

The role and role context of the Lebanese school principal: Toward a culturally grounded understanding of the principalship

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Abstract

This study provides empirical data about the role and work context of the school principal in the Lebanon. The study applied grounded theory methods in collecting and analysing the data. The data were collected through a series of open-ended interviews with 53 secondary school principals, and focus group interviews with 8 principals from public as well as private schools. The results show that Lebanese school principals, despite a wide variety of backgrounds, share a core set of role expectations. Discussion of the results compares the role and role demands of the Lebanese school principal to what has been reported in empirical studies of principals in Western countries. While the results reveal many role similarities, it is also clear that the socio-political and cultural conditions in Lebanon shape the role and role demands of Lebanese school principalship. In contrast to their Western counterparts, principals in Lebanon: (1) give limited attention to the instructional dimension of the role; (2) assume limited responsibilities as the agent for school change and improvement; (3) adopt an authoritarian orientation in enacting the role; and (4) hold a highly idiosyncratic ‘craft’ conception of the work of the principal. The study’s results reinforce the need for more in-depth cross-cultural comparative studies of education professionals.

Keywords

contextual role demands, cross-cultural comparative analysis, principalship in Lebanon, principal role, socio-political work context

Introduction

A growing number of researchers warn of the cultural dependency and ethnocentricity of the educational administration’s theoretical and empirical knowledge base. They invite us to question its ‘portability’ across cultural contexts and its usefulness for understanding the school principalship

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in non-Western settings (Bajunid, 1996; Cheng, 1995; Dimmock and Walker, 2000; Hallinger, 1995, 2003; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Hallinger and Leithwood, 1996, 1998; Heck and Hallinger, 2005; Hofstede, 2001, 2004; Walker and Dimmock, 2002). However, like their counterparts in many other countries, Lebanese researchers, policymakers and practitioners continue to pay little attention to these limitations. They typically adopt Western ideas as 'universal truths' in their research and practice; failing to consider the specific cultural context, challenges and perspectives of Lebanese schools and communities, and their teachers and school leaders (Akkary and Greenfield, 1998; Bashshur, 2007, 2010; El-Amine 2009).

Purpose

This article reports on the role and work context of the Lebanese school principal as perceived by the principals themselves. It paints a picture of the role, its demands and the contextual factors that the principals identify as shaping their daily performance on the job. The field work's primary purpose was to provide empirical data about the role and work context of the Lebanese principal in order to develop a culturally grounded conceptual understanding of the school principal role. The study was intended as a first step in laying the foundation to develop a conceptual model of the role dimensions that highlight commonalities across school type (public and private) and location (rural and urban). The objective of the study was to answer three questions:

1. What are the role responsibilities of the Lebanese school principal?
2. What are the contextual factors that Lebanese principals identify as shaping their work life and their role demands?
3. What are the unique aspects of the role of the Lebanese school principal and how does it compare to conceptions of the role in Western literature?

Principals hold a position that is key to the functioning of their schools (Marzano et al., 2005; Mathews and Crow, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2001, 2007), making their perspective on their role, its challenges and demands critical to any attempt at improving the school's administration (European Training Foundation 2010; Hallinger and Leithwood, 1994). However, as Hallinger (2003: 346) argues, ignoring the school social and cultural context as it relates to the principalship renders any attempt at understanding this role 'meaningless'. With its focus on the case of the principalship in Lebanon, the results of this study offer the broader global community of researchers and theoreticians new insights on the interplay between cultural context and role performance in the field of educational administration. Furthermore, the study provides perspective on the applicability of models and theories developed in Western contexts to informing and studying school administration and leadership practices in other cultures.

Cultural Context: The Educational System in Lebanon

The Lebanese educational system is built on a long tradition of valuing the 'freedom of education' where all religious communities are granted a constitutional right to establish their own schools (Lebanese Republic, 1990). As a result, the private sector has long borne the largest share of Lebanon's educational responsibilities. In 2010, more than two-thirds (70%) (Center for Educational Research and Development, 2010) of the country's school-age children attended a private school for their K-12 education, making Lebanon one of the most privatized educational systems in the world (Chapman and Miric, 2009). The majority of private schools in Lebanon are owned by

religious denominations, around 10% are owned by foreign governments or organizations, and the rest are locally owned by individuals or secular for-profit and non-profit organizations (El-Amine, 1994). Funding for private schools comes solely from private sources, with the government playing no role in regulating or supplying those funds. Elementary education is compulsory in Lebanon, and is free only through the government's own public schools. Students are free to choose the school they want to attend. There are no restrictions on enrolment based on the place of residence.

The current system shows the influence of the Ottoman Empire's laws and maintains a form of governance instituted by decrees dating back to the 1959–1964 period (El-Amine, 1994). There have been no comprehensive restructuring attempts since the establishment of the current Lebanese State in 1941 (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1993). The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) controls either directly or indirectly all important aspects of the educational system. The level of control is directly linked to the type of school. Public schools are tightly managed and financed by the government, with the MEHE setting their policies, managing their budgets, recruiting teachers and principals, dictating the curriculum content and the choice of textbooks, and supervising the functioning of the school. In contrast, private schools are loosely controlled by the MEHE, leaving them the freedom to set their own policies, design their internal organizing structures and choose their curriculum. This loose control is achieved through limited guidelines governing the process of obtaining a license for the school, criteria for selection of personnel and setting the budget and through official students examinations mandated as a requirement for graduation (El-Amine, 1994).

Statistical information on the principals in Lebanon is very limited. There are no official numbers on their distribution based on gender, level of education, areas of specialization, age or time in service. According to the latest statistical report from the Center of Educational Development and Research (CRDP, 2010), there are 258 principals of secondary public schools (6–12th grade), and 424 principals in the private secondary schools (K–12); constituting 19% and 44% of the total number of public school and private school principals, respectively. However, it is common knowledge that most principals have teaching experience prior to their appointment and many of them, especially those in public schools, continue to teach after becoming principals. Once appointed to their positions, principals rarely change schools. Most principals stay on the job in the same school until their retirement. In public schools, female principals constitute almost one third of the secondary principals (36%). The gender of the principal usually matches the gender of the students in single gender schools, while co-ed secondary schools have mostly male principals.

Conceptual Framework

There is a scarcity of empirical and theoretical literature on school principalship in Lebanon that reflects the culture and the context of practice. While theoretical literature is practically non-existent, there are a growing number of related empirical studies. However, the majority of these studies are in the form of non-refereed unpublished manuscripts prepared as master's or doctorate theses in local universities. Of the few publications that an extensive search revealed, none tackled the role responsibilities of the school principal. Rather, the studies covered topics related to the leadership style of the school principal (Mattar, 2012; Theodory, 1981); or focused on understanding the aspects of the school leader and instructional supervisor behaviour that promote teacher leadership (Ghamrawi, 2010, 2011; Theodory, 1983).

In the absence of a culturally grounded knowledge base, the study relied on broad theoretical principles of school leadership and administration (as conceived predominantly by Western

researchers) as a preliminary perspective on framing the problem and designing data collection and analysis procedures. Being attentive to the possible limitations of these ideas in their applicability and usefulness in studying the principalship in Lebanon, the researcher – herself a bilingual native-born Lebanese university professor – proceeded with a special sensitivity to the assumptions and values embedded in these concepts, anticipating they may or may not be useful in the Lebanese context, and was prepared to discard or modify concepts as dictated by the data being collected and analysed.

A framework rooted in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), cross-cultural comparative perspectives (Hallinger and Leithwood, 1994, 1996, 1998; Heck and Hallinger, 2005) social systems theory (Getzels and Guba, 1957; Getzels et al., 1968), and role theory as developed by Gross et al. (1958) and by Katz and Kahn (1978) provided the conceptual language to formulate research questions and conduct data analysis.

Symbolic interactionism views the human being as possessing a self and has provided this study with the assumptions to comprehend the merits of exposing an individual's perspective as a means to understand their action. The study has also adopted the view that theoretical and conceptual models in educational administration are shaped by the cultural context from which they are derived (Bajunid, 1996; Cheng, 1995; Dimmock and Walker, 2000; Hallinger, 1995, 2003; Hallinger and Leithwood, 1994, 1996, 1998; Heck and Hallinger, 1996, 2005; Hofstede, 2001, 2004; Raihani, 2008; Walker and Dimmock, 2002). It includes culture as a construct in the framing of the study and follows a cross-cultural comparative approach to analyse the results and draw conclusions.

Social systems theory (Getzels and Guba, 1957), socio-technical systems theory (Hoy and Miskel, 2010; Owens and Valesky, 2011), the socio-cultural school model (Hallinger and Leithwood, 1996) and the cross-cultural school-focused model (Dimmock and Walker, 2000) provided the over-arching framework for the study. In line with the social systems model the school is conceived as consisting of two major dimensions: (1) the institutional dimension that gives rise to certain roles and expectations to achieve the goals of the system; and (2) the individual dimension with certain personalities and need-dispositions inhabiting the system (Getzels and Guba, 1957; Getzels et al., 1968).

Finally, two role concepts advanced by Gross et al. (1958: 48) are relevant to this study: position, and expectations. Position is used to refer to the location of an actor or class of actors in a system of social relations. Expectations are defined as 'an evaluative standard applied to an incumbent of a position' (Gross et al., 1958: 58). Role expectations are not restricted to the job description as presented by the official rules of the organization. Rather, they include many different influences regarding the preferences of specific acts – things a person should do or avoid doing, as well as personal characteristics or style, and ideas about what a person should be, should think, or should believe (Katz and Kahn, 1978).

Katz and Kahn (1978) provide two additional concepts for role analysis; sent role and received role. The study analyses the role of the school principal in terms of the sent and received role. However, it mainly focuses on the reflexive role expectations that school principals send to themselves, since these will shape their perceptions of their role and ultimately have the strongest impact on their actions.

Study Design and Procedures

The data for the study were collected through an extended exposure to the field, in two major phases over a 10-year period. Phase 1 was completed between 1997 and 1998 and phase 2 was

completed between 2009 and 2010. The following is a description of the study methodology, participants' selection and data collection and analysis procedures.

Methodology

This study is rooted in an interpretivist epistemology (Gall et al., 2005: 305) where 'social reality is seen as a set of meanings that are constructed by the individuals who participate in that reality'. It adopts a naturalistic, qualitative methodology (Gall et al., 2005; Merriam, 1998, 2009). Since the purpose of the study was to develop theoretical/conceptual explanations of social processes from rich field data based on the perspectives of Lebanese school principals, it has been designed in accordance with the procedural goals and guidelines of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005, 2010; Glaser, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1994, 2008).

The study adopted Glaser's (1992: 15) approach to data analysis, viewing it as 'an on-going process of generating conceptual categories, comparing them, checking them against the field data as well as against the existing conceptual literature, with the purpose of integrating them toward generating a theory that is characterized by 'fit, applicability, relevance, modifiability'. However, unlike Glaser (1992), the researcher applied a grounded theory method reflecting a constructivist perspective. Its purpose is to 'construct' rather than 'discover' an inductively derived theoretical portrayal of the role and the work context of the school principal in Lebanon that emphasizes understanding rather than prediction and explanation. Moreover, the researcher took a reflexive stance towards the research data, considering both her interpretations and those of the study participants as a basis for constructing the theoretical understanding (Charmaz, 2010). Thus, describing the role and role context of the Lebanese school principal was the result of the blending of two interpretations: an emic perspective captured in the participants' understandings of their experiences in their own words recorded during the interviews, and an etic perspective provided by the researcher as a participant-observer throughout the study. The research process was fluid, interactive and open-ended wherein the researcher became an integral part of the study rather than an outsider to it (Charmaz, 2010).

Sources of data included the following: (1) individual and focus group interviews with principals and ministry representatives; (2) policies, decrees and directives from the Ministry of Education and from the private schools that were visited; and (3) researcher memos and journal notes during the field work. Multiple measures were taken to minimize the potential for bias and to ensure the credibility and the trustworthiness of the results; namely, member checking, and keeping a detailed researcher journal throughout the study (Merriam, 2009).

The field work proceeded as follows. First, the researcher began with specifying the role and role context of the school principal as a 'target of interest' (Kratwohl, 2004: 26). Second, the relevant literature was examined and a number of theories were selected to provide a conceptual anchor to 'claim, locate, evaluate, and defend the study position' (Charmaz, 2010: 163). Third, a general review of the available decrees and internal policies that addressed the principal job description, scope of authority, selection process, as well as accountability criteria and measures was completed to understand the formal dimension of the role. Fourth, the strategy of theoretical sampling was followed; an initial group of study participants were selected to assure maximum representation of the range of school types and contexts. Afterwards, subsequent selection of participants as well as requests for additional policy documents followed. This subsequent selection and documents gathering process was guided by the understanding of the role that was emerging from the preliminary analysis of the data. As data were analysed and relevant concepts and

Table 1. Demographics of participating principals.

Location	School type	School religion	Student enrolment	Age	Years in position	Gender
27 Urban	29 Private	16 Catholic	25 Min	36 Min	1 Min	19 Female
25 Rural	23 Public	8 Orthodox	3570 Max	51 Max	34 Max	33 Male
		18 Muslim	850 Mean	67 Mean	15 Mean	
		10 Secular				

relationships became clearer, it was possible to be strategic in selecting principals representing particular types of schools or community contexts to interview, and to thereby further clarify and substantiate the emerging theoretical categories. Relevant documents [policies, decrees and directives] were collected throughout the field work and analysed to enrich and further substantiate the emerging categories.

Participants

As described in the Methodology section, the participants in both study phases were selected according to theoretical sampling procedures. The selection ensured at all points maximum variability of roles and contexts by including principals in public and private schools as well as urban and rural schools from various regions in Lebanon. In phase 1, the participants consisted of 33 secondary school principals and two Ministry of Education officers. In phase 2, 20 secondary principals participated in addition to one officer at the Ministry of Education who was directly involved in an on-going reform initiative at the Ministry directed at training public school principals.

As such, the participating principals in this study represented public and private, urban, town and rural schools with enrolments varying between 25 and 3570, and an average size of 850 students. Of the principals participating in the two phases of the study, 55% were in private schools, 52% were located in large urban centres and 48% in rural areas. In addition, of the private school principals, 30% were from schools owned by Catholic organizations, 15% were from schools owned by Greek orthodox groups, 35% from those owned by Muslim groups or individuals, and 20% from schools owned by secular groups or individuals. The oldest participant was 67, the youngest 36, and the average age was 51 years. Of all principals, 36% were women, and 15% had doctorates. The number of years the principals spent in their position ranged between 1 and 34, with an average of 15 years. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the principals who participated in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The constant-comparative method of concurrently collecting and analysing data was used throughout the study to elaborate categories, specify their properties and to define relationships between categories.

The recording of memos was used throughout the field work. This activity consisted of recording the ‘research and analytical progress’ and reflecting upon those notes to determine what had been learned and what needed further study, and to identify the steps to be taken in order to elevate the emerging theoretical categories ‘to higher levels of abstraction’ (Charmaz, 2010: 94).

In phase 1, data were obtained through a series of open-ended interviews (Merton et al., 1990) with 33 principals and 1 focus group interview (Krueger, 1994; Merton et al., 1990, Morgan, 1997, 1998) with a group of eight private and public Lebanese school principals. Interviewed as well were two officers at the Ministry of Education directly involved in policymaking and administrative decisions pertaining to the school principalship. All available ministry policies, national laws, organizational rules and school policies shaping the role of the principal were also examined.

In Phase 2, a series of open-ended interviews were conducted with an additional 20 public and private school principals from the greater Beirut area, the North, and the South region in Lebanon and with one officer at the Ministry of Education. Moreover, policies pertaining to principal selection and formal responsibilities that were introduced or modified after 1998 (the end of Phase I of the study) were examined and analysed. Additional data sources included participant observer notes from the researcher's experience as a professor and consultant in Lebanon, as well as research memos kept throughout the data collection process.

The data analysis included many stages and multiple levels of analysis. In the first stage, the interview data were subjected to a multi-level content analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2007): (1) open coding of the individual interviews and focus interview data in relation to the study's main questions and in relation to the emergent themes; and (2) pattern coding of the coded data to infer conceptual categories and themes used to construct a profile of the role of the principals and their work context. In the second phase, open coding was completed for the newly collected data, then the phase I data transcripts as well as the codes from both phases were revisited and axial and pattern coding was completed through a comparative analysis of the themes from both sets of data, focusing mainly on the themes that persisted across both phases. The cross-examination resulted in clarifying, refining and merging of some themes. Data analysis concluded with a cross-thematic interpretation in relation to the existing relevant literature (Charmaz, 2010).

The questions asked of the participants in both phases of the study were centred on inviting the principals to share their views about the role of the principal and encouraging them to describe in detail what they actually did at their schools. During the analysis, it became clear that what the various principals shared were not just descriptions of what they did but also included their beliefs and aspirations about what 'good' principals should do, and as such reflected their role expectations of the occupants of this position, as shaped by their values and the demands and challenges of their specific school context. The results thus reflect both a descriptive and a normative dimension, and the analysis sought to reach a broadly shared construction of the role across the diverse group of principals that were interviewed.

Results

The results showed that the interviewed principals shared major similarities across their various backgrounds in their social construction of 'the principalship'. Although the principals were at different stages in their careers, of different ages and genders, had different experiences and were working in very different contexts, they shared a core set of role expectations and demands. These role expectations and demands are organized next under the following categories: (1) principal selection and evaluation; (2) principal preparation and induction into the position; (3) the tasks and responsibilities toward teachers, students, parents and the principal's administrative superiors; and (4) the organizational work context and factors shaping the role demands of the principals. Differences that have been identified across school type and location are noted in the following description under each category.

Principal Selection and Evaluation

The Lebanese government provides few guidelines and limited criteria for selecting public and private school principals. There is no examination system or a licensing process to establish a pool of qualified candidates for the position. The formal selection criteria requires a public school principal to be a tenured school teacher for a minimum of five years (Decree No. 1436; Decree No. 44, 1964; Decree No. 590, 1974), while in private schools principals are required to have (1) a university degree in education or educational administration or (2) a university degree in a field other than education and at least three years' teaching experience (Decree No. 2896, 1992). In 2009, a new decree (Decree No. 73, 2009) was added that requires principalship training as a criterion for selecting principals. However, this requirement is loosely enforced and rarely applied in private schools.

The formal selection process for a public school principal usually starts with a recommendation at the school's Directorate of Education [Elementary, Secondary ...] and is finalized, upon approval of the recommendation, by a decree from the Minister of Education (Decree No 590, 1974). In private secondary schools, the owners/operators of the school determine the selection process, but candidates have to meet the government's established criteria. Private schools select principals mostly from among their experienced teachers. The private school selection process for external candidates typically involves candidate interviews and checking of references, but teachers and parents are rarely consulted in the process.

Except for the government's formal qualification guidelines and criteria, the selection process in both private and public schools is mostly informal and often determined by compatibility of religion between the school and the principal, support from local political leaders, and personal connections. For example, interview data suggested that in 97% of the cases principals who were selected had the same religious affiliation as either the owner of the school, in the case of private schools, or of the community where the school was located, in the case of public schools. In addition, local political leaders had considerable influence on principalship appointments of for both public and private schools in their political district. Many of the interviewed public school principals described a selection process that often began with a visit to a political leader of the school area, seeking support. In other situations, political leaders notified chosen candidates of their endorsement, requesting them to apply for the vacant positions. A majority of public school principals asserted during interviews that the endorsement of a political leader was not only necessary but often sufficient to receive the appointment. In private schools as well, personal connections, often mediated by community religious and political leaders, were key to receiving appointments.

There are no term limits for a principal's tenure on the job. Public school principals typically keep their positions until retirement, as do private school principals (with minor variations). Moreover, principals are rarely subjected to regular formal evaluation. In public schools, evaluation is vague, non-existent or limited to inspection for attendance and abiding by decrees from the Ministry, and proper management of the school budget. Sanctions are limited to major offenses, such as bribery or stealing. In private schools, principals are subject to higher quality standards and to tougher scrutiny from demanding, tuition-paying parents, yet the process is still in the majority of the cases informal and not governed by clear standards-based criteria.

Induction

According to the responses of the principals who participated in the study, principals in both public and private schools were left on their own to learn their responsibilities and to formulate their own

conceptions about the job. Official school policies provided minimal guidance about the principal's responsibilities.

Of the interviewed principals, 50% noted that their primary learning about the role of the principal and their views of their work were gradually formulated 'on-the-job.' Several mentioned 'finding their way through experience' and 'learning new things every time there was need for that'. Moreover, most principals including those who recently received educational administration training were still not convinced of the added value of receiving such training. Less than 30% of the principals interviewed considered formal pre-service training essential for assuming the principal position. Moreover, many of those who attended in-service workshops maintained this view, describing the workshops as 'mostly a waste of their time', stating that 'one is either a good leader or not and no training can help anyone acquire this special talent'.

Areas of Responsibilities

Formal Role Expectations. Unlike in Western countries, role expectations of principals in Lebanon are often not written, and when they are, they tend to be sketchy, lacking specificity and details, and are often internally contradictory.

Examination of the available documented lists of responsibilities for public and private school principals revealed the following similarities in the role's demands. Principals are expected to be the main person responsible for supervising all aspects of the school's functions. The principal is required to plan the school year by setting the teachers' schedules, deciding about the school tests and examinations, selecting the textbooks and assessing the school staffing and educational supply needs. Moreover, they are expected to report regularly to supervisors about the school's finances, academic standing, and equipment and maintenance needs.

However, private school principals appear to enjoy broader authority and have additional responsibilities. Examination of the internal policies provided by the interviewed principals revealed the following. First, they were actively involved in recruiting, appointing and evaluating their teachers. Second, they had more discretion on setting and managing the school budget. Third, they played a major role in setting the school's internal policies, especially those related to handling students' discipline and academic problems. Fourth, many of the private schools' formal principal job descriptions included facilitating and encouraging the school-parent relationship.

Reflexive Role Expectations. Role responsibilities seem to be mostly based on the unique history of each school and are mostly communicated orally and informally to newly appointed principals. When asked about their role expectations the principals rarely referred to formal written policies, and mostly talked about 'customary procedures' and what they perceived as expectations held by their immediate superiors. All participating school principals considered their role to be a complex, time demanding and evolving role; one that cannot be strictly predetermined by policies, but rather was to be shaped in response to the emerging demands and prevailing conditions as they presented themselves. They viewed themselves as role models, parent figures and as the main individual responsible for the school's daily functioning. They saw their roles as having the highest authority inside their schools and the final word in every decision.

From the perspectives of the interviewed principals, the work day of the principal was composed of a multitude of activities touching all facets of the school's functioning. The principals' activities included the following general areas: dealing with their supervisors; supervising teachers and the school staff; dealing with students; dealing with parents and community; implementing rules and

policies; managing the administrative functions; planning and organizing instruction; and, for few, introducing minor improvements within the confines of the existing structure. All principals viewed their position as the focal link between the school and the governance body in charge of setting school policy – the central office in the case of public schools and the school owner(s) in the case of private schools. With varying degrees of autonomy and participation, policy implementation was a major part of the principal's responsibilities in both public and private schools. Principals viewed themselves as 'executives' in charge of implementing and communicating school goals, policies and directives to their teachers. In addition, for many principals, especially those in public schools, implementing policies also included being critical of their practical relevance and coming up with creative interpretations that bypassed/overwrote their perceived restrictions to serve the best interest of the school.

Supervising the school staff constituted another major part of the perceived role responsibilities of the principal. The interviewed principals related that one of their main goals was to provide a good working atmosphere for the teachers and the other school staff. Principals viewed themselves responsible for organizing the work of teachers by planning the teachers' schedules, assigning coordination responsibilities to selected teachers and presiding at curriculum planning meetings to ensure alignment with the officially mandated curriculum. Moreover, principals viewed themselves to be in charge of evaluating the work of teachers by ensuring their adherence to assigned teaching schedules, checking preparation booklets to make sure teachers followed the assigned curriculum and checking students' grades on examinations as an indicator of whether a teacher was performing well or not. They also saw themselves as responsible for providing their teachers with guidance and support, staying in close contact with their teachers, especially those who were newly appointed to the school. Principals believed that they needed to respect both personal and professional needs of their teachers through establishing a family like atmosphere of caring and support. In many instances, principals were not only responding to the teachers' professional problems, but assisted in resolving personal problems as well.

Managing students' academic and discipline problems was another area of the school operation that the principals participating in the study considered to be part of their responsibilities. Most principals stated that they adopted an open-door policy to be accessible to students; they listened to students' complaints about their teachers, and on a few occasions helped resolve personal problems that were affecting academic performance. They stated that principals were expected to be the head disciplinarians and also the ones with the most discretionary power to resolve an emerging crisis. They also related that they were responsible for setting the school discipline rules and reinforcing them, and for establishing a student-friendly vision for the school, mainly through dealing with students compassionately and securing high academic standards so that students performed well on official exams.

Managing school–parent relationship was yet another area of responsibility identified by the principals in this study. Though dealing with the parents and the community was rarely stated as part of the principal's formal responsibility, all of the principals interviewed cited dealing with parents and the school community as an important aspect of their job. To various degrees, principals in both public and private schools acted as mediators between the schools and the parents while managing the school–parent relationship. The principals noted that they tried to be responsive to parents' concerns about finances and academic standards, and that they worked hard to encourage the uninvolved parents to come to the school and contribute in some way. In addition, principals related that they were actively involved in handling problematic situations with the parents, as in the case of an underachieving or misbehaving student. In smaller private schools, and

schools serving rural communities, a unique dimension of the principal role emerged, that of being the moral authority, the counsellor whose involvement went beyond solving student's academic challenges to addressing personal and family problems.

According to the interview data, managing routine administrative functions of the school occupied a considerable portion of the principal's responsibilities. These included getting involved in raising funds for the school, managing routine paperwork, keeping school records and the documentation of financial transactions, as well as reporting regularly to supervisors about the school's finances, academic standing and needs for equipment and maintenance. Moreover, principals in the study explained that they were the ones in charge of student recruitment and admission process. In public schools, this meant sometimes contacting families to encourage them to send their kids to school. In private schools, this aspect of the role involved setting criteria for accepting students, managing the entrance examinations, and making and communicating students' acceptance decisions.

Finally, regardless of the type or location of the school, principals declared themselves the only catalysts for improvement in their school, despite limited resources. Interviewed principals in both public and private schools presented themselves as the main source of new ideas for improving instruction, organization, and facilities within their schools. However, most of the improvements they referred to focused on ameliorating the physical conditions of the school, like adding to basic classroom equipment, and on finding administrative loop-holes to avoid the dysfunctionality of the rigid bureaucratic system. While there was a strong concern by the principal that the school succeeded in teaching its students (determined primarily by the number of students able to pass the official examinations), changes and improvements tended not to focus directly on the effectiveness of teaching and learning, the instructional programme or the school's curriculum. Although the public school principals interviewed for this study cited many examples of attempts at improvement, it was apparent from the description of their initiatives that they were not rooted in any empirical data and were limited to ad hoc, dispersed interventions in reaction to emerging needs rather than based on a coherent strategic long-term improvement plan with clear goals. More importantly, the principals' discourse about school improvement failed to provide a well-rationalized argument for why they chose to do what they did, and never included questioning the status quo of how the system was organized, especially when it came to the line of command and scope of responsibilities.

Contextual Influences

Interview data indicated that many factors shaped the work context of the Lebanese school principal. These will be discussed under the following categories: organizational structure of the school; school location; and prevailing socio-political conditions in the school community.

Organizational Structure. This is a major factor that shapes the principal's role expectations. In both public and private schools, the principal's institutional work context has the characteristics of a Weberian bureaucracy with a highly centralized authority. However, variations in the distribution of authority within the bureaucratic structure are associated with differences in the school type and ownership. In private schools, the governance structure varies from one school to another. Yet, in general, this structure gives the principal more authority in making decisions related to the daily operation of their schools when compared to their public school counterparts. In most cases, the interviewed private school principals had a substantial role in making decisions like choosing

textbooks and allocating instructional time to different subjects. They also had a major voice in decisions related to hiring and firing teachers, accepting students, setting and implementing student disciplinary policies and setting budgetary priorities. Moreover, principals in private schools, unlike their public school counterparts, enjoyed geographic proximity to their supervisors. This facilitated interaction and enhanced the principals' chances to provide input to the centralized policy decisions made by the school's owner or the owner organization. Consequently, private school principals viewed policies as general guidelines that never restricted their work, and were more likely to get actively involved in setting those policies and shaping their implementation.

In public schools, however, the interviewed principals worked under a highly centralized bureaucracy that limited the scope of their decision-making authority. All schools in Lebanon are under the direct governance of the MEHE. The ministry is headed by a minister who is assisted by a director general of public education. The latter is assisted by a group of directors, each in charge of elementary, middle and secondary schools. Those directors of education are the immediate superiors of public school principals (Decree No. 590, 1974). As such all secondary principals, 256 principals in 2010 for example, report to the director of secondary education, who in turn reports to the director of general education, who reports directly to the minister of education.

All directors operate from the headquarters of the MEHE, centralized in Beirut, which is the capital of Lebanon. The directors of education make the main decisions for the schools under their jurisdiction based on the policies and decrees signed by the MEHE. The decisions made by the director of secondary education are communicated to all the secondary principals in the different educational districts through an internal correspondence system. On rare occasions, the principals are required to go personally to the central office to meet with their supervisors (Decree No. 590, 1974).

In addition to receiving orders from the directors of education, public school principals are accountable to the directorate of central inspection who reports to the country's prime minister (Decree No. 2460, 1959), and is independent of the MEHE. Educational, administrative and financial inspectors visit the schools to examine the performance of the public school principal and to ensure adherence to the laws and regulations in effect for the schools (Decree No. 2460, 1959). This inspection is the only measure for evaluating public school principals. Inspectors are the only ones who hold the authority to recommend disciplinary measures and contract termination. Under this highly centralized bureaucracy, public school principals' decision-making power is very limited. In the public sector, the central office mandates the curriculum, assigns the teachers, evaluates their work, makes decisions about reprimanding incompetence, decides what equipment to send to schools and determines how and when to allocate resources to maintain the school building. Under these conditions, the principals face difficulties both holding teachers accountable and providing them with what they need to maintain a high level of performance within the classroom.

Despite the variations, both public and private school principals that were interviewed often dealt with situations where their superiors mandated regulations without adequate consideration of the individual needs of the school. Both groups noted a major dissonance between the realities and demands at the school level and the mandates of centralized regulations and decisions, be it the ministry's or the school's owners. In one instance, the director of secondary education issued a decision to require every secondary school to have a science lab. With the mandate, some schools in that area received the equipment needed to set up their labs along with lab instructors, even though their buildings did not have the space for those labs. In private schools, many principals related situations where some centrally mandated policies regarding attendance, academic promotion or student discipline did not take into consideration the unique nature of the student population

in their schools where a large number of students held jobs to help their parents make some ends meet. Moreover, in both types of schools, there was no process in place to initiate a review of the relevance or effectiveness of mandated decisions or to actively involve the principals and take into account their schools' needs.

School Location. The school's location is another contextual factor that influences the principals' role expectations in both public and private schools. In both the public and private schools, there are no policies in Lebanon that determine attendance areas and restrict enrolment to students from a certain geographic area. As a result, students in both public and private schools are free to choose the school they attend regardless of their place of residence. However, in rural areas, and given the scarcity of schools in those areas, the location of the school seems to determine to a great degree its students' population.

Conversely, the study data showed that school location shaped the resources available and school relations with the community, creating additional role expectations for the principal. Principals of both public and private schools in rural areas had to deal with more resource shortages than did their counterparts in urban areas. In many instances, public school principals in rural areas did not have school buildings that had the capacity and specifications needed to properly accommodate the number of students enrolled. Moreover, they did not receive the teaching staff they requested, and rarely got funding from the central office in response to their expressed needs. In some instances, principals could not allocate space for science labs because they needed every room for classroom usage. Public school principals from remote rural areas explained that because of these shortages, they found themselves consumed with daily problems that are far from what they would like to do as principals; for example, fixing broken windows, rearranging their office to serve as a classroom, substituting for absent teachers and handling all the secretarial work within the school.

In rural areas, private school principals were found to also be affected by resource limitations, although in a slightly different manner. On average, private schools were better equipped and staffed than their public counterparts. However, many rural private school parents were too poor to pay the tuition fees – the main source of funding for the school. Consequently, fund raising became a major part of the principal's work. Principals in those schools related that they were actively involved in finding scholarships to support their needy students and to subsidize the school budget.

The location of the school was also found to place varying demands on the principals' time. Principals in urban schools rarely became involved in the local school community. For most urban schools, the families attending those schools did not come from the immediate community where the school was located. As a result, the principals rarely interacted with the families or members of the larger community in matters beyond school related business. Moreover, those principals limited their relations with parents to interactions within the school. Both public and private school principals in urban areas had fixed schedules to meet with parents, and only got involved in students' lives and families in severely problematic cases.

In contrast, in small towns and rural areas, principals related that they knew the families of their students personally, exchanged social visits with them and participated in social occasions, such as weddings and funerals. Principals in rural areas explained that they got actively involved in the lives of their students, and spent a major part of their time being available to students and their parents. Parents often depended on the principals for advice in matters beyond school issues and sought their help to resolve some of their child's personal problems. In contrast to urban school principals, principals in rural areas were expected to participate and contribute to local events, and had leverage in critical decisions at the community level.

Socio-political Conditions. Local and national politics is a major factor shaping the work and work context of the Lebanese school principal. In fact, the Lebanese educational system might best be described as a 'politicized bureaucracy'. The organizational structure of the system follows the characteristics of a highly centralized bureaucracy, yet closer examination shows that the actual functioning of this system is strongly influenced by local politics grounded in religion and in family.

According to the study participants, religious leaders and other influential members of the community exerted strong and regular pressure on school leaders in the public and private sector, and on senior administrators in the highly centralized educational bureaucracy. In this sense, religious/sectarian nepotism was institutionalized in the system. It was the accepted way of doing things. Political and religious favouritism determined, to a great degree, the teachers who got hired, the students who were admitted and the amount of resources a school received. Community religious leaders and other politicians also interfered in many decisions related to the daily functioning of the school, such as promoting students, enforcing discipline rules and reprimanding incompetent teachers. Consequently, a principal's ability to make educationally appropriate decisions within the school became highly constrained. In most cases, principals devoted considerable time and effort to managing the demands placed on them by local politicians: responding to and negotiating these demands, and attempting to minimize potentially negative effects on the school's functioning. According to the data collected in this study, the impact of politics on the work of the principal existed in both public and private schools, but occurred in different ways and to different degrees.

In the public sector, politics affected school administration at all levels. At the central ministry level, the main governance body of public schools, politicians' preferences and views influenced, to a large degree, all major decision-making processes and outcomes. Religious leaders and other community politicians were actively involved in shaping decisions related to appointing new public schools' principals and teachers, the opening of new schools and allocation of resources among the schools. As the principals reported, because many policies were formulated in response to political considerations, they often resulted in decisions that complicated rather than facilitated the work of the principal.

The influence of politicians on educational decision making in public schools was propagated through an institutionalized process of favouritism in hiring. Many public school principals described how community political and religious leaders competed fiercely to ensure that their followers held as many key leadership positions (at all levels) as possible. Politicians' influence was also maintained by the fact that Lebanese educators, as individuals, tended to have more loyalty to their personal religious and political affiliations when making decisions than to their professional judgment and views as educators. By getting followers hired to key positions, political and religious leaders appealed to the expectations of their followers and thus reinforced and perpetuated their influence in the school system (and within their respective political and religious communities).

The principalship seems to be one of the leadership positions over which politicians compete. As the study revealed, political affiliation was a strong determinant of who got selected to become a public school principal. Local political and religious leaders pushed to ensure that one of their followers was selected. Once appointed, the supported principal was expected to allow that religious or community leader to have a say in every issue in the school. Most interviewed public school principals shared that politicians demanded personal favours from them, which in many cases consisted of breaking the school's formal policies. For example, because political and religious leaders wanted to please parents in their community and win their support, they sometimes asked principals to promote students who had received failing grades. Another example was trying to stop the principal from reporting to the central office the poor performance of a teacher considered to be an ally or follower

of the political or religious leader, thereby helping that teacher maintain his or her job despite inadequate teaching performance.

Interestingly, according to the interviewed principals, political and religious leaders were able to exert pressure on the public school principals in their communities, even when they were not directly involved in supporting the hiring of a principal. As a result, most public school principals found themselves forced to choose between two evils: pledge loyalty to a certain political leader to get support when asking for resources (at the risk of allowing this politician unconditional interference in the school); or avoid being associated with politicians (at the risk of leaving the school to suffer from a lack of resources and political support, consequently leading to having the school's needs ignored by supervisors at the central office).

Although the most blatant examples of political interference was found to take place in public schools, interviews with the participating private school principals revealed that political influence occurred as well in private schools in several ways. In most cases, the school owners were either associated with a certain political or religious leader or were themselves those leaders. As a result, private school principals were shielded somewhat from the complexity of multiple and competing politicians' interferences in their work (as typically was the case in the public sector). However, they still had to be loyal to and serve the agendas of the local politicians with whom the school owners were aligned. Second, because private schools competed for clientele by holding both their teachers and students accountable to a high standard of performance, decisions to please politicians were limited to situations which did not affect the well-being of the school in terms of its academic performance. This criterion was rarely, if ever, taken into consideration in the case of a public school of an interviewed principal. However, despite these differences, principals in private schools still had to put up with attempts by politicians to win favours for their followers, especially through influencing principals' decisions about hiring and evaluating teachers and promoting, placing and disciplining students. As one of the principals related, the school owner, himself a politician, asked the principal to violate the school policy by promoting a failing student as a favour to the child's parents.

In general, the data analysis revealed that in both the public and the private schools, political and religious leaders pushed to have things done their way in the school, thus leaving little room for principals to use their professional judgment as educators. Moreover, the intensity of the interference forced most principals to work hard to find ways to limit the politicians' negative effects on the school. In order to achieve that, principals had to shift their focus from educational and instructional matters to managing the demands of religious and community leaders. Interestingly, the study found that in both public and private schools the politicized nature of the work context affected the principals' views of what constituted a satisfactory role performance. Principals from both public and private schools believed that to do a good job in their position meant to be successful in blocking the politician's interferences in the decision-making process, hence shielding that process from potentially harmful consequences.

Discussion: A Comparative Analysis of the School Principalship in Lebanon and the West

Published research on the principalship in Western countries was revisited at the conclusion of this study to identify similarities and differences in the way the role is conceived and practised in the West and in Lebanon. With the lack of other empirical studies that have examined the Lebanese principals' perspectives on their role responsibilities and work context, the results of this study will be used as the basis of this comparison. As in the true tradition of grounded theory

methodology, the empirically grounded conclusions reached in this study will be treated as 'tentatively representative' of school principalship in Lebanon in the context of comparison with the Western principalship.

Similarities between Lebanese and Western principalship are mostly apparent in terms of the broad areas of responsibility typically associated with the dimensions of the role of school principal as depicted in the Western literature. However, as one might expect, the Lebanese cultural and socio-political context, as described earlier, has a major effect on the details of how the principals actually do their work, on the nature of the daily demands they face in their schools and communities, and on how they view and respond to these demands.

Similarities with Western Conceptions of the Principalship

Despite the wide cultural differences, the Lebanese principalship shares several repeatedly documented characteristics of the principalship in the international community. Existing similarities in the role are down partly to the general institutional characteristics of the role. Principals around the world occupy an executive middle manager position in the organizational structure of their educational system, connecting strategic policymakers to those at the front line of school level implementation. School principals all around the world have to interact and respond to demands from their supervisors, the instructional and administrative staff at their schools, and students and their parents, all within a complex web of organizational, societal and cultural influences that shape their role (Foskett, 1967; Goldhammer et al., 1971; Greenfield, 1986, 1988, 1995, 2004; Hallinger and Leithwood, 1996; Hallinger and Murphy, 1987). Similar to their Western counterparts, Lebanese principals address a core set of role dimensions: managerial (Cuban 1988), moral (Greenfield, 2004), instructional (Hallinger and Leithwood, 1996; Bossert et al., 1982), political (Cuban, 1986, 1988) and social/interpersonal dimensions (Day et al., 2001; Greenfield, 1988, 1995). Based on this study, Lebanese principals' conceptions of their role seem to be dominated by the managerial aspect, echoing Cuban's (1988) assertions that unlike the other dimensions, the managerial aspect is 'embedded in the DNA of the principalship' and naturally supported with the normative and structural conditions of the role and its context (Hallinger, 2003: 335). Like their Western counterparts, Lebanese principals explained that they need to work hard if they are to attend to the other dimensions of their role. While Greenfield (1995, 2004) argues for greater attention to what he views as the centrality of the moral dimension in the Western principal role, Lebanese principals seem to be very much tuned in to this dimension. They viewed their role to extend beyond completing the functional tasks of the position toward contributing to the future of their country as they prepare the future citizens. Moreover, Lebanese principals seem to view themselves as the guardians of their schools' 'professional integrity'. The school becomes for the principals their own territory that they need to defend against the unwanted political interferences of local politicians and confessional leaders.

Similar to their Western counterparts, Lebanese principals focused on the interpersonal dimension of their role. They talked about the importance of building good relationships with the teachers through offering them both professional and personal favours. Those included professional development opportunities, modifying their schedules to accommodate their family obligations and granting them time off when they ask for it.

Similarities appear also in some aspects of the work context of US and Lebanese principals. Dwyer's (1985) description of the nature of the US principal's work context parallels to a large degree that of the Lebanese principal. Both principals have to contend with the uncertainty of the

school environment, the fluctuation of resources, the unpredictability of enrolments and the complexity of the political climates in their communities. Organizational arrangements are conceived to impact the work of both Western and Lebanese principals (Hallinger and Murphy, 1987). For example, there are similarities with what was reported about the Swedish principalship; principals seem to be preoccupied with the structural aspect in their daily activities, with a focus on stability and maintenance rather than on improvement and change in the school culture (Höög et al., 2005). This focus is explained by the principals' response to structural demands faced in a highly centralized system that dictates a national curriculum with its pre-set standards and grading system, leaving the principal in the role of the 'executive' who is in charge to enforce the centrally mandated policies and deliver the expected learning outcomes. Like their Swedish counterparts, Lebanese principals found it imperative to understand and respond to the culture and structure of their educational bureaucracies. Additionally, findings by Salley et al. (1979), as well as results in the present study, strongly suggest that the school type (private or public) is associated with differences in the way the principals described and enacted their role.

Finally, the nature of the daily work of the Lebanese principal was found in this study to be similar in many ways to that of their international counterparts. As Blumberg and Greenfield (1986) reported about US, principals, Lebanese principals are faced with competing demands that they find hard to balance. In addition, many of the images in the Western literature used to portray the work of the principal seem to capture well the essence of the work of the Lebanese principals. Similar to Wolcott's (1973, 2003) description, the work of Lebanese principal appears to be fragmented, and mostly reactive, while their days are filled with routine managerial activities. Spillane and Hunt (2010: 294) report on images of the work including 'brief encounters' and 'fire-fighting'. Lebanese principals described their typical day at work as full of unpredictable and urgent events, relating how they always stand in the first line of defence, taking on crises as they pop up around the school and trying to prevent others throughout the day. Moreover, the views Lebanese principals hold of themselves echo characterizations of school principals in the USA as the 'heroic Lone Ranger' (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger and Murphy, 1987). Though surrounded by many people, the image of the principals' work is that of a solo endeavour, with the principals bearing the burden of the full responsibility to get the work done, and asking for help from others only when needed.

What Is Unique about the Lebanese Principalship?

Comparing this study's data about the Lebanese principalship to the empirically grounded understanding of the principal's role as reflected in the predominantly Western literature reveals a number of interesting differences. We discuss next four unique aspects of the Lebanese principalship that have been inferred from the data collected and analysed in this study: (1) little or no attention to the instructional dimension of the role; (2) little or no attention to the role of the principal as a change agent; (3) the highly authoritarian nature of the role; and (4) the dominance of a highly idiosyncratic 'craft' conception of the role and of the work of the principal.

Instructional Dimension of the Role. The instructional dimension of the principal's role is far less pronounced in Lebanon compared to Western conceptions of the role in developed nations. Although Blumberg and Greenfield (1986) reported that the actual work of the principal is mainly one of maintenance, and that the principal acts more as a manager than an educational leader, the professional literature in the West emphasizes that principals are expected to influence curriculum and teaching, and to become involved in teachers' evaluations and in their professional development

(Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood and Duke, 1999; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000). In contrast, Lebanese principals do not seem to hold any expectations to be instructional leaders in their schools. With few exceptions, Lebanese principals in this study have been found to focus primarily on monitoring teachers' attendance records, and on checking the teachers' preparation books to insure that teachers have prepared to teach what has been prescribed, rather than view their role as instructional leaders responsible for helping teachers improve their instructional methods and for improving the curriculum. According to this study, most principals evaluate teachers only to make sure there are no major problems in their performance that might warrant dismissal. Principals undertake no formative evaluation of teachers that is followed by professional development to address specific areas of need. Although a few principals talked about planning some professional development activities in their schools, the majority did not give attention to this role function.

Role of the Principal as a Change Agent. A second unique aspect of the Lebanese principalship that has emerged from the data analysis is that the principals' conceptions of their role include no expectation that the principal assumes any responsibility as a leader for change. While the Western literature strongly promotes the leadership aspect of the principal role (Greenfield, 1995), and enlists transformational leadership as highly associated with being an effective principal (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood and Duke, 1999), Lebanese principals' views of their role are dominated by maintaining the status quo and are far removed from challenging the existing norms and structures. Though the principals in the study mentioned on many occasions that they felt responsible for introducing improvement to their schools, these improvements were often in the form of additions to the infrastructure, or sporadic adoption of new teaching methods or new textbooks. The second-order transformative change (Lambert, 2002; Lambert et al., 2002; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000) portrayed in the Western literature as part of the role of an effective school principal is virtually non-existent in the Lebanese principals' accounts of the tasks they engage in as part of their role responsibilities. As transformational leaders, Western principals are expected to develop a vision for their school and to work on increasing the capacity of teachers to engage in continuous learning and to work toward aligning their personal aspirations with the school's broader organizational goals (Hallinger, 2003). In contrast, Lebanese principals were consumed almost entirely by concern for implementing the directives of their superiors, and with finding ways to operate within the constraints of a bureaucratic system. Rather than setting a vision for their school, they shared a dominant feeling in their view of the seeming inevitability of the status quo. Based on their responses, principals from both public and private schools were found to rarely assume an 'activist' stance critical of the systemic barriers they face on the job. They either became minimalists, reducing their role to keeping the system going at the basic bare minimum, or 'reactive' problem solvers trying 'heroically' to put out fires and minimize the negative consequences of established norms, policies or organizational practices.

Highly Authoritarian Nature of the Role. The third unique aspect of the Lebanese principalship is the highly authoritarian nature of the role. Lebanese principals work within a system that is both hierarchical and authoritative. Within this system, principals believe that being in a superordinate position means to be the one who knows it all, the one who has to make all the decisions, and the one who has to tell their 'dependent' subordinates what they are supposed to do. Western principalship role concepts like professional collaboration, participative decision making and distributive leadership (Gronn, 2000, 2002; Mayrowetz, 2008; Spillane and Bijou, 2010; Spillane et al., 2001, 2004) are not among the ways Lebanese principals conceive of their role as leaders. The authoritarian aspect of the

role affected the principals both in their behaviour as subordinates and as the chief administrator within their schools. As subordinates, the principals viewed their role as being responsible for submissively executing the orders of their supervisors at the central government in the case of public schools and from the owner(s) of the school in the case of private schools. With few exceptions, the principals did not reflect critically on their superiors' decisions, and did not perceive themselves as responsible for giving input or taking part in making the strategic decisions they are required to execute.

Similarly, as the formal school administrator, the principals' views of the role reflect an authoritarian rather than a participative, collaborative or distributive approach. The 'parental' metaphor was repeatedly used by the principals as they described their role. In the Lebanese culture, being like a parent means, in addition to the 'caring' connotation, that the person is the sole decision maker in a group of people perceived to know far less than he or she does. The principals' rhetoric about treating teachers as colleagues and trying to involve them in the school's operation do not contradict this view. As the school head, principals keep the discretion to ask the teachers for input whenever they judge there is need for that. Yet, the principals did not view teachers as ready for active and continuous participation in the decision-making process: making decisions is only the job of the principal.

In addition, the principals' accounts included another indicator of their authoritarian view of their role. Most principals were apprehensive of being evaluated and spoke of it as unnecessary when they were directly probed. In the Lebanese society, it is a culturally unusual idea to evaluate people occupying leadership positions. The higher the position is in the hierarchy the less formal measures are in place to hold its occupants accountable. Once someone is appointed to such a position, the very fact of the appointment implies that this person should be considered all-knowledgeable, and hence is not in need of evaluation. Accountability measures, quality standards and procedures for evaluating the performance of principals simply do not exist. The data collected throughout the study could not locate policies that thoroughly outlined an evaluation process, or accounts that described such practice. Finally, as a consequence of the authoritarian culture, and the infallible personae principals' are expected to maintain, principals' description of their work context revealed that they worked in isolation, unable to share ideas with their supervisors, unwilling to invite input from their staff members, and reluctant to engage in reflective professional dialogue with their fellow principals.

Highly Idiosyncratic 'Craft' Conception. The fourth unique feature that has emerged from the data is the Lebanese principals' conception of their principalship role as solely a 'craft' they learn, rather than a profession that one becomes qualified to join as a result of formal study and preparation, and perhaps by examination. The Western literature is rife with theoretical models framing the role of the principal as a professional with a long list of formal responsibilities (Marzano et al., 2005; Sergiovanni, 2001). There are many prescriptive statements about key competencies all aimed at, performance standards, and best approaches to building those competencies all aimed at preparing candidates for the responsibilities of the principalship (Darling Hammond, 2010; Murphy, 2008). On the other hand, the Lebanese principals look at their work as a craft they learn on the job, rather than as a professional role with a clear set of expectations, pre-determined standards for quality, and theoretically and empirically supported recommendations for best practice. Many of the principals interviewed for this study talked about the impossibility of capturing the principal's role in a formal job description, and believed that there is no training that can convey the skills that are needed for the role. Many of the principals showed mistrust in the usefulness of principal preparation programmes,

if such were to exist. The principals interviewed insisted that learning the role can only take place on the job. Moreover, they believed that the principalship is not simply a predetermined list of job responsibilities and that principals themselves define their role and determine their own responsibilities. In fact, the principals thought that what each one of them does as part of the role is highly contingent on the nature of the problems they are facing at their particular school. The action they take comes out of solving specific problems they face using their 'own judgment, wisdom and experience'. Finally, with few exceptions, Lebanese principals in this study conceived of their core role as being that of a teacher with some added responsibilities. Many pointed out that success in the principal role is solely connected to having had a successful teaching career. This lack of emphasis on the development of administrative or leadership skills as necessary for the role leave many of those who take the position without a notion of the path they need to follow to become the more professionalized school administrators and leaders their position requires.

Conclusion

There is a long way to go to build a knowledge base that is grounded in the cultural realities of the Lebanese principalship. More descriptive and contextually sensitive studies are needed to examine the emic perspective of practitioners with a focus on social context, and the relationships among the school principal and others. Learning more about factors shaping and characterizing the work contexts of school principals is thus crucial to any attempt at improving the principalship in Lebanon. Comparative studies, both within and across cultural contexts, promise to yield new and valuable knowledge about the work, and the work-world, of this key actor on the educational scene. While this study has identified and highlighted some of the commonalities in the role responsibilities of the school principal that cut across school type and location, more comparative studies are needed that go more in depth in examining the aspects that vary across school type and location.

As educators examine the transferability of the emerging global knowledge base in educational administration, more informed decisions regarding what practices to adopt and adapt to the culturally specific needs of the principalship, in Lebanon or in other non-Western countries, will emerge. Extending the knowledge base in this fashion will provide needed direction for revising and implementing professional preparation and training for school principals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Donmoyer, 1995, 1999; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger and Leithwood, 1996; Murphy, 2008). For Lebanon, such knowledge also promises to offer policymakers a basis upon which to redesign the role of the school principal, help them build a standards-based evaluation system tracking the effects of their performance on children, teachers and parents, and establish the tradition of connecting the views of the practitioners as well as research results to the policymaking process.

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