Navigating ambiguity: Early childhood leaders' sense-making of their identity in a new mid-level role

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Abstract

Mid-level roles in education have been widely explored, primarily in schools, but little research has been conducted during the systemic reform that involves creating a mid-level role between end units and the system. The present study explores the sense-making of Early Childhood Leaders (ECLs) at the initial stage of their new role as mid-level managers. The new role was established as a result of a national administrative reform that, among others, made the systemic hierarchy more vertical by establishing a new mid-level layer between superintendents and early childhood teachers. This qualitative research included semi-structured interviews with 47 mid-level preschool managers. The study sought to uncover their views of the main challenges associated with assuming a new mid-level managerial role, and their coping styles in this role. The analysis revealed that the new mid-level management role raises three challenges concerning the ambiguity of identity: power base, voice and interpersonal loyalty. ECLs cope with these challenges by assuming different types of leader identities, those of the representative, the companion, and the mediator. The implications of the findings for the limited knowledge on ECLs and for the introduction of the new mid-level roles are discussed.

Keywords: early childhood education; kindergarten; leader identity; middle management; mid-level managers; preschool education
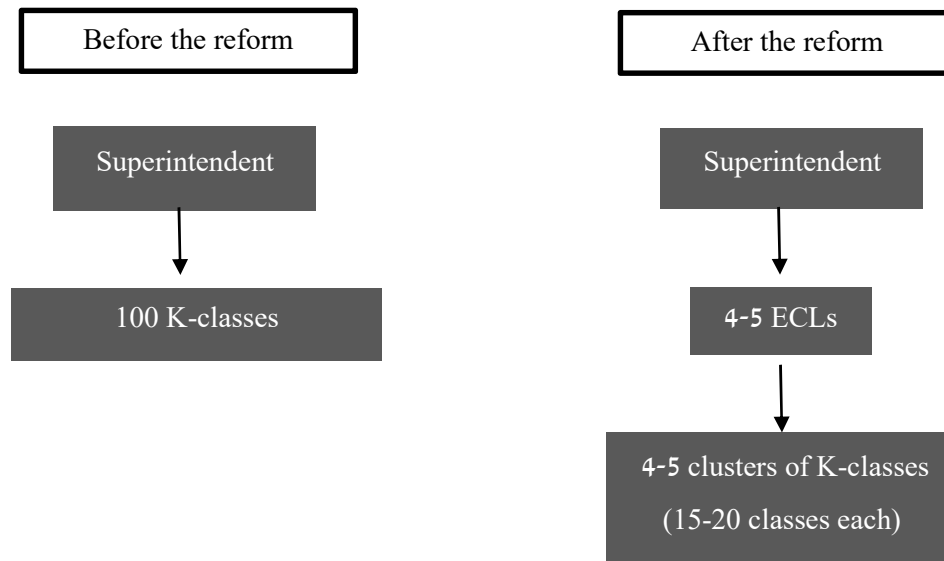
1. Introduction

Although the governance of early childhood education (ECE) has undergone a significant transformation in the past decades, research on early childhood leadership is in its early stages (Hujala et al., 2013). The knowledge on early childhood leadership is greatly limited even in countries that place strong and consistent emphasis on the training of ECE teachers (Eskelinen and Hujala, 2015). The purpose of the present research is to expand the knowledge on the connection between governance and leadership in ECE settings by exploring the way early childhood leaders (ECLs) cope with identity challenges in assuming new mid-level managerial roles introduced by systemic changes. We followed the establishment of the ECL role in the Israeli pre-school education system over the first two years of its implementation under an administrative reform initiated by the Israeli Ministry of Education.

The Israeli preschool system has several unique characteristics. First, it is universal and inclusive (Al-Yagon et al., 2016; Ziv and Aram, 2018). The Mandatory Education Bill, which took effect in September 2012, provides free education to all children aged 3 and older. Since 1999, the number of children in the Israeli preschool system increased from 284,294 to 512,214 (Ministry of Education website, 2017). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics website (2017), 91.92% of children aged 3-5 attend preschool. Second, the Israeli preschool system is relatively independent. Preschools are financed and supervised by an independent division in the Ministry of Education, separate from the school divisions. Kindergartens are located within neighborhoods, usually grouped in pairs. Newer kindergartens in populated neighborhoods are located in large educational complexes, but most preschools are separated from the schools. Third, the Israeli preschool system is relatively

centralised. The Ministry of Education is the direct employer of kindergarten teachers (Ziv and Aram, 2018). The ministry finances the construction and equipment of preschools. A hundred and forty-five country superintendents are responsible for 20,374 k-classrooms across the country. The role of local authorities in the preschool system is relatively minor (Al-Yagon et al., 2016; Ziv and Aram, 2018). Last, the Israeli preschool system is characterised by low quality standards: average of 27 children per room (the maximum number allowed being 35) and high adult/child ratios (2:35 for 4- and 5-year-olds and 3:35 for 3-year-olds).

In 2015, as part of an overall effort to improve the quality of kindergartens, the Israeli Ministry of Education established a new role: that of the ECLs. The main job description was leading about 20 kindergarten teachers, grouped into 'clusters' based on geographic proximity. In other words, the reform created a new middle-level management role, which reported directly to the superintendents. Before the reform, preschool superintendents were in charge of about 100 K-classes. In the more populous municipalities, the number could reach up to 150 classes per superintendent. Superintendents had no administrative assistant, and their responsibilities included hiring teachers and overseeing their professional development, coordinating between the Ministry of Education and the municipality, answering parents' complains, and handling various emergencies. Dividing preschools into clusters of 15 to 20 classes, and assigning an ECL to each was a significant change in the governance of the public preschool system. Figure 1 illustrates the change in the Israeli system.

Figure 1. Structural changes in the Israeli public preschools system following the administrative reform.

Before the reform
Superintendent
↓
100 K-classes

After the reform
Superintendent
↓
4-5 ECLs
↓
4-5 clusters of K-classes (15-20 classes each)

The main assignments of the ECLs were to reduce the superintendents' workload, assist with the administrative work (paperwork, data collection, and delivering messages to and from teachers). Once a month, ECLs were required to facilitate a group meeting of all teachers in the cluster (on their own or assisted by other professionals). Following Ministry guidelines, teachers selected for the job were active, full-time teachers, with at least 5 years of seniority as preschool teachers. The Ministry also required the ECLs to hold an MA degree (with some exceptions). Leaders were appointed with little knowledge of what was expected of them. They were required to discharge their new functions in seven hours per week (a workday). The research followed the reform in the first two years of its implementation.

This phenomenological study of establishing new middle level management role within the preschool education system combines three central trends in education policy: first, the growing interest in research, policy and practice with middle level leadership and its contribution to the improvement of the education system. Second, the acknowledgment in the importance of ECE and growing investment in providing

and regulation ECE services. Third, the contribution of top-down systemic reforms to the improvement of educational systems.

There are two common uses of the term 'mid-level' roles in the educational management literature. One focuses on *mid-level roles within end units*. For example, teachers at mid-level in schools are often structurally situated between senior leaders (principal and vice-principal) and teachers with no formal leadership roles (e.g., Shaked and Schechter, 2018). The other use focuses on *mid-level roles between end units and the system*, for example, principals acting as mid-level intermediaries between systemic representatives and the teachers (e.g., Mizrahi-Shtelman and Drori, 2016). The present work focuses on the latter: mid-level roles between end units and the system.

A key attribute of mid-level roles in education is that individuals in such roles usually maintain original field work responsibilities, while additionally taking on new leadership responsibilities (Wenner and Campbell, 2017). Mid-level roles involve formal administrative functions such as supervision of field workers, implementation of policies, and the provision of professional development (Shaked and Schechter, 2018), as well as non-formal socio-psychological functions, such as managing relationships and managing oneself (De Nobile, 2018).

Policy contexts of systemic reforms and large-scale changes are described as frequently including the creation or redefinition of mid-level roles (Shaked and Schechter, 2018), since these roles are viewed as instrumental for reforms success. Despite the significance of mid-level roles for the success of systemic reforms, most of the literature on mid-level roles between end units and the system focuses on the meanings individuals at mid-level ascribe to policies (Spillane et al., 2002), while the empirical evidence on these individuals' views regarding the main challenge in

assuming new mid-level managerial role and their coping styles is scant. To the best

of our knowledge, the introduction of mid-level roles between end units and the

system in preschool has not been explored. The present research investigates the

experiences of ECLs at the initial stage of implementing their new role as mid-level

managers in the wake of a national administrative reform that, among others, made

the systemic hierarchy more vertical by creating a new mid-level layer between

superintendents and early childhood teachers. The study uses the theoretical approach

of sense-making to explore leaders' constructions of their new mid-level roles,

focusing on the new meaning assigned to ambiguous and unclear situations (see

Weick, 2009). In this way, the study seeks to generate new insights with regard to

identity challenges and types of leader identity in assuming new mid-level managerial

roles.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Early childhood education

The recognition in the importance of ECE has been growing since the beginning of

the 21st century. This has been particularly so in developed countries, where public

and political attention has shifted to quality and gaps in the provision of preschool

education (Melhuish et al., 2015). The centrality of 'a good start in life' was stressed

by a growing and compelling body of empirical evidence indicating that 'preschool

programs have lasting positive effects on young children's cognitive and social

development' (Pianta et al., 2009: 49).

This recognition has been fueled largely by the work of international agencies

such as the OECD and UNESCO. OECD and UNESCO reports (e.g., OECD, 2017;

Sun et al., 2015) have generated interest in childhood education as a key cost-effective

catalyzer of educational progress and as a motivator for encouraging parental

enrolment in the labor market in a competitive global economy (Elango et al., 2015).

The understanding that the economic value of preschool education depends on its

effectiveness (Campbell et al., 2014) has produced a ripple effect on ECE policies.

The central effect was to mobilise countries to form governance structures that

promote systemic accountability and ensure systemic quality (Pianta et al., 2009).

Redesign of governance of the public ECE systems may attempt to affect one

or more aspects (Regenstein, 2015): (a) coordination—connecting parts and

programmes of ECE (e.g., national curriculum); (b) alignment—promoting

administrative coherence across units (e.g., using evaluation and standards, funding,

or supervision); (c) sustainability—ensuring long-range implementation of changes

(e.g., legislation); (d) efficiency—allocating resources in a cost-effective manner; and

(e) accountability—informing stakeholders and involving them in issues of

performance and outcomes.

Many ECE systems are currently undergoing a massive expansion process in

which ECE is underwritten by the private sector and the third sector, and restructured

as a public service financed, or operated at the state level (Gambaro, 2017). In many

countries we witness the formation of expert policy units, the establishment of data

collection evaluation agencies, and the institution of training and monitoring

authorities in early education (Male and Nicholson, 2016). Countries have been

realigning ECE under a new governance that acts as a 'glue' connecting preschool

education to national educational aims and ensures reliable childcare services

(Melhuish et al., 2015). This trend has been documented in England, with the

introduction of the National Childcare Strategy, in 1997 (Chalke, 2013), with the

National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) aimed

at leaders of children's centres in 2005 (Ang, 2012), and with the revised Early Years

Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) in 2012 (Chalke, 2013). Since then, the

NPQICL has been discontinued and the latest Statutory Framework for the EYFS is

DfE (2017). Changes have been introduced in the preschool curriculum in Sweden

(Håkansson, 2016) and in Australia, through the national curriculum document, the

Early Years Learning Framework (Davis et al., 2015). In this spirit, standards and

assessment tools are becoming part of the discourse and work of educators in ECE in

Australia, New Zealand, and the US (Smith et al., 2016).

     The new governance of ECE includes structural reforms that unify pre-school

systems and childcare provision under one regulatory framework, direct provision, or

financing of ECE services to new age groups (European Commission, 2014). It also

regulates the quality of services by forming (or reforming) the national curriculum,

raises entry standards to the profession, and invests in in-service professional

development (OECD, 2011). Structural reforms are frequently described as including

the creation or redefinition of leadership and management roles.

2.2 Leadership in early childhood education

The research field of early childhood leadership is still in an emerging stage (Fenech,

2013). Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, and Briggs (2004), who reviewed research on

leadership in early childhood concluded that despite the importance of early

childhood, we have little descriptive knowledge and few normative frameworks

relating to the leadership practices of those working in preschool education. Similarly,

Rodd (2013a) contended that 'unless there is an active and strong identification and

recognition of the leadership role and a broader conceptualisation of their professional

role and associated skills, members of the early childhood field will not be able to

meet increasing demands for competent administrators, supervisors, educators, researchers and advocates' (5). Moreover, Thornton, et al. (2009) argued that the lack of research focusing on leadership in ECE contexts is surprising because of the wealth of research on leadership in schools.

Some research has addressed the role definition of ECLs. In Finland, for example, the literature identified five main areas of responsibilities of early childhood leaders: leading care, upbringing and teaching; leading service organization; leading work organization; leading expertise; and being an expert in ECE (Heikka and Waniganayake, 2011). Training for leadership positions in ECE is lacking, and leaders are not adequately prepared for the job (Sims et al., 2015). Nevertheless, leaders often develop a field-based understanding of their role. This is a form of socio-relational leadership that relies on moral authority and trust, rather than formal authority. Exploring leadership of early childhood centres in Victoria, Australia, Rodd (1996) found a similar shared general understanding of the effective leadership characteristics in ECE, with a few differences between individuals and sites.

Much of the research on ECL demonstrates how it interacts with new pressures and policies. For example, Woodrow and Busch (2008) found that a mandated curriculum, auditing, and the commodification of children's services hindered the development of strong leadership identity that makes possible social activism and engagement. Sims et al. (2015) reported that despite pressures concerning quality in the management of preschool education, early childhood leaders still value relational aspects above all.

In particular, one school leadership framework, which appears to accumulate support in the discourse on ECL, is distributed leadership (Heikka et al., 2013). The notion of distributed leadership subverts the understanding of leadership as

concentrated in the hand of one office holder, and seeks to see it as distributed

between multiple professionals and teams (Heikka and Waniganayake, 2011; Heikka

et al., 2013; Kangas et al., 2016; Rodd, 2013b).

Despite considerable interest in new formal professional development

initiatives in early childhood (Hujala et al., 2013), the structural effects having to do

with the realignment of current leadership roles and with the creation of new roles

(such as mid-level management roles) in this process remain under-explored.

2.3 Mid-level management

The basic defining element of a mid-level leadership role is that it is a 'management

role within the middle of a hierarchy' (Busher and Harris, 1999: 308). Consequently,

from this central position in organisational hierarchy, individuals in these roles engage

in extensive and direct communication with both top-level management and

employees. This dynamic often leads mod-level managers to feel 'squeezed from the

top and from underneath' (Gleeson and Shain, 1999: 468). The responsibility for

achieving the goals and meeting expectations of both ends of the hierarchy are placed

on the mid-level leaders' shoulders, who find themselves engaging heavily in bridging

the two sides (Glover et al., 1998).

Top management expects mid-level leaders to broker new policies that reshape

employees' role demands and authorities, and to do so quickly, in a way that will

benefit politically the upper levels of managers and policymakers (Spillane et al.,

2002). Employees often expect mid-level management to help translate abstract

policies into practice, and to actively or passively deflect undesirable demands. As a

result, mid-level leaders must cope with the burden of overwhelming expectations

from both top-level management and employees by using their discretion and filtering

messages from above and below. It has also been suggested that mid-level roles produce a duality in the identity and commitment of mid-level managers (Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Glover et al., 1998).

This complex dynamic makes mid-level leaders' pursuit of gaining and maintaining legitimacy both in the eyes of top-level management and of employees a central challenge for educational leaders. But ultimately, mid-level leaders' roles are about promoting policies they did not formulate. This challenge is made more difficult by the fact that their managerial status and authority are neither detailed nor fully recognised, and their employees are often their peers, which makes voluntary cooperation essential (Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Spillane et al., 2002). Evans (2010) suggested that middle-level managers may have an important role to play in nurturing the professionalism and discretion of street-level bureaucrats, being their direct managers.

Torrington and Weightman (1989) argued that mid-level roles in education are particularly demanding because they require balancing management and collegiality, given that the employees are also professionals. Therefore, mid-level leaders in education are merely first among equals (Glover et al., 1998). Glover and colleagues (1998) also argued that the size of the team being managed also shapes mid-level management, so that those managing a small team are more likely to view themselves as merely taking on additional tasks than as mid-level managers.

Among the key duties of mid-level leaders in education, De Nobile (2018) identified the promotion of pedagogical aspects, such as assisting in the professional development of educators, and of shared aspects, such as distributed leadership. Similarly, Busher and Harris (1999) argued that mid-level educational leaders preform four functions: (a) translating policies of top-level management into practice (also

known as bridging or brokering); (b) acting as a liaison or representative, negotiating with the external environment on behalf of employees; (c) promoting group identity and solidarity; and (d) improving professional performance and learning. Mid-level leadership is often associated with managing professional learning communities whose aim, among others, is to affect children's learning and growth, promote organisational improvement, empower stakeholders, and encourage their participation (Wenner and Campbell, 2017).

2.4 Sense-making as a conceptual lens to explore coping with identity challenges

Individuals' perception of their identity affects their thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and goals (DeRue et al., 2009). One's identity as a leader emerged as a key predictor of effectiveness and career development (Day and Harrison, 2007). According to DeRue and colleagues, people 'often have different cognitive representations or schemas about what leadership behaviors and actions are appropriate' (DeRue et al., 2009: 222), which leads to experiencing ambiguity of identity. Bartel and Dutton (2001) suggested that individuals are driven to resolve identity ambiguity by social interactions. In teamwork where leaders' formal position and differentiation are unclear, individuals are said to receive ambiguous social feedback and experience greater uncertainty about their identity as leaders (DeRue et al., 2009). Accordingly, individuals find that they need to cope with ambiguity and tailor their identity to fit their evolving understanding of the social context (Pratt et al., 2006). We adopt sense-making as a conceptual lens to explore how mid-level leaders view identity challenges related to new roles and how they adapt their leader identity.

Sense-making is a cognitive process in which individuals engage in understanding events or circumstances that are new, ambiguous, unclear, or

unexpected (Shaked and Schechter, 2018; Weick, 2009). Weick (1979) argued that in this process individuals 'construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many objective features of their surroundings' (164). Sense-making is an active construction process that focuses on the present stimulus, but also draws on ones situated experience and knowledge (Shaked and Schechter, 2018; Weick, 2009). Educational leaders' sense-making process is not only individual, but it is also based on prior collective experience, knowledge, norms, and traditions (Ball et al., 2012). The educational administration research has suggested that sense-making helps explain how policies affect leaders (Shaked and Schechter, 2018).

3. Method

The study seeks to understand the roots of identity challenges that characterise the new mid-level management. We adopted a qualitative research approach that is naturalistic, exploratory, inductive, minimally structured, and open to respondents' feedback (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). Specifically, we embraced a phenomenological design, as our aim was to better understand a given phenomenon (the new mid-level role in Israeli ECE), and to accomplish it by exploring individual perceptions and experiences (Creswell, 1998).

3.1 Participants

The data were derived from a research commissioned by the Israel Ministry of Education The research followed the systemic reform in the first two years of its implementation. The ministry chose the superintendents whose ECLs participated in the study, but ECLs were randomly selected by the researchers. Forty-seven ECLs

participated in the study (100% response rate). The participants (100% female)[1] had

an average experience in preschool education of over 20 years (90% of teachers had

more than 10 years of experience). The vast majority of participants (n=43) held an

M.A. degree, three participants had a B.A. degree, and 1 held a PhD. Participants

were interviewed by the first author, who is not part of the ECE system in Israel.

3.2 Data collection

We used a semi-structured interview because it provides a general framework and

ensures coverage of the main topics, at the same time allowing participants to raise

new topics (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). The interviews were guided by an

interview protocol, which was reviewed by an expert with a background in

educational leadership and qualitative research. Among the representative questions in

the protocol were: 'What are your main job requirements'? 'What challenges and

difficulties did you face in the first two years as ECL'? 'Which elements supported

your work as ECL'? Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted

mostly in the kindergartens and preschools. Nearly all the interviews were recorded

and transcribed. Informed consent was obtained from participants, and participants

were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. Therefore, we use pseudonyms when

citing excerpts in the article.

3.3 Data analysis

The interviews were analysed using the Atlas.ti program. We followed the four stages

of analysis described in the literature: (a) organising the data, (b) extracting themes;

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[1] In general, early childhood teaching is a highly gender-segregated profession in the West. In the most heterogeneous countries (e.g., Norway), the ratio of males in the public education system is 9%; in less heterogeneous countries, the ratio of males is negligible (e.g., 2% in New Zealand and 0.2% in Israel) (Education Review, January 20, 2013; Gravé-Lazi, January 11, 2016).

(c) testing the emergent narrative; and (d) searching for other narratives (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). Therefore, we first identified and coded units of information; second, we connected units of information to form themes; third, we used comparative analysis in coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2014) to structure our emergent narrative; and fourth, we used peer review to enhance trustworthiness and reliability, and to explore the possibility of alternative narratives (Marshall and Rossman, 2014).

3.4 Ethics

In the process of this study, ethical aspects of data collection, analysis and publication were honored. First, potential participants were informed about the purpose of the research and invited to participate voluntarily. Second, interested participants provided written consent. Third, the participants were informed both in writing and verbally that they are free to withdraw their participation at any time or refuse to answer specific questions. Fourth, the research was conducted with systemic support and endorsement, therefore it was important to participants that the research staff commit to complete confidentiality and anonymity, so that participants' identity would not be revealed through their comments. Fifth, in all publications participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms and identifying details were obscured to maintain anonymity.

4. Findings

4.1 New mid-level ECLs and challenges related to ambiguous role identity

The interviews conducted with ECLs revealed that ambiguity presents a significant identity challenge when teachers assume a new role as mid-level leaders and acquire the ability to act as such. Following the reform, ECLs found themselves holding a

management position, while continuing to teach in their kindergartens. Interviews conducted with leading k-teachers showed that the new position was characterised by multi-dimensional ambiguity. We found ambiguity in three main areas: power base, voice and interpersonal loyalty.

Ambiguity in the power base. Mid-level positions are characterised by a vague power base and blurred boundaries of authority and responsibility, leading to resistance among colleagues. Some of these, especially the senior teachers among them, objected to the idea that a fellow teacher was now their superior. Others did not understand the objectives and authority of the new role, found it unnecessary, or simply objected to collaborating in carrying out some of the additional assignments the leaders sought to impose on them.

> Shira: In the beginning, I visited the preschools, dropped in to say hello. At first it was difficult since I'm not among the senior teachers and I was afraid there might be resistance among the senior teachers… The great difficulty was to present my role, what am I here to do… It was very difficult to define… I come to a colleague of mine and have to justify why I'm there and what I'm doing.

Ambiguity in the voice. The new ECLs struggled to develop their new voice as leaders while maintaining their role as teachers. They found it difficult to articulate what characterises their perspective of mid-level management, what defines it, and in what way it differs from the points of view of the superintendent and of the teacher.

Karen: I didn't know exactly what our role was […] If I see something wrong in the preschool, can I say 'I see you have an rowdy group. Can I help you', or should I go to the superintendent

Ambiguity in interpersonal loyalty .Mid-level ECLs have conflicting loyalties. On one hand, their new position strengthens their connection with the superintendents, and they are expected to mediate between the superintendent and the teachers. On the other hand, ECLs maintain their position as practitioners and identify closely with the teachers' perspectives:

Dana: The superintendent is only one person. And they have a huge workload. I think it made it easier for them, and on the other hand they have someone who is in the field, available to the teachers, who hears them. The superintendents know everything, they have full control, but the teachers are also stressed out and sometimes they are afraid to approach the superintendent, and we are their champions.

Sannaa: The teachers say that ECLs 'snitch' on the teachers to the superintendent. If we find something wrong, we let her improve it, and yet they say that ECLs are the superintendent's snitches.

4.2 Types of leader identity of new mid-level ECLs and their association with challenges deriving from ambiguous identity

The thematic analysis indicated that ECLs navigated ambiguity by adopting one of three types of leader identity in their new mid-level role: those of the representative,

the companion, and the mediator. Each type copes differently with the challenges

related to ambiguous identity (Table 1).

Table 1. Types of leader identity of new mid-level ECLs and their association with

challenges related to ambiguous identity

	The representative (N=16)	**The companion (N=20)**	**The mediator (N=11)**
Ambiguity in the power base	Legitimacy	Referent power	Experience
Ambiguity in the voice	Superintendent's voice	Voice of the self	Voices of top management and teachers
Ambiguity in interpersonal loyalty	Underlining her loyalty to the superintendent	Underlining her loyalty to the teacher	Underlining her loyalty to the system

The representative. ECLs of this type of cope with ambiguity in the power base by

deriving their authority from that of the superintendent. They use that power at times

by allowing the superintendent to make the decision, or more commonly, they derive

confidence from the framing of their job as representatives.

> Yafa: I felt resistance from two veteran teachers… I allowed them not to
>
> participate. It was a professional development session I led on behalf of the
>
> superintendent and I said I was a messenger of the superintendent and it was
>
> all right if they felt they should not be here.

New mid-level managers of this type also cope with ambiguity in the voice by

adopting patterns of superintendent's behaviour when visiting preschools and

communicating with teachers. They handled ambiguity by adopting the superintendent's voice and imitating what they believe to be the superintendent's norms and behaviour. Note that while doing this, ECLs made sure to openly identify themselves as management. Under this framing, the ECLs view themselves as representing the superintendent while working to advance the interests of the teachers. The ECLs framed themselves as representatives and the voice of management—their authority, therefore, deriving from a legitimate power base:

> Bar: It comes from an equal footing … I make comments to the girls on things they don't do the right way in their kindergartens, and they know I comment now, and it remains between us, but the next time when it comes from the superintendent it won't end well.

Last, representatives cope with ambiguity in interpersonal loyalty by giving precedence to loyalty to the superintendent and feeling accountable mostly to the superintendent. They regard retaining the superintendent's trust in them as an important part of their work. Nadira: 'We sit [the ECL and the teachers], talk, I hear their problems… I tell the superintendent what the problems are, I call her, keep her updated'.

The companion. Companions frame their job as a colleague or a big sister. They are reluctant to claim the superintendent as the source of their authority because they retain their identity as teachers. ECLs of this type cope with ambiguity in the power base by resorting to referent power (i.e., personal relationships and interpersonal skills). ECLs of the companion type invested great effort into avoiding been perceived

as representing the superintendent and intentionally obfuscated the leadership aspect

of their position. As a result, they struggled with issues that required authority and

collaboration: Shlomit: We issue recommendations, the superintendent issues orders.

ECLs of this type cope with ambiguity in the voice by preserving their old

voice as teachers and colleagues. Karen: 'I preferred to visit [the kindergartens] as a

friend who came to support and help with whatever is needed'. Ruth added: 'We refer

to ourselves as an companion teacher rather than as a leading teacher'. This type of

mid-level manager clings to her identity as a teacher and finds it difficult to develop

her voice as a leader. This perception of middle management conceals whatever

advantage the leader might have in experience or professionalism, and frames the

relations between the leader and the teacher as voluntary.

Finally, ECLs of this type cope with ambiguity in interpersonal loyalty by

displaying loyalty first and foremost toward teachers in their cluster. From their

perspective, the teachers' trust is essential for their work and they believe that they

must gain it to do their job well. Jasmin: 'If I know there are problems in the class, I

keep it confidential'.

The mediator. The mediator manages ambiguity by adopting the perspective of the

common good. ECLs of this type cope with ambiguity in the power base by claiming

to represent the system as a whole as professionals, and by inspiring loyalty:

> Gadot: In the beginning I didn't know how to make the girls attend the cluster
>
> meetings… I could have told them the superintendent said it was mandatory,
>
> but how can I make them want to come?… I needed them to feel that they
>
> belong to the group. When they felt that they belonged, they would come and

take responsibility and it made everything more efficient… And who wins?

The child.

Mediators cope with ambiguity in the voice by representing both sides:

the teachers and the superintendents. Mediators serve the common good and

their powers are rooted in their professionalism and expertise. Gadot: 'I feel

responsible for the good relationships between the teachers and the

superintendent'. Mediators must navigate between the teachers and

superintendents and embrace duality as intrinsic to their job. The authority of

this type of ECL derives from their success as mediators and the essential

nature of their work.

ECLs of this type cope with ambiguity in interpersonal loyalty by

maintaining multiple loyalties and navigating between them, trying to serve

what they consider to be the good of the public or the system.

Abigail: Last year, there was a teacher who went through some serious

difficulties, and she was 'out'. She was extremely upset and I thought she

needed help. So I reported to the instructor, the counselor, and the

superintendent to see what they could do for her. It wouldn't have happened if

it weren't for the ECL.

5. Discussion

The article examined the establishment of the middle level management role in Israeli

preschools as part of administrative reform. Addressing the needs of the ECE system

through mid-level management implies the diffusion of ideas and policies from the primary and secondary to the preschool system. Establishment of mid-level management has many advantages but ECLs who assume these roles appear to experience a high level of leader identity ambiguity.

The present research explored this ambiguity and the way in which mid-level leaders cope with it. Wenner and Campbell (2017) explained that ambiguity in mid-level leadership derives from the main characteristics of the leaders—practitioners who take on leading responsibilities in addition to their teaching responsibilities. DeRue and colleagues added that ambiguity derives from different understandings of what leadership is and of what is required or expected from leaders (DeRue et al., 2009). Ambiguity paints the field of action of mid-level leaders in shades of gray, allowing them to reconstruct their understanding of work through social interactions with their peers and superiors (Bartel and Dutton, 2001). At the same time, as DeRue at al. suggested, this ambiguity adds a level of uncertainty regarding their identity as leaders. We found three main arenas of ambiguity: in the power base, in the voice, and in interpersonal loyalty. These ambiguities may be exacerbated by the process of reform, but they are intrinsic to the structure of mid-level leadership. Multi-level ambiguity illustrates how uncertain mid-level management roles are. ECLs are required to lead with a blurred understanding of their authority, their authenticity, and their loyalty.

The difficulty of coping with the ambiguity of a new leadership role seems to characterise the ECE systems worldwide. For example, a qualitative study in Australia found that ECLs struggle when attempting to lead parents' committees (Campbell-Evans et al., 2014). A quantitative study of preschools in Hong Kong found that: "[t]eacher leadership in relation to leading the community (organisational learning)

when considering school-wide issues or as sharing and realizing a clear vision for the school was almost non-existent" (Li, 2015: 441). ELCs, therefore, often experience difficulty becoming versed in leadership roles, possibly because of internal reasons and professional socialization.

The present study found that Israeli ECLs address ambiguity by sense-making and reframing the boundaries of their role. According to Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann (2006), mid-level leaders navigate ambiguity by reconstructing their identity to accommodate the developing social context of their work. We identified three types of leader identity: the representative, whose power derives from that of the superintendent; the companion, who wields referent power and acts toward her peers as first among equals; and the mediator, whose power drives from her experience and professionalism, and who acts on behalf of the common good.

The most common pattern of leadership was that of a companion. Twenty out of 47 ECLs reframed their work with reference to friendship, acting as big sisters or collegial advisors. This sense making avoids the authoritative aspects of the job and establishes a voluntary relationship between the leader and her peers. These findingc are consistent with those of Gonzales (2004), who reported that teachers avoid taking on leadership positions because of the fundamental conflict between ideas of leadership, power, and advantage on one hand, and the egalitarian ethics that characterises the teaching profession on the other. The ECLs' fear of changing their relationships with their peers may also explain their tendency to adopt the companion model. This fear was also identified by Margolis (2012), who found that recent teacher leaders' relations with their peers deteriorated and their new position affected collegial relations negatively. Leaders who reframed their role as companions were

more likely to feel pressured by 'serving two masters' and by the conflicting demands

of each side, as described by Gleeson and Shain (1999).

A local explanation of this finding may have to do with the national power

distance. From an international perspective, Israel is considered to have a low power

distance culture (i.e., acceptance that power is distributed asymmetrically). This

condition favours informality in society, and in governmental administrative culture

there is often a significant gap between formal requirements and informal

understanding (Dery, 2002). As a result, ELCs may have to reconcile their new role

with the dominant administrative culture.

The second most common pattern of leadership was that of the representative.

Sixteen out of 47 ECLs adopted this model. Representatives reframed their work as

the voice and delegate of the superintendent, and interpreted what they understood to

be the superintendent's demands. This strategy helped representatives cope with the

gray areas of authority and with resistance to it. This model conforms to studies

indicating that teacher leaders' confidence increased after taking on leadership roles

because they felt connected with management and empowered as leaders (Hunzicker,

2012). At the same time, this sense making of their work pushed leaders away from

their peers and reframed them as part of management in the eyes of their colleagues

(Margolis, 2012). One possible explanation of this finding is related to the masculine

model of educational leadership (aggressive, impersonal, etc.), which in many

countries, including Israel, is hegemonic, and women promoted to managerial roles in

education often feel pressured to conform to it (Oplatka, 2001).

The least frequently adopted model was that of the mediator, which we

identified in 11 out of 47 ECLs. Mediators regard themselves as serving the common

good, bridging the demands of the system with the needs of the teachers. The power

of the mediators lies in their experience as teachers and as leaders, and in their success in serving as a bridge between the system and the practitioners. Other studies suggest similar mediation patterns among some of the leaders (Wenner and Campbell, 2017). One possible explanation of the fact that this is the least frequently adopted model is that the mediator model requires a high level of professionalism, which is difficult to accomplish, especially in the first years of leadership. Another explanation is the scarcity of role models from whom leaders can learn and whose work they can imitate.

ECLs who were interviewed for this research rarely addressed the fact that they were pedagogical leaders that their work affects their wellbeing, development, and education of young children. They focused their concern and attention on the ambiguity that followed from the leadership aspects of their role. One possible explanation is that the notion of pedagogical leadership in Israeli ECE is not fully developed. In Israel, the meaning of professionalism in early childhood is yet to be defined, as has been done in other countries (Chalk, 2013; Heikka and Waniganayake, 2011). The fact that ECLs do not regard themselves as pedagogical leaders can also be explained by the framing of the reform as an administrative one, focusing on the reassignment of some of the authority of the superintendent, and on the reorganisation of kindergartens into clusters. It is also possible that the framing of the reform as administrative rather than pedagogic contributed to the multi-level ambiguity. The administrative reform does not rely on the strength and the experience of the ECLs as preschool teachers, but assigns them to a new territory of leadership.

Last, it is intriguing to reflect on the power bases, voices, and loyalties that were absent in the present study. French and Raven (1959) distinguished between reward power, coercive power, referent power, legitimate power, expert power, and

informational power. We found that three categories were useful for the new mid-level ECLs: the legitimate, referent, and expert bases of power. The reward basis of power is rarely relevant in the case at hand, possibly because ECLs have no access to resources to reward teachers. Similarly, coercion is less relevant because ECLs cannot punish teachers. The informational basis of power was also found to be less relevant, perhaps because mid-level leaders often participate only partially in the decision-making process; most decisionc are made at the management level, whereas ECLs operate at the local administrative level. In addition, we found that ECLs regard the superintendent, the system, the group of teachers, and themselves as stakeholders with respect to the voices communicated and the loyalties acknowledged. One main stakeholder was absent from the narrative, however: the parents, possibly because the interviewed ECLs perceive the ideal parents as having low agency and value only their involvement with the organisation, not with learning itself (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). Further research is needed on the factors that advance or hinder certain power bases, voices, and loyalties of new mid-level managers in early childhood settings.

6. Conclusions

The study provides new understanding of the role of mid-level ECLs, and explores the emergence of the mid-level role in its first years. This understanding may be of value given the growing knowledge about the important contribution of these roles to the administrative and pedagogical success of educational systems. The study also contributes to better understanding of ECE and the role of ECLs in the local Israeli context. The insights generated by the present study expand the limited knowledge on

ECLs in Israel and can help improve the future design of mid-level leaders' role in the

Israeli ECE system.

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