

Principals' Management Styles for Coping with Discipline Problems: Practical and Theoretical Aspects

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Abstract

Although discipline problems in educational settings are universally common, they are rarely mentioned in the educational management literature. Three cases of severe discipline problems in two elementary and one middle school in Israel are described. The methods by which principals coped with these cases are analyzed according to political, bureaucratic and collegial educational management theories (Bush, 2011). Principals' management style was found to combine one approach as a main strategy with another one as a secondary strategy. Due to their busy schedules, principals calculated their efforts by preferring lenient measures to more aggressive ones, taking each case separately, avoiding analyzing the organizational implications and not responding according to their own personal educational management approaches. The discussion suggests that students' misbehavior has a significant impact on principals' daily activities and should, therefore, be emphasized in practical and theoretical conceptualizations.

Keywords: Principal, discipline, school, management, problem behavior.

1. Introduction

A search for scholarly literature on school management reveals that one aspect, common organizational 'noise,' is rarely mentioned. Unlike planning, budgeting or human resource management that are covered in many managerial theories and studies, one may get the mistaken impression that pupils' rude behavior and violence simply do not exist (Marais & Meier, 2010). Such cases, which are not easy to define or conceptualize, typically occur in unexpected situations that violate the norms of behavior that school staff attempt to establish. These situations of chaotic reality penetrate classroom environments, as well as principals' offices. Despite the fact that daily school schedules are fully planned in advance, teachers and principals are forced to spend precious time dealing with children's misbehavior. Reducing discipline problems serves important goals, among which are providing a peaceful atmosphere, reducing stress, improving school and classroom social climates and reducing teacher burnout (Friedman, 1995a), while increasing students' achievements and satisfaction. The current study examines such organizational 'noise' in order to portray its practical nature and examine its theoretical implications. This paper presents three case studies of ways that principals cope with discipline problems analyzed within the framework of three management theories (Bush, 2011).

1.1 Management and School Discipline

Students' disruptions and misbehavior are common universal phenomena (Bru, 2009; Infantino & Little, 2005; Marais & Meier, 2010; Psunder, 2005) which present obstacles to teaching and learning. Misbehavior is a broad term that relates to "any act that is considered as inappropriate for the setting" (Charles, 1996, p. 2) or "behaviors that do not conform to the established rules of the classroom and school" (Robinson & Ricord- Griesmer, 2006, p. 788). Although most disruptions tend to be rather minor, rare cases of eruption of violence may threaten students' and teachers' physical and emotional well-being. For example, according to the reports of American principals in 2008-2009, in one tenth of the schools, students do not respect their teachers; in four percent, total disarray prevails and in about thirteen percent, at least one gang crime was reported in city schools (Neiman, DeVoe & Chandler, 2010). Studies in Israel confirm this picture of much noise, negative relationships between students and teachers and frequent outbursts of aggressive behavior (Khoury-Kssabri, Astor & Benbenishty, 2009).

School principals fulfill many roles and dealing with students' disruptive behavior is among the least preferred by them. Hartzell and Petrie (1992) maintain that successful management of discipline problems depends upon the principal's effective application of fundamental administrative skills in each of the three dimensions of school life: 1) the organizational structure of the school, 2) the behavior of the teachers and 3) the behavior of the students. Empirical evidence points to the importance of the school structure and the organizational aspects. For example, student misbehavior occurs less often in smaller schools and in schools where the rules are clear, fair and firmly enforced (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985). When teachers and principals agree upon the strategies for dealing with misconduct, it paves the way for more effective enforcement of rules. Recent large-scale interventions of school-wide reform to support positive behavior tend to focus on the general school environment in which both teachers and pupils view their schools as a place for success, rather than on the consequences of specific discipline problems (Horner et al, 2005). Other studies, however, portray principals' style of coping more as fire-fighting strategies than as planned system-oriented interventions. From an organizational standpoint, for example, during the induction of novice teachers in Israel, principals tend to emphasize the establishment and enforcement of norms for behavior (Fisherman, 2011), rather than offering their staff guidance and training (Zusman, 2011).

1.2. Management Theories

Since actual organizational 'noise' is rarely mentioned in the management literature, the current study aims to portray how principals cope with discipline problems and to examine whether these managerial efforts adhere to any theoretical model. As in many other fields of management, there is no single all-embracing theory of educational management. The existence of different perspectives creates what Bolman and Deal (1984) describe as 'conceptual pluralism,' in which each theory has something to offer in explaining behavioral events in educational institutions. This study suggests the application of educational management theories to the area of discipline according to the established typology of Bush (2011), the political, collegial and bureaucratic management theories.

1.2.1 Political Management Theories

Political models embrace those theories which characterize decision-making as a "bargaining process" (Bush, 2011, p. 99). These theories are based on insights gained by watching party politics and real-life bargaining negotiations accompanied by decision-making processes. The central assumption is that members within an organization seek to fulfill their individual and collective interests by using power, tactics, threats and etc. Conflict, therefore, is an endemic feature within the organization and is likely to occur at any time. The political approach implies that discipline is an inevitable conflict between students and organizational policies. Children dislike many aspects of school life. They attempt to bend the norms and rules to suit their convenience by their behavior (e.g. not arriving on time to class, not doing homework, etc.). Teachers view these acts as a threat to their authority and use power or bargaining to

enforce their demands. An interpretation of this approach indicates that the core mode of action is the *use of coercive and manipulative measures to guarantee control of students by authoritarian figures*.

1.2.2 Collegial Management Theories

Collegial theories stress that organizations determine policy and make decisions through a process of discussions leading to consensus. Power is shared among some or all members of the organization who are thought to have a mutual understanding about the objectives of the institution (Bush, 2011). Unlike bureaucratic organizations, power in collegial schools is divided more equally among staff members who gain larger shares of power through their expertise rather than through their formal positions. In such schools, teachers tend to work better together and to consult with each other along professional and personal lines of communication. Common values and sharing of ideas are more prevalent. Decisions based on common values help staff determine policy by consensus. Collegial models tend to be idealistic and normative (Brundrett, 1998). They encourage involvement and participation in the decision-making process. Yet, they overlook issues such as conflicts among sub-groups and the status and accountability of the head of the organization.

Disciplined conduct in an orderly environment is perceived as a fundamental value that helps transmit the cultural heritage, assists in maintaining a proper climate necessary for learning and prevents dangerous disarray from breaking out in the classrooms. Staff members work hard to reach consensus as to rules by which to run the school. Since reaching agreement by consensus is a lengthy and arduous process, chances are that rules and regulations (according to a code of conduct) have not always been determined and rules are often unclear. Most teachers do their best to implement their values and help students behave properly. The core mode of action of collegial management theories *emphasizes discussion and value clarification, rather than punitive measures, to educate students to internalize norms of behavior*.

1.2.3 Bureaucratic Management Theories

Since the principles of bureaucratic organizations were proposed by Weber (1947), bureaucracy has become synonymous with inefficiency and impersonality. That is a simplistic and unfair description. Because organizations tend to grow and become more complex, some operating rules must evolve in order to enable smooth operation and to avoid anarchy. Bureaucracies tend to emphasize the importance of law and order. Detailed regulations are implemented to clarify what is expected of organizational members and disobedience is treated by specific predetermined sanctions. The implicit assumption is that people behave according to the goals of the organization as long as the regulations fit their interests and needs. Misbehavior may occur when the rules are ambiguous, the sanctions are not perceived as severe enough or enforcement is inefficient and inconsistent. The definition of misbehavior is based on deviance from the regulations.

Most schools operate within a bureaucratic framework in which the principal and the teachers are positioned on the higher levels of the hierarchy with the students at the bottom. Children are expected to obey all orders that they receive from adults. The division of roles clearly defines who, among the staff, is authorized to punish a student. The core mode of action of bureaucratic management theories *is based on rigid use of rules and sanction to maintain law and order inside the organization*.

The three theoretical models can be divided into two main categories that enable us to analyze the mode of principals' interventions. First, the criteria used by principals to define student's behavior as misbehavior; second, the principals' mode of intervention. Each category can be divided into four sub-categories, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Differences among the three models regarding definitions and resolutions of discipline problems

Elements of Management	Bureaucratic	Collegial	Political
Criteria of definition:			
Who defines the case as misbehavior	teachers according to rules and regulations	teachers in consultation with head and other teachers	the person with the most power in the situation
Misbehavior is determined according to	deviance from rules and regulations	behavior violates moral rules and code of conduct	behavior challenges authority figures
Existence of clear rules	high	medium	ambiguous
Principals' involvement	according to severity of event and regulations	in extreme cases	only when needs to 'oppress revolt'
Mode of intervention:			
Mode of response	according to regulations	hold discussion with pupil	flexible: bargaining, threats / punishment
Who decides	teacher. penalty is set by regulations	joint decision by head and teachers	head. may add parent or student
Flexibility of decision	low. Fixed sanctions according to regulations	some flexibility	high flexibility
Typical response	a letter to parents, written reprimand, detention	clarification talk, demand for apology	bargaining, threats

The research questions are:

1. How do principals cope with discipline problems?
2. Do principals' coping styles adhere to any of the three theoretical managerial models?

2. Method

Since coping with student's misbehavior is a very complicated occurrence, the current study provides three unique examples of real people in actual situations. Such case studies enable the reader to understand how ideas from abstract management theories can be combined (Yin, 2009). The choice of case studies enables (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) gaining some preliminary insights as a pilot stage prior to the use of quantitative methods.

2.1 Sample

The sample included two elementary schools and one middle school in a medium-sized city (pop. 50,000) in northern Israel. School A is a Jewish religious elementary school with a population of 360 students composed of 12 1st- through 6th- grade 'regular' classes and 1

regional 5th-grade class of special education. The principal, Ruth (48 years old), has served in her current position for almost ten years. In addition, 2 other participants were the 2 veteran teachers who were involved in the case presented. School B is the largest school in the same city with 21 1st-grade through 6th-grade classes and over 700 students. The current student population comes from diverse lower and middle class families. The principal, David (42 years old), has held his position for two years. Participants from this school also included a teacher and the school counselor. School C is the municipal junior high school which includes over 800 students in 21 7th-grade through 9th-grade classes. The school is organized according to 3 grade levels and various subject-matter departments. Each grade-level coordinator is required, among many other roles, to help solve discipline problems. The principal, Rebecca (45 years old), has taught in and managed several other institutions prior to having been chosen to head this middle school three years ago. Two teachers and a grade-level coordinator also participated in the study. The schools were selected by quota sampling (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) in order to include various types of schools (elementary and high school; secular and religious). This school sample represents about one third of the student population of the city. Needless to say, the sampling of only 3 case studies does not seek to present solid ground for drawing valid conclusions.

2.2 Tools

Collecting information was carried out by semi-structured interviews with the principals, the teachers and the other participants who were involved in the case studies. After a warm-up of 'small talk' and obtaining formal demographical details, the interviewees were asked to describe a case of a discipline problem ('Could you please tell me, in detail, about a behavior problem that occurred in your school recently?'). Probing questions helped to clarify the details (how it began, who was involved, how the principal was informed and what information he/she was given about the case, etc.).

2.3 Procedure

The researcher (author) works as a school psychologist at the local municipal Psychological Services and is familiar with the 3 principals. The researcher requested their participation in the study via telephone and arranged an appointment at their office. He asked them to select and describe a case of a discipline problem in which they were asked to be involved. No predetermined guidelines were set. In addition to the semi-structured interviews with each principal, they were asked to name one or two teachers who were involved in the case (e.g. taught the class when the disruption occurred). These teachers were requested to participate in the study by to principal and met the researcher after agreeing to do so. Such triangulation widens the perspective of the case and prevents a unilateral presentation. Each interview took between 30-60 minutes.

The procedure of the study protected the privacy of the teachers and pupils by ensuring their anonymity. The identities of the principals and of the schools were kept confidential by deletion of identifiers, using crude report categories, micro aggregation, and error inoculation (Cohen & Manion, 2011).

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is based on the theoretical framework of Bush (2011) that was developed and adapted to contain concrete parameters especially suited to this study (see Table 1). The analysis focuses on two main aspects: First, the criteria used by principals to define students' behavior as misbehavior. Here we examine who defined the offense as misbehavior (teacher/principal)? According to what criteria misbehavior is determined (deviance from rules/moral code/ challenge to authority figures)? The existence of clear rules in school (e.g. existence of code of conduct/ when it was updated); and the amount of involvement requested of the principal. Second, the principals' mode of response: what is the nature of response (according to rules and regulations/holding a discussion/ flexible and bargaining)? Who decides and punishes (principal/ principal and teachers)? Is the decision-making process

flexible (low/certain/high)? What are the typical reactions (punishment /discussion/ bargaining)?

3. Results

The results depict three case studies that, according to the classification of Merriam (1998), provide: a) descriptive data in a narrative form that begins with a detailed account of the occurrence and b) interpretive data that develops conceptual categories inductively in order to examine the initial theoretical assumptions. Each case study is examined according to the causes and the considerations that have led the principal to decide how to respond. Due to space limitations, the cases are presented as 'stories' without direct quotations of the interviewees' responses.

3.1 First Case: Disarray in the Science Museum

Last Wednesday, the fourth-grade class, with only boys, visited a science museum in a nearby city. The students continually interrupted the guide, laughed loudly and quarreled with each other. They were so rude that the guide asked the teacher if it was a special education class. Deborah, the homeroom teacher (referred to as an 'educator' in the following) felt ashamed by the pupils' misbehavior. Usually, they behaved properly in her lessons and interrupted only in other teachers' lessons, during the breaks and outside of school. Some of them simply enjoyed watching violent acts. A day later, Esther, the principal, was in a meeting with the school inspector when she was called urgently to restore order in one of the lessons. Later, she informed the educator and the science teacher about the students' rude behavior. The three of them consulted about how to respond. Deborah suggested canceling a science outdoors activity that was planned to take place the next week. The suggestion was unanimously accepted and the principal asked Deborah to inform the class and representatives of the PTA. The pupils protested against the punishment and asked the educator to change her mind. "You are responsible for the results of your behavior," she explained and refused to reconsider the decision. A few parents called expressing doubts about whether collective punishment was a smart decision. The principal explained to the boys, in person, that the punishment was a "natural result" of their conduct and that it was implemented after many warnings.

3.1.1 Analysis

General global and national changes in the social climate of schools have paved the way for specific cases, such as the rude behavior of the class in the museum. First, classes in Israeli schools are, on average, relatively large compared with OECD countries (Hemmings, 2010). Crowded classes certainly increase the level of noise and animosity. Second, the rapid growth of the ultra-orthodox religious sector has created bitter competition with the orthodox religious sector, which among other things, has led to a division of classes by gender (Volansky, 2010). Boys' classes, unlike girls' classes, have become a frequent setting for behavior problems. In addition, the general attitude of Israeli parents to schools and schooling has dramatically changed over the last decades. The rising standard of living and better education has created a situation in which more people hold academic degrees. This has led parents to behave arrogantly, criticize teachers and principals publicly and engage in threatening measures of sending letters to higher authorities in order to change school decisions. This involvement by parents of the fourth-grade class is one example.

Esther considered the case 'severe' since the rude behavior not only interfered with learning, but threatened to escalate into greater animosity. She explained that it was the first time this year that the children dared to rise up against their educator's authority, a symptom of deteriorating discipline. Being especially sensitive to misbehavior that occurs in activities outside of school, she tends to brief teachers and students before going on field trips and other events. Feeling that the incident at the museum damaged the school's reputation, Esther laid the responsibility on Deborah's shoulders, preferring that she would be the first to respond, before referring the case to her. She explained that early involvement by the principal may undermine the teacher's authority and be interpreted as a sign of mistrust. "I believe that the principal's duty is to assist staff members. Let them solve problems on their own instead of

replacing them. I expect my teachers to lead their classes. Signs of weakness are dangerous, especially with regard to part-time teachers," she explained. Esther clearly backed up the teacher and mainly used a collegial style of management. She consulted with several staff members, defined the case according to specific values and reached a consensus as to how to respond, emphasizing the use of 'natural results,' as opposed to punishment. No rules prevailed in the school, simply because Esther preferred flexibility to rigid laws.

3.2 Second Case: Unwanted Invitation

Ron (3rd grade, fictive name) grew up in a broken family. His parents are now engaged in a bitter divorce process. At school, he behaves in an aggressive and irresponsible manner. For example, he may leave the group without permission on school trips, fails to concentrate in class, seriously interrupts lessons and engages in violent quarrels. At home, he behaves tyrannically towards his mother. Last year, she tended to defend him and blame the teachers. Since Ron's behavior became intolerable, it was decided last year to move him to another class. Since this resulted in no improvement, the senior staff of the school is presently considering a referral to a special education class for next year.

Last Thursday, David, the principal, was in his weekly appointment with the school psychologist when his secretary interrupted them to announce that Ron was fighting with another child. David stopped the meeting and rushed to the classroom. On his way, he met the child being dragged by his mother to his office. The quarrel broke out when another student took a cookie from Ron, who became so infuriated that he kicked the teacher who came to separate them. The mother, who 'happened' to cross the corridor (she was used to visiting school almost every day), heard the shouts, rushed to see what was happening and forcefully took her son away to prevent him from taking revenge. They met the principal in the courtyard. David tried to calm the child down, who was angrily kicking his mother. In his office, Ron continued to be so boisterous that the principal took him by the hand, forced him to sit down and together with the psychologist tried to clarify what had happened. After several minutes, the mother, who remained in the waiting room, entered the office. Her presence rekindled Ron's rage and he began to attack her in order to run away. The principal quickly rushed to block the door. "I am stronger than you," he mentioned calmly. Ron gave up and sat down. For a few minutes, three adults tried to convince a small child not to take revenge, but in vain. Later David invited another child to negotiate between them, but Ron was so furious that the meeting was soon stopped. Only then, did David order the mother to take the child home, suspend him from school for one day (Friday) to allow him to calm down and return to school on Sunday. To ensure that they left school quietly, he personally accompanied them to the gate.

A day later, the father came to school. The principal and the teacher explained that they could no longer tolerate Ron's behavior. The father promised to become more responsible and take care of his son.

3.2.1 Analysis

Ron's unique family constellation falls within global and local demographic trends as seen in the large increase in divorce rates. Such personal and societal crisis influences pupils' well-being and poses a greater challenge to the ability of schools to teach and educate. The principal's definition of a case as a discipline problem is based mainly on two parameters: The severity of the disturbance to the lesson and the challenge to the teacher's authority. David applies those criteria flexibly. Generally, he empowers the teachers to solve small-scale difficulties. Other than a few cases of inexperienced teachers (including Ron's teacher) that need his involvement, he rarely gets involved in ongoing disruptions. Through such selective assistance, he signals to his staff that it is their responsibility to overcome difficulties and maintain their authority. On the other hand, his willingness to assist, when necessary, helps maintain a peaceful atmosphere and prevents small-scale problems from turning into full-blown crises. The principal weighs the severity of the problem not only by the results of the case, but also according to the child who is involved. Ron's name almost always triggers that conditioned reflex to leave everything and rush to help.

As a principal, David is committed to his teachers' success, shares the same values with them and is determined not to let misbehaving students interfere with the smooth operation of the school. Since he does not like bureaucracy, the school has no formal written regulations. Ron's suspension is a coercive measure. At first, the principal separated the child from his rivals. This act negated the educator's role and weakened her authority; as if he had replaced her. David later admitted (with some embarrassment) that suspension seems to him to be a sign of weakness. He would have preferred to calm the child down and then send him back to class. As an educational leader, he usually prohibits teachers from suspending students, yet in the face of failure to contain the child's anger, he decided to bend one of his long-held commitments (no suspension) in favor of another, more urgent one (no violence in school). Based on the three interviews conducted at the school, it seems that David's style of management is quite collegial. There is a lot of teamwork in which many decisions are made together. He tends to support his staff by backing their decisions (although, not automatically). Meanwhile, he does not hesitate to use 'political' measures to personally intervene and exert his power to solve problems quickly. Unlike the common use of written rules and regulations of the bureaucratic model and the frequent use of conversations of the collegial style model, body language signs are the most direct measure of radiating ones feelings (best-suited to politically-oriented managers). With his friendly smile and tall appearance, David gently manages to cause others to obey him, especially in stressful situations. Throughout the interview, one could not avoid noticing the discrepancy between strongly declared collegial principles together with the rejection of any 'political' connotations, on one hand, and the flexibility to make decisions, some quite authoritative, on the other hand.

3.3 Third Case: "Dirty" Cards

It was 9:30 A.M. when Miriam, the 8th-grade level-coordinator, crossed the silent corridor and found three boys sitting in a hidden corner. When she approached the group, she noticed Dan (8th grade) playing cards with two of his classmates. Reluctantly, he handed her the cards. Upon seeing their pornographic content, she blushed. "How do you dare sneak out of class . . . without permission... in the middle of a lesson... to play with these dirty cards?" she asked angrily. She immediately confiscated the cards and sent the boys back to their classes. During the break, together with the school counselor, Miriam discussed the case with Dan. "I found the cards outside of school," he explained. "Besides, what is wrong with playing with these cards?" he replied with pretended innocence. For a few minutes of tense and fruitless discussion, Dan refused to cooperate, wouldn't admit to buying the cards and spoke rudely to the teachers. When Miriam realized no progress was being made, she decided to take the boy to the principal. In her office, he continued to defend his position. In order not to waste time, Ruth, the principal, invited three of his classmates to her office. She interrogated each of them separately, integrating the many details of their responses into one story and invited Dan back into her office. Upon being confronted with his classmates' version, Dan finally 'showed his cards' by admitting to having taken money from his mother to buy pornographic material. Ruth decided to suspend him for two days and asked the counselor to invite his mother the next day. A day later, the angry mother arrived at the meeting. Not only was she lacking in embarrassment concerning the content of the cards, but objected to the principal's arguments and continued vehemently to defend her son's behavior. The principal's warning that her son would be transferred to another school did not change her mind. Once Ruth and Miriam realized that the mother would not help them, they explained their decision and ended the meeting. Searching for other sources of support, they decided to invite Dan's father (the parents were divorced), whom they had not met before. His first reaction to the invitation was anger and Miriam feared that they would face a harsh response. However, during the meeting, Ruth managed, with her soft and caring voice, to convince him to support her position and commit himself to his son's education. Within the next two months, Dan's behavior improved markedly.

3.3.1 Analysis

The middle school deals with discipline problems in a typically bureaucratic manner. The school has a very detailed list of rules and regulations, which specifies exactly how students and teachers are expected to behave. Sanctions are attached to each kind of violation and a clear sequence of reactions is defined. For example, once a student comes late to school, the teacher talks to him and registers the tardiness in the student's file. If tardiness is maintained, then a letter is sent to the parents and they are invited to a serious talk with the educator and the grade-level coordinator. If students continue to violate the rules more than 5 times, then they are suspended for a day. The regulations, which are written by the principal and some of the senior teachers, are distributed to everyone before the opening of the school year. One of the secretaries is in charge of keeping a record in students' personal files.

The organization runs a structured chain of command as how to deal with discipline problems. Teachers are expected to control rude behavior. When a student misbehaves severely, the grade-level coordinator is asked to intervene (sometimes together with the grade-level counselor). In the next step, one of the two vice-principals is responsible for taking action. Only a few problems are referred to the principal. Interestingly, the principal has been leading a comprehensive drive to attain an ISO 9000 quality standard over the last two years. Some of these standards refer directly to issues of misconduct.

In the current case, Ruth and Miriam determined the severity of the case less by the content of the cards and more by the degree of disobedience to the rules. i.e. leaving class without permission and being out of the teacher's control which made them feel helpless. The nature of the reaction was in accordance with the regulations. However, the principal used the content of the cards to create a crisis in order to change Dan's behavior. She combined formal rigid treatment (suspension) with a more flexible political approach. When the boy, and later his mother, rejected her arguments, she looked for another powerful person (the father) who would join in to help her. Although the cases were selected randomly with no predetermined hypothesis, combining the analysis of the three cases portrays clear trends of management styles (see table 2), which appear in most of the parameters used (e.g. existence of clear rules).

Table 2. Resolution of discipline problems analyzed by management style
C – collegial, P – political, B – bureaucratic

Elements of Management	School		
	A	B	C
<u>Criteria of definition:</u>			
Who defines the case as misbehavior	c	p	b
Misbehavior is determined according to	p + c	p + c	b + p
Existence of clear rules	c	p	b
Teachers ask principal	p + c	p + c	b + p
<u>Mode of action:</u>			
Nature of reaction	b + c	p	b + p
Who decides	c	p	b
Flexibility of decision	c + p	p	b + p

Typical reactions	b + c	b + p	b
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4. Discussion

Three cases in which principals were faced with coping with discipline problems were examined in depth. The three principals were personally acquainted with the students and had already taken some educational measures on their behalf in the past. When a problem emerged, it set into motion a chain of actions, from a managerial standpoint, of which the first was the principal's decision to 'own' the problem (Friedman, 1995b). Once they became involved, the principals directed their efforts to non-coercive measures to solve the problem. Yet, when no improvement was attained, all of them exercised their power and punished severely, sometimes against their own declared ideology. Interestingly, none of the principals applied creative thinking or second-order solutions (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974). For example, in regard to the pornographic cards, they preferred responding with condemnations and threats instead of curiosity and humor. Analyzing the similarities and differences among the principals (Table 2) shows, first, that each of them used one main management style, coupled with an additional minor management style (Esther - mostly collegial and less political; David - political + collegial; Ruth - bureaucratic + political). Second, it appeared that bureaucratic considerations were not mixed with 'political' actions or collegial consultations.

The combination of a solid, but flexible, management style portrays the principals' efforts to cope with complicated situations in pragmatic ways. Changing tactics, letting angry children calm down, using threats, intensifying a crisis, discussing with a group in order to change norms, reflect attempts to select the most effective measures. Once the initial measures failed, the principals intensified their pressure and escalated the amount of power they used to solve the problem. Flexibility has its disadvantages: The 'political' mode used by David contradicted the 'collegial' atmosphere of his school. Some teachers confided that they would have preferred that he consult with them before taking action, or, at least, signify to them which difficult students should receive special attention.

None of the principals made an attempt to analyze the case according to a broad, systematic approach in order to implement organizational measures. According to Drucker (1994), the most common mistake among decision-makers is treating generic situations as if they were a sequence of random events. Such pragmatic behavior, without capturing the unifying rule, leads to frustration and fruitless action. The principals could have inferred that each individual case was actually a warning sign for inconsistent application of their policy. For example, the rude behavior displayed by students towards some of the teachers who taught fourth grade could have been seen as a lack of agreed-upon unifying policy or a lack of support among the teachers.

As Bush (2011) argues, each of the theoretical models discussed here provides valuable insights into the nature of the management style of the principal. Yet, all of these perspectives are limited in that they do not give a complete picture of the schools, the principals and other participating protagonists. The applicability of each approach depends on the size of the institution, the organizational structure, the time available for management and the availability of other resources, as well as the external environment, such as those factors mentioned in the first case. These models help turn the spotlight on particular aspects of the school setting and, consequently, leave other features in the dark. Since "the ultimate test of theory is whether it improves practice" (p. 210), principals may profit from theory once they select the most appropriate approach to a particular issue and avoid a one-dimensional stance. Developing 'conceptual pluralism' (Bolman & Deal, 1984) would help them grasp the underlying complexity of factors that are involved in each case.

In summary, the current study is only a pilot, a first call for more elaborate quantitative and qualitative studies that would examine the nature of interruptions faced by principals and the ways they cope with them. Recalling Kurt Lewin's saying that there is nothing more practical than a good theory, it is hoped that drawing on management theories to analyze principals' interventions will contribute to our understanding of everyday cases. Such efforts would help

to include more chaotic elements into the well-established theoretical models that are already in existence.

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