

THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN MARKETING THE SCHOOL: SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATIONS AND PERSONAL INFLUENCES

Introduction

The introduction of school choice programs into the educational systems of many Western countries throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Cookson, 1994; Levin, 2001; Lubienski, 2005; Nir, 2003; Oplatka, 2002) has led to more competitive environments for schools. In this kind of environment, a school (especially junior and senior high) has to face considerable competition from other schools for funds, resources, examination success, pupils, and public esteem. In Israel, many schools are compelled to compete for new pupils and funding if they want to survive financially. In large cities (e.g., Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa) the competitors are other urban schools due to the right given to parents to choose their child's junior high school and high school. In other areas, the competitors might be magnet schools (e.g., Kibbutzim schools, holistic schools, and democratic schools), private schools, community schools, and so forth.

To survive in this new environment, many schools have given an increased priority to the marketing of their programs and activities (Foskett, 2002; Hanson, 1996). They were found to incorporate various forms of marketing perspective into their strategy in order to successfully recruit students in the new competitive environment (Foskett, 2002; James & Philips, 1995; Levin, 2001; Oplatka, 2002) as well as to increase their public image in their community. These new functions and emphases, however, have not been without criticism. Ball (1993), for example, presents the introduction of school choice to education as a "mechanism of class reproduction" that legitimates and reinforces the "relative advantages of the middle and upper classes within state education" (p. 13). The strategic processes of choice systematically disadvantage working class families but benefit middle class groups (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). Furthermore, the search for efficiency in education that underlies the school choice process seems to be in sharp contrast to other educational goals (e.g., democracy, equality), pushing schools in opposite directions (Labaree, 1997).

The literature on educational marketing to date has been concerned with the ways by which schools market and promote themselves in the community (DeZarn, 1998; Foskett, 2002; James & Philips, 1995; Lauder & Hughes, 1999; Oplatka, 2002, 2007; Oplatka, Hemsley-Brown & Foskett, 2002), their strategies to maintain and enhance their image (Grace, 1995; Hanson, 1996), and the factors affecting parents and children and the processes they undergo when choosing their junior high and high school (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001; Maddaus, 1990; Oplatka,

2003; Powers & Cookson, 1999). Yet, there remains a paucity of research on principals' patterns of involvement in the marketing and image-building of their schools, and on the potential impact of these new managerial activities on principals' careers and well-being.

To fill the gap in this respect, the current study aimed at providing insight into principals' subjective interpretations of their role in marketing their schools, and the meanings they attach to issues of school marketing and school image-building. More specifically, two questions merit highlighting: (a) What is the place given to role tasks related to marketing and image-building in the principalship; and (b) What is the perceived impact of marketing on principals' careers and well-being?

Understanding principals' perspectives towards their roles and responsibilities over the domain of school marketing may shed light on changes in the construction of the principalship in competitive education environments, as well as help policymakers and school governors in planning the degree of principals' involvement in the implementation of school choice programs in schools. It is widely accepted that any policy that ignores its subjectively-held influences upon principals (and teachers as well) may fail, for principals (with their staffs) are both the protagonists and the performers in any educational reform (Newton & Zeitoun, 2003; Tubin, 2007).

The Research on School Marketing

The literature on educational marketing, which first appeared in the early 1990s, was theoretical in nature in its incipient stages, including mainly books and papers that gave recommendations and guidelines for marketing the school (Gray, 1991; Kotler & Fox, 1995). Only in the mid-1990s did an empirical knowledge base in marketing aspects of school life emerge in the literature of educational administration (Bell, 1999; Foskett, 2002; James & Philips, 1995).

Marketing was defined by Kotler and Fox (1995) as "the analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with a target market to achieve organizational objectives" (p. 6). It is considered to be an indispensable managerial function, without which the school cannot survive in its new competitive environment, on the grounds that it is not enough for a school to be effective, but it also needs an effective image for parents and stakeholders. According to marketing philosophy, the school is encouraged to carefully examine the needs of its clients and customers in order to meet those needs more precisely (Hanson, 1996).

Nonetheless, studies conducted to explore the practice of marketing in schools, mostly in the U.K., have revealed that most school principals and staffs neither hold a coherent marketing ideology and practice, nor do they employ marketing research, strategies, or plans (Bell, 1999;

Foskett, 2002; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). Moreover, the concept of marketing was for most principals alien. Foskett (2002) has shown that there is a wide range of interpretations of marketing among principals in high schools and confusion about its relationship to public relations, promotions, advertising, and management of external relations.

In contrast, despite the lack of coherent marketing ideology and practice, studies have shown that many managerial as well as organizational school activities may be regarded, to a large extent, as part of a marketing practice (James & Philips, 1995; Oplatka, 2002). It follows that many marketing activities, unidentified as such, take place in schools in the form of open days, day visits, improvement of physical appearance, prospectus formulation, brochures, service development, and public relations (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Oplatka, 2007).

One of the issues discussed in the research on school marketing is the extent to which principals and staffs are responsible for marketing their school. Notably, the management of the school marketing is accomplished mainly by the principals and by some role incumbents in the school. In James and Philips's (1995) research, in none of the schools studied did anyone other than the principal have explicit responsibility for marketing. School marketing is recognized as virtually a characteristic of school management (Foskett, 2002), both by British principals themselves and by their Israeli counterparts. The second group of principals perceived itself as leading the marketing function in the school (Oplatka, 2002). Similarly, teachers from the south of England considered marketing to be under the auspices of management (Oplatka et al., 2002).

Little attention has been given to the interaction between the marketisation of schools and the psychological well being of those who are supposed to manage their schools: the principals. When this sort of interaction was explored, it became evident that the emergence of school choice reforms, which necessitates ensuring the recruitment of prospective students to the school, created greater tension, stress, and frustration among school principals (Bunnell, 2006; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Grace, 1995). McEwen and Salters (1997) clearly presented the interplay between the new role demands resulting from marketisation and the principals' level of stress:

Currently, headteachers (principals) are under pressure to introduce more commercially based methods of managing their schools in order to promote efficiency, to compete with other schools and...to tender their own...performance observable and measurable. (p. 70)

The new need for the principal to build a positive school image and to gain public approval for programs was also identified as a factor in principals' burnout (Gmelch & Gates, 1998) and a pressing aspect of their role (Gewirtz et al., 1995). In an attempt to explain the negative association between the market and principal well-being, Bell (1999) uses the term 'conflict' to describe the heads' dilemma following marketisation:

What emerges here is a possible, intrinsic value conflict between business methods and education as a public service or, at the very least, business methods and the idea of a comprehensive education. (p. 58)

However, principals may also experience professional growth and self-renewal as a result of the emergence of marketisation in education, even if this is found among few principals. For example, Grace (1995) found that positive reactions to marketisation applied to only about 30 percent of his sample and was largely expressed by male high school principals of already successful schools. Similarly, Portin, Shen, and Williams (1998) indicated that only 30 percent of the heads in their study felt more enthusiastic about their job than they did five years ago, i.e., before the establishment of marketisation in their country. The potential influence of marketisation on principals' careers and well-being is, then, manifold.

Method

The method employed in the current study is based on the qualitative research paradigm (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Following Erickson (1986), who claimed that conceptions in qualitative research are revealed during data analysis, no defined hypothesis is tested in the study. However, based on the literature indicated above and the selection process that targeted principals of schools in highly competitive environments, it was assumed that principals might be involved in and influenced by school marketing, although no specific pattern of involvement or influence was postulated.

Participants

Eight principals (four males and four females) from the south of Israel were chosen to participate in open-structured interviews during the academic year of 2006. The principals worked in public high schools whose number of students ranged from 200 to 1,227. Four of them worked in the State Education System and the other four in the Religious State Education System, which is directed to children of observant Jews. All of the principals had academic degrees, and their length of experience as principals ranged from 5 to 30 years. Likewise, the participants came from schools they identified to be in high competition with other schools for prospective students from their community.

Due to the need to focus on a homogenous group of subjects in a qualitative inquiry that aims at understanding a certain phenomenon profoundly, the principals in this study were selected using criterion sampling, i.e., all subjects that meet some criterion (Patton, 2002). In this case, the principals were chosen because their school's environment was considered in their view a competitive and uncertain one, which might lead

school members to adopt a marketing perspective. After receiving a list of high schools in the South District of the Ministry of Education, 15 school principals were contacted by phone, the nature of the study was explained and a face-to-face meeting was scheduled with eight who met the requirements of the study and agreed to participate.

Procedures

Open, semi-structured interviews were conducted by a research assistant in order to expose the personal perspectives of the principals. The interviews were managed face to face in the school buildings, and may seem to be, as Patton (2002) noted, purposeful conversations where their contents and evolution were not defined a priori, so that there was some variation among the interviews. The contents of the interview included the respondent's subjective conceptualizations of marketing, the school's promotional activities, and the principal's responsibilities for school marketing. The potential implications of inter-school competition and marketing for the principal were also considered.

The analysis of the transcribed interview data followed Marshall and Rossman's (1995) four stages: organize the data; generate categories, themes, and patterns; test emergent hypotheses; and search for alternative explanations. The analysis aimed at identifying central themes in the data and searching for recurrent experiences, feelings, and attitudes, so as to be able to code, reduce, and connect different categories into central themes. The coding was guided by the principles of comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It included the comparison of any coded element in terms of emergent categories and sub-categories. Then, all the interview data were compared, leading to the identification of central patterns. The analysis was conducted by one person and the data were validated by peer review and structured analysis involving two other colleagues. The results of this analysis are presented in the next section.

Findings

In line with past research discussed above, the school principals emphasized the key role of marketing in competitive educational environments, along with some discomfort stemming from the need to be engaged in promotion, public relations, and other forms of marketing. For the purpose of this study, however, the interviewees' high awareness of inter-school competition in their external environment provided some justification for the conjecture that principals have to handle issues of school marketing and promotion. The principals' role in the performance of this new managerial function and its implications upon their well-being and careers are illuminated in the following pages. When quoting a participant, his/her gender and years as a principal are indicated.

Perceived Marketing Tasks and Responsibilities in the Principalship

To unearth the marketing tasks in the principalship, the interviewer opened the interview meeting by asking the interviewee about the principal's role in marketing or enhancing the image of his/her school. Almost all principals in this study claimed that the principal is responsible for every aspect of school life, and marketing is not exceptional, emphasizing that "simply, everything that happens in the school, this is the principal's role to assure effectiveness and efficiency" (male, 19).

Yet, the inductive analysis employed in this study reveals both implicit and direct responsibilities of the principal over aspects of marketing and image-building. The interviewees pointed to their leadership and management of the school as components of their role that contribute much to the marketing of their schools, as well as to their direct involvement in public relations, internal marketing (recruiting the staff to the marketing of the school), and other promotional activities in school.

The principal's implicit responsibility over marketing. For most of the interviewees, being a moral and innovative leader promotes the school's effectiveness through vision, new educational projects, and increased satisfaction, which in turn increases relationship marketing and word-of-mouth communication with the community. In this sense, the principal is perceived as a marketing figure, whose personal characteristics, leadership style, vision, morality, and even physical appearance are strongly related to his/her role in the marketing and image-building of the school. When asked to present the ideal role of the principal in marketing the school, a male principal (22) stated:

...It is first of all the principal who is a leader in his appearance; he is a person who is seen as a moral person, with high values...

Another principal explained the association between leadership and marketing:

...I think that when parents consider whether to send their kid to this school, they want to meet the person at the top of the system, not the Geography teacher or the Chinese language one. The person on top has much influence on their decision (male, 30).

The principals also constructed a connection between their involvement in change initiation and implementation in school and their role in marketing and image-building. In their view, through the initiation or adoption of new education projects or innovative programs, they demonstrate their role in marketing the school. When asked to outline the marketing-related tasks in their job, they pointed to some new projects in school, using words or phrases like "improvement," "new school-university collaboration," and "new projects." A clear picture is gleaned from the next quote:

...I do think that new projects and a wide variety of small changes create the image of the school. So, by implementing new projects that are important to the school, the principal contributes to the school image (female, 10).

An effective, caring, moral, and innovative schooling process is assumed by the interviewees to enhance the current students' and parents' satisfaction, which in turn increases the likelihood that they will informally market the school in their community. This cycle is related to the concept of relationship marketing (RM), according to which attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships are important determinants of the customer's overall satisfaction with a service (Brown, Fisk, & Bitner, 1994). RM puts emphasis on nurturing relationships, especially with existing customers, and the development of supportive market networks.

Thus, the principals believed that when a principal generates a positive school climate and a good atmosphere, he/she is indirectly (but not necessarily intentionally) engaged in marketing the school, as is echoed in the following extracts:

Interviewer: What is, in your opinion, the role of the principal in enhancing the school's image?

I think that, first and foremost, to make sure that the final results are good...to create a special atmosphere in school, to have an agenda that promotes the school in the best way... (male, 12).

And another replied:

...I say, it's important to create a good atmosphere in school. But the one who witnesses the existence of good atmosphere in school is not the principal but the child who will meet someone and tell him about the good atmosphere in our school (male, 30).

The principal's direct responsibility over marketing. As far as actual marketing activities in school are concerned, the principals play a key role in promoting and implementing these activities either personally or through other staff members. The interviewees considered public relations, external relations, internal marketing, and promotion to be integral parts of their role, to which they are strongly committed, mainly due to the high significance they attach to marketing in the new competitive education environment.

Notably, the major marketing-related task of the principal, in the view of the interviewees, concerns the presentation of the school to external constituencies. The principal is conceived of as the 'gate' of the school, the person who is supposed to present the school's vision, activities, and strengths, as can be seen from the following quotes:

The principal is directly responsible for the marketing and image of his school. He should be involved in public relations and external relations with authorities...if a principal of a feeder elementary school was changed, he should meet the new principal...the principal is responsible for the building of the connections... (female, 11).

...When there is a need to present the school in a certain forum...I think that this is the job of the principal. When it comes down to it, people want to speak with the principal...because they see him

as the central person in the system... (male, 30).

Related to this responsibility are public relations activities, i.e., those concerned with media exposure and impression management. As the central figure in school, the principal is considered to be responsible for the promotion of the school in the community, either directly or through other staff members:

You are involved with local media, trying to squeeze out newspaper articles about the school (male, 19).

I don't think the principal should do everything alone, but he should take care of advertising, brochures, to make sure that everybody knows that he is the school principal (female, 10).

It is widely accepted in the marketing literature that marketing tools and concepts can be used internally with employees, because satisfied employees usually lead to satisfied customers (Brown et al., 1994). A similar perspective is held by the interviewees who perceived their role to include the leadership of internal marketing in their school:

I think that I have to encourage other people to market the school, to tell people about what's going on here... (female, 10).

The principal's responsibility? Oh, to increase awareness, to let every teacher know that she has no clients unless she wins the hearts of the pupils honestly (female, 7).

The liaison between the junior high school and its feeder elementary schools has already been indicated to be part of schools' marketing activities (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). Principals of the junior high schools establish good relationships with their counterparts from the elementary schools so as to promote their schools in the feeder schools. This kind of liaison is managed directly by the principal:

Interviewer: What do you personally do in order to recruit prospective students?

Principal: When the school was new, I went to the elementary schools around, I came to talk with the pupils, their teachers and the parents, and explained the uniqueness of our school...today, the school councilor is responsible for that...I invite parents to the school and meet them, and give a presentation... (female, 10).

I meet the principals of the feeder elementary schools, and we schedule the time of the visits to our school, when to explain to parents about the choice process... (female, 11).

Finally, the principals are involved in simple marketing tasks that aim at recruiting prospective students and at increasing the school's image:

I would say I do most of the marketing activities of the school that present the school in front of parents and pupils. Then, I call potential customers who seem to be suitable for our school, and I invite them to an interview [meeting]... (male, 19).

I answer the phone, asking what the parent who calls needs...I am fully aware of its importance in marketing... (female, 7).

Mixed Attitudes and Feelings Towards Marketing

Consistent with their counterparts worldwide, when asked to elaborate on their role and responsibility over issues of school marketing, promotion, and image-building, most principals expressed some discomfort with the inconvenience, minimizing the importance and place given to these functions in their role. For example, in half of the interviews, silence was the first reaction of principals. Most principals, nevertheless, regained their composure quickly, expressing their mixed emotions towards marketing:

Interviewer: What would you describe as an image-building task in your role?

Principal: I don't invest much in image-building. I have a problem with that. It gives me a sense of something unreal. Image is how the school is looked at by others, but I don't try to build an image that is different from what we have here. I try to have a school image that matches the real situation [in school]. Therefore, I don't try to shape an image but tell people what's going on here (male, 22).

Interviewer: What do you feel when you market the school?

Principal: I can't say I like it, and I wouldn't say it's easy for me, but I do it anyway. I do it because I understand that today, in our competitive era, when every day there is a new school, there is a sense among parents that if they don't like something, they can go somewhere else...so I understand that I need to market whether I like it or not... (female, 10).

The second quote reflects, in some sense, the principals' dilemma in respect to school marketing. On the one hand, they feel that marketing is not compatible with education or rather with moral aspects of schooling. Yet, on the other hand, they seem to be aware of the need to be engaged in marketing and image-building in a competitive education arena. When asked to explain why he devotes so much time to issues of school marketing and image-building, a male principal (12) replied:

I always tell my staff that it's not so obvious that every year 400 new students will enroll in our school.... If fewer than 400 new students come [here], that means fewer teachers, or even a need to sack some teachers. When it comes down to it, if we are not concerned every day with our image, there is no guarantee that we will go on to attract many students...

With a seeming contradiction between marketing and education in mind, many interviewees felt the need to justify their marketing-oriented role tasks. Thus, they ardently claimed that marketing is legitimate in education provided the principal uses it to deliver only true messages and effective functioning. The subsequent citations illustrate this notion clearly and explicitly:

...I don't sell something that doesn't exist and is untrue. I don't say that school is like this or like that and in reality it isn't that. I advertise the positive things taking place in school... (male, 30).

...I think that marketing is related to trust, to be trustful and to say only the truth.... For example, I always say that there are some girls who don't follow God's rules, but we don't give up and we handle this issue... (female, 10).

Another principal looked at this issue in a slightly different way:

...To sum up my role in marketing, so this is to make sure that what I promise I can provide the students, and I'll do everything I can to fulfill my promises...because if I can't fulfill what I promised, this is the image the school will get, and I can't afford myself having such an image of the school... (male, 5).

It is apparent that a potential dissonance, which might have characterized the principals due to the need to be engaged in what they consider to be uncomfortable or even immoral tasks, is partially solved by defining marketing or image-building as a means to reflect reality, not to recreate it in positive terms alone.

The Influence of Marketing Upon the Principals' Careers and Well-Being

When asked about the potential influences of their responsibility over and involvement in marketing and image-building activities on their careers and well-being, half of the interviewees' initial response was that there is no influence at all, because this is something principals ought to do as part of their managerial work. Others pointed to some negative influences:

(When I present the school to parents and children) this is energy consuming, I feel I'm very tired. I need to be very straight and to the point, focused on what they want to hear, and that demands much preparation in advance.... I don't think I will stay in this system for long... (female, 7).

You are under pressure to weigh every word, because parents and others check if you tell the truth or not; they don't make it easy for me.... I feel like I'm on trial (female, 10).

...To present the school is not an easy work. There is much suspicion among parents, they want to see actions, not speeches. They are more critical and asking many questions... (male, 19).

Interestingly, nevertheless, throughout the interview meeting, four interviewees pointed also to some positive influences including positive emotions, intellectual stimulation, and fulfillment of professional challenges. This is evident in the following quotes:

Interviewer: What do you personally feel when you present your school to parents?

Principals: I feel highly challenged, to move them from not know-

ing anything about my way of leading this school, to my side. My ability to create a better society through education will be increased if I manage to convince them to grasp education in my own way, and that's why I am so excited... (female, 11).

I see it as a challenge...I have my moral borderlines, I wouldn't bad-mouth other schools, but I will do everything to recruit a student who can't decide which school to go to (female 7).

One principal felt a sense of self-improvement subsequent to his need to compete for prospective students:

Look, it's much easier not to have competition... I wouldn't invest so much time in advertising...but when there is competition you should make the most benefit from it...competition is used as an incentive to be better... (male, 30).

The principals expressed a wide variety of influences, both emotional and cognitive. However, one should bear in mind that the subjective constructions of their own well-being and state of mind subsequent to marketisation of their educational system are probably influenced by many other determinants not necessarily related to marketing. A thorough investigation, using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, focusing on the impact of marketing upon school principals is, therefore, warranted.

Discussion

The results set out above provide initial observance of what seems to emerge as marketing leadership. Due to inter-school competition brought about by the introduction of school choice reforms into many educational systems worldwide, the principals appear to internalize what Gewirtz et al. (1995) termed 'market ideology' (e.g., marketing, promotion, individualization). In this sense, albeit marketing is not perceived to be on par with education, the principals realized the significance of this managerial function for the survival and success of their school provided that it delivers only real and honest messages, a view shared by many principals worldwide (Foskett, 2002; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004).

Fully aware of the responsibility they have over all school activities, coupled with the high place given to marketing in the new competitive era, the principals constructed the principalship to encompass promotion, impression management, internal marketing, and persuasion. Note, however, that the principals justified their new engagement not only in terms of competition and survival, but also in terms of values, performance, or vision. Put differently, they strived to generate an association between moral and instructional leadership that is committed to education, innovation, values, and improvement, and the marketing-related tasks in their role.

Likewise, the principals' indirect, implicit responsibility over marketing and image-building is related to other managerial functions that admittedly have long been legitimate in the educational system, such as vi-

sionary leadership, moral leadership, change initiation/implementation, and the generation of positive school climate. These functions are subjectively associated with marketing, even though indirectly and not for the sake of this new function per se. This finding sheds light on principals' broad understanding of their marketing tasks and extends the conclusion of past research (Grace, 1995; James & Philips, 1995) that found that marketing is recognized as a characteristic of school management.

Whereas the principals shared similar premises with respect to their marketing-like tasks, their interpretations of the influence of the market and marketing upon their career and well-being were inchoate. They presented contradictory understandings, ranging from a belief in no influence to potentially positive outcomes. Their accounts are less likely to align, to a large extent, with previous research (Bell, 1999; Grace, 1995; McEwen & Salters, 1997) that reported a link between the principals' need to ensure the survival of the school and high levels of stress, pressures, role conflicts, and dilemmas.

What was also absent in the principals' accounts were attempts to examine the needs and desires of pupils systematically, a basic aspect of marketing philosophy (Kotler & Fox, 1995). In addition, similar to their counterparts worldwide (Foskett, 2002; James & Philips, 1995), they did not display any coherent marketing plan, or a strategy to recruit prospective students. They emphasized the promotion-like activities such as open days, visits to elementary schools, or advertising. Their construction of the principalship is, therefore, limited to these simple marketing tasks alone. The concluding message of this study is that an emphasis should be put in further investigations on the relationship between new educational reforms and the individual in school.

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