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Sustaining school-based improvement: considering emotional responses to change

Sustaining
school-based
improvement

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Abstract

Purpose – Emotions of school leaders influence school culture and structure. Understanding emotions is under-researched and under-theorized in non-western contexts, especially during educational change. The purpose of this paper is to understand the nature of the leadership team's (LT's) emotional responses to change, their coping strategies and conditions that maintain their commitment to change.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used intrinsic case study research, drawing on data from interviews and a focus group that illuminated perceptions of the LT in a school. The data set was analyzed following the general inductive approach.

Findings – The LT's experienced three critical incidents (CI) of educational change that provoked a range of intense negative and positive emotions, a national curriculum reform. Despite the team's attempt to cope with the national curriculum reform (i.e. CI1), negative emotions and unsupportive conditions challenged their commitment to change. In CI2, supportive conditions and effective personal coping strategies helped elicit positive emotions, which led to sustained commitment to change. Emotions experienced during the capacity-building program (i.e. CI3) were predominantly positive due to support from the school principal and coaches, resulting in sustained commitment to change.

Research limitations/implications – Findings from this small-scale case study in Lebanon are not generalizable to other contexts. The time lag could have affected the recollection of experiences. All participants were female, and their experiences might not reflect those of other school members affected by the changes.

Practical implications – Examining emotions during change uncovers insight into school leaders' subjective experience, facilitates a more nuanced understanding of change, and supports change implementation. Considering emotions during change informs the development of tailored interventions that provide effective support.

Originality/value – This study examines how emotions affect the success of educational change. Contrary to common understanding, change does not always generate negative emotions that impede implementation. School-based improvement creates structural and cultural conditions for effective change as it considers practitioners' socio-emotional needs, eliciting positive emotions.

Keywords School leaders, Leadership effectiveness, Commitment to change, School improvement, Educational change, Emotional leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Emotions are central to education (Beatty, 2007; Crawford, 2009) and shape leaders' understandings of their practices (Tenuto *et al.*, 2016), decisions, actions and relationships with other school members (Yamamoto *et al.*, 2014). However, research in the context of educational reform is focused on leaders' rejection or acceptance of changes and effects on adaptation, rather than the sense making or emotional labor involved (Sutton and Wheatley, 2003; van Veen and Slegers, 2009; van Veelen *et al.*, 2017; Schmidt and Datnow, 2005). Research on emotions in the field of educational leadership in Arab societies is especially scant (Hallinger and Hammad, 2019; Karami Akkary, 2014). Hammad and Hallinger (2017)



found that only seven empirical studies published between 2000 and 2016 investigated emotions, with a narrow focus on motivation, commitment, and satisfaction. Likewise, Karami-Akkary and El Saheb's (2018) review of 250 educational leadership studies published in Arabic journals reveals no studies with emotions as the core focus. Very little is known about school leaders in this region, especially in reform contexts.

To address this knowledge gap, this study examines the experiences of seven school leaders who are members of a leadership team (LT) responsible for leading improvement initiatives in a Lebanese school. The study aims to understand the nature of LT's emotional responses to change, their coping strategies and conditions that maintain their commitment to change. Focus group and individual interview data are used to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Which emotions are experienced by school leaders as they implement reforms?

RQ2. What emotional coping strategies do school leaders employ while implementing reforms?

RQ3. What are the conditions that sustained their commitment to reforms?

By answering these questions, the study provides insights on the role of emotions in educational change in a rarely studied cultural context, hence enriching the knowledge field on educational change in that and similar contexts while expanding our understanding of this phenomena across cultural contexts.

Emotions and change

Few studies investigate how school leaders subjectively experience and process emotions, reflecting an incomplete understanding of leadership theory and practice (Hargreaves, 2005). Traditionally, leadership scholars have taken a rational approach to conceptualizing organizational management practices (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Yamamoto *et al.*, 2014). However, a growing body of literature acknowledges the role emotions play in leading educational change. These emotions have been examined from multiple perspectives, including sociological, psychological and organizational perspectives to explain the link between change and emotions (Schutz and Zembylas, 2011; Saunders, 2013).

Scholars in different contexts found that emotions during change range from positive to negative emotions, such as uncertainty, nervousness, anxiety, worry, confidence, excitement, and motivation (van Veen and Slegers, 2006, 2009; Scott and Sutton, 2009; Kelchtermans *et al.*, 2009; Saunders, 2013; Tsang and Kwong, 2017). Different emotions responded to the nature of change and associated conditions, environments, relationships, and responsibilities.

Educational reforms demand major changes in beliefs and practices and challenge personal goals and values, eliciting negative emotions because of uncertainty and ambiguity. Scholars have primarily examined negative emotions (i.e. sadness, guilt, fear of change and failure, shame, anger, frustration) (Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Blackmore, 2010). Viewing emotions as impediments to change may lead researchers to conclude that emotional responses, which are more intense during change, must be eliminated (Agote *et al.*, 2016; Kiefer, 2002).

However, understanding emotions provides insight into how school leaders of change interpret and transform new ideas into practice, and how they relate to their environments and colleagues during change. It also allows for understanding how they personally and collectively make sense of the demands of reform (Ganon-Shilon and Schechter, 2017). Understanding school leaders' emotions is considered essential for effective capacity building and implementation (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2005; Beatty, 2007; Agote *et al.*, 2016). Emotional reactions affect the success and effectiveness of leadership practices,

school improvement initiatives and organizational change (Hargreaves, 2005; Oreg *et al.*, 2011). Thus, scholars call educational leaders and reformers to examine emotions to inform the process of creating conditions conducive to change (Crawford, 2009; Saunders, 2013).

Approaches to change and emotions

Historically, educational changes have been implemented as top-down, large-scale reforms to improve student achievement and learning (Fullan, 2001, 2016; Thoonen *et al.*, 2012). Top-down changes have created conditions and demands that elicit negative emotions. Externally developed as one-size-fits-all initiatives, they have been imposed on practitioners, with standards and desired outcomes that do not align with the reality of classrooms and schools, lacking mutual learning and development activities (Fullan, 2001; Harris, 2002). Such reforms neglect professional learning needs and subjective experiences, demoralizing teachers and compromising agency and autonomy (Thoonen *et al.*, 2012; van Veen and Slegers, 2009; Fullan, 2016). Lack of support and participation in decision making during top-down change often provoke a range of negative emotions, such as resistance, fear, and anxiety (Fullan, 2001; Harris, 2002).

In Arab contexts, top-down, large-scale changes have dominated reform agendas (Karami Akkary, 2014). Reforms have been motivated by political agendas removed from practitioners' needs, classroom challenges, and sociocultural contexts (El Amine, 2005). In this region, teachers have limited capacity to enact change, and, when provided, professional development typically takes the form of disconnected and prescriptive workshops that deliver technical knowledge. Reforms have also marginalized school practitioners, resulting in feelings of helplessness and passivity (Karami Akkary, 2014). Like their international counterparts, researchers in that region attributed the failure of educational reform in yielding improvements in the quality of education, teacher practices, and student learning to the limited research-based knowledge base on the implementation of successful improvement initiatives (El Amine, 2005; Karami Akkary, 2014).

On the other hand, the international literature presents school-based improvement as an effective alternative to top-down, large-scale reform. There is a growing understanding that school-based improvement builds local capacity among school leaders to lead change (Fullan, 2001, 2016; Leithwood *et al.*, 2010; Muijs and Harris, 2006; Thoonen *et al.*, 2012). This type of change set supportive conditions and evoke positive emotions that trigger internal motivation and promote commitment among participants despite its challenges and demands. School-based improvement requires broad-based teacher participation, a compelling school vision and leadership capacity (Frost, 2012; Harris, 2002). Teachers initiate and implement initiatives to improve educational practices, giving them a sense of ownership and agency, and linking their professional development to the school's development (Frost, 2012; Owens and Valesky, 2011; Thoonen *et al.*, 2012). As a result, they experience positive emotions when their views are considered (Agote *et al.*, 2016; Drago-Saverson, 2004), and, when they lead reform initiatives, they feel empowered, energized and confident in their abilities to overcome challenges and implement necessary changes (Fullan, 2016).

Conditions for effective change

Principals play a critical role in creating a healthy school climate, especially during changes which generate intense emotions (Fullan, 2001; Glickman *et al.*, 2010; Leithwood *et al.*, 2010; Thoonen *et al.*, 2012). To ensure successful implementation of change, principals provide emotional support and establish cultural and structural conditions that sustain commitment to change. This emotional support could be projected through emotional reframing when principals redirect an unpleasant emotion by reorienting the perception of the situation or the emotion to bring new positive perspective (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002; Hanhimaki and

Tirri, 2009). Emotional reframing by principals could assist teachers in adapting to new situations, feeling self-competence (Hanhimaki and Tirri, 2009), and increasing their affective commitment to the school and its reform (Berkovich and Eyal, 2017). Principals also set a common vision, create professional development opportunities, and organize participative processes that foster motivation and relationship building within their communities (Blasé and Blasé, 1999; Fullan, 2016; Maeroff, 1993; Turan and Bektas, 2013). A principal's ability to motivate and mobilize teachers facilitates school improvement by increasing school practitioners' readiness, willingness, and capacity for change (Thoonen *et al.*, 2012). Researchers have found that a positive climate sustains commitment to change (Yu *et al.*, 2002) through trust. Trust in principals contributes to the success of such initiatives as a result of their efforts to provide socio-emotional support during uncertainty, to realize a common vision and values, and to work with integrity and transparency (Agote *et al.*, 2016; Wieczorek and Theoharis, 2015).

Coping strategies

School leaders' emotional coping capabilities shape their approach and commitment to change. Since negative emotions impede work toward the achievement of desired goals (Frijda, 1994), leaders employ coping strategies – cognitive and emotional tools, processes and behaviors – to transform negative emotions into positive emotions in challenging situations (e.g. change) (Wang *et al.*, 2016). Coping strategies include help seeking; processing, problem-solving; seeking renewal; managing difficult relationships; changing behavior; and deploying attention (Castro *et al.*, 2010; Sutton *et al.*, 2009). Researchers found that coping with negative emotions facilitated dedication to challenges and change (Niesche and Haase, 2012). In the context of teacher leadership, resilience is found to involve the capacity to cultivate resources (e.g. social emotional competencies, support networks) and develop adaptive coping strategies (e.g. problem solving, time management) to address challenges and adapt to new situations (Beltman, 2015).

Theoretical framework

Many theoretical approaches have been used to study emotions in the context of change, resulting in diverse conceptualizations of how emotions are experienced (Zembylas and Schutz, 2009; van Veen and Slegers, 2009; Saunders, 2013). This study is informed by the social-psychological cognitivist theory of emotions, which is focused on sense-making of the relationship between an individual and the environment that result in certain emotions (Lazarus, 1991a, b, 2006; Keltner and Ekman, 2000; Slegers *et al.*, 2009). Emotions here are defined as responses to problems or opportunities that are continuously modified based on situational changes (Keltner and Ekman, 2000; Scherer, 2005).

According to Lazarus (1991a), emotions derive from relational, motivational, and cognitive processes, which emphasize an interdependency between emotions, environment, and the individual. Environmental factors affect emotions through the relational process. Thus, a reform could elicit positive emotions in one school, and negative emotions in another. Personal goals and motivations affect emotions through the motivational process, affecting individual perceptions of specific reforms. Through the cognitive process, emotions develop based on individual's basic knowledge, evaluation of a situation, and understanding of operational norms. These processes are influenced by one's personality, the situation, and one's ongoing appraisal of that situation. This framework highlights the importance of the relational, motivational, and cognitive processes in emotional responses, and it is useful for exploring school leaders' emotional responses to reforms, and related sense making and adaptation activities. Thus, it can help understand how school leaders' emotional responses influence how reforms are experienced.

Research context

Lebanese education system

The Lebanese education system has reinforced sectarianism, social inequality, and disparities in education quality (Frayha, 2009). Today, private and public (state) education systems exist with significantly different curricula, with the former attracting middle and upper-middle class students and the latter attracting lower-middle class and poor students. The system is highly bureaucratic and centralized (Mattar, 2012); the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) tightly manages public schools by setting policies, hiring teachers and principals, managing budgets, monitoring school operations and curriculum implementation, and imposing reforms (Mattar, 2012; Karami Akkary, 2014). Some principals and teachers in public schools do not have prior training or qualifying degrees; instead, they are appointed based on religious and political affiliations (Karami Akkary, 2014). In 1999 – the first top-down national reform initiative since 1971 – MEHE and the Center for Educational Research and Development mandated a curriculum reform that involved a major pedagogical shift in instructional design, goals, and strategies to focus on student-centered and project-based approaches. The reform lacked effective support for professional learning that facilitates its implementation.

Capacity building for school improvement

It is within these conditions that a university-based project was set to support effective school-based improvement initiatives, by building leadership capacity of practitioners to lead the process of change. Its school network comprises 46 schools in eight Arab countries: Lebanon, Jordan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Egypt and Sudan. In Lebanon, six public schools participate in its capacity-building program, which follows a contextual and responsive design that is based on a job-embedded school improvement journey. The design builds knowledge and skills for lifelong learning, inquiry, professional dialogue, reflection and professional collaboration. Coaches play a mentoring role as they train, challenge and support school practitioners to identify the school's needs, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their improvement initiatives. They consider their socio-emotional needs as adult learners and build on their strengths throughout their participation in the program. Primarily, the project stresses the involvement of teachers as leaders in the school improvement journey. More importantly, it gives teachers an active role in recasting their identities as professionals exercising agency in improving their practices and their schools.

Methodology: case study research

An intrinsic case study methodology was used to investigate the research questions (Stake, 1995) in a public middle school established in 1967 in an underprivileged suburb of Beirut. It employed 50 educators and served 413 students between the ages of 12 and 15 in grades 7–9, mostly from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Although the school has a low operating budget and lacked adequate resources, support, and access to meaningful professional learning opportunities, MEHE recognized it as innovative. Its principal had been exposed to best international practices during a one-year leadership training program. Seven members who volunteered to form the school's LT and have various teaching, supervisory and administrative responsibilities participated in this study (see Table I).

Data collection

Qualitative interview data were collected from the participants (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Initially, individual interviews were conducted as a means to explore the individual

experiences of the participants. Participants were asked to describe: their school climate and school reform experiences, critical incidents (CI) of educational change that provoked intense positive or negative emotions, related coping strategies, and conditions that sustained their commitment to change. Critical incidents were used to promote professional self-reflection (Tripp, 1993). After conducting individual interviews, the researchers conducted a focus group interview as a means of triangulation by ensuring a shared understanding of the critical incidents and convergence of the central emotions to change across the focus group and individual interviews, thus, adding to the interpretation of the change across the various critical incidents. Interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted mainly in Arabic, their native language. The interviews and focus group discussion were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the general inductive approach (Creswell, 2010). After a brief review of the data to determine the general storyline and identify segments of critical information, analysis proceeded in two phases: initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). Coding focused on references to negative and positive feelings toward change, types of change, emotional coping strategies employed during change, and conditions surrounding change. Three researchers independently read the transcripts, identified categories and subcategories, and assigned extracted quotes accordingly, some to more than one category. Collaboratively, they refined the codes and sub-codes to reduce redundancies.

Findings

This section presents LT members' journey with educational change over a period of 10–18 years, highlighting emotions experienced during identified experiences of change, coping strategies and conditions that sustained their commitment to change. When asked to reflect on their experiences as agents of change while focusing on the events that provoked a range of intense negative and positive emotions, they unanimously identified three CIs of educational change; a national curriculum reform, the employment of a new school leader (their current principal) whose appointment constituted a major shift in the school climate and strategic priorities, and participation in a capacity-building program.

Despite the LT's attempt to cope with the national curriculum reform (i.e. CI1), negative emotions and unsupportive conditions challenged their commitment to change. In CI2, supportive conditions and effective personal coping strategies helped elicit positive emotions, which led to sustained commitment to change. Emotions experienced during the capacity-building program (i.e. CI3) were predominantly positive due to support from the school principal and coaches, resulting in sustained commitment to change.

Member	Role	Years of experience
Principal (P)	School principal	25 ^a
Team member 1 (T1)	English teacher, subject coordinator	18
Team member 2 (T2)	Biology teacher and student supervisor	23
Team member 3 (T3)	Assistant principal	23
Team member 4 (T4)	Chemistry and physics teacher, subject coordinator	21
Team member 5 (T5)	Biology teacher, subject coordinator	21
Team member 6 (T6)	Extracurricular activities coordinator	38

Notes: ^aTeacher: 10 years; principal: 15 years

Table I.
Roles and years of
experience of the
study's participants

CII: curriculum reform

Participants described the national curriculum reform in 1999 as an emotionally intense experience dominated by negative emotions. Although they employed multiple coping strategies, their commitment to change led to minimal compliance due to a lack of support.

Emotional responses. Participants initially experienced negative emotions in response to the top-down mandated reform implementation approach, and the nature of accompanying professional development. They reported feelings of uncertainty and confusion, insecurity, self-doubt, anxiety, and fear. Two participants attributed feelings of uncertainty and confusion to the lack of follow up during implementation. One participant explained: "I felt uncertain and confused about whether I was preparing for my lessons and teaching the right way and the right content the new curriculum required" (T2). Another participant shared:

I was expected to use a new grading system to assess students' skills and knowledge separately. I felt insecure and doubted my ability to do what was expected of me. I did not know how to grade, no one followed up on my work and supported me [...] [This] posed serious challenges to the way we performed, which made me feel frustrated and anxious (T4).

Another participant described a similar emotional response: "I felt insecure and overwhelmed with self-doubt to the extent that I questioned myself, my abilities and my teaching in class [...] I wanted some guidance and affirmation, to regain some of my self-confidence" (T2). One participant described feeling "anxious and afraid, as I was expected to execute these changes without having received the training" (T5). Another explained:

During the first year I was so afraid and confused because I did not know whether I was working in the right manner or not. Was this what they wanted me to do, or was there something else they wanted? (T2).

Coping strategies. Participants employed various coping strategies. They resorted to a support network to cope with fear and anxiety: "We sought help from our colleagues to resolve negative feelings and deal with these changes. We spoke to each other, reflected on the changes, and compared our strategies" (T2). Also, participants described several personal characteristics that helped them cope, such as their motivation for learning: "I am naturally curious and like to keep learning for the benefit of our students and their learning. I do not get concerned or worried; I get excited to learn and improve" (T5). Another participant described how her motivation for learning helped her face challenges: "I never for a second hesitated to learn and explore new ideas and strategies. I am happy and comfortable learning and improving myself. These are part of my personal characteristics, which helped me face challenges of change" (T6). Another participant described how her motivation to learn helped her cope: "I attended all kinds of workshops, even if they were not mandatory, to cope with the demands of change. I am dedicated to improving myself and learning, and I get excited about new ideas and applying them" (T3).

Conditions supporting commitment to change. No conditions enhanced participants' commitment to the curriculum reform. "During this change, the ministry did not support us, and there were no conditions that supported our learning and commitment" (T3). Moreover: "Our perspectives were not invited, and we did not participate. We were only informed about the new curriculum; we did not have a say in the changes, and we had to apply [them], which compromised commitment" (T5). A select few were invited to attend professional development workshops to facilitate change implementation. However, the experience was "not helpful, as we did not understand well, and we did not apply our learning" (T4). Negative feelings prevailed: "I attended the training feeling irritated [...] they pressured us and forced us to attend these workshops [...] the training provided by the in-service teacher training center was useless. The workshops were a burden" (T4). Another participant noted

similarities with other ineffective top-down reforms: “The change in the national curriculum seemed like any other traditional change in Lebanon, which failed to create sustainable impact, did not promote authentic learning of new knowledge and skills, and focused on the priorities of policymakers instead of practitioners” (T1).

In this context characterized by ambiguity and low agency, teachers had to “adapt to these changes” (T2), which were not perceived as positive. Consequently, they failed to take ownership of them, despite their desire to meet expectations. Participants also reported inability to create meaningful changes in practices and their own skills and knowledge: “This reality did not make us feel empowered and we were not improving our practices and moving forward. I felt stuck” (T2). They were neither engaged as active agents in the process nor transformed by the learning opportunities it offered. “We were only expected to implement the new curriculum without prior knowledge of its requirements. The workshops provided by MEHE were ineffective as they did not facilitate our learning. So, we just did the minimum, barely applying these requirements” (T3).

CI2: new school leader

All participants identified the hiring of a principal with advance expertise and a high commitment to change in 2009 as a CI that provoked intense emotions. They described a sustained and enhanced commitment to change thanks to effective coping strategies and a supportive school climate cultivated by the principal, which inspired them to implement changes despite challenges.

Emotional responses. Four participants reacted positively to the principal’s vision for improvement, despite their initial anxiety that was triggered by her leadership approach and substantial changes she introduced. One participant explained: “The school principal’s vision and aspirations for the school aligned with my vision and professional aspirations. The changes she introduced excited me, and I was happy to take part in leading them” (T6). Another said: “She puts the students and learning first, focusing on improvement all the time. These changes excited me and aligned with my vision” (T5). Participants also appreciated the principal’s approach: “The principal ensures that all our voices are heard and that we participate in decision making. Her vision for leading the school and approach make me feel empowered to work on initiatives and overcome any challenges” (T5). Feeling “safe and supported” (T3) and “very comfortable” enables participants to “be creative and innovative” (T1).

Two participants initially experienced negative emotional responses: “I felt angry and frustrated with the new principal. I thought she misjudged us and considered us incompetent” (T2). Another participant elaborated:

My first encounter with the principal was very annoying. I was really upset about the negative impression she had about us. I also felt uncomfortable and discouraged at first because we had to do a lot of things we never did before as a result of the changes (T4).

However, these emotions soon dissipated:

We started to feel motivated and comfortable after she listened to us and noticed our motivation to learn, improve and work harder. We also realized she wanted to make a difference and improve the school. She worked with a lot of dedication, and, at times, worked harder than teachers, so we could not help but put in more effort (T4).

Coping strategies. In addition to self-initiated coping strategies, participants described how the principal enhanced their ability to cope with change. One participant explained: “The principal valued and appreciated my work with the students during the implementation of changes [...] I felt motivated and empowered to cope with change” (T2).

Another participant reflected: “learning opportunities encouraged by the principal equipped me with knowledge and skills that improved my practice, thus I felt better about the changes and about myself” (T5). Another said professional development opportunities offered by the principal “changed my perspective, taught me a lot, motivated me and transformed my mentality. The workshops helped me cope with my emotions and empowered me to face these changes” (T1).

All participants described how the principal modeled coping strategies by demonstrating a commitment to lifelong learning: “Because the principal works hard to improve herself, I am also inspired to develop myself and my abilities to rise up to the challenges of change” (T4). Participants also highlighted how the principal helped them cope, feel safe and supported by following up and monitoring the effects of professional development on their practices and students’ performance. One participant said:

I never saw the old school principal on my floor, and he observed classrooms only once a year. However, the current school principal visits classrooms every week to follow up on the progress of teachers, supervise instruction and monitor student learning after professional learning. She checks if any teacher is facing a problem, constructively points out to teachers some teaching problems they have to attend to. She is very supportive (T1).

The principal also fostered a strong sense of trust and reframed their negative emotions by bringing forth a new perspective on the importance of all the new initiatives taking place at the school: “The school and student learning are her priority [...] and I trust her because she introduces, supports and encourages all the improvement initiatives that would benefit the school” (T2).

Conditions that sustain commitment to change. Participants asserted that they felt more comfortable leading change as a result of the principal’s efforts toward promoting and supporting improvement initiatives. One participant explained, “We committed to the changes the principal introduced because of the school environment” (T5). She emphasized how the principal had created “an environment that is democratic and collaborative, which helps us feel heard and supported, especially during the process of change” (T5). This collaborative environment sustained participants’ commitment to change: “She never makes decisions on her own [...] she says it’s everyone’s work and effort, that we are a team, a family and each member of the team has her impact on the school. This keeps us motivated and committed to deal with challenges associated with change” (T5). Others agreed: “She helps us develop, learn and remain committed to lead change in school” (T2). Another stated: “I found myself consistently giving more to the job and being appreciated and seen for the work I do, especially for improving the school and participating in change initiatives” (T1).

CI3: Capacity-building program

Participation in a capacity-building program since 2015 was the third CI of educational change. Initially, participants exhibited a commitment to change despite anticipated challenges, seemingly due to the established supportive school climate. Challenges triggered brief periods of negative emotions that seemed to dissipate quickly. Participants highlighted how the program’s supportive conditions helped them cope and commit to leading change.

Emotional responses. Participants reported mixed feelings about the capacity-building program. After initial feelings of excitement, negative emotions emerged. Participants attributed their ability to transform negative emotions into positive emotions to the training approach and continuous support from their principal.

Initially, participants felt excited about the opportunity to lead meaningful change from the bottom-up, demonstrating their existing sense of agency and commitment to change, largely due to previous experiences and their supportive school climate: “What excited me

was the program's approach to change [...] We assess our needs, address these needs in school and we improve ourselves in the process as well. There is support from the outside, but the improvement begins from us and our school that has a supportive climate" (T2). Participants also recognized the potential benefit of the training they would receive to support their efforts to lead change: "Joining the program excited me because I thought it would improve our work and that we would all benefit personally and professionally" (T5). Another participant expressed excitement about the potential impact of the capacity-building program on her professional development, the school and her team (T4).

These initial positive feelings were challenged when the team scored poorly on a series of diagnostic assessments that evaluated their professional competencies. "When we received the scores, we felt disappointed because they were too low" (T5). Participants found the professional learning experience challenging: "There were a lot of new concepts that confused us, and we felt frustrated" (T2). The team also "felt overwhelmed as the program was demanding and difficult, especially because of other competing commitments we have and our busy schedules" (T3).

After a supportive intervention, participants experienced positive emotions: "Coaches never explicitly told any of the teams they're wrong;" instead they "built on our work and ideas, guiding us and helping us improve [...] which made us overcome the confusion and frustration" (T5). This left them feeling transformed, empowered and confident. One participant explained: "[The program's approach] enriches me and my learning, empowers me and makes me feel better about myself" (T4).

Coping strategies. Despite challenges and negative emotions, participants effectively used their existing coping strategies. They worked collaboratively to process their emotions and learn new concepts, and they engaged in self-reflection. Active support from the principal and coaches was also reported to help.

Existing team relationships were critical coping mechanisms. "The support we got from each other during the change helped us cope. We discussed these unfamiliar concepts to become familiar with the material and overcome the confusion," (T5) and "spent a lot of time working together, trying to understand the challenging training material, to overcome the negative emotions and feel better about ourselves and our work" (T1). One participant valued encouragement and praise from LT members, noting how "they acknowledge what I find or learn in the process" (T2). Exchanging expertise and knowledge with program participants outside their school also was valuable: "When we got to see the success stories of other school teams that completed the capacity building program, we felt excited and motivated to work on our own initiative, learn and improve" (T4).

Another participant pointed out that the coaches also offered support: "We could call and reach the program's co-principal investigator or any member of the team any day and any time to ask questions and receive feedback and support to cope with this confusion" (T5). "They keep praising us and acknowledging our efforts. This encouragement is very essential because it motivates us. It also inspires us to work better and harder" (T2). "Positive feedback makes a huge difference, and the coaches are always supportive. This support, I feel, strengthens our motivation as a team" (T1).

Conditions that sustain commitment to change. Participants reported that the supportive school climate and the capacity-building program's approach promoted their commitment to leading change: "The school climate is very encouraging and supportive of collaboration and improvement. This made work in the program easier" (T5). One participant elaborated: "The principal is very supportive. She designated a day for us to meet on a weekly basis, freeing our schedules to facilitate our work on the improvement initiative" (T4).

Participants also described how aspects of the program's training approach – specifically, encouragement, positive feedback, appreciation, acknowledgment of efforts and responsiveness – sustained their commitment to change, despite challenges and unpleasant emotions.

One participant described how the school's aspirations aligned with the program's goals: "We were struggling [...] to achieve our goals. The program aligned with our vision. It facilitated this for us and made everything so much easier" (T6). Another participant explained: "The way the coaches monitored our progress in learning, closely followed up on the challenges we faced [...] and based the training on this follow up helped us overcome the barriers and commit to change" (T2). Another participant described how the program's network structure "necessitated that we work together and learn from each other, which inspired and motivated us to persist in our change efforts" (T1).

In this environment, participants felt motivated and driven, supported, inspired and empowered to learn and exercise their agency for change. One team member expressed that she felt "great self-confidence" as she developed a "new professional identity" that made her "an active agent in the process of change" (T2). Another team member acknowledged: "My role as a leader of change in the program and in school makes me feel confident, empowered and capable of leading change" (T2). Another agreed: "We began to see the transformation in ourselves" (T4). Participants exercised agency and took ownership of the design and implementation of their school improvement initiative: "We are waiting to observe the impact of our efforts on the school and students and how what we have been doing will be reflected in practice. We feel confident in our abilities to change in the school" (T5). They described themselves as self-directed learners and change agents who gain "satisfaction from improving ourselves, our skills, and our profession" (T1).

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that those engaged in leading change experience a range of emotions during periods of change and use different coping strategies to deal with these emotions. They also affirm the critical role principals can play in channeling emotional responses toward creating supportive conditions throughout the implementation of improvement initiatives. In line with the international literature, these affirmations point to school-based improvement as a promising school reform approach where the centrality of emotions to the process of change seem to cut across cultural contexts.

In fact, the study found that emotions, which are considered integral to individual and collective experiences of educational change (Beatty, 2007; Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves, 2005; Harris, 2004), were indeed influenced by the type of change and environmental conditions, which in turn influenced the effectiveness of coping strategies and their ability to sustain commitment to change (Agote *et al.*, 2016; Beatty, 2007). Moreover, participants' emotional responses were influenced by relational processes to the reform. Their motivations and personalities also affected their emotional responses to change. In addition, participants' assessments of the changes influenced their emotional responses to change and related coping strategies. This affirms Lazarus's (1991a) social-psychological cognitivist theory of emotions that theorizes that emotions are derived from the relational, motivational, and cognitive processes between the individuals and their environment.

Negative emotions such as confusion, uncertainty, fear, and anxiety were provoked by top-down mandated change, characterized by a lack of participative decision making, and support throughout implementation (Fullan, 2001; Harris, 2002). Participants' associated the neglect of their professional development needs with negative emotions and expressed frustration for the lack of professional learning from what they considered to be ineffective workshops. On the other hand, participants coped with emotions and adapted to changes by seeking help from others. Personal characteristics such as motivation toward learning influenced how change was interpreted and experienced. Most participants took responsibility for their learning and worked hard to overcome challenges despite the existing environmental conditions that do not sustain their commitment to change.

The results also affirmed that failing to consider emotions or provide supportive conditions can lead to resistance, stagnation and/or reluctance to comply with change, thus undermining generative learning, and commitment to change. Similar to what is reported in the international literature, large-scale top-down reform (e.g. CI1) was found to generate negative emotions, and its intended goals reported not to be achieved because its mandates neglected the socio-emotional dimension of change and typically failed to address the emotional needs of practitioners (Fullan, 2016; Harris, 2002; Thoonen *et al.*, 2012). This large-scale, top-down reforms is commonly mandated in the Arab region (Karami Akkary, 2014; Karami-Akkary *et al.*, 2012).

However, CI2 and CI3 reveal a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play. Negative feelings about the leadership change quickly dissipated as the principal cultivated a positive, supportive school culture that facilitated coping and commitment to change through emotion reframing and legitimizing the mixed feeling they were experiencing during change. As predicated in the literature, teachers responded positively to the principal's leadership approach and her commitment to change (Beatty, 2000; Humphrey, 2002); they felt motivated, excited, committed, and inspired to learn and implement changes because they had ample emotional support. Moreover, the principal recast negative emotions and brought new positive perspective on the situation by expressing concern for the team's well-being, following up, adopting a participative approach to decision making, emphasizing collaboration, continuous professional learning and a focus on improved student learning, and empowering her team. Consequently, participants developed trust in the school principal and felt comfortable learning and taking risks to overcome challenges. The positive climate also fostered positive emotions, reflective practices and values that reinforced the team's educational vision and commitment to learning and professional development, thus establishing positive relationships and rapport that supported sustained commitment to change.

This study extends on the previous research that shows that principals could support change by creating strong and supportive school climates (Fullan, 2001; Glickman *et al.*, 2010; Leithwood *et al.*, 2010; Thoonen *et al.*, 2012), providing compelling visions, implementing participative leadership practices, and establishing structural and cultural conditions that motivate school practitioners to learn and build relationships, and foster their well-being (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999). Feelings of trust facilitated the embracement of change and largely determined participants' responses, in line with Kiefer's (2002) proposition. More importantly, the study shows that the principal could reconstruct the affective organizational perspectives on change and reform through emotional reframing. Feelings of trust also diminished their concerns and contributed to success of change (Agote *et al.*, 2016; Wiczorek and Theoharis, 2015). Leadership practices established a positive and supportive climate for change, thereby mobilizing participants to collaborate with others, take ownership of the process and lead implementation activities (Durias, 2010; Fullan, 2016; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009).

Likewise, the capacity-building program elicited positive emotions. Initial negative emotional responses were replaced with feelings of confidence, empowerment, excitement, and readiness to learn. The program capitalized on existing favorable conditions for change in the school and provided a safe climate for learning and risk-taking through emotional support mechanisms such as praise and positive encouragement. Participants took the lead by identifying the school's challenges and designing and implementing their improvement plans, as recommended by Fullan (2016). Under these conditions, participants helped each other cope with challenges. The coaches valued and acknowledged participants' views, assets and needs and created supportive conditions that empowered and equipped participants with necessary knowledge and skills. As a result of addressing their socio-emotional and professional needs, participants were able

to overcome challenges and negative emotions and sustained their commitment to change (Sutton *et al.*, 2009; Muijs and Harris, 2006).

Supportive conditions characterizing most school-based improvement initiatives trigger positive emotions throughout the implementation process. Coaches' responsiveness, accessibility, and support also promoted these positive feelings. These conditions enabled skilled and motivated participants to take ownership and develop relevant capacities to lead and implement change, in line with the academic literature (Agote *et al.*, 2016; Fullan, 2001, 2016; Harris, 2002). This ownership and support during change elicited positive emotions, motivation and increased resilience, which enabled participants to cope with negative emotions during change and commit to its implementation (Castro *et al.*, 2010; Sutton *et al.*, 2009). Thus, school-based improvement with such capacity-building program that match the school's context, build on the school's needs, and align with the needs and goals of the school makes it possible to generate positive emotions and bring forth a meaningful experience of change (Frost, 2012; Owens and Valesky, 2011; Fullan, 2016).

In addition to the above affirmations of the existing literature, the findings of this study provide a culturally grounded understanding of how attending to emotional response can not only enhance the effectiveness of school-based improvement but also provide a critical resource for leaders in a context characterized by limited financial and human resources. Leaders of change can play a critical role by attending to emotions through implementing effective coping strategies and instituting a supportive climate that responds to the emotional needs that emerges at all stages of the implementation of improvement initiatives. The accounts in this study have shown that the principal comprehensive approach where emotions were central to leading change ensured long-term commitment not just to implementing an improvement initiative but to change itself – an astounding achievement in the context of Lebanon and its region (Karami-Akkary *et al.*, 2012; Karami Akkary, 2014).

Conclusion

The study challenges the prevailing understanding that change only provokes negative or problematic emotions and that mitigating negative emotions during change increases the likelihood of commitment to implementation of change and success of reform efforts. Its findings suggest that emotions play a critical role in determining how teachers ultimately receive and experience reforms. While change creates circumstances and demands that trigger a range of negative emotions, these emotions, however, do not necessarily have to lead to rejection of change. When the socio-emotional needs of practitioners are considered, including relational, motivational and cognitive aspects, change can elicit positive emotions after initial feelings of confusion and stress, thus activating agency and facilitating commitment to change. This is facilitated by principals who establish supportive cultural and structural conditions, responsive capacity-building programs that build the knowledge and skills necessary to plan and implement change, and cultivating personal characteristics that help those involved cope with a wide range of emotions triggered while leading change. Positive emotions are also facilitated when a change initiative aligns with the school leaders' personal and professional goals which strengthen their coping strategies, help them overcome the challenges, and empower them to lead these efforts.

Implications for practice and future research

Although educational change can be made to be a positive emotional experience, it remains unclear how long-term commitment can be sustained in a stressful environment with frequent government-mandated reforms. Studying emotions in change settings reveals insights into school leaders' subjective experiences and emotions and facilitates more nuanced understandings of organizational change – specifically, how emotions affect the success of such initiatives. More research is needed to identify conditions that might foster

commitment to change and positive experiences during the change process. The resulting understanding of affective aspects of change may help reformers identify potential implementation challenges and underlying causes and acknowledge emotions. For designers of capacity-building programs, examining emotions and understanding how they influence practitioners during change informs the development of tailored interventions that provide effective support.

Limitations

Findings from this small-scale case study in Lebanon are not generalizable to other contexts. Participation was limited to the LT because of their involvement in the capacity-building program and exposure to its training and change approach. The time lag could have affected the recollection of experiences, but it is understood that CI leave a lasting impact on individuals because of associated intense emotions. All participants were female, and their experiences might not reflect those of other school members affected by the changes. The richness of their responses illuminates emotions experienced during change, coping strategies and conditions that could sustain commitment to change.

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Further reading

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