

The Application of the Knowledge of Systemic Psychodynamics in Management in Primary Schools

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Abstract

The principal's primary task is to foster a collaborative climate that facilitates high-quality learning conditions for students. The TALIS 2018 survey reinforces the notion that principals, within numerous educational frameworks, are tasked with leading and managing schools by promoting mutual cooperation among teachers, enhancing their professional growth, and establishing conditions conducive to improved learning and teaching.

We will disclose the findings of our research, which explored the perspectives of elementary school principals on interpersonal relationships, with a particular focus on the application of systemic psychodynamic knowledge in school management. Our interest was piqued by how principals perceive their role and the significance they place on fostering positive interpersonal relationships and creating a secure and motivating work environment, as well as their views on the relevance of their authority, influence, and emotions in leadership. This research aims to contribute to the dialogue surrounding the integration of systemic psychodynamic principles into school management, thereby promoting enhanced administrative practices.

In the article, we will initially outline the theory of psychodynamic approaches to management, emphasizing the critical understanding of roles, attitudes towards authority, and the impact of emotions within organizations for effective management. Subsequently, we will illuminate these insights within the context of primary education and principalship. Thereafter, we will reveal the insights from the research we conducted with four principals of Slovenian primary schools, employing the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews.

Keywords: management, principal, systemic psychodynamics, interpersonal relations, safe environment, stimulating environment

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of leadership, principals require political acumen and the capacity to negotiate and forge coalitions, which are instrumental in building bridges within the collective and the broader community. Equally important is their emotional intelligence: the ability to discern colleagues' emotional responses and manage them effectively (Koren, 2006). To ensure success, principals should be well-acquainted with the employees and the dynamics between them. Modern organizations that thrive are characterized

by strong collective cohesion, shared values, and practices, embodying the traits of a learning organization (Krantz, 2018). For principals to cultivate a safe and stimulating learning environment, they must first establish a safe and stimulating working environment.

Systemic psychodynamics delves into interpersonal relationships from the angle of unconscious forces that sculpt organizational dysfunctions. It examines how individuals navigate organizational demands and the extent to which they are shielded by it (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020). The focus is on one's own authority and that of others, clarity in role comprehension, understanding of responsibility and power, and aims to decipher the motives and emotions of both managers and employees. It scrutinizes how leaders interact with employees' attitudes and behaviors and explores avenues for enhancing leadership and collaboration (De Vries, Florent Treacy, & Korotov, 2013, p. 78).

This article presents research findings on the potential application of systemic psychodynamic knowledge in school management to foster and enhance good interpersonal relationships and establish a safe and stimulating work environment.

Peculiarities of School Management

The essence of school management lies in its people-centric processes. Consequently, the outcomes of schools hinge predominantly on effective human resource management. Leaders must intimately understand their employees to guide them properly, enabling them to showcase their capabilities and excel (Subotić, Mandić and Duđak, 2012).

Effective principalship is pivotal for the efficacy and equity of schooling, where the principal's primary task is to ensure optimal working conditions and a positive school climate, culminating in fair and effective education for all (OECD, 2008).

The principal's role is complex; their powers and responsibilities are extensive and intersect with numerous domains that, in other organizations, would be managed by separate departments or units. Roncelli Vaupot underscores that principals must not only be conversant with the school system and roles but also with legislation, pedagogical planning, and other processes. They must adeptly handle interpersonal interactions within the school, ranging from students to parents, and proficiently manage meetings, conflicts, communication, and staffing (Roncelli Vaupot, 2001). Such multifarious responsibilities demand considerable mental and sometimes physical exertion (Dolgan, 2012).

There is no roadmap for principalship, as Koren says: "Leading schools is not a destination journey with certain coordinates, but a journey with many detours and dead ends", highlighting the importance of continuous learning. He points out that principals can successfully motivate students and teachers to learn only if they themselves are open to constantly upgrading their own knowledge (Koren, 2006). A culture of learning among all school participants fosters a learning community, open dialogue, increased engagement in school activities, mutual respect, and trust, all foundational for a safe and stimulating learning environment (Krajnc et al., 2019).

A Safe and Stimulating Learning Environment

A safe and stimulating learning environment is intrinsically linked to the school's climate and culture. Organizational culture, including that of schools, is influenced by the organization's history, employees' attitudes towards it, the significance of their work, their roles, collaboration with peers, communication, internal and external pressures, environmental impact, and organizational success (De Gooijer, 2018).

Principals face the formidable task of creating a cooperative milieu where they can establish a partnership with teachers and collectively shape school policy (Vec et al., 2019), thereby enhancing job

satisfaction among staff. To achieve this, principals must be cognizant of employees' needs and motivators, urging them to demonstrate their expertise and proficiency through feedback, sharing authority and responsibility with teachers, providing spaces for reflection, and promoting continuous learning and professional development (Žerak and Boštjančič, 2018).

Systemic Psychodynamics

Systemic psychodynamics operates on two fundamental principles: it encompasses both the systemic structure and psychodynamic processes. The system aspect pertains to comprehending the organizational structure, including its operational mode, division of labor, communication culture, organizational climate, and approach to learning and knowledge. Psychodynamics, conversely, delves into the psychoanalytical dimension of an individual's experiences and cognitive processes, such as transference, resistances, fantasies, and object relations, while also considering the unconscious impact of group dynamics within the organization, like collective defenses (Gould, Stapley and Stein, 2007).

At its core, systemic psychodynamics aims to understand organizations and their members from three distinct perspectives: a psychoanalytic lens that sheds light on the unconscious influences on individuals' reactions and behaviors. The second perspective focuses on group dynamics, striving to unravel the underlying realities and how these dynamics shape individual behavior and productivity. The third perspective examines how societal norms, culture, and the broader environment shape the actions and interactions of individuals and groups (Neumann in Fraher, 2004).

Psychodynamic concepts equip managers with the tools to discern the underlying forces at play and tailor their leadership for heightened effectiveness. Individuals are driven by diverse motivators, and psychodynamic approaches address precisely this—what propels and inspires someone, the rationale behind their actions, and the reflection of these motivations in their relationships with others and the organization (Kutilla, 2022). Investigating human nature through a psychodynamic lens considers the inner world of individuals, individual motives for emotional responses, and their contributions to—and influences from—group dynamics.

In this context, leaders wield significant power, which can be harnessed to enhance clear thinking under pressure, to genuinely comprehend others without bias, to accept them as they are, and to not demand blind allegiance merely for convenience (Wilke, 2005).

Systemic psychodynamics also scrutinizes how individuals navigate organizational demands. When faced with pressures, a variety of defense mechanisms, both conscious and unconscious, may surface. These mechanisms are not solely individualistic but often merge with the objective of forming defensive strategies to mitigate anxiety, unease, and even collective envy within a segment of the organization (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020).

Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies that enable us to manage distressing experiences and channel our energies more constructively. However, they can become detrimental when excessively active or immature. Present in both individuals and organizations, even under stable conditions, these mechanisms primarily arise from two sources, extensively studied by systems psychodynamics scholars. The first source is the anxiety stemming from work-related tasks. The second pertains to the psychological challenges of collaboration—with colleagues, superiors, and others—which evoke early relational patterns and, consequently, distress and conflicts tied to formative experiences (Krantz, 2018). It is crucial for leaders to recognize and mitigate the adverse effects of defense mechanisms promptly,

thereby preventing the primal fears and anxieties of individuals from adversely affecting organizational dynamics.

In individuals, we often observe projection, projective identification, transference, narcissism, and idealization. Organizationally, systemic psychodynamics examines foundational assumptions such as dependence, fight/flight, and pairing, concepts introduced by Wilfred Bion (2003) in his work “Experiences in Groups and other papers.”

Psychodynamic Approaches and Leadership

In the realm of systemic psychodynamics, leadership scrutiny revolves around the psychological adaptability or inflexibility of managers, their susceptibility, and the resultant impact on employees and the organization at large (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020). Kahn emphasizes psychological presence, defining it as the leader’s complete engagement, with all senses attuned and vulnerability acknowledged, capable of dispelling anxieties and past experiences that may cloud current perceptions (Kahn, 1992).

Ringer asserts that leaders must possess insights into group dynamics, yet remain open to alternative perspectives, a process demanding considerable emotional maturity (Ringer, 2008).

Leadership approaches informed by systemic psychodynamics align with the concept of “good enough” organizational leadership, paralleling Winnicott’s notion of the “good enough” mother. Adequate leadership does not dismiss or overlook critical situations but instead draws upon personal intuition and experiences, while valuing employees’ sentiments and perspectives in problem-solving. Such leadership is particularly attentive to the observation and regulation of unconscious dynamics.

Thus, psychodynamic management approaches analyze the interplay between leaders and followers, acknowledging their mutual influences. They rest on the premise that both leaders and followers possess distinct personality types and states of consciousness. These approaches advocate for managerial self-awareness, fostering a deeper comprehension of one’s own reactions and the reasons behind employees’ responses.

Systemic Psychodynamics in Schools

Numerous management approaches have been developed to enhance the efficacy of principal leadership, including leadership for learning, transformational leadership, and agile leadership. Research indicates that the most effective management style is one that amalgamates various approaches and adapts to the evolving needs of the organization and its personnel.

Contemporary leadership paradigms underscore the significance of relationships, communication, organizational climate, and culture, as well as learning and collaboration, thus fostering a safe and stimulating environment (Özgenel, 2022). For a collaborative, impartial, consistent, and equitable management approach, principals must consider not only the overt factors but also the unconscious dynamics, regulate their own emotions and those of employees in stressful situations, endure the pressure of uncertainty in challenging circumstances (*ibid.*), and sufficiently distance themselves from personal negative beliefs and assumptions that could impede their judgment and leadership. Principals must exercise judicious authority and wield power appropriately. It is this self-regulation by principals and their concern for the mental and particularly emotional well-being of teachers that has an invigorating effect on individuals, motivating them to better manage negative

emotions at work, reevaluate their issues and their origins, assess the situation, and find solutions or effect change (Zheng, Shi, and Liu, 2020).

Baptiste asserts (Baptiste, 2019) that principals, by actively enhancing teacher satisfaction and well-being, positively influence student performance, as contented teachers are more inclined to dedicate themselves to their work with greater quality.

Roles through Different Perspectives

Typically, an individual's position within the organizational hierarchy defines their role, expectations, responsibilities, and authority. Despite the precision of role definitions in job descriptions, the role is invariably shaped by the individual occupying it, as well as by all others who interact with them, from management to colleagues and other stakeholders.

In leadership, the principal finds themselves navigating between societal norms, institutional mandates, individual expectations, and their own values, standards, and cultural norms shaped by personal development and experiences. Alongside their identity, knowledge, skills, hopes, and fears, they uniquely imprint the role they perform. Leadership is predicated on the understanding that the person, role, and value system are concepts inextricably and distinctively intertwined within an individual (Bridger, 2009).

The principal's role is a mosaic of numerous roles, making it exceedingly complex. Concurrently, the principal directs individuals in their work, who bring their own roles, molded by their biography and the history of that role. Leadership necessitates discerning where one person's role ends and another's begins, recognizing the scope and limits of one's authority, and being willing to accept the authority of others (Berkovich and Eyal, 2015).

Beyond observing individual behaviors in their roles, systemic psychodynamics focuses on their fantasies, fears, defense mechanisms, reaction patterns, cooperation methods, and attitudes towards authority. This is done with the aim of recognizing the significance of these elements for achieving results, completing tasks, and fostering relationships within the collective (Gould, Stapley, and Stein, 2007). Hence, we will explore authority, power, and emotion, which are crucial for creating a safe and stimulating work environment in schools.

Interdependence of Authority and Power

Effective management and leadership require both authority and power (Obholzer and Miller, 2018). Aghion and Tirole (in Trnavčević, 2010) distinguish between formal and actual authority. Formal authority grants the right to make decisions—power—while actual authority pertains to the successful oversight of decisions and is characterized by influence. Obholzer and Miller (2018) categorize authority differently, into external—further divided into “from above” and “from below”—and internal authority. Thus, authority is conferred by the organization's structure (“from above”) and employees (“from below”) and is also self-recognized within the leader's inner world based on personal experiences.

Considering how employees perceive a leader's authority, it's essential to recognize that current relationships with authority figures often mirror past relationships, particularly those from early childhood with parents (Oglensky in Hirschhorn, 1990). Both managers and employees bring their early experiences with (parental) authority into their interactions, influencing behavior and responses (Winkler in Kutila, 2022).

Authority alone is insufficient; power is also necessary, providing the means to enact and enforce decisions. For instance, a leader with strong authority among employees and a positive self-view of their

authority will nonetheless be ineffective without power, which can manifest as resources like influence, finances, personnel, equipment, etc. Conversely, a manager with power but lacking confidence in their authority, or without it among employees, negatively impacts management and employee relations. Power without authority leads to an authoritarian leadership style (Obholzer, 2003).

Authority and Power of the Principal

Educators seek a principal who is engaged, cordial, and innovative, one who holds respect for themselves and their colleagues (Burgar, 2006). They desire to be guided by a gentle leadership style that cultivates results through strong interpersonal connections. Concurrently, they yearn for leaders who possess resolute authority, characterized by commendable decisiveness, self-assurance, and the ability to convince and inspire (ibid.).

The prospect of authoritarian leadership instills trepidation among teachers, as such a regime often stifles the expression of emotions, particularly those with negative undertones like fear and anger (Zheng, Shi, and Liu, 2020).

Emotions, Feelings and Interpersonal Relationships

Emotions are woven into the fabric of our social and professional spheres, influencing our cognition, behavior, and the contours of our relationships and interactions. Historically, emotion studies concentrated on cognitive and expressive facets, alongside the physiological and neurological underpinnings of emotional responses. Yet, in recent decades, there's been a burgeoning recognition of the intrinsic social nature of emotions. Typically, emotions are elicited by others, directed towards others, or modulated to align with societal norms (van Kleef et al., 2016).

Every organization is an emotional landscape, crafted by human hands, serving human needs, and reliant on human existence and function (Armstrong, 2018). As emotional entities, individuals' emotional states ripple through and influence the collective experience within the organization. Thus, the emotional climate of an organization warrants a comprehensive and systematic approach (Reed and Bazalgette, 2018).

Anxiety is a prevalent emotion within organizational settings. When it dominates an individual, it skews their perception of colleagues and leaders, fitting them into personal narratives rather than reality (Cilliers and Koortzen, 2000).

Psychodynamic leadership approaches advocate for attentive observation of employee dynamics and responses, striving to comprehend the roots of their reactions and the leaders' own internal motivations. This understanding facilitates the management of emotional responses and fosters self-reflection, leading to more effective leadership. It enables leaders to better understand and regulate their role, and to tailor their management style to the emotional needs and behaviors of employees (Powlus v Kutila, 2022).

Expectations of the Principal's Superhuman Abilities

Principals, while human, are often laden with expectations to possess superhuman capabilities in all school-related matters. Beyond legal duties, the principalship is infused with the school's mission and societal role (Roncelli Vaupot, 2001), coupled with the expectations of staff who envision the principal as a problem-solver, solution-finder, motivator, supporter, and recognizer of challenges (Bush in Koren, 2006).

The multifaceted collaboration between principals and teachers presents numerous opportunities for divergent perspectives and the emergence of negative emotions. Principals often find themselves navigating conflicts between their own emotions and those of others, driven by differing values. Managing these situations can push principals beyond their emotional limits, potentially leading to feelings of anger, frustration, anxiety, and sadness (Berkovich and Eyal, 2015).

Leaders attuned to the emotional responses of their staff can forge stronger, more cooperative relationships (Koren, 2006). Such sensitivity is only possible with adequate understanding and valuation of emotional dynamics. Hence, it is imperative for principals to deeply engage with their own emotions and those of their staff (Berkovich and Eyal, 2015).

THE EMPIRICAL PART

Methodology and Research Sample Used

The aim of our study was to garner a holistic understanding of principals' experiences in their role, their perspectives on fostering interpersonal relationships among school staff, their stance on authority and power within the principalship, and their insights on the significance of emotions in leadership. We opted for a qualitative research approach, characterized by gathering data through detailed descriptions of individuals, events, or scenarios, with the goal of gaining a deeper comprehension of behavior from the students' viewpoint (Vogrinc, 2008).

We selected four principals, balanced by gender with two females and two males, to potentially discern any variances in responses across genders. For enhanced data comparability, we focused on principals who were at least in their second term of service.

We employed semi-structured interviews as our methodological tool. During data analysis, we utilized open coding to develop concepts or codes from the responses. This involved categorizing text segments, assigning codes, and then aggregating texts under identical codes into categories to organize the data systematically (Vogrinc, 2008). The research culminated with an analysis of the categorized data.

Research Findings

The findings revealed that the principals deemed strong interpersonal relations—both with themselves and among staff—as crucial. They emphasized the need for effective, respectful communication and active listening, which aids in better comprehending colleagues and situations, allowing for timely intervention when necessary. The importance of well-organized workspaces conducive to conversation and informal socializing was noted, although the male principals did not address spatial ecology in their discussions.

Informal gatherings were highlighted as key to nurturing interpersonal relationships, providing a chance for staff to bond in a relaxed setting and establish a foundation for future collaboration. Despite efforts to maximize participation, some employees abstain from such events. The importance of interpersonal relations was especially accentuated by two principals during the pandemic, recognizing it as vital for a safe and stimulating work environment. They acknowledged the need for individualized approaches, as no single strategy fits all, focusing on specific relationships and scenarios like commendation or the dynamic between junior and senior teachers. Principals also noted that while they significantly influence interpersonal dynamics, these do not solely hinge on them, prompting efforts to raise staff awareness about the value of collective endeavors for positive relations. Mutual trust was also ranked highly.

Experiencing a Professional Role

Beyond legal duties, the principals placed high value on relationships with colleagues, students, parents, and the community. They acknowledged that the school's success and reputation largely depend on their proactive efforts, decision-making, collaboration, communication, delegation, and networking. They reported a lack of support in legal matters, with a substantial amount of administrative and technical tasks—the latter particularly underscored by male principals, such as supervising construction and maintenance, while female principals stressed the importance of relationships with often-overlooked technical staff. There were noted gender differences in role experience, including feelings of isolation mentioned only by the female principals. Their pre-role expectations contrasted with the current reality, which was more demanding than anticipated. The role of principal was described as highly stressful, requiring round-the-clock dedication. The multitude of responsibilities and diverse work areas necessitate support from colleagues and family, with the greatest satisfaction stemming from public recognition and collective backing.

Authority, Power and Emotions at Work

It was observed that all the selected principals exhibited reluctance when discussing authority and power. It seemed as though these concepts were perceived negatively as if they were out of place or even taboo within the principal's role. The principals emphasized their desire to cultivate an authority rooted in respect, aiming for an earned authority that they believe is recognized among employees. They distanced themselves from authoritarian leadership styles and the misuse of power, viewing the principal's power as delegated and to be exercised judiciously, particularly when decisions must be made without consensus or under pressing circumstances. They acknowledged the power inherent in their roles and the power of reference, yet none highlighted their professional power, which they likely possess given their tenure and the nature of their interpersonal relationships.

The principals considered the role and impact of emotions to be of great importance. They reflected on their own emotions and those of their colleagues, understanding that emotional self-regulation is vital for effective collaboration and that awareness of one's emotions can enhance leadership. A gender difference was noted in this regard; female principals felt it was important to express emotions, even negative ones, in an appropriate manner, while male principals believed in concealing vulnerability to prevent transmitting worries or negative moods to colleagues. However, they admitted to experiencing emotions privately, away from public view. They advocated for the school to be a safe space where all emotions are permissible, expressed at the right time and in the right way, and encouraged activities that bolster positive emotions among staff. They observed a range of emotions in their environment and expressed a desire for more support and positive emotions reciprocated from employees.

Use of Systemic Psychodynamic Approaches

While not consciously familiar with systemic psychodynamic approaches, principals seem to employ them intuitively to some extent. This is evident in their efforts to understand employees, foster open communication, build trust, and address individual needs. They recognized the importance of frustration tolerance and often refrained from immediate reactions, sometimes choosing to reflect before making decisions. However, they did not consistently delve into the biographies and historical roles of individuals, which could aid in managing diverse or challenging employees. Principals showed interest in the emotions of employees and disciplined themselves accordingly. Their own emotional awareness and regulation were deemed important, though they seldom explored the origins of certain feelings, nor did they recognize projective identification, transferences, or defense mechanisms, which often underlie disagreements and conflicts. They were cautious when considering their own authority and power but aimed to establish authority based on respect and exert positive forms of power.

Conclusion

Currently, systemic psychodynamics is only sporadically and inadvertently present in the schools of the selected principals. They utilize some psychodynamic approaches in their management effectively, albeit partially. All participants recognized the significance of strong interpersonal relationships for achieving school objectives and endeavored to create a safe and stimulating work environment. Gender differences were apparent in the experience of the principal's role, with female principals focusing more on interpersonal relationships, while male principals addressed administrative, legal, and technical aspects. The gender disparity was also pronounced in the expression of emotions, with female principals feeling isolated and desiring more feedback from employees, whereas male principals preferred to hide their negative emotions. The study suggests ample scope for further research in this domain.

A deeper understanding of roles from a psychodynamic perspective could benefit principals, aiding in comprehending employees and enhancing communication. Recognizing defense mechanisms at both individual and collective levels could facilitate management.

Addressing occasional insecurities and bolstering self-confidence might be more effectively achieved by systematically engaging with emotions and reactions and seeking causes beyond the school setting.

The most surprising aspect of the research pertained to authority and power, where principals showed considerable hesitation to discuss these topics. Reinforcing the importance of authority and power in management could simplify decision-making and delegation processes.

With a firmer grasp of psychodynamic approaches, principals could mitigate feelings of being overwhelmed, strengthen cooperation, and empower employees towards greater autonomy. Embracing the principle of "good enough" management could lead to high-quality work without the pursuit of perfection.

The research underscored the principals' dedication to their profession, viewing it as a mission that extends beyond regular working hours. They prioritize interpersonal relationships, not just within the team but also with students, parents, and the community, striving to cultivate a school "community" where emotions are welcomed, respect is mutual, and the well-being of students is paramount. They aim for the collective good, sometimes at the expense of their own well-being. However, only a principal who practices self-care, who establishes clear boundaries and occasionally declines requests, who recognizes the talents of colleagues and delegates tasks with confidence in their competence, who navigates conflicts by acknowledging each individual's distinct narrative, who perceives diverse viewpoints as avenues for growth rather than as grievances or hindrances, can consistently implement innovative changes and thus navigate the dynamic challenges of our era with success.

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