many cases, I try to solve problems and to deal with issues using the assistance of the school staff members, especially when delicate issues are involved. Such cases I don't want to expose to the outer world. As a result, there are many problems that receive less than proper solutions.

School principals' tendency to keep problems and difficulties to themselves may be further explained considering that they see a threat in help seeking since help seekers provide others with information that may be used against them at some other time:

*Chris:* When I asked other principals, they always responded that everything is OK in their schools. I rather quickly learned that when I talk about my problems, it doesn't look good in the eyes of the others. Therefore, when asked, I always say that everything is fine. It is threatening to expose your weaknesses.

Another school principal further emphasized:

*Betty:* One of my problems is that I tend to provide too much information and too many details and than I feel bad about it. There were cases in which I requested help from my fellow principals and some of them used that information against me. Such experiences taught me to keep my problems to myself.

*Lack of sustainable and reliable sources of help within the formal system.* Another problem raised by principals preventing them from asking for help is related to the lack of reliable sources within the formal system designed to offer professional help to school principals:

*Amanda:* There is no point to apply to the Ministry of Education for help – the officials there give the problem back to you, arguing that it is your responsibility to deal with it. You don't apply to parents for help because it is dangerous to expose them to dilemmas and details that they might use against you and/or against the school at some later time. The superintendent expects you to deal with the problems by yourself and, finally, there are the teachers – obviously it is not reasonable to expose your difficulties to them as they expect you to act as their leader who knows what she is doing.



*Personal inhibitions.* A few interviewees mentioned that they find help seeking psychologically frightening:

*Terry:* There were many instances in which I should have asked for professional help but I never did. I guess I was afraid to go into a place I really didn't want to enter. This is especially true when the difficulties I encountered were directly linked to my personality attributes.

*Professional image.* Possible negative influences on professional image seem to play a role as well when principals consider asking for help:

*Betty:* When you ask for help, others might think that you lack managerial qualifications: if you don't know how to deal with your problems by yourself, maybe you are not fit to be a principal.

*Ben:* When you ask for help, people might start treating you as if you don't know what you are doing and, eventually, rather than being helped, you will end with even a lower image of your self.

*Fear of losing the capacity to influence.* A major consideration affecting principals' willingness to ask for help is related to their fear of losing their power in the eyes of their followers and outsiders:

*Terry:* The beginning of your professional career as a school principal is the time when you need help most. However, you tend not to ask for help so that others will not think that you don't have the capacity to manage and lead and to make sure they listen to what you have to say. So, you avoid asking for help and you take your chances.

#### *Seeking help in the formal system*

The fear that help-seeking behaviors may be interpreted by others as a weakness and lack of proficiency is evident in particular when principals consider asking for formal help within the educational system:

*Ben:* The difference between asking for formal or informal help is huge: The formal system hardly provides any help but rather criticism. Principals have difficulty formally asking for help because there will always be those who will remind you of your weaknesses. Therefore, I always prefer informal help as a means to avoid future trouble.

*Jane:* I went through several very difficult situations – some of them affected me personally. So, I applied in the first place to the Ministry of Education and to the Local Educational Authority (LEA), but no one viewed this positively and they all said that principals should help rather than be helped.

*Chris:* I always prefer to ask for help when I encounter a problem or a situation that I don't know how to deal with. I feel no shame to say that I don't know. However, I take into consideration how others will perceive my request for help. I will not apply to my superiors or to other high-ranking officials because I have tried that in the past and got burned.

*Ann:* Anything that is more institutionalized and formal creates a threat: If you tell officials at the Ministry of Education about your need for help, you might lose your job. Asking formally for help is a very delicate and dangerous act and I would very carefully consider my moves before acting in this direction.

In addition to the fears of being criticized by high-ranking officials, school principals realize that officials tend to pass the ball back to them when controversial issues are involved and, therefore, that applying for help is not likely to be beneficial:

*Linda:* I once had a child in school who was diagnosed with AIDS and it wasn't clear to me after carefully reading the regulations published by the Director General at the Ministry of Education how I should go about it: should I inform the other kids in school or not. So, I applied for help to the legal department at the Ministry of Education. After waiting for their response for four weeks, they replied that it is up to me to decide, and so I was back in square one.

### *Seeking help informally*

Attempting to avoid negative consequences and potential risk resulting from the exposure associated with seeking help within the formal system, the other possible channel that school principals may address is the informal one. And, indeed, all interviewees report that seeking help informally is a rather common behavior.

One source of support school principals most often use is their relatives and family members:

*Bob:* The easiest thing to do is to call my father. He was a school principal himself before he retired and a well-known and appreciated educator. When I ask for his advice I can be sure that I will get an honest and straightforward answer.

*Amanda:* I sometimes consult members of my family. However, this is very problematic because they are not aware of all the details and considerations that need to be taken. So, you end up with answers that are frustrating both to you and to your family members who see you unhappy with their answers.

Some principals also mentioned an open channel they maintain with other fellow principals whom they consider close and personal friends:

*Pam:* I have close friends who also serve as school principals. With them I feel comfortable to expose my problems and weaknesses. If one of us has a problem she will contact one of the others in no time.

### *Help-seeking strategies*

Although seeking help informally is less intimidating and therefore more common, principals still adopt various strategies intended to reduce potential threats, embarrassment and the exposure of weaknesses that typically follow help-seeking behaviors:

*Avoidance.* This strategy is evident when school principals are unwilling to ask for help when confronted with an issue which demands knowledge and/or proficiency they don't have:

*Sally:* Occasionally, I just say that I don't know. However, there is a limit to the number of times you can say that you don't know. Therefore, I sometimes intentionally ignore issues that don't seem to me very important.

*Buffering.* Lack of knowledge causes stress and so do help-seeking behaviors requiring the exposure of one's weaknesses. Therefore, attempting to avoid the stressful situation, principals tend to postpone the decision or measures required to some later time, hoping that in the meanwhile additional knowledge or clarity will be gained:

*Linda:* When I am not sure what to do, I postpone my decision and in the meanwhile I check various possible directions and gather information. This process provides me some answers



that I didn't have before which enable me to adjust my decisions accordingly. It also presents me to the others as a thinking person.

*Differentiation.* All principals see a great difference between seeking help for their school and seeking help for their own professional needs. In general, they are more easily willing to become involved in help-seeking behaviors for their school:

*Betty:* I have no problem asking for help that will enable us to solve issues related to the school as a whole, to the teachers or to a specific area such as pedagogy, didactics or evaluation. I am all for it and I believe that everything should be done in the open.

Yet, when it comes to principals' personal needs, a more conservative notion towards help seeking emerges:

*Terry:* When my personal needs are involved, the help provided should be discreet and confidential. In most cases, I would prefer to receive help after the school day is over.

In some cases, in order to conceal their lack of knowledge and need for professional help and to avoid potential criticism, principals tend to present their personal need for help as if it were an organizational one:

*Sally:* Once, I faced a major problem which I didn't know how to deal with: A number of parents were not satisfied with the way I managed the school and they started to make a lot of noise, writing letters to the superintendent, the LEA and to the local newspaper. It was clear that they wanted me to resign. Nevertheless, I brought in an organizational consultant and together we decided to treat the situation as an organizational problem and to use this event to promote school processes. Eventually, the school performed better and the criticism of the parents dissipated.

#### *Help provider characteristics*

While school principals consider the informal channel beneficial for help seeking, they still mention a set of characteristics they take into account before approaching someone for help.

All of them mentioned the level of expertise of potential help providers, referring mainly to their proven knowledge and qualifications in a particular area of expertise.

However, in considering the fear of exposure and loss of power when asking for help, principals additionally mentioned two personal attributes of the potential help provider which are crucial in determining their willingness to ask her/him for help:

*Discretion.* In considering the dangers embedded for school leaders when engaged in help-seeking behaviors, all interviewees mentioned confidentiality and discretion as a main concern when asking for help:

*Ben:* Confidentiality is the most important factor when I consider whether to ask for someone's help. Today, school principals are subjected to lawsuits and, therefore, you cannot just reveal information related to your school unless confidentiality is guaranteed.

*Sally:* Confidentiality is a central issue because there are always many wolves and vultures creating threat. You must be extremely careful before you ask for someone's help.

Confidentiality is important even when school principals are clear about what needs to be done:

*Jane:* Discretion is extremely important. For example, at one time I had a problem with drug addicts who used to come at night to the schoolyard and to leave used needles there. The

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reasonable thing to do would have been to call the police and ask for help, but I decided not to do so because I was afraid that the whole story would leak to the local press and that someone might get the wrong impression that children in our school use drugs. Eventually, I decided to lock the gates of the schoolyard at night. That solved the problem quietly.

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*Reliability.* All school principals share the notion that in order to ensure discretion and confidentiality, help providers must be reliable individuals:

*Pam:* I ask the help of a former school principal who is retired by now whom I fully trust. I know she would never do or say anything that might harm me and, therefore, I feel comfortable sharing with her my difficulties and asking for her help.

Another principal provides a vivid example:

*Chris:* I would never ask for help from individuals who are not reliable. For example, it took me some time to learn that the superintendents tend to discuss among themselves various occurrences they encounter in schools. At that point I decided not to tell everything to my superintendent because I knew that if I tell her – all the other superintendents will know about it as well.

In summary, data indicate principals' loneliness on the job and need for professional help. Yet it appears that the threat implied in exposing one's weaknesses, lack of reliable sources of help within the formal system, personal inhibitions and fears of damaging self-image and losing capacity to influence are barriers undermining school leaders' inclination to formally seek help. Therefore, they prefer to informally ask the assistance of lay individuals, but even then, adopt various strategies such as avoidance, buffering and differentiation, attempting to prevent the assumed negative consequences associated with help-seeking behaviors.

## Discussion

The aim of this study has been to assess the extent to which school principals are involved in help-seeking behaviors, the barriers they face, and the strategies they employ when they consider asking for professional assistance.

Loneliness (Assor and Oplatka, 2003) on the one hand and frequent need for help on the other hand seem to characterize the typical circumstances in which school principals operate. The ever-changing and complex challenges they typically confront seem to create a discrepancy between their existing and required knowledge and proficiencies and, therefore, require them to constantly seek guidance as a means for effectively meeting these challenges.

Yet, while help-seeking behaviors are considered beneficial in terms of increasing adaptation and coping proficiencies (Leonard-Barton, 1989), the threat that these behaviors create following the need to expose individual difficulties may promote a negative tendency towards seeking that very help. Based on school principals' responses it is evident that one extreme expression of this notion results in principals' propensity to avoid issues for which they lack the knowledge to deal or to provide inadequate solutions rather than seek the help of others that might improve their coping.

In line with prior findings and claims arguing that help-seeking behaviors present the help seekers as incompetent (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker and Weingold, 1992), powerless (Winter, 1993) and negatively affect their professional self-image (Lee,

1997), this study shows that similar fears affect school leaders and create a negative predisposition towards help seeking. This claim is found true particularly when personal lack of confidence is the cause for the needed help. As previously argued, in leadership positions, these fears play a role (Kanter, 1977; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977) which may be even more intense in the context of schooling considering the rather flat school hierarchy and the small differences in authority existing between principals and teachers. Since professionalism is a significant source of authority for school leaders, they are therefore faced with a dilemma between seeking help and risking exposing difficulties and lack of professional proficiency to others and not knowing how to deal professionally with complicated matters. In considering that individuals placed in leadership positions are characterized by "power motivation" and are therefore concerned with having influence over others, it may be understood why school principals are rather reluctant to expose their difficulties and ask for help.

Based on the interviews' data, it appears that those fears create a tendency not to apply for help within the formal system mainly because school principals are not confident that such requests will not be used against them at some future time. Along the same lines, being accountable for their school, principals seek help using various strategies that are less likely to endanger their professional reputation or status. Such fears and the lack of formal, discreet and reliable channels that offer school principals professional support push them to seek informal help and to follow layman's advice, which is not always beneficial professionally speaking.

Although generalizations drawn from a set of interviews conducted with a small group of school principals can only be suggestive of possible courses of action, it appears that there are sufficient similarities between the findings of this study and other research on help-seeking behaviors to encourage comment on the theoretical and practical implications of its findings for educational leaders working in national public education systems.

Theoretically, it is possible to conclude that those who are most in need due to their hierarchical position and role complexity are least likely to become involved in help-seeking behaviors. Hence, high power positions simultaneously create the need for help and the obstacles to ask for it.

From a practical point of view, it seems that a more broadly based approach is required if we are to encourage experienced as well as novice school leaders to become engaged in help-seeking behaviors and to ask for professional assistance.

Perhaps more could be done formally by the LEA and/or by the Ministry of Education to support school leaders. In realizing the professional distress characterizing school principals' daily routine, it seems important that the formal system encourage them to become involved in help-seeking behaviors and to consider these acts as genuine opportunities for learning. Such a perspective would legitimize principals' application for help rather than leave them to deal alone with issues which at times exceed in complexity expectations of public schools. This implies that the formal system may consider initiating and establishing mechanisms that would allow school principals to obtain professional help.

In realizing that principals are unwilling to expose their professional difficulties to high-ranking officials, it is suggested that a constructive approach allowing for the development of bottom-up initiatives and the establishment of school principals' professional communities would be beneficial. Furthermore, since professional

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development programs for future school leaders are typically monitored and supervised by high-ranking officials, it may be beneficial to train future school leaders to become active learners not only when undergoing their pre-service training but also at later stages of their careers. Emphasis should therefore be placed on the notion that searching for advice or knowledge implies acting professionally rather than unprofessionally. Finally, establishing within the formal system a discreet channel that would enable school principals to confidentially ask for guidance and professional advice seems beneficial for school principals as well as the educational system as a whole. This would decrease school principals' professional distress and would improve their abilities to cope with the various issues to which they are exposed during their daily routine.

Although these suggestions may be directly linked to the difficulties and barriers expressed by school principals, one major limitation of this study rests in the fact that, because of its exploratory nature, it did not account for the effectiveness of the schools studied or for individual competence levels that previous studies have shown to be related to the tendency towards help seeking (e.g. Butler and Neuman, 1995; Karabenick and Knapp, 1991).

Therefore, it is suggested that future studies should be wider in scope and employ comparative research designs that take into account school principals' competence and their school outcomes.

Hence, although power motivation seems to play a dominant role in determining the professional behavior of school principals, it seems that encouraging them to become involved in help-seeking behaviors may eventually promote their professional authority. Therefore, establishing a formal support channel rather than leaving principals to cope by themselves with highly complicated issues may improve trust and climate within the educational system and may eventually be beneficial for the advancement of children and the educational system as a whole.

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