School principals coping with child sexual abuse in their schools

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Schools serve a central role in prevention, disclosure and intervention in cases of child sexual abuse (CSA). As school principals often face CSA cases in their daily work, they may hold the key to making social change on this front. However, research on principals' experiences of contending with CSA remains limited.
Objective: The current study is part of a larger qualitative research project examining various Israeli educators' coping with CSA among their students in diverse cultural contexts. In this study, we specifically focused on principals. The research questions were: (1) What are the unique ways in which school principals cope with cases of CSA during their course of daily work? (2) Do their cultural contexts and cultural affiliations shape their coping, and if so, how?
Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 principals from multiple cultural groups (secular, religious and ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Arab-Muslims), which were analyzed using a thematic approach.
Results: The findings indicated that principals demonstrate three types of coping strategies in response to encounters with CSA in the course of their work: they may act as "navigators" (exclusively responsible); "sharers" (rely on teamwork); or "balancers" (negotiating between cultural and legal demands). Furthermore, two contextual factors affected their construction of coping: ongoing professional experience in cases of CSA and personal experiences, including being a CSA survivor.
Conclusions: This study highlights the importance of principals in identifying and leading interventions for CSA cases. It also raises the need for training to combine reflective, experience-based practice alongside evidence-informed practice.

1. Introduction

1.1. School principals' roles and challenges

School management is a multi-faceted position that operates within ongoing, dynamic, and constantly changing realities and reforms (Bhengu & Myende, 2016; Tansiongco & Ibarra, 2020). The school principal is "expected to be the instructional leader with heavy accountability for student achievement and to be a change agent who leads reform efforts, both of which carry emotional

components" (Mahfouz, 2020, p. 442). Principals are required to manage various aspects of the school's community while also facing highly emotional demands to coordinate between stakeholders and resolve conflicts (Maxwell & Riley, 2017).

Previous studies have pointed to the principals' key role in leading schools toward high standards and academic success (Hallinger et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2008; Murphy et al., 2006). Additionally, they are expected to promote a positive school climate (McCarley et al., 2016) and self-efficacy and well-being for teachers (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Hallinger, 2003) to enhance performance and retention (Brown & Wynn, 2007; Kartini et al., 2020). They must also establish productive school-parent/guardian partnerships (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014) and coordinate between parents/guardians, teachers, students and external parties (Mahfouz, 2020).

Compared to past decades, elementary school principals are currently subjected to greater demands, longer hours, and management of more staff (Ferrandino, 2001). Thus, studies around the globe have pointed to principals' high levels of occupational stress and overload and emotional demands (Leventis et al., 2017; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Tintoré et al., 2020), resulting in exhaustion and fatigue (Drago-Severson et al., 2018). Principals deal with overwhelming guilt, being underestimated and under-valued by staff and superintendents (especially young female principals), and poor work-life balance and self-care (Greco et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2020). Furthermore, they face ethical dilemmas regarding management and conflictual interactions with the school community (Kimber & Campbell, 2014; Poirel & Yvon, 2014), a deficit in human and financial resources, and personal pressure (Elomaa et al., 2021).

Previous studies have demonstrated how a principal's experience of these multiple stressors can induce secondary trauma and compassion fatigue (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Mahfouz, 2020). This can eventually result in burnout, low performance and effectiveness (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Grissom et al., 2015), early resignation and frequent turnover (Swen, 2020). However, positive, collaborative and caring relationships, as well as investment in self-care and leadership, have been revealed as sources of strength among school leaders (Drago-Severson et al., 2018). Developing problem-focused strategies for coping with stressors was also found to be important in decreasing burnout among school principals (Elomaa et al., 2021).

1.2. Principals' role construction in dealing with CSA

The education system has been identified as holding a significant role in confronting child sexual abuse (CSA) (Finkelhor, 2007; Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Lynas & Hawkins, 2017; Márquez-Flores et al., 2016). However, since the 1990s, scant research has been done specifically on the principal's role in dealing with child abuse (McClare, 1990; Payne, 1991). Instead, most studies in this arena have focused on counselors and teachers (e.g., Goldman & Padayachi, 2002; Mathews et al., 2009) as recipients of CSA self-disclosure (Sigad & Tener, 2020; Xiao & Smith-Prince, 2015). Principals may be the primary recipients of reports from these professionals and may conduct official reporting to the authorities and consultations on issues of child abuse and neglect (Lindenbach et al., 2021; Sigad & Tener, 2020).

The extent to which principals report child abuse cases is controversial and ambiguous, and there is a lack of up-to-date information in this regard. While there is some evidence that school principals comply with the reporting mandate more than other professionals (Zellman, 1990), other studies point to inconsistent and even opposite trends (Kenny & McEachern, 2002; Payne, 1991). In one study, principals are even described as uncooperative, and as barriers to reporting, more than they are cited as sources of support (Sivis-Cetinkaya, 2015).

1.3. Contextual factors affecting principals' role construction in dealing with CSA

The role perception of educational professionals in CSA cases depends largely on their training on issues such as the extent of their duty, how and where to report incidents, and how to identify abuse (Mathews, 2015). Principals, who have a central role in addressing CSA and creating a safe school climate (Hinkelman & Bruno, 2008; Mitchell, 2010), have variously described themselves as assured of their ability to manage abusive situations (Zellman, 1990), reported inadequate training for coping with child maltreatment, and expressed confusion regarding definitions and identification of abuse (Alvarez et al., 2004; Kenny & McEachern, 2002; Zellman, 1990). Furthermore, studies have shown that there is sometimes ambiguity regarding the stages of the reporting procedure (Bartucci, 2012) and a lack of awareness of welfare investigation policy following suspicion of abuse (McCabe, 2020).

1.4. School principals' role in addressing CSA within the Israeli context

Educators in Israel are required to report any reasonable basis to believe that abuse has been committed against a minor by a person in charge of the minor (Mandatory Reporting Act, 1977); a family member under 18 (amendment of 2007); or in a daycare, educational, or therapeutic setting. Reflecting a commitment to training educators in how to identify abuse and how to respond professionally, the Director General's Circular (2008) of the Israeli Ministry of Education (MoE) details reporting procedures for schools, including the circumstances under which the reporting obligation applies, to whom it should be reported and how.

While the MoE develops educational policies, the school administration is in charge of their implementation. School principals are subject to a strict reporting obligation and are responsible for holding at least one staff meeting per year in light of the circular guidelines, creating frameworks that will enable teachers to deal with complex situations, and publishing the main provisions of the circular among students and their parents (Director General's Circular, 2008). In addition, a recent study with principals in Israel showed that restructuring the school's educational routine rests primarily on principals, who have the power to lead school achievement, success, and reputation (Tubin & Farchi, 2021). Therefore, policy implementation within Israeli schools is greatly impacted by how principals interpret and make sense of educational policies and reforms, including those related to CSA, and the ways these resonate with their professional role identity, values and beliefs (Mizrahi-Shtelman, 2021).

1.4.1. Arab and Jewish principals' roles in CSA cases

Both the Arab and Orthodox Jewish community are distinguished from the majority secular Jewish population by lifestyle and cultural norms, one consequence of which is their maintenance of separate education systems (Shapira et al., 2011; Spiegel, 2011). However, to date, the effects of Jewish (secular and Orthodox) and Arab principals' cultural identities on their role construction in CSA cases have never been studied. Arab and ultra-Orthodox school principals cope daily with the tension between their commitment to both Ministry of Education regulations and their local communities and sociocultural values (Arar and Abu-Asbah, 2013); a similar conflict has been observed among educators in these communities coping and intervening in CSA cases (Sigad & Tener, 2020; Katzenstein & Fontes, 2017). Arab principals have also been the target for verbal and physical violence in light of internal political attempts by the community to assert control of school functioning (Arar, 2012), and this threat is intensified in the face of CSA disclosure (Sigad & Tener, 2020).

Studies dealing with role perception and the managerial style of Arab principals have shown contradictory findings, with different styles linked to different value orientations (Abu-Hussain, 2015). Thus, while some studies describe principals as authoritative, imposing a strict hierarchy on their staff, others indicate a trusting and cooperative approach (Arar, 2019). On the other hand, the management styles of ultra-Orthodox principals have as yet only been explored in a limited way. They are mainly described as adhering to a conservative and hierarchical management style (Oplatka & Herts-Lazarovits, 2011) and working to preserve the community's social norms. Compared to their secular counterparts, they have also been found to engage in less active management in crisis situations and less participative leadership in general (Barth & Benoliel, 2019). These dimensions of pro-activity, hierarchy and partnership largely shape management style in a crisis such as an instance of CSA disclosure.

1.5. The current study

The current study is part of a larger qualitative research project examining various groups of educators in diverse cultural contexts and the ways they cope with CSA among their students (Tener & Sigad, 2019; Sigad & Tener, 2020). This study, which focused on principals from multiple social and cultural groups (secular, religious and ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arab-Muslims), aimed to describe and analyze their coping with CSA in their work, and the ways their backgrounds may shape such coping. The research questions that guided the study were: (1) How do school principals experience cases of CSA during their course of daily work? (2) How do school principals view their responsibilities regarding CSA cases?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and sampling

The sample included 25 elementary school principals from different areas within Israel, including the Jerusalem, North and Central districts. Principals who participated in the study had a cultural background consistent with their school's religious affiliation; this included 11 secular Jews, two Religious Zionist Jews, six ultra-Orthodox Jews, and six Arab-Muslims. Their ages ranged from 35 to 67, with 19 females and six males. The participants had 5 to 35 years of experience as educators in general, not only in management positions. Most were married (23) and parents (21). Inclusion criteria consisted of having at least one experience contending with CSA during their tenure as principals.

2.2. Data collection

The study was based on a purposeful sample. Participants were recruited through two key informants, field practitioners who consult with principals on topics relating to at-risk youth; one conducts research among the Arab population and the other among the Jewish population. The informants utilized a professional WhatsApp group and an email distribution list to share a call for participation in the study, which included an explanation of the study goals and the criteria for participation. The informants passed on only the names of those who expressed initial interest, a total of 22 principals, of whom 12 were Arabs and 10 were Jews.

The research coordinator then provided these principals, by phone, with an extended explanation of the topic of the study and the expected interview. Subsequently, 8 Jewish principals and 4 Arab principals gave their initial consent to participate in the study. The rest refused to participate due to lack of time or technical constraints. The interviewers contacted the consenting principals to arrange their interview sessions. The rest of the participants were recruited directly by the interviewers, based on personal acquaintance.

Three graduate students and one doctoral student from education or social work studies conducted the interviews. All students underwent training to conduct semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted at least one hour on average and were based on an interview guide that included the categories of principals' perceived roles in CSA cases (e.g., What do you think is the role of school principals concerning CSA?) and responses to CSA disclosure (e.g., From your own experience, what are the responses of school administrators when contending with CSA?). All interviews in the study were recorded and transcribed.

2.3. Data analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted by all authors to reveal themes in the interviews according to the framework presented by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012), using Dedoose software. The analysis was inductive and therefore "grounded" in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). First, the authors reviewed the transcripts to become familiar with the data. Initial codes were then identified

from the data and reviewed to generate themes. The authors then reviewed the themes to ensure they maintained the meaning of the initial codes. The themes were then defined and named (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, the authors chose quotes to exemplify the various themes, which were translated from Arabic and Hebrew into English. Randomly chosen quotes were back-translated to ensure the accuracy of the translations.

2.4. Trustworthiness

Validity in qualitative research is a challenging concept, and there are multiple viewpoints as to how to define it and numerous terms used to describe it (FitzPatrick, 2019). For this study, we have adopted the model of trustworthiness, a major term currently widely in use, in accordance with the position that establishing trust and validation are related concepts, each of which is adapted to a distinct methodological tradition.

In order to ensure trustworthiness, member checking was employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015), allowing participants to provide further details and clarifications (Morse, 2015). The authors also took steps to combat any bias in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This included an audit trail of intensive record-keeping and attaching raw data to the analyses. In addition, for each quote, the participant's details were included as well as a contextual examination of the quote and how it related to the theme, according to the authors. In this way, readers can assess the quality of the analysis (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992) and agree or disagree with the findings (Angen, 2000; Patton, 2002). Furthermore, weekly peer-debriefing meetings were conducted during the first stage of the analysis to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study, with regular meetings for the remainder of the analysis to confirm the coding and ensure systematic results (Nowell et al., 2017). These included discussions about the method and analysis with trusted peers, experts in CSA and qualitative research (FitzPatrick, 2019). Records of the peer debriefing process were kept (Spall, 1998).

2.5. Ethics

The overall research project, including the current study, was approved by the ethics committees of the academic institutions with which the researchers are affiliated. Participation in the study occurred after obtaining informed consent from the participants while ensuring their dignity, integrity and confidentiality. Participants were provided with referrals in case of emotional distress and were told they could terminate the interview at any time. Pseudonyms were used and identifying details were removed from the data set.

3. Findings

Principals in our study described the complexity of confronting CSA cases among their students in the course of their work. Whether secular or religious Jews or Arab, all of them described multiple ways of coping with these cases, which can be described in two parts: first, the various coping strategies they employed; second, the contextual factors that affected their construction of coping. These factors were (1) their ongoing professional experience, gained over the years after confronting several cases of CSA; and (2) their personal experiences, including the effect of CSA cases on their personal lives as well as, for some, the effect of being CSA survivors. Each of these subthemes will be further elaborated on below.

3.1. Principals' role construction in dealing with CSA

Most study participants considered themselves the main school actors and leaders in dealing with CSA among their students. Three main types were identified regarding role construction: (1) "navigators" – principals who perceived themselves as the sole leaders in dealing with CSA disclosure cases; (2) "sharers" – principals who emphasized being part of a team and sought out cooperation; and (3) "balancers" – principals who were mostly occupied with the need to balance the conflicting needs of those involved in the case. It should be noted that a principal can belong to more than one type and that context also influences the roles they adopt. Each of the three types will now be described and illustrated.

3.1.1. The navigators

The first type, the *navigators*, took the lead in cases of CSA, handled cases throughout, and were the ones who made the final decisions. When encountering ambiguity, they are characterized as taking a firm stand, even at times when this conflicted with the approach of other personnel. This role construction was seen among eight participants; four were Arab-Muslims and four were from the various Jewish groups. Navigator principals were also characterized as being highly alert to the possibility of CSA and were attentive to identify such cases and handle them effectively. This was described by Noel, a female in her forties with 18 years of experience and principal in an Arab-Muslim elementary school:

> I always hear people say that it is better not to get involved in these problems, but I feel the necessity to intervene responsibly and see myself enlisting and a soldier in the war, and I have to wear protective armor and fight to discover the roots of the case.

She went on to say:

> First of all, I believe that my presence in the school provides safety and security for the students. It is very important to me that the student feels safe inside the school, and […] safe at home, which is an integral part of school. A person who does not feel safe

will not be brought to the highest levels. In cases of sexual abuse, I completely empty and suspend myself to deal with the problem. I leave my job and spend three days in a row to deal with the issue with the help of my team.

Several participants described allies, such as vice principals or counselors, in cases of CSA disclosure at school. Ayelet, a female in her fifties with eight years of experience and principal in a Jewish ultra-Orthodox elementary school, described:

You would probably see me trying to make a connection with whomever I can recruit – a psychologist, a counselor. I would look to see and hear from someone who can help me deal with the issue.

The navigators also described how, at times, their involvement and centrality meant paying high personal costs. Although they were aware of the cost, they chose to stay in their navigator role. This is described by M. G., a female in her fifties with 30 years of experience and principal in an Arab-Muslim elementary school:

M. G.: I was once accused of destroying an entire family due to my report on incest […] I remember that and I'm having goosebumps. Her dad […] raped her.
Interviewer: What did you do?
M. G.: I reported it to the child protection officer and she ordered a child investigator, took the girl for an out-of-home arrangement. The whole family […] threatened me and said 'the house-destroying principal'… it was a very difficult story […] I bore all the criticism alone, I was worried for my life and the lives of my family. I met the girl by chance and she shared with me that her father is still in prison and that she is married and happy. Only then I breathed a sigh of relief.
Interviewer: If the wheel of time went backward, what would you do differently?
M. G.: Despite what I experienced, I would choose the same. I will not hesitate to report. It is really essential despite the difficulty. This is the way to protect our children, do not become like an ostrich and bury ourselves in the sand.

3.1.2. The sharers

The *sharers* represented principals who worked with a strong network of other professionals both in and out of the education system, sharing the intervention and emotional load after the CSA disclosure. Twelve participants were identified as sharers, most commonly among the secular Jewish group. Sharers were characterized by their feeling of togetherness. When asked what usually happens after CSA is disclosed in school, Lea, a female in her fifties with 11 years of experience and principal in a secular Jewish elementary school, answered:

So usually, it [referring to CSA disclosure] goes in the direction of the counselor. They usually turn to her, or they turn to me and I contact her. Then we share [...] More than once, I heard her say to the teacher, "[T]ry to talk to him [the child] a little more" [...] and then depending on what comes up, then the counselor usually consults with the instructor. There is an instructor on the subject of sexual abuse, and there is the counselor's supervisor [...] If it is a known [to authorities] family there is a social worker, [so] we will contact the social worker, and if not, then there is a child protection officer who works with the school. And we consult with them.

The sharer principals described the importance of working closely with professionals who are experts in the field of CSA so that these professionals can share their expertise with them. This was described by Shifra, a female in her fifties with 34 years of experience and principal in a Jewish ultra-Orthodox elementary school:

]W[hen a soul is hurt, [the principal's] role is to be here […] We are here for them. And to do it right, I am accompanied by a professional. I am not a professional in this field. I need professionals who will do the right processes and will both accompany me and also accompany the case. I do not change hats. I think sometimes there can be very big damage when a person who is not a professional touches on things that are not his.

Sharing provides principals not only with information sharing and joint decision making but also the ability for emotional sharing, venting and a sense of togetherness that protects against loneliness. Edna, a female in her fifties with 20 years of experience and principal in a Jewish secular elementary school, shared:

As I tell teachers to do with cases that are difficult for them, just build a network of staff members who work together and think about it together. You share the thoughts, the emotions, even the question marks and the uncertainty because you do not always know [...] There is a group, and in this group you can also put the not simple emotional parts. This is what I do. When it's hard for me, I turn to the team and I say what we will do and they are really super smart. They know how to work. They are serious, thinking girls. I have fun working with them and it makes it easier for me.

Furthermore, in this context, Tamar, a female in her fifties with 30 years of experience and principal in a Jewish secular elementary school, described the important emotional role of the meaningful partnership she had with other professionals when asked by the interviewer about her immediate feelings and responses after a CSA disclosure in school:

First of all, I... I'm in shock and I have very, very, very strong heartbeats. I took care of myself in the office, when I had difficult events and had to breathe. I bought this soap bubbles game, when you blow soap bubbles. So I had this game of soap bubbles, and when I really had a hard time, I hung up the phone, I took this soap bubble device, I closed the door, the door was always open but I closed it. I sat for a minute, exhaled soap bubbles and said to myself, Tamar, think for a moment what you are doing.

> After a minute… I do not know if it is a minute or so, but after a while, I called the counselor. […] I shared it. I called my deputy as well, and together the three of us started thinking about what we were doing. But… I have never been left with it alone.

Finally, for two male principals, sharing was aimed at passing the case to more qualified people, transforming the responsibility. This was accompanied by a feeling of helplessness and lacking knowledge. Amir, a male in his forties with 12 years of experience and principal in an Arab-Muslim elementary school, described his feelings concerning the case he dealt with:

> In order to protect myself and the child, I must report in order to ease the burden and share the responsibility with another entity. I have the ability to deal but no tools to handle it. I do not approach, "I hand the bread to the bakers." I report to the Ministry of Education and Bureau. Although in most cases the bureau in East Jerusalem does nothing, I have proof, I send emails and report and even they bother to answer me.

3.1.3. The balancers

The third type, the *balancers*, were a minority represented by four participants, all from the Jewish ultra-Orthodox sector. Their description reflected, in various ways, a societal/cultural demand to silence the case and not let any other formal system outside the school intervene. They may share this value, but they also feel a duty to deal with the case professionally, such as the obligation to report CSA to the formal authorities. Thus, they try to balance between the mandatory reporting laws made by those outside their community, the children under their responsibility at the school and the surrounding community to which they belong. Usually, there are conflicting or contradicting interests, as described by Shifra:

> First of all, you have a responsibility towards the girl who needs to be protected, but also towards the abuser. If you are automatically reporting, you can ruin a person's life, ruin a family's life. It's important to really know what to do right and what not to do.

This perception is very different from the secular Jewish principals, to whom mandatory reporting was an obvious obligation. For the ultra-Orthodox principal, mandatory reporting contradicted other values that should also be considered, as described by Zili, a female in her sixties with 34 years of experience and principal in a Jewish ultra-Orthodox elementary school:

> A story that happened to us last year or two years ago, amazing story […] A girl in first grade went all the time with girls to the bathroom and took off their underwear […]. It was a nasty business. An amazing girl with lots of talents. Of course, the teacher was hysterical, really hysterical. We immediately talked to the counselor, the counselor said there is a duty to report. We were called to the Ministry of Education. We sat there and there was a discussion about whether to involve welfare or not. I begged from my soul: "Listen, this is a great family, one word with the parents everything will look different" [answered:] "Do not talk to the parents, you must report." In the end, they were convinced to let us call the parents to see what would happen. It was unpleasant.

She further described how she apologized to the parents after reporting, feeling that she "committed a crime against the family." This quote reveals the clash between how religious and secular communities in Israel see the responsibility for handling cases of CSA. While the secular Jewish administrators saw, first and foremost, the legal aspect of the duty to report and considered the CSA victims to be the center of intervention, the ultra-Orthodox principals looked at the good of the entire community and the place of the families in handling such cases. Gili, a female in her sixties with 25 years of experience and principal in a Jewish ultra-Orthodox school, also referred to the place of the community rabbi in intervening in CSA cases. She saw him as the supreme authority for decision-making, as is customary in ultra-Orthodox society:

> Whenever I hear something, I turn to the rabbi for permission. I know I have a duty to report, but as part of the duty to report, I can choose the rabbi and report to him. I do not run away from my role and I always get permission for a move that I think I should make. It's right at the base, and I take all the staff involved […] Everyone has a chance at this meeting to say and explain his position and his thoughts, and then we hear a ruling. It really calms us down all the way. Even when we take a scary step, I know the ruling is from a rabbinical person and it accompanies me. It gives me a lot of strength.

On the other hand, Gili also stated that she is aware that the rabbi will probably choose not to report the case to the authorities. For her, the desire to be released from the responsibility for the case outweighed the need to know the rabbi's actions.

> I know the rabbi will not go and complain to the police about the perpetrator. Maybe he will send people on his behalf. I never questioned the rabbi, what he does, when he knows. I would like to throw this story off me and pass it on to someone else.

3.2. Contextual factors affecting role construction

During the analysis, it appeared that the construction of the principal's role was affected by two contextual factors: (1) professional expertise in dealing with the phenomenon of CSA; and (2) personal experiences of being sexually abused themselves, or the effect that previous CSA cases had on their personal lives. Each of these will be further elaborated on here.

3.2.1. Developing professional expertise

Most participants described experiences over the years in dealing with CSA and the way such experiences affected their current

positioning. They appeared to differentiate between their current coping with CSA cases and the way they handled such cases in the early stages of their careers. For example, Amir described a case of CSA revealed in his school during his first year as principal. He shared how one of his third-grade students arrived to school not showered and his attempt to intervene that eventually led to the abuse disclosure:

> I told him, "Listen, if tomorrow you come without a shower, I will bring the water pipe [...] and I will wash you, in front of your friends and in front of the whole school." [...] Still, he came without a shower, so I realized there was a problem here [...] I decided to contact the educational psychologist. She sat with him, asked him to draw. She concluded that the child is being sexually assaulted and raped. [...] I asked her to write a report so I could refer him to the Welfare Office and the Ministry of Education... It was a difficult case and a shock for me. I learned that we should not judge children by their outward appearance. Surely there are hidden and deeper things.

The principal initially took a forceful approach, threatening to embarrass the child. Although the child did not want to be publicly humiliated, he still arrived unwashed the next day. This caused the principal to understand that the child's choice not to shower had a deeper meaning. The principal then sought the help of a professional, leading to the disclosure of CSA. He described the case as a turning point for him, causing him to realize that external behaviors have deeper hidden meanings. Later in the interview, Amir described how his professional experience taught him to expand the definition of what is perceived as CSA. He shared:

> At the beginning of my journey, I thought that sexual abuse means full intercourse [...] I initially thought it was an adult with a minor, but I started learning about cases that it is between children... Each stage, I expand the definition based on my experience.

Another principal, Dganit, a female in her forties with five years of experience and working in a Jewish secular elementary school, described how her previous experience working in a mental health institution prepared her to deal with CSA in her current position:

> Say, I grew up a bit like in a bubble, my kids are growing up too, we live in the same neighborhood, and it's kind of a good neighborhood, good kids, really, [...] you do not see the horrors of the world. And all of a sudden, when I was working at [name of the mental health institution] and I saw a catastrophe, really, some shocking stories of horrible situations. [...] I think when I came to school, I was already very experienced and mature [...] already as if I had seen everything. So, I think it also comes from a place, you know, of not being alarmed and very, very calm and understanding.

Lea shared how her experience made her more resilient in coping with CSA:

> Over the years you get a little rough. I do not think today I take these events more easily, really not, but how you take it, you yourself emotionally. You are no longer scared to report. Okay, then the parents will be angry but eventually they will understand that it is for the better. You learn how to deal with these feelings. A principal cannot let everything shake him emotionally [...]. You learn to be tough, elephant skin.

3.2.2. Personal experiences

In this theme, two main issues were identified: CSA that the principals themselves experienced, and the personal consequences of the CSA incidents they encountered at work. These layers stand on their own but also intertwine, as in the case of Revital, a female in her forties with seven years of experience, principal in a secular Jewish elementary school. Revital described how CSA disclosure in her school brought up painful memories of her own abuse:

> I can tell you that I too have, unfortunately, been sexually abused as a child in elementary school, and it's something that accompanies you... in a place like this it floods you. It does return to these places... until I got to this school, I did not realize how much. I think something in this school is very much overwhelming me all the time [...]. It brings me back to moments, to images, to emotions, to this panic, to a sense of guilt, to shame, to all these places that you want to kill whoever did it and take this girl and you know what journey awaits her, how difficult it is [...]

Here, it seems that the abuse that occurred at the school evoked powerful negative emotions relating to her own abuse. On the one hand, this may increase Revital's sensitivity toward the case and promote intervention and treatment. On the other hand, it produced a constant emotional and mental difficulty with unclear implications for Revital and those around her. She went on to tell how, although she had worked with the same student population before, being faced with CSA disclosures while in the position of principal evoked stronger emotions:

> I have always worked with such extreme populations and I never thought about what happened to me when I was 11. It was never a turning point that affected my professional development, but now it might be. It does cause me to constantly process this. And it's not something I like to talk about. It's not something I want to talk about, it's not something I want people to know about me.

The difficulty she is experiencing is evident in this quote. The circumstances are new and unfamiliar and cause her intense discomfort. Revital's need, as a principal, to deal with the CSA disclosure in her school is overlapping with her past abuse, which she does not want to be part of her professional image.

Additionally, dealing with CSA cases, whether the principal experienced abuse or not, had complex implications for the participants' personal lives and their relationships with themselves and others. Noel described the emotional effect of the CSA case she dealt

with:

> When I hear that there is sexual abuse, my thoughts return to cases I experienced within school, as if I was watching a movie of all the stories and cases of sexual abuse I experienced – if there were success stories that feel comfortable and also remember the cases and stories I could not handle… then [I] feel deep suffering and imagine the sexually abused students and ask myself why I could not treat these students even though it was very clear to me that they were sexually abused. And repeatedly ask myself where I failed and why I failed, why I could not recruit people to help me […]

Another principal, Tamar, told of how being emotionally involved made her eventually decide to leave the position:

> I would just disconnect myself, put on some music and sing out loud. Come home, put on running shoes and go for a run, first of all, clearing myself of it all. And return home, wake up in the middle of the night, at two or three in the morning, and think of the children. It was very, very, very difficult […] so I had anchors and I had supports […] But they're hard experiences. So, I decided, all this dealing with the pain and suffering of people, I decided after eight years, enough. I see it can hurt me both physically and mentally, so I went out and I have to tell you that, really, in the last few months I have been breathing.

In contrast, Idan, a male in his thirties with 11 years of experience and principal in a secular Jewish elementary school, shared how, at the time, he became more resilient and how the encounter with the CSA case made him choose to volunteer in a rape crises organization:

> It all started when […] my student was raped and she came and told me… I just contacted the Rape Crisis Center because I was a social education coordinator and I brought kids to them for workshops. And they really helped me and the student and really accompanied us. And I was so impressed with it that I said, "Wow, here's a place I want to volunteer," you see? So, if at first, even the conversations in the center were very difficult for me, today they are no longer. I am no longer easily shocked. I do not feel today that it costs me some mental price as it used to, I am not numb […] but I am definitely able to hear a very, very difficult conversation… there is so much ugliness and evil and horror that… it's just a part of life.

Thus, Idan expressed how encountering CSA increased his engagement and involvement in confronting the phenomenon even beyond his role as principal. It taught him how to accept evil as a part of life and use his experience and strength to help.

In summary, it appears that principals adopt diverse management roles to address the circumstances that arise in the face of CSA disclosure. These approaches range on the continuum from exclusive responsibility to shared responsibility, from making decisive and quick decisions while confronting an oppositional environment to finding compromising solutions designed to please conflicting stakeholders. Furthermore, principals do not act as a "tabula rasa" and rely on experiences that have shaped them over time, both traumatic personal experiences and formative professional experiences.

4. Discussion

The current study aimed to uncover the coping styles of principals confronting CSA in their work. These findings are particularly relevant when considering the principal's centrality in creating and shaping school culture, developing trusting relationships and disciplined inquiry and action (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Accordingly, the multidimensional role of the principals in our study included many managerial tasks, some of which were conflicting, namely, supporting teachers, students and parents; sustaining a climate that is safe and conducive to learning; and liaising with parents and other stakeholders (Maxwell & Riley, 2017).

The present study revealed three archetypes based on the principals' constructions of their management role in CSA cases (navigators, sharers, and balancers). These archetypes, potentially conceptualized as "management styles," refer to the principals' ways of coping with conflicts as an expression of their school leadership (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Yariv, 2012). Our study illustrated how these typologies have critical implications for interventions in cases of CSA, which required coordination between school stakeholders and societal expectations, while resolving interpersonal conflicts and performing a leadership role (Bhengu & Myende, 2016; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Tansiongco & Ibarra, 2020).

The *navigators* saw themselves as leaders of the case and the ones to pave the way for a solution in times of conflicts, also defined by Adizes (2004) as the "producer" management archetype. This type drives performance and delivers results. They focus on what is happening at the moment and tend to make quick decisions. The principals in this study could also be classified as the "charismatic leadership type" (Bell, 2013), as they inspire eagerness in their teams and motivate them to move forward. As seen in our study, these principals tended to perceive themselves as the leaders "at the forefront," while their staff members functioned as facilitators and backup support. As previously stated (Bartucci, 2012), they considered the fulfillment of mandatory reporting a necessary component of effective leadership. Therefore, they promoted a climate that actively supported teachers and other school staff to report and trained them to spot signs of CSA. In one case, the principal suggested leaving the staff out of the process (Bartucci, 2012), which does not conform to the Director General's Circular (2008) recommendations. The possible danger in such a management style is the amount of confidence placed in the leader rather than the entire team, making the team dependent on the leader's presence in crisis situations (Amanchukwu et al., 2015).

The *sharers* in our study could also be classified as the "collaborating-integrating" type (Adizes, 2004; Rahim, 2002), as they made an effort to collaborate with others in searching for a solution that fully addressed the issue at hand, satisfying all parties involved. This type can also be referred to as "democratic leaders," "distributive leadership" or "intensified leaders," as they included staff members in the decision-making process while encouraging their creativity, responsibility and engagement (Harris & Chapman, 2002; Liggett, 2020). In our study, the principals' management style was enhanced by interactions and networking with others, including teachers,

parents, and the wider professional community (Kruse & Louis, 2009). The danger of this type of management is that it can falter when speed or efficiency is essential during a crisis. In CSA disclosure, such cooperation requires a great deal of effort, which often results in burnout, resentment, becoming territorial, and withholding information (Kaminer et al., 1988). In addition, the team might waste valuable time gathering information or intervene without the knowledge or expertise needed in high-quality interventions (Márquez-Flores et al., 2016).

The *balancers*, the least prevalent pattern, included principals from both Jewish and Muslim traditional backgrounds. These principals were committed to cultural codes that often limited their ability to intervene in the aftermath of CSA disclosures (Sigad & Tener, 2020). Inherently, principals are required to hold and manage various aspects of the school community simultaneously, while facing highly emotional demands in coordinating between all school stakeholders and resolving interpersonal conflicts (Maxwell & Riley, 2017). This study shows that in CSA cases, principals face huge conflicts that focus mainly on the tension between mandatory reporting and societal/cultural demands. These principals hold a "compromising" management style, as they strive to find a solution that is mutually acceptable, expedient and partially satisfies the parties involved (Rahim, 2002). Alongside its cultural efficiency, this approach has significant potential to be a stressogenic factor for principals who face highly emotional demands coordinating between school and society stakeholders to resolve interpersonal conflicts (Mahfouz, 2020; Maxwell & Riley, 2017).

The principals in this study focused primarily on a professionalization process that relied on their past personal and professional experiences. In fact, their professionalization was based on experiences acquired "on the go." Thus, the development of their roles in CSA cases was largely based on "a trial and error intuitive approach" (Davidov et al., 2017, p. 721), which suggests that principals act from an experiential standpoint and less from a formal knowledge-based position. This form of role construction can be attributed to the reflective knowing-in-practice of Schon (1983). According to this approach, practitioners become researchers through "reflection-in-action," by "thinking back on a situation they have lived through, and explor[ing] the understandings they have brought to their handling of the case" (Schon, 1983, p. 61–62). As seen in this study, the unintended result might involve a mistake that needs to be corrected, an abnormality that needs to be understood or an opportunity that needs to be seized – these all provoke reflection. In light of this, the experienced principal reconstructs the situation and creates a new strategy of action.

The study findings suggest that alongside being "instructional leaders" who aim to provide safety and support to others (Mahfouz, 2020; Reid, 2021), principals might be in a vulnerable position themselves as they cope with the consequences of secondary trauma (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Secondary traumatic stress (STS) refers to behaviors and emotions resulting from knowledge about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other (Beck, 2011). Among the principals in this study, there was a unique emergence of secondary trauma for those who had reported sexual trauma in their pasts, a life event that also constructed their role perception in CSA cases today. Past studies have shown that among teachers, STS increased if they had experienced traumatic events similar to those of their students (Caringi et al., 2015; Hydon et al., 2015). Accordingly, when encountering CSA cases in the present, the principals in this study experienced a flood of memories relating to past traumatic experiences. As such, they can be described as "wounded leaders" struggling to cope with conflicting conditions in their leadership practice that they had also experienced in their personal lives, such as vulnerability, isolation or fear (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004).

4.1. Limitations

Firstly, in line with qualitative studies and limited sampling, this study does not purport to be statistically representative but rather aims to recognize the uniqueness of the case presented and be transferable to other contexts (Polit & Beck, 2010). Future studies should look beyond elementary school principals' experiences within the general education system to focus on diverse educational contexts (e. g., special education schools).

Second, the sample included principals from secular and religious Jewish and Arab societies working in different school settings. This heterogeneity further limits generalizability. Future studies should address the specific components of principals' cultures, such as the unique conflicts and dilemmas of closed, conservative religious communities. Also, the sample was gender asymmetric, which could bias the findings, especially in light of what is known about the relation between gender and educators' managerial styles (Blackburn et al., 2006) as well as gender and reporting awareness (Greco et al., 2017). Further research should examine the context of gender in managing complex situations, such as child abuse and neglect.

Third, it is possible that principals already committed to dealing with CSA were more likely to participate in the study, so that principals of other stances were not represented in the sample. Lastly, further research should examine the interdisciplinary team dynamics (within which principals operate) in schools to gain a more holistic understanding of CSA in this context and the associated impact on effective interventions.

4.2. Implications for theory, research and practice

This study illustrates the range of management practices used by principals in CSA cases according to their role construction. Every managerial style has advantages and strengths as well as "dangers" that must be considered (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Therefore, principals must pay attention to how their value systems shape their leadership styles (Abu-Hussain & Essawi, 2014). For example, a "navigator" type principal, who holds the value of taking total responsibility, should also recognize the potential of this managerial style to thwart the inter-team productivity necessary for successful CSA intervention (Davidov et al., 2017). Furthermore, a "sharer," who believes in partnership and reciprocity, should recognize the limitations of team decision-making when immediate responses are needed, as in CSA cases.

Moreover, the study highlights professionalization mechanisms regarding CSA cases that are not training-based but that lean more

on professional and personal experiences. These experiences shape vital insights among educators, but the insights must also be accompanied by reflection to guide future actions (Ersozlu, 2016). In addition, as leaders, principals should be equipped with formal, up-to-date knowledge for creating evidence-informed practices (Nelson & Campbell, 2017) to better identify and prevent CSA. In Israel, the principals' responsibility to report abuse, impart knowledge in the field, and provide a supportive framework for intervention all require extensive managerial capabilities. These must be addressed in training programs, including conceptual skills (to perceive the significant elements in a situation and make relevant decisions); human skills (to manage conflicts); and technical skills (to use effective methods and techniques) (Lunenburg, 2010).

Professional colleagues in this study were found to be a significant source of support and guidance for principals. Additionally, almost half of the principals held a "sharer" managerial style, stemming from the perception that decision-making in a crisis must be coordinated within a team. This finding highlights the need to work in an interdisciplinary manner (Dahir et al., 2010) in CSA cases (Davidov et al., 2017). It was further found that the "navigators" tended to take responsibility for reporting in situations where their staff had difficulty fulfilling this duty. These findings suggest that an inter-team partnership in CSA cases requires a clear division of roles for all involved alongside the flexibility of role boundaries in exceptional situations. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of peer learning, collegial emotional support and constant synchronization among teams coping with CSA.

Finally, our results indicated the need to explore the phenomenon of principals' secondary traumatization, specifically when they carry a background of past trauma. Understanding their emotional experiences is necessary to enable them to create safe environments for their students. In light of what is known about how secondary trauma and coping strategies influence levels of principal burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2019), the issue of principals' mental well-being while coping with CSA cases in their schools must be further investigated and addressed.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Acknowledgements

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